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# Dealer's Notebook: Q&A with Gallerist Matthias Arndt

BY SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP | APRIL 19, 2015



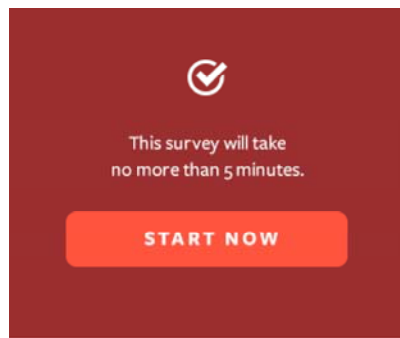
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(Bernd Borchardt)

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**Name:**  
Matthias  
Arndt

**Hailing  
from:**  
Frankfurt

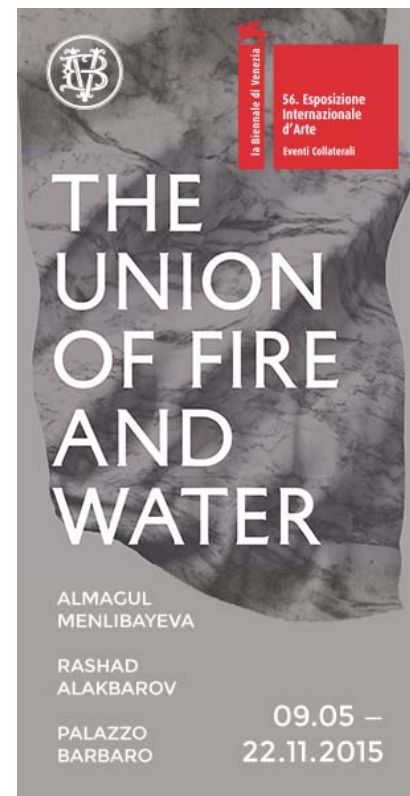
Presides over:

ARNDT Berlin and Singapore

**Gallery's specialty:** International Contemporary Art

**Artists represented:** Gilbert & George, [Sophie Calle](#), [Rodel Tapaya](#), [Eko Nugroho](#), Qiu Zhi Jie, [Heinz Mack](#)

**Latest show:** *I Know You Got Soul*, group show featuring new works by American-based contemporary artists (Phoebe Collings-James, Liam Everett, Amy Feldman, JPW3, Kika Karadi, Hugo McCloud, Joshua Nathanson, Leif Ritchey, Diego Singh, Travess Smalley and Jeff Zil). Click on the slideshow to see.



### When did you decide to open a gallery?

I discovered early that I wanted to work with artists and chose the gallery format as the most direct vehicle to support artists and promote their work. I opened my first gallery in 1990, when I was 22 – I was a student and worked for Documenta in Kassel.

### Who was the first artist you chose to represent?

The French artist [Sophie Calle](#). At the time she was already internationally famous and it took some time to “court” her and get her confidence. We then found her a project with which she wrote Franco-German Art History. We’ve now been working together for 21 years.

### How did you develop your program?

I intuitively selected artists who I found were relevant for the discourse of the time, but most importantly artists whose work “matters” – takes a position and engages with society and the world. From the very beginning I took an international perspective, brought international artists to the recently reunified city – Berlin needed the artists from outside to redefine itself and build a new identity. From the first collaborations with [Sophie Calle](#), Thomas Hirschhorn, Nedko Solakov, we worked with many other internationally renowned artists, such as Ilya and Emilia Kabakov and Erik Bulatov from Russia, Franz West, Gilbert and George and even held the first solo exhibition of Yayoi Kusama in Berlin in 2006. I keep my antennas up all the time. In 2009 I started to come to Asia regularly and was fascinated by the Indonesian and Southeast Asian contemporary art landscapes that, at the time, were totally new to me. I started to learn and to explore and since then we have been showing many of the best artists from the region in Berlin and in the Singapore space we opened in 2013. Just to name a few: [Eko Nugroho](#), Agus Suwage, Entang Wiharso, Arin Dwihartanto, Jumaldi Alfi from Indonesia, [Rodel Tapaya](#), Geraldine Javier, Nona Garcia, and Jigger Cruz from the Philippines.

### What was the greatest challenge in the first years?

Berlin was not the international art center it is now. There was no money in the city, no support, neither from politics, nor from museums or private collectors. Preserving the faith, staying on course, and at the same time building international markets for what I believed was

relevant, was quite a challenge. Today I am grateful for these first tough 10 years from 1994 to 2004. It made us independent and successful by building and exploring international markets and audiences — a capital from which I still profit today

### **What would you do differently today?**

I might do an apprenticeship with a major dealer and then also work in the secondary market before I start my own company. I was “inventing” the gallery business for myself from scratch at the time... a long stony path. Looking back it became a big success story, but learning from others first, building experience, and starting with an artist and client list before starting your business today would be a smart thing to do.

### **Do you still remember your first big triumph?**

Selling [Sophie Calles](#)'s first major work, a series of 12 works she made in Berlin, to the German Parliament, where it is exhibited still in the governmental buildings that had been erected when Berlin became Germany's capital in 1997.

### **What criteria are important to you when deciding whether or not to represent an artist?**

Besides having a unique style and ‘recognizability’ and mastering his medium to perfection, a great artist does work that “matters” that is connected to his own environment and ethical codex but that speaks about the world and its issues openly. Also an artist today has to have a plan and understanding of his place in the market and the ambition to grow within the art world. The art market has never been more global and more competitive. This is where my and my team's expertise and international contacts come in to play: to help the artist reach his aims and to successfully implement his work in the local and the global context.

### **How has the art market changed since you entered the business?**

There have been fundamental changes. The art market has become faster and less focused on long-term developments and most importantly has become truly global and developed a strong financial interest. You can complain about, ignore, or try to hold against this development; I decided to meet the challenges of today's markets and translate the gallery format into the 21st century. We reformulated our mission towards the artist and our clients, the private and public collections and museums by answering to the growing need of advice, orientation, education, and management in the international art world. That means from the gallerist I started as, I am today an Artist-Agent and Manager and furthermore I am an art dealer and an expert mainly for contemporary art, advising selected private collections and museums worldwide.

### **What does a good gallerist need to be able to do?**

First, identify the talent, then help the artist to formulate a plan and later he has to have the expertise and the contacts to implement the artist's career plans. The gallerist should look beyond his personal interest and perspective but take the larger and longer-term perspective. Same applies to the relation between dealer and client: overview, expertise, a long-term vision and ideally no conflict of interest. The gallery business is extremely hard work and a gallery should grow with and for its artists.

### **And what should a good gallerist never do?**

A gallerist should always honor all his relations, both to clients and artists, always keep his word, honor financial arrangements and never put his own personal short-term business interest above the clients' or artists'.

### **What was the last piece of art that thoroughly impressed you and why?**

The “Lightroom” by Otto Piene, that we installed three weeks ago in our show in Berlin. Making art out of light which is nothing and everything is such a fundamental concept and Piene is the master of “Light-Art”. The apparatus are technically so simple, but the result, the final work cannot be described but only experienced and witnessed in person. It is an homage to progress and at the same time an ode to the oldest thing in our universe, light, bringing us warmth, hope, and life. A fundamental and spiritual experience.

### **Which era in art history would you like to time travel to if you could?**

The 1950s and 1960s, the birth of the American Abstraction and the ZERO Group in Berlin. The artists started literally at “o” – reinvented everything and were only forward-looking. Art was never more positive, energetic, and progress-oriented. I would have loved to see those first shows and meet the artists at the time. I was lucky to still meet Piene, one of the three founders of the ZERO Group. And I am happy to represent [Heinz Mack](#) who is still with us and whom we just showed in Singapore last year.

**Which historical figure would you like to share a drink with?**

I would have loved to be present at one of the lunches at Picasso’s home at the Villa La Californie – to meet the older Picasso working against his own mortality, making his own path to eternity.

**If you weren’t a gallerist, you’d probably be ....**

Director of a major museum or cultural institution. I love running larger infrastructures, working on exhibition concepts, raising funds for productions and exhibitions... But frankly, I am happy with what I am and where I am, and I constantly develop my work, our operation, further outside of the traditional gallery format. So I think I am already a bit of everything above. I will always work with art, with artists and collections; this was my childhood dream that I keep following.

**Art is....**

The essence of a thought, an idea, a feeling that cannot be fully described nor expressed with words other than by the incorporation it takes in the final work of art. Art can change the world, as it opens up to us new perspectives of the world surrounding us, as it sharpens our senses and opens our mind it does affect our actions and therefore a great work of art can indeed change the world.

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