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# Disenchanted Globalisation

Alternative Visions of the Polycultural

## GIVING ART A PLATFORM

### 20 years of Galerie Priska Pasquer

Sabine Maria Schmidt spoke to  
Cologne gallery owner Priska  
Pasquer

It all began with photography. Twenty years ago, gallery owner, consultant and curator Priska Pasquer opened her gallery on Cologne's Goebenstrasse, showcasing vintage photographs from the 1920s. By "reinventing" herself on a regular basis, she has focused on a number of different areas over the years. In the last five years, she has provided a platform above all for artists exploring the social change being brought about by everyday digitalisation. Having based her gallery for the last five years at Albertustrasse 18 – where, as a student, she would visit Rudolf Zwirner's exhibitions – she is planning to move again in autumn 2020.

**Sabine Maria Schmidt:** Running a gallery is not something many children say they want to do when they grow up. How did you get into gallery work?

**Priska Pasquer:** I originally wanted to be a director. My mother was an actress, my father a painter. Back while studying Art History, German Language & Literature and Romance Studies, I was already working in the theatre. First in the Goethe Institute in Argentina, later at the Westfälisches Landestheater and then at the Theater der Keller in Cologne as a dramatic advisor, assistant director and director. At the same time, I worked for the New York-based Robert Miller Gallery at Art Cologne. That was my first contact with the art market and where I first crossed paths with Rudolf Kicken. When Rudolf Kicken set up a gallery with Michael Pauseback at Bismarckstr. 50 in 1987, he offered me the chance to come and work for him. Those were exciting times with exhibitions by Eva Hesse, Andy Warhol and Komar & Melamid. When putting together a group of original photographs by László Moholy-Nagy, I was finally bitten by the art bug.



**Portrait:** Priska Pasquer, 2000,  
Courtesy: PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne

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Rudolf Bonvie reading *Le Monde* (the title page featuring his picture: *Dialog von 1973*), 13. November 2014, Courtesy: PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne

**Wasn't it rather museums that were the workplace of choice for passionate art historians back in the 1980s? In those days, market, museums and art criticism were all still separate areas with distinct labels.**

Possibly, but I came from a theatre background. And was fascinated by the sheer vitality of gallery work. I stayed with Galerie Kicken-Pauseback (later Galerie Rudolf Kicken) for over eight years.

**What did you learn most of all working at Kicken?**

That the world is a small place. Particularly in the photography sector, it was important to be active internationally. We worked a lot with Japanese artists, which was something of a new departure. And we sold early Bauhaus and László Moholy-Nagy. Rudolf Kicken once sent me to a fair in Valencia on my own with a suitcase full of originals. Carmen Alborch (director of the Valencian Institute of Modern Art (IVAM) at the time) and Vicente Todoli (later director of the Tate London) were extremely taken and bought up virtually the entire stand. That was an important feather in my cap.

**And then you set up on your own?**

First I gave birth to my daughter in 1994. Two years later, I went out on my own with Photographic Art Consulting – a consulting service for collectors of photographic works. But then I was actually dealing with artist estates – first photographs from the estates of El Lissitzky, then Gustav Klutis and Valentina Kulagina, Japanese photographer Osamu Shiihara and Heinz Hajek-Halke. I sold a lot of El Lissitzky works to German museums. In 1999, I travelled to Paris, Casablanca, Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York in what was a very important trip for me personally. I visited the key museums and was able to place some of the photographs from my portfolio with them. The high point was when I sold an Osamu Shiihara photograph to the Museum of Modern Art, which I recently saw next to a fantastic Hans Bellmer sculpture in the new presentation by MoMA. As well as this, I had applied to take part in Paris Photo for the very first time and had an international launch at my trade fair stand with Bauhaus photographs, El Lissitzky and Osamu Shiihara.

**You then opened your first gallery on Goebenstrasse in Cologne in 2000. At the time, there was a real gold-rush vibe on the international art market – not least because new museums were springing up, for example in Spain.**

But photography was still an enormously specialised segment and wasn't easy to sell.

**Was the rather small photography scene elitist at the time? Did you need to have very specific expertise and know the right people?**

Possibly. On the other hand, there was always a certain hesitancy towards photography among German collectors, who did not accept its value by a long shot. Or its monetary value.

**Photography had a very bad reputation in the post-war period because it had been hijacked for propaganda purposes. This meant that it was no longer possible to take up where the avant-garde scene of the 1920s had left off – the many illustrated magazines in Germany, reportage photography and much more besides.**

Yes, that's right. As well as this, very many photographers, illustrators and producers had fled, gone into exile or had been murdered in the camps. An important German cultural stratum had been wiped out. Particularly in the USA, but also in England, I have quite a bit of contact with German art collectors who succeeded in fleeing the country and with their offspring as well.

**Can you tell me any highly significant moments in your career?**

When I first discovered Japanese photography! At around 2000, I began to work with Ferdinand Brüggemann, who had lived in Japan. We first exhibited works by Daido Moriyama, then Eikoh Hosoe, and later Shōmei Tōmatsu, Yutaka Takanashi – or female photographers like Rinko Kawauchi, Asako Narahashi, Mika Ninagawa and Lieko Shiga. Particularly for women, photography was an important means of expression in what was still a very patriarchal society.

**What characterises Japanese photography for you?**

The entire Far Eastern pictorial tradition is condensed in the pictures.



Every time a photograph is taken, a poem is conjured up at the same time – images are seen as being similar to words. At the same time, photography was a subversive medium, a means of holding a mirror up to society.

### Which exhibitions were important?

Needless to say, each individual exhibition was important. But it was Rudolf Bonvie who triggered me into action, leading me to hold my first themed photography exhibition about children in photography in 2004 (“Kinder”). This featured exhibits ranging from 19th-century works to Annelise Kretschmer and Astrid Klein, all the way to Christian Boltanski’s installation “Children seek their parents”. I met Rafael Jablonka via an exhibition with Warhol polaroids in 2011; this led to our joint project space: JABLONKA PASQUER PROJECTS. Around about 2012/2013, I began to view art in a different light again, because the upheaval brought about by the all-pervasive digitalisation in our lives was becoming more and more apparent to me. I wanted to work with artists who were reacting to this.

View of *Reset III*, with Judith Sönnicken, The Swan Collective(Felix Kraus ), Fiona Valentine Thomann, Banz & Bowinkel, 2017, Courtesy: PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne

View of *Kinder* mit Christian Boltanski and Astrid Klein, 2004, Courtesy: PRISKA PASQUER,



**You have been based at Albertusstrasse 18 – a prime location in Cologne – for five years and are working with artists such as Ulrike Rosenbach, Johanna Reich, Banz & Bowinkel, Warren Neidich, Radenko Milak, Hanno Otten, Pieter Hugo and many more besides. Do you take more of a curatorial approach to themes such as social media, neoliberalism, platform capitalism and surveillance?**

Outside the context of traditional gallery work, I have always been greatly interested in new formats for collaboration and bringing art to people, in examining overarching questions. The large spaces on Albertusstrasse were ideal for exploring themes in more complex, almost museum-like group exhibitions and placing various pieces in a communicative context.

I was also looking for additional possibilities on the sales front. For instance, there was a new model with Rudolf Bonvie. One image on his website had been downloaded and shared thousands of times. It is called “Dialog” and depicts two hands touching on a bed.

People responded to this image in many different ways. We then asked ourselves whether it would be possible to transfer this back from digital to analogue and to create an inexpensive edition for people to buy in physical form. This in turn led to a webshop being set up as early as 2013. That got us a lot of press coverage (from *Le Monde* to *Handelsblatt*).

**You have an enormous list of artists on your website. You work with many of them – is it still possible to have a close working relationship with artists in the traditional sense, i.e. helping them to build their reputation and representing them exclusively?**

I already work closely together with a selection of artists whom I also represent with, among other things, traditional gallery work.

For instance, I was very active with Rinko Kawauchi between 2004 and 2010 and still represent her today, even though she is no longer quite as visible in my exhibition profile.

**Do people engage with art in a more superficial way these days? Of course, you are working to counter this – for instance with exhibition series such as *On Equal Terms*, *Reset I-III* and *Future Talks*, which examine the transfer zones between analogue and digital art.**

I am interested in helping people to connect on a deeper level with art. *Future Talks* also takes a look at social questions such as unconditional basic income, neuroplasticity and surveillance.

**Is traditional gallery work no longer enough on its own? Are events an essential factor now?**

Traditional gallery work has never been enough for me. This might also have something to do with my theatre background. I have these great spaces where I can hold events and it has also allowed us to reach a new audience and get them excited about art. The shutdown experience in the spring of the coronavirus pandemic made me feel even more strongly about this.

**With the coronavirus crisis, we came to realise that this is just the start of an everyday existence that is increasingly geared towards the digital. You’ve indicated that there is another change in the pipeline?**

Yes, I will be moving to a new Rhineland location on Konrad-Adenauer-Ufer in September 2020, where my husband – author, investor and digitalisation expert Karl-Heinz Land – has spacious premises. As well as exhibitions, which can only be visited with great caution due to the pandemic situation, we are raising our profile on the digital front and producing synergies with the start-ups based there.

**Is it easier or harder to be a female gallery owner than it used to be? Does gender still play a role in the art business (or is it playing a role again)?**

For me – also as a single parent – it’s never been something that has figured very highly. But at the same time, it’s plain to see that men have much more of a say than women.

This is one of the reasons why I organise Instagram live talks and primarily invite female artists and other women to them. However, the same can also be said of some of my male colleagues – such as Johann König, who represents a large number of female artists.

**But isn’t it true to say that the big money is made almost exclusively by men?**

Yes, to be a gallery owner, you have to be an extrovert, you have to be able to overcome self-doubt, be daring and take risks. Above all, not having to be perfect is often more difficult for women, as they tend to get in their own way more than men.



That is a role that I had to grow into. This reminds me of my grandmother, who was visually impaired since childhood but made up for it by always making her voice heard. Even when she was put in prison during the Nazi era for hanging up anti-Hitler posters together with my grandfather, she said exactly what was on her mind.

**What will gallery work be like in the future? Is there still a future for galleries?**

It will definitely be necessary to come up with new models. The question is whether this will only involve sales? Perhaps in future, galleries will be responsible for building bridges between art and society, so that artists can be involved in the decision-making processes of companies and public institutions. Aesthetics aside, works of art also have the potential to provoke changes of perspective and usher in new ways of thinking. In any case, artists have a lot to say and we need to provide them with a platform for doing so.

**Will fine art be as important for our society in the future? Or will it become merely a mixture of entertainment, nostalgia and preserving relics from the past.**

It will definitely be important. Art will be more important than ever before. This is because it is the last remaining bulwark for physical and spatial forms of interaction that go beyond the everyday.

Particularly since everything is getting more and more virtual. But even the digital art forms will help us to perceive the world in a whole new light. There is nothing like the physical experience of being in a room with a work of art. How I change in relation to it – how the exhibition, the artwork, the interaction makes me feel – that is always new and unique.

*Our Duty is to Experiment – 20 years*  
 Galerie PRISKA PASQUER, Hanno Otten, Asako Narahashi, Ulrike Rosenbach, Ausstellungsansicht, Courtesy: PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne

Johanna Reich, Ulrike Rosenbach and Priska Pasquer, 2019, Foto: Nathan Ishar, Courtesy: PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne

