

whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

FALL 2010



THE FASHION ISSUE

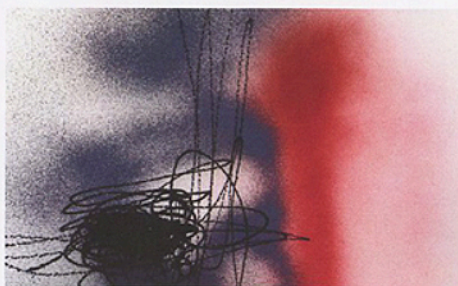
HEDI SLIMANE, STELLA McCARTNEY, KARA WALKER, KEHINDE WILEY

GALLERIST ROUNDTABLE: CHELSEA

WITH ADAM SHEFFER OF CHEIM AND READ, COURTNEY PLUMMER OF LEHMANN MAUPIN,
AND JANINE CIRINCIONE OF FRIEDMAN BENDA

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY McCULLOCH

Hans Hartung (1904–1989)
T1989-K46
1989
Acrylic on canvas
60.5 x 98.5 inches
Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York



This issue launches a new series for *WhiteWall* — a roundtable discussion with galleries from a specific neighborhood for each issue. We asked three influential Chelsea gallerists to sit down with us to talk about curating upcoming shows, new artists to look out for, the state of the art market two years after the bubble burst, what makes their neighborhood unique, and what they wish collectors knew.

For the first roundtable in the series, Friedman Benda's Janine Cirincione, Lehmann Maupin's Courtney Plummer, and Cheim and Read's Adam Sheffer gathered over the summer at B.E.S. in Chelsea to talk shop.

WHITEWALL: Since this discussion has a focus on Chelsea galleries, I'd love for you to talk about Chelsea as a neighborhood: the benefits, the vibe, how it's changed over the past couple of years — just a general sense of the neighborhood.

COURTNEY PLUMMER: I think a major benefit is that the neighborhood is always changing. It's very dynamic. I feel like every two seasons it's a different neighborhood altogether. Since I started working in Chelsea 10 years ago, it's a completely different place, for sure.

JANINE CIRINCIONE: Well, I'm a newcomer to the neighborhood, having been at the Tilton Gallery on the Upper East Side. I have to say, I love the spaces; I love the density and the concentration of the traffic that we get. I find that a dialogue among exhibitions and galleries is possible in Chelsea. People will see maybe 10 interesting summer shows in a day, and then they'll come by and they'll compare.

ADAM SHEFFER: What I find really interesting about Chelsea is that it's part and parcel of the most current leg of New York art following real estate, in that 57th Street was the bastion for so many years. Then, eventually, Matthew Marks, Pat Hearn, and Carol Greene took it upon themselves to

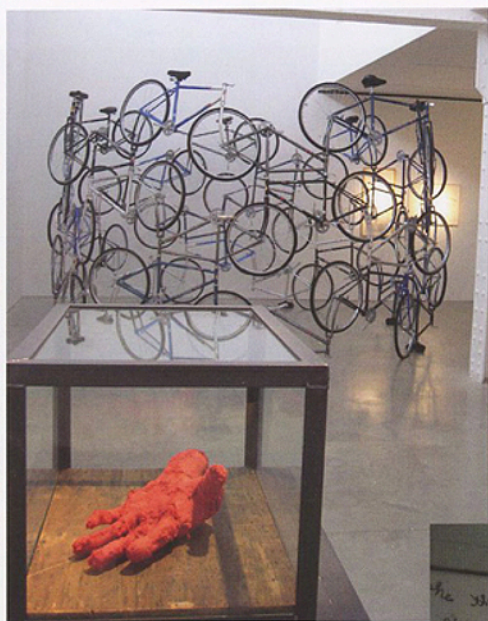
come over here as pioneers, and that eventually grew into the West Chelsea Arts District.

CP: When I started working down here, it was students, artists, and collectors that came to Chelsea. Now it's all types of New Yorkers and tourists. Chelsea is now kind of known as being the heartbeat of the art world in America and internationally. I feel like it's really become more of a generalist neighborhood in a way, which is very comforting because it means that the audience for contemporary art is now larger, too.

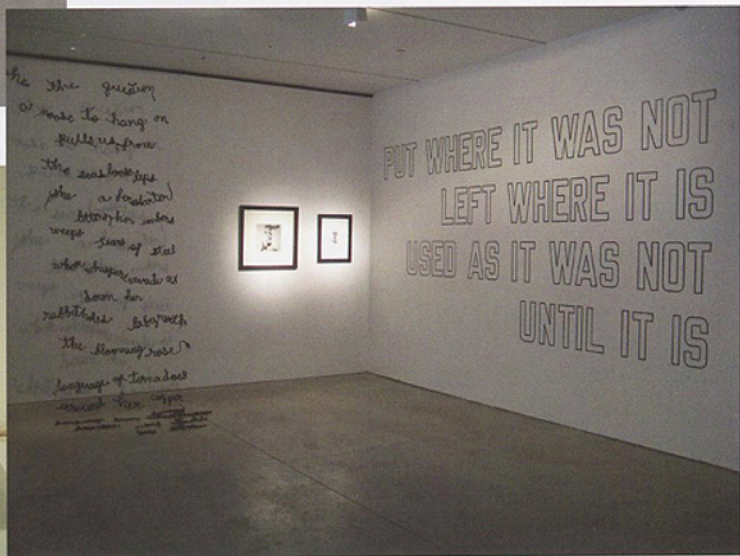
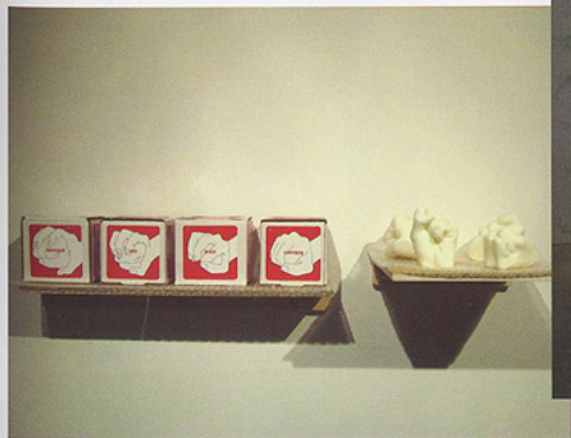
WW: What are the shows you have coming up for the fall and winter?

JC: I'll jump on that, thank you. One of the interesting things about the show we have up right now, "Other than Beauty," is that it was a great opportunity for us to mix contemporary masters with emerging artists. The show includes work by Louise Bourgeois, Nari Ward, Kim Jones, and Ai Weiwei. And it's very interesting to see how younger artists have actually looked back at ideas and images and learned from them. You may even see relationships among older and younger artists that may have not have been visible before. One artist that we're working with now, Titus Kaphar, looks so great next to the Chamberlain sofa. One would never think of relating them ideologically, yet seeing them together makes a certain visual sense.

AS: And you probably changed his life some way in doing that. I think, because we all work with living artists, that the idea of looking forward is just inherent in our daily project. But I think the idea of looking back, as well, in a revisionist way, is something that I see as a current trend. We work with some senior artists and some estates — Louise Bourgeois and Joan Mitchell, for instance — and the more that you have a hand in the past, the more it offers a fresh perspective on what is going on in the here and now. For instance, we have begun to work with the Hans Hartung estate, and his work is



Installation views of "Other Than Beauty" (June 1–July 31, 2010) at Friedman Benda, New York.
Courtesy of Friedman Benda, New York.



JC: It takes a lifetime.

AS: It's really nice to be talking to dealers about art and not the economy.

WW: Do you feel that sometimes you're misconceived as a dealer versus a gallerist? Someone more on the business side rather than on the artists' side?

CP: Oh, every day. I mean, I do. I don't know how the two of you feel.

AS: Absolutely. It's very hard. We're in an unregulated market that is all based on perceived value, and I think misunderstandings are inherent in that, and, unfortunately, they can be problematic.

JC: But I think one reason I don't feel as much like a dealer as a gallerist is because — and I think that all of us feel this — we work with living artists. We're not just selling artworks or merchandizing them. We are helping to build the context and the art history around a living being in a living, growing career. And that, to me, is a very big difference. And I think that's where the fun part comes in.

AS: Take Leo Castelli, as the great example. I mean, this man was more about art and artists than anything, and, although he was a brilliant salesman, he could have been a hell of a lot richer.

CP: How can we help an artist make their work freely when the artist can't afford the studio fees? So of course we have to be sales-oriented. I see nothing wrong with that. I do feel like there is a perception that the art world is too commercial, but it all goes hand in hand. You can't dissect the critical success from commercial success because they inevitably become entwined in some way.

AS: I'd rather be known as a gallerist, but I am a member of the Art Dealers Association of America, and I think "dealer" is a broader term than "gallerist." I don't think of myself as only a dealer; otherwise, I'd be sitting on my bed with a stack of transparencies.

WW: Roberta Smith in September 2009 did a piece where she used New York galleries as a litmus test for the art market one year after the crash. Do you think that's fair? Are galleries the vital organs of the art world, versus an auction or a fair?

AS: I thought it was a very astute and worthwhile comment.

CP: One hundred percent. We're one step away from an artist's studio, and I would say that it is a litmus test. This is where the artist works out all the kinks and where the audience does, too. You figure out what you like.

AS: That's a very interesting point, that we are one step away. I think a lot

of private collectors get great pleasure from sitting down and working with people who are the conduit directly to the artist. They don't need it edited through a third source, because they want to talk to the person who has the direct relationship with that artist on a daily basis.

WW: *Are you seeing a change in the collectors that you're working with? Perhaps in the way that they're purchasing?*

CP: It's all changed for the positive. In this sort of questionable economy, all of the collectors I've been working with are incredibly earnest and incredibly enthusiastic, and they really are excited to be collecting art. They're doing it with heart, mind, body, and soul. I think the wheat and the chaff have been separated a little bit.

AS: Well, Warren Buffet said it best: Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked [laughter]. I think that's what we experienced.

WW: *Going back to this idea of a litmus test, the summer auction sales were iffy and inconsistent at best. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that and if you'd caution against using auction results as a barometer for the market?*

JC: I think you can't just look at the auctions, either in an up market or a down market. Gallerists cannot assign prices based on the highest point on an auction record. And it's the same for when the auction record goes down. You still believe in your artists and you still believe that there is a solid base for your market (and you actually know it's true).

AS: And auctions aren't really about art, after all.

CP: You can look at auction results on Artnet, but Artnet's not going to tell you the mood in the room or who was in the room or what happened that day in the stock market. There are so many different factors that aren't conveyed in the whole story of the auction. We have artists that are very mature, kind of beyond midcareer, that sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars and have no auction record whatsoever. You can't just look at it as a main barometer for the art market or the art world.

WW: *Do you find that collectors now are looking at art as an investment that will hold its value now versus another consumable luxury like a yacht or a boat?*

AS: I think everybody looks at it so differently, really.

WW: *Does anyone ever ask you about whether something will hold its value? Or is that a conversation you hardly have?*

AS: It happens from time to time. It's a reality, and as a gallerist you have to be prepared to defend and promote your artists' market. It's what we do. And that's the part that the artists don't want to deal with, nor should they have to.

JC: Nor should they have to. That's right.

CP: I mean, if you love it, you love it. Disregard what the auction rules are saying. It doesn't mean anything.

AS: Yeah, I feel like the manager of a Major League Baseball team, and I'm really concerned about my 32 players. What everybody else does out there is open season. But my guys I look after above all else.

CP: And you know, quite honestly, the auction houses are not going to market your artists' work in the same spirit that you will.

JC: I think there are different kinds of collectors, also. Some are much more likely to look at things as asset classes. And I think right now, word on the street is that art is a good asset class. The other set of collectors is made up of people who are buying artists' work still and steadily because they love it and that's why they did it in the first place.

WW: *Is there something you wish collectors knew that they often don't know?*

CP: I wish that they all understood that there's no such thing as a mistake. I've had collectors come back and say, "Is that a mistake that I bought that?" I'm like, "No, if you love it, why would it be a mistake?"

AS: Or that you're going to make mistakes. You are going to outgrow things. It's like if you look in your closet at that sweater you bought a few seasons ago; you may not buy that again today, but you're not going to stop buying sweaters if you're a sweater wearer. That's the most basic analogy that I can think of.



CP: There are certain things that I wish I could say. Like, if you're questioning it, then you shouldn't buy it. You shouldn't enter into anything with a lack of confidence or comfort, because you're actually not serving the artist in that sense or yourself and your hard-earned money.

JC: I think it's always important for collectors to remember that at the end of the transaction is the artist, who is making the work, and, while the gallery is there to act as a facilitator between the artist and the collector, the collector who buys the work is forever in a dialogue with the artist and the work.

WW: *Maybe conversely, is there something that artists often don't know that you wish they did?*

CP: My first reaction to that is that it's not the end of the world if someone decides to sell your work at an auction. We've had some artists that have been really heartbroken by the fact that some of their work has appeared in auction. It's part of a whole synergy that's very important. You have to look at it from a very holistic point of view that actually some positive things can come out of your work being presented at public auction.

AS: I'm reminded of the Scull auction, where they sold the Rauschenberg, and Rauschenberg practically assaulted Bob Scull. We've come a long way since then. A collector said to me the other day, when I asked him why they were letting something go, "You know what? People sell paintings, and that's just the way it is." And I think sometimes if you just realize that your art is at a point where it is wanted in the stream of commerce beyond our control, that's actually quite flattering.

CP: Oh, it is. I would even argue that it's success.

AS: It means your career is organic, and it's out there and moving along on its own.

incredibly influential. In November, we will present an exhibition of his last works, produced in 1989, the year he died. Christopher Wool, although not represented by our gallery, has spent extensive time understanding the work and has written about it personally. When you look back, you understand the present in a way that is not sui generis.

CP: Definitely. I might even take an opposite position to that because so much of what we're about is presenting new culture. We're not really known for looking back historically. We don't have Louise Bourgeois; we don't have the stable that you have that's so weighted in history. I have to say, all of our artists are incredibly productive and they just want to show. This is where the role of curators becomes so important, because that's where we really look to curators to kind of redefine what we're doing and put it in a different context. Maybe take Tracy Emin and put her in context with Louise or someone else.

WW: Do you curate in-house or bring in curators?

CP: We self-curate. I know that there's been this trend of inviting curators to come in, but we still do it in-house. It's really about what we like and what we feel will work and how we can make our program tighter.

JC: I think that's important to curate in-house because not only does it make a show tighter, and perhaps closer to one's own aesthetic sensibility, but it forces you to take a curatorial view of your own program.

AS: It also adds freedom and variety to your exhibition program in that there are other artists whom you will learn about from your gallery artists, or it's an opportunity to mix the past and present, something a bit more organic and out-of-the box. I think curating is one of the great pleasures of what we do. In a way, it's kind of like recess for a gallerist.

CP: If anything, we would let our artists curate shows, you know. They tend to be somewhat shy about it, but I'm all for that, yeah.

AS: Some of the best shows out there are done this way. An artist's perspective is something no gallerist could mimic.

WW: As directors and partners at your galleries, how do you interact specifically with your artists? What's, I guess, an ideal relationship for you with an artist?

CP: Oh, wow. That's an interesting question... ideal relationship. That's a really big question because you're really getting into the philosophical...

AS: And it's at the root of what we do every day.

CP: I define our relationships with artists as being incredibly intimate, sort of like a marriage: Hopefully, you don't do it more than twice in your life (as far as changing galleries). We have constant communication with them. We talk with them on a yearly basis to figure out what their goals are, and then we alter our business plan to match those goals. The ideal relationship is really about results. I would consider any relationship with an artist successful if we can get them shows, we can help them pay their mortgages, and we can help them position themselves in their life so that they can make art very freely. It's an interesting question because I don't exactly know how to answer it in terms that aren't abstract, and so much of it is based on chemistry, too, to be honest.

JC: I like what you just said about helping them make their work more freely, because I would place that one toward the top of the list. There's the trust,

there's making sure they can make a living, but it's really hard to make your work and to do it on your own. And I think that the best thing that a gallery can do is provide their artists with the base to help remove the problems or the obstacles that may get in the way of making the work. If you start there, allowing them to do what it takes to either be more ambitious or more productive or more relaxed, to be able to really go for it, then all the other things will fall into place.

CP: I remember, very distinctly, we were interviewing a very talented young artist and we wanted him to join the gallery, and we said, "For you, what would be success?" And he said, "Well, to not have a day job, just to be able to make my work freely and be able to pay for my studio." Every artist has different goals, and some value commercial success more than critical success, and every now and then you get that one that has both...

AS: Look, I started out as an artist, and I knew pretty early on that it wasn't going to work. I was a painting major at Vassar and studied with Catherine Murphy. My first job in New York was actually working for Dan Flavin. I came to realize that my real passion was working functioning as an advocate

for artists, to promote them so that they could work unencumbered. And that's as close to the mark of being an artist as I'm ever going to get, and it's what I have come to absolutely love to do. I think that our gallery is particularly unusual and unique in that we function with our artists as a real partnership. It is a real collaboration, and in it a certain way, it is even like a kibbutz. The gallery came about from the friendship of John Cheim and Howard Read, which started back in the seventies when they were students at RISD. And a lot of the relationships that they have had with artists over the years, including Louise Bourgeois and Joan Mitchell and Jenny Holzer, are things that organically happened since that time. So it's really a very tight-knit familial situation, and it takes us years before we decide to add an artist to our roster. We like to think that there are some strains of content or theme that run within the gallery and among our artists. Somebody

said to me the other day, "Oh, you guys need to run out and get a Chinese artist and a Russian artist, too." Well, you know what? We've got the artists that we want, and sometimes what you need to do is bring the mountain to Mohammed.

CP: Well, we're not portfolio building here. I mean, there are other galleries that do that, but...

AS: And there's nothing worse than going into a collector's home and it looks like they've set it up like an automobile showroom with the makes and models of that season.

CP: Or you're going to a group exhibition of the galleries' artists and you can't pull the thread of what it's about. I mean, I think the most successful galleries in Chelsea have a brand and a program. I mean, that word "branding" is so, like, maybe it's too commercial a word to use, but you know what you're getting.

JC: Context matters. The tenure of a gallery over the long term really is like a curated exhibition played out over time, and that's why it's so interesting to watch. I liken it to building a collection, because over the long haul the strengths start to emerge, maybe a little bit of dead weight falls away from some early decisions, and the vision gets stronger and the eye gets stronger. It really does become a vision that is clear and recognizable. But it's one of the hardest things, I think, to achieve for a gallery.

CP: It takes years.

