

PAUL SCHIMMEL

Interviewed by CHARLES DESMARAIS

Paul Schimmel, one of the world's most respected curators of up-to-the-minute contemporary art, lives at the northernmost edge of the Los Angeles Basin in a quiet community with a decidedly Old California feeling. The lovely, art-filled 1927 Spanish Colonial Revival home he shares with his wife of thirty four years, Yvonne, embraces a peaceful interior veranda, where I conducted an interview with him on June 22 of this year. The recording captures perfectly the contrast between the tranquil background sound of water in the patio garden fountain and Schimmel's powerfully delivered, New York-accented, rapid-fire locution.

The interview took place shortly after it was announced that the former Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art will enter the commercial gallery world in forming Hauser-Wirth & Schimmel, but before the announcement that his former boss, Jeffrey Deitch, will soon also leave MOCA.

My personal and professional relationship with Paul Schimmel goes back a quarter century. In a May 2013 commencement ceremony, the Trustees of the San Francisco Art Institute, where I am President, bestowed the honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree on Schimmel and the film director Kathryn Bigelow.

So let's start at the very beginning. You are one of the most knowledgeable people I know concerning contemporary and modern art. Where did that knowledge come from?

I grew up in a home of—well, my father was a rare book collector, and people like A. Hyatt Mayor from the old Met—the man who actually brought photography into the Met through the back door—knew my father well.

And a fantastic collection of my uncle, Herbert Schimmel, of [Henri de Toulouse-] Lautrec. Not just every print he'd ever done, but 270 letters, his library, furnishings—the idea of not just collecting somebody, but this wonderful idea of *giving yourself over* to somebody.

And my father was the only American who owned the entire output, all the publications of what many consider the finest press in England, the Ashendene Press. The Kelmscott Chaucer was the most famous of all the books he owned.

So my father and uncle were very big in the collecting world—though more historical material.

Did they talk to you about it? Did you talk to them about it? Was it interesting to you as a kid?

You know, I grew up in households where, as a kid, you don't go and push the books on their shelves, and when you're at Uncle Herb's house, you don't rock back and forth in the art nouveau furniture. So the special and privileged place that these collections had was apparent. The dog and the books came before the children, for sure!

My father always had interesting friends, especially through the Grolier Club in New York, where he was president of the board at one point. But it was my mom who really liked contemporary art. My father was rather old-fashioned. She was not a collector; it wasn't like she was serious about art, but she was serious about the fact that I liked art.

And growing up, once we moved from Westchester to Manhattan—after my Bar Mitzvah—New York was amazing because my parents were members of all the various museums. MoMA at that time was a much smaller, much more intimate place, and the fact that you could take some high school girl up to the "Members' Lounge" and have a little lunch out there on the top floor—this was the best date in New York!

I figured out that I wanted to be a curator hanging around MoMA and doing research on Gertrude Stein and her collection when I was in high school. But the Met was my museum.

I just went back there with [my oldest friend] Marc [Freidus] to go see the re-install of European painting, which is astonishing. And I realized how much I've grown up going to that museum. I used to take my friends from high school to go visit different parts of the museum. I especially loved their Manet collection. I loved Spanish painting. So I would do early Impressionism, Spanish painting, and I had a certain route. And it was, like, Manet's *Woman with a Parrot* was my painting. The Havemeyers may have given it to them, but this was MY painting!

Which is, of course, the whole point of a museum anyway...

In the most fundamental way, yeah! And to use it, and to talk to people about a work, was enormously gratifying.

So, were you studying these things in an organized way? Or [more casually] going back again and again and coming to love them, just—visually?

You know—and this is fairly consistent to this day—I've always had the good sense to know that you can never have a first impression that's better than if it's unencumbered. I'd never, for example, really looked at early Renaissance painting. A little hard to do in this country anyway; most of the panels that make their way over here are not exactly the most satisfying. So, I would go to see the frescoes and I became obsessed, especially with the period around 1450. This was just a few years ago.

So, I realize how fortunate I have been that, throughout my life, I could always start with an object and really have an impression that I own—it's my own feeling for it.

And this is not a fixed thing, it does actually change in time. You love things, then you don't love them as much, and then sometimes you kind of even wonder why. Then other times you wonder, *Gee, how smart was I?* But being in New York, and being able to see objects—I mean, I fell in love with the sheer audacity of all that pink in the *Woman with a Parrot*. And, yeah, I can see its relationship to people like [Frans] Hals, who I don't really love so much anymore, but at the time I really did love all that unbelievable gesture and bravado. I like painting; it's my natural affinity. Looking at that was astonishing. Then you start learning. And you learn what it is that you love, and then what it means, so you can own it on your own terms.

I don't know if I want to take too much time with this but, clearly, you came from a family that was relatively well off, or maybe very wealthy. I mean, one doesn't collect books without...

...surplus income! Like Holland in the 17th century! The bourgeoisie now has enough income to be able to.

So, what did your dad do?

My Grandfather was a very successful accountant in a time period when accounting was just beginning. Going back to the '20s, he was a New York, bright, Jewish young man and he went to night school and got a degree in accounting. And he was extraordinarily successful, both in terms of his ability to see opportunities *vis-à-vis* tax codes, and to attract very interesting and high profile clients who appreciated his ability.

Then, in the '30s, at a time when money was rather scarce, there were clients like Ben Marden's Riviera Club—and Marden used to actually commission [Arshile] Gorky and [Willem] de Kooning to do the great murals at the Riviera Club—with huge surplus income. One could say a group of wealthy, or aspiringly wealthy, Jewish families that were not unlike other immigrant families.

And he then successfully became an investor in real estate. So the family had, up until the '70s, really extraordinary properties in New York. Places like the San Remo and the Beresford, and other really quite illustrious buildings. When New York almost went into bankruptcy, my grandfather, who had lived through the Depression, really scaled back. So, very wealthy, but nothing like today's standards.

The standards of your new clients. So that's very, very interesting. And you live now in an environment where you're surrounded by, let's face it, enormous wealth, people who are on the boards of the major museums that you've worked at or you work with. The gallery that you are entering into—the whole gallery world. I'm sure you've given thought to that whole connection between wealth and art.

[Laughing] I told my father, who was really as demanding and as unappreciative as the most challenging client or trustee, that everything I learned, I learned by his emotional withdrawal!

One can always serve as a bad example!

Yeah, the world of collectors. Whether they're collecting (by today's standards) very modestly, relative to net worth, or they're spending tens of millions of dollars, the collection and its relationship to their family, their children, their priorities, public institutions, private initiatives—all of that really complex interchange that takes place is fundamentally the same. And it doesn't, I think, change, whether you're spending tens of thousands of dollars on a book, or millions of dollars on a painting. It all has to do with both a commitment to legacy and the competitiveness people within the family feel towards others. It's complex.

It is very complex. And it strikes me, as you're talking, that to some degree—obviously, people can go into museums who have no money at all—but there seems to be a strong connection between the opportunity to learn about art; to experience art; to feel as though one can call it one's own, in the way that you grew up; and a certain level of...

Privilege...



Installation view of "Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962" at MOCA Grand Avenue, October 6, 2012–January 14, 2013, photo by Brian Forrest.

Privilege, exactly. That same connection doesn't really exist on the making side.

No, not at all. And I should say, the museum profession used to be really dominated by only wealthy people. That was a huge, huge limitation on what museums did. If there is a striking change that has taken place, it is the rise of an educated class and a class that doesn't necessarily have this great interest in the material goods of museums, but education and more conceptual aspects, and that has been a hugely positive change to the museum world. There are directors still, in this day and age—not so much in the United States, but overseas—where their compensation can only be justified in terms of their being able to afford to "give back" to the public. And that's always been a very unfortunate, limiting, condition in terms of who gets the jobs. I feel very fortunate that I've been well appreciated and well compensated, relative to the "nonprofit world," and that the not-for-profit world, in my thirty five years, has become far more professionalized. But I'm absolutely certain, especially early on in my career, that being able to be somewhat cavalier about compensation—it didn't mean I got paid less, it just made everyone kind of feel, Yeah, he doesn't really need it. So, it had a certain privilege.

But it also gave opportunities that you wouldn't otherwise have had.

Yes. My Grandfather had left enough money for each of the grandkids, not to live on (he felt this was a mistake that he had made) but enough that you could do whatever you wanted to do. You could teach, be a museum person, you could do volunteer work in Africa—all the things, and still have enough of an income to kind of balance. And that is the privilege of the wealthy. I think it's, fortunately, changing across the board, and especially in the United States.

So, at a certain point, you went to Syracuse to go to college?

Specifically to study museums! In my undergraduate application for Syracuse, I applied for a "selective studies program," which they had. They had a few graduate-level courses in museum studies affiliated with the (then recently opened) I.M. Pei-designed Everson Museum. I didn't know [James] Harithas was there, or anything like that. I got kind of lucky. But I specifically wanted, at that time, to be a curator.

I studied art history. I took some "museum studies courses," which were graduate-level courses, doing internships that I got credit for at the Everson. And studio arts. I felt I needed to do all of those three things. And I was absolutely, from my freshman year on, completely clear that, "I'm going to be a curator and that's it." Yvonne always thought that was just, like, kind of phenomenal: that somebody at such a young age...

So when did you decide? By eighteen you already knew that you wanted to be a curator, so when had you decided?

Betty Tompkins, who is quite a successful artist these days—her very early work from the

late '60s, which were photorealist-inspired compositions based on pornography, [is] in a show opening right now at Marianne Boesky Gallery—was really a great high school teacher. She not only loved making art, but she knew I really loved talking about art and looking at art, and she actually used to make the list of the galleries to go see. So, she moved me from the museum to the galleries...

What school was this?

Bentley High School, which no longer exists.

My high school English teacher, Robert Schwager, a wonderful man, also knew of my interest in art and art history. When he had each of the kids choose a great American author in which to become really involved in an in-depth, one-year study, he assigned me Gertrude Stein. And once I discovered who she was, while I found the writing a little bit pompous and confusing at times—certainly she was no Hemingway or Fitzgerald—I fell in love with Gertrude Stein. So, my English teacher and my art teacher kind of got together, and encouraged this research, specifically on her both as a collector and a writer. And I got more and more into it: I started being able to identify every work in their apartment on Rue de Fleurus, and I went to visit the place, and...

This is a seventeen-year-old kid.

Yeah, and I'm hanging around MoMA a lot—the library.

Honestly, until this day, when I'm involved with museums, I feel you want to have the library onsite and accessible. Not to the public, but to people who care, who make appointments—and more than to just the staff. The library is an incredible door, a way to enter into it.

And the librarian, after four or five times of this kid hanging around, pulling all the various books related to Stein...Cone family...Alice B. Toklas...says to me, "Well, I mentioned your interest to one of our associate curators, who's doing research on an upcoming exhibition of the Stein and Cone Families."

The show was several years off, and it did end up happening. MoMA may have been difficult at times in my career as a collegial institution, but I will tell you, when I started, they couldn't have been more generous: having this associate curator/librarian take me downstairs and, you know... The *aha!* moment was them pulling out some of the racks, and there on them were some of the pieces I had seen in reproduction, in black and white. And that moment, alone with these objects. I was just, like, *This is the coolest thing!* This was...in a weird way, it had something to do with some kind of personal ownership or something.

And I knew then, that's what I wanted to be: a curator.



Installation view of "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979" at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, February 8 – May 10, 1998 , photo by Brian Forrest.

I'm a little concerned right now. I am seeing a trend—and it's been growing over the last years, and it may be a direct result of just too many curatorial study programs—that the glorification of the curator is taking precedence over that which they do, their activity. Maybe it's a generation of entitled curators

So, then it was just a matter of applying myself in a very focused way in that direction. It did not take that long.

I was working a little bit at the Everson....

Was David Ross there at the time?

David was there, three or four years older than me. He was just segueing into the area of museum studies. He was really a School of Communications person. Then, Harithas and he identified, quite rightly, that video art was going to be the next thing. I remember being in the back seat of a car, with William Wegman and David Ross yacking in the front.

I was already far enough along that, while I was still in college, I interviewed Nam June Paik and got published on the front cover of *Arts Magazine*—the first video issue. While I was still in college [I went to] Charlotte Moorman's New York Avant-Garde Festival, and I would hang out at events with Gordon Matta-Clark. I was cleaning up coyote shit from the Joseph Beuys [work], *I Like America and America Likes Me*—I lived in René Block's apartment taking care of the gallery, his loft in SoHo. It was really the super early days, and Jaap Reitman was on the ground floor, and this was my world. So, it wasn't like I was just a curator. I very quickly found, through Harithas, through that moment in time, a certain kind of sensibility.

You were totally born to this. It's really extraordinary; you were, in every way...
Lucky. It was a gift.

But you were meant to do this, no question.

It was a gift that, like most such gifts, you don't actually know it. People give people gifts all the time, and they just sort of walk over them or reject them. I was fully and completely prepared. Harithas used to love to give me, really—couldn't have been more supportive—but gave me a hard time. He'd say, "Oh! Paul is the youngest curator in the world! The youngest!" He was perfect for me because he was, on the one hand, a cutting edge, radical, new generation director, which in many ways I'm not (as a curator). On the other hand, he was someone deeply committed to postwar art. [But] he gave far more importance than in many art history related museum programs to the artist's words, the artist's vision, and that very special opportunity that you really only have once in an artist's life: to try to capture [the moment]. Thousands of years on, anyone can split the hairs however they want, but there's really only one time, and it's usually a very short period of time, when you can really both embrace and preserve the vision of the artists themselves, that primacy both of the studio and the artist's intent. In a very simple way, those two things—the studio and the intent—are things that are rock solid, in terms of who I've always been as a curator.

This might be a good time to ask how that art world has changed. The world that you're describing—which I had a taste of, too; I'm a couple of years older—is, in many ways, a completely and entirely different world from the world today.

First of all, neither of us grew up in the generation of the '60s, when it was a really explosive development of both resources and commitment to contemporary art. Unprecedented. We'd heard about it, we knew about it, but the generation of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, among many others, almost seems aberrant, in terms of American history. By the time we came of age in the '70s—and it wasn't just in the commercial world—across the board, in contemporary art, whatever promise the '60s had shown, the '70s proved not to be an era of fulfillment of those promises. The value of the works themselves became very stagnant. The economy was not doing well. We lived in a period when political unrest, a sense of the entitlement of the rich, the wrong wars—all informed a kind of art that was really outside the commercial arena. In fact, the big institutions, some of them, like LACMA, had made a huge and very important commitment to contemporary art in the '60s. And by the time the '70s rolled around, they weren't

interested. They kind of pulled the plug on what were very good people doing interesting things. So, contemporary art, although certainly acknowledged, understood—there was very little money for it. And you had the rise of alternative spaces, artist-run spaces, support from educational institutions through teaching, etc. These were far more important than big institutions and commercially driven programs. It was a really different period from today.

That said, you know, it's never been bigger, richer, more broadly based, more global in its enterprise. The real switch for me—the one that went, like, *What happened?!*—was between '70s and early '80s. That was overnight. Things that had been either overlooked or neglected or not valued at all from the '70s [became quite valuable]. That included minimalism, which obviously is today among the most celebrated movements in the post-war period. There was nothing going on [by the end of] the '70s; classic Minimalism is late '60s and going into the '70s. That's why [collector and MOCA donor] Panza was able to buy it all for nothing, because there really wasn't much going on.

In the early '80s, I already had been a curator for five or six years. I had worked in Houston, had gone to graduate school by then; I had become familiar with a number of artists, including people like Julian Schnabel back in Houston, and even DeKooning. [And then] the market changed. From Schnabel to DeKooning—the entire market—changed. It was, like, *What happened?* The early '80s was a revelation; you couldn't understand how it could change so quickly. And it changed, as you know, from the bottom up: it changed from a new generation emerging in the early '80s, and declaring a value, in this case, for painting.

And you had my generation, now, of artists like Eric Fischl and David Salle and Julian Schnabel. Salle's from LA, studies with John Baldessari; Eric Fischl goes to Cal Arts; Julian studies with Malcolm Morley; and you go, *Whoa! It's really interesting!* That new generation that came across neo-expressionism, and a whole generation of New Imagists, or New Image Painting; this was a huge change all of a sudden. Collectors were back in the field.

I think [money] had everything to do with it. All of those artists were there in the '70s, they were doing good things. [But] it was not a very good period. High inflation; interest rates were unbelievably high. You couldn't borrow. Remember when inflation was 15% and interest rates were 15%? So, I would say it had everything to do with the changing economics, and the kind of belief in the power of individual wealth that characterized Reaganomics. You saw it also in Europe with Margaret Thatcher. Charles Saatchi and his collection couldn't have happened, literally, without Margaret Thatcher. But it was a change. There was surplus income. And I think what happened, very quickly, was a sense that, *It's all around us, and we haven't been doing anything!* I don't think it started in New York; I actually think Europe, Germany, led the change that took place.

We don't really give them credit now, but it was the new German painters that got us looking again at Polke, Richter, Beuys. It was really a youthful generation that changed everything from the bottom up. I think that is what's still interesting today, actually. I think more history is written by what young people are looking at. I'm always very interested in trying to think about shows that reflect interests of younger artists. I was really gratified by [the attention paid to] *Painting the Void* by a lot of young painters who were looking to do a kind of slow abstraction, that has political content to it. They gravitated towards that, but I gravitated toward the subject because [while] it's something I was thinking about, it was something I was also seeing among young people. I have found that revisionist art history, and the revisions of the markets associated with that, are very much driven by what is meaningful among the younger generation of artists.

A lot of what you're talking about is this idea that things start with intuition for you, then move into an intellectual pursuit. Here's the question that I have, maybe because I run an art school: how do you teach people that? How do you encourage the idea that people can first understand something in their soul—or own it, as you say—then try to pick it apart and understand it better?

Let me tell you, it's a pretty good trick, as you're nearing sixty, to think that somehow you can put forty five years of seriously looking at art behind you, and you can still be intuitive. So you know, I may be dreaming! It may be wishful thinking on my part, but it is something, as has been the nature of this conversation, that really is in people and who they are. I recently wrote a piece on Jason Rhoades, a graduate of San Francisco Art Institute. I had an interesting revelation—and this is in no ways a criticism, this is a fact. Here is this kid, growing up in the foothills of the Sierra, in the middle of frigging nowhere, going with his mom to state fairs; fixing jukeboxes—you know, pretty talented with his hands; this kind of blue-collar aesthetic; making ceramics, these yellow ceramic things. It's who he is. Absolutely, as a teenager, it's who Jason Rhoades is. [So his art becomes] this thing that somehow is bringing in the family, the history, the blue-collar-Republican-versus-creative-hippy experience, that comes from his DNA and his family. To such a degree that he makes this commitment to actually become an artist, a high school art teacher. He ends up at the San Francisco Art Institute. And he wants to—maybe even a bit unusually for San Francisco Art Institute standards—he wants to be a big star! A success! And within a year, all that was really the best in his work had utterly disappeared. He was doing really good painting; you know, San Francisco, it's a painting school, or it was.

He could have studied with Paul Kos and it would have been a very different experience.

Exactly. But he started making these paintings. And it didn't take that long before he became very good at it. [though] they were maybe a good ten years late, in terms of where it was coming from. And he kind of lost it. I mean, completely.

It wasn't until he went to Skowhegan, which is another kind of painting place, that he looked around, and sort of discovered that he didn't even like who he was, what he was doing anymore. And so, in the middle of this painting place, he starts chiseling some rock. Banging on it, in the woods—annoying everyone all over, and they're hearing Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! And eventually, after days or maybe longer—as the story goes, it was Jason at his most annoying—he takes this rock and carries it up to the highest peak near Skowhegan. And it's a kind of a calling device for aliens. What are you making here? I'm making something that's going to draw in the people from outer space! And that's when he re-discovered who he was.

I was just fortunate that I had, in high school, discovered something within myself that was immensely comfortable. You know, it was who I was, and unlike many people, I was able to build a world that worked for me. I don't think, going back to your original question: I don't think it's something you end up teaching. You create an environment where those people who have that, can have the opportunity, and the support, and the sense of community that allows whoever they are, to be that. In many respects, it is the opposite of the top-down academic approach that many universities take. And in fact, that is what San Francisco, at its very best, has always been about.

You might very well argue that without his having been at the Art Institute, and seeing what was also going on in New Genres with Tony Labat and Paul [Kos] and all of the rest of them, even if he didn't partake of that, that when he went to Skowhegan, just having been exposed would allow him to start banging on the rock.

Completely. It's exactly what Kathryn Bigelow was saying at the graduation: there was enough there, that that know who you're not. But, more importantly, you know there is this other world that's out there. I just think, so often the most rigorous, the most structured, well thought-out, well-disciplined, well-supported programs really don't necessarily do the best. Things that are a little more informal, less developed, less refined. UCLA was great when it had all the chops, but none of the history—now it's where San Francisco Art Institute was in the '60s, in a way. There are glory years, and then you're still talking about it. These things do come in waves.

That said, fundamentally, both San Francisco Art Institute and my experience with Harithas and Everson, do privilege artists over academics. I'm a little concerned right now. I am seeing a trend—and it's been growing over the last years, and it may be a direct result of just too many curatorial study programs—that the glorification of the curator is taking precedence over that which they do, their activity. Maybe it's a generation of entitled curators, but also, I've heard it from some very distinguished collectors, where they say, "We need to do shows that are about what curators do." And I'm thinking, I'm a little old not to remember that there was nothing in our entire life more dominant as a curatorial vision than Clement Greenberg was in the '60s. This is a brilliant man, one of the great writers of all time, and at a certain point his vision, and his language became so dominant that it literally hijacked the art world for a period of time.

Artists too, not just the art world.

Exactly! Maybe [this comes from] my experience in Houston, because the [Museum of Fine Arts] at that time was still kind of in the '70s, working out people like *Friedel Dzubas*, you know?! Friedel Dzubas had a one-person show at the MFA in Houston!

You realize: Boy, you want to poison the well, you start putting curators in front! If you make them the ones that are leading the pack of dogs, you're going to follow the scent right off into a bog! Whereas, if you stick with artists—and that's my total and simple mantra—if you stick with artists, it will keep you moving forward. Not every day in the right direction, but overall in the right direction.

You hang around with artists a lot.

I do.

Is there a way for you to keep relationships with younger and younger artists? People tend to hang with people of their own generation.

Well, younger and younger is relative. Younger and younger, for me now, may be people who, when I started out, seemed older and older. You know, staying in Los Angeles does give me a clear sense of both place and time, in a way. People come from all over the world to LA, and they kind of scramble shit up. I was reading something about Paul McCarthy in the New York press. It was a lovely piece, but somehow it put Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, all into one generation. I'm reading this shit and I'm going, *This is just bullshit*. This person doesn't know anything about the truth.

What seem, from a distance, just sort of slivers in generations are actually much more profound when you live there and you're part of it. Chris Burden—who is my dearest, best friend in the art world, and the person I talk to almost every day when I'm in town—is at least a full generation older than me. Mike Kelley is my generation; we came here at the same time, same age, etc. Charlie [Ray] is my generation. John Baldessari, who I've known from when I first started out, is two generations ahead of me, maybe even three. A long ways.

Likewise—and this has been, for me, wonderful and uplifting in the best sense—there is a whole younger generation in their late 30s and 40s, and that includes people like Laura Owens and Sterling Ruby. And Mark Grotjahn, and Thomas Houseago. Diana Thater. These are not young and emerging artists, but they are a full generation-plus younger than me. And it

is that generation, that both grew up with what I do, and who really, in so many ways, big and small, kept insisting that I figure out a way to stay here in Los Angeles. That the contribution that I've been able to make as a curator has had meaning for them, and that they want to participate in that for the next generation, who are emerging right now, as we speak.

How do you find those people? Do you still go to alternative galleries? If I'm hanging around the galleries do I see you?

Not so much in the last three years. I used to go much more religiously. In the last few years—and it's been a big problem—things started getting really uncomfortable around MOCA, with its financial crisis, Jeremy [Strick, the former director] leaving, more crises, all of those things. It got harder for me to go because I got really tired of having to try to not answer questions about things I was uncomfortable with. It really stopped, in some cases, being about the experience of the art, and had everything to do with, "Paul came by and...." No matter what I said, it was not easy. So I've gotten out of the habit in just the last few years.

That said, I am one of the people who continues to visit studios. I was in Amsterdam visiting the re-hang of the Stedelijk, which Ann Goldstein's done such a great job with. While I was there a younger dealer friend of mine said that an artist [in whom I'd expressed interest] lives in town, so I arranged to do a studio visit.

A friend came along, and we went there and talked about the work, and how the artist exhibits the work, what she's hoping for. It was really interesting work but, kind of, in bits and pieces. Not so young that you're not looking for coherence: *What are you trying to do here?* And afterwards my friend says "That was rough stuff! You kept insisting upon some sort of answer!" And I said, *I can tell you, this was no different than any other studio visit*. And he goes, "Well, tell me, how is it when you go visit someone like Richard Hamilton (who I've been working with, and is smarter than god)?" And I said, *Oh, no, no! I'd hammer away and he'd hammer back! Boom boom boom!*

Artists, really, if you're talking about what they're doing, [are not concerned about whether you are] complimenting them. It's about really digging in, and questioning what they're doing, what they're trying to achieve, and what their goals are. What their intentions are. What the studio means to them. I can go visit somebody and ten years later—nothing to do with anything I did or didn't do—things we talked about were really meaningful and stuck with them. Because it is so rare, even among artists, to really try to talk about what you're doing and making and meaning. It's so much easier to talk about distribution [and the market] and all these other things.

I am absolutely certain that Iwan Wirth, who is a very bright young man, understands that for the business of representing artists, that dialogue with artists—including the artists with Hauser & Wirth—is of great value. Maybe even greater value than somebody who is focusing on sales or distribution.

So, it's really just a matter of talking to artists. Like Chris Burden telling me: "You know, now that we're halfway through the Newport Harbor Art Museum planning for my retrospective, you really should look at what Charlie [Ray] is up to."

And Thomas Houseago, whom I met in a studio visit outside of Amsterdam in 1998, or something like that. I said, *Oh geez, you've got to get out of this place—you've just completely filled the room, the shit's just piling up on top of each other, you're just going to dig yourself a hole. This is amazing, but it's just not going anywhere!* And he goes: "Where should I go?" And I said, *Of course, LA. Because we have all the space in the world and you can build all this shit*. This was very important to him. Just to get out of Europe. Europe is a little bit like building history on top of history, and at a certain point it's like ancient Rome: you've got five histories built on top of each other. You need to move it out. He is among the people who encourage me to go and look at younger artists.

This could go on for many, many more hours. I do want to—

I love the questions. It's much more interesting because it's really about the essence of what I feel I do, rather than the functional, the manual of how to do it.

But in order to make this interesting to people, there are some questions I have to ask that everybody's going to want the answers to.
I'm not answering those questions.

[Laughter] I heard on National Public Radio that what you're supposed to do, really, if you want people to talk about the tough, embarrassing things, is to ask the really harsh question, that the person will never answer, first. Because then everything afterwards sounds, like, Well, I can answer that! Because I didn't have to answer that one about the body that's buried down in—

[Laughter] I had a very professional guy from the *New Yorker* call me up the other day, having to do with an article by Calvin Tomkins, who's an old friend. I've done quotes with him on everybody from John Baldessari to Rauschenberg, etc. He was doing something on Ruscha. And this young writer who's working for him calls me, and I thought, *OK, he's calling me about Ruscha*. The next thing I know, the guy comes up with, *Why did Ed Ruscha leave the board of MOCA after you were fired?* And that's an easy answer: Ask Ed Ruscha! But he asked me and I said, I'm just not talking to you about that at all. I'm really upset. If you called me and you're trying to say this stuff to get something, forget it. This is not happening. This is not the time,

it's not the place, and I hung up. No, the last thing I said was, *Look, if you want to know what I think: I think Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel is going to be fantastic here in Los Angeles and I really feel super fortunate to be involved with serious people, who have a long history here in this town.* And then I hung up. I thought that was the end of that. The next day I got a call, and he'd gone back to Calvin, and he goes, "Okay, so when's the gallery opening?" I said, *All right!!*

So, what is the harsh thing you want to ask?

Of course, we don't have to talk about this if you don't want to. But there has been so much speculation about what happened at MOCA, about your interactions with trustees, your interactions with Jeffrey, and all the rest of that. Rather than all of the gossip, I'm interested in what you perceive to be the difference between you and Jeffrey Deitch. In the way that you think, or the way that you approach things. Because you're just different people, obviously.

You know what, I've known Jeffrey longer than I've known you, and I've known you a very long time. We were two kids, remarkably enough, who somehow crossed paths when we were still in our early 20s. I was in Houston, and Jeffrey was in Massachusetts at the Worcester Art Museum. He started out in the not-for-profit world, as did I. I suspect, if he had had different experiences, he might have even stayed in the not-for-profit world. He loves art, is totally serious about it. In some ways you could point out the differences in our aesthetic but, frankly, there have been a lot of artists we've both championed, and championed at the same time. Me, more so with some, and he, more so with others, but lots of overlap.

There have been times in my life [when I would have liked to do what he was doing]—and I said this to Jeffrey. He was working for Citibank. And then he was getting to do a show with Asher Edelman, *Post Human*. And then he was getting to do one of the sections of the Venice Biennale. And I'm, like, in Newport doing my thing, and I said to him, *Goddamn it, Jeffrey, I'd love this!*

And there are times when I remember Jeffrey saying to me, "You know, you get to do the big shows, and you get to really engage with artists." He was thinking about opening a gallery at the time, and I said, *Oh, that's a terrible idea, Jeffrey! You have no idea how good you've got it right now. You get all the honey and you don't have to clean up shit. You don't have to be a handmaiden.* "No, no," he says, "I want to be involved with artists, like you do." I said, *Let me explain something to you, and it is really a profound difference. I've been really lucky because I've been able to have serious, heavy dating. But I didn't have to father their children!!* It's very different.

I suspect that what Jeffrey and I have in common, in terms of certain kinds of aesthetics and ideology, is far more [than people might assume]. The situation wasn't that. It was what I perceived—and, I believe, rightly—were the highly specialized needs of MOCA at that time. From my standpoint, it needed somebody who was going to provide institutional stability. Who was going to take a long-range approach, not to building up the quality of its program or its collection, but to the third leg that had been so neglected at MOCA: the institution. That's everything from facilities, to operations, to the endowment. These are huge things. And I believed that at that time MOCA really needed a museum person and not somebody who was entrepreneurial by nature.

So, your switch to the commercial world: I realize that you've said this is going to be a very different kind of gallery. And, I'm sure, with you running it, it won't be like every other commercial gallery. But, still, it will be a pretty big switch.

And it is a commercial gallery. And it will be more like a commercial gallery than a museum.

Some of the things people have quoted you as saying, are that this is going to be like a museum, with education programs and all that.

It will be. It will be in look, and in the sense of all the amenities that constitute a good museum. And it will, in many respects, look to museums as a model. And museums look to commercial galleries as models, too. Not just models for financing, but also models for projects. Models for more short-term reporting; participating; not just standing back. Museums have changed enormously in my lifetime. They reflect changes that I have both participated in, and grown up with.

Likewise, galleries—and you see this more in commercially mature cities like New York and London—have been doing important, historical, "non-selling exhibitions" for decades. Some of the finest shows [have been presented by galleries], whether it's Wildenstein, Knoedler—or Pace or Gagosian today. You see a little bit more of that, lately, here in LA. Blum & Poe did this important exhibition of late '60s and early '70s Japanese sculpture, a really serious "museum-type exhibition." Los Angeles is big enough, rich enough, mature enough, diverse enough, that that kind of program can have a place here.

Hauser & Wirth, as a gallery, has represented artists from LA from the very beginning. I've had the opportunity to work with all of these artists, in one way or the other. And, some, I've played a huge and instrumental role in their lives—in some cases, even introducing them to Hauser & Wirth. These artists represent the largest concentration of artists from one region in the entire gallery roster. Iwan and myself, Manuela [Wirth], Marc Peyot, and Ursula Hauser (who really started the whole program), recognize more than ever the value, not just to the community, but to the artists themselves, of being seen within a serious, demanding, challenging, innovative, historical, contemporary program that is not just driven by sales. When you look at a gallery, there are three important legs on which it stands. One is great

representation for the artist. Sales, placement of work, getting shows, doing all that stuff. Two: amazing spaces. Certainly, you see that here, but you see it all over the world; galleries have some of the most beautiful and inspiring spaces. And, three, is the historical and, one could even say, more academic side of the gallery world. Publications. Context of other historical artists.

The greatest comfort in moving from what I've done to what I'll be doing: I've always believed strongly (maybe to the chagrin of some benefactors, who say, "Who are you working for?"), I've always said, *I'm working for the artist.* I've always felt that if you privilege that, you'll get the best work; be able to make the biggest difference.

And I know that to be the case. So, the value that I put on artists, first and foremost, is something that is absolutely the foundation of what a good gallery is about. As much as you might think it's about collectors, museums, critics—all of those actors play a role—but, first and foremost, it is about the gallery's work for the artist. I suspect that has been the biggest change. I was talking about the late '70s to '80s change, and how it sort of flipped? [In film] it used to be studios had all the power, and the talent didn't—then it flipped? When we were younger, somebody like Eleanor Ward could have a gallery called the Stable. Because, yeah, it was an old stable, but it was also a stable of artists. Now, artists have a stable of galleries.

There have been richer (certainly), more powerful (certainly) museums than MOCA. But I've always felt that by really privileging the artist, and making their brand our brand, and letting their vision supersede the corporate vision of an institution (for a moment, a day, a week, a month) that we could give something to artists that you can't put a dollar on. And I absolutely am certain that Iwan's respect, and the primacy of that artist relationship, is something that has even greater value than how somebody's work comes out at an auction, or in the highly charged world of dealers competing in the secondary market. Obviously, a lot of shows I've done, especially historical exhibitions, have had a huge and significant impact on the secondary market, revisionist markets. I'm super happy that I, among others, have contributed mildly to a complete change, for example, in the market for Gutai material. From when I first started really working with it, in '97 or '98, for *Out of Actions*, it's like night and day. But it does go back to saying, *Okay, what is most valuable to artists?* And not what is most valuable to collectors or to museums.

And if you continue to say, *What is of greatest value to artists?* You will, as an art historian, as a curator, and as a dealer, be leading the market, rather than chasing it.



Installation view of "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990's" at The Temporary Contemporary at MOCA, January 26 – April 26, 1992, photo by Paula Goldman, © The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



Paul Schimmel at home with the Christopher Wool drawing that inspired the title of his seminal 1992 exhibition Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s. Photograph by Charles Desmarais, 2013.



Installation view of "Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962" at MOCA Grand Avenue, October 6, 2012–January 14, 2013, photo by Brian Forrest.