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MATTHIAS ARNDT

"Art needs a healthy urban environment: music and drugs and prostitution."

EUGENE HÜTZ, GOGOL BORDELLO

"When you're in love, you hardly ever know what the fuck is really going on."

LUKAS MOODYSSON

"Avatar's success reminds me what an enormously immature and childish business I work in."



"The new East is the West," says "pioneer" gallerist Matthias Arndt. "Art needs a healthy urban environment: drugs and prostitution and music."

Matthias Arndt founded Arndt & Partner in 1994, the gallery where Sophie Calle, Thomas Hirschhorn, Nedko Solakov and Gilbert & George had their first Berlin solo exhibitions. He also set up Artservices, a cultural management and education company, and devised the Kunstherbst art festival. Arndt & Partner has been at the forefront of the gallery scene's spread and migration – from a dilapidated building in Hackesche Höfe to swankier quarters on Zimmerstraße and then Heidestraße, as well as outposts in Zurich, Beijing and New York. In May, Arndt went solo with his eponymous gallery on Schöneberg's Potsdamer Straße.

You've been observing the Berlin art scene from a privileged vantage point. How would you characterize it? It's never been as strong, historically, as it is now. There's a density and strength that wasn't there when I came to West Berlin in 1988. Of course, there was a different artistic life then, on both sides. A lot of that has gone. But luckily – because it's the only way the city can survive – Berlin has professionalised itself on various levels. Institutionally, in particular.

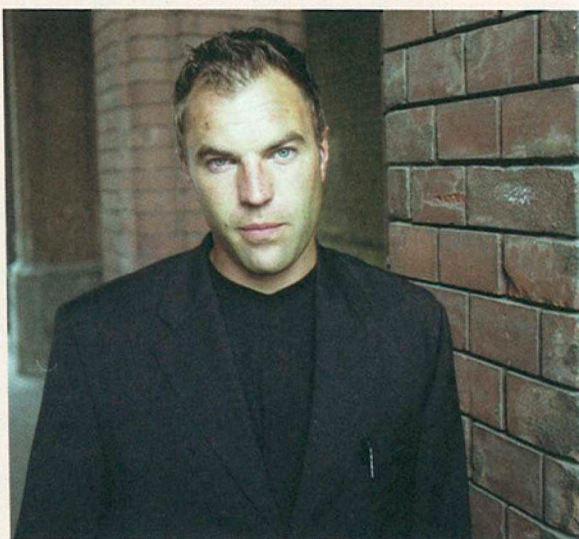
What's changed? First, there was a new director at Kunst-Werke, Susanne Pfeffer; then Udo Kittelmann at the Neue Nationalgalerie and Hamburger Bahnhof. And now Thomas Köhler is at the Berlinische Galerie. There are new people at Kunst-Werke and the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. It's amazing how much has changed in the last five years. Formerly all the power was in the hands of one guy – Peter-Klaus Schuster, the director general of the Preussischer Kultur Besitz, who was also in charge of Hamburger Bahnhof and the Nationalgalerie. So he sat on the only powerful institutions for contemporary art. The Hamburger Bahnhof was dominated by the collection of Erich Marx, which suffocated the function of that institution: it had to rely on private collections, and those were on loan, not donated.

So Berlin's institutions are just catching up with its artists? Yes. They're giving room to contemporary art now, professionally. Likewise with the art markets and the Gallery Weekend.

So what about the infrastructure you, the gallerists, have set up? Are you involved with the Gallery Weekend? I was. I'm not sure whether I was a "founding member", but I was in the first wave. There have been so many alliances and discussions over the years. At first, there was a bigger group of six to eight, and then more of us were invited. Then we elected a very small group of people to give form to those talks; they founded a company to run the business of the Gallery Weekend. I love the Gallery Weekend – though this year I wasn't invited. It's being copied in New York now, and other cities are thinking of doing a Gallery Weekend, too. They're learning from the Berlin spirit!

How would you characterize that spirit? We started with the artists. First, we built galleries around them, which also functioned as art centres because none existed at the time. They were less commercial and had an educational approach. Then we had to finance these huge centres we all built, me and my colleagues – Neugerriemschneider, Esther Schipper, Ulrich Gebauer, all these amazing people that work here. We had to build the economic structures to support our work. We were putting all the money we made back into that structure, making it stronger.

We were working all over the world, because there wasn't



the money in Berlin. It's important now for Berlin to be a great host city, to attract as many visitors as possible. It's visitors who bring in the discourse (curators); they bring in the money (collectors and museums). In terms of bringing the outside world in, the Gallery Weekend may be Berlin's best tool.

What then is the role of the art fairs – Art Forum, for example? The fair has new directors and I think they'll do a good job, but from the beginning, I was saying, 'Don't do it too big! Do it Berlin-style, in a disused building!' That was the way the Armory Show in New York started. Basel is a marketplace for art; Cologne is a marketplace. One day, Berlin will hopefully be that too.

You opened Arndt Berlin with a show called *Changing the World*. Can art do that? I first encountered art at 15 years old with Joseph Beuys – the whole cliché. I went into a room and was changed... Not by energy, but by wanting to understand what it meant. By seeing that there's no direct explanation of things, but there's an ambience... space... a statement: a kind of total feeling. That changed my perspective. It made me see things differently. If I see something and think of a work by [sculptor] Thomas Hirschhorn, my perspective changes, my actions change. Through this detour of thinking about art, the world can be changed.

How is Berlin's success as an art city changing it? Art has flourished without being invited. Berlin desperately tries to get industry into the city – to enchant investors: they spent millions to get Universal and other companies here; they make them nice nests. Olafur Eliasson didn't get a subsidy to come here. No one pays for Thomas Demand's studio. But Berlin's art industry is very successful. And it's built a serious market return, and indirect profitability in restaurants, hotels, framers, production companies, laboratories – what we all spend on our businesses, and artists spend on their employees.

Does it face any dangers? The only danger is trying to be more like London or New York. Berlin lives from its 'specialness', and I don't mean its poverty. The way we've built all this up is in the Berlin spirit: financially conscious – within economic frameworks – but also with a lot of improvisation. That's what people come to Berlin for; not to see it like other places. If, while maintaining this spirit, Berlin can still be a good and polite host, it will succeed.

ARNDT | Potsdamer Str. 95, Schöneberg, U-Bhf Kurfürstenstr., Tel 030 2061 3870, Tue-Sat 11-18:00, www.arndtberlin.com. From June 11-Sep 15, Arndt will be showing Dennis Scholl's *Schmelzende Teilnehmung* and Nedko Solakov's *The Optimistic Stories*.