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Basel, "Making History." *ArtForum*. (June 18, 2017)

ARTFORUM

Making History

BASEL

06.18.17



Left: Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier. Right: Artist Anders Clausen and Wolfgang Tillmans. (All photos: Linda Yablonsky)

THE REVIEWS ARE IN.

"Our most successful ever."

"Exceptional."

"One of the most upbeat fairs I can remember!"

That's pretty much the consensus—from dealers—on the forty-eighth edition of Art Basel.

Now that it's over we can say that collectors paid big—hundreds of millions—for the big names and spent more good money on the next tier and the one after that. Even as the world ties itself into sorrier knots every day, the market for modern and contemporary art is booming.

Is it like anxious eating? "Either that," one dealer told me, "or it's a demonstration of faith in art and a willingness to invest in our future."

But you've already heard who bought what from whom for how much. So let me take the road less traveled and report on how it *feels* to be there.

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Like a guilty pleasure, that's how.



Left: Artist Arthur Jafa and dealer Gavin Brown. Right: Artist Doug Aitken.

Maddening, too. Meals, for instance, are rarely memorable for the food—generally overdone meat. Green salads are hard to come by. Cheese, however, is plentiful. So is wine and milk chocolate.

Perhaps that's all one needs—other than friends.

Understand that this is one quiet city. Nothing happens that isn't supposed to happen. People behave. It leaves the unexpected to the art.

Forty-eight hours before the June 13, VIP opening of the mighty fair, first responders—i.e. anyone not installing a booth—headed either to Zurich for the Gallery Weekend there or straight to museums for the amuse-bouche to the week's horror vacui.

The choices were many.

At the beatifically lighted Fondation Beyeler, dealer Fernando Mesta joined a general swoon over "Wolfgang Tillmans," a retrospective installed by the artist in a clarifying narrative that gave his photographs and (especially) his films even more sensuality than his sweeping, recent survey at Tate Modern.

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Left: Kunsthalle Basel director Elena Filipovic and artist Christopher Williams. Right: Dealer Marian Goodman.

Out in the garden, meanwhile, Beyeler director Sam Keller was hosting a lunch for Tino Sehgal, one of the artists in a splendid new hang of the museum's collection.

Dealer Marian Goodman, a guest at lunch, accompanied Sehgal to the spot where a female dancer was performing a work of his from 2000, ceaselessly folding and unfolding her apparently rubber-boned body on the floor.

The nominally more static *Lying Figure*, a 1969 painting by Francis Bacon, was the only other work in the room. "That's the ugliest Bacon I've ever seen," Goodman remarked, turning back to the dance, which proceeded with an enviable lack of concern for the passing time. "That must take a lot of strength," the gallerist said. "And *patience*." Not so much, Sehgal told her. "It's the way I used to move in 2000," he said.

Back in town, hungry-eyed visitors wafting through the Kunstmuseum Basel's bunker-like addition harvested a healthy crop of sketches by Cézanne (one loaned by Jasper Johns), and a tit-for-tat exchange show with the Prado that paired Holbein with Zurbaran, Baldung with Velázquez, Memling with Goya. According to whoever is the museum's resident comedian, "This is how history is written."

Now we know.

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Left: Dealer Sadie Coles. Right: Dealer Nara Roesler, artist Julio Le Parc, and dealer Emmanuel Perrotin.

At the institution's contemporary branch on the Rhine, interested parties like David Zwirner Gallery director Bellatrix Hubert escaped the 90-degree heat in a retrospective program of films by Richard Serra. This was very cool. Farther afield, those jumping into the swift current of the river for a swim could float to the Tinguely Museum for Wim Delvoye's first retrospective in Switzerland.

Retrospectives are, like, a *thing* here.

By dusk, the swelling art crowd had colonized every restaurant on Barfusserplatz and, probably, every other eatery in shouting distance of the Kunsthalle Bar. The beloved Bodega alone attracted a swarm of exhibiting dealers.

The Modern Institute's Toby Webster and Andrew Hamilton hosted artists Anne Collier and Nicolas Party with Herald St's Nicky Verber and Ash L'ange. At separate tables marking their own territories were Tanya Bonakdar, José Kuri and Mónica Manzutto, Nathalie Karg, Xavier Hufkens, Daniele Balice and Alexander Hertling, Simon Wang, and Deborah Schamoni, while Art Basel Conversations curator Mari Spirito entertained collector Dillon Cohen and advisor Fernanda Arruda.

This was the slow night.

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Left: Collector Julia Stoscheck and Art Basel director Marc Spiegler. Right: Dealers Monica Sprüth and Philomene Magers.

Come morning, hundreds of collectors and curators would head to the ageist Liste fair, where young dealers rarely show work by artists over forty. Alas, on the way there, I was sidetracked by Art Parcours, the flâneur's favorite.

Arrayed in museums and other public spaces around the Münsterplatz were interventions by twenty-two artists from nearly as many nations. Flaka Haliti raised white banners—ghosts—in the courtyard of the old Town Hall (or Rathaus), once the site of public executions. Marble figures by Reza Armesh commanded three different sites, one overlooking the Rhine. Also turned to the river was a neon propaganda poem by Rirkrit Tiravanija visible only from the nearest bridge. Marvin Gaye Chetwynd built a papier-maché video lab for a fictive diva and a mad scientist facing off in a room hardly large enough to contain their psychedelic egos.

There was also live art. Instead of walking to art destinations, Christodoulos Panayiotous gave distinctive necklaces to select curators to walk around town. Wu Tsang recast an historic hideout for revolutionaries as Club de Bâle, a speakeasy animated by Juliana Huxtable, Isabel Lewis, and other artists, but only at night.

The wow factor loomed larger at Art Unlimited, which gave off a definite whiff of carnival. Just inside the entrance, a translucent helium dirigible by the late Chris Burden magisterially circled a track behind a giant blue inflatable houseplant (*Blue Star Linz*, 1980) by Otto Piene while an LED text bar by Jenny Holzerhopscothed through the air.

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Left: Artist Tino Sehgal. Right: Artist Juliana Huxtable and dealer Sophie Mörner.

Interactivity was also having a moment, even when it wasn't as obvious as Subodh Gupta's *Cooking the World*. The artist, dressed in kitchen whites, was dishing out food to consumers seated at a clean white counter inside a pavilion made entirely of strung-together battered pots and pans—a rather impressive sight, it has to be said.

Susan Hiller was also on site, encouraging negligent fairgoers to play the handsome Wurlitzer at the center of *Die Gedanken sind frei* (Thoughts Are Free), her installation from Documenta 13. On the walls were the lyrics to a hundred political songs. "People have to play the jukebox," she said, frustrated. "But they're just reading the walls! This isn't something just to look at."

In another part of the hall, however, people didn't hesitate to throw off their shoes to walk on the 20,000 wooden eggs of Cildo Meireles's *Amerikkka*, even though the raked ceiling above was made of 40,000, hollow gold bullets. Others were game to step through the turquoise steel cages by eighty-one-year-old Paolo Icaro, a onetime arte povera person who expanded his reach. "He made these to counter minimalism in New York," said dealer Alessandro Pessoli, adding, "Minimalists aren't famous for their use of color."

If the fair gave out a People's Choice Award for most popular project, *Rob Pruitt's Official Art World/Celebrity Lookalikes* would have won handily. Covering the walls of a crowded booth, floor-to-ceiling, were downloaded portraits of artists, collectors, and curators that Pruitt paired with their perceived doppelgangers from moviedom, politics, and pop music—Maja Hoffmann and Elizabeth Taylor, François Pinault and Jeff Sessions, Norman Rosenthal and Jabba the Hut, etc. "This is hysterical!" said Hatje Cantz program director Holger Liebs. Collector Tony Salamé just laughed out loud.

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Left: Artist Susan Hiller. Right: Collector Don Rubell with artist Wang Shang and collectors Mera Rubell, Michelle Rubell, and Jason Rubell.

Art can still be profound as well. All you had to do was submit to the Adrian Piper room, where suave gray walls held very dark photographs that the artist made of herself in 1971, as a hedge against disappearing. “Heartbreaking,” noted Wexner Center director Sherri Geldin. Across the aisle, grayscale photograms by Liz Deschenne formed a striking, abstract counterpart. “The most beautiful pairing here,” observed Martin Klosterfelde.

Another big winner was Arthur Jafa’s *Apex*, an eight-and-a-half-minute reel of disparate, often close-up images set to a pulsating soundtrack by Robert Hood, a DJ and techno music producer who is also an Alabama preacher. Though dated 2013, Jafa had done a new edit just hours before the opening. “Some of the frames just didn’t quite fit,” he said, as dealer Gavin Brown rolled his eyes. I knew why. The work was gripping as is.

No day at a fair ends when the lights go down in the exhibition halls. My main event that evening was Brown’s rollicking dinner at traditional Restaurant Löwenzorn for Jafa and LaToya Ruby Frazier, whose black-and-white photographs of Noah Purifoy’s outdoor museum of sculpture in Joshua Tree also impressed at Unlimited. Here was a great chance to hear her talk about this work, which Purifoy made in the 1960s from the wreckage of the Watts Riots. I caught her compassion for it. But that was later.

Before dinner, I stopped at the riverside Gasthof Zum Goldenen Sternen, where 303, Eva Presenhuber, Victoria Miro, and Regen Projects galleries were giving a dinner—hopefully more edible—for Unlimited artist Doug Aitken. Why were dealers Paula Cooper and Francesca Kaufmann mixing in with their respective Unlimited and Art Parcours artists, Matias Faldbakken and Latifa Echakhch? It’s a popular venue! Everyone cross-pollinated. And the sunset was glorious. Would such collegiality be evident on the selling floor?

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As soon as the Art Basel doors opened the following morning, both floors were swarming with people eager to nail purchases made in advance of the fair via phone and email—a growing trend.



Left: Artists Mickalene Thomas and Raquel Chevremont. Right: Dia director Jessica Morgan.

The ground floor was too respectable, or awash with too much of the same-old, same-old for my taste. “What’s the price?” collector Jean-Pierre Lehmann asked Jay Jopling, a refrain that must have been repeated up and down the aisles thousands of times that day.

Lehmann was staring into a glass case at the golden skeleton of an animal fetus by Damien Hirst. Its two million was less than what dealer Jack Shainman set for a new painting by Kerry James Marshall, his first to feature white people. (It went to a certain museum in London.)

With Sarah McCrory, director of Goldsmith’s new gallery in London, I went upstairs to Statements—solo presentations by younger artists. I lost sight of McCrory within minutes. Each to her own pace!

At Emanuel Layr, Cecile B. Evans built an actual, three-story house for viewing a fictional television show where weather, words, and communal behavior all chip away at capitalist ideals. And at Labor, Documenta 14 artist Antonio Vega Macotella had fashioned an industrial music box from an enormous barrel roll perforated by nineteenth-century hammers and chisels typically used by miners in Bolivia. When turned by a viewer, the mechanism played the first known protest song in Latin American—one recognized by passing Colombian collectors, who started to sing along. “It’s dude art,” admitted dealer Pamela Echeverria. “But it’s also a precision instrument.”

Either stand could have won the Baloise Prize, which went to Sam Pulitzer and Martha Atienza. The entire Rubell family, however, was totally sold on the mirrored, geological lightbox sculptures

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of Chinese artist Wang Shang at Magician Space. “It’s tech meets the natural world,” enthused Mera Rubell.



Left: Artist Paolo Icaro with dealers Alessandro Pasotti and Fabrizio Padovani. Right: Artists Ingar Dragset and Michael Elmgreen.

I was more taken by just about every one of fifty booths in the Feature section for undervalued artists or unknown works, including some by Nam Jun Paik (at James Cohan), Stan VanDerBeek (at The Box), and Stephen Willats (at Balice Hertling). Dealers took the time to speak at length about each.

It was time for lunch. That meant getting in line at the sausage stand in the courtyard. I squeezed in behind Art Institute of Chicago deputy director Ann Goldstein with artist Christopher Williams; Wexner Center director Sherri Geldin and her chief curator Michael Goodson; Santa Barbara Museum of Art photo and new media curator Charles Wylie; and Warhol Foundation president Joel Wachs. Collector John Kaldor, a towering figure among Australians, was going around with Public Art Fair director Nicholas Baume.

I should mention that this fair attracts at least as many top museum professionals as art advisors. In other words, Art Basel is not for dilettantes. For social anthropologists, however, it’s like winning the World Cup. And if all you want to do all day is talk about art and its political or social import or its failure to make any difference, and why, this is the place to do it.

Political events in the big world—at this point, I’ll refrain from calling it the real world—kept intruding on people’s art joy. Following French President Emmanuel Macron’s election and withering rebuke to Donald Trump’s on climate change, his country has become popular with the cognoscenti. As Parisian dealer Niklas Svennung told me, “This is the first time, ever, that people came into the booth just to say thank you!”

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At the close of the fair's first day, dinners tend to be muted and small. Dealers generally are too exhausted to throw big parties. Even Larry Gagosian had to take a bench break in midafternoon. (The red and green benches facing the interior courtyard are Art Basel's most treasured asset.)



Left: Collector Eyal Ofer and dealer Jeffrey Deitch. Right: Collector Dasha Zhukova and art adviser Sandy Heller.

The Approach's Jake Miller and Emma Robertson took artist Magali Reus and supporters like 2016 Turner Prize winner Helen Marten, SculptureCenter curator Ruba Katrib, and Hepworth-Wakefield curator Andrew Bonvicini to Birseckerhof, which must be a dealer favorite. Andrew Kreps and Chiara Repetto were dining there too. So was Victoria Miro and her whole crew, while Stedelijk Museum curator Bart van der Heide was meeting a whole other group.

How do Basel's restaurants survive when the art fair isn't in season?

On Wednesday morning, I missed collector Maja Oeri's breakfast at the Schaulager for David Claerbout, so I happily indulged in more of the main fair till it was time for the Swiss Institute's annual lunch at Volkshaus. There a concentration of Swiss artists and curators applauded director Simon Castets's announcement of the projected opening (next spring) for SI's new, Annabelle Selldorf-designed building on Saint Mark's Place—until now not notably so Swiss.

Conversations everywhere seemed to begin with whether you had come from Documenta 14 in Kassel or Athens or from Skulptur Projekte Münster or the Venice Biennale—or were going to one or the other after Basel. Home seemed a foreign concept—except to Elena Filipovic, director of the Kunsthalle Basel and curator of two edifying exhibitions opening that night. One introduced the work of the young Yan Xing. The other, "Ungestalt," was a group show of mainly sculpture that amounted to Filipovic's own version of "Eccentric Abstraction." Much of it would strike tourists as ugly. Nothing was conventional. I liked it.

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Left: Collector Ulla Dreyfus-Best. Right: *Parkett* cofounder Bice Curiger and dealer Niels Olsen.

Outside, just as Aitken and Oeri arrived for the Kunsthalle's benefit dinner, I saw guests flatten themselves against the building wall as a flatbed truck drove slowly toward the street on the pedestrian walkway from Theater Basel next door. What was happening?

Additionally, musicians on the theater plaza were giving a bagpipe concert. As if that weren't surreal enough, it turned out that one of the Tinguely sculptures that have been splashing water in the reflecting pool in front of the Kunsthalle garden for heaven knows how many years was on the flatbed, broken and beautiful and sad, proceeding offstage to that mournful music for either burial or repair.

After that, it was business as usual, only business seemed less competitive than social events—gallery dinners, a *Kaleidoscope* party for Martine Syms, a party at the Three Kings to celebrate the tenth anniversary of both the Zabłudowiz and Julia Stoschek Collections, a Vito Schnabel lunch at the Donati for Walter Robinson, a private museum conference, side trips to the Kunsthalle Bern for Verena Dengler and Jill Mulleady or the Kunsthalle Bregenz for Adrián Villar Rojas.

What is a person to *do*?

I left for Athens.

— *Linda Yablonsky*

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Left: Dealer Esther Schipper. Right: Artist Sylvie Fleury and curator Nicolas Trembley.



Left: Dealer Isabella Bortolozzi. Right: Collectors John Kaldor and Naomi Milgrom with dealer Nicholas Logsdail.

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Left: Dealer Jack Shainman. Right: Dealer Francesca Kaumann with artist Andrea Bowers and dealer Susanne Vielmetter.



Left: Swiss Institute director Simon Castets and curator Julie Boukobza. Right: Dealers Kurt Mueller and David Kordansky.

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Left: Dealer Thor Shannon and dealer Nicky Verber. Right: Dealer Maureen Paley.



Left: Frieze Art Fair director Victoria Siddal and dealer Angela Westwater. Right: Dealer Leilah Heller and artist Reza Aramesh.

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Left: Public Art Fund director Nicholas Baume. Right: Dealer Fernando Mesta.



Left: Hepworth-Wakefield curator Andrew Bonvincini, Goldsmith's Gallery director Sarah McCrory and artist Helen Marten. Right: Collectors Norman and Norah Stone.

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Left: LACMA COO Diana Vesqa and LACMA director Michael Govan. Right: Dealer Shaun Caley Regen and artist Alex Hank.



Left: Artist Gabriel Kuri. Right: Art consultant Akemi Shiraha, Tate curator Ann Gallagher, and Whitechapel Gallery director Iwona Blazwick.

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Left: Dealer Anton Kern. Right: Collector Jean-Pierre Lehmann and dealer Jay Jopling.



Left: Dealer Massimo Minini. Right: Dealer Matthew Marks.



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Left: Collector Jill Kraus and dealer Mickey Schubert. Right: Dealer Iwan Wirth.



Left: Collector Alan Hergott with Hammer Museum director Ann Philbin and Hammer Museum chief of staff Curt Shepard. Right: Dealer Casey Kaplan.



Left: Dealer Beat Raeber. Right: Beyeler Foundation director Sam Keller and Hirshhorn Museum curator Jarrett Gregory.

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Left: Dealer Gió Marconi, artist April Street, curator Philipp Kaiser, and artist Markus Schinwald.
Right: Dealer Pepi Marchetti Franchi.



Left: Dealers Simon Wang and Deborah Schamoni. Right: Dealers Simon Wang and Deborah Schamoni

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Left: Serpentine Gallery artistic director Hans Ulrich Obrist. Right: Collectors Maja Hoffmann and Leon Amitai.



Left: Art Institute of Chicago deputy director and chief curator Ann Goldstein and Santa Barbara Museum of Art curator Charles Wylie. Right: SculptureCenter curator Ruba Katrib.

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Left: Architects Florian Beier and Nina Bischofberger Beier. Right: Art historian Catherine Pettigas and curator Aphrodite Gonou.



Left: Art advisor Ana Sokoloff and MAMBO director Claudia Hakim. Right: Art advisor Meredith Darrow and collector Rosa de la Cruz.

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Left: Artist Flaka Haliti and dealer Deborah Schamoni. Right: Artist Lucy Raven and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts director Dan Byers.



Left: Collector Tiffany Zabłudowicz. Right: Collector Alberto Mugrabe.

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Left: Collectors Anthony D'Offay and Marie-Louise Laband. Right: Collectors Anita and Pujo Zabłudowicz



Left: Collectors Elham and Tony Salamé. Right: Collectors Eric Diefenbach and J.K. Brown.

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Left: Composer Hans Berg. Right: Auctioneer Simon de Pury.



Left: Dealer Jurgen Becker. Right: Dealer Mónica Manzutto.

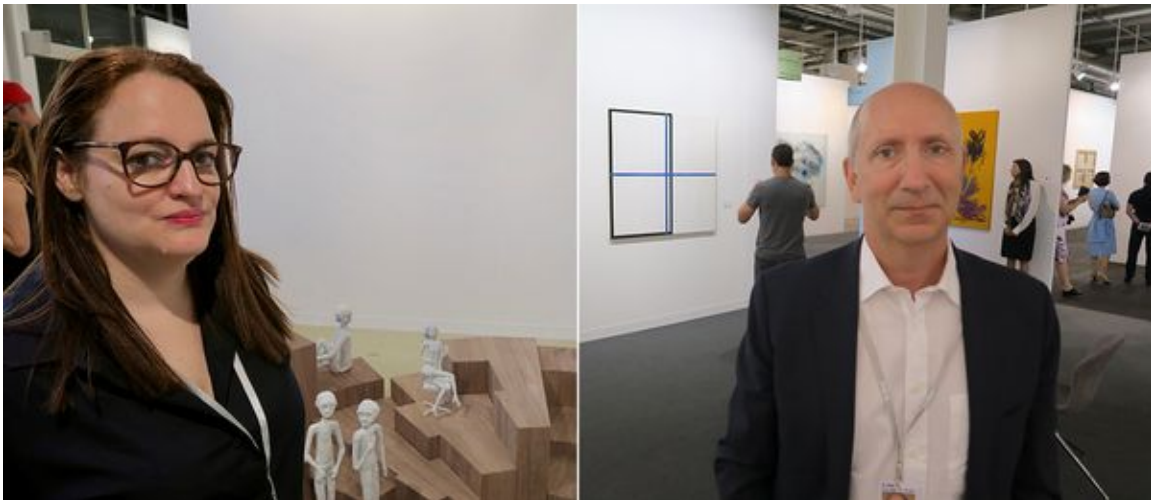
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Left: Dealer Kate Werble. Right: Dealer Simon Lee.

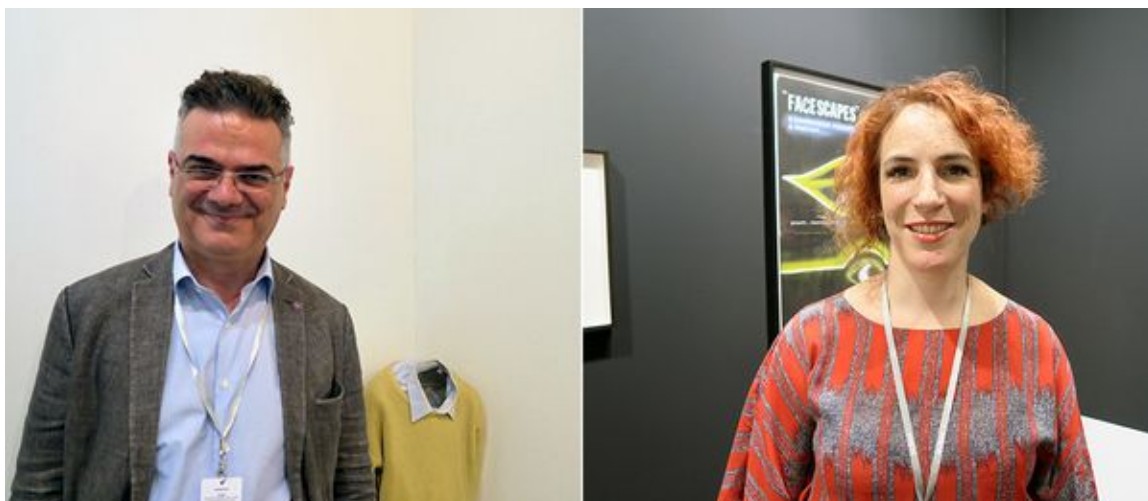


Left: Dealer Nicole Russo. Right: Dealer John Van Doren.

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Left: Dealer Roupén Kalfayan. Right: Dealer Mara McCarthy.



Left: Dealer Tim Blum. Right: Dealer Jamie Kenyon.

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Left: Swiss Institute curator Laura McLean-Ferris and artist Helen Marten. Right: MoMA curator Laura Hoptman and dealer Markus Rischgasser.