

IN FAVOUR OF TRANSPARENCY

A ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION ON COLLECTORS AND COLLECTIONS WITH CANDICE BREITZ, PEGGY BUTH, JONATHAN MONK AND ANDREAS SIEKMANN, MODERATED BY SVEN BECKSTETTE



Jonathan Monk, "The distance between me and you", 2001/02, Filmstill; © Sammlung Haubrok

Sven Beckstette: The heightened interest of collectors of contemporary art is a relatively recent development in terms of scope and the way it attracts public attention – it's perhaps 30 years old. Why can one observe this phenomenon so strongly at the moment, and – connected to this – what is the relationship between artists and collectors today? I would like to ask this question to you first, Jonathan, because you produced a work specifically for the Berlin-based collector Axel Haubrok. The piece consists of twelve Super 8 films titled "The distance between me and you" (2001–2002). How would you describe

this distance, or closeness, between yourself and the collector?

Jonathan Monk: I was involved with projects that needed someone to activate them or needed someone at the end of the process. The work couldn't really exist unless it got to someone. With that particular piece, I needed someone to receive the film copies. Each reel showed the bike trip from where I lived to the post office; I filmed this journey with a Super 8 camera mounted on the handlebars. It was like three minutes per ride and when I got there I just took the film, put it in an envelope and sent it to Kodak in Stuttgart where it got processed. Kodak would then send the film directly back to whomever it was, and in this case it was Haubrok. With this move, the piece wouldn't be so easily transferred to some sort of market. It's very difficult to resell something that it is very personal or specific to one person.

Beckstette: In this case, entering into a relationship initially takes place only in one direction in that you don't address the work to "anyone" but a collector. Seeking a dialogue with him is characteristic of an artist-collector relationship, because it is shaped to a considerable degree by desire and dependency. How do you deal with this relationship's asymmetry? And how important is it, particularly in the case of these works, that the collector pays for the correspondence?

Monk: With certain collectors, there is quite a lot of back and forth. When you start to know them a little better, there is more communication. I guess you share similar interests, as they are willing to invest this money and time in being involved in a work that I make for them. I think that someone like this, however, is only a specific type of collector; there are clearly thousands of different ones. I would try to avoid collectors who seem only to be

interested in how art makes them look or how it might be able to help climb a social or other ladder. This is a game I am not so interested in playing. But when you understand that collectors share similar ideas and interested in the same things as you are, the relationship can become quite close. It is possible to exchange ideas and encourage the collectors to look at specific artists or books that you think they might find interesting or vice versa.

Beckstette: Here, the amount of money and time the collector invests would express appreciation for the artistic value. But do collectors and artists really pursue the same interests? Doesn't one play down the intrinsically conflictual relationship between collectors and artists in this manner?

Monk: I assume the shared interest is art or a way of making art. With some of my works, there is clearly some obvious collaboration within the production process. There is more to it than a straightforward exchange of good or services. But I think I am generalizing a little here – each collector is different and has a different approach and reason to collect a specific type of work. If it makes sense for an artist to be friends with an art collector, it makes sense ... if there is an understanding and support in both directions, then it is clearly an opportunity to develop ideas that are very specific.

Peggy Buth: I often notice that the current debate on collectors and collections always focuses very much on the question of art's value. I mean not only economic but also cultural valuations that are frequently regarded as supposedly running parallel or concurrently, but that can also shift. It is interesting to continue thinking on from this point and to include in the discussion concepts that I find important here, like "useful" and "useless". Art that is actually "useless" and allegedly without presuppositions can be legitimized through its economic utilization. "Useful", in this context, means not only that which possesses value, but which is suitable to increase value and also to be utilized, at least as a possible investment.

Beckstette: But don't categories such as "useful" or "useless" also have a valuating dimension?

Buth: It's about connecting art to concepts such as morality, or about utilizing art as a form of knowledge production. The importance of an autonomy of subjects or the autonomy of art is often reduced to serving their respective purpose or to their supposed political potential. In the past few years, the concept of autonomy has again been increasingly debased as apolitical and handed down or rejected in a discursive form ... and thus situated in a limited way within a modernist theory of art. What is neglected in the process is that aesthetic experience is something endless, like the endlessness of interpretation and of the production of meaning itself. In my view, the reflective, individual stance bears a much larger political potential than organized participation on the part of the viewer or the organization of a community within the frame of an artwork.

Andreas Siekmann: The question at the beginning was also why collecting is in the public eye. It's about the difference between people who collect privately and collectors who use their collections as a political instrument, striving for a kind of hegemony, like the Saatchi Group has done since the Thatcher-Blair era, for instance. I believe that in Germany after 1989, collecting behavior has shifted toward the state and politics. Perhaps collectors have also learned from public-relations agencies that have been hired by politics over the past 20 years to explain the purported restructuring of society or the purported crisis, which is more than just a financial and debt crisis. So in structural terms, there might be the same kinds of meaning production and a crisis of meaning in art collections as in politics. Both arise from the problem that society, as a democratic polity, can hardly be represented in a legitimate manner anymore. In my opinion, the increased attention paid to collections (and also to their quite rapid form of self-musealization) has to do with this crisis of representation.

Buth: I wouldn't say that representation is in a crisis, but rather that it is undergoing a change. Since representation in general is dependent on an "image", regardless of what type, I would like to use the term vagueness, here, to refer to the artist's image. Artists definitely use vagueness as a factor of unrest or uncertainty, as an "intended error". In the areas of political theory, sociology or cultural studies, however, this ambiguity gives rise to a feeling of

uneasiness, because it is perceived as unfocused interest, impreciseness and an alleged deficiency. The demystification of artists, for example, would be an operation of focusing, in that one would represent them as role models for freelance entrepreneurs or as marketable individuals particularly prepared to take risks. But I regard this as the beginning of the next artist myth: like, for instance, the notion of the artist as a cultural worker with a curatorial mission. I also see this development in the context of an increasing delineation and functionalization of art, especially on the level of policies on higher education, whenever the issue is artistic research or curatorial studies, for example, but also with other forms of rationalizing the access to the artist subject and the reduction of art to its commodity character. These are certainly highly complex interrelations, yet I wouldn't speak of a general crisis of representation right away, but instead of a "normal" development within globalized, capitalist society, in which it is all about constantly producing value.

Beckstette: When you speak of a globalized, capitalist society, the art market was also subject to a thrust of globalization in the past years. What does representation mean in this context, when Western-style contemporary art is traded on other market platforms with different collector structures?

Siekmann: I believe that in the wake of globalization, art, or collecting art, is used to contribute to legitimizing the winners' view of the new accumulation, as a factor in the current class struggle from above, as it were. During the Cold War period, art and collecting art possessed the emotionalism (and the meaning) of a civil societal and anti-fascist commitment and were part of an overall cultural and state structure. Now, however, the financial crisis is being used to restructure or remove cultural apparatuses that originated along with this ethos, for example, closing art schools and museums in the Netherlands, the present policy of massive cultural cutbacks in England, Italy, and Greece, just to mention a few countries in which the entire public sector is being radically scrutinized. In this context, it is very hard to assess the current collectors' positions in countries such as China, India, or the Arab power regions. It could be an adaptation of this class struggle of a transnational hyper bourgeoisie – meaning a class struggle from above – with the usual international-style canon; on the other hand, there are traditional and grown, autonomous collecting structures and interests going beyond current trends in these countries, of which we know very little.

Monk: Maybe the art world is only a type of world, if you can call it a world, where you can easily buy yourself a place ... now on a global level. And that's quite standard because that's what we expect to happen. Particularly now more than any other time before, art is in fashion; it's a trendy and exclusive luxury commodity. The younger the artist the cooler it is to take that slight risk to invest in him or her; and basically at the end of the day to make yourself really interesting and smart. That's what a lot of people do ... maybe not specifically in China or India, but certainly in Russia and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, art fairs, for example, Basel – now a good example because it owns both Miami and Hong Kong, but for contemporary art of course Frieze, too – control completely what certain collectors decide to buy, because they position themselves in such a way that they only accept specific galleries to show works. They know that specific collectors will come to buy specific works. It ultimately controls which artists survive and which do not. They really have complete control over the art market, which sooner or later seems to represent the whole art world.

Candice Breitz: I'm not sure that it's fair to pin the tendency you're describing on regions of the world that have only relatively recently begun to sprout collectors. I've encountered a great many American and European collectors who use their collecting habits to buy into a certain lifestyle. We are talking about a very specific collector type I think, who could just as easily be from Beijing or Miami; most often individuals who have only fairly recently been attracted to collecting, perhaps because they have only fairly recently accumulated enough wealth to enter the game. Often they are first generation collectors: buying art is a clear way to communicate upward mobility and affluence. The distinction between old money (which is perhaps less gauche in its operations, though not without its own complex agendas) and new money (which includes, but is certainly not limited to, countries like India and China) is an important one in terms of understanding what kind of value a collector is after, be it investment

appreciation or social currency. The approach that new money takes to the art market mimics the approach that it might take to markets in general; the logic of venture capitalism can easily be transferred. "Discovering" a young artist or "buying" an emerging artist comes with a social frisson, but of course also means that the work is still relatively inexpensive, and thus not terribly risky as an investment. To come back to what Jonathan was saying, for this type of collector, contact with art and artists is not just about wielding a certain social privilege or flouting economic affluence, but also about harvesting novel and unpredictable experiences, moments of serendipity that seem to offer an escape from structure and everydayness. The social thrill that comes with being invited to the "right" dinners, being present at the "right" fairs, or knowing the "right" artists, sweetens and maybe even motivates the ongoing accumulation of art, as does the competitive dynamic that at times develops between collectors. This kind of collecting is not about keeping a low profile – it thrives on visibility, it flaunts itself. There is a whole event culture that supports this particular approach to collecting, a complex social calendar that some artists are adept at embracing and mining as "part of the job", while others try to avoid it to the extent that they can.

Beckstette: What position does this new dynamic put artists into, especially if they can't or don't want to financially participate in this lifestyle and event system? Can one evade the social pressure?

Breitz: I don't think the amount of time that one chooses to spend (or not spend) socializing with collectors ultimately determines the success or failure of an artist's work on the market, at least not in the long term. Artists who are socially reclusive and reluctant to participate in the circus can be just as fascinating to collectors as artists who gregariously attend and participate in art events, and there are surely a great number of artists who occupy the middle ground, selectively participating in the event culture according to their needs and interests. I think you're in trouble when you start earnestly believing that participating or not participating in a certain lifestyle will make or break you as an artist.

Beckstette: At the beginning, Jonathan said that some of his pieces were made personally for certain collectors to take them out of the cycle of reselling. In a globally operating art market, can artists at all decide to which collectors or collections in which country they sell their works, and what happens to their works when they no longer possess them?

Breitz: As an artist, I think one has the right to be involved in deciding which collections your work does or does not go into. I'm surprised when artists show no interest in which individuals or institutions a gallery is selling their work to. Most galleries are not that discerning about whose money they will take, and will accept the first client that comes along, regardless of whether that placement of the work is in the best interests of the work – and by implication, the artist. I've had difficult and interesting conversations with the galleries that I've worked with ever since I started working with galleries, and have had the most satisfying working relationships with those galleries that are willing to respect my interest in where the work goes. I don't feel obliged to sell my work to every collection that expresses an interest in buying it. I have always felt very strongly that I want to be able to have a say in the placement of the work, and sometimes that means choosing to veto a sale. A good gallery might not like that kind of involvement from an artist, but will respect it. The reasons that I may want to avoid having my work placed in a particular collection vary, but often it's because I prefer not to sell my work to obviously speculative collectors if I can avoid it.

Siekmann: Time and again, stories about appropriation circulate, like the one about an artist engaged in political art who then sells his work to the Deutsche Bank Collection. In reality, this sort of appropriation hardly takes place, quite to the contrary: The more concrete the political content of the work is, the less it is appropriated. I don't know whether that was any different during the age of the bloc powers and the tolerance they had to prove, whether, for instance, works by Hans Haacke were purchased to prove progressiveness and tolerance.

Buth: I would like to briefly respond to what you, Candice, just addressed. I believe it is a luxurious situation for artists, and one that can rarely be encountered in real life, to be on par with their gallerists. Except if they founded

the gallery together or have another kind of long and intense relationship that makes it possible to tell the gallery where the work should go. Of course I can do that because it's my work. The other question is whether I can afford it. For me, it is also a form of value creation to say that, on principle, I always keep an eye on where my works go. In a certain respect, I find that a hypocritical announcement, for the majority of artists who sell their works or give them to galleries depend on the fact that they are actually sold. Only ten percent of all artists – and that's already a very high estimate – can live from selling their art. In what way do we talk about the economic conditions under which artists live? How do artists finance themselves? An analysis of these aspects has to be included in the discussion on the relationship between artists and collectors. To what extent do state-run, public institutions feel obliged and to what degree are they able to pay artist's fees? Under which conditions do artists actually work nowadays, and what dependencies exist?

Breitz: You seem to be suggesting that one of the only options that remains for artists – given withering state support for the arts – is to survive by selling work through a gallery, and that any compromise that has to be endured in the context of a gallery dialogue should therefore be seen as inevitable. To argue that swallowing compromises in a gallery relationship is a necessity because one's livelihood would otherwise be jeopardized, strikes me as melodramatic. Artists are not frail creatures that can only sustain themselves with the life support of the art market. Your evocation of the gallery-artist relationship reminds me of traditional understandings of the husband-wife relationship, where the wife has to go along with what hubby says, or lose her pocket money. I simply don't see letting a gallery play husband to my wife as a necessary given. I also need to point out that state or institutional support of artists, even in its currently dwindling forms, remains the exception rather than the norm. Outside of the few affluent nations that have fostered their contemporary artists, most artists have never had the benefit of state or institutional support for their work. Because my starting point was South Africa, I never set out with the assumption that the state would look after me as an artist. I had never heard of a "Honorar" or a stipend before I began exhibiting in Europe. Neither did I assume that I would be able to sell my work or live from it. As in most countries – outside of the few that have a stable gallery system – there was virtually no market for art at the time that I chose to go to art school in Johannesburg. I never thought of my art practice as a "career", and was surprised when it became one. If you suspect from the outset that you're unlikely to live off your work – which frankly remains the reality that artists are most likely to encounter – then a gallery relationship might eventually present itself as one way of making a living (should you be one of the very few who has that opportunity), but it's definitely not the only possibility, nor one that artists should rely on. For that reason, regardless of how well or poorly my work is selling on the market, if I take strong objection to the way a gallery is handling my work, I will absolutely speak my mind, regardless of the consequences for that relationship. These days you can be a wife and have a job.

Buth: I have a different opinion – I don't find it melodramatic at all to make the claim, as an artist, to finance oneself through one's professional work, to which teaching or holding workshops at an art school can also belong, and not through jobs having nothing to do with art. I also mentioned the problem of being dependent on galleries to point out the necessity of remunerating artistic work, also on the institutional side. I find it urgently necessary to point the finger to these kinds of dependencies, to make them transparent and to stand up for possible changes. Within this debate, it is always about the respective speaker position, which is indeed bound to one's own background and not least tells of localization battles and conflicts over distribution that take place not only in the field of art.

Siekmann: One must ask oneself in general, to what extent one subscribes to this form of professionalization. I often think that many artists seek to remain in charge by means of this kind of professionalism, as if they were their own clients, while they are totally overtaxed by an international exhibition business expecting the artist to be present everywhere at once and deliver his or her work. For this reason, professionalization often arises from the fear of falling out of the system, if one produces just two works a year and determines how one makes use of his or her time. Instead, artists often operate like a medium-sized industrial plant, something which totally contradicts post-industrial society, and in which case I ask myself whether in this fear-ridden entrepreneurial simulacrum, a

new generation of artists is emerging that merely reproduces the emancipative content of art from memory, because it only supplies exhibitions with this reproduction but does not share experiences of its own, not to speak of a collective experience.

Beckstette: Whereby, of course, adequate room to maneuver has to be created again for this emancipative content. What could that be like?

Siekmann: It's not about demanding rooms to maneuver from any authority or planning them in a socio-technical manner. These rooms to maneuver often arise quite automatically, usually in situations in which there is a common commitment to something. This can include conflict situations, rejections, or protests or attacks against a system that simultaneously keeps available and excludes the individual. These protests are presently taking place in countries around Germany, without the cultural sector being reflected in them. Room to maneuver could consist in solidarity, for example.

Buth: This is why I think it's good to join together and form artists' groups or to seek other public spaces, for example, artist-run galleries. Contact can then be established from there to curators and the – of course not only evil – market. Many curators and also collectors are not interested in commerce and hype, and have not forgotten that artists in such contexts show their works in solo shows on which they have worked for years. That only becomes relevant again when they show artists in a museum. What is taking place is that individual positions and actors are played off against each other, and I believe one must treat this cautiously.

Beckstette: Peggy spoke about creating one's own form of audience against structures that are only oriented toward increasing value. What role does the public play in the context of private collections, which are at first a purely personal affair with different underlying interests or motivations and need not necessarily be presented on an open stage? What kind of consequences does this have for the visibility of artworks?

Monk: Some collectors aren't interested in promoting their collection – they are interested in having the work and living with it or keeping it in the storage. This model of course, seems to represent a collector who has a very personal, maybe intimate or passionate connection to his or her collection as he or she even lives with it and is surrounded by it on a daily basis. By this the work, however, is most of the time not visible for the public, it is kind of hidden. As some of these collectors are really unknown it might be hard to research where a certain work could be in the end. On the other hand, a lot of collectors these days, do promote their own collections and even build their own museums. That clearly ups the value of the work. Every time they do an exhibition, make a book of the work that is available or there is an article in the press, people read about it and think it's important to have this kind of work. One would tend to say that this collector just seemed to be more interested to be associated with his or her work or simply tries to raise the profit of the collection. But at the same time he or she makes it accessible for the public, usually through Kunstvermittlung with guided tours etc. in which even the collector's personality often comes into focus.

Breitz: These days the budgets that museums have to acquire work are dwarfed by the sums that private collectors are willing to invest in contemporary art. Museums are less and less able to compete with private money. There are ways to encourage more reticent private collectors who are not self-promotional in their collecting style to help make works accessible to a broader public. Some collectors are open to long-term museum loans or even to signing agreements at the time of sale whereby they commit to letting the work travel to public institutions as a condition of the sale. Some collectors are willing to consider temporary ownership of a work, holding the work in a private collection for a couple of decades and then donating it to a public institution.

Buth: It appears relevant to me to interpret and describe processes of collecting in regard to the acquired objects. In view of art history, as well, it is important to find out why certain artifacts have been and are being collected. I believe one can do this in a public or private institution. This form of self-reflective research by all means belongs to