

ARTFACTS.NET

Art Forum Berlin - Interview with Wilhelm Schürmann



Wilhelm Schürmann

This is an Artfacts.Net interview with Wilhelm Schürmann. Wilhelm Schürmann is professor of photography and free photography at the Faculty of Design at the UAS Aachen. He is known as a collector, artist and exhibitor, and most recently, he is back in Berlin with his own space (Schürmann Berlin). Furthermore, Wilhelm Schürmann is a member of Freunde des [Art Forums Berlin](#) (Friends of Art Forum Berlin).

AfN: Hello Mr Schürmann.

Where do you position yourself in the art world? Is there still a clear differentiation between gallery owner, collector, curator, artist, auctioneer?

Schürmann: I consider myself as private collector, as a private scholar in matters of art. It is quite secondary which professional activity I am officially attributed to. All that counts is the personal connoisseurship, and this is not just something to be achieved by buying or possessing art but also by reflecting on how to make things beam again, beyond their materiality. Art locked up in the storage room or at home does not offer any possible connections between work and public reflexion. Private exhibitions of images in an unprotected public space are the background in front of which I - as a collector, as a person who is dealing with art, both privately and professionally - am operating.

AfN: But this differentiation of roles in the art world becomes more and more blurred?

Schürmann: This has always been irrelevant to me. 20 years ago, people already asked me to determine my professional activity, but why can't I just embody several activities? It is always about this one thing - about dealing with art, dealing with images, dealing with objects and mainly about the question what art is: what is this thing I am looking at? What does it mean? How do I position it in relation to the viewer? No matter if I am myself the viewer, the visitor, the colleague or whatever.



© Thomas Mohren
Martin Kippenberger
The mother of Josef Beuys,
Oil on canvas, 1984
160 x 130 cm

AfN: Although you are quite busy, you take your time for Berlin. Why is that?

Schürmann: The answer is very simple: Berlin is the most exciting city in Germany. Being in an urban metropole that speaks one's own language is really a very fortunate circumstance because the entire surrounding identity is quasi reflected in one's genes. This feels different compared to being abroad in a similarly big metropole. Berlin is incredibly vital, enjoyably un-German, at present maybe the most international city in this country and permanently on the move. Berlin has this critical mass of interested persons so that a public, an audience for special programmes can be guaranteed.

AfN: You are a member of Freunde des Art Forums Berlin. What are the goals of this association?

Schürmann: The goals of the association are strengthening the fair, the self-esteem of a German fair location as an emporium of visual arts - mainly contemporary art - and for that purpose, finding persons who identify themselves with it, also publicly. There are also other locations but in the medium and long term, the capital is just

unbeatable. For years, there has been this discussion about the competition Cologne-Berlin. I think that this will soon be done. For a long time, Cologne as neighbouring city has been the cultural living room of the temporary capital Bonn, and it is clear that, after the Fall of the Wall, Berlin as the capital has necessarily become culturally more attractive, with all the treasures that can be found in its museums - this is just world class.

It is the only city that can offer all this in such richness. As a corollary, there needs to be a fair location for art in Berlin as well. The only backlog demand - in comparison to Cologne - would be a stronger emphasis on classical Modern Art. Berlin focusses on contemporary art. I think that in this respect, the Friends can bolster the acting persons. In Germany too, we might be able to work together and not against each other.

AfN: [Art Forum](#) once was thought to be a creative Berlin answer to the market controlling position of [Art Cologne](#). [Art Forum](#) is now an important player in the world concert of fairs. What will happen to the smaller fairs gathering around the top dog? Will they vanish into thin air?

Schürmann: That's the beauty of it - it is the market that will decide. There might be several little niches but the abundance of fairs has become so variegated that the galleries participating in many fairs will have to think about where to show their principal works. Top level art is rare, and if it is actually shown at fairs, the question will be "where?". There will be a natural selection. Nobody wants average quality. Quality will be the crucial factor; I do not know how much time it will take - but in the long term, Berlin will definitely have a big chance because the international visitors like to come to Berlin. No fair location should think that visitors would solely come for the art fair; the overall concept of the city needs to be attractive. It's the art, the location, the people that arouse interest. People do not just go to Basel and then back home, but they make a tour to South Europe, in Switzerland and visit whatever could be of additional interest.

AfN: In an interview you said that you considered this current global permanent fair as totally overrated by the media.

Schürmann: Yes, I still think so. It is false to think that the principal art offers can exclusively be found at fairs. The visitors' length of stay is limited, and complicated, complex or difficult art cannot be experienced en passant; in the future, it will still be necessary to see, experience and penetrate more complex works without immediate recognisability in galleries and over a longer period. A collector incorporates a work in his life; it becomes a part of his everyday life. It is a time process; it can take a while.

As a collector I pose myself the question if a work, in five, seven or ten years, will still be able to offer the same intensity. This is not something I can decide by just quickly passing by. A fair will never be able to offer that. A fair - any kind of fair - is always a class reunion, a meeting place for a lot of people in a very short period of time. A marketplace. There are possibilities of comparison gathered in a very limited space; it is thus possible to develop one's own criteria in a short period of time. Everbody has a similar access to information. Via networks, everybody can become an insider. A good art fair is also able to generate within one week numbers of visitors that can usually only be offered by big institutions. Very good galleries take certain fairs so seriously as if they would provide for important solo exhibitions. For one week. They retain special works for these fair presentations. You would never obtain such a number of visitors in galleries. This is obvious for everybody. But as I said, genuine quality is rare.

AfN: In matters of quality in art or art fairs, you once said: "Art has always been relatively rare, and it still is. We have to say good-bye to the idea that we need to embrace everything that is labelled as 'art'. It is the same for music: I cannot complain every day about boygroups..."

Schürmann: ...I cannot complain about the fact that not everything labelled as 'art' is satisfying my expectations. I do not listen to the music of a 12 year old either. It has become more difficult to find music that I like when I turn on the radio; so I have to buy a CD or other sound carriers or get it from the net. But it exists. The same applies to art. I do not need to consider everything under the same cover as relevant. But what's more difficult nowadays is the fact that there are no explicit styles, no isms noticeable anymore. Trends are quickly exhausted. These days, I have to develop my own ideas and wishes in the long term, and when I am able to follow them, I can find incredibly interesting things.

AfN: Do you think that there are parallels between the art business and the music business?

Schürmann: At this moment, I can see parallel developments only in the fair domain. Visitors like to go where there are recognisabilities. I recognise what I know. There is a visual effortlessness, and music can also be just light background noise. But what is separating the two from each other is the marketability. Visitor numbers correspond to audience ratings. Every fair visitor is also a client - mostly as a member of the audience, rarely as a customer.

Music can be sold en masse. It is infinitely reproducible. Art - apart from the multiples - remains rare, there is no mass market. This is why the prices rise. It is thus a completely different situation. There might be parallels to television but this is not where art can be found. I think that the contemporary success of art has



© Collection Schürmann
Heimo Zobernig
without title, 2000
Acrylic on canvas
123 x 118 cm

- apart from the glamour factor and the market records - also something to do with a need for something lasting, with sustainability. Glimmering optic and acoustic noise have even reinforced the need for the lasting.

AfN: The director of the Armory Show, Katelijne De Backer, has presented MTV shows in the past. She is an attractive and professional manager. Do you think that quirky individualists of the art scene will be replaced by slick managers?

Schürmann: This might be wishful thinking: interchangeable predictability. Did the Armory Show become the most successful fair? Or was it the Basel Art Fair with its charismatic Samuel Keller? The personal charisma is crucial, not the slick professionalism. Art is non-interchangeable because it is powerless, because it is always somewhere else, because it always takes new turns. Art is a permanent, unpredictable regeneration machine, and slick manager pros will continue to have problems with it. That's what makes it likeable.

AfN: According to you, art is produced by extraordinary artists and targeted at the markets. Apart from the artists, are there also producers in the art world, comparable with Frank Farian who stage-managed a band, Milli Vanilli that could not actually sing but only dance and look good?

Schürmann: This is a good observation. I think that this already exists for a long time: there are professional gallery owners who believe to know what their market wants, and who not only want their artists to join in, but who also select or even program their works. According to the motto: I can sell this one, the other one can be put in the store room, the market is not ready for it yet or your image needs something different...

AfN: What are currently - from your point of view - the most interesting places in matters of art?

Schürmann: The most interesting places are those where people dealing with art can unhurriedly do their thing without any permanent daily flaring fever. I noticed that some of the art works that I personally find most interesting, have always been created at side locations. In the networked world it is no longer necessary to act and to live in key cities. It might be useful to be able to try things out unhurriedly. I am thinking of places like Glasgow compared to London. I am thinking of academies like Karlsruhe compared to Düsseldorf.

I am thinking of cities like Los Angeles compared to the marketplace New York. The community of producing artists and of participating visitors, collectors etc there have been and are still able to talk and to exchange views unhurriedly. It is the same in Berlin at present. Whenever I meet visitors from London, they cannot believe that this city they like so much is so empty. Compared to London, it is almost an oasis of tranquility; London is always incredibly crowded - everywhere you go. Berlin is still enjoyably empty. And it will continue to be like that for a while; even if there is space for 7 or 8 million people, these would first need to find a job in the city.

AfN: Is Asia a destination, too?

Schürmann: I cannot join in that conversation. No idea. I have never been there, and I do not intend to operate there as a collector. I would feel like a colonial collector. I do not know the cultural background; I do not know the mindset. I think that a collection is the most credible when it reflects lived life. I do not miss anything, so I cannot miss out on something in Asia.

I want to understand Europe first. After my cultural socialisation with American images, I am now rediscovering the richness, the diversity and the distinctness of cultural offers in Europe, and I believe that

with regard to this, Berlin could in the medium and long term take a monopoly position in gathering everything that is top-level and that the diversity of different starting-points of cultural nations had to offer for centuries - such as languages, mindsets, traditions, etc. How should an average tourist be able to experience European art in all its richness if he does not know the language? "What you see is what you get" is not enough anymore.

The art market often functions that easy, too. The price explosion takes place where decorative needs are served. Art - how I understand it - is interfering in my life and not only in the skyline of my living room. But I think that this actually is insignificant; we have to understand that in the art world, there are nowadays innumerable realities existing side by side at the same time. You cannot talk about the art scene, the art business, the art market. There are a lot of businesses and markets side by side.

AFN: Professor Schürmann, thank you very much for the interview.