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«My idea was to represent the best artists in their own country»

A conversation with Eva Presenhuber

Raphael Gygax

Born in Austria and based in Zurich since the late 1980s, gallerist Eva Presenhuber is one of the most influential people in contemporary art today. In addition to several locations in Zurich, the gallery now also has one in New York. This conversation, which was conducted in July 2020, aims to trace the history of the gallery and throw light on the specific historical conditions of its emergence.

Eva Presenhuber in front of a painting by Michael Williams, 2019, Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York, Photo: Reto Guntli

Raphael Gygax: You attended the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 1984–89, which is where you met the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone.

Eva Presenhuber: Right. I studied at the UAAV under the Austrian artist Ernst Caramelle. During my studies I was mainly interested in seeing exhibitions. I wasn't able to travel much at the time, so I mostly stayed in Vienna. There were many students who finished before me: artists like Heimo Zobernig and Gerwald Rockenschaub. To me those were interesting young artists who already had galleries and regular exhibitions and whose work I followed. As was Franz West, who was quite a bit older. We'd go to Galerie Krinzinger and to Peter Pakesch and then have discussions and free wine. That's what people did at the time. Afterwards, we'd often still go out together; the music scene in Vienna was really exciting at the time and there were many alternative concerts. All in all, it was a very stimulating time.

RG: How did you eventually end up moving to Switzerland and switch roles from ‹artist› to ‹curator/gallerist?› Was this an idea you already had when still studying?

EP: No, not really. It happened more or less in my final year. That's when the question of what to actually do after graduating became more relevant. In 1988 I had curated an exhibition at the gallery of Grita Insam and didn't really feel I was an artist. I didn't have the drive. There were, of course, many artists I derided, because I felt they were ‹bad artists› who'd be better off not making art. So it was also clear to me that I absolutely didn't want to be one of them who doesn't make it to the top. I met Ugo Rondinone in 1986 and we did a lot together: we went to see exhibitions together and wrote reviews we'd read to each other to exchange views. And so when I said I didn't really know what to do after graduating it was he who suggested that I should open a gallery in Switzerland and exhibit his work.

Eva Presenhuber (right), Galerie Walcheturm, Zurich, ca. 1993, Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York, Photographer unknown

RG: How did it happen that you ended up taking over Galerie Walcheturm which already existed prior to your arrival in Switzerland? How was it set up and what changes did you make?

EP: In the weekly Die Weltwoche I saw an ad that the Walcheturm ‹association› or ‹gallery› was looking for a director who also brings ideas for a program. I responded and got the job. The gallery was basically a pseudo-association: there was no money; a few members paid about 100 francs a year, so you would have maybe about CHF 5,000 a year. Added to this was a one-off amount from an industrial company, which the then board members of the association. Of course, that money was gone the very first year, but this also motivated me to take things into my own hands. The gallery had been around since the 1950s, but its history didn't interest me much. I simply thought ‹great space›. What's more, the rent was quite low, a thousand francs a month, though this meant you needed to prove to the city that you were in compliance with the articles of association and had at least one hundred members. I didn't have a hundred members at the time, so I simply entered some random addresses.
Then, after my first year as gallerist, the board resigned more or less en bloc. So I went and found new board members, really cool people, all of them collectors. Andi Stutz was the first and he brought Franz Wassmer along. Beat Curti, Peter Nobel and Fritz Ammann were also on the board. They always ended up buying things from me, too, pieces they still have today. Especially Franz Wassmer bought a lot — works by Ugo Rondinone, Pipilotti Rist, Fischli/Weiss, Franz West and so on. He was one of my collectors who made it possible for me to keep going. I didn't know anyone yet in Switzerland, except for Ugo, but he was still in Vienna at the time. Then I met Urs Frei who was on my roster for a long time, and through him I made contact with other people. In 1992 I had the first solo exhibition of Fischli/Weiss and in 1993 the first one of Jean-Frédéric Schnyder. In 1995 Franz West and Urs Fischer followed, as did women artists who are more or less of my generation: Sue Williams, Karen Kilimnik and Angela Bulloch. They all later signed with the gallery.

RG: How did you find the artists?

EP: Well, I had probably seen an exhibition of Angela Bulloch in London where she showed her drawing machines. The same with Kilimnik: I saw an exhibition and then contacted her gallery at the time. Because we all started out at the ‹same› time — Bulloch's gallerist was Esther Schipper — we knew each other and were able to build a network. You surrounded yourself with people who were like-minded, of the same age and started out doing something around the same time. You go to their galleries and look at their program, and they look at your program.

RG: How many exhibitions did you show at the beginning?

EP: About five a year. I deliberately adopted a two-pronged approach. I knew I wasn't necessarily going to work long-term with many of the Swiss artists I was exhibiting. With them I worked on a project basis, because I liked that I was establishing a kind of platform for Swiss art in Zurich and doing PR work in a way. At the same time, I built my own roster of artists I wanted to represent. In addition to the exhibitions, I organized readings and concerts. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Isabelle Graw did talks. They were all young people at the time and easy to get to do something. In the first eight years I worked quite hard to foster such initiatives. I think that's also why the Walcheturm developed into an important venue for contemporary art.

Installation view, Marcus Geiger, Galerie Walcheturm, Zurich, 1989 © Marcus Geiger

RG: With what exhibition did you inaugurate the space?

EP: I opened in 1989 with a solo exhibition of Marcus Geiger that promptly scared off my board. He exhibited boxes with stacked terry towels and made terry-towel suits. Geiger is a Swiss artist who studied in Vienna and still lives there. I thought it would be cool to show a

Swiss artist, since the other galleries, like Victor Gisler's [Galerie Mai36], had been around longer but didn't represent many young Swiss artists.

RG: What was your perception of Zurich at the time? What did the scene around you look like?

EP: Great, Zurich was ideal for me. There were a few galleries that opened around the same time: Bob van Orsouw, Mark Müller, Peter Kilchmann. The Kunsthalle Zürich, which was quite new then, was particularly relevant to me at the time. Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, Bice Curiger and Jacqueline Burckhardt were active there, and then later on Beatrix Ruf. Ulrich Loock, the then director of the Kunsthalle Bern, was important to me: he did fantastic shows there. The same goes for Rein Wolfs, the then director of the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art. It was a fantastic time. They were all extremely active people. Including Roland Wäspe, director at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, and the curator Konrad Bitterli. We were all friends. Lionel Bovier, now director of the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain in Geneva, was still very young at the time, but he always came to see my exhibitions, just like Josef Helfenstein, director of the Kunstmuseum Basel, and Christian Klemm, the long-time curator of the Kunsthaus Zürich. It was really the best time back then, there was a sense of awakening in the air.

RG: Did you have a ‹master plan› in developing your program? What was your approach?

EP: My idea was to represent the best artists in their own country. People didn't know this at the time, but I believed in it, of course. And when you have the best artists of a particular generation, then you also have a chance to achieve something for them internationally. You're have a very different status, a different reputation compared to when you settle for this and that. I was only interested in representing ‹exceptional› artists.

RG: This sense for high quality you mention, is it also due to the fact that you saw an awful lot of art during you student years? Do you think you have a particularly well-trained eye as a result of your art studies?

EP: I think that, above all, you have to be able to listen. I have no ego issues at all when it comes to that. I ask the artists, ‹who do you think is good?› and then you talk about it and discuss, because, ultimately, other artists tend to be an important factor in art. And when I ended up feeling that, yes, the work is good, I would look for a way to exhibit it. Artists are almost always a very good source. They often have a feel for like-minded artists, because they see parallels to their own practice. But that doesn't necessarily mean they are the best artists. I have met many artists in this way. The old-fashioned concept of a ‹Programmgalerie,› a gallery with a coherent program where the artists know and appreciate one another, still very much appeals to me. When you're an artist and you signed with a gallery where you don't think much of any of its other artists, then you will look for the first opportunity to get out of that gallery again. But when you are with a gallery where you can relate to 90% of the artists, then you won't be as likely to leave that gallery. This was never a well-defined strategy I consciously pursued, but rather a way of working that I always felt strongly about. I think that artists are happier with a gallery if it offers them an environment in which their work is appreciated for its own sake, rather than for its commercial potential.

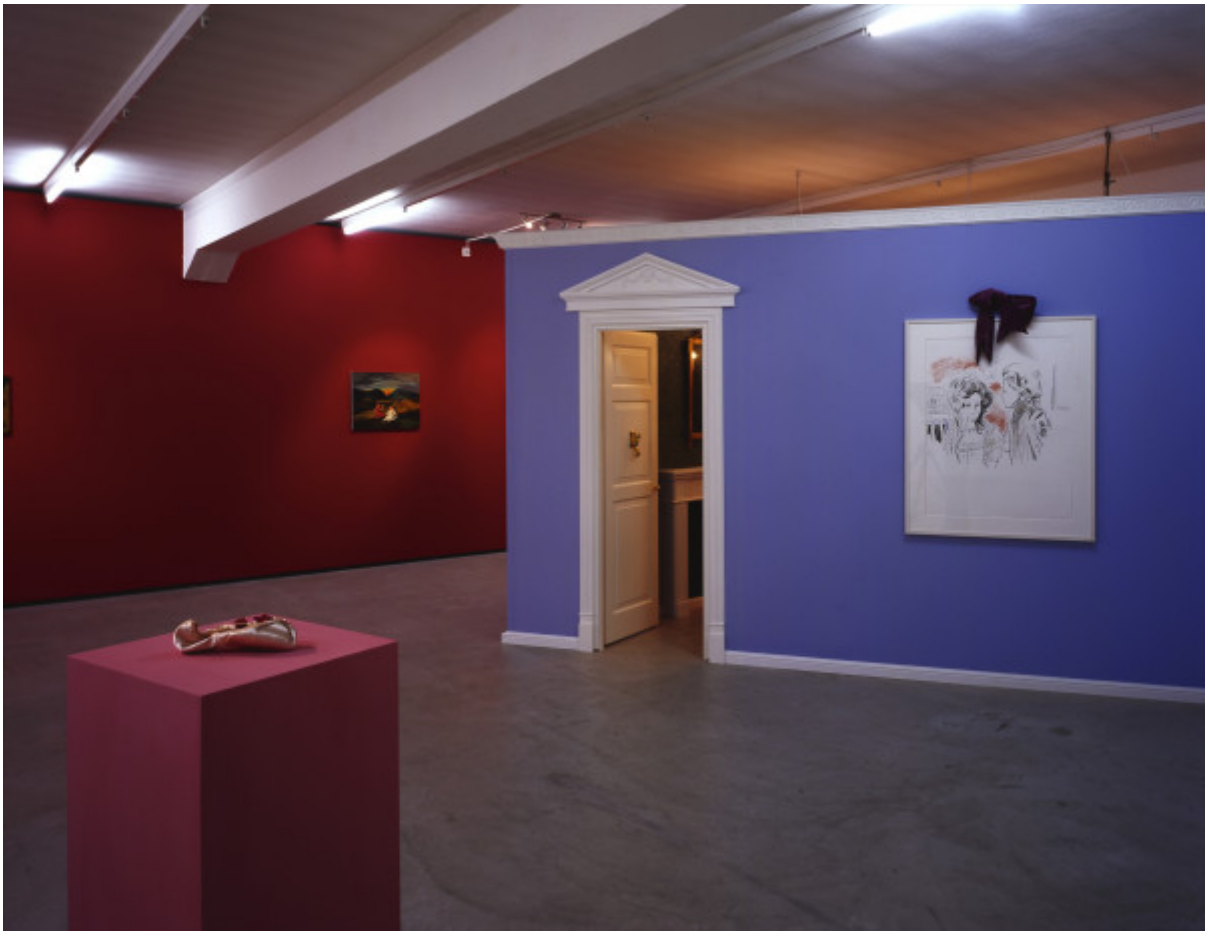
RG: And all the practical stuff, how did you teach that to yourself?

EP: No idea… (laughs) That was really difficult and, I have to say, you simply need good people. At the beginning I was alone at the Walcheturm which was always open from 11 am to 7 pm, Tuesdays to Sundays. And so I'd be sitting there. At some point I hired an exhibition

technician on a part-time basis. And later on, I got someone who helped me do the accounting and who paid or wrote invoices every month and collected the receipts. I still had to learn all that. I did have an idea what kind of practical matters needed to be done, but after three years or so I was finally able to hire someone on a permanent basis who took care of all those things, allowing me to focus on looking after the artists and on sales. On the whole it was learning by doing.

RG: Do you still remember your first (substantial) sale? Did you already have one in the first exhibition of Geiger?

EP: No, I definitely didn't sell anything then. To be honest, I don't recall. At the beginning, Yves Simon-Vermot would buy things from me; I even lived at his place for a while, because I didn't have an apartment. I do think I subsequently sold work in every exhibition, because otherwise things wouldn't have worked out. In 1993 I had an exhibition featuring Jean-Frédéric Schnyder who was considered difficult and didn't want a gallery, but he got along fine with me. Then at some point I sold twenty of his paintings — that was a substantial sale, I remember. In the first years I had two wonderful exhibitions curated by Ugo Rondinone: one featuring only women (*Group Show – Women*, 1993) and another featuring only men (*Group Show – Men*, 1991). Some of the artists in those exhibitions I then ended up including in the gallery's roster. The Ringier Collection was an early buyer, and the collection of prints and drawings of the Swiss Institute of Technology (ETH) acquired something by Fischli/Weiss, something substantial. Overall, things went well..



Installation view, Karen Kilimnik, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, 2005, © Karen Kilimnik, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York

RG: Were there particular art movements to which you felt closer, or were you more open in that regard?

EP: I was and continue to be quite open when it comes to that. I often felt that painting is better, because it's easier to sell, but you can't have a program focused exclusively on painting. You have to show the art that is being made, that's also important to me personally and I continue to do so. There are always new generations of artists that emerge, and so you look at what they do and who you think is good.

RG: But do you sometimes find yourself in an internal conflict where you are personally convinced that something is good, but you can't really afford including it in your program, because it's very difficult to sell?

EP: In the past I didn't think about it that way, I do that more now. When you do a Bruce Nauman exhibition you can't consider in detail who is going to buy all that. It's always been like that. There were simply a few collectors who collected Nauman, it was never commercial and still, as a gallerist, it's not something you want to miss out on.

RG: Were there artists in the early 1990s you couldn't show?

EP: Yes, Matthew Barney.

RG: And you would have liked to show him?

EP: At the time, I went to his gallerist, Barbara Gladstone, who still had a smaller gallery on Greene Street back then and I told her I'd like to show Matthew Barney. She declined, saying that Matthew didn't need a gallery in Europe. So no, I didn't get him. But I didn't think anything of it, I was convinced I had a great gallery the way it was.

RG: Do you think it was easier then than now?

EP: Well, it was very difficult to make any money. That's much easier today. At the same time, I never really had competition in Switzerland, even though there were cases, or course, where artists already had a gallery in Germany and didn't need another one in Switzerland.

RG: That has really changed now. In the past the motto was that one gallery in the US is enough, one in Europe and, sure, the Asian art market didn't really exist back then.

EP: That's quite different from one artist to another, also depending on their work. There are those who only do exhibitions every two years, and then there are those who are constantly busy producing and, accordingly, need to be able to do more exhibitions. I find both interesting, but to be honest I prefer those who produce more, because in my opinion they are the ones who are always at it. I don't like artists who strategically produce little. I find that terribly boring. I feel that they are merely strategists with works that are okay; but is it a Warhol? No!

Poster for the inaugural edition of LISTE Art Fair Basel, 1996

RG: Art fairs are a tremendously important instrument and a platform for a young gallery to position itself in the international market as well. You are one of the initiators of the LISTE Art Fair that was established in 1996. How did that come about?

EP: I was always very convinced of myself, more so than I am now, and initially I absolutely wanted to be at Art Basel, since it obviously had the best program. [laughs] Of course, I didn't really think about the financial implications. It's all very expensive and you need proper financial resources. I kept calling Sam Keller who at the time was assistant of Lorenzo Rudolf, the fair's director, and was brushed off time and again. They said my program was so hip, so trendy — to which I responded, well I sure hope so, because it would be boring if it weren't. Then at some point I was accepted to Art Basel, twice. But I quickly realized that it was not at all easy to actually sell art there. A rather sobering realization.
In 1996 we then founded the LISTE. Back then they had the Unfair in Cologne, that motivated me, because there they had the same issue: young galleries were not accepted at Art Cologne and then they got their ‹revenge› by founding the Unfair. I felt that something like that was needed in Basel as well, but I didn't want to do it alone, because I was scared shitless I'd never be accepted at Art Basel again if I were to undermine its authority by founding a satellite fair, and so I joined forces with Peter Kilchmann and Peter Bläuer.

At the same time, I was talking to Pierre Huber who was on Art Basel's selection committee back then. Of course, he was anything but thrilled, but I was able to convince him of the need to at least have someone on the committee who understands «our» generation of galleries. ‹Well, who'd you put on the board then?›, he asked me. And so, at my recommendation, Esther Schipper became a committee member who ended up really changing something. Nonetheless, Art Basel initially wasn't particularly cool with us founding the LISTE. But after the first year they already realized that it is really great, because the LISTE relieves pressure on the fair. Younger galleries had this option to go to the LISTE first and collectors coming to Art Basel went to the LISTE to make discoveries, and vice versa. Art Basel and LISTE in a way perfectly complemented one another, and Art Basel was relieved of the pressure to accept young galleries at what could be too early a point, because they don't have the necessary financial stability yet. Art Basel doesn't want galleries that have great programs but then are forced to close within ten years. They want galleries that remain stable and, as a result, represent their particular artists for decades.

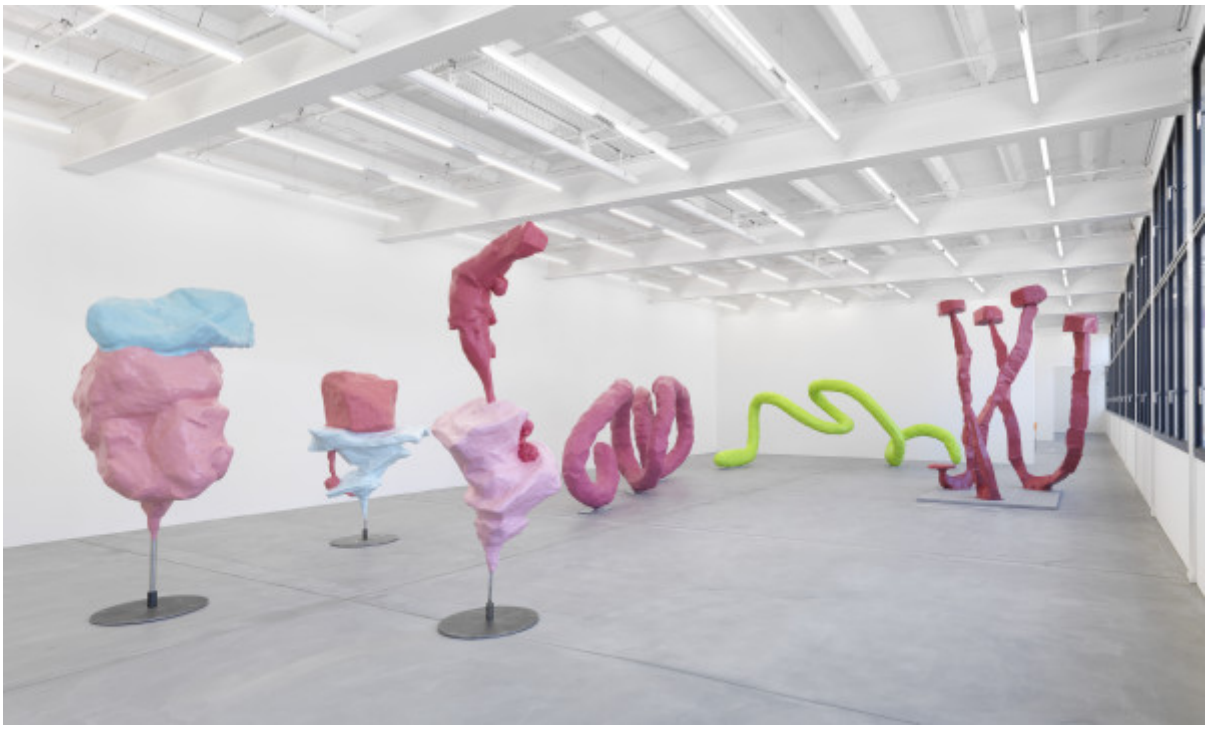
RG: And how long did you and your gallery take part in the LISTE?

EP: I myself was at the LISTE for only two years; after that I already switched to Art Basel, because I had joined forces with Galerie Hauser&Wirth in 1998 and we were given a joint stand.

The late 1990s: Growth, Löwenbräu-Areal and Acceleration

RG: As you just mentioned, you started a cooperation with Galerie Hauser&Wirth in 1998, initially under the name Hauser&Wirth 2 and shortly afterwards as Galerie Hauser&Wirth&Presenhuber. How did that cooperation come about and what were the pros and cons of the partnership?

EP: I already knew Iwan Wirth for some time. Starting in 1995, he'd regularly come to Galerie Walcheturm with Hans Ulrich Obrist and buy work for the collection of Ursula Hauser, which he curated back then. At a dinner I suggested to Iwan that he should become a member of the board of Galerie Walcheturm. He accepted the offer and when he told me at some point that he'd be interested in a closer cooperation, I suggested that we could do something together. Ursula Hauser was also involved and I basically contributed the program, because even at that time Iwan was primarily interested in the secondary market. That was his thing, while I continued to focus on contemporary artists. It was an interesting period, also because things were very different in terms of available financial resources. In the fifth year, however, the cooperation started to crumble, because our egos didn't get along that well. I no longer felt comfortable under the label of Hauser&Wirth&Presenhuber — it simply didn't interest me anymore. Either way, we both learned a lot, both Iwan and I. For me, everything became much more professional. I had my own staff and we shared the technicians and the accounting associate. When we went separate ways in 2004, I was very fortunate that all my artists with the exception of Roni Horn, whom I had signed on, came along with me. I got to keep the space at the Löwenbräu-Areal, as HauserWirth were interested in the spaces on the ground floor of the former brewery building.



Installation view, Franz West: Der Definierte Raum, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, 2011, © Archiv Franz West, © Estate Franz West, Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

RG: You moved into the Löwenbräu building as a result of the cooperation with HauserWirth and bid adieu to the Walcheturm. Was it hard to leave?

EP: No, it wasn't hard, because the Walcheturm space had worn off at some point. And, of course, I wanted to be at the Löwenbräu-Areal where everyone was. At the time it was a center of contemporary art that was also perceived as such by the public.

RG: What happened with the Walcheturm after you left? You no longer had anything to do with it after your departure, right?

EP: Right, I pulled out completely. Claudia Spinelli then ran the Walcheturm for two years. Today, Patrick Huber is running the space that is now at the Kasernen-Areal.

RG: How did you experience the relations between the institutions and the galleries in the Löwenbräu building at the time?

EP: They were very good: we were all friends, all of us were happy to do the joint August openings. And we paid low rents at the time, of course. Everything was just right and there were really terrific exhibitions.

The 2010s

RG: Why do you think that has changed?

EP: It's a typical Swiss thing to effectively talk something to death, which is also why I moved out. I'm not going to pay all that rent and then read in the paper all the time that nothing's happening there. They just sucked all the vibe out of the building and that has nothing to do with the 2012 renovation.

RG: Aside from the Löwenbräu premises, you then already had a new space at the Maag-Areal right next to the Prime Tower. Now you have a space on Waldmannstrasse as well.

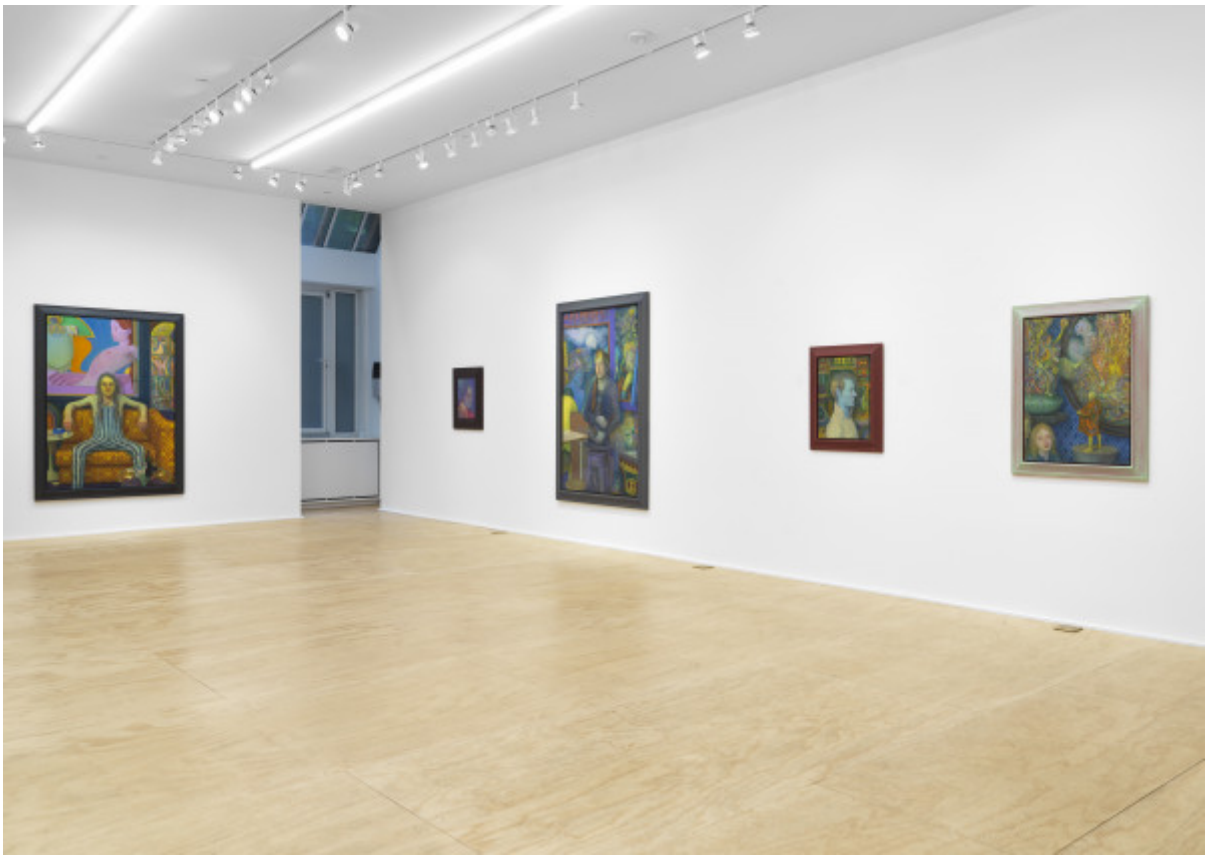
EP: It just so happened that on Waldmannstrasse spaces became vacant that I had had an eye on for three years. And the artists, too, need a change every now and then. The proximity to the Kunsthaus also played a role for me.

RG: By now you also have numerous artists on your roster whose works are sold on the secondary art market. How do you deal with that?

EP: That's quite normal when artists are looking back on a 30-plus-year career. What's more, over the past 15 to 30 years selling contemporary art through auctions has evolved into a successful business model for auction houses. That didn't exist before. In principle we try to sell to collectors who don't resell. That's the guiding principle but, of course, you can't always meet it. If they do resell their works in auctions, I can, to a limited extent, buy back something, but I can't guarantee 100% protection. You can't afford that. The auctions are definitely a burden on galleries, but at the same time you need to realize that they have encouraged a lot of people to buy art who don't necessarily go to galleries. At the auctions you can buy relatively anonymously, instead of ‹surrendering› yourself to a gallery.

RG: In the mid-2000s, increasing numbers of contemporary galleries started to work with estates without having shown the artists in question during their lifetimes. Working with estates never interested you?

EP: Does every artist really have to be dug up again? No! I think it's great of course when galleries take care of estates, but it has never been something that appealed to me personally. I'm not even certain you can make more money with it. Probably only in the case of estates like the one of Günther Förg — I wouldn't say no to that either. And if one of the artists on my roster were to die and I was offered the estate, I'd probably do that too. But I'm not digging up some people I have never known. After all, I'm already doing so much more than just trading art. It is important for me to keep up with exhibitions and be there for my artists, and vice versa. Working in that way is no longer particularly popular, but it's more fun for me.



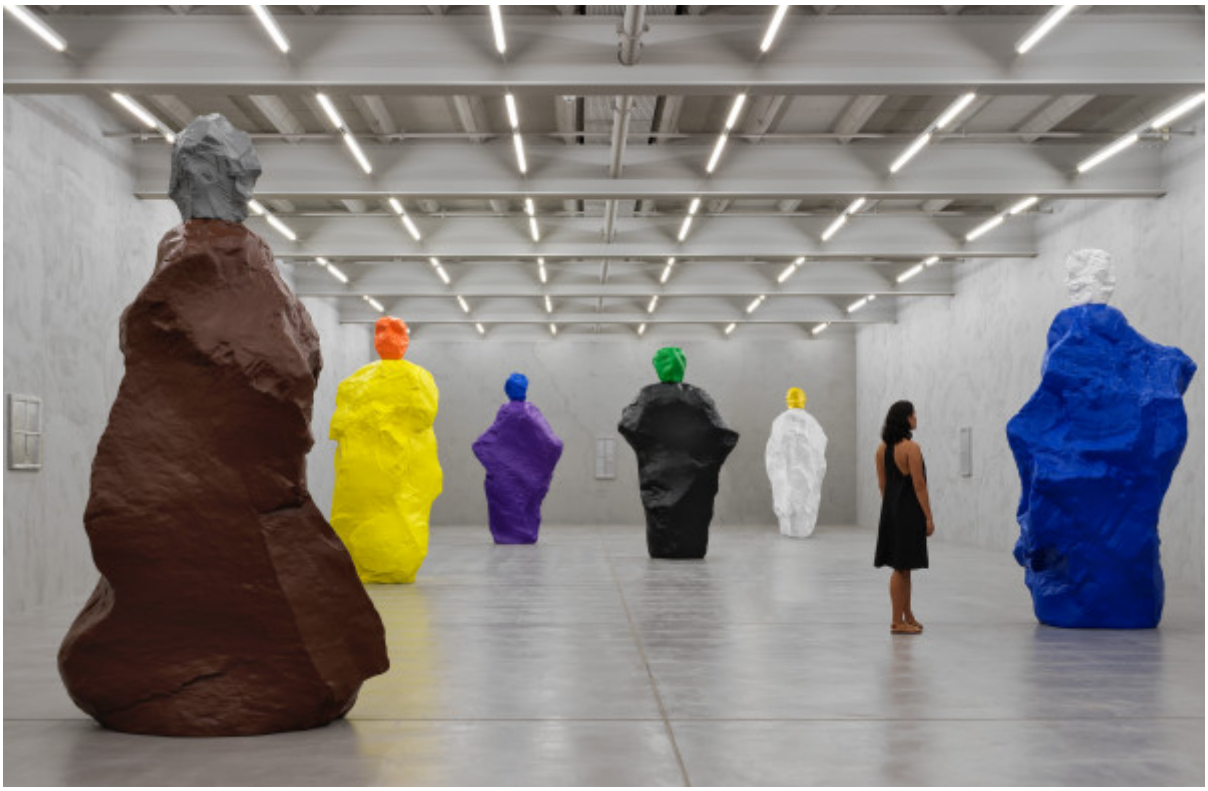
Installation view, Steven Shearer: The Late Follower, Eva Presenhuber, New York, 2018, © Steven Shearer, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York, Photo: Matt Grubb

RG: Regarding the relationship to other galleries and the increasing competition in recent years: Did you have a code of ethics you drew up for yourself? What's your position on the poaching of artists by other galleries?

EP: That's just the way it is. I mean, Gagosian for instance «took over» Urs Fischer from me. Also, of course, because we had a falling out. My most successful artists do get people knocking at their doors on a regular basis.

RG: How do you respond to that?

EP: Well, if they want to join another gallery, then they will do so. What can you do about it? We're free people. We don't have exploitative contracts like they do in Hollywood.
I know that the future will bring situations where people start knocking at the doors of my particularly successful artists such as Shara Hughes, Tschabalala Self and Steven Shearer, but I don't really think that's a problem. You also need good partner galleries and sometimes the ones you have are a bit too small. When an artist's «career» is bigger than the gallery's, then I think they should change. That's why I also try to stay interesting as a gallery.



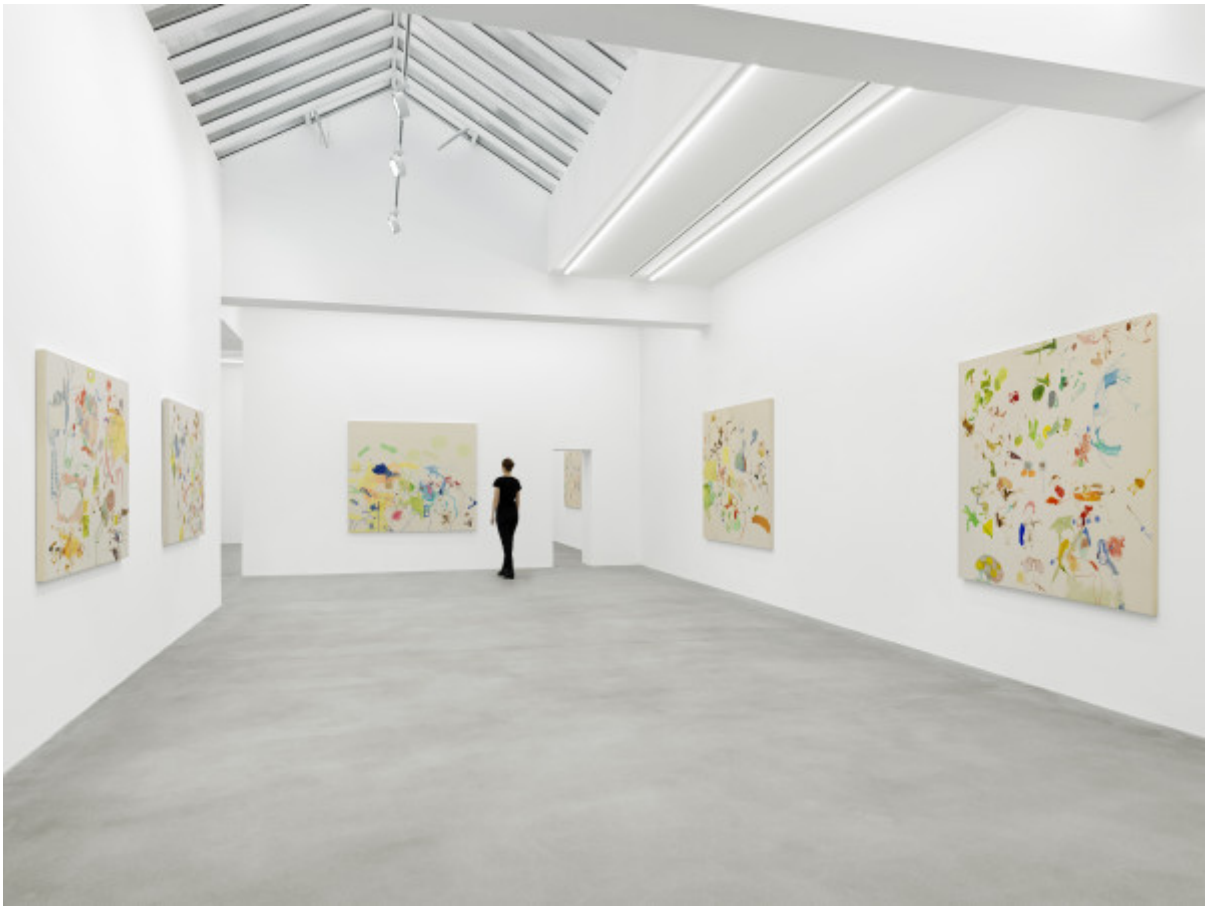
Installation view, Ugo Rondinone: nuns + monks, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Maag Areal, Zurich, September 12 – December 19, 2020, © Ugo Rondinone, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York, Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

RG: At your gallery you have, on the one hand, major collaborators like the Gladstone Gallery (Michael Williams, Ugo Rondinone, Carroll Dunham) and, on the other, medium-size galleries like The Modern Institute in Glasgow (Martin Boyce)? Do you have contracts between the galleries?

EP: We collaborate directly with the artists. I personally approached all the new artists I have co-opted. Apparently, the way the young generation of artists goes about it is that they now also have contracts with mega galleries. It seems to be a new trend, but I don't want to show consignments. They should all organize their own studios, their own productions. Financial support you offer only at the beginning of a career. At some point, the artists then have to bear their own business risks, which at the same time makes them more independent.
I don't talk that much to other galleries anymore. At art fairs perhaps, but in the end it's always also a matter of competition. When we were younger, we were all kind of in the same boat. Now it's more a competition thing; you also have more to lose than you did in the past.

RG: What mistakes would you avoid today? Are there things you wouldn't do again in the same way?

EP: I would want to change my personality, because I always had so many prejudices — this person is this or that and that one is boring, etc. In my life I have met many, many people and I haven't done enough to cultivate those relationships. That probably also has to do with the fact that, on the one hand, I always have a lot to do and, on the other, I'm very much preoccupied with myself. I'm not someone who calls others on the phone just like that; I always have to have a reason, like I need something or I'm buying something. I don't have the talent to make friends with collectors and curators. That's what I would like to change about myself, that I'm a bit more patient with people.



Installation view, Sue Williams, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Waldmannstrasse, Zurich, 2020, © Sue Williams, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York, Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

RG: And in terms of business?

EP: I should be less generous — I have been way too generous. That can also be weakness, when you constantly give in, instead of negotiating to get the best possible deal for yourself. And then at some point you do get angry with yourself for being so generous. I say this mainly with a view to artists who can be very egoistic. When you're generous when it comes to their work and exhibitions and then afterwards they're all miserly towards you.

RG: Do you ever think about quitting?

EP: Everyone does that, especially now during the Corona crisis. But no, I wouldn't and won't quit now, if only because I'd be terribly bored. I already have the next ten years planned out. I have leases. But I'd like to do more business, provided someone from the team or from outside joins on a partnership basis, so that I no longer have to be at the gallery every day. I can imagine focusing only on certain projects and artists.

RAPHAEL GYGAX

Dr. Raphael Gygax (*1980) is an art historian, curator and writer. He studied Art History, Film and Drama Studies at the Universities of Berne and Zurich. The topic of his PhD was on the use of instrumentalized bodies in contemporary art (Extra Bodies – The Use of the ‹Other Body› in Contemporary Art). From 2003–2019 he was Curator at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich where he curated numerous exhibitions and was Head of Publications. Since Spring 2019 he is Head of the Bachelor Fine Arts at the University of the Arts in Zurich.