

INTERVIEW WITH ART COLLECTOR MR. ULI SIGG

BY OLGA TRÖSCHER

“If no one does it then I do it”



Uli Sigg. Painting by Shao Fan. Photo credit Karl-Heinz Hug

CHINESE WHISPERS: Recent Art from the Sigg Collection a comprehensive exhibition on Chinese contemporary has recently been shown at MAK Museum in Vienna. Uli Sigg has been following the development of contemporary art in China since the late 1970s. In the mid-1990s, he started putting together the world's most significant and representative collection of Chinese art. A business journalist, entrepreneur, and Swiss ambassador to China, North Korea, and Mongolia (1995–1998), he had the chance to take a look behind the scenes of the social and economic developments dedicated to both tradition and the future, as China's vision of a new Silk Road shows. Cultural and sociopolitical values form the frame of reference of the MAK exhibition.

Olga Tröschler: What in your opinion makes Chinese art so special?

Mr. Sigg: China, Greater China, which is mainland China, the People's Republic, Taiwan and Hong Kong, is the biggest cultural space in the world. So, we'd better know what they are doing. And it is a cultural space definitely different from ours, so of course, the art also looks different, comes across different, has very different roots and very different resources artists may or may not go to. There is one school of artists that tends now to look at their roots and to art which has to do with their tradition. And then there are artists who want to be part of the global main-

stream. Their art they do not want to look “Chinese”; they, you know, want to be good artists among good artists and not selected because of their passport.



Wang Xingwei, My Beautiful Life, 1993–1995. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Sigg Collection. © Wang Xingwei

Olga: How did you get the idea to create your collection? What was the impulse, how did you start it? Just because you liked a few works and then you got the idea that it could be a great opportunity?

Mr. Sigg: I looked at it from Day One, you know, it started in 1979 — that's the birth of contemporary art in China. So, I could see it all along. At first I was not impressed by it, it looked very derivative of Western art, but after some years I saw the artists had found to their own language. Then I got interested. And when I acquired a few works I realized that no one was collecting Chinese contemporary art — no institution, no individual. So I thought: “This is really strange”. As I said earlier, the biggest cultural space in the world and no one took interest in the contemporary art of Mainland China. So then I decided to do what actually a national museum should do but did not, for



Ai Weiwei, Descending Light with A Missing Circle, 2017. © Ai Weiwei

many reasons, mainly political, censorship, but also lack of appreciation. So I thought: “If no one does it then I do it”. Then I changed my focus — Not according to my personal taste but like an institution would collect, just trying to mirror the art production, across all media, whether I like it or not.

Olga: Where do you usually find the works? Do you prefer to buy them in the galleries or at the art fairs or you prefer to visit artists' studios?

Mr. Sigg: The first years there were no galleries and the only way was to find the artists in order to find the works. That was also a main reason why I did it: I was actually studying China through the contemporary art. I was there to build the first joint venture company between China and the outside world. So, I was a business person then, but of course, I was always observed, never left alone... So I felt I need to see another China than the one I was restricted to. And I thought through the contemporary art I could see that other China.

Olga: When you make a decision to acquire an artwork, are you more led by intuition or by intellect?

Mr. Sigg: All of the above. You understand, when you collect like an institution you try to mirror what is important, what is of concern to different artists, what is relevant to society. And of course, you have some additional subjective criteria: does the work have a certain energy, can it take you somewhere where you can't go by yourself? These criteria also exist. But basically it is like an institution — I put together an encyclopedical collection.

Olga: When you acquire artworks, is the personality of an artist important to you? Is it important for you to build a kind of relationship with an artist?

Mr. Sigg: There is a school which says that the art critic should not know the artist because this would influence the view on the work (a prominent school in the US). I don't believe in this, because, as I said, I want to see the Chinese reality, so the contact with artists is a very important part. So, of course, I want to meet artists and I know every artist I have a work from.

Olga: Could you, please, say a little bit more about the spectacular artwork “Descending Light with a Missing Circle” by Ai Weiwei. What is the concept behind it and how did you acquire it?

Mr. Sigg: I commissioned it from the artist, it was made for me. And the main concept of that chandelier is the red color, which has different meanings at different times. Before revolution red color was erotically charged, like “a red lantern”. Then came the revolution and, of course, red becomes very important and ideologically charged. And now this chandelier represents also luxury. Even in pre revolutionary Shanghai these beautiful chandeliers existed. And now, in his view this luxury world may crash has. It is a crashed luxurious object.

Olga: What is your favorite work in your collection which is exhibited in the MAK Museum and why do you find it special?

Mr. Sigg: What I really like at the exhibition is the one called “Archives” by Mao Tongqiang. It is not very spectacular, but this “Archives” consists of old furniture and masses of documents from the Inner Security Bureau that had been found by the artist. Covering 1949 to 1979 they were destined to be discharged or burned or recycled, but the artist

collected them, these documents contain so many tragic moments of many lives. They still need to be researched, it's a lot of papers but just the superficial reading reveals how heavy it really is. Of course, it can be argued, how much is this art, how much is this just documentation. But that is a very moving work.

Olga: What was the most unusual or interesting story connected with the purchasing of an artwork?

Mr. Sigg: Since I got most of the works from the artists, there were sometimes difficult circumstances and many works came to me not in a routine way. For instance, a particularly difficult work was the one made of human fat, called “Civilization Pillar”.



Artist: Mao Tongqiang, “Archives”. 2011–2013. Technique: mixed media

That work is very memorable. It is made to remind you of our civilization with all this excess consumption. But it was very difficult to shape it (it is about four meters high), to store it, it was not clear how it was going to sustain, how long would it sustain — these questions were quite difficult to answer. And another work called “RMBCity” by Cao Fei. She creates this work in “Second life”, which was the first virtual reality world on the computer. There you could buy the virtual space on the Internet and you could change this space. The artist shaped it by creating a city. I was involved in the process; we did many buildings. Then we could let it out to artists and they did virtual exhibitions in the virtual space. I was interested in this work very much because it was so difficult to define what is the collectible, how you collect this virtual space work, maybe like data on a hard disk or videos or physical objects or what. When we started the project, we couldn't define what is the collectible. so we helped ourselves by saying When the project finishes, what I will collect is what there will be as an exhibition. We will make the exhibition soon and the debate what the work really is goes still on... It is a great example because it covered new ground!

Olga: Are there any particular modern Chinese artists you would recommend to keep an eye on to watch their development, to pay close attention to their art?

Mr. Sigg: It is very difficult to mention names, because to mention someone means to not mention someone else. I would make the recommendation to encourage people to really follow the young Chinese art. Now we see a movement in China, that many Chinese collectors turn away from their roots and collect less of their own Chinese art production. They began to travel, study and work abroad and feel more comfortable now to purchase international art. Still, I think the international collectors should pay attention to what very young artists in China are doing.

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