

# KUNSTHALLE BERN

THEY SAY, WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE

Tom Kummer

*Tracy, are you there?*

The line is bad ...

*Did you get the text on the shows in Bern and Glarus?*

I've read it all. But give me just a few minutes. Chloë Sevigny is on line 2, David Zwirner on 3 ...

*Okay.*

*Waiting. Thinking. Who is Tracy? For five years, she has been working for WME Beverly Hills—Hollywood's most influential talent agency. Tracy came from the Gagosian Gallery. (People say she slept with Larry at one point. Tracy's career is strewn with gossip.) The Los Angeles Times recently called Tracy "the most important link between Hollywood and the art market ..." Now she will analyze the market value and gossip quotient of the artists presented at the exhibition in Bern and Glarus for us. It's going to be about the staged confusions of the present—a world that has never consisted merely of truths in images, texts, and objects, but of fragments, contradictions, fictional conventions, staged rumors, fictional artist biographies.*

*As an example, I will tell Tracy about **Ulises Carrión**, who analyzes rumors that have led to scandals in life and in art. As early as 1975, in *The Art of Making Books* he discerned plagiarism, calling it "the starting point of the creative activity." Why is there plagiarism? Because there are too many books. Art is not private property. They represent love for the author ...*

Tom?

*Yes, Tracy.*

Do you hear me? Please excuse the noises, I'm just eating my lunch salad.

*What kind of salad?*

After a recipe from Gwyneth (Paltrow).

*Okay, Tracy. Bon appetit. You already know what the exhibition at the two venues in Bern and Glarus is about, right?*

I love Bern. And the Lake of Lucerne. Magnificent landscape.

*Glarus is not Lucerne, and Bern lies on the Aare.*

I understand. Glarus is beautiful too, the architecture of the building. The director is cool. But she should eat more salad. (Tracy laughs.) I'm familiar with Switzerland. A nation of carnivores. Horrible.

Helvetiaplatz 1, CH-3005 Bern

T +41 31 350 00 40 info@kunsthalle-bern.ch kunsthalle-bern.ch

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*Please, no lessons in “vegan lifestyle,” Tracy. What’s much more important: You told me about a meeting with your clients Jodie Foster and Leonardo DiCaprio. What was it about?*

I brought them together with Helen Molesworth (chief curator of the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum). That’s all. It was about the acquisition of new works—a pretty monumental moment, if you know what I mean. (Tracy laughs.)

*Tracy, the theme we are addressing is mainly about breaking with the traditional understanding of roles in the market, about subverting the conventional borders between production, distribution, and also the reception of artworks. In times of radical economic transformation processes, networked communities, and liquid identities ...*

I understand, Tom. But something entirely different, before we delve into that: Will Valérie Knoll really remain the director of the Kunsthalle in Bern? I would have a job for her here. And a house with a pool ...

*I think she’s very happy in Bern. By the way, she’s just preparing a Harald Szeemann retrospective with the Getty Museum.*

Good for her! Then let’s talk about *They say, where there’s smoke, there’s fire*. What a title! (Tracy laughs.) Unfortunately, my time is limited. I can’t compose a bible text for each of the artists you’re presenting. On account of the intensity of my work, I sometimes speak in a choppy or hysterical manner, also verbosely. I can be a nasty little bitch. But that’s the way you like it too, right?

*Sure.*

So let me tell you Swiss people. Nobody’s going to replace Fischli & Weiss on the market anytime soon. And unfortunately, Pipilotti Rist isn’t such a big favorite here anymore. (Tracy laughs.) ...

*That’s what your informers tell you?*

That’s what my clients say.

*What about Urs Fischer?*

He should first get the divorce from Tara Subkoff behind him. That’ll cost him millions.

*How powerful is the currency called “gossip” for you?*

Very powerful. More than 90 percent of an art investor’s knowledge is based on rumors.

*And that’s what you’re in charge of?*

Also in charge of. My misfortune is that I’m at the source and know what’s going on in the minds of Angelina and Brad, but also of Justin Bieber, Elton John, Meryl Streep,

or Jay-Z. And what Hillary Clinton is planning, since her personal consultant is Ari Emanuel. She likes Kiki Smith, by the way.

*Kiki?*

I know, you two had something going, Bad Boy Kummer. Did she at least give you a work back then? Then you’d be financially made.

*I won’t say.*

You know, Tom, I often think in pictures, what I mean is that I see the thinking of my clients in pictures, I study the web of connections independently of their position with a clear view to the possibilities. I walk this thin borderline between appearance and being, mask and face, life and art, the subjectivist excesses, the stolen and invented, the strategically employed rumor and the facts, which I then directly include in the decisions I make.

*How do you define a malicious rumor?*

Difficult questions. For example, when an artist becomes unfaithful to his collector or gallerist, just because he supports Donald Trump ...

*Interesting. You were resented because you provide consulting in collecting art for Ivanka Trump.*

Let’s talk about something else, please ...

*Why? It’s really not a rumor anymore that you established the connection between the artist Richard Prince and Ivanka, for example.*

No comment.

*What advice did you give Ivanka, when Richard Prince withdrew the copyright on a picture in her collection and reimbursed the purchase price of 36,000 dollars?*

I thought, what an idiot.

*I thought it was Richard Price’s best gesture and “work” in a long time.*

Give me a break, Tom

*And what do you think the exhibitions in Bern and Glarus are about?*

I happened to speak with Larry (Gagosian), when I received your information. I think it is about the blasting and glorification of authorship. In the case of **Lutz Bacher** as well. My goodness, how often has the name been mentioned with us. Just recently again with my client Will Ferrell. He was totally enthusiastic—and uncertain. Yes, because the pseudonym LB is part of a thorough complication of unambiguous identities. Here, the alter ego becomes an escape route and provides a

commentary on the art world and its unfortunate obsession with categorizations.

*I'm quite familiar with this condition ...*

Exactly. In your case, the staging of “journalism” aimed at the originality of the genre of the truth fanatics—and how, as one could then gather from the hysterical reactions, your Situationist intention apparently proliferated to become a real threat to the reality of the print media. When that happened, you already won, you achieved your aim. You could withdraw and let the market play.

*Okay, I understand ... and then?*

Tom, give me a minute. I've got Chloë Sevigny on line 4.

*Okay, no problem.*

*Waiting. Thinking. The omnipresence of social media has made us all architects of identity masks. A multiplied ego is an advantage in this surveillance apparatus, not only in the economy of the art world, but in the entire society of control. Tracy's form of anonymous operation, with rumors strewn in a targeted way, is for purely pragmatic reasons—maybe like in the case of the **Guerrilla Girls** with their three decades of agitation. “The freedom of anonymous speech is guaranteed in the Constitution,” Tracy recently explained to me. And this statement could also be by the **Guerrilla Girls**: “You'd be surprised, Tom, what people in Hollywood say, when their behind a mask ...”*

Tom, I'm back already. Where were we?

*Drawing borders. Like with Reena Spaulings, John Dogg, Vern Blossum, or Rose Sélavy, for instance, who are also on view in Bern and Glarus. Are you familiar with these names?*

Exactly, **Reena Spaulings**. Sexy pseudonym. I just talked about that with David Geffen, my favorite collector. At the time, he didn't understand it at all. Negotiating new borders between art and fashion, for example, activism critical of capitalism and the commercial culture business. I always understood Reena Spaulings in this vein, as a titular character who deliberately confuses, according to the maxim: Artistic fiction can indeed serve as a placeholder for concrete, political-economic decision-making processes.

*It can also be an epic strategy.*

Right. The strategies of the fictional art-world muse with a multiple personality structure ... that's also the way I operate. (Tracy laughs.)

*Are you familiar with “Bernadette Corporation”?*

You mean Bernadette Van-Huy, John Kelsey, and Antek Walczak? A staged business model and a branding

strategy that began in 1995 with a women's fashion line, right?

*Right.*

Of course, it was also about alienating the alternative, politically correct people. That doesn't catch on here yet with the collectors in Hollywood. But that could change.

*1995 was a time when the fashion industry was confronted by the DIY rebels. Bernadette Corporation were strongly inspired by the historical avant-garde.*

I know the story, Tom. My client Chloë Sevigny is the iconic idol of Bernadette Corporation ... You know, one can find clearly defined models in your exhibition. Besides Duchamp, my personal heroes like Vivienne Westwood, Malcolm McLaren, or Jean-Luc Godard. Clearly part of a Situationist movement. One identity is no longer enough. And this play with identities always arises, when the excesses in the art market increase. A quite natural game.

*Do the names John Dogg, Vern Blossum, or Rose Sélavy say anything to you?*

Hollywood collectors signaled an interest in **Vern Blossum** to me. And way up front: Nicolas Cage, although he is currently going through a financial crisis. Wes Anderson would like to collect Blossum, Anthony Kiedis too. The only question is, if he can attain the works. He is interested in simplified renditions of parking meters, hydrants, mailboxes, and fire alarms.

*That's already an old story, but still fantastic. Did you reveal them to your clients?*

Sure. Blossum, the artist, didn't even exist. It was the pseudonym of a painter who has remained anonymous until today. Because this “Blossum” regarded Pop Art as an affront to painterly skills, he produced a bit of cantankerous faux Pop, and after proving his point he disappeared from the scene again. If you look at how ahead of the times Blossum's fake was, it's clear that people want to collect him today.

*I find that works such as Stop, Abgelaufen, or Bent are strongly oriented toward the structural-conceptual, and Duchamp's weird language games basically anticipated John Baldessari or Joseph Kosuth.*

Exactly. What is more is that people like Blossum or John Dogg not only demonstrate how the meaning of art changes depending on the context, they also stand for the recurring inclination of artists to assume false identities, not least in response to the constraints of the art market: They split up into numerous parts.

*When I now mention a few names of artists appearing in our show, could you briefly say what comes to your mind? No matter what it is, it can also be gossip ... For example, John Dogg.*

**John Dogg** is a fictional artist in the style of the beatniks conceived by Richard Prince and the now deceased New York gallerist Colin de Land. His few exhibitions in the 1980s presented neo-minimalist car and truck tires and hubcaps. They are terrific gestures of a mischief-maker and covert operations.

*St. Bernard?*

Pseudonym (also) of Colin de Land, one of New York's most exciting gallerists. He started his career on East 6 St., during the heyday of the East Village art boom. De Land was married to Pat Hearn, who died from liver cancer in August 2000. In 2004 de Land also died from cancer. Unfortunately, I never got to know them personally. What a nasty team. Really tremendous figures of recent art history.

*Henry Codax?*

Is also a fictional artist, a character from the novella of Reena Spaulings. The works could be a collaboration between the older Olivier Mosset and the young hot shot Jacob Kassay.

*People today still ask whether he really existed.*

He exists in painting that bears his name—without a signature. Because signatures are easy to forge. His paintings are monochromes, because the message that the monochrome sends is: "It is art about art." I find it great. And so do Matt Damon and Angelina Jolie, by the way.

*What do your prominent Hollywood clients find so appealing about this concept of confusion?*

I think it fundamentally touches the core of this subversion of the old Hollywood system. The value of authorship and originality is called into question. If you keep the authorship mysterious, the viewer has to confront it more intensively. When you don't know who the author is, speculations begin ...

*So the minimalistic brings the question of what art is to a head?*

You know, we've coined a nice term for this speculating quite a while ago: flipping!

*You hype a young artist and then offer the work at auctions, right?*

You could say that. It's an exciting moment when things come together, the connections function, the rumors

leave their mark; the ends of my nerves then feel as if they were being sanded by glass paper, my heart throbs, and I only feel relieved when the connection between my client and the right recipient has been completed.

*That turns you on?*

Sure. We're wide awake, we don't miss a thing. For the person who is then hit by fate, who crosses my path, grand days lie ahead ... (Tracy laughs.)

*How did you meet **Bernd Fischerauer** and **Wolfgang Bauer**?*

It happened a few years ago at a party in the house of Quentin (Tarantino). A film called *Change* was being shown. I think without sound. And then there was David Fincher and a chick from *Art in America* and they all demanded that the volume be turned up. And everybody watched the film. And then someone yelled, what a shitty spoof, and everybody laughed. I think it was a melodrama set in the Viennese bohemia, a mocking satire about the Viennese culture business and a portrayal of freaked-out, Austrian petit bourgeois. Quentin Tarantino thought that was super trashy ...

*What can a film like *Change* from 1975 still induce among today's Hollywood elite?*

I think it's this mocking manipulation of fiction and reality. The deliberate confusion of fiction and life.

*That's how progressively the Hollywood elite thinks?*

That is totally misjudged in Europe. It's always about countering any sort of societal constraints and norms in life and in art. And in that respect, I think Hollywood is quite advanced nowadays. Entirely different people like Matt Damon or Jay-Z are suddenly interested in the work of Marcel Duchamp ...

*Pardon me?*

Yes. It seems to be less about encryption than about the blasting and obscuring of authorship. The insight formulated in your exhibition also makes it clear why Marcel Duchamp, alias **Rose Sélavy**, already became a trailblazer of modern art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, because he no longer defined himself based on an oeuvre, but through an idea and its mise en scène. Decisive is its experimental character that grasps artworks merely as traces or documentations of experimental arrangements.

*Are your clients still that wild about Marcel Duchamp today?*

He is the daddy of dada ... a prankster and master of subversion. He didn't believe in art, he believed in artists ...

*Nicely said.*



For Duchamp, stagings of the self and subject inventions were both an aspect of his art and part of his life. Two areas that in his case dovetailed and necessitated each other. His surroundings were crucial, they offered the freedom he required: a bourgeois home, financial security, and no urge to create! That's all the difference.

*What comes to mind when you hear the name **Christian Leigh**?*

What a mystical and underrated figure of the art scene! He was briefly a fashion designer, then a curator, and with the show *The Silent baroque* (1989) he drew my attention to the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. He constantly appears with slightly altered names: Kristian Leigh, Christian Leigh, CS Leigh, C.S. Leigh. He created clothes for Jane Fonda, Farrah Fawcett, Jessica Lange, and one of my favorite clients, Meryl Streep, who wore his dress at the Oscars in 1982. He disappears time and again, and there are a lot of assumptions and stories about this mysterious figure.

***Puppies Puppies?***

What an awesome enigma. I saw their show in 2015 on the occasion of the Material Art Fair here in Los Angeles. Ready-mades are really nothing new anymore, but the Puppies Puppies redefine the genre. It's also fantastic the way they managed to maintain a mystery surrounding their persons and works in a time of total overexposure in the social networks. Yet they openly concede that there can be no art without models. Every art is based on a model, it is in a certain way genial plagiarism, perfect sampling, but of the kind that opens new horizons.

***Werner von Delmont?***

Strange affair. I know the work, but who's behind it?

*An artist called Stephan Dillemath.*

But what does he want to tell us? That the bourgeois project is over and with it the ideals of enlightenment, democracy, and the public sphere? That's something I can understand well. After all, we are living in Corporate Rococo today.

*Corporate Rococo? Where did you get that term from?*

Stole it somewhere.

*I think Dillemath questions the social role and political potentials of artistic work. Long before big data, he engaged with technological-social surveillance apparatuses and the exploitation of privacy and the privatization of the public sphere. He counters our economized society of control with the artistic practice of bohemian research.*

Sounds like really smart conceptual art. Unfortunately, I can't sell that here ...

***Kim Seob Boninsegni?***

Hard to position. The teacher, the curator, the political activist, director, filmmaker, draughtsman, organizer—you can no longer pinpoint these artists.

*Kim builds a network out of objects, activities, and relations, in which he retraces the language and power of the market and of consumption, while resisting integration and letting attempts at integration fail.*

That's what everyone here in Hollywood is trying to do. That's why you go to Netflix, Amazon, or Hulu as a director, because the artist isn't supposed to integrate himself there—just let them do it.

***Verena Dengler?***

I first thought she was a Nazi. Maybe she is. But her pranks are juicy and it's clear where she's coming from. Yet I did have a hard time presenting her here in Beverly Hills. The Jewish collectors are indeed fussy when it comes to radical rightist put-ons.

*Radical rightist?*

That's the effect it can have.

*Nonsense, Tracy. Verena Dengler joyfully plays in zones that are meant to empower young artists to successfully produce great art as radical, political, creative entrepreneurs who are at the same time attractive for the market.*

Okay, I think Quentin might like the Dengler material. I would label it "Radical Chic." But then he would have to be allowed to physically touch her. (Tracy laughs.) Maybe Dengler only likes little boys. But who doesn't want to be touched by Quentin Tarantino ...

*I think "Radical Chic" is a key concept in regard to Dengler's artistic engagement. The American writer Tom Wolfe coined it in the early 1970s to describe the phenomenon that saturated members of the educated classes supported the radical Black Panther Party—a fashionable game in the hazy grey area of lifestyle and political engagement.*

That's a great comparison. And that makes Dengler attractive for our market as well. Although a lot of L.A. artists do that here.

***Bonnie Camplin?***

A super precise researcher of our entangled relationships and subjective experiences. She creates her own universe, the idea of "the invented life." Am I right?

*You could say that ...*

She was nominated for the Turner Prize. That made her important for us ... although her work is still considered cryptic and opaque. But soon her work will no longer be regarded as unsellable.

**Danny McDonald?**

A homeboy, so to speak. Born in Los Angeles. He responds to the living and working conditions of his generation. Especially in this city. I think he belonged to the legendary Art Club 2000. At any rate, I think that with Danny a lot of tomorrow's murderers and super capitalists grew up in the kid's room. They are pretty gruesome childhood dreams. I always had to think of Miley Cyrus, who has a contract with WME. I should introduce Danny to her one day. But maybe they're already acquainted ... Quite possible.

**Nancy Halt?**

Never heard of her.

*It's a fictive name, Bob van der Wal and Julia Moritz are behind it. The figure they invented refers to Nancy Holt, one of the few female Land Art artists. In Glarus and Bern they will present a trailer—in both senses of the word.*

Okay, I'll have to remember that.

**Thomas Julier?**

A Swiss, isn't he? I heard about his show *Hunter in the Void*. Very complex. *Traces of the Hunter*, the epilogue you are presenting in your exhibition, also seems to devour reality as we once knew it. I find it exciting the way he proposes a new temporal dimension, a mythical or literary time. Nevertheless, the guy is compatible with the mainstream. Suzanne Deal Booth, my absolute favorite collector, told me about him. He did something at Marfa, right? Pretty slick and shiny. He showed something with Marlene Dietrich there, a chain of references to pop culture and philosophy. That reminds me of your interviews ...

*Julier stands for a generation of artists who don't delegate success to others, but take it in their own hands. You invent yourself in different identities, establish off spaces, and launch yourself as a brand.*

In Julier's case, success came damned fast. I remember that he exhibited in New York and was supposed to have a strategic talk with gallerists and our marketing pros about his art and his concepts. Then he backed away. Why? Nobody here understood that.

*Maybe he was afraid of being catapulted into art heaven too quickly. Like one of the Young Wild Ones ...*

That happened to you too. You were ahead of your times, Tom. An artist without a work—but with a clear concept.

You weren't even twenty yet and already had an affair with Kiki Smith, then Nan Goldin falls in love with you and you're the star in her first book. Later Pipilotti Rist makes a pass at you. All the while you're constantly expanding different genres and forms of German-language journalism. And on the side you write a critically acclaimed bestseller with *Nina & Tom* ...

*Life is beautiful ... Do you know Gianni Motti?*

He's that globally operating party basher—a talented pain in the ass. He tried to provoke a scandal here at the Academy Awards, too. He wanted to take the stage as a doppelganger and pick up an Oscar ...

*A funny art activist.*

He is a living homage to the 1960s prankster, Abbie Hoffman. A clever parody of politically charged action art of the 1960s and 70s.

**Ramaya Tegegne?**

The name has popped up at various Swiss institutions lately.

Which of her works are you showing?

*Bzzz Bzzz Bzzz, a kind of gossip oral history of the off space New Jersey that was closed in 2013. It was very important for a new generation of young artists for a couple of years and it also shaped the contemporary art landscape in Switzerland.*

I find the research on networks of social relationships in art and also gossip really exciting. A couple of people from my circle will take a look at your show.

**Seyoung Yoon?**

It's exciting the way she counteracts the hashtag mechanisms. That's why Yoon created the artist figure "Soon Boon." I think that's a highly topical effort, to blur authorship and destroy the modes of quick internet searches. There are hardly any hits for "Soon Boon" on Google ... Hey Tom, sorry, we have to break off our conversation soon. Ari (Emanuel) has called us to a meeting.

*Just one more name, Tracy: Philippe Thomas ... does he still ring a bell?*

Does Thomas have anything to do with **Claire Burrus**? Oh, the French. Such highbrow clowns. But the idea of his agency did have a deeper meaning, and that is still highly relevant today. And although I didn't directly experience the 1980s, I do know that this phenomenon of the totally overheated art market and the increasingly hyped figure of the art star created a counter-movement. From that point of view, the strategy of Thomas makes

sense.

*Are you familiar with his work readymades belong to everyone®?*

Yes, great. The person who buys his art becomes the author of the respective work. In this way, Thomas seeks to redefine the value of “art” as a commodity, meaning that he operates within the system while simultaneously reflecting on the rules of the game. In my view, that pretty much encapsulates the significance of your show: “The essential feature of modernist art is to criticize itself from within.”

*Nice ending, Tracy ...*

Just a moment. A short message before I have to attend to Ryan (Gosling). (Tracy laughs.) Here we go: No artist should deceive himself today: You all want a NAME! And success only counts, if you have a name in the elegant, glamorous world. That’s what you need me for. Keep that in mind! That’s all.

*Tracy, thank you for the conversation. Greetings to Los Angeles!*

This text was written for the exhibition  
*Sie sagen, wo Rauch ist, ist auch Feuer*  
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