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LITERATURE / SWITZERLAND

# READING THE ROOM

What do writers need? Time and space – both of which are on offer at the Jan Michalski Foundation, an idyllic retreat designed to incubate great writers and welcome readers from around the world. Its founder, Vera Michalski-Hoffmann, shares her vision of a literary utopia.

WRITER *Annabelle Chapman* PHOTOGRAPHER *Guillaume Megevand*



In the village of Montricher, at the foot of the Jura Mountains, the Jan Michalski Foundation for Writing and Literature offers writers and readers a haven half an hour from Lausanne. “This place is a bit of a bubble, outside the city, outside life, where people have the luxury to take time,” says the foundation’s director Vera Michalski-Hoffmann, gesturing at the vast landscape including the snowcapped Alps on the other side of Lake Geneva.

The Swiss editor established the foundation in 2004 in memory of her husband Jan Michalski. The couple met while studying in Geneva; after marrying in 1983, they moved to Montricher. There they founded publishing house Editions Noir sur Blanc with the mission to bridge east and west in the divided Europe of the Cold War era. After Michalski’s death in 2002, his wife created the foundation on land that used to be a summer camp. “Our mission is to halt the erosion of reading and, by extension, to defend literature,” says Michalski-Hoffmann. “We wanted to build a village here that provides a microclimate that supports writing.”

Designed by architecture firm Mangiat-Wahlen from the nearby town of Nyon, the foundation is made up of two main buildings linked by a concrete canopy, echoing the forest behind it. While one structure houses an exhibition space and an auditorium, the other is made up of an impressive five-floor library of contemporary global literature comprising almost 70,000 books. Lined with light oak wood, the handsome space is filled with desks and reading nooks where anyone can pull up a chair and pluck titles from the shelves. On the grounds, cabins designed by several different architects were added in

**From left:** The foundation with its concrete canopy; German author Michaela Wieser; writer’s cabin; the foundation’s library of contemporary literature.



2017; seven are available as temporary retreats for resident writers, while the eighth provides a communal space for cooking and socialising.

A connection to nature is fundamental to the institution’s ethos. “To engage with literature you can open a book but you can also use your other senses. We open all the doors and all the windows that can shed light on a writer’s thoughts,” says Aurélie Baudrier, who manages communications at the foundation.

Its exhibitions, such as one dedicated to German artist Anselm Kiefer’s books and woodcuts, draw connections between writing and other arts. The next show on the calendar, opening this February, will be about the collaboration between publisher Gérard Cramer, painter Joan Miró and poet Paul Éluard.

Other events include meetings with authors, story time for children and the annual Jan Michalski prize for literature, which went to Israeli author Zeruya Shalev last year. The prize is open to fiction or nonfiction writers from anywhere in the world and the winner receives a work of art as well as CHF50,000 (€45,800).

The foundation strives to be an open space: anyone can use the library and Montricher’s residents can attend exhibitions for free. “To read a book, you need to concentrate. Today’s civilisation pushes people towards zapping: they read one minute here, one minute there,” says Michalski-Hoffmann, who also runs several publishing houses between Lausanne, Paris and Warsaw. “It’s important for people to slow down, take their time, and follow their ideas and dreams. We try to make that possible here.”



MUSEUMS / ITALY

# All change

Milan’s Pinacoteca brought in a foreign director – and he’s having fun shaking up the institution.

WRITER *Ivan Carvalho* PHOTOGRAPHER *Piotr Niespuz*

This tranquility has made the foundation appealing to authors from around the world, particularly those who specialise in nature writing. Every year it welcomes up to 40 writers in residence, who generally stay for one or two months. Most recently it hosted authors from France, Germany, Belgium, the US and Switzerland. If they crave company, they can gather for a film night or to discuss books; otherwise they are left alone.

“Here I have the time; all I have to do is write,” says Michaela Wieser, who is working on a novel set in 17th-century Japan. After arriving in Montricher, she threw out 400 pages of work and started anew. “This residence makes me go so deep into my work that I feel I am getting the best results possible,” she adds.

Compared to her fast-paced life in Berlin, Montricher reminds Wieser of the time she spent at a Buddhist monastery in Japan in her early twenties. The writers live simply: Wieser’s treehouse contains a bed, bathroom and kitchenette, with a dedicated writing space on the top floor. Her mornings begin with yoga and a 90-minute walk in the forest; after that, she makes a coffee and begins to write.

“The most important thing they have given me here is time,” says author Adrien Gygax, who is there to finish his third novel, a book set in the area. The young writer, who grew up in a neighbouring village but has lived in Lausanne for the past 12 years, completed his first two novels by writing in the evenings and at weekends while working as a management consultant. “Here, on a good day, I can do 10 hours of writing. The average is five or six hours, which was totally impossible in my old life,” he says.

When his residence ends, Gygax plans to reduce his working hours in consulting and leave the city to lead a simpler life. “If you want to slow down, if you want to write, if you want to have time to read, you have to say ‘no,’” he says.

*The Jan Michalski Foundation is open Tuesday to Sunday; [fondation-janmichalski.com](http://fondation-janmichalski.com)*

In 2015 government reforms permitted for the first time the hiring of foreign directors for Italy’s major museums. In Milan, UK-Canadian curator James Bradburne was brought on board to oversee the city’s Pinacoteca di Brera, which holds paintings by the likes of Raphael and Modigliani. To revive the often-overlooked Milanese institution, Bradburne has pursued an innovative strategy. Much of it revolves around getting locals to reconnect with the museum: employing measures such as live musical performances in the galleries and inviting taxi drivers and concierges to exhibition previews in order to help spread the word. Now reapportioned for another four years, he now has his sights set on a much-delayed expansion.

**Museums often resort to blockbuster exhibitions to boost visitor numbers. You are not a fan of these. Why?** Blockbuster temporary shows are a drug. The least interesting number at a museum is total visitors per year. You need to count repeat visitors, what time of day they arrive, how long they spend in the gallery. What we aim for is repeat tourists; when you go back to a city you want to feel like an insider. And the museum should be embraced by the city: if the city loves its museum, the word gets around.

**What changes have you made to improve the experience for visitors?** For those queuing to get in, we hand out a booklet with a map and games to get visitors interested in what they are about to see. We put in drawing benches, which has produced more than 3,000 sketches. We reinstalled

the entire permanent collection for the first time in 40 years with new lighting, new colours – darker hues not just white walls. We want to increase the emotional impact of the rooms. We are in the city of fashion so we have hosted fashion shows. We bring in artwork from outside to [make people] look at our collection in a different way: we brought in a Rembrandt and put it next to a Caravaggio that was depicting a similar scene; we’ll have Raphael’s “The Marriage of the Virgin” next to a Chinese scroll painting to compare east and west.

**You are a big proponent of experimental labelling. Why?** Here we don’t have the opportunity to introduce every visitor personally to the artworks so the labels speak for the museum. There are grey labels made by art historians, family labels that give grown-ups something to read to their children. Remember: nobody goes to a museum to look at paintings. We go to museums to talk about looking at paintings. We also have “other voices” labels because experts can’t monopolise the dialogue. I look for authors – Ali Smith, Orhan Pamuk – to write labels to help get you to look longer at the painting. Good writers see things that others don’t.

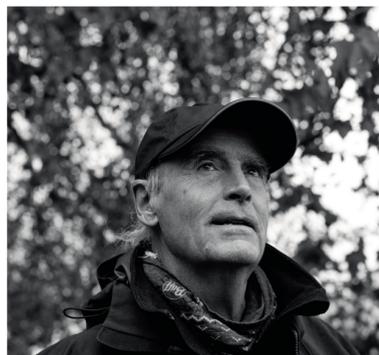
**What future plans do you have in store?** Our plan is to open Palazzo Citterio, a historic building next to the Pinacoteca. It will house renowned 20th-century art collections with works by Modigliani, De Chirico and other key figures that have been amassed over time by Milanese families. We want to give this back to the city. [pinacotecabrera.org](http://pinacotecabrera.org)

Hamish Fulton is a UK artist who for 50 years has been making work based on walks whether they be through Nepal, Tibet, Scotland, Wyoming or up Everest (if you can call that “a walk”). Fulton is not a painter but a communicator of the experience of moving through landscapes via forms including photography, printing and “wall works in wood”.

*A Decision to Choose Only Walking* – a retrospective celebrating nearly a half century of Fulton’s work and its connections to psychology, nature and the seasons – is currently showing in his native London. Thankfully for us, Fulton suggested a tame Thames-side walk to discuss his work.

“I prefer the plan of no plan,” says a cap and anorak-clad Fulton as we negotiate the crowds beneath Blackfriars Bridge. “I’m more interested in going off the path.” And he’s been doing so since 1973, when he completed a meaningful meandering walk from Duncansby Head in the north-east of Scotland to Land’s End in Cornwall (more than 1,000km). Along the way he realised that he had found what would become his unique artistic practice: his decision “to choose only walking” that gives the retrospective its title.

“It just hit me – I was crazy with happiness – like a Damascene conversion,” says Fulton of his



ART / UK

# Walk of art

Hamish Fulton reflects on his radical decision – nearly half a century ago – to base all his work on walking.

WRITER *Robert Bound* PHOTOGRAPHER *Elena Heathervick*

artistic revelation. “I couldn’t then make other sorts of work; I had to discipline myself only to do things that were to do with walking. It was an incredible freedom.”

Tens of thousands of kilometres, dozens of pairs of hiking boots and almost five decades later, his unmistakable body of work is both definite – made in ink, print and photography – and impressionistic about its subject matter. Are the walks themselves sacraments and the works remnants? “There is a sense of casting off, yes, of walking to separate myself,” says Fulton. “Walking does have energies about it that are not easily identifiable or specifically scientific or that you can pinpoint.”

The idea of walking away from complication toward something like serenity is not precisely part of Fulton’s work but it is certainly a motive for his walking. He talks of Japan’s so-called “Marathon Monks” (Tendai Buddhist monks), who “run 87 kilometres for 100 consecutive days followed by a ceremony at the end where they don’t eat or drink for eight or nine days.” One of his own walks crossed paths with a monk on Mount Hiei, near Kyoto, during this ultra-rigorous religious practice. “We locked eyes for a second and that was enough to put my own walking into perspective,” he says with a chuckle.



By the time we reach Lambeth Bridge, we finally have the Thames path to ourselves. With Lambeth Palace behind us and Westminster Abbey just a stone’s throw away, I ask what sort of spirituality walking unleashes for Fulton. “This sort of spirituality isn’t my type,” says Fulton with a nod to those godly towers. “Mine is about nature and there is a sacred nature to walking. I’ve never doubted walking at all.”

*‘A Decision to Choose Only Walking’ is on until 8 February.*

“I couldn’t then make other work. I had to discipline myself only to do things that were to do with walking”

MEDIA / ROMANIA

# Unheard realities

A journal is shedding light on eastern Europe.

WRITER *Tom Jeffreys*  
PHOTOGRAPHER *Hovatu Sovaiala*



“We like to see the magazine as both timeless and timely,” says Petrica Mogos, who co-founded *Kajet* with Laura Naum. The pair started what they call “a journal of eastern European encounters” as a way of responding to the often stereotyped portrayal of the region’s citizens, culture and politics in English-language media.

Launched in 2017, the magazine has so far published three issues addressing big ideas and complex histories with a light touch. Each is dedicated to a theme (so far these have been communities, utopias and struggle) and has seen Mogos and Naum work with a different graphic designer. “*Kajet* is an opportunity to experiment,” says Naum. From in-depth articles on memory and public space in Kiev, to magical realist fiction set during Romania’s communist regime, the magazine spans an eclectic gamut that’s reflected in its size. Instalments arrive through the letterbox with a satisfying thump: at 230 pages, *Kajet* is a hefty tome.

It’s been a busy few months for Mogos and Naum (pictured, Naum on left). Most recently they have launched Camera Arhiva, a freely accessible online archive of 20th-century Romanian visual culture. The team has also relocated to a handsome building in the centre of Bucharest constructed in 1947



for Vasile Canarache, who founded a number of publications and museums. *Kajet* shares this new home with graphic designer Alin Cinca. Together they see the new space as a collective platform for their myriad projects: from exhibitions to new publishing ventures. The first is Dispozitiv Books, a bookshop specialising in English-language books and magazines that you couldn’t find elsewhere in Bucharest. For Mogos, the “idea for such a bookshop has always been on our minds – even before we launched *Kajet*.”

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