FRONT DESK / BACK OFFICE

The secret world of galleries in xxx candid pictures and two texts.

There's something not quite right about commercial galleries. They are a kind of schizophrenic space. On the one hand they explicitly present things with an intellectual and immaterial value, while on the other hand it is clear that one could eventually possess these things; the experience has a price tag attached. They represent two different realities or systems: the discourse and the market. The discourse is more at home in art institutions and artist- and curator-run spaces, where looking at art is not corrupted by finance. Selling is, of course, the commercial gallery's main function, but the discourse is equally important. It is for this reason that looking and buying are kept apart and that these activities take place in two discrete spaces. In the white cube one looks at the art and talks about the artist's intentions and the position of the work within the discourse. Talk of money is taboo here. That takes place in the back rooms.

The documentary photographs in this book were taken during the past five years, but allready since the 1990s I look at the back rooms – the other side of the art machine – and became obsessed by the understatement of the façades, the messy, cluttered desks in the small galleries and the cold professionalism of the major players' offices, and, above all, the uniformity of the design. They all have the same MacBooks and iMacs, the same desk lamp by Michele de Lucchi and the same designer furniture by Charles & Ray Eames, Arne Jacobsen and Dieter Rams. Have you ever taken a good look at the front desks? It was at Air de Paris that I first saw a gallery position its office partly as a front desk in the midst of the white cube. That might have been a statement of openness, but perhaps more so a conscious staging of openness.

More and more galleries seem to be testing the boundaries between non-profit and the market – whether out of genuine interest or as part of a clever image, or both. But artist- and curator-run spaces are also edging towards

that boundary from the other direction. They call themselves an artist-run 'profit' space or a *Produzentengalerie* and so position themselves in the market, whereas the art fairs, with their vast budgets and parallel programming look increasingly like biennales. The new style of gallery has, at the every least, a project space or incubator where young, inexperienced artists can show experimental work. And those that have truly understood the market mechanism have a residency programme and run a 'discursive space' with evening screenings, lectures and debates. They disguise themselves as artist-run spaces or art institutions. There are some that also publish a magazine and artists' books and have their own bookshop. I know of one gallery – the largest and most fashionable in São Paulo – that, alongside all the aforementioned, also has a high-class restaurant and rents out studios. It looks increasingly as if the large commercial galleries are the new small museums or centres for contemporary art.

Front Desk / Back Office brings together a selection of candid photographs of the front desks and back rooms of galleries in Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, São Paulo and Zurich, which I have taken over a period of five years – mostly without permission. The names of the galleries and a list of the artists they represent can be found at the back of the book. I adopt a hit-and-run method in making these documentary photographs. I took them all with the wonderful point-and-shoot analogue Yashica T4 camera with Carl Zeiss Tessar 3.5/35 lens, the same one that Terry Richardson uses. The idea of 'observing and recording my own cultural group and habitat' began in 1997/98 when I saw the films of Jean Rouch and David MacDougall at a documentary film festival. It was Jean Rouch in particular who made me aware that art, just like documentary film or visual anthropology, could be a subjective form of research: that making art is a visual activity through which you can critically question reality and that the facts can mean anything you want them to.

In the meantime the interest in the context and background of the 'unique' and the deconstruction of myths is no longer restricted to art; the popular media also has a fascination with the 'backstage' and 'the making of'. In some cases this is about institutional critique or empowerment, in other cases unmasking and establishing the truth, and sometimes it is simply about envy or sensation seeking. But it has also simply become a marketing strategy: a style called 'reality'.

It is now therefore even more interesting to see how a gallery stage-manages its back rooms. What do they look like? Is the door open, ajar, or shut tight as in the galleries in London? Is there a front desk or a semi-public back room, which fulfils and displays some of the functions of the real back room. And if so, which ones?

I asked my friend, the French architect Thibaut de Ruyter to interpret the photographs with an eye to the galleries' style, architecture and design. He has written the text 'A Suit Does Not Make a Man, But it Helps' about gallerists' preference for modernist design classics. I asked the Dutch sociologist and journalist Olav Velthuis, who has undertaken years of research into the relationship between art and money, to include the sections on 'The Front Room' and 'The Back Room' from the first chapter – 'The Architecture of the Art Market' – of his book *Talking Prices*. Its central question is: how do dealers price contemporary art in a world where objective criteria seem absent? I bought it in 2008 when we were living in Zurich and doing research for *Fucking Good Art – The Swiss Issue* and found in his writing a context for my photographs. In exchange for two of the photographs, Velthuis has written a special adaptation of his text under the title: 'Separating the Sacred from the Profane: the front and the back of a contemporary art gallery'.

Rob Hamelijnck, May 2010

Separating the Sacred from the Profane: the front and the back of a contemporary art gallery

Olav Velthuis

Adapted from: *Talking Prices. Symbolic meanings of prices on the market for contemporary art* (Princeton University Press, 2005)

Introduction

In his classical work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), the French sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that every religion is based on the same principle: a radical separation of the sacred and the profane. Durkheim observed that every society prevents some goods from entering the everyday sphere of the profane, and in particular from treating these goods in terms of calculation and rationalisation. It is this radical separation, he argued, that 'constitutes the essence of their sacred character' (Durkheim 1914 [1964]), p. 335-336).

To understand how the market for contemporary art operates, this Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane is highly insightful. On the one hand, the art gallery's world is a profane, capitalist world. Like any other commercial enterprise, a gallery has to find art works that it deems marketable, it needs to attract potential customers, and make sales in order to keep its doors open. Also, in case the dealer depends on the income of others to run its operation, if it has bank loans or private investors (so-called 'backers'), it will need to hold itself

accountable to these parties. In order to do so, the dealer needs to negotiate with the artist about contractual issues, he needs to determine a price for the works he offers for sale, and, if a collector is interested, he may need to bargain harshly over this price before the work is eventually sold. Afterwards, the dealer will try to keep track of the art works, not only regarding its whereabouts, but also with respect to its future economic value. In order to do so, he may pay attention to what appears at auction, to the work's pre-sale estimate, and the final price it is sold for.

At the same time, however, dealers are enmeshed in a sacred world, where art is seen as an object that is essentially non-commodifiable, where the only appropriate discourse is aesthetic or critical, where plain commerce is considered taboo, and dealers instead claim to be 'playing for history', as one of them put it when I was studying the New York and Amsterdam art market in the late 1990s.

This simultaneous existence in two worlds whose logics are opposed, has historically shaped the art dealer's business repertoire. As a result, this business repertoire is structured along a series of Durkheimian oppositions: between the sacred and the profane, between art and commerce, between the marketable and the non-marketable. Art galleries, in short, attempt to preserve the sacred character of contemporary art by separating it from the commercial aspects of their trade.

On the art market, this separation of the sacred and the profane can be seen at different levels. For instance, it manifests itself in the clear-cut separation between so-called avant-garde and a commercial circuit within the market, between 'sacred' galleries and 'profane' auction houses, between the primary and the secondary market operations of the gallery, or between 'real' collectors who care exclusively about artistic values, and speculators who see art as a mere addition to their financial portfolios.

Front room

The separation between the sacred and the profane can also be retrieved physically in the architecture of the art gallery: almost invariably, a shop window is absent, while it is impossible in many cases to view the inside of the gallery from the outside because of the use of opaque, frosted glass windows or because of thin curtains behind the windows. Neon signs or signboards that most other retail stores have are absent, while some galleries only display their name in small letters next to the entrance door. This entrance door gives access to the main exhibition space in smaller galleries, while visitors to larger galleries may need to pass through a small hall or corridor before accessing the exhibition. Much like in the classical, nineteenth-century design of art museums, this passage serves to disconnect the world of art from everyday life.

Inside, the most intricate symbolic attempt to separate art from commerce, is a division between the front and the back of the gallery. The front of the gallery contains, depending on the size of the gallery, one or more exhibition spaces. These spaces have concrete or wooden floors (carpets are hardly ever used), white walls without ornamentation, no furnishing, and fluorescent or bright halogen lights, whose fixtures resemble those of construction sites. The minimal decoration, absence of furniture, and lighting of the gallery space create an atmosphere that reinforces the autonomy of the art works on display, and keeps commerce at bay (Moulin 1967 [1987], p. 154; Troy 1996, p. 113). The uniformity of this basic structure of the gallery space is striking. It can be seen not only in art capitals such as London,

Berlin, Amsterdam or New York, but also in avant-garde galleries located in small towns throughout the Western world. The minimalist, austere architectural language links avant-garde gallery spaces on the one hand to the non-commercial world of museums and on the other hand to the commercial world of luxury commodities. Indeed, one of the well-known architects of gallery spaces, Richard Gluckman of the architectural firm Gluckman Mayner Architects, who designed the gallery spaces of renowned New York art dealers such as Paula Cooper, Mary Boone, Luhring Augustine, Andrea Rosen and Larry Gagosian, has also designed retail spaces of well-known luxury boutiques such as Helmut Lang, Yves Saint Laurent, Gianni Versace, and Katayone Adeli, as well as museum spaces for the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the Dia Foundation in New York, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe.[1]

Inside the front room, price tags next to individual art works, a cash register or a device for electronic payment are conspicuously absent. When a work has been sold, it is not removed from the exhibition (which would result in awkward situations in the not uncommon case that all works of art are sold before the exhibition even opens), but a small sticker may be put on a price list of the works that are exhibited. Although these lists are frequently lying on the desk located in the back or on the side of the exhibition

1 Gluckman is not the only architect who masters this symbolic triangle of boutiques, museums and galleries. The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas for instance, who designed the gallery space of Lehmann Maupin in Chelsea, is famous for his design of the Rotterdam *Kunsthal*, a non-profit, museum-like exhibition space without a collection of its own, but also for his Prada Shop in SoHo, New York. See Raul A. Barreneche, 'Building a Specialty in Art', *Architecture*, 85 (11), 1.11.1996; Eve MacSweeney, 'Making the Scene', *www.onemedia.com*, February/March 2001. Fred A. Bernstein, 'Post Prada, A Design Star Slims Down', *The New York Times*, 24.4.2003.

space, the absence of price tags was the subject of a legal dispute in the late 1980s. In 1988 the New York City Government decided to enforce the 'Truth in pricing law' for art galleries, which they had been exempted from since the early 1970s. According to Consumer Affairs commissioner Angelo Aponte, people are entitled to buy art 'without being subject to the vagaries of mystery, theater and snobbery.' As a consequence of the decision, all galleries had to 'conspicuously display' prices 'by means of a stamp, tag or label attached to the item or by a sign at the point of display'. Protests against the decision were fierce in the art world; conservative art critic Hilton Kramer argued in *The New York Times* that this law would turn galleries into ordinary retail stores. Adding fuel to 'financial voyeurism', the law would make money and the 'consciousness of money' even more important in the art world than it already was. Galleries themselves protested by arguing that their function was not only to sell art but also to show it: their exhibitions, as galleries pride themselves in, are open to the public without a fee. Because price would get in the way of the visitor's enjoyment of the exhibition, many art dealers refused to obey the 'Truth in Pricing Law'. Nineteen violators ended up paying $200 fines. Ronald Feldman, owner of an established SoHo gallery, faced a $4,000 fine when he refused to pay these fines in principle out of disagreement with the law.[2] In the end, however,

2 Douglas C. McGill, 'Art Galleries Told to Post Prices', *The New York Times*, 10.2.1988; Hilton Kramer, 'The Case Against Price Tags', *The New York Times*, 20.3.1988; 'NYC to Art Dealers: Post Prices or Else', *Art in America*, April 1988, p. 232; Dwight V. Gast, 'Pricing New York Galleries', *Art in America*, July 1988, p. 86–87. Auction houses are usually more explicit about prices and price estimates. Even they, however, usually abstain from mentioning the title and maker of an art work when they publish selling prices of art works after the sale. Instead, the information they provide is limited to the lot number of the

the government dropped the issue, so that at the end of the century, when I was conducting my research, prices of expensive art works in particular were available only on request; in some cases, assistants would not even be willing to mention prices on request, saying that the works 'had not been priced yet'.

Back room

White cubes, as the austere gallery spaces have come to be referred to, have provoked a wide range of reactions. On the one hand, Charles Simpson argues in a sociological study of the SoHo art world that these types of spaces 'try to make art viewing an unintimidating secular experience. [...] The public is encouraged to look around unchallenged and without ostentatious supervision' (Simpson 1981, pp. 16, 17-18). At least, Simpson writes, these galleries provide a neutral background for contemporary art. On the other hand, the artist Brian O'Doherty wrote in an essay entitled 'Inside the White Cube' that the gallery space is directed at making works of art look expensive, difficult, and exclusive: 'here we have a social, financial, and intellectually snobbery which models [...] our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so efficiently codified' (O'Doherty 1976 [1999], p. 76).

For me, it is besides the point to give a normative judgement of these spaces, whether critical or affirmative. Instead, it is important to register how the meaning of the white cube is constructed in opposition to the back room of the gallery: if the front, most visible and museum-like part of the gallery suppresses any references to the commercial function of the gallery, the backroom, by contrast, is constructed as a commercial space; in other words, art and commerce are juxtaposed physically in the architecture of the modern gallery. In some cases, the back is sealed off from the front room hermetically, suggesting that the exhibition space is all there is to the gallery. Other gallery owners allow the public at least a partial view of the back space through open doors or glass windows. In small galleries, especially those located in Amsterdam, the back space may be limited to a single room or even a niche of the gallery space, where a small number of art works is stored and a desk space is located for the owner of the gallery and his/her assistant. In the largest New York galleries such as the Marlborough Gallery, or the PaceWildenstein Gallery, located in corporate buildings on 57th Street, the back of the gallery consists of several corridors of spaces with distinct functions. These spaces may include the following: offices for the directors or dealers and, in some cases, for their personal assistants; a private viewing room, furnished with comfortable seats, where potential buyers can look in all comfort at a small number of works they are interested in; a stock room, where (part of) the inventory of the gallery is stored; this room is the every day territory of the art handler, who is responsible for the shipping and installation of art works. A general office room may have a larger table where staff meetings take place, and where deals may be negotiated and arranged between the dealer and a collector, away from the works of art.

In general, the back room makes the permanent information streams visible which galleries both tap into and contribute to. Information about the whereabouts of the art works that have been sold

art work and the selling price. On the internet, avant-garde galleries usually only list prices of works made in edition, not of original paintings.

by the gallery in the past is stored in archives (after these works have been provided with a unique identification number), as well as price lists of past shows. Any information related to the careers of the artists that the gallery represents (books, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, catalogue texts, press releases) is kept track of meticulously, and is either stored on floor-to-ceiling shelves, in computer databases, or in paper archives. If the gallery is involved in secondary market activities, auction catalogues and annual price guides published by art price information firms such as Artprice are stored on the shelves. Apart from computers, telephones, a fax and a copier are the most essential 'tools of the trade' that the directors and gallery assistants make use of. The backroom may not only make the information architecture of the market visible, but also the gift economy that the art market is embedded in: multiple copies of monographs, gallery catalogues, and catalogue raisonnés of individual artists are stored in the backroom, which the gallery may sporadically give as presents to collectors.

Secondary market

Two different types of activities are conducted in the back spaces: primary market operations related to works which the gallery exhibits in the front room, and secondary market operations. On the primary market, new works of a limited number of living artists that the gallery represents are sold, while the secondary market involves the profitable trade in high-priced art works made by a variety of established, often deceased artists that have, in most cases, never been represented by the gallery. In most cases, these secondary market sales happen on a commission basis (meaning that a collector who wants to sell a work, pays a commission to the dealer); sometimes, however, the dealer buys these works himself, and subsequently tries to resell them. Because of a lack of financial means, because supply and demand for works in this price bracket is limited, or simply because local market conventions prevent them from doing so, few Amsterdam galleries engage in secondary-market trading. In New York, however, estimates of the percentage of secondary-market sales I heard during interviews in New York ranged from 25 per cent to 60 per cent of total revenue (see Velthuis 2001). Nevertheless, as I noticed during my interviews, most dealers feel reluctant to talk about this part of their business, and conduct these activities out of sight of visitors in the front room. The reason is that the trading on the secondary market is as stigmatised as it is profitable: they make the gallery resemble commercial establishments rather than cultural exhibition spaces. In other words, the secondary market violates the dealer's self-assigned role of promoter of artists and patron of art. One of them said that 'you are not really cutting edge if you would touch something that is established. [...] You want to be perceived really ... pure. And you are only pure if you do primary. If you do secondary you are not pure'. Since secondary-market activities are stigmatised, dealers who run their gallery successfully without having recourse to the secondary market tend to take pride in this. Conversely, the reputation of a dealer may be harmed when too much time and energy is devoted to them. Larry Gagosian for instance, a New York dealer who is known for his aggressive secondary-market activities, was accused by his colleagues of 'degrading the business' and 'bringing the habits of a souk rug seller to a refined trade'. In the media Gagosian defended himself against such allegations by saying: 'Is it written somewhere that only Sotheby's and Christie's should profit from the resale

of art, and that everyone else should be some kind of saint?'[3] The point is, of course, that such legitimacy structures of the art world are neither formalised, nor written down, but are effective nevertheless. Even a director at one of the world's largest dealerships told me that 'interestingly enough it is not something we pay too much attention to. We are mostly interested in primary dealing, meaning from the studio. [...] By and large we prefer not to do the trading'; nevertheless, during the tour of the gallery, which he gave after the interview, I spotted secondary-market art works by modern masters such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg that the gallery offered for sale.

Different strategies exist to counter this stigmatisation. The New York art dealer David Zwirner, whose main gallery is located in Chelsea, separated the primary and the secondary market to some extent by opening another gallery in the wealthy Upper East Side of Manhattan; this gallery, co-owned by the Swiss art dealer Ivan Wirth, is exclusively devoted to the secondary market.[4] In my interviews, I frequently encountered attempts to legitimate secondary-market dealing in different ways. Dealers told me, for instance, that they use the revenue from secondary-market activities to finance the promotion of innovative, experimental art. They said that they could hardly keep their doors open if they restricted their business to the primary market: an art dealer who is committed to promoting new, innovative art in the front room, can do so only by creating revenue from secondary-market activities in the back room. 'You don't survive on the shows', as one dealer put it bluntly: 'The primary market is small, and it is much more the labour of love [...] So if I want to do a money-losing show in the gallery, I could support it by selling a painting by Gerhard Richter, or something by Bruce Nauman'. Another frequently encountered argument to legitimise secondary-market activities is that the art works involved in these activities provide a cultural and historical context for the artists that the gallery represents on the primary market. Secondary-market activities may also be considered as far as they lend credibility to the work of young artists who do not yet have a reputation. To that purpose, some dealers say they only buy work on the secondary market which 'makes sense' and 'does not look odd' next to the work of 'their' own artists.

3 Philip Delves Broughton, 'Damien's one of the good guys', *The Daily Telegraph*, **3.10.2000.**

4 Robert Knafo, 'Upward mobility: SoHo stalwart David Zwirner is staking a claim on the Upper East Side', *ARTnews*, **October 1999, p. 62-64.**

Afterthought

It was more than ten years ago since I collected the data (including many interviews with dealers in Amsterdam and New York) that these observations are based on. Frequent visits to galleries ever since, as well as recent interviews with art dealers in Berlin, have convinced me that the business repertoire of the art gallery has not changed dramatically since that time. The present financial crisis is unlikely to do so either. Just like the Durkheimian separation of the sacred and the profane appears in religious life throughout history, there is a certain permanency to the dealer's separation of the front and the back. The casual visitor is allowed access to only one half of the dealer's life, the commercial nitty-gritty remains hidden from view. The visitor who is interested in this nitty-gritty, for whatever reason, will have to make do with the photographs displayed in this book.

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A Suit Does Not Make a Man, But it Helps

Thibaut de Ruyter

A friend of mine who is a gallery manager has been trying to persuade me (with a triumphant look on his face) that he plays an active role in the artistic education of the youth, arguing that anyone who wants to see an exhibition at his venue may simply walk through the door and marvel at the art on the immaculate walls of his space without having to pay for it. According to him, the sheer fact that entry to his gallery is free of charge ensures that it is more democratic than a museum, where tickets are likely to cost up to 15 euros (although there are significant national differences in policies). But my friend conveniently forgets that if you want to access his stylish white cube, which is neatly tucked away behind a gate in a posh residential area, you first have to ring a bell, cross an inner yard lined with lavish private mansions, open yet another door to enter a lavish reception area designed by famous architects and reigned over by a young damsel on high heels, politely say 'hello' (without getting so much as a nod from her), make your way into the exhibition space, then creep back out again past the pretty mademoiselle whose dismissive look makes it clear that someone with your demeanour shouldn't even bother enquiring about prices.

Although some galleries have shop windows where they exhibit the occasional art work, I have trouble believing that 15-year-olds would venture into this kind of place. And suppose they did – what

would they make of all the ambient coolness and hipness? While it can be argued that private galleries are venues where the latest in contemporary art can be seen for free, it is no less true that they are first and foremost places of commerce and, as such, have to conform or play with the prevailing canons of interior design. I'm not referring here to Brian O'Doherty's white cube theory but rather to the objects required to create an atmosphere, the distinctive features which will ensure that a gallery, though it may be as white and clinical-looking as a dentist's surgery, will always remain a gallery.

When asked to design a private gallery venue, pretty much any trained architect is likely to deliver a decent job. He will require skilled plasterers to build seamless display units, he will have to consider the need for and design of plinths, choose a certain type of lighting (but there are professionals for that as well), and decide on the material and colour of the flooring. He will furthermore need to make some decisions as regards the spatial disposition according to the client's wishes and needs: while one gallery manager wants a secluded work space and a single receptionist, another may want to show off by having a long rooster of female staff tapping away at the keyboards of the latest Apple computers. In some galleries the artists' catalogues and portfolios are displayed so as to be seen from the entrance, while in others they are tucked away in bookshelves that remain invisible to the visitor. Here, too, decisions are subject to the owner's preferences, to his working habits and his general conception of his job. Last but not least, one of gallery managers' favourite architectural gimmicks is a private or intimate lounge, to which only visitors with a certified pedigree will be invited. This is where everything happens.

Yet the true architectural specificity of private galleries is their interior design. Faced with a series of typical constraints – no curved or coloured walls, providing the artists with a more or less functional 'blank canvas' for exhibitions etc. – architects and interior designers (often in conjunction with the gallery owner) select the furniture so as to reflect the owner's taste without inflecting or disrupting the perception of the art works on display. Out with Joe Colombo, Verner Panton or Gaetano Pesce and their eccentric creations in coloured plastic; in come Arne Jacobsen, Charles & Ray Eames and neutrality! But when this very neutrality becomes a proper aesthetic canon, the question arises as to the true reasons behind this choice.

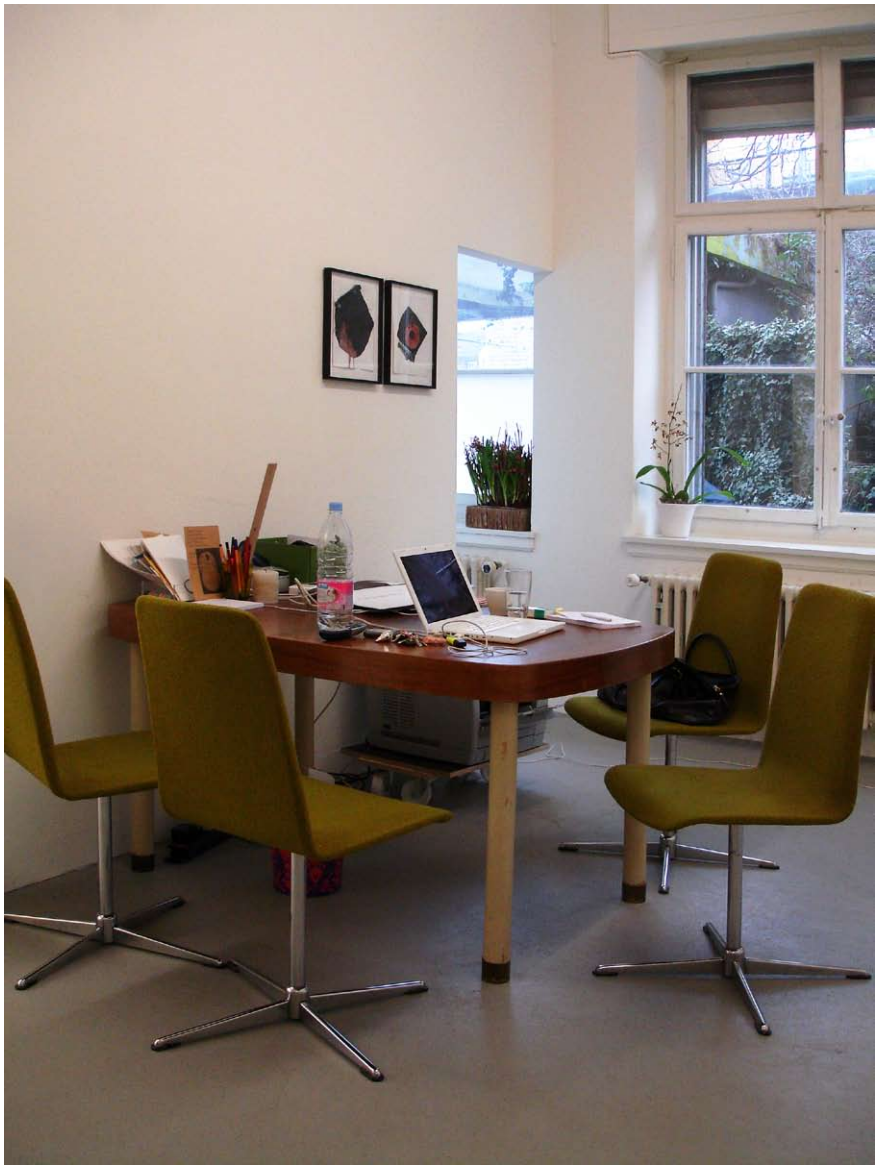
It was in 1958 that the Eameses designed their first *Aluminium Chair*. Its shape is defined by two lateral beams, with the seating and backrest no more than a piece of fabric stretched between the two. The resulting frame is light, both in terms of weight and appearance, while its materials evoke modernity and aircraft construction technology. Its looks and sitting comfort are beyond reproach, and even some 50 years after it was designed, this chair and its variations (high or low version, with or without armrest…) have become true classics of industrial design, invariably manufactured by the Vitra company and sold to hundreds of offices around the world. Arne Jacobsen's chair named *Series 7* or *3107* appeared in 1955 and features an intelligent combination of strips of plywood glued onto chromed

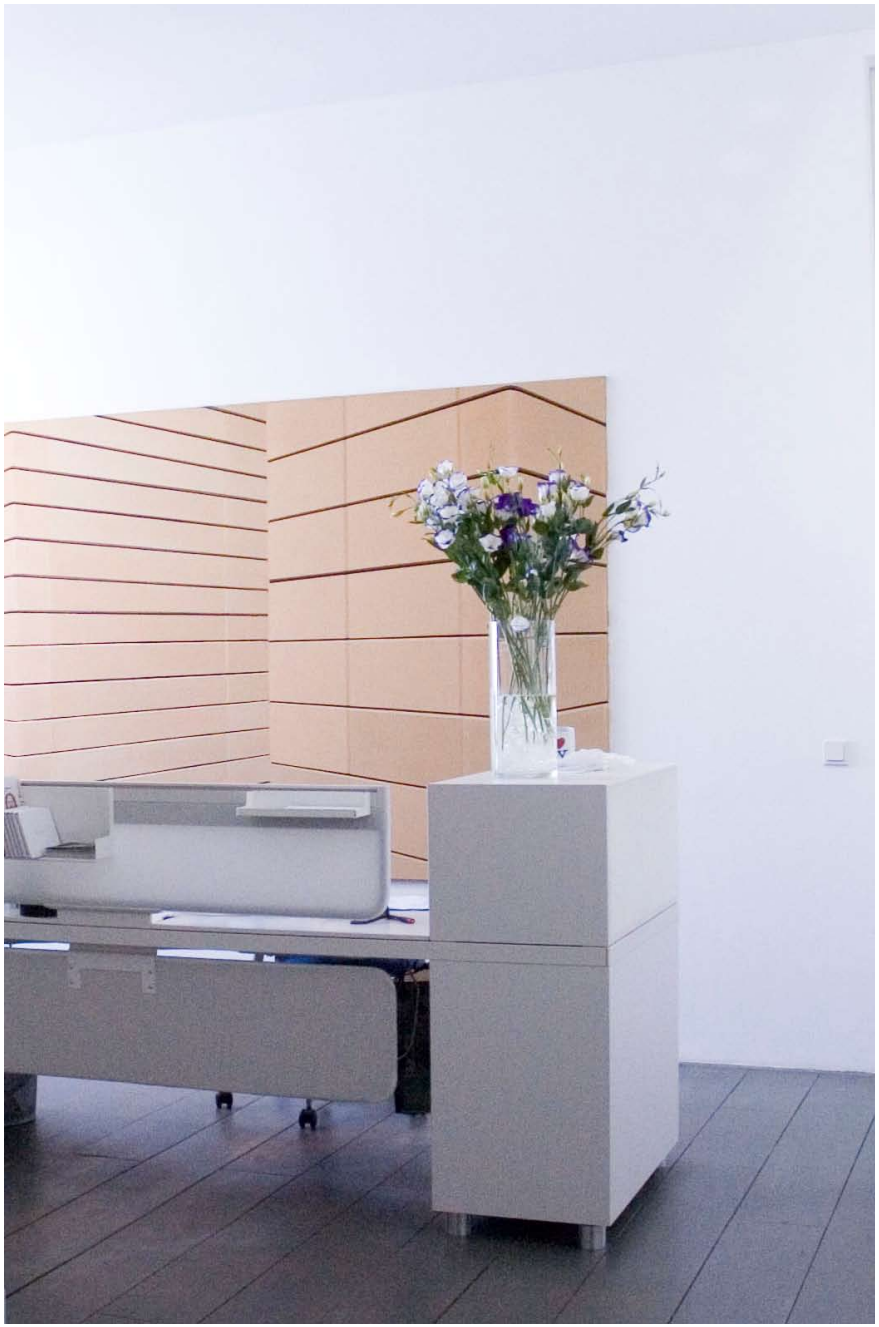
steel tubes. More polyvalent in use (it can be stacked and is resilient yet comfortable) it fits in neatly with gallery spaces (but also museum cafés, conference rooms and collectors' living rooms). For his private quarters, the inveterate collector will prefer a 'vintage' model whose commercial value far exceeds the 300 or 400 euros required to buy a new one; contemporary design, it turns out, is already governed by the same laws as the antiques market. If the gallery owner is German and ever-so-slightly interested in what his country has brought forth, he will opt for the timeless *SE 68* chair designed in 1950 by the brilliant Egon Eiermann. Sharing the functionality and construction principle of Jacobsen's, it looks slimmer and uses even more ingenious technology (its backrest being supported by a 'fifth' chrome leg). Eiermann has also designed a range of stunningly beautiful office desks, to which you might want to add the *606* cupboards designed by Dieter Rams for Vitsœ in 1960. Apart from their uncluttered shapes and simple geometry, these objects share a range of materials such as chromed steel, aluminium, fabric and plywood, which came directly out of the Bauhaus workshops. With colours ranging from black and white to shades of grey (even though there are more and more 'pop' versions available featuring red lacquer or shades of orange and green) and shapes which have been constantly revised and reused (and copied), each of these objects has literally become invisible, or, to quote the advertising blurb for one of them: 'the purity of its form is eye-catching'. Which is one way of saying that simply looking at it implies that you are capable of distinguishing its simplicity, modesty and purity – which in essence makes you an aesthete.

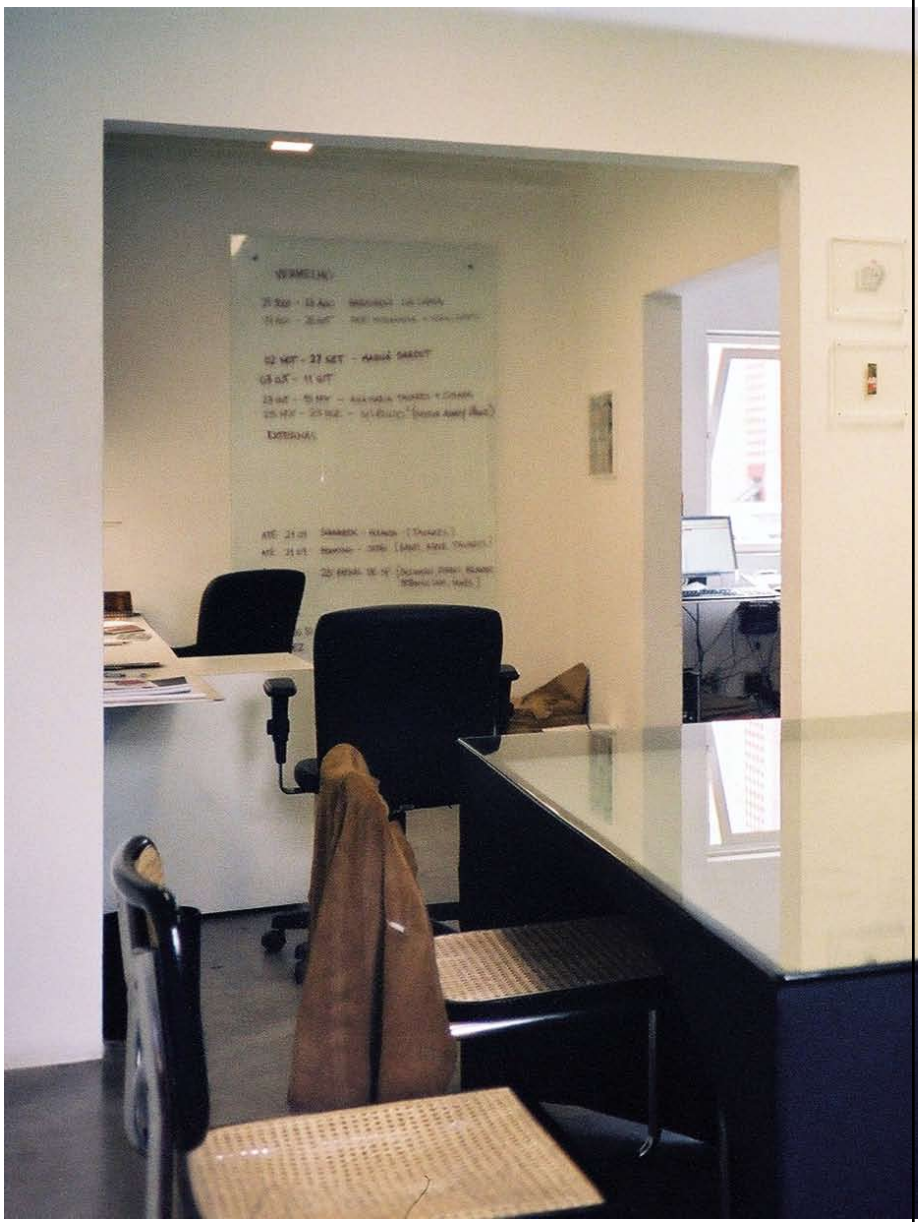
This is all slightly perverted. If tomorrow I were to walk into a gallery fitted with battered Ikea furniture, I would probably construe that business is bad. Furniture, it appears, has become a signifier which, similar to the cut of the gallery manager's suit or the brand of shoes worn by his assistants, informs us about the aesthetic and commercial value of the art works on display. While a record shop impresses you with the sheer quantity of vinyl on its shelves, the layers of vintage posters on the wall behind the counter, the moribund appearance of the nicotine-fed shopkeeper, the looks of the blokes rummaging through the records with a knowing smile on their faces, and the background music that sets the atmosphere as soon as you enter, the distinctive signs of a prospering contemporary art gallery are somewhat more subtle. This, then, is the true quality of the type of furniture favoured by gallery owners: it is extremely elegant, clearly functional and sufficiently expensive to be exclusive yet just short of a conspicuous show of wealth. Herein also lies the tragedy (and failure) of modernity as imagined by the inventors of this furniture, which had in fact been designed to be mass-produced at relatively low cost and with a humanist aim in mind (creating lightweight and affordable objects for a large number of consumers). But history slowly perverted this ideal by turning it into a superficial sales argument. Once the designer had died, manufacturers launched into profitable and particularly disgraceful celebratory operations (suffice to consider what Wilde+Spieth, the current manufacturers of Egon Eiermann's chairs, have recently been turning out in order to boost sales figures). Ever since

it has become a mere matter of style (instead of concept), and not least thanks to the manufacturers' advertising efforts, we have witnessed a paradigmatic shift – away from the initial idea to create uncluttered and open living spaces with affordable and lightweight furniture towards an era in which, if you want to be modern, you have to let your wallet do the talking, thus leaving the less fortunate to assemble their furniture themselves. Ironically, we are being told that ready-to-assemble furniture is tantamount to the triumph of modernity's ideals of plain, transportable and cheap furniture. As for the well-informed who are still keen to express their individuality and taste, they are likely to skim through eBay, where design classics can be found at more reasonable prices – unless they are hunting for a rare or original edition (these items of furniture have practically never ceased to be produced for the past 50 or so years, which means that millions of them can be found in the offices of creative people throughout the world). Or they might simply get hold of one of the innumerable copies that have flooded the market, as few gallery visitors will be able to make them out as such.

As with all business models, there are of course independent minds who break the rules and get away with it. But while some galleries may not care for appearances, they must be aware that they are likely to miss out on certain opportunities. The fact remains that in 99 per cent of cases, galleries opt for refined neutrality – a reflection of 1950s modernity, which has hardly aged in terms of formal language and has thus achieved 'classic' status (though I'm constantly amased at the unlikely association of the terms 'modern' and 'classic'). So to all owners of Eames, Jacobsen or Eiermann chairs (I will admit to owning four *SE 68*s myself), just ask yourself this question: why do you like them so much?







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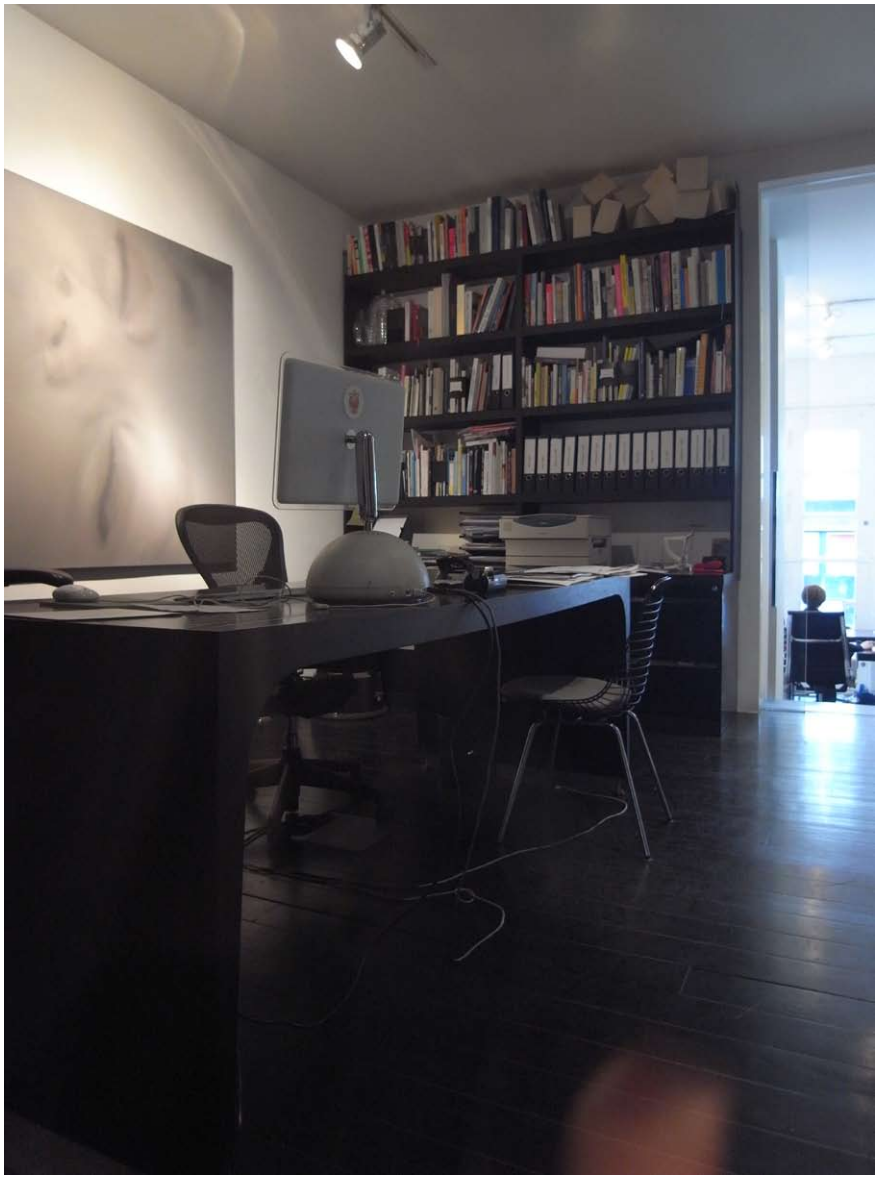

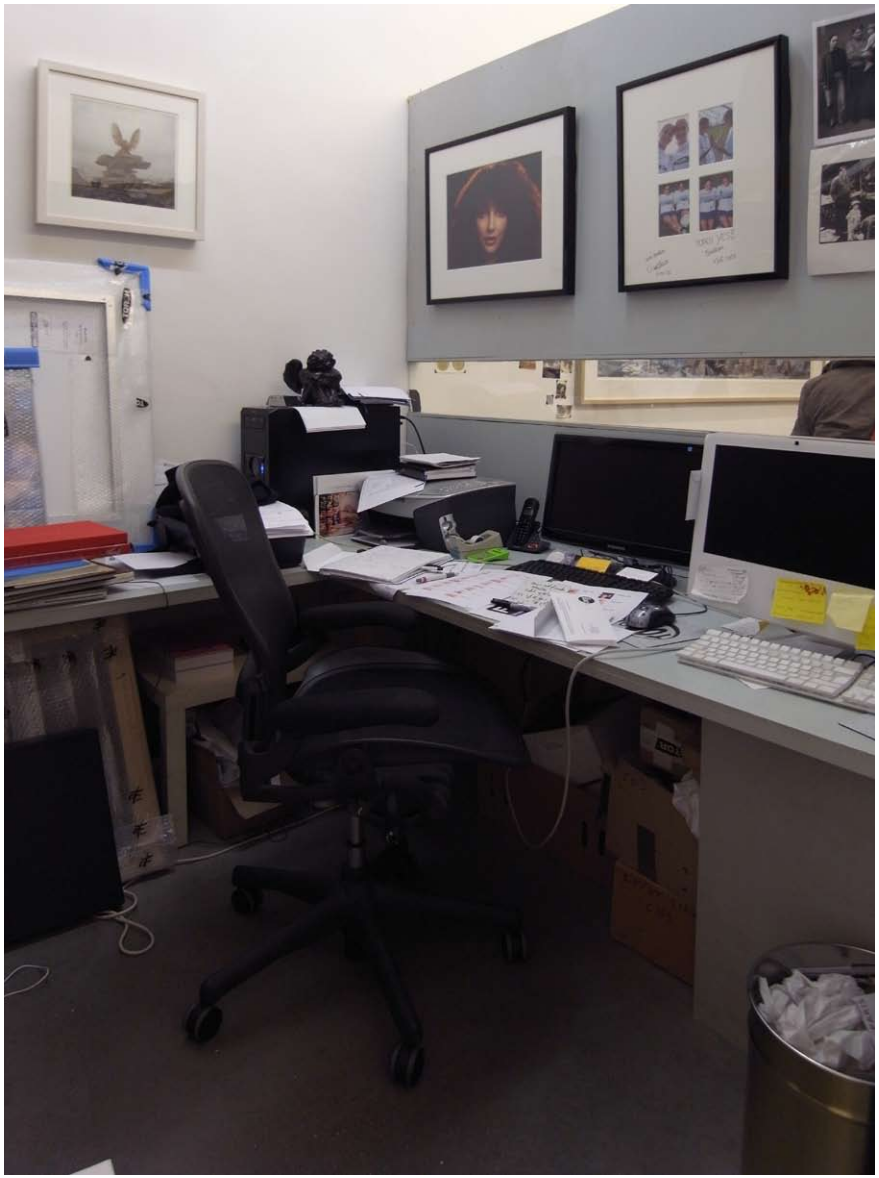

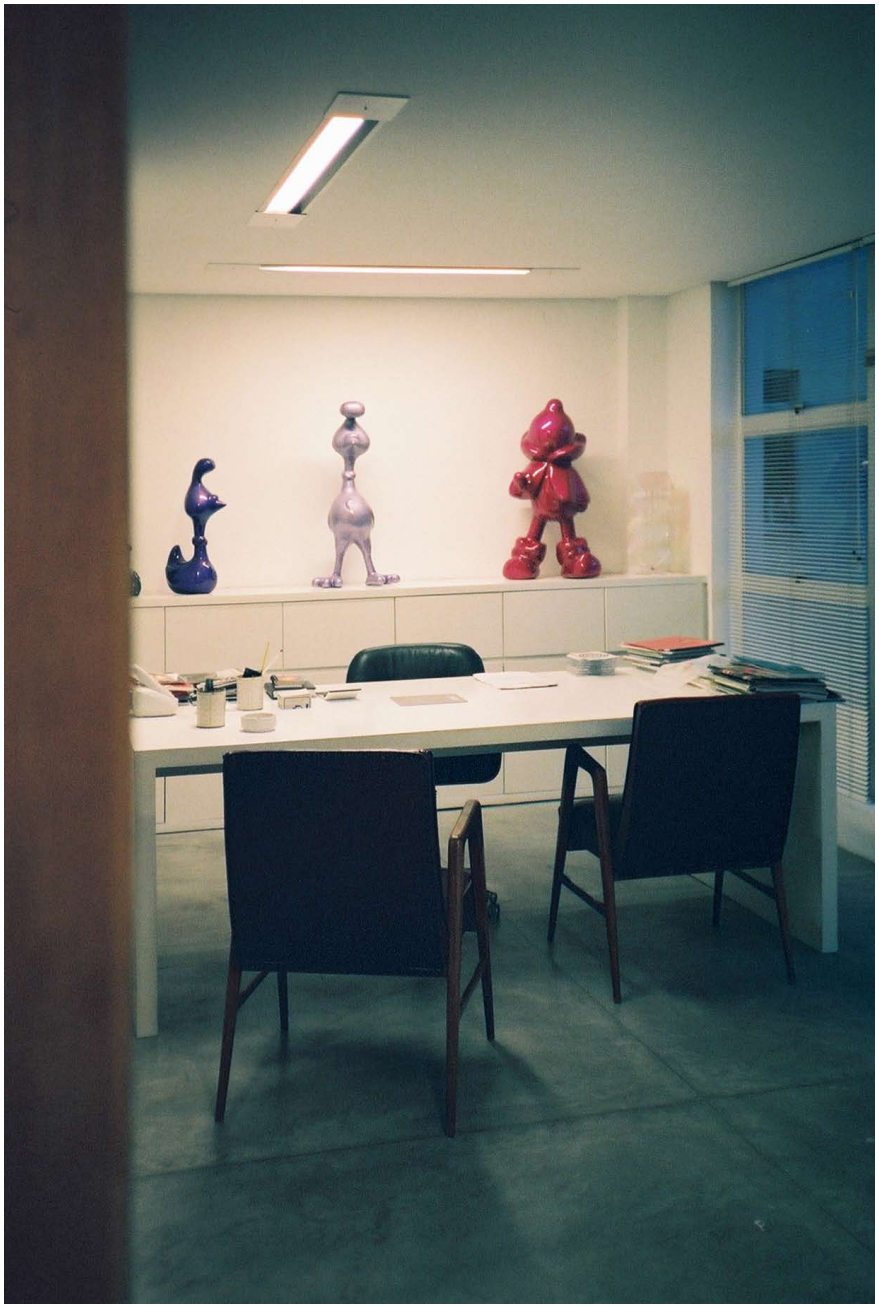

ARTISTS AND GALLERIES

Amsterdam

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Ed van der Elsken
Alicia Framis
Anya Gallacio
Ryan Gander
Carla Klein
Meiro Koizumi
Kiki Lamers
David Maljkovic
Dan McCarthy
Jenny Perlin
Bradley Pitts
Liza May Post
Muzi Quawson
Glenn Sorensen
Barbara Visser
Erik Wesselo

Ellen de Bruine Projects

Lara Almarcegui
Otto Berchem
Andre van Bergen
Ralf Berger
Ross Birrell
Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz
Anne-lise Coste
Keren Cytter
Jeremiah Day
Uta Eisenreich
Ksenia Galiaeva
Dora Garcia
gerlach en koop
Anthony Howard
Saskia Janssen
Paul Ramirez Jonas
Mark Kent
Suchan Kinoshita
Klaas Kloosterboer
Michiel Kluiters
Nesrine Khodr
George Korsmit
David Miles
Ioana Nemes
Erkka Nissinen
Maria Pask
Rune Peitersen
Susan Philipsz
Falke Pisano
L.A. Raeven
Daragh Reeves
Jannie Regnerus
Thomas Rentmeister
Jan Rothuizen
Michael Smith
Evi Vingerling
Chikako Watanabe
Luuk Wilmering

Fons Welters

Yesim Akdeniz Graf
Eylem Aladogan
Tom Claassen
Jan De Cock
Claire Harvey
David Jablonowski
Job Koelewijn
Sven Kroner
Zilvinas Landzbergas
Gabriel Lester
Pere Llobera
Renzo Martens
Matthew Monahan
Paulien Oltheten
Maria Roosen
Daniel Roth
G√©-Karel van der Sterren
Berend Strik
Jennifer Tee
Alex Winters

Torch

TINKEBELL
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Susan Anderson
Various Artists
Eelco Brand
Hans Broek
Edward Burtynsky
Gary Carsley
Anton Corbijn
Popel Coumou
Martin C. de Waal
Martin Denker
Wouter Deruytter
David Drebin
Rowena Dring
Eldon Garnet
Margi Geerlinks
Anthony Goicolea
Simon Henwood
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Min Kim
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Stepanek Maslin
Justin McAllister
Jochen M√ºhlenbrink
Ulf Puder
Terry Rodgers
Carlos & Jason Sanchez
Kahn & Selesnick
Lena Soulkovskaia
Henk Tas
Gerald van der Kaap
Carrie Yamaoka

Berlin

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Erik Bulatov
Sophie Calle
Joe Coleman
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Yannick Demmerle
Gilbert and George
Anton Henning
Thomas Hirschhorn
Jitish Kallat
Jon Kessler
Douglas Kolk
Karsten Konrad
Josephine Meckseper
Vik Muniz
Muntean / Rosenblum
Julian Rosefeldt
Charles Sandison
Dennis Scholl
Nedko Solakov
Hiroshi Sugito
Ena Swansea
Mathilde ter Heijne
Susan Turcot
Keith Tyson
Shi Xinning
Ralf Ziervogel
Emilia and Ilya Kabakov
Jonas Burgert
Andreas Golder
Aya Uekawa

Art Transponder

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Maisae Alabdallah
Tamara Albaitis
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An Architektur
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'Separating the Sacred from the Profane: the front and the back of a contemporary art gallery' by Olav Velthuis is an adaptation of 'The Front Room' and 'The Back Room' from the first chapter – 'The Architecture of the Art Market' – of his book *Talking Prices. Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the market for Contemporary Art*, published by Princeton University Press in 2005.

Olav Velthuis is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of *Imaginary Economics* (NAi Publishers, 2005) and *Talking Prices. Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (Princeton University Press, 2005). Before, he worked for several years as a Staff Reporter Globalization for the Dutch daily *de Volkskrant*. His journalistic writings have appeared in among others *Artforum* and the *Financial Times*.

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