

Day 8 - June Shin

One of the most influential men in the art world, Iwan Wirth is a Swiss born man who is now still only 41. According to a Financial Times article, he is the second most powerful art dealer in the world (Wulschlager). Now the president of Hauser & Wirth, he had an unusually early start in the career of art dealer. He opened a gallery at age 16, in 1986 (Wulschlager). He mostly worked in New York before he moved to London in 2005 (Wulschlager). In his stable are 35 artists, which include Louise Bourgeois, Paul McCarthy, Wilhelm Sasnal, and Martin Creed (Wulschlager). With these prolific artists, Hauser & Wirth had 480 museum and institutional exhibitions in the year 2005 (Milliard).

Wirth chose London as his hub in hopes of bringing together America, Europe and Asia (Burns). He has turned Hauser & Wirth into a "global brand" that offers exhibitions in its contemporary art galleries in Zurich, London, and New York (Burns). He says that he sees his role as someone who opens up new doors and makes things possible for the artists (Milliard). Another purported role of the gallery is to educate through a "constant dialogue with the public" and loans (Milliard). A lot of school classes come to his gallery, and Wirth has given tours to schools himself on several occasions (Milliard).

Hauser & Wirth also borrows the power of the Internet. Wirth maintains that, while it is useful for attracting people's attention and making them want to visit the actual gallery, it will never replace the one-to-one relationship, which he emphasizes (Milliard).

Because artists and collectors rarely go to Zurich, unlike many major art cities, Wirth faces another challenge of having to lure them into Switzerland, which he says he does by having a story to tell and telling it compellingly (Wulschlager). The result of this story is reflected in his success in art dealing.

According to Artinfo UK, another one of Wirth's business tactics is to maintain a family business charm, which became possible through his marriage to Manuela Hauser, the Hauser in Hauser & Wirth (Wulschlager). He works closely with his mother-in-law Ursula Hauser, a collector of modern art (Wulschlager). Because the art market is a vertical market, a lot of it is, in Wirth's words, a "people business" (Wulschlager).

He claims that, rather than running his gallery like a shop, he tries to act as a bridge between the actors involved in the market, among which are curators, museums, artists, and collectors (Milliard). During his interview with FT, however, he openly admitted to fully taking advantage of the art market's "system [that] works with tools that would be illegal in any other market – fixing prices, having a cartel" (Wulschlager). I got an impression that it's almost inevitable that dealers are more entrepreneurs than art lovers.

Realizing that the old gallery model of simple buying and selling was outdated, Wirth provides his artists with production teams, technical crew, studios and storage to facilitate the artists' production (Wulschlager). He has never lost any of his artists ever since he became a dealer, and I think that winning the hearts of the artists that he picks is essential to his success as someone who has to work very closely with them.

He also admits that there is a lot more "rubbish" flooding the market than couple decades ago but doesn't seem to be bothered too much by it. He uses this fact to emphasize the role of an advisor (Wulschlager). Talking about contemporary art becoming a "lifestyle," he says, "There are worse things you can do with your money than buy art. You're not harming the environment. You're not hurting other people" (Wulschlager). What he doesn't seem to see, or doesn't show, is that this almost nonsensical frenzy of art collecting for wrong reasons that is so common in the art world today is hurting not the environment or other people, I know, but art.

An art critic for several decades, Robert Hughes tells a grim yet compelling story about the contemporary art market in *The Mona Lisa Curse*. He traces the beginning of what he calls the "Mona Lisa curse" back to the painting's arrival in the United States in 1962 for temporary loan. His premonition came true when people all made a pilgrimage to the famous masterpiece, "...not to see it but to have seen it" (Hughes). According to Hughes, the commodification of art in the U.S. started here. People saw art not as art but as just another commodity to consume. Some started collecting art as an investment, which developed into today's art market.

The Mona Lisa suffered and still suffers from what Hughes calls "uncomprehended adoration" by the mass. In the contemporary art market, this "uncomprehended adoration" is deliberately induced and manipulated for financial profit. Although there are still some people like the MET's director that see dealers and collectors as "guardians" of art (or at least think that they ought to be) because works of art cannot defend themselves and are 'physically as well as conceptually vulnerable,' Hughes grumbles at that today's art world is filled with people who resemble "gamblers" rather than "guardians" (Hughes). Hughes' grief at the current state of the market and concern for its future are heartfelt.



Iwan Wirth

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