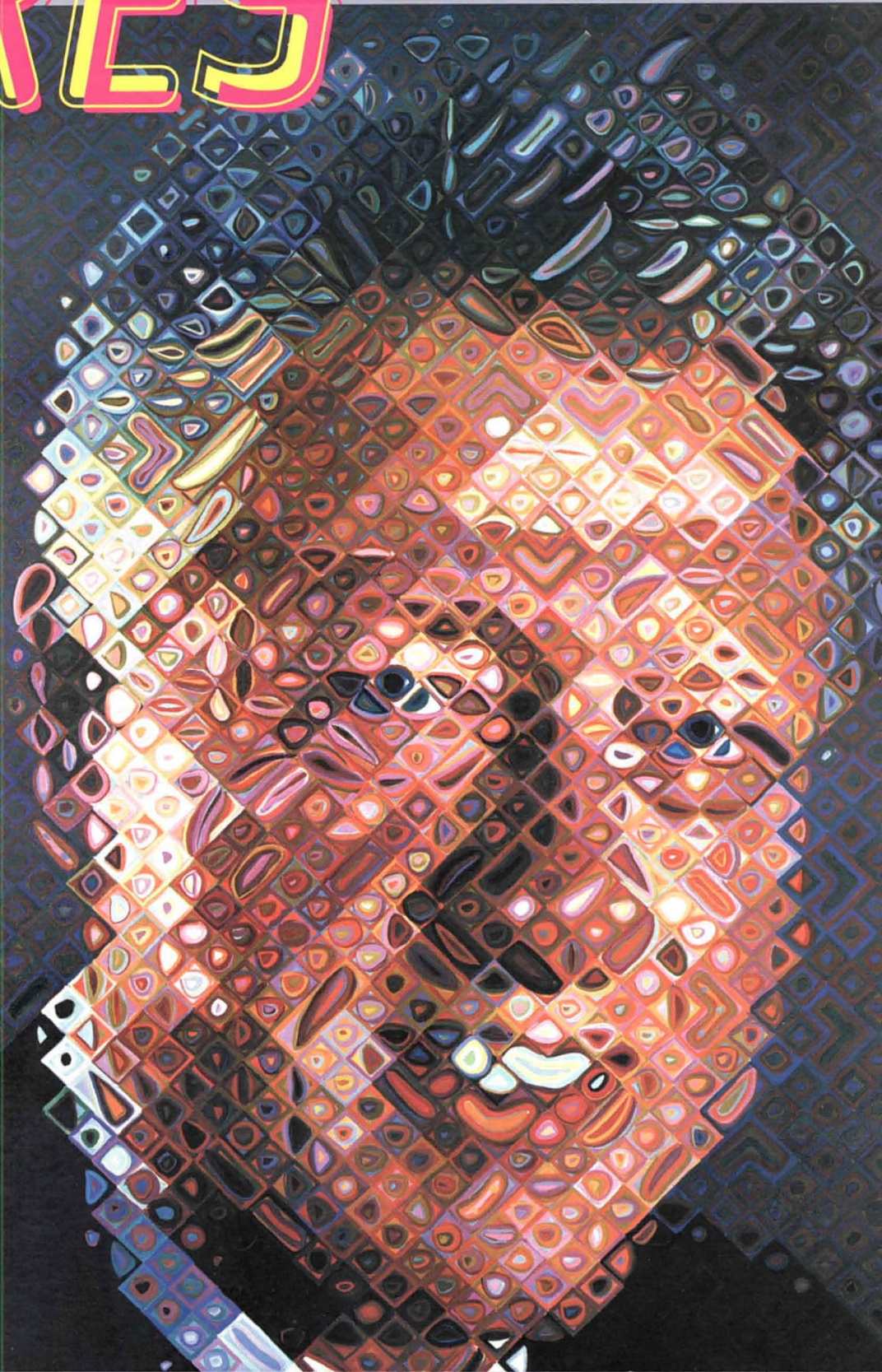


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CONVERSATION WITH MATTHIAS ARNDT

PACO BARRAGÁN

'I truly love and believe in a direct interaction and exchange with the artists and the audience'

Arndt is celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 2014. It's a remarkable event in a competitive sector as contemporary art is today, and a perfect opportunity for an overall recapitulation of the gallery's trajectory. We talked to Matthias Arndt about his experience with the art market, art fairs, collectors, and the challenges a gallery is called to face in the 21st Century.

PACO BARRAGÁN In your opinion, what were the gallery's strongest achievements during the past twenty years?

MATTHIAS ARNDT The first major achievement was that we succeeded in bringing the art market to Berlin, a place that in the early post-wall days was teeming with international artists but had no market and practically no local support. When we opened in 1994, I have been told that 'Berlin will never, never ever make it'. Düsseldorf and Cologne were at the centre of the German art market. So together with the artists and a group of fellow gallerists we managed to transform Berlin into an art centre and create the premises for the international audience to come over here.

Another major achievement was commercial success. After having identified the artists I would consider fundamental for my time and my understanding of what art is and what it can do within society, we successfully built a market around them, including artists who don't make the most commercial work like Thomas Hirschhorn, Sophie Calle, Nedko Solakov and later on Gilbert & George. Since I had no startcapital, family means or connections, I had to conceive the gallery as a solid and viable business, mainly for the artists but also for myself. Making the right artistic choices definitely helped. We participated in major international art fairs like Art Basel, Art Basel Miami, Frieze and FIAC from the beginning. Parallel to this, during the first seven years of the gallery, I worked as an advisor, establishing a company for arts management. We worked for Documenta, in 1997, Expo 2000 in Hannover, and the Volkswagen Group, and we developed a communication platform for the Berlin art scene, such as the Berlin Art Week.

PB Conversely, what are the fields where the gallery has been less successful or failed to meet your expectations?

MA Building a structure and growing with the artists was and certainly is the most exciting part of my business. But the larger a structure becomes, the less you can focus on contents, core-businesses and strengths. I primarily conceived the gallery as a forum for the artists and a tool to expand the radius of their work to a larger international audience, but with the growth of the artists roster, 2000 sqm of space in Berlin and Zurich, offices in New York and Beijing, and



Migration Melbourne
 Migration Melbourne Edition
 30 October to 15 December 2012
 Migration migrates to Melbourne, Australia's leading cultural city
 Arndt Australia Announces Melbourne Pop Up Exhibition

a staff of 35 people [a big structure even for international standards], I found myself more like a manager of a global corporation than the art expert working on the content side and the pulse of artistic creation. But I wasn't ready to make massive concessions towards a much more commercial orientation and sacrifice what I considered relevant in art. I should have hired exclusively 'sales staff' – management consultants, financial directors, etc. but this was not the vision I had for my business. So I had to make a tough choice and halt my business expansion in order to reorganise and reposition my operation. I took advantage of the global financial crisis to think how, from my personal perspective, the format of a 21st century gallery should be like to respond to the needs of artists and clients in a global art market. Today I have a staff of twelve people between Berlin and Singapore, with me working as a dealer, agent, advisor and expert for International and Southeast-Asian Contemporary Art.

PB You just mentioned the crisis and the choices you had to make to make the gallery economically viable. Yet, despite of the crisis, there are more galleries now than ever, and the world has become more global. What are in your opinion the most important changes that have affected the modus operandi of the gallery? [Like for example the traditional sale with a more direct and intimate relationship with the collector]

MA The art business has changed on many levels since we opened the door twenty years ago in Berlin. The good news is that contemporary art has never been more in demand and more accessible than today. You can safely say that the audience and the market have increased over the past ten-fifteen years. On the other hand, with more players involved, the pressure and competition between artists, collectors, gallerists and curators is dramatically more intense. Artists, once in the limelight, are forced to be more productive. They also choose to work with more dealers, and be represented in every major art capital in the west hemisphere and Far East Asia. As for dealers, from being a reference point for collectors looking for a particular piece or simply seeking advice, they now have to work in a world where information about the whereabouts and the cost of an artwork are verifiable with a mouse click through platforms like artnet.com, artprice.com etc. Auction houses and secondary market dealers have realized that the primary market is a lucrative place to cop clients and direct consignments from artists. Art fairs have earned immense importance as platforms for the display and trade of art and for networking in general. Last but not



Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies, August 01 – October 03, 2014
Indonesian Art Now, Group exhibition
Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide
Australia, Curated by Matthias Arndt

least, large corporate collections have increased their influence as tastemakers and trendsetters, with bigger budgets than many public institutions. So the environment we are working in today is 100% different from what it was twenty years ago. Having said that, change is the motor for all innovation and progress. I never understood the concept of the commercial gallery as a static format, and I never stopped asking myself how to improve my business model and what services I have to provide to the artists, as well as to the private, corporate and public collections I work with. So in 2010 I announced a change of format and approach, working on 'ARNDT 2.0' if you like. Gallerists today have to be dealers as well as agents, advisors and experts.

PB Since the beginning of the 21st century, art fairs have become the absolute key players in the art world, and the sales platform par excellence for a gallery. This of course can be read in different ways. What are the positive and less positive sides of what I framed as the 'art fair age' from your perspective?

MA Art fairs have undoubtedly become the focal point – a situation that presents many advantages for all parties involved. At key conventions such as Art Basel, Art Basel Miami, Art Basel Hong Kong, FIAC or Frieze, dealers present their best works, collectors and curators have the best offer in a limited time and territory, and have perfect conditions for networking. However, the pressure behind the scenes is immense. Artists now produce for fairs rather than for solo shows in galleries, and cater to a larger audience. Dealers are engaged in an extreme competition to stay on board, with selection committees composed of other dealers deciding about their competitors' application. Finally, the costs and efforts demanded by major art fairs are huge, and inevitably affect the selection of artists and works on show. So art fairs are incredibly important, but the education of the audience, the long term advisory of the clientele and also the career edification of an artist is still happening in galleries, museums and other institutions. And fairs wouldn't exist without galleries. I truly believe in the direct interaction and exchange with the artists and the audience, and that's the reason why I stuck to the idea of having my own space in Berlin, and now also in Singapore.

PB Let's talk about your gallery in Singapore. Why Singapore? What is your experience in terms of local collectors and institutions?

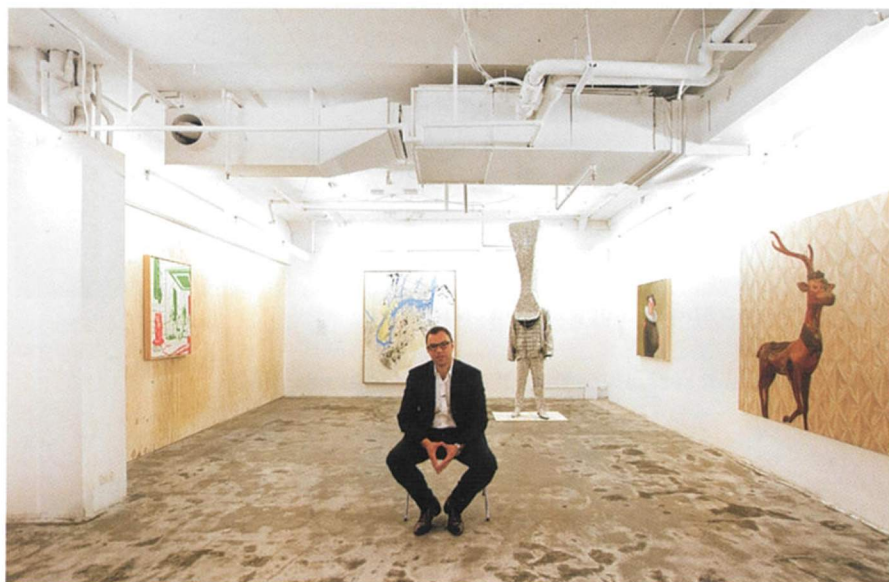
MA I started visiting Asia about six years ago, and was particularly fascinated by the depth and diversity of the Southeast-Asian artistic landscape. 'ASIA: Looking South', our first show with SEA Art in Berlin in 2011, was an 'eye-opener' for me. For personal reasons my family had to move to Australia. Geographically, Singapore is in the middle between Berlin and Melbourne. It is also the biggest 'Art Hub' in Asia after Hong Kong, where many international galleries and businesses are already operating. Most importantly, Singapore is the gateway to Southeast Asia. The idea of Gillman Barracks, a gallery and art centre in a former army compound appealed to me and reminded me of Berlin, where many dealers and artists successfully worked together to create a major international art hub. So we started with a smaller space in January 2013, and we will expand to a larger location in January 2015, with my family and I finally moving to Singapore in June.

PB In your Singapore branch you have started to do pop-up exhibitions. You also stressed the importance of educating the audience. Can you talk about this and what motivated this approach?

MA The pop-up shows actually started in Sydney and Melbourne in 2012. Both exhibitions were titled



Art Basel, 2008
Basel



Migration Sydney
Migration
First International Pop Up Show by ARNDT
opening in Sydney March 26th
March 27th to July 10th 2012
Photo by Gerard Wood

'Migration'. One was in a former office building and one in a former Institute for Blind People. The idea is not new but is effective. It's about showing art in unconventional spaces and environments, enabling a new audience to approach it without that 'Schwellenangst' of them not being art experts. But it also vitalises and created a buzz in the existing art community. Commercially, both shows did incredibly well (they also ended up being as expensive and as much as an effort as a running a permanent gallery). We were surprised to see how many people turned up. Not having a commercial gallery in some areas enables you to work in a different way. For example, I am now advising a number of private collections and museums in Asia-Pacific.

For Singapore we have different plans. It will be a permanent space, and we are already collaborating with many local institutions as well as setting up initiatives and events. For every exhibition we organize an artist's talk, produce a short online film about the artist, the work, and the show, and we will soon start holding 'Art Appreciation Courses', working with external experts we either invite to Singapore or who come to visit. And we will continue on our mission to bring the best emerging and established artists from Asia to Berlin and Europe, and premiere major international shows in Singapore while expanding our activity in Asia and Australia as well.

PB In light of your experience, what would you recommend to a young professional who wants to open a gallery?

MA The advice I would give to someone who would like to open a gallery is the following:

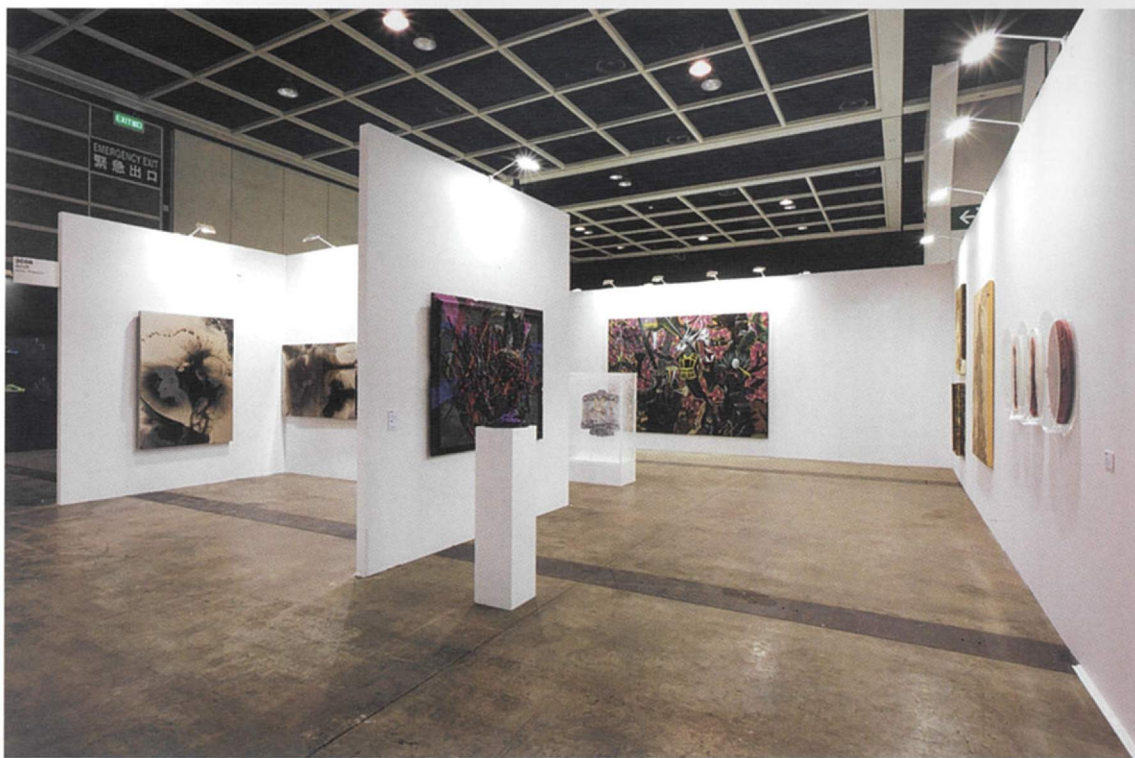
1. Do an internship or an apprenticeship in a major gallery first, and get an insight into the secondary market before starting your own business.
2. If you still want to do it, then make sure you have a business plan that allows you to be financially independent for at least three or four years.
3. Have a global vision and overview, and be a good networker. Without alliances there is no growth in any business.
4. Think out of the box. There is no formula or written rule about what a gallery has to be in the 21st century.
5. Do your own thing and avoid business partnerships and other investments until your own sense of business is mature enough.
6. Build an inventory as soon and as much as you can.

PB In what way the 2014 Matthias Arndt resembles the 1994 Matthias Arndt? How has he changed?

MA The 2014 Matthias Arndt has fewer illusions about enthusiasm and passion being the only condition for success in art today. Business acumen, figures and networking are of even greater importance for my success today. So the 2014 Matthias Arndt is grateful for the twenty years of experience, global expertise, and contacts that make things so much easier. The 1994 Matthias' spirit of following his own curiosity to discover and explore new art landscapes and markets and bring the best from one world to the other, either by being the initiator and the moderator, trusting his feeling for quality and his intuition for identifying new trends is still with me and is the main driving force for everything I do. ●

Matthias Arndt (Frankfurt, 1968) is a gallerist, advisor and dealer based in Berlin and Singapore. In 1994 he founded the gallery Arndt & Partner in Berlin, subsequently opening other branches in Zurich and now Singapore. He has lectured at the Berlin Institute for Cultural and Media Management from 1996 to 2004, and was named Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 2001.

Paco Barragán is an independent curator and a PhD Candidate at University of Salamanca in Spain. He served as co-curator for the International Biennale of Contemporary Art in Prague in 2005 and the Bienal de Lanzarote in 2009, and has organized a number of international exhibitions including 'The End of History and The Return of History Painting' at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem (MMKA) in Arnhem (2010), and 'Patria o libertad. The Rethorics of Patriotism', at MoCCA in Toronto (2011). He is a Contributing Editor of Art Pulse magazine and has authored many books and publications, including 'The Art Fair Age' (Charta, 2008) and co-editor with Selene Wendt of 'When a Painting moves... Something Must be Rotten!' (Charta, 2011).



Art Basel, 2014
Hong Kong



Exhibition View, 2014
Art Stage Singapore
ARNDT Booth

