

Wagner Collection at the Whitney, 25 Years of Astute Buying

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#) DEC. 3, 2015



Puppet versions of artists by Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija at the Whitney. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

More collectors of contemporary art should follow the lead of [Thea Westreich Wagner and her husband, Ethan Wagner](#). They are neither building a [private museum](#) to house their holdings nor sending their trove off to auction hoping for headline-grabbing profits, although this is partly because their purchases have not especially encompassed the so-called trophy art that earns such profits.

Instead, Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner are doing something that is, unfortunately, beginning to feel old-fashioned. They are giving a great deal of a strong collection with an independent bent to two museums historically committed to new art.

All told, some 850 works amassed mostly during, and mostly dating from, the last quarter-century will move house (but not quite yet — the majority are promised gifts). The Whitney Museum is receiving almost 550 works by artists born or based in the United States. The Pompidou Center in Paris will be the new home for 300 by artists based primarily in Europe.



A detail from a Christopher Wool work from 1990-91. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

These are exceptionally large gifts for both museums, but the Whitney's portion is momentous. Its arrival coincides neatly with the museum's move to a new, larger building last spring and its expanding cultural presence (although the dearth of nonwhite artists represented in this windfall runs counter to the Whitney's increased emphasis on inclusiveness).

The couple's largess is being celebrated here with an exhibition, "[Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner](#)," organized by Elisabeth Sussman, the Whitney's curator of photography, and Christine Macel, the Pompidou's chief curator. Of the 111 works they have selected, nearly 80 will become the Whitney's; just over 30 are destined for the Pompidou.

The show constitutes a first look at the gifts and how the collection came to be, while providing glimpses of some recent developments and flashes in the petri dish of art. In addition there's an imposing catalog with enough hosannas, self-congratulations (and also self-disclosures) and weird history — interesting but myopic — to make it a fascinating, even useful document.



Lee Friedlander's 1997 photographs "Florida," left, and "Oregon." Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

It reveals a couple who seem to fall in love more with artists than art (a long tradition among collectors) and gives a full picture of the cliquishness on which the art world partly, and inevitably, runs. This world is a series of villages vying, consciously or not, for some kind of dominance or effect.

The interview and the curators' essays stress the collectors' avoidance of market darlings; those they own, they bought early. Still, the art world is shaped by different arbiters of fashion, including both the blue-chip art market and academic cachet. Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner have chosen the cachet, which is not any more predictive of historical importance than the marketplace, but which has higher status in many circles. After all, who doesn't want to be welcome in some of the hippest, most intimidating and, often, the smallest galleries in the art world? But only time will tell if the couple's choices are, as Mr. Wagner puts it, "for better or worse."

The show samples three or more decades of recent art on both sides of the Atlantic. It is a bit austere and short on color, with a broad slant toward conceptual/neo-conceptual art, to which the collectors freely admit, along with their lack of interest in much recent painting.



Matias Faldbakken's locker sculpture. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

The display suggests that the curators wanted to make the collection look both historically correct and as with-it as possible. It is fairly predictable in the beginning, with its roster of 1980s and early '90s art stars and starlets (bought pre-stardom) and too thin toward the end, with a group of esoteric younger artists whose works look either intriguingly inscrutable or completely uninteresting if not silly.

The catalog's lavish illustrations and list of the full gift suggest the possibility of a funkier, less orthodox show that might have included paintings by Ellen Berkenblit; Andrew Masullo; a young artist named Mathieu Malouf, whose two paintings incorporate mushrooms; as well as the eccentric artist [Robert Melee](#). But nearly every criticism you can make of this show can be credibly countered: Predictable or not, this streamlined version may be the most comprehensible introduction to the Wagners' collection.

The gift bulks up the Whitney's holdings in big-name artists like Jeff Koons, Christopher Wool, Robert Gober and Richard Prince. It adds substantial works by major figures like the Minimalist Dan Flavin and the nonconformist [Richard Artschwager](#) as well as by overlooked artists like [Tony Conrad](#), a filmmaker who makes wonderful film-related abstractions.



"Bouquet III," by Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Its greatest breadth may lie in photography, where it astutely establishes a progression from relatively traditional practitioners like Robert Adams, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus and Weegee; through artists who manipulated straight photography, like Larry Clark, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Zoe Leonard; to a loosely defined gathering of photo-based Pictures Generation artists like Mr. Prince, Cindy Sherman, James Welling and Sherrie Levine, who approached the medium as an object of critique; and beyond with artists who deconstruct the medium more literally, like Christopher Williams, Anne Collier and Liz Deschenes.

At times Americans may chafe at the Whitney's limiting purview, to artists based in this country, especially where art by young, globe-trotting artists is concerned. Some of the best works in the show are by the European contingent: Klara Liden, Hito Steyerl and Annette Kelm, who work mostly in Germany, and the British artists Merlin Carpenter and Simon Starling. Their work often has such a New York presence as to make you feel robbed.

If I had to choose one work to take home, it would be a snow-laden Christmas tree by the French artist Philippe Parreno titled "Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork, and in December It's Christmas (November)" from 2009. Particularly amusing, in a clubbish sort of way, is the nearby piece on which Mr. Parreno collaborated with the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija: 10 extraordinarily endearing puppets portraying some of

the artists and curators associated with the rather full-of-itself relational aesthetics movement. (Coily, no one is identified.) Above them hangs David Robbins's 1986 "[Talent](#)," a grid of glossy Hollywood-style head shots of 18 artists of his circle, all identified. It is humbling to realize how many of them have slipped from view, and memory.



Philippe Parreno's Christmas tree has the title "Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork, and in December It's Christmas (November)." Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

The catalog interview with Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner gives a surprisingly forthright account of their involvement, separate and together, with art. He began as a collector of ceramics, she is an art adviser, and both published artists books. They speak of works they have sold, including paintings by Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, to continue buying the art of the young and untried.

They also lament artists they didn't acquire when they could still afford them ([Pierre Huyghe](#) and Liam Gillick). In this vein, they might have discussed why their gift does not represent certain high-profile artists from the galleries they favored, such as the painter Josh Smith, who first showed with the influential [Reena Spaulings Fine Art](#) and R. H. Quaytman, a primary figure at 47 Orchard, a subversive, short-lived artist-run space, who now shows with [Miguel Abreu](#), a gallery high on the hip, intimidating list. Did they not like the work? Did they buy it and sell it? Are they holding it back for pleasure or for resale?

At times they seem to have listened more than looked, spoon-fed the artists' "intentions" by the artists themselves or their dealers. They also seem a tad naïve about the power

dynamic in the artist-collector relationship: Artists tend to be friendly to collectors because they want collectors to buy their work.

But never mind. Mainly what we have here, in this gift, show and catalog is a passionate involvement with the art of our time, elaborately revealed.

As is often noted, every art collection, public or private, is a work in progress. Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner intend to go on buying new art as it attracts them. And this show is but the beginning of a new life for the art they have given away, most of which we have yet to see. Its value and scope will emerge as it is integrated into the collections of the two museums, and as curators present and future begin to study and contextualize it. Artists can talk all they want about their intentions, but in the end the meanings of their work are a never-ending collaborative project, built by all of us.

“Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner” is on view through March 6 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street at Washington Street, Manhattan; [212-570-3600](tel:212-570-3600), whitney.org.

A version of this review appears in print on December 4, 2015, on Page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: 25 Years of Astute Purchases . [Order Reprints!](#) [Today's Paper!](#)[Subscribe](#)

Art & Design

At the Whitney, Thea and Ethan Wagner Show the Fruits of Prescient Collecting

By ROBIN POGREBIN NOV. 18, 2015



Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner flanked by artworks that they are donating to the Whitney Museum and that will be featured in a show opening on Friday. At right is Alex Israel's "Self-Portrait," from 2013; at left, "Talent" by David Robbins, from 1986. Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Thea Westreich Wagner can remember every time she has walked into a gallery with her husband, Ethan Wagner, and thought to herself, "This is the last piece by this artist we're going to be able to afford."

"At a certain point you say, that's the end of that ride," she said.

That is because many of the artists whose work the couple have collected over a quarter-century — including Christopher Wool, Jeff Koons and Richard Prince — have seen their prices soar into the stratosphere.

In 2012 the Wagners decided to give more than 500 works from their extensive collection to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where about 120 of them [will go on view](#) on Friday.

Shows featuring donor collections can be problematic, given potential conflicts of interest, and the Whitney presents such exhibitions only when a significant number of the works are coming to the museum.

“We’re delighted to be able to celebrate collectors when they’re going to make donations,” said Adam D. Weinberg, the museum’s director, adding, “We would never have committed to do a major show and a major catalog if we did not believe in the entirety of the collection.”



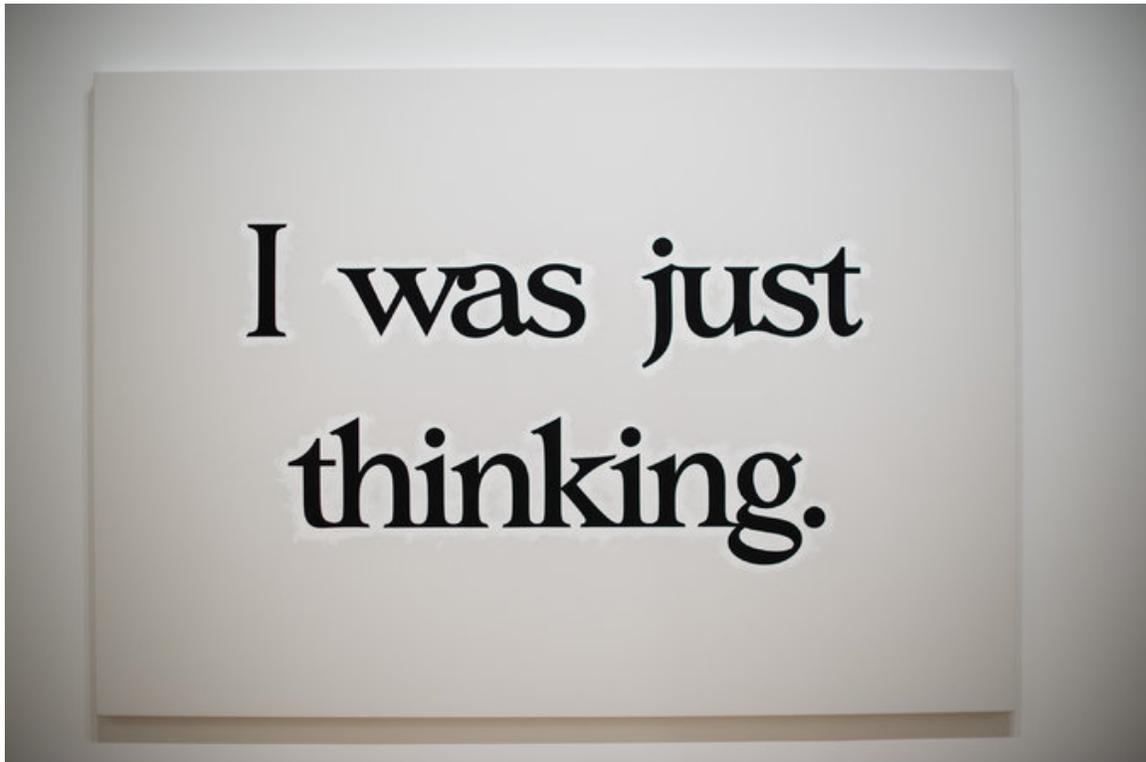
Organized by the Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman — with Christine Macel, the chief curator at the Pompidou Center in Paris, which is getting more than 300 works by non-American artists from the couple — the show represents a highly personal collection.

Walking through the Whitney galleries the other day, as their pieces were being hung around them, the Wagners recalled buying Robert Gober’s 1985 “Ascending Sink” — two stacked (nonworking) sinks mounted on the wall — right out of the artist’s studio. They pointed out Danh Vo’s 2009 chandelier, hanging in a corner of the sixth floor. They recalled discussing Mr. Wool’s “Untitled” (2002) — a large piece featuring strong brush strokes that greets visitors as they step off the elevator — over countless meals when it hung on their dining room wall.

“They’re not just inanimate objects,” Mr. Wagner said. “They’re the best part of our history.”

Why give so much of it away now? It isn't the tax benefit, Mr. Wagner said, noting, "We will never have enough income to use the possible deductions." And the Wagners held back some pieces for their five children (three from her previous marriage, two from his) and their nine grandchildren. They also kept some to sell so they can acquire new work, which they continue to do — often by emerging artists. "We don't buy Koons or Wool now," Mr. Wagner said.

The Wagners — he is 74, she 73 — wanted to see their collection in important institutions in their lifetimes. "We can still walk around a museum without stumbling over ourselves," Mr. Wagner said, "and we've got the energy for it."



Ricci Albenda's "I was just thinking." Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

The two started dating in 1990, when Ms. Westreich Wagner was already a prominent art adviser and collector, and Mr. Wagner had begun collecting while running his public affairs consulting firm.

They married in 1994, and their connection has been inextricably bound up with their obsession. They eliminated fireplaces and windows in their Mercer Street apartment to make more wall space. They have never disagreed on a work of art — well, "close to never," Mr. Wagner said.

"We mutually become interested or we mutually lose interest," he added.

They play a game at museums and galleries in which they each pick out a favorite and compare their choices, as they did in Dresden, looking at two rooms of work by Lucas Cranach. They separately picked out the same piece, as they almost always do. (During an interview — he in a blue sweater with glasses hanging around his neck, she in a sleek black leather jacket — they commend each other’s aesthetic judgment and finish each other’s sentences.)

Eventually, Mr. Wagner joined her business, and the two have been traveling the world, befriending artists and acquiring treasures before they were sanctioned by the marketplace, like the Goyer sinks. “It was very bold to buy that when they didn’t know what he was going to be,” said Ms. Sussman, the Whitney curator.

The collection they have built over the decades defies easy categorization, ranging as it does from the 1950s to the present, with photography by Diane Arbus, works on paper by Sol LeWitt and pieces by younger artists like Anne Collier, Gareth James and Rirkrit Tiravanija. It is particularly strong in works from the 1980s and 1990s.



Robert Goyer’s 1985 “Ascending Sink” and Danh Vo’s 2009 chandelier. Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

“There’s a lot that has humor in it,” Mr. Wagner said. “There’s a fair amount that is a commentary on the economics of our time, on the social difficulties of our time, on the politics of our time.”

It hasn’t all been smooth going. In 2004 Ms. Westreich Wagner’s company, Art Advisory Services, pleaded guilty to failing to collect New York City sales tax on over \$5 million in art sales and paid a \$250,000 fine. Mr. Wagner pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count involving filing a false business tax return to the city.

The Whitney show marks a high point for them; artists in their collection from all over the world showed up for an opening dinner on Tuesday night, even those who were not included in the current exhibition.

The show has allowed the Wagners to see their collection in a new light — they were struck by the curators’ juxtaposition of the abstract photography of Eileen Quinlan and the activist photography of David Wojnarowicz, for example — and to view some works that were too big for their home, like “Weeding Aralia,” Simon Starling’s sprawling 2002 screen print.

It also offers a window onto two collectors’ approach to buying art, which Ms. Sussman said was exemplified by the title of a Ricci Albenda acrylic on linen piece from 2009, “[I was just thinking](#),” which is featured in the show.

“This is what they encourage us to do — you have to think about things,” she said. “That’s what they like about collecting — how it makes your mind work as well as your eyes.”

A version of this article appears in print on November 19, 2015, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Two Collectors Who Bought Early and Often.

HYPERALLERGIC

An Early Thanksgiving: The Wagner Gift to the Whitney

[Thomas Micchelli](#) November 21, 2015

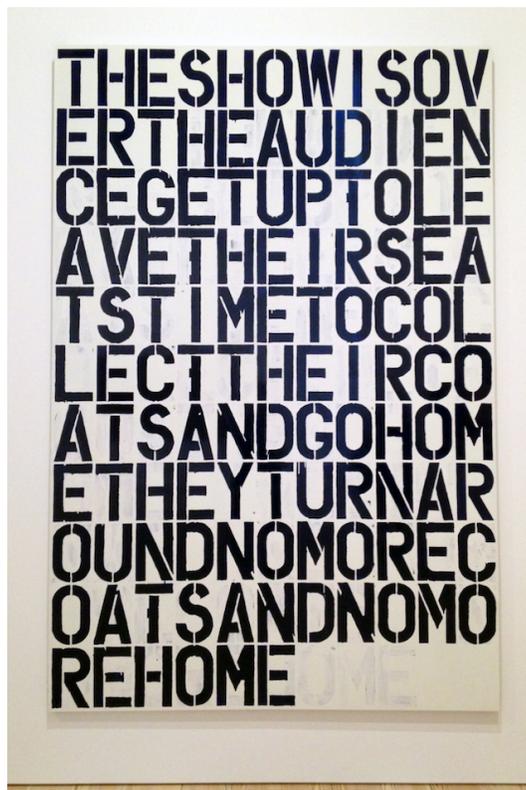


Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija, “Puppets” (2009), mixed media, 29 1/2–34 1/4 inches each. Centre Pompidou, Musée national de art moderne, Paris; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

Opening in the shadow of the Paris attacks, the exhibition [Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner](#) represents — as Adam Weinberg, the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, said in his remarks at the press preview — “a celebration of what matters in life.” The connection between the artwork and the massacres, however, is not simply rhetorical.

The show marks what the museum is calling a “transformative gift” of 550 works by U.S.-based artists from the Wagners’ collection, a donation that is being shared by the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which will receive more than 300 works by artists from Europe and elsewhere.

The exhibition’s curators, Elisabeth Sussman and Elisabeth Sherman of the Whitney and Christine Macel of the Centre Pompidou, chose to round out the collection’s context by including artists whose works are destined for the Whitney as well as the Pompidou, some of whom, Weinberg noted, have their studios in the [10th and 11th arrondissements](#), the areas afflicted by the worst of the carnage, where poets, dancers, critics, artists and architects were among the dead — “a strike against the heart of Paris’s creative community.”



Christopher Wool, “Untitled” (1990–91), enamel and graphite pencil on aluminum, 108 x 72 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner (click to enlarge)

The historical weight foisted on the show by timing and circumstance is not something it was particularly designed to bear. Although the bulk of the artwork was produced from the late-1980s on, it gives politics and social concerns a wide berth, with little evidence of the AIDS epidemic, 9/11 or the Bush wars, except by indirection.

AIDS is mentioned in the wall label for Robert Gober’s “The Ascending Sink” (1985), which is remarkably the first of the artist’s sink sculptures to enter the Whitney’s

collection (“This sense of bodily fragmentation, combined with the themes of hygiene and cleanliness implied by the sink, found pointed resonance during the AIDS epidemic, to which the work dates.”)

And the Vietnamese artist Danh Vo’s “16:32, 26.05” (2009), consisting of a 19th-century chandelier, evokes the backstory of the Parisian hotel where it once hung — the setting for, among other events, the Paris Peace Accords, which ended the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. (From the wall label: “By divorcing the opulent chandelier from its function and historical setting, this object, designed to convey elegance and celebration, holds within it the memory of the difficult moments in global history it has witnessed.”)



David Wojnarowicz, “Untitled” (1989), gelatin silver print; sheet, 15 7/8 x 19 7/8 inches, image, 14 1/8 x 18 5/16 inches. Edition no. 3/5. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

Otherwise, the show is based mostly in the personal and the formal, with the exception of a stunning untitled photograph from 1989 by David Wojnarowicz, for whom the personal was nothing if not political, depicting a pair of bandaged hands holding a bird’s nest that’s as spiky as a crown of thorns. But within that range, the works run from the ultra-reductive (Hito Steyerl’s “Red Alert,” 2007, a looped three-channel digital video

presenting the color red, period) to the ultra-decorative (Marc-Camille Chaimowicz's "Basel Sequence," 2011, an acrylic painting on five plywood panels mimicking wallpaper designs).



Joyce Pensato, "Reclining Glove" (1983), charcoal on paper, 21 7/8 x 22 3/16 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner (click to enlarge)

Those demarcations aside, the biggest dividing line running through the show is between those works that proceed from life (including experience, imagination and the material stuff of the artwork itself) and those based on a conceptual twist — not *art pour art* but art about art.

The first category includes a striking head shot by Diane Arbus, "Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark, N.Y.C." (1965), an indomitable-looking woman with thick masses of black hair, painted eyebrows and misapplied lipstick. Other compelling works include Steven Parrino's untitled, aggressively materialist painting in black enamel, whose canvas is all but pulled off its stretchers, turning it into a sculptural relief; Joyce Pensato's charcoal drawing "Reclining Glove" (1983), which appears to belong to her signature appropriations of Mickey Mouse; and Charline Von Heyl's "Boogey" (2004), a red and yellow abstraction in acrylic, oil, and charcoal, which is the show's poster image. Interestingly, the painting, at least to my eye, looks tangled and harsh in reproduction, not at all indicative of how it feels in person, where the coloring and texture are soft and sumptuous. A real knockout.

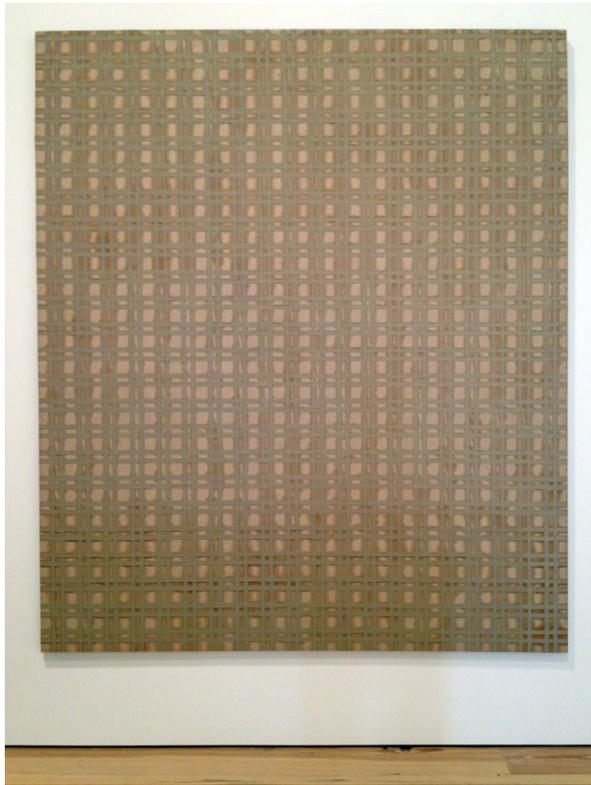


Charline Von Heyl, "Boogey" (2004), acrylic, oil, and charcoal on canvas, 82 1/16 x 78 1/8 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

The four works cited above are in fact all from the same room. The show is organized according to the ideas the works represent, rather than genre, medium or chronology, an approach that fills galleries with like-minded imagery across disciplines. (The art in the room displaying Arbus et al., according to the wall text, "embodies a rebellious punk attitude aimed at upending established norms and power structures.").

It is a mark of the tightly-focused curation that I found myself responding viscerally, either positively or negatively, to an entire room, with a few exceptions for individual works. The gallery devoted to the artist-as-celebrity, for instance, which typifies the work based on a conceptual twist, is off-putting in its self-regard and facile irony, though the puppets seated in a corner of the floor, which were conceived by Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija as stand-ins for fellow artists at a 2005 panel discussion, possess a certain flat-footed charm.

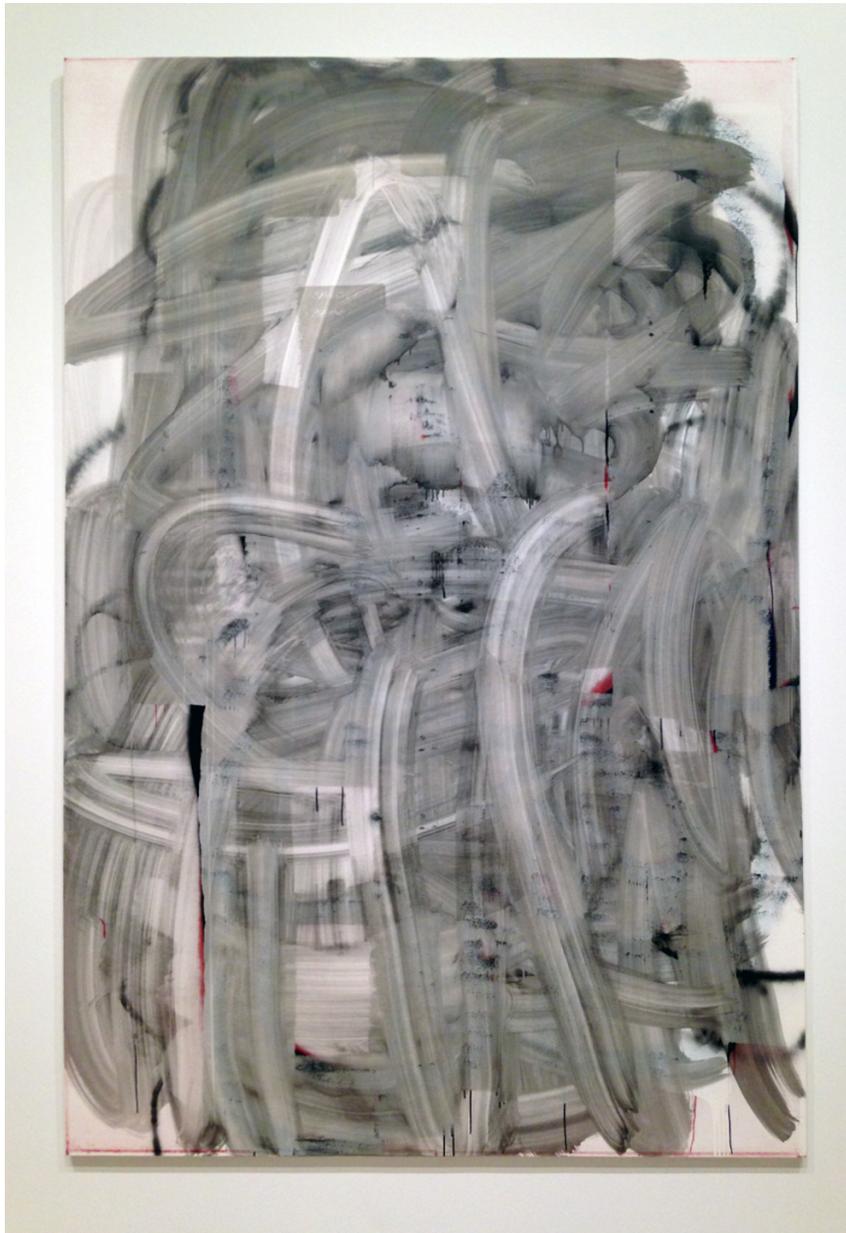
It is intriguing to note that perhaps the most entrancing room was one that the curators decided to leave context-free, where there is no wall text and the artworks, mostly photographs, are apparently grouped intuitively. This is where the Wojnarowicz is hanging, and beside it is “Failed Portrait” (2013), a highly evocative gelatin silver print by Eileen Quinlan in which a blank gray field is bracketed by a mysterious pair of abstract smears.



Cheyney Thompson, “The Production of an Unevenly Distributed Surplus Results from the Facticity of Format and Ground” (2006), oil and graphite pencil on linen, 84 1/8 x 72 1/16 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

A series of starkly geometric photos, mostly of landscapes, from the late ‘60s-early ‘70s by Robert Adams are on an adjacent wall, and beside them hang a pair of dreamily murky silver prints by Zoe Leonard, dated 1986 and 1988, depicting a field of grass and a map of Krakow, respectively.

Other thematically unrelated but visually cohesive works include a trio of Early Modernist knockoffs from the mid-1980s by Sherrie Levine, which remain conceptually irritating but here look refreshingly, crisply graphic; a 45-minute video from 1994 by Gary Hill; a 2009 color photograph of a child in a white Levi's t-shirt by Josephine Pryde; some bundled pseudo-newspapers by Robert Gober (1992) and, in a collaboration between Gober and Christopher Wool, a photograph of a girl's dress hanging in a tree (the dress presumably Gober's handiwork; the photograph, Wool's), near one of the latter's enamel-on-aluminum pattern paintings.

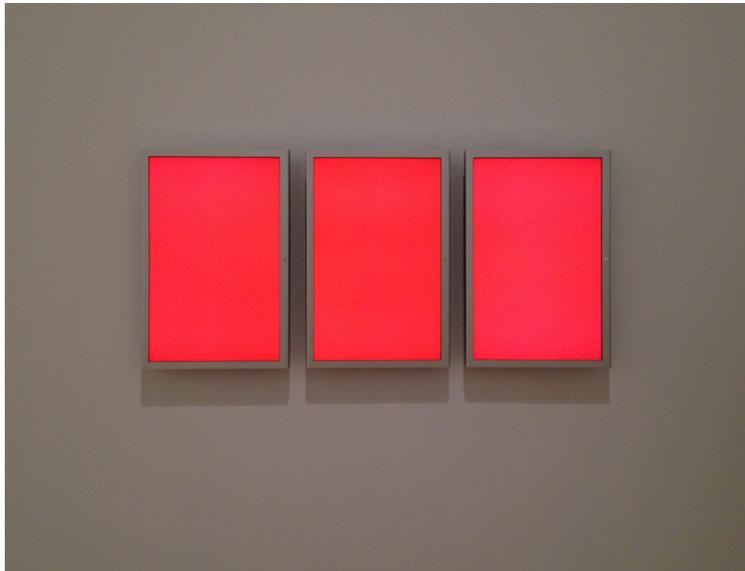


Christopher Wool, "Untitled" (2002), enamel on linen, 108 x 72 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner (click to enlarge)

Wool emerges as the star of the show, with seven works in all. A smudgy, untitled abstraction in enamel on linen from 2002, the first thing you see as the elevator opens, meets you with the unexpected power of Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning" (1953). (I had previously found Wool's gestural abstractions dispiriting and wan.) His word painting "Untitled" (1990-1991), in enamel and graphite on aluminum, which begins with "THESHOWISO / VERTHE AUDIEN / CEGETUP," dominates the room devoted to art based on language and advertising, which includes a joke painting by Richard Prince ("Nancy to Her Girlfriend," 1988) and the mock liquor ad, "Come Through with Taste—Myers's Dark Rum—Quote Newsweek" (1986) by Jeff Koons. There is even a photographic suite in the "punk attitude" gallery, "Incident on 9th Street" (1997), in which Wool documents his wrecked studio after a fire.

During a walk-through at the press preview, curator Sussman discussed the diverse ways Wool and Gober drew upon their experiences and environments as they developed their practices. (Despite his commitment to abstraction, Wool was invariably influenced by the street art and graffiti of the Chinatown neighborhood where he lived.) It is arguably this life/art interchange that keeps the works of these two artists, among others in the show, vital and engaging more than a quarter-century after they were made.

Wool also offers a key to the aesthetically cool, intellectually sharp vibe running through much of the art in the show, where the last room is filled with much more recent work, including geometric abstractions by Scott Lyall, Sean Paul, and Blake Rayne, all from the past several years. Steyerl's "Red Alert" is here, as well as a very fine copper-clad, plastic-and-steel scroll by Sam Lewitt, "Weak Local Lineament (ICF 01)" (2013). Like Wool's paintings, the pieces in this gallery feel at once alien and familiar, presented in materials and forms that carry on the legacy of High Modernism, while their conceptual systems seem to lie just beyond our grasp.



Hito Steyerl, "Red Alert" (2007), three-channel digital video, color, sound, 00:30 min. Each, looped. Three 30-inch flat-screen monitors, three Apple Mac minis, mounting system, and connecting hardware. Edition

of 3, 2 AP. Centre Pompidou, Musée national de art moderne, Paris; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

No artist exemplifies that quality better than the late French painter Martin Barré, whose queasily vacant striped canvases were expertly [parsed](#) by Gwenaël Kerlidou in Hyperallergic last month. His “74-75-C-113×105” (1974–75), a J-shape composed of diagonal and horizontal stripes along the right and bottom edges, leaving the rest of the surface blank, hangs in a corner beside a juicily painted monochromatic grid, “The Production of an Unevenly Distributed Surplus Results from the Facticity of Format and Ground” (2006) by Cheyney Thompson, who brought Barré’s work to the attention of the Wagners.

There is a sense of estrangement in both paintings (as there is in much of the work in this room), with their subtle departures from the conventions of abstract painting — Thompson’s perfect geometry drenched in oil bleeds; Martin’s imperfect geometry quavering on a flimsy armature — stirring a shift in expectations and the anxieties that accompany it: a locus of confusion, hostility, and acceptance that the art critic and historian Dore Ashton called “the unknown shore.”



Martin Barré, “74-75-C-113×105” (1974-75), oil on canvas, 44 1/2 x 41 5/16 inches. Centre Pompidou, Musée national de art moderne, Paris; promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

The events of the past week evince a world spinning out of control, but Parisians have been flocking back to their cafes in a show of defiance, and — as Weinberg expressed in his remarks about this exhibition — culture continues. The magnanimity and civic-mindedness of the Wagners’ gift to the Whitney and the Pompidou constitute a bracing

denial of current trends and values, an inestimable investment in the free exchange of ideas over the Darwinian logic of commerce.

Like the legendary collectors of Minimalism and Conceptualism, [Herbert and Dorothy Vogel](#), the Wagners have decided to give their collection away in its entirety. Unlike the Vogels, who amassed their trove on working-class salaries, the Wagners are people of means, but not at all on the scale of billionaire museum board members. They collected blue-chip names (again, like the Vogels) when they were nobodies, or near-nobodies, and their work was affordable. And they plan to continue discovering new art and artists, undistracted by the siren song of the auction block, into the foreseeable future, all for the good of the public sphere.

[Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner](#) continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through March 6, 2016.

NYMAG.COM

ART

December 19, 2014 11:40 a.m.

Art-Advising in 3 Acts

By **Alexandra Pechman**



Ryan Gander and Thea Westreich. Photo: Ryan Gander: Venturelli/WireImage; Thea Westreich: Owen Hoffmann/?Patrick McMullan

On an ice-cold morning last month, art adviser Thea Westreich tried to woo Ryan Gander. “He called me up and asked me on a date, and I said I was married,” she joked of her first meeting with the British conceptual artist, who came to the city to accept an honor at the New Museum’s Next Generation fete (“I’m in town for some dinners,” he told us modestly). For his last day, the artist decided to give Westreich — who is, in truth, an old friend — a shot at nabbing him as a client. Westreich arrived to the Upper East Side via black car wearing a quilted parka, her blonde hair neatly bobbed, to find Gander, in plaid and a puffer vest, already deep in conversation with her current client, Grant Henegan, a collector and businessman in town from North Carolina looking for his latest find. On the agenda were visits to Skarstedt, Dominique Lévy, MoMA, and Fergus McCaffrey for some Oehlen, Polke, Gober, and more, as Gander observed adviser and advisee. In a nod to Gander, we present a script from the day.

Act One

Per Skarstedt

20 East 79th Street

New York, NY 10075

Introductions

Grant Henegan: I've an eager eye to see what you pick up today.

Ryan Gander: He's the real collector. I'm just observing.

GH: So to manage your work, you've got to be able to produce the art, manage your career, manage it commercially, and in your case particularly you've got a lot of people producing in your studio for you.

RG: Yeah, it's strange. Whatever amount you earn, you don't just keep the money — with the studio, it's extraordinary. And when you see the tax return at the end of the year, I'm like, "How did we spend that much money? What did we make, cars?"

GH: How many works did you make last year?

RG: I made 324. We have a really accurate database.

GH: And you have someone from your studio keeping track of where it is, who got it, and once it goes to the gallery ...

RG: No, see, we do it differently. We don't have a main gallery or anything. We run it as a business so we allocate works with an allocation fee like a gallery would consign a work to another gallery. It has to be returned within six months if it's not sold and the price is fixed. The amount of discount given has to be fixed, the gallery absorbs any further discount. You just lose track of work. There was a point ten years ago where I was making, like, 60 works. Just had no idea what we had anymore. My studio's in London, and then I have another one in Suffolk near home, in between a nuclear power station and a dog-food factory. Very romantic.

The Setup

Thea Westreich: So the reason that we're doing this is that I'm trying to get Ryan as a client. I already have Grant as a client. What we typically do is allow a lot of space in terms of what the client sees in advance of their selecting a way to go forward: how they're going to collect, what they're going to collect, and why. We would do this with Grant with or without trying to capture Ryan's interest.

RG: I hadn't thought about that.

TW: Yes, this is what we would be doing with Grant in any case. The reason we're coming to Oehlen is because we've talked about people like [Michael] Krebber and Merlin Carpenter — people who emerged in the early 1980s in Cologne. Per has a particularly *good* secondary market eye, and he collects almost *always* when he gives a show like this.

On when you encounter a master:

GH: Yeah, having just seen the Polke show in London [at the Tate], you get it.

RG: Aaaaaazing.

GH: Wasn't that a great show? A walk-through of a life.

RG: It shook me up a bit.

TW: Yeah?

RG: I thought I should have been an electrician or something else. I had the feeling I wasn't good enough.

TW: Well, with that show, with the two of them — Malevich and Polke in one — I mean, you'd have to give it all up. Anybody would. But I have faith in you, baby. I wouldn't give up on you.

When one is enough for the collection:

TW: Do you have a favorite? [*They regard the Albert Oehlen paintings.*]

RG: I think you'd need more than one.

TW: Of *these*?

RG: No?

TW: If I were thinking about if I did want to collect another, I would want a painting but from a different expression of his because they're all various and they're all very, very good. For example, there's a black-and-white series of paintings that are very good. When you start with buying younger artists, like, for example, we did — you go in and you buy your first Christopher Wool — and you're really invested, you keep going, until the price points get out of hand, and then you start with something else. You want an evolution of Albert's paintings to have an important collection.

Act Two

Dominique Lévy
909 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10021

On what's really happening when people gift works to museums:

RG: [*He is recounting the prices from Per Skarstedt*]: 1.1 million, 800,000, 600,000 — that's like 3 million, and 15 percent at the secondary market ...

GW: I don't understand the commercial model because they all do it: Gagosian does it, Zwirner does it, they all seem to do these historic exhibitions with nothing for sale!

TW: In this case, they're probably not for sale. That may or may not be true: It may be in collections that Per has already built or that he's already sold to. Did you hear them say that somebody bought it as a gift for MoMA? Well, now the dealers with work that's very hard to get, that has high currency in the market, they're saying, "Oh, I'm sorry, we're only selling to people who are giving their work to institutions."

RG: Isn't that a conflict of interest?

TW: Of course it is.

RG: Because then it puts pressure on the museum to do a retrospective of that artist, which will increase the prices in their collection, and they're the trustees of the museum, and it's all a big circle of deceit.

TW: No one knows how to get out it. No one. I've seen patrons in museums talking to curators telling them to raise and lower paintings, or fix the lights. It's an astounding thing to witness. But the big thing I say to everyone with whom we work is great art is great art. Sooner or later the rubbish goes to the rubbish cans, and the great art stays in the forefront of history.

On taking things slow when it comes to building your collection:

TW: Collecting is an incredibly interesting experience if you do it the way Grant is doing: learning, taking the time to look at things, making decisions *emphatically* when they need to be made.

RG: I always felt that collecting is a bit like ... in the same realms of panic. You know what I mean?

TW: Ummmm ...

RG: If I was collecting now without you here, I think I'd just be running around like headless chicken going, "Fuuuuuuck!"

TW: You would be.

RG: Well, that's the thing is that now I'm really relaxed. You've unfolded the whole of art history in front of us, and we're looking at one little swatch, and now we're going to look at another swatch. Which is a *nice* way to think about collecting, isn't it?

On supporting young artists — even when it's ugly:

RG: I have a merely ethical and moral relationship to collecting.

GH: Moral?

RG: A moral and ethical relationship to collecting, whereby I never collect things that I necessarily like. I collect things by young artists who don't have any money because I need to give them some money! Because I think that they should carry on whether I like it or not.

TW: See, I have the opposite feeling: I think you should give to artists you really believe in, so that they can continue to give the world ...

RG: That's what I do, but it's kind of like the idea of being swayed by aesthetics of beauty for your collection. Because sometimes buying the ugly work is the thing that you know you should do.

TW: Ohhhh.

G: We've all learnt that!

TW: That's for *sure*!

G: Ugly is good!

TW: *Absolutely*.

RG: You see the practice of an artist and want to better them and further their career and know that currency could enable them the time and space to make more work. *But*. I might not actually like the work. And I think that's really important, like when I do selections for shows, like prizes.

TW: Yeah, but Ryan, if you start to really collect with a vision, what you say is ugly is by somebody else's eye. It's more that you recognize that there's something significant being done and that it interests you, and you may not know all about it, but it does draw you into the room. I mean, I hardly know all about your work and I've been looking at it for...

RG: It's less to do with it being ugly than I'm not buying it for myself. I'm buying it for them.

On a possible sale at Dominique Lévy:

TW: Here's an artist, for example, who is not highly recognized in the international world, Antek Walczak. We're very eager for Grant to buy this work. He's a major figure in the young art world. I can never describe his work adequately, but two of his works are available. Remember, this is post-internet art that we're looking at.

RG: Is it?

TW: Yep.

GH: I've got two already.

TW: He's got the American version thereof.

RG: But I like this.

Act Three

Afterward

The verdict:

RG: I always say artists must broaden their research. I go to casinos, fly fishing, to show apartments in new residential buildings, watch fairs, the football, ikebana courses, survival expeditions, Dungeons & Dragons nights, and it doesn't matter which of these I personally want to do — that is my job. That's true research; otherwise, it would be a bit like masturbating. My fantasy art collection day was part of this diverse research.

I wasn't taken to anywhere I would have gone if I was alone. An "I know what I like" mentality is hard to shake, but of course appreciation has space for being challenged. I think that's what Thea and Ethan are awesome at: listening and then turning collectors upside down and shaking them, then listening again when they're back on their feet.

TW: Grant acquired the Antek painting, which is the third of Antek's work in his collection. He is also interested in Sam Lewitt, but the piece he wanted had already been sold ... Ryan is more likely to make a work of art about the event than we are to get him as a client.

RG: I would love to go to the auctions with Thea once also, if she'll have me.

the PARIS REVIEW

Staff Picks: Dimensions, Defacements, Darkness

By [The Paris Review](#)

October 24, 2014

[THIS WEEK'S READING](#)

PARTS, 11" X 8.5" EACH. © THE ESTATE OF MIKE KELLEY/MIKE KELLEY FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS



Last week I went to a show at Skarstedt Gallery to see [a show of work by the late Mike Kelley](#). Kelley was a genius of an artist; to my mind, he *is* a genius of an artist, even though, of course, we will get no more new work from him. That present tense may be partly due to the fact that since his death, I've seen art by him that I hadn't previously seen—like the installation at Skarstedt, which comprised fifty small, framed illustrations torn from American history textbooks and defaced by Kelley. The doodles are lewd and juvenile—he has Alexander Hamilton making a pass at George Washington and a signatory barfing on the Declaration of Independence—graffiti appropriate to the bored teenagers who likely suffered through the books. It's a smart, astute work and very funny (a combination no artist does better than Kelley), but what really got me was the wall text, which was taken from Kelley's introduction to a book of these images, published in 1990. This too-sober text turns an idealized view of American history and patriotism on its head: "Such childish resentment is the cause of the defacements presented here. The inability to accept their lower position in the order of things provokes these 'artists' to drag back to the surface garbage long buried—to sully, vandalize, and render inoperable our pictures of health," he writes, adding, "Not that such a tactic is always bad." —**Nicole Rudick**

12 Books on the Ins and Outs of Collecting Contemporary Art

By MutualArt

Navigating the art world as a collector can have its share of frustration and confusion. With passion as a driving force, successful collectors need to temper their love and enthusiasm with knowledge of the landscape and the development of some personal strategy. We've collected a roster of helpful books from experts and art world insiders to not only help build a collection of meaning and value, but also to help unmask the somewhat unorthodox processes and practices that buying, selling and pricing art can entail. An educated collector makes for a happy collector, who can focus on enjoying that ecstatic adrenaline rush of adding a new piece to their collection. Whether a beginner or a seasoned pro, there is something of interest on this list that will offer revelation into the inner workings of the art world, helping to keep the acquisition process about excitement, rather than the stress of negotiation.

Collecting Art for Love, Money and More
By Ethan Wagner & Thea Westreich Wagner

Penned by husband and wife, Ethan Wagner and art advisor Thea Westreich, this book is written with a focus on the love and passion of collecting art from an insider's perspective. The advice, insight and tips imparted by the Wagners' allows collectors to add a layer of business-smarts to the sheer pleasure of buying art, giving educated tips for making the most out of the buying experience. For use as inspiration for your own collection the book also outlines some of history's most important collectors.

The Art Newspaper

Don't buy this, buy that

A guide to building a collection that is comprehensive but a little too polite

By Benjamin Eastham. From [Frieze New York](#) daily edition

Published online: 11 May 2013



Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner

Art collectors are “ruthless, greedy, tyrannical and disreputable” in the words of art historian Kenneth Clark and redeemed only by their possession of “one principle worth all the rest: the principle of delight”. *Collecting Art for Love, Money and More*, by the influential art advisers Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner, promises an insider’s insight into the small world populated by those people whose maladjustments finance the commercial art market. It is both a guide to those looking to start or expand a collection, and a rumination on the compulsion to collect.

The ten chapters into which the book is divided each address a simple issue pertaining to building a collection, from how to manage a budget appropriate to your means to dealing with gallerists, auction houses and dealers. The advice provided is drawn from the authors’ own experience and from the historical examples of celebrated collectors like John Quinn and Gertrude and Leo Stein. The text is rich with anecdotes that illustrate how the great collections were built around the aesthetic or intellectual preferences of visionary individuals, and these asides make the book a more diverting read than might be expected of a vade mecum to the art market.

The book is written in a conversational, intimate tone that suggests the authors are experienced at putting people at ease. Discretion and diplomacy are further qualities essential to any art advisory service so it is hardly surprising, though nonetheless disappointing, that even the most tepid criticism of any artist or gallery (and any good art adviser will have trenchant opinions on both) is prefaced by “some might say that”, or “many people would consider that”. On those occasions when the authors do draw attention to familiar flaws in the operations of the blue chip contemporary art market—“A hard look at other artists in [Gagosian Gallery’s] programme, and surely certain artists at other mega-galleries, begs the question: can high prices be sustained over time when artists fail to engender any serious critical and curatorial interest?”—the reader is left to draw their own conclusions.

The art world is plagued, or blessed, with endless scandal, intrigue and fallings out. While the media attention afforded to these enmities and rivalries has undoubtedly contributed to the overall rise of the market, these internecine squabbles are also hugely influential upon the careers of individual artists, whose reputations depend upon those of the people who are buying and selling their work. Charles Saatchi is the subject of damnation by faint praise (in a chapter entitled “The Vicissitudes of the Art Market”), but the reader is left longing to know what the authors really think about the sway that he and others hold over individual artists and indeed entire movements. Their reticence can occasionally frustrate, but does not significantly impede the book’s primary aims.

Collecting Art... reminds the reader that buying art is subject to the same rules as more mundane investments, and the authors are to be applauded for their efforts to demystify the process. As with any purchase, the buyer should be knowledgeable about the product and informed of its critical reception, should resist fads and buy for the long term. Yet, despite taking obvious pains not to explicitly condemn any motive that inspires the purchase of art, the authors clearly align themselves with a tradition that values the patronage of specific artists and the establishment of a publicly available legacy above short-term financial profit. In the book’s most interesting passage they discuss the widespread anxiety over the appreciation of contemporary art, specifically the fear that inexperienced buyers who “view the market as an easy-to-compute indicator of artistic significance” are skewing the production and critical reception of new work.

Their conclusion, that quality will always ultimately be recognised, is convincingly argued and, perhaps not coincidentally, reassuring to any reader making their first steps towards buying art.

Readers should not expect the authors to share Clark’s appraisal of the peculiar personality traits that drive individuals to amass collections of objects that they often do not have the time or space to display. Instead, the titular “more” that they append to the all-pervading impulses of love and money is summarised as a combination of social status, “intellectual satisfaction”, “emotional stimulation”, egotism, a craving for public attention and the peculiarly human desire to leave a historical legacy. Yet none of these quite matches the capacity for “delight” that Clark identified, and indeed *Collecting Art for Love, Money and More* is less successful as an analysis of the compulsion to collect than as a handy guide to those already bitten by the bug.

Collecting Art for Love, Money and More, Ethan Wagner & Thea Westreich Wagner, Phaidon, 192pp, £22.95 hb

Ethan and Thea's guide to surviving Frieze NY

New York's foremost art advisors give Phaidon the lowdown on how to do an art fair successfully

Share



Ethan Wagner and Thea Westreich Wagner

One of our favourite books of the last few weeks here at Phaidon.com has been Ethan Wagner and Thea Westreich Wagner's [Collecting Art for Love Money and More](#). It's a fabulously revelatory tome by a legendary husband and wife team of art advisors which tells you all you need to know about getting started on the journey to not just appreciating or loving art but more importantly buying, collecting and having a real personal relationship with it. It's packed with interesting tips, acute observations, revelations that will give you the odd raised eyebrow and more besides.

By the end you'll have a pretty substantial knowledge of how the art world in general and the art market in particular works. It's a brilliant, pacey read which

will give you a lot of pleasure - even if you never plan to buy so much as a print. We caught up with them as they prepared for this week's Frieze Art Fair and asked them if they had any tips for the fair.

One of many amazing revelations in Collecting Art for Love, Money and More is the sheer number of art fairs now in existence around the world - 300 alone last year. How many do you think you attended?

Thea: Well, not 300 but a good number!

Ethan: I bet you we do a dozen a year.

Thea: Oh at least, at least. The reality is that we do actually enjoy them from the standpoint of being able to see things that we otherwise would not see and also visit with people who we like to see and don't see except at art fairs. So there's a lot about them that makes them appealing - as many things of course as can make them not appealing!

We imagine your experiences must differ greatly to those of many of the people there. As well as a physical workout we imagine it's a pretty intensive mental one for you

Thea: Well, I never have trouble falling asleep at the end of the day!

Ethan: It's hard to sort of unscramble the egg. There's a lot of very intense things. To see that much art in one place and when you're looking on behalf of clients - makes for a really intense day.

Thea: Yes and you're continually making decisions in a different way than you would when you're not at a fair - making decisions about acquisitions for clients who aren't there at that time, for example.

Do you have a checklist or plan that you stick to when it comes to getting round an art fair?

Telegraph

Art Sales: 'Our focus is about identifying extraordinary artists'

Colin Gleadell talks to the Wagners about their experiences of Art Basel.



Pablo Bronstein, 'Marie Antoinette and Robespierre engage in an irritable post-coital conversation', 2013 Photo: Herald St, London

By Colin Gleadell

3:45PM BST 17 Jun 2013

Art Basel, the world's largest and most prestigious fair for modern and contemporary [art](#), closed on Sunday night with the majority of galleries feeling happy with the amount of business done. Scores of sales have been reported from \$1,200 (£766) for small works by young contemporary artists to \$12 million for a [Magritte](#) painting. Shippers handling works for a broad sweep of galleries say that business was considerably better than it was last year or the year before.

Taking special interest, as ever, was art advisor and collector Thea Westreich Wagner, who has been advising since the early Eighties, and her husband and business partner, Ethan Wagner, who joined her in the Nineties. Among their clients have been the top American

collectors Mitchell Rales (European and American masters from Giacometti to Jeff Koons); Norman and Norah Stone, who have a wide range of blue chip and cutting edge art in an underground museum they have built in California; and Richard and Pamela Kramlich, also from California, who have the biggest private collection of video and new media art in the world.

The Wagners also have a substantial collection of their own and recently donated over 800 works by artists ranging from US superstars Richard Prince and Christopher Wool, to British artists, Ryan Gander and Keith Tyson to the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Whitney Museum of American Art, which will be displayed in 2015. They have just written a book, *Collecting Art for Love, Money and More*, published by Phaidon which, apart from outlining the numerous factors which contribute to creating a successful [contemporary art](#) collection, benefits from some insightful anecdotes about the world of advising and collecting. I caught up with them for breakfast in Basel and asked about the fair from the point of view of the consummate professional.

Colin Gleadell: What does Art Basel mean to you?

Ethan and Thea Wagner: Art Basel offers collectors the most expansive and high quality buying venue of the year. It provides an extraordinary overview of primary and secondary market material. And, increasingly, it is responding to the growth of the global art market, offering a more comprehensive look at galleries and art making practices around the world. It has for a long time set the standard among art fairs, though [The Frieze Art Fair](#) is not far behind as a venue for serious collectors.

Related Articles

CG: How do you approach it with such a huge variety of work to see?

E&TW: Our approach is and always has been to be prepared and informed. Well before a fair opens we are in touch with galleries whose material is of potential interest to our clients. We vet these art works and prepare reports in advance of the fair so that our clients — those who attend the fair and those who don't — are informed and prepared to act. [The Wagners are usually among the first visitors to enter a fair, and were once reprimanded at Basel for jumping the gun.]

CG: What were its main strengths this year?

E&TW: A number of galleries in the Feature section for curated presentations were impressive and creative. Among them were London's Herald Street, which produced a performance ('Marie Antoinette and Robespierre engage in an irritable post-coital conversation' available for £35,000) created by the artist Pablo Bronstein, and the Kolkata gallery, Experimenter, which featured three compelling young artists. In the Statements section for emerging artists the standouts for us were Daniel Lefcourt at the Campoli Presti

Gallery and Antoine Catalla at the 47 Canal Gallery. On the ground we were thrilled by the Egon Schieles at Richard Nagy. As always, the gallery called 1900-2000 from Paris had rare, incredible material.

CG: Do you have an impression of how the market is doing?

E&TW: Frankly our focus is more about identifying extraordinary artists and locating desirable objects than it is taking the temperature of the art market. Whatever the market's condition, there is great material to be had, and over time that's where value is located.

CG: What did you achieve this year?

E&TW: We were able to access and acquire some remarkable works on behalf our clients, and we found a few artists of considerable promise. We also met with several galleries to discuss acquisition opportunities that are ahead.

The Wagners, clearly, are consistently discreet about their clients, eschew the notion of buying art purely for investment, and refuse to give top ten artist tips, because, they say, there's always another ten equally worthy of attention. They are also wary of naming young artists they have just bought because it can have a snowball effect, encouraging a wave of speculative buyers to follow suit.

Art is for Art Lovers: On Collecting Art for Love, Money and More

By [James Delbourgo](#)

JULY 7, 2013

Triptych image: Nan Goldin, "Shroud"
2013

ART COLLECTING, IT TURNS OUT, is for lovers. It's not just that the authors of *Collecting Art for Love, Money and More*, Ethan and Thea Westreich Wagner, are a couple, or that they joke about their acquisitions while sharing bottles of wine over dinner. Many of the noted collectors they discuss are also couples, presumably married ones, though in some cases disagreements over taste lead to divorce. There are the Nashers, Raymond and Patsy of Dallas; the Kramlichs, Pamela and Richard of San Francisco; and then there's hedge fund manager Steven A. Cohen and his wife, Alexandra, who in 2006 disbursed a cool \$137 million for Willem de Kooning's *Woman III*, making it one of the most expensive paintings ever sold. They must have enjoyed their wine — or champagne — that night. But did they make love?

The question is only partly facetious. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard famously suggested that collecting is an erotic act driven by a regressive desire for possession. "Invariably it runs counter to active genital sexuality" and suggests "a failure to establish normal human relationships." Collectors are people who direct their passions not toward other people but, with fanatical intensity, toward inanimate objects. Perhaps like the 17th-century Italian collector Hippolito Vitellesco, who, according to travelers' accounts, was given to embracing and kissing his own statues, the collector caresses non-human objects that return affection in their own particular way. Or rather, Baudrillard concludes, objects reflect the love they receive "like a mirror constructed in such a way as to throw back images not of the real but of the desirable."

What is it about art that art lovers love? This eternal mystery lies at the heart of the Wagners' how-to guide to collecting in the world of 2013.

These New York-based art advisers offer strategies for becoming a collector of contemporary art: how to navigate what they call "the talkative art world" and develop one's own collection. (Their credentials are totemically signaled in the book's first of many exuberant photos: a Warhol hanging in their Soho apartment.) Collecting is an individual "adventure" that nevertheless requires mastering the art of social encounter. Interpersonal acumen and a love of society are definite pluses: the ability to mingle with what *The New York Times* sometimes calls "the boldface crowd." No one the Wagners know has been able to resist Jeff Koons's "unique and compelling personality," for example. Learning such skills from a book seems a touch improbable, however, so one might wonder why this book in fact exists.

Anyway, here's how you become a collector. First, you'll need a few tens of thousands of dollars *per annum*, minimum, in surplus income. (If you don't have it, stop reading now.) Always make sure you see the art in question before buying it; don't just scan the internet. A work of art must have "wall power" (an updating, it seems, of what Walter Benjamin used to call "aura"), something that can only be felt in its presence. If possible, meet and get to know the artists to understand their work better. It may be helpful to frequent major exhibitions and fairs such as Documenta in Kassel, Germany, or even the somewhat outrageous Art Basel in Miami (don't mind old Tom Wolfe). See as much art as possible to gain knowledge

and train your eye. That way, there is a greater chance of recognizing original work when it comes along: it should just *look* different.

Of course, there's so much art around in our global age that, the internet notwithstanding, no one can see it all. This is where art advisers come in: their aim is to "see through their clients' eyes." Perhaps most importantly — and never mind the whiff of paradox here — advisers can help you discover your own personal taste and express your individuality. Think of art collecting as finding yourself in company: "collecting with your ears," they call it in one of many unwittingly marvelous phrases. Those lacking Steven Cohen's budget will want to spot cheap young talent and, possibly, a cunning niche. Echoing the Borgesian encyclopedia that moved Michel Foucault to laughter (and to write *The Order of Things*), the authors cite collectors who specialize in contemporary China; art inspired by Marcel Duchamp; art depicting the human hand; "nude women"; square art; and blue art — yes, art relating to the color blue.

□

The Wagners' tale of art collecting as a form of obsessive modern love is not exactly a story of love on the dole. You may not appreciate modern art, but modern art appreciates just the same. One evident purpose of the book, then, is to guide readers through today's art market. In a section entitled "Art Market Trends," the authors describe a signature auction scene, to give the reader the flavor of *being there*. They describe the dramatic rise in prices for 1980s photography and how this played out at Phillips de Pury & Company in New York one day in 2004. Three hundred works came under a gilt-edged hammer, selling for \$9.2 million, about a third above their estimated pre-auction value. Record prices were achieved for several artists, including Cindy Sherman. The climax of the sale is the significant part. Barbara Kruger's *I shop therefore I am* (a neat play on Descartes) is dispatched for \$601,600, at which point the "crowded auction room burst into applause in appreciation of the record prices that evening."

But perhaps those present were really just applauding themselves. Who was it, after all, who had just increased the value of the works in question by buying them at record prices? This is the shady magic that charges up the art world the authors inhabit, one in which "the market" is invoked with ever more Ozymandian intent as the ultimate measure of value. The buyers' applause is a rite at once cleansing and mystifying, in which the efforts of interested investors to increase value is made to disappear — as though value were an external force that simply *rises*.

This is where a singular tension marks this otherwise breezy how-to book. Even as it embraces the art market, it offers a muted, even somewhat tortured lament protesting the radical monetization of art. The authors are participants in a world of extreme wealth, but they are in fact profoundly ambivalent about the coronation of the dollar as the arbiter of worth. And why shouldn't they be? This radical monetization threatens the kind of expertise they themselves propose: expertise by way of knowledge and critical judgment of art's historical significance.

But, for art collectors today, as the Wagners tell it, seeing is wanting and wanting means buying because buying is "a declaration of belief." Buying is the kind of belief that counts because it can be counted: aesthetic appreciation that financially appreciates. Not the "museum as a way of seeing," as the art historian Svetlana Alpers put it, but as a way of shopping. Shopping is how you show love, the kind that others can see. The authors quote Sotheby's resident prophet Tobias Meyer, who stated in 2006 that "the best art is the most expensive because the market is so smart." Coming just two years before Lehman Brothers *et al* brought about the near total collapse of the financial system, Meyer's statement no longer looks "so smart." Nor do the words of another disinterested observer, Damian Hirst, who remarked of his Thatcherite patron Charles Saatchi in 2004: "[H]e believes he can affect art values with buying power."

To assign value by price, as an objective measure beyond argument, is far from new. In the late 17th century, the physician William Petty aimed to manage the English occupation of Ireland by establishing precise values for conquered land so it could be distributed without controversy, a method he called "political arithmetic." The last two decades merely bear witness to the adaptation of this ethos into aesthetic

arithmetic. Art stores and increases value — with some help from those willing to declare belief, i.e., buy at higher prices. If this distorts the value of art, it sometimes produces beneficial effects as well. Who knew that pre-privatization British Rail invested \$70 million in Old Masters and Impressionists in 1974, bagging an 11-percent return for their pension fund? Declaring financial belief in young artists is also vital for encouraging new talent and the progress of art itself. This is the work not of calculating investors but zealous “art supporters.” From top to bottom, growth isn’t just a strategy, it’s a necessity.

Investing in art, the authors suggest, has a long history: it can be traced from the emergence of auctions in the 17th-century Netherlands to the collection of modernist masterpieces assembled by Gertrude and Leo Stein in the early 20th. The authors implicitly situate the Saatchis and Cohens within this tradition. Hmmm. Was Walter Benjamin’s book collecting really spurred by the same “passion” as today’s billionaire businessmen? Maybe. Is BP, sponsor of Tate Britain, a patron just like the Medici? There must have been some terrible Renaissance oil spills.

The Wagners describe a sequence of giant leaps forward. One was at Sotheby’s in 1973, when a Twombly bought at \$750 went for \$40,000 and a Rauschenberg jumped from \$900 to \$85,000; another at Christie’s in 1997, when a Picasso-fueled orgy transformed one collection’s value from \$2 million to \$206.5 million. “Awe and shock” is how one dealer described the sublime effect of the 1973 sell-off. As with so many other arrangements of our times, the past ended and “the present” began around the 1990s in the aftermath of Reagan and Thatcher. The era of banking deregulation and burgeoning real estate speculation was also the moment when art became an instrument for deliberately increasing wealth, fueled by contrivances like the Mei Moses Annual All Art Index (devised in 2002 by two NYU economists) for charting price trends.

What has emerged since then is a striking inversion of John Cotton Dana’s vision for the Newark Museum, which he founded in 1909 in reaction to the collections of super rich elites. Dana instead stocked the museum with inexpensive objects that possessed a “direct bearing on the daily life of those who support it,” objects ordinary people might admire, buy and even use. The cultural system we have now threatens to turn all who look at art into consumers of luxury goods and, increasingly, voyeurs seeking peep shows of private property in a “quasi public” sphere, as collectors like billionaire hedge funder and MoCA trustee Eli Broad resist bequeathing to public institutions. A pre-Enlightenment world beckons: one of exhibitions as *noblesse oblige*, one before the British Museum and the Louvre established free public museums as a right of cultural citizenship.

□

What judgment do our authors pass on all this? They denounce “flippers”: those who buy art to sell for a quick profit. Above all, they warn against mechanical profiteering: value *isn’t* nearly so predictable. (Art prices in fact began declining in 2012.) *Caveat* you know who. They acknowledge that reducing art to investment is problematic and give voice to Duchamp’s scornful criticism: “The feeling of the market here is so disgusting. Paintings and painters go up and down like Wall Street stock” (from his 1928 letter to Alfred Stieglitz from New York). Strong stuff. Art should be about love, not money; passion, not calculation.

Or should it? They defend knowledge and criticism as a basis for judging the significance of art. They elevate the authority of critics and gallerists who pass artistic judgment as opposed to art economists who simply measure “beautiful assets.” (The name of the company founded by the inventors of the Mei Moses Index is Beautiful Asset Advisors.) And the fact that they have published a book in the age of electronic monetization seems a nostalgic throwback to the prestige of old-time learning and the conversational pleasures of one’s art library. There are no graphs in the book.

Nevertheless, auctions, they report, embody “the democracy of the dollar.” Nor can they resist vindicating their expertise in financial terms, citing one work acquired for clients at \$93,000 that later resells for \$2 million. Their company website more frankly talks assets. Its statements about “assessing and increasing value” speak of their “unmatched archive” of price data for “minimizing the potential for risk and

increasing the potential for gain.” This is strangely not included in the book — perhaps the second edition? “No single approach or mindset or reason for collecting,” they conclude, “is less legitimate than any other,” even though passion and knowledge may be preferable to profit and distinction as motivations (they even quote Bourdieu). No value judgment about value here. Yet a recent *New York Times* article quoted Thea Westreich Wagner speaking out sharply against trading art like stocks.

Confused? Our authors are evidently of two minds. They commenced their career as brokers in the 1980s before the recent boom and just donated hundreds of works to the Whitney and the Pompidou Center in Paris. But they’re caught in the current Anglo-American trap: how to pursue non-financial forms of value without subordinating them to the logic of the market. Radical monetization may look inexorable but was really only set in train about two decades ago. What we call “value” is increasingly an agonistic zero-sum game, in which those who invoke the market encourage the elimination of all other values (in domains from health care to higher education) as impediments to profit. Wages stagnate, corporate profits vacation on offshore islands, bankers’ bonuses rebound, private debt soars, and public services get gutted. Asset-chasers, meanwhile, fall in love over and over at the auction house, cashing in their paper winnings from capital gains before the next crash.

The art world is not a passive beneficiary of this monetization but, in prominent instances, actively encourages it. Using art as a financial instrument to increase the wealth of a select few allows for its recycling into other forms of power and prestige, political and otherwise, producing greater income disparity between rich and poor, and, so far, higher art prices. Who are today’s Citizen Kanes? Steven Cohen and his colleagues at hedge fund SAC Capital Advisors have been subpoenaed to testify by the federal government over insider trading and are currently pleading the Fifth. MoMA president and Hudson Institute free-market economist Marie-Josée Kravis has defended “Anglo-Saxon capitalism” against “Europe’s social capitalist politics.” And in 2010, billionaire Frick/Asia Society/New York Public Library trustee Stephen Schwarzman, co-founder of the Blackstone Group financial advisory, likened Obama’s tax proposals to Hitler invading Poland. Such goings-on are well summarized in “Le 1%, C’est Moi,” an article by artist Andrea Fraser written for last year’s Whitney Biennial, reviving the spirit of shows like 1977’s “Anti-Catalog,” which exposed the glorification of wealthy patrons at the Whitney itself. Open-Rolodex art world portraits like the Wagners’ at least allow readers to ask where the money’s coming from, rather than just gaze at where it’s going, and to question the legitimacy of “collecting” as part of today’s socioeconomic order.

And love?

In May 2013 the emergency manager of the city of Detroit called for 60,000 works of art in the Detroit Institute of Art (founded 1885) to be appraised for possible sale either to help pay the city’s debt or in the event of the city declaring bankruptcy. Their estimated value is \$2 billion — the city’s debt, \$15 billion. The manager in question is Kevyn Orr, a former bankruptcy and restructuring adviser appointed by Michigan’s Republican governor and venture capitalist Rick Snyder. (Critics question Orr’s legitimacy, citing a popular vote in 2012 repealing Michigan’s emergency manager law.) “I’m a great lover of art and so is Kevyn,” commented Orr’s spokesman, Bill Nowling, but went on to insist, “We’ve got a responsibility to rationalize all the assets of the city.” DIA director Graham Beal responded, pointing out that “objects held in the public trust [...] don’t have a value.” Museum officials around the country condemned the move to appraise the DIA collections. “This direction should be quickly and firmly rejected,” said Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Art for the public is not interim, fungible or liquid.”

“All that is solid melts into air,” Karl Marx wrote. Whatever else happens, it’s nice to hear an institution like the Met opposing the logic of capital in the name of art and society, if not love.

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• INTERNATIONAL

ARTICLE

Ethan Wagner and Thea Westreich Have Built Their Life Around Their Art

BY DEBORAH WILK, ART+AUCTION | JULY 06, 2013



The open living area and study of Ethan Wagner and Thea Westreich's SoHo loft (Kristine Larsen)

Art+Auction July/August 2013

“There are any number of museums in which the architectural signature overwhelms the art,” says collector Ethan Wagner, who, with his wife and business partner, art adviser Thea Westreich, has acquired some 800 objects over 22 years. “If it happens in museums, it can certainly happen in

a home.” Yet when Wagner and Westreich needed to reconfigure their loft in New York’s cast iron district, Wagner relinquished his skepticism of architecture’s flash to engage the services of a seasoned professional whose expertise helped the couple elegantly showcase their collection, which rotates through the space pending its move to the Whitney Museum of American Art and Centre Pompidou in Paris starting in 2015.

According to Wagner, architect James Harb brought “a sense of proportion and how space works both for art and life” to the renovation of the 4,000 square feet of living space. “We haven’t seen that kind of sensibility embodied in many residences,” he says. He and Westreich call Harb a genius, high praise from a couple who, having recently published *Collecting Art for Love, Money, and More* (Phaidon), literally wrote the book on buying and living with art.

Just as the couple counsels care in the selection of those who dole out art advice, collectors would do well to seek the wisdom of designers. The best bring vast experience to planning both formal and comfortable residential spaces that accommodate art. They have developed a variety of tricks, both universal and unique, to address the needs of each client and collection, resulting in distinctive spaces that are far from white cubes.

Harb, the principal of James Harb Architects, consulted with Wagner and Westreich on typical elements such as lighting and establishing maximum wall space—a constant issue for those with objects to hang. Fortunately the couple was amenable to radical interventions: Two fireplaces were enclosed, as were two windows, to gain more surface area. (Another fireplace was left intact, and the top-floor loft had enough remaining windows to keep it flooded with natural light.) Recessed fixtures are a popular choice for art lighting, and during the planning, Harb proffered yet

another radical, seemingly counterintuitive alteration. He suggested lowering the ceiling to its current height of 11 feet to level its original slope and provide concealed space for air ducts and light fixtures. Westreich says the move actually created an airier effect throughout the loft, thanks to a universal linearity that keeps the architecture from competing with the art. “Since he made that change, both your eye and mind go to the art uninterrupted,” says Wagner.

“The space welcomes the work, allows it to shine, and be all that it is,” is the way Westreich describes it. As with all classic lofts, the living and dining areas flow into an open kitchen that suits serious cooks who love art. Sean Paul’s appropriation of an Ingres print, composed upside down at an odd angle, wraps the wall above the Sub-Zero refrigerator, while a diptych by John Kelsey and a photograph by Eileen Quinlan offer respite just to the left of the Viking cooktop. “We can sit and read or I can cook my heart out, and we can live a life with our art,” she says.

Places for quiet contemplation are certainly a regular quest for art collectors. In contemporary architecture, that calm is often characterized by minimal lines and the purity of industrial materials. One parochial execution of such structural serenity can be found in architect Richard Meier’s Perry Street Towers, erected on the Hudson River in 2002. The raw spaces offered to original residents were unpartitioned swaths of concrete and glass, walls optional. The challenge issued to architect Ali Tayar, of Parallel Design, by his collector client was to preserve as much of the open plan as possible while extracting display solutions for not only an impressive collection of modern and contemporary masterworks, but also a growing holding of Persian textiles and Art Deco furniture. “The goal wasn’t to create a gallery,” says Tayar. “But we extended the idea of

curating from the art to the furniture” to elicit a seamless residential composition.

Fortunately for the client, Tayar excels at devising custom structural elements that connect seemingly disparate existing components. To create distinct living areas, the architect designed movable panels that swing back and forth to reveal the adjoining spaces to or conceal them from the main living area. To warm the cool building materials, he sheathed the surfaces in zebrawood veneer, but he left the plywood edges showing. “The whole apartment has a high-low feeling,” says the architect. The panel in front of the den holds [Damien Hirst](#)’s *Beautiful pop spinning ice creamy, whirling, expanding painting*, 1995, while the bathroom is located behind [Richard Prince](#)’s *Cowboy*, 2000.

A drywall partition was required for the bachelor collector’s [Sol LeWitt](#) *Series, Part III, #12A + B*, 1969. The wall drawing required an expertly planed and skimmed surface, and to make matters more exacting, the apartment’s sunset view meant any imperfection would be glaringly obvious on a daily basis. Tayar’s confidence in his contractor was rewarded with a flawless ground for LeWitt’s work.

Carl Andre’s *Almanta*, 2000, which was acquired during the project, rests on the balcony. He had sandstone inlays milled for the outdoor floor to best show the piece. “It’s a natural stone that complements the structure’s concrete and glass balustrades and the work’s cast metal,” the architect explains.

Tayar continued to warm the apartment with bronze, which rings the bottoms of the concrete structural columns and was used for the kitchen hardware. “It was machined, but not sealed, to maintain a natural patina,”

he says. He used a polished version of the material in his design of custom bathroom sconces that set off bare bulbs at odd angles. In a happy coincidence, the client happens to own [Jasper Johns's](#) lithograph *Lightbulb*, 1976. “We never really talked about it,” says Tayar, “but one day I came in and found it installed.” Call it a quietly contemplative nod of approval.

Wall space was not an issue for a couple who acquired a Park Avenue perch to shelter both their young family and a collection of work primarily by contemporary stars. Indeed, the prewar property's configuration—a warren of variously sized rooms—would remain a constant obstacle for architect Martin Finio, who runs Christoff & Finio Architecture with his wife, Taryn Christoff. Because the co-op board restricted the number of amendments to the original floor plan, the design team had to concentrate on removing niches and being certain the proliferation of walls lined up and were evenly skimmed. “It's a clean design in which all the lines are perfect,” says one of the collectors, “which is no small feat in an apartment originally designed for smaller paintings in gilded frames. They really had to fit a square peg in a round hole.”

The trick was opening the layout's transitional components “in a way to make it feel connected,” says Finio. Because art will rotate as the collection grows, lighting and alignment had to establish every wall as fair territory for two- and three-dimensional objects as well as digital work. Recessed ceiling fixtures were placed in a calculated spread to maintain even lighting for anything on or against the wall.

The interior is also one in which children live with art. “I grew up with a father who is collector,” says the client, “and we like exposing our kids, fostering the next generation of art lovers.” Accordingly, Florian Maier-

Aichen's untitled C-print of a brilliantly colored coastline, from 2005, hangs in the playroom, while Micah Lexier's *A Minute of My Time* (August 30, 1998 12:40–12:41), 1998, and Vik Muniz's *Double Elvis* (Pictures of Chocolate), 1999, grace two of the three children's rooms. Of course, mishaps can occur. In the living room, Table Rose, an unsealed acrylic cocktail table by [Yves Klein](#) from a posthumous 1963 edition, the interior of which is dusted with pink pigment, has suffered a few unfortunate knocks. "You have to have a sense of humor," the client says.

Reflecting a trend among collectors engaged in interiors projects, the client says, "We wondered how to do something different with the gallery hall." By coincidence she came across the mural-size wall collages by the collective Assume Vivid Astro Focus during construction and bought *Butch Queen 4.4*, 2010, as a birthday present for her husband. "This was the perfect solution," she says. Finio and Christoff were assigned to send the exact dimensions to the artists for fabrication, but more details had to be worked out. Because the piece runs the length of one side of the hallway and turns a corner to wrap a bedroom doorframe, the decision was made for the piece to respond to the wall rather than simply having the wall accommodate the art. "There's a great conversation between the art and the structure and its quirks," says Finio. A gap, known as a reveal, distinguishes the mural from the floor plane, while another reveal around the frame differentiates the picture from the structure, allowing the art crucial autonomy. "It's the small details," adds Finio. "It doesn't take a lot, but they really set the piece off significantly."

Coordinated planning of architecture and a work in progress was also vital in Christoff & Finio's work for a collector couple building a home on the eastern end of Long Island. The clients approved the architects' design for a two-part structure, clad largely in black-stained cedar that featured a

foyer separate from the main living spaces of the house. The design called for a glass-enclosed ground-floor entry with a minimal interior containing little more than a terrazzo-ground concrete staircase with a solid granite railing leading up to the rest of the house, and a mechanical room. The architects had yet to find the right exterior treatment for the mechanical room when the clients, with their art adviser Sima Familant, decided to commission [Jenny Holzer](#) to create a piece for the entry.

“Of course, she was given the choice to interact with the space in any way she wanted,” says Finio. But the architects secretly hoped the artist would see the opportunity of the mechanical room exterior. In a perfect melding of architect and artist minds, Holzer approached the room entirely of her own volition, choosing to wrap it in one of her signature text pieces of sometimes blank, sometimes profound aphorisms rolled out in scrolling lights.

The heavy lifting began as Holzer’s studio team, the electronic engineers, the mechanical team, and the architects all worked in tandem to design and fabricate the piece. Some 600 10-foot-tall, 1½-inch-deep fins, fitted with vertical sets of LEDs, were locked together in a toothlike configuration and fastened to the walls with cleatlike devices, making them appear to float off the surface. “We all wanted the piece to be as seamless a part of the architecture when the lights were off as when they were on, so we agreed to give the fins a metallic powder-coat finish that would catch the natural light when off,” says Finio. Holzer’s selection of the mechanical room was fortuitous as it easily accommodates the cables and computer equipment that attend the piece, but a few of the fins had to accommodate the heating and cooling vents originally designed into the walls. The door required to access the mechanicals is seamless. “You would never find the door if it weren’t pointed out to you,” says Finio.

Reflecting on the mind-set of the current breed of architects who welcome a constant dialogue with artists and artworks, Finio says, “We are always trying to create spaces, surfaces, and situations that might inspire a specific way for art to engage with it. Architecture can suggest a specific artistic intervention, just as a particular work of art might dictate a specific architectural response.” No doubt even Ethan Wagner would approve.

This article appears in the July 2013 issue of Art+Auction.

ART MARKET

Buy Young, Sell High? On Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner's New Guide to Collecting

By Rachel Corbett

APRIL 23, 2013



A view of Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner's home

A photograph of a Bronx storage facility crammed with wooden crates and cardboard boxes appears in the opening pages of *Collecting Art for Love, Money and More*, the new book by husband-and-wife art advisors **Thea Westreich Wagner** and **Ethan Wagner**. The overflowing space pictured in the photo, the caption reveals, is just one of the several sites—totalling 3,000 square feet—that house the Wagners' colossal collection of contemporary art. Clearly, the couple are their own best clients.

The picture might lead one to wonder, why buy so much art just to put it in storage? Collecting can quickly become a compulsive endeavor, the

Wagners admit. “Once you get the bug, you’re involved in a profound way,” Thea told Artspace. Today the couple relies on a database to keep track of the work, which they rotate throughout their home and lend to exhibitions. Last year, they announced a donation of 800 contemporary works from their collection to the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) and the **Pompidou Center**.

Like many addictions, art collecting also offers a heady rush. Ethan traces his interest in art back to his days running a consulting firm, when dull meetings filled up most afternoons. “As soon as I got out of there I’d walk down to the **Chester Dale** rooms at the **National Gallery**,” he said. “The Impressionist paintings used to make me just spin through those rooms. I couldn’t fix my view on anything because it was all so demanding, all so exciting.”

Today, the Wagners have also been known to go to **Art Basel** in Switzerland and purchase, as they did in 2011, five works by installation artist **Klara Liden**, plus more from **Josephine Pryde**, **Annette Kelm**, **Danh Vo**, **Melvin Moti**, and **James Beckett**. They flew home “anxious about money,” the book relates, but filled with “feelings of mastery, magical escape, and states of transport and renewal”—a common acquisition high, the Wagners say.

The thrill might incite some buys, but there’s “no one reason to collect,” Thea said. Investment, decoration, and intellectual curiosity—all are valid rationales for acquiring art, and the Wagners want to validate collectors across the spectrum. Not quite a how-to manual, the book, published by **Phaidon**, is an anecdotal, fully-illustrated examination of

the art world “as it is, rather than as it is depicted in the press,” Thea said.

Through a series of brief case studies of their own clients, the authors share models of how to form relationships with artists and dealers, and how to navigate new frontiers in online sales and auctions. They describe, for example, a young couple that had allotted \$50,000 a year for art acquisitions. Thea and Ethan advised them to fill their home with works by emerging names like [Ryan Gander](#), [Claire Fontaine](#), and **Alex Olson**, which they began to complement over time as their budget grew. No one can know for certain if these artists will also prove to be lucrative investments, but the Wagners are known to buy work by artists on the brink of stardom. In 1985, a client called Thea “crazy” for buying one of **Robert Gober**’s sink sculptures from [Paula Cooper](#). Later, after meeting Ethan, the couple bought a painting by Gober’s friend [Christopher Wool](#), whose auction record soared to \$7.7 million last year. Today they have their eyes on dozens of promising young artists, including **Cheyney Thomspon** and **Sam Lewitt**.

“Sometimes the door that leads one to collect is as an alternative investment,” said Ethan. “But art has a way of winning out.” The museums that the Wagners are now pledging their storerooms of work to, and the countless viewers who will soon be able to enjoy it, would agree.

New York Couple's Gift to Enrich Two Museums

By CAROL VOGEL MARCH 15, 2012

For more than two decades Thea Westreich Wagner and her husband, Ethan Wagner, have been known to the art world as advisers perusing fairs, bidding at auctions and attending gallery openings and museum previews.

But in addition to shaping collections around the country, the couple have been busy collecting contemporary pieces for themselves, assembling work by many of the biggest names in American and European art.

They plan to continue collecting, but the couple decided it was time to choose where their art will ultimately go. After years of deliberation, they have promised to give more than 800 works by leading contemporary artists to two institutions.

About 500 works by some 70 American artists will go to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and about 300 works by 27 European and international artists are earmarked for the Pompidou Center in Paris. The collection as a whole, which ranges from the 1950s to the present, has particularly rich examples from the 1980s and '90s.

"We've been together for 22 years and we've been collecting for 22 years," said Ms. Westreich Wagner in a telephone interview.

The couple said they picked the Whitney and the Pompidou because they knew their gift would make a difference at each museum.

After the Whitney's scheduled move to the meatpacking district of Manhattan in 2015, it will have far more space to show its permanent collection. And the donated works will strengthen the museum's holdings of 1980s works by artists like Christopher Wool, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, Robert Gober and Cady Noland.

The gift will also augment the Whitney's photography holdings, adding images by Lee Friedlander, Robert Adams and Diane Arbus.

Adam D. Weinberg, the Whitney's director, said the couple's collection is "a perfect complement." He added, "In some cases it fills gaps, while in others it adds strength to artists whose work we already have."

The couple's European material needed a home too. Ms. Westreich Wagner said that 23 of the European artists in the collection were already on the Pompidou's wish list. The gift adds to the Pompidou's holdings works by artists like Simon Starling and Mark Wallinger, who were unrepresented in the museum's collection.

Alain Seban, chairman of the Pompidou, said it was one of the largest gifts in the institution's history. "We hope this will be an example for collectors in the future," he added.

For a French institution, the gift is particularly significant: such donations are rare in France, where collectors do not reap the tax benefits that Americans do.

Curators at both institutions are planning a major exhibition of work from the collection. It is scheduled to be on view at the Whitney in 2015-16, timed to the opening of its new building, and then travel to the Pompidou.

ART IN REVIEW; Christopher Wool

By **KEN JOHNSON** MARCH 17, 2000

Skarstedt

1018 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street

Manhattan

Through March 25

Here is a fine time capsule. In the 1980's, Christopher Wool was doing a Neo-Pop sort of painting using commercial rollers to apply decorative patterns to white panels. One day he saw a new white truck violated by the spray-painted words "sex" and "luv." Mr. Wool made his own painting using those words and went on to make paintings with big, black stenciled letters saying things like "Run Dog Run" or "Sell the House, Sell the Car, Sell the Kids." The paintings captured the scary, euphoric mood of a high-flying period not unlike our own.

In 1989 Mr. Wool created a series of word paintings on paper for a tome called "Black Book." The 22 pieces are exhibited for the first time here, in an elegant wrap-around installation. Each page bears a nine-letter word broken up into a stack of three-letter groups. Blocky nine-inch letters spell the names of disturbing character types: terrorist, anarchist, mercenary, paranoiac, and so on.

The percussive typography joins the verbal content to aggressive and somehow morally imperative effect. With minimal means, Mr. Wool conjured a world of political anxiety that the novelist Robert Stone might have envisioned. **KEN JOHNSON**