

## A world outside the white cube

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Matthias Arndt in his Sydney pop-up space with works by Chinese artist Sui Jianguo. **Photo: Louise Kennerley**

### Katrina Strickland

When Matthias Arndt opened his gallery in Berlin in 1994, the first West German to launch a contemporary art gallery in the re-opened East, he quickly realised that while artists were flocking to the German capital, those buying the art tended to live elsewhere.

“When I started there in 1994, there wasn’t such a thing as an art market in Berlin,” Arndt says.

“So I was looking all over Europe, to North America, South America, Mexico. I had to build a market.”

He did that very successfully, selling contemporary works to collectors and institutions around the globe, including in Australia, to institutions such as the Sydney and Adelaide state galleries, and collectors such as John Kaldor.

A chance meeting with Tiffany Wood, an Australian who has spent 23 years abroad working with auction houses Sotheby’s and Phillips de Pury in London, New York and Berlin, and at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, led to marriage and the birth of their son, August, who is three.

Now, following a long tradition of Australians moving home after the birth of their children, the 43-year-old Arndt has arrived in Australia, with big plans.

Perhaps surprisingly, they do not involve opening a permanent gallery space. Rather, he and Wood will stage a series of pop-up shows with work by European artists such as Gilbert & George, Sophie Calle and Thomas Hirschhorn, as well as Asia Pacific stars such as India’s Jitish Kallat and Eko Nugroho from Indonesia.

He plans to take artists from the region back to Berlin, where he still has a gallery, and into collections he has handled across the northern hemisphere, and also to sell work by his European artists into collections across the Asia Pacific. “I do not expect to be fed by the Australian market only,” Arndt says.

He will steer clear of Australian art for now, reasoning that he is not an expert and there are plenty of good people here who are, but that could change over time.

Many dealers talk about the impending demise of the white cube gallery; Arndt is acting on the talk. He will represent some artists, but not exclusively, and will include work by artists he doesn’t represent, some bought outright and some on consignment.

Further, he will hold shows in a range of places depending on the need – sometimes in his own pop-up space, sometimes in an existing gallery (he did a group show in Singapore in January this way), sometimes in public

galleries.

“Galleries need to find a new way of doing things,” he says.

“The art market is now global and no single conventional gallery can represent artists successfully.

“An artist doesn’t necessarily need a new show in Berlin every two to three years, but he needs an international strategy, and that is what I will help him do.”

Arndt’s first pop-up show opens in Sydney on March 26, timed to coincide with the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art’s new wing and in a space just around the corner.

It will feature 70 works by 40 international artists, priced from \$US6000 (\$5700) up to \$US450,000 for a George Baselitz oil on canvas. A second pop-up show is planned for Melbourne later in the year, and Arndt will have a stall at the Melbourne Art Fair in August.

It’s a global strategy for a globalised sector, and it will be interesting to see how it works.

The timing is certainly prescient. Australian collectors historically have focused on artists from their own backyard, almost exclusively. But that has changed markedly in the past decade, thanks to the proliferation of art fairs and cashed-up collectors happy to travel the world to see, learn and buy.

The high dollar has helped lower the blinkers, as collectors who were previously priced out of the white hot global sphere realise they can buy international contemporary art at prices not wildly above those charged for Australian works.

More international contemporary art has gone on show in our public galleries in recent years, too, thanks to developments such as the new Kaldor wing at the Art Gallery of NSW and the opening of David Walsh’s Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart and Judith Neilson’s White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney.

Deutscher and Hackett is also getting in on the act, with plans to show mostly international art in its New Albion Gallery from 2013. D+H board member Doug Hall, a former Queensland Art Gallery director and Venice Biennale commissioner, is using his contacts in Asia and beyond to secure representation for some big global art names for D+H.

Hall credits London dealer Anthony d’Offay with getting contemporary international art into Australian galleries and private collections many years ago, during his regular trips here – “his legacy is very substantial” – but he agrees that interest from collectors and the public has jumped in recent years.

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