AN INTERNATIONAL ART GATHERING TRANSFORMED SNOWY GSTAAD INTO A RADICAL PERFORMANCE SPACE

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The art world—once confined to certain western metropolises like New York City—has unquestionably become a global phenomenon. And yet, even when the art world is of the world, it has a tendency to subsume the aesthetic nowhere of the white-walled gallery space. That approach is a disappointingly sterile way of thinking of destinations as multilayered as Venice, Rio, or Beijing. One of the most dynamic—if vertiginous—exceptions to this rule occurs in Gstaad, Switzerland every few years as Elevation 1049. Curated by Olympia Scarry and Neville Wakefield, the art festival’s third iteration, “Frequencies,” devoted to performance works, occurred last weekend under bright sun and Alpine snow. The festival is a wonder of place, taking full advantage of the peaks and valleys of this achingly beautiful resort town. The resulting works call upon and cross over its geography like latitudinal and longitudinal lines.

The weekend started with ice and ended in fire. Artist Doug Aitken constructed a mirrored chalet on a snowy mountain meadow. The visual equivalent of a mountain echo, the “Mirage Gstaad,” absorbed the atmospheric static of its surroundings — heavy snow, mountain peaks, and evergreens — proffering a faint trace of human intervention on the landscape. This already iconic piece (Aitken’s first mirrored house was exhibited in the Palm Springs desert in 2017) will remain in Gstaad for two years, allowing the architecture to absorb the changing seasons. While the settler’s optimism of Aitken’s installation opened Elevation 1049, Marianne Vitale’s fiery “Burned Bridge” demolition closed it. At the top of Eggli Mountain, the artist erected a large-scale wooden model of a bridge that was summarily torched under a blaze of bonfires. Watching the architecture of connection be violently destroyed at time when walls are the presiding cultural preoccupation was a conspicuous commentary. Yet, a burning bridge also offers some relief, as evinced by the joyous, ritualistic atmosphere that accompanied Vitale’s torching. In it lay the promise of never having to turn back.
In between these bookends, Elevation 1049 offered a number of sharp performances, from Isabel Lewis’s nudist bacchanal around the indoor pool of a chalet once owned by Gunter Sachs, to Marie Karlberg’s hilariously sour critique on an artist being inundated with trivial sidetracking questions in her piece, “The Artist Will Be in Attendance.” Scarry and Wakefield, the weekend’s curators, have created something of an art miracle in this nestled skiing enclave—and it won’t be traveling to a white space near you.