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Harald Szeemann
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ART REVIEWS

New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

Margot Bergman's doll images, Harald Szeemann's quirky tribute to his grandfather, and the neo-Classicists rising again.

Harald Szeemann

Through Aug. 18. Swiss Institute, 38 St. Marks Place, Manhattan; swissinstitute.net.



Harald Szeemann's show focuses on his grandfather.
Balthasar Burkhard, via J. Paul Getty Trust



"Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us" includes more than 1,200 objects. Daniel Perez

In the 1960s and '70s, Harald Szeemann (1933-2005) was a groundbreaking curator who helped redefine contemporary art. But he wasn't opposed to making art himself, as "[Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us](#)," originally from 1974 and now recreated at the Swiss Institute, shows. This wild and (literally) hairy installation focuses on the life of his grandfather, Étienne Szeemann, a Hungarian immigrant to Switzerland who became a successful hairstylist, wig maker and inventor. It includes 1,200 curious objects, most from the grandfather's collection.

The elder Szeemann, it becomes quickly apparent, was a character. He collected combs and emergency currency (circulated after World War II), loved Chihuahuas (a stuffed one is here) and his adopted nation (a Swiss cross emblem made with the hair of his clients is proudly displayed). He also invented a permanent-wave machine for hair — it looks more like a torture device or a Dadaist sculpture — and attended every exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern when his grandson was its director and curator.

This show is reminiscent of absurd [surrealist exhibitions](#) or Marcel Broodthaers's "[Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles](#)" (1968-72), which was originally mounted in the artist's own home, like this one. This installation also argues that anything can be art and anyone can be an artist; it's just a matter of context and definition. In Harald Szeemann's hands, his grandfather became a maker and a pioneer — and ultimately, an artist. *MARTHA SCHWENDENER*