



# REFLECTIONS ON BASEL

I recently attended a conference in Switzerland celebrating the 100th birthday of Dr. ALBERT HOFMANN, inventor of LSD. The good doctor is still ticking after a century on this planet—youthful spirit, funny, sharp as a whip, and overall a damn good spokesmodel for LSD. I want to take the drugs that will make me live to a happy hundred.

The conference allowed for fantastic opportunities to learn about recent research. Scientists from around the world discussed various plant-derived medicines. For example, one study reported on old ladies in nursing homes who were given small sacks filled with *Cannabis* to wear around their necks at bedtime—the aroma alone helped to provide a restful night's sleep. In another study, Amazonian plants showed remarkable promise in attacking soft-tissue tumors. German researchers are working with computer models to search out complex molecule combinations from 36 thousand plants.

Of course, ALBERT HOFMANN was the superstar of the event. Slowly moving through the throngs, HOFMANN could have been MADONNA or BRITNEY SPEARS, surrounded by a wall of fans, paparazzi, and security. I stood beside him for a long time, while we both examined the multitude of cabinets displaying 1960s memorabilia: out-of-print books on LSD, early research papers from the CIA and HARVARD, blacklight posters with the typical liquid-flowing lettering style from that era. I didn't want to disturb his delighted voyage down memory lane as just another groupie spewing the same drippy drivel he's heard for the last sixty-plus years. ("Thank you, Dr. HOFMANN. You changed my life forever!") So we soaked it all in together in silence.



At one point, a friend who was videotaping some of the conference found himself sitting directly behind ALBERT. The Swiss are fastidiously tidy and always impeccably dressed. So my buddy was dismayed when he noticed a short white hair on Dr. HOFMANN'S shoulder. He was about to non-invasively brush it off, when a wicked thought crossed his mind: eBay! Like the relics of old Christian saints, surely

this stray strand of DNA might at *least* be seen as having a powerful symbolic spiritual value? But my friend had crept himself out from his initial base desire for monetary gain, and he let the hair remain where it lay. (On hearing this story, someone later remarked that a profitable industry could be set up by rummaging through Dr. HOFMANN'S trash each week on garbage collection day.) If I had been there, I would

have snatched the hair in a heartbeat and created some conceptual art from it. Or maybe in the future, a clone...

Being a Californian, I always carry a bottle of water wherever I go—especially on planes, since they never give you enough liquids to compensate for the throat-parching pressurized-cabin environment. I arrived at my hotel late and jet-lagged, and awoke very early to make the conference's opening ceremonies. Not having time to refill my bottle (I still had about a cup of water remaining), I consumed what was left in the first fifteen minutes of Dr. HOFMANN'S remarks. So I stepped into the lobby to locate some more water. Basel has a dry high-altitude winter atmosphere; add to that the conference center's artificially heated air, and I was beginning to feel like I was in a desert. Yet search as I might, I was unable to locate any tables with glasses and pitchers of ice water (a staple at American conferences), nor even a single drinking fountain.





The cost of everything in Switzerland is through the ceiling. There's seemingly no unemployment, and salaries must be as high as their very comfortable standard of living indicates. At lunch one afternoon, the German anthropologist CHRISTIAN RÄTSCH remarked that you simply can't think about the cost of food while you are visiting Switzerland; if you did, you wouldn't ever eat anything. Could a simple sandwich really be fifteen dollars? And a thimble-sized bottle of water demand ten bucks?

Perplexed, I asked both the hotel staff and several Swiss conference attendees where I might find a drinking fountain. Everyone I asked responded that I could fill my bottle in the restroom. "Really? The restroom?" I balked, shuddering from the image of an American men's room that flashed across my mind. But the Swiss didn't even glance up at my question—they just went about their business. So I walked into the bathroom, and sure enough there was a sink with a tall curving stainless steel spigot rising up from a spotless and gleaming black porcelain sink. My face reflected off of every surface inside the restroom, including the floors and urinals. Nary a scrap of toilet paper sullied the floor, nor even a single drop of pee. Immaculate. It could have passed with an "A" under any restaurant's kitchen inspection code.

So I filled up my bottle and exited the restroom. But lifelong conditioning is hard to break, even for those whose mental facilities have been made more flexible via the use of psychedelics. Before I actually drank my bathroom-sourced water, I decided to ask a couple more conference staff and attendees what they thought. "Are you absolutely *sure* it is okay to drink water from the tap of the bathroom sink?"

"Of course it is okay," they responded proudly and somewhat insulted, again not looking up from their work. "This is Switzerland, not America. You can drink the water from anywhere, anytime."

"B-b-but..." I stammered, holding the bottle up to the light, "It looks a little... yellow." Without skipping a beat, each person responded, "This is because your bottle is from America, and it is probably dirty."

I was recounting this bathroom water story to my friend JON HANNA and to DIETER HAGENBACH, the organizer of the conference. JON was laughing his head off, but DIETER—who is Swiss—kept scratching his head with a puzzled look on his face. Again, even psychedelics may not be enough to soften long-held cultural conceptions. DIETER just couldn't wrap

his mind around the fact that Swiss water might pour out of their taps dirty. So in that very sweet, polite manner of the Swiss—while simultaneously realizing the humor in what he was about to say—he asked, "Yes, but maybe... your *bottle*... was dirty?"

It turns out that the conference hall lighting was casting a yellow tint on everything, including the white table cloths, making them appear cream-colored. The water was delicious.

Swiss trains run on time to the second. Stations have clocks that count down the minutes until the next train will arrive. The trains fly at high velocities and stop with military precision at a thin red line painted along the shiny marble tiles. Little metal plates attached to the train cabin walls near the exits express an unusually authoritative attitude: "EMERGENCY OPERATIONS, ALL ABUSES WILL BE PUNISHED." And somehow the Swiss have also mastered the *external* environment to comply with their orderly life-styles, commanding the snow to fall only in designated areas. I was in Basel ten days, and not once did it snow in the city. The surrounding countryside was thickly blanketed in snow: roof tops, parked cars, and roads were barely visible beneath the white canopy. But not a single snowflake landed inside Basel, and no snow banks were shoveled to the sides of the streets like any normal city in winter would display.

Departing from Basel, we rode the train for about an hour. Our destination was Europe's first absinthe bar, opened shortly after the Swiss lifted their hundred-year ban on this booze. (Funny that the ban was within the same time frame as ALBERT HOFMANN's life.) What a delicious drink! I don't usually like alcohol, but this beverage has a very pleasant inebriating effect. We were first introduced to absinthe at the conference, where ROGER LIGGENSTORFER—the Swiss owner of the drug book publishing house NACHTSCHATTEN VERLAG—had set up a small "outpost" bar. Following the conference, ROGER kindly invited us to his full Absinthe-Bar & Bistro, DIE GRÜNE FEE (THE GREEN FAIRY), located at Kronengasse 11 in Solothurn. The train ride's view was breathtaking, with its quaint old farmhouses and tiny postcard villages covered in snow.

Culturally important beverages tend to be ritualistically prepared: Japanese tea ceremonies, ayahuasca circles, frothy *Salvia divinorum* potions served up by virgins. Absinthe is no different. A large, sensually shaped glass-and-metal container is filled with water and ice. (ROGER explained that absinthe should never be served "on the rocks," as direct con-



tact causes the essential oils to cling to the ice cubes.) Narrow silver tubes protrude from the container like spokes. Tiny faucets capping each tube slowly release the chilled water: drip, drip, drip. Drop after drop splashes onto a sugar cube held by a perforated silver spoon laid on top of a glass that contains a shot of absinthe. Absinthe spoons come in many different styles, decorated with perforation patterns as unique as the snowflakes that never fall in Basel.

There are several approaches to serving absinthe. The first drink that ROGER made for us was a non-traditional offering called a “Bohemian.” The sugar cube was saturated with absinthe and lit on fire, allowing the sugar to melt and caramelize slightly. Once it had burned out, water dripping commenced, dissolving the sugar through the spoon’s holes into the glass of absinthe below. Sugar adds a crisp sweet flavor that intermingles well with the slightly bitter taste of the wormwood in absinthe. As the water mixed with the absinthe, the resulting liquid turned milky white. (I remarked that the color reminded me of Pernot, a French liqueur that is also mixed with water. ROGER responded that, apart from their similarity in color, Pernot is a castrated absinthe; it contains no wormwood.) Despite it being known as “the green fairy,” straight Swiss absinthe is traditionally clear. The herbs used to create a greenish alcohol were first introduced to absinthe produced in France. The proportion of water ultimately added can range anywhere from 2–4 parts water to 1 part absinthe. However, I preferred the absinthe without any water added at all, because I enjoyed the stronger taste. (But then again, I like very dark chocolate too.) DIE GRÜNE FEE serves eleven different brands of absinthe distilled from the Val des Travers region, the area where absinthe was illegally bootlegged during its prohibition. Each brand has its own unique flavor: some are more bitter, some more creamy, some have a stronger anise taste.

After a few drinks, we took a short and snowy car ride to the NACHTSCHATTEN VERLAG warehouse, where all of their books are stored. There is a special room dedicated solely to the SANDOZ LSD and psilocybin archives. Nearly every research paper and article published from 1943 (when the psychoactive effects of LSD were discovered), until 1986 (when collecting was discontinued), has been retained and catalogued: there are thousands of documents. (The few dozen articles I skimmed appeared to demonstrate the generally benign nature of LSD, and its lack of physical harm when ingested in the microgram doses at which it’s psychoactive.) Like leather-bound books in a rustic library, hardcover binders were neatly shelved and labeled: LSD 1943–1953, LSD 1953–1963, etc. But all of their contents had been stripped and reinserted into black vinyl three-ring binders, aligned on the shelf below. During 2001–2002, while preparing the papers for scanning and posting to the web (see [www.erowid.org/references/hofmann\\_collection.php](http://www.erowid.org/references/hofmann_collection.php)), the EROWIDS painstakingly removed the papers from their decaying original binders. When I opened one of the empty hardback binders, all that was left were these long one-inch strips that had previously held the papers in place, as if a stack of blotter papers had gone missing. A friend yelled out, “Look! Somebody ate all the acid!”

Later that evening we went to a private dinner party at an amazing traditional Swiss restaurant. I found Swiss food to be divine. It’s a cross between the German heavy meat-and-potatoes plate and the sauce-oriented French dishes, but artfully presented like California cuisine. They kept serving unique courses on oddly shaped



Top to bottom: Absinthe spoons hanging on wall at DIE GRÜNE FEE; lighting sugar cubes; flaming sugar; water drips from the fountain into glasses; João’s first taste.





platters all night. One dish was a savory horsemeat appetizer. Now I know what happens to Swiss horses when they go out to pasture.

On the last night of the conference, a group of us sat around the hotel lobby until 4:00 am; too tired to talk, but unwilling to say farewell. We get to see this smart group of people once or twice a year, so none of us wanted to miss spending any moments together. Who knew when we'd be together again in one place; BURNING MAN, perhaps?

My travelling companion and I were among the last ones to leave Basel, staying on a few days past the end of the conference. It was sad to say good-bye to everyone and watch the numbers dwindle down to the two of us. I wanted to spend my final evening as a tribute to Dr. HOFMANN's famous bicycle ride in 1943. So on a dose of about 100 micrograms each, we watched the Alps melt and we painted the town red... and yellow, and purple paisleys.  
—JOÃO SERRO



WITH A SORT OF “CAR WRECK/RUBBERNECK” MENTALITY, I am always fascinated by security procedures when crossing borders. Flying into the Miami airport, on my return from Jamaica, there was an escalator stretching down into the baggage claim area. From the top I could see a cop with a dog at the bottom. I don't know if he was trained to sniff for bombs or for drugs, but that lengthy escalator ride sure could cause any mule to break out in a sweat. I made sure to pet the pooch in a friendly manner—“Gooood doggie!”—as I passed by (thankfully, without anything illegal on my person). On my way to Switzerland, my first customs stop was in Germany. Stepping through the metal detector, the heavy zippers on my boots set off the alarm, and I was gruffly scuttled aside for the most personal frisking I can recall ever having experienced by a stranger. (The same thing happened on my return through Germany.) But in Switzerland itself? I can't say that I have ever entered a more laid-back country in my life.

The thing is, everybody loves the Swiss. The cheese! The chocolate! The finely crafted watches! Not to mention their handy Army knives! As a landlocked country surrounded by mountainous barriers, with a tradition of being a neutral safe-haven (while wars exploded around them), people just aren't going to fuck with the Swiss. Plus, military duty is obligatory for all male citizens 18–40, which means that every home is likely to have a gun in it somewhere. I mean seriously, even a criminally inclined person isn't going to wreak havoc on a country that houses much of the world's ill-gotten loot. God bless anonymous Swiss bank accounts. And so, when traveling into what may well be the safest country in the world,

there was no one at all who seemed to want to search my bags. My passport was only given a cursory flip open and shut, and the security person didn't even glance up to look at my face or ask me anything. (On my way out of the country, the person checking my passport merely released a grunt and didn't even open it—I'm not kidding.) Ah, to live somewhere where there is no fabricated fear of terrorism!

Crossing the border back into the United States took me at least fifteen minutes, as security x-rayed my boots and bags, pawed through my photography and computer gear (requiring me to turn on everything), swabbed my belongings with explosive-powder-detecting wipes, patted me down and wanded me, and then made me stand in a tiny room where jets of air were blown onto me with the surrounding air then analyzed to determine if any traces of explosive powder might be on my clothes. (I hate to think what sort of treatment I might have gotten if I was wearing an EMI KOYAMA “Suspected Terrorist” button.) As all this was happening, a wave of grief washed over me as I saw a mother explaining to her daughter—who looked about the same age as my own six-year-old girl—why it was that the strange security man would be touching her body to keep America safe.

Both of my mom's parents hailed from Switzerland. Mom, however, was born here in the United States. Alas, she never applied to retain her Swiss citizenship before she turned twenty-two, leaving me with little choice but to remain an



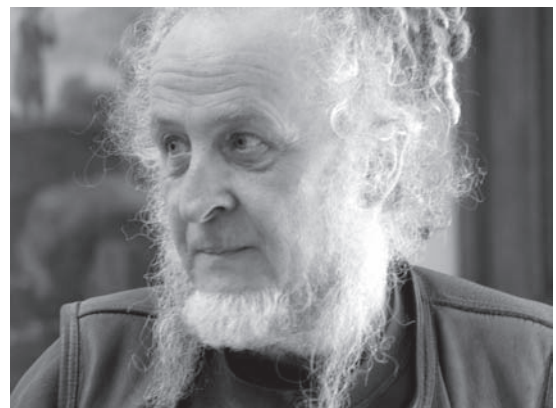


American. Prior to the conference, the last time I was in Switzerland I was seven years old, visiting relatives. It hasn't changed much.

I got to Basel a few days before the conference, in order to attend a birthday party for ALBERT HOFMANN held at the MUSEUM OF CULTURES. Late night, the evening before the party, I walked the mostly deserted city streets with some friends, stoned and silly, to make sure that we wouldn't have any trouble finding the museum the next day. When we reached the venue's door, I suddenly wished that I had brought a few sheets of vanity blotter with me. Broken into single hits, I could have scattered them over the cobblestones at the museum entrance as celebratory confetti. Would those opening the museum in the morning smile, or would they head for a broom?

The official ceremony the next day was a who's who of the entheocognoscenti, with over 200 guests. Even STANISLAV GROF—whom HOFMANN has called “the godfather of LSD”—made an appearance, despite the fact that he was unable to attend the conference itself. A representative from NOVARTIS (the company created from a 1996 merger of SANDOZ and CIBA-GEIGY) described the various pharmaceuticals that HOFMANN had invented for SANDOZ over the years. Several other people gave presentations as well. Alas, the talks were all in German, so I have no idea what was being said. However, I was told later that ALBERT was touched and surprised when a letter from the head of the Swiss Federal Council was read; President MORITZ LEUENBERGER apparently congratulated Dr. HOFMANN on his longevity, thanking him for his contributions that allowed artistic, philosophical, and religious questions to remain alive in the realm of science, and saluting him as a “great researcher of human consciousness.” (It would be hard to imagine SASHA SHULGIN ever getting such a letter from President BUSH!) ALBERT said a few words himself—to a standing ovation—and the formal portion of the party ended, leaving us to head over to a larger room for cocktails and socializing. I am happy that I got a chance to meet Dr. HOFMANN, who had the patience of a saint and the endurance of a marathon runner to smile and chat with such a long line of old and new friends.

When the birthday party wound down, a group of us headed to lunch. Not being able to read the menu, nor knowing what the best regional dish to order might be, I asked a German couple dining with us—CLAUDIA and CHRISTIAN—what they recommended, and we all ordered the same thing: *Zürcher Geschnetzeltes*. It turned out to be veal in a white wine cream sauce with mushrooms, and it acted as the first time-travel portal that I would step through via various meals during my stay in Basel. Now, I haven't eaten veal since—well, I can't recall since when; perhaps since my older brother described how baby calves are kept caged in tiny pens. Was that twenty-five years ago? Thirty? In any case, the food in Switzerland repeatedly caused my mind to be flooded with memories from childhood dinners at my



Top to bottom: (left to right) Dr. HOFMANN, EARTH EROWID, ROBERT FORTE, CHARLES S. GROB, JON HANNA (photo by FIRE EROWID); CHRISTIAN RÄTSCH, WOLF-DIETER STORL; H.R. GIGER, Dr. HOFMANN, STAN GROF; (photo by CARMEN SCHEIFELE); WERNER PIEPER.





From top: PARACELUSUS museum: *Datura* plant depicted in book; Human skull; SYLVIA absorbed (via PHOTOSHOP) into *The Spell II* (detail); 1974; acrylic on paper/wood); Bottom: *Li Room* H.R. GIGER MUSEUM (photo by WOLFGANG HOLZ).



grandparents: the bratwurst (alas, probably also made from veal), the *rösti* (fried potatoes), the cheese fondue with a shot of kirsch. Each meal made me think of things I hadn't remembered for decades. It was fairly surreal.

With our bellies full, we were off to another museum—this one dedicated to PARACELUSUS. Born about 400 years before ALBERT HOFMANN, PARACELUSUS was the original Swiss alchemist and pharmacologist. He is known for his famous quote, “All things are poison and nothing without poison; only the dose makes that a thing is not poison.” He is also credited for reintroducing opium into European medicine. The museum was a hodgepodge collection: countless vials of white powders, dried insects, a narwhal horn, a stuffed alligator hanging from the ceiling, chemistry glassware, books, paintings, and even some human skulls—one of which looked like it had been trepanned.

The following day, ALEX GREY kindly offered to rent a car and drive some of us to the H.R. GIGER MUSEUM. The museum is a few hours from Basel, between Fribourg and Lake Geneva in the town of Gruyères. The ride was filled with enjoyable conversation, learning more from ALLYSON and ALEX about the latest going's-on with their CHAPEL OF SACRED MIRRORS project.

The museum is located at the top of a hill, where no cars are allowed to drive. With its snow-covered chalets and breathtaking view of the Alps, the town looked as though it could have been straight out of a HEIDI story-book. It was hard to imagine that Gruyères could actually be topped with a building housing the nightmarish visions of the Swiss bad boy of the art world.

Did I mention that Dr. HOFMANN's birthday party had a lot of cool folks in attendance? H.R. GIGER there. I tapped his shoulder at one point and told





him, “Nice job with the art,” and he smiled back at me. Rock stars don’t turn me into a giddy schoolgirl, but get me around certain psychedelic chemists or visionary artists, and the suppressed groupie in me starts to surface.

Without a doubt, GIGER is one of the world’s most impressive, innovative, and influential living artists. Perhaps best known for his design work on the *Alien* movies, GIGER’s dark “biomechanical” style has been appropriated as the look for an entire genre of dystopian sci-fi flicks: *Star Trek’s* borg, *I, Robot*, and *The Matrix*, to name just a few. GIGER’s art is a perennial favorite among tattoo enthusiasts—one area in which GIGER doesn’t mind being ripped off, since these “collectors” are truly dedicated fans.

The museum was incredible. GIGER has technical mastery over a wide variety of art mediums, equally comfortable with drawing, airbrushing, painting, or sculpting. He’s produced thematic concepts for film, created furniture and architecture, made fashionable watches for SWATCH, cast jewelry, and even designed a microphone stand for JONATHAN DAVIS, the singer for KORN. He recently licensed his art for use on a series of IBANEZ guitars.

Much of GIGER’s work is extremely large, and the museum went on and on. It was quite a visual treat to have such an amazing scope of GIGER’s work collected in one place. The museum had four levels, with the top floor consisting of GIGER’s personal art collection of other incredible artists. (Some of my favorite pieces included works by ARMAN ARMAND, ERNST FUCHS, and JOE COLEMAN.) After being thoroughly blown away, we crossed the street to the GIGER BAR—suitably designed with skeletal chairs and ceiling arches—where my friend SYLVIA and I had our first taste of Swiss absinthe from a bottle distilled right there in Gruyères. It was somewhat amusing watching the locals, charming little old men, sitting in this hellish watering hole having their afternoon nips.



Top to bottom: SYLVIA & ALEX in GIGER BAR; window views from GIGER BAR (photos by WOLFGANG HOLZ).





The following day the conference kicked off—and what a conference it was! Undoubtedly the largest psychedelic symposium that has ever been held, it drew attendees and presenters from all over the world, including a large American contingent. Over 2000 folks were present at what MICHAEL HOROWITZ has described as “the ‘WOODSTOCK’ of psychedelic conferences.” And indeed, there was a palpable sense of being present at a history-making event. Along with putting us speakers up in the swankiest hotel I have ever had the pleasure to stay in, the hotel was directly connected to the humongous conference center. Concurrent presentations were held in multiple rooms, forever too much to soak in or possibly see, but a wonderful assortment of choices to sample. Many of the speakers were oldsters from the 1960s, sharing humorous personal anecdotes and whimsical stories about interactions with famous bands like PINK FLOYD and the GRATEFUL DEAD. The main lobby was filled to the brim with visionary art, cultural memorabilia, a smart bar, and a bounty of vendor booths. (One booth was selling sealed glass ampoules—reminiscent of the vials that SANDOZ LSD used to come in—filled with ergot. An attached booklet explained that LSD was produced from this starting material. It was the ultimate conference memento for the drug geek schwag collector.)

No conference that I have ever been to (including my own), has been as well-produced as this event was. Everything ran on schedule. The latest conference tech was available to presenters and attendees alike. I was pleased to notice a screen monitor for presenters next to the podium, negating the need to strain my neck to view images from the gigantic screen in the main hall while I was giving my presentation on hallucinatory animation. And that screen, that screen, that wonderful screen! Split images were projected onto it, so that folks could see a presenter’s POWERPOINT slides along with a towering live head-shot of the presenter, which was being filmed and projected simultaneously. With the real-time movie-style presentation, there wasn’t a bad seat in the house. Many (if not most) of the presentations given in the main hall had concurrent translations into either English or German, which were made available on radio-controlled headsets to anyone in the audience. I was pleased to see that—with the headphone attachment removed—a simple mini-jack cord allowed the translator unit to be plugged into my video camera, letting me record the translation for those talks presented in German. (Unfortunately, the organization officially recording the event didn’t tape any of the translations, making me even happier that I had discovered the tech-hack for those German talks that I taped.)

During the opening ceremonies, two nuns flanked the entrance to the main hall, handing out religious literature. Sister SARA TONIN of the PERPETUAL COSMIC DISORDER and CHURCH OF TRICK slapped a small *Chemical Salvation?* booklet into the hand of a friend as we passed into the auditorium. The booklet, a history of LSD with a spiritual bent, was a parody of JACK CHICK’s Christian comic tracts. A stack of these came in handy later, when my buddy JOÃO and I went outside the conference hall to engage a group of Scientologists who were protesting the event. Following a short interview (see [www.entheogenreview.com/cchr.html](http://www.entheogenreview.com/cchr.html)), there was a literature exchange. They gave us their propaganda; we gave them ours. Psychedelic researcher CHARLES S. GROB, M.D. remarked to me later that if Scientologists are protesting LSD enthusiasts, then that *surely* must be evidence that we’ve practically become “the establishment.”

As usually is the case for me at such events, I ended up spending much more time catching up with old friends and meeting new ones, than I did attending talks. Additionally, being sucked into the HALPERNGATE controversy (see page 9) consumed an abundance of my time. So I am perhaps not the best source for details about who said what in the official program. Thankfully, many of the talks are available for purchase on CD or DVD (see [www.lsd.info](http://www.lsd.info)), so I hope to someday catch a bit of what I missed.

There is really no way that I could say enough good things about this conference, which was presented with elegance and style. Knowing how stressed out and short-tempered I can get at my own events, I was even more impressed with the smiling, calm, unharried, always-attentive conference producer DIETER HAGENBACH. His demeanor will forevermore be the mental example I’ll call upon when I begin to freak out under the pressures of MIND STATES productions. The other WONDER DRUG producers, LUCIUS WERTHMÜLLER and MICHAEL GASSER, and their assistant ANGELA CONSIGLI, were equally composed and gracious hosts. LUCIUS interviewed doc HOFMANN at several points during the event, and MICHAEL orchestrated the massive conference bookstore, which was a central hub for the 2000+ customers who attended the event. ANGELA quickly and cheerfully answered any questions that I had throughout the event, and even asked that my animation presentation be shown a second time for those who might have missed the first screening, which I was happy to oblige. Congratulations to everyone at the GAIA MEDIA FOUNDATION for a job amazingly well done. I can’t imagine that Dr. HOFMANN has ever before had a birthday party quite like this one. — JON HANNA

