



Götz Adriani (ed.), *Die Kunst des Handelns: Meisterwerke des 14. Bis 20. Jahrhunderts bei Fritz und Peter Nathan*, exhibition catalogue Kunsthalle Tübingen, Hatje Cantz, 2005, pp. 291-296

## **ART DEALING - VOCATION AND OBLIGATION PETER NATHAN**

Studying art history gave me a thorough grounding as well as expanded possibilities in my profession. From the beginning I embarked on my career with relatively broad horizons. But in the same breath I have to admit that the vast majority of art dealers, including ones who have become extremely successful and famous, have never studied, and that whilst others might have studied, they studied something completely different. It was only after graduating from his degree in medicine that my father, from whom I took over our business, turned to the art trade, which admittedly had already been practised in the family. Being an art dealer is not only a profession but also at the very least a vocation in which professional activity and the fine arts are closely combined with each other. But the art dealer of stature – let us not talk about the bad ones – is the one who feels called to recognise art and its value and to stand up for it as a person and a businessman. Such an amalgamation of art and life is only possible with the appropriate passion and temperament, with adventurousness and the ability to take responsibility. This is why people from completely different fields often switch to the art trade. Imaging a young banker who uses his free time to go to museums and develops, for example, a passion for the Old Masters there. He sees a drawing by Palma Giovane – to mention an important artist whose drawings cost little, even today, from a dealer or auction house. He acquires the drawing and now desires nothing more than a drawing by Guercino. In order to be able to buy this, he has to sell on the Palma Giovane, and he has already become an occasional dealer. Given the right entrepreneurial temperament, it is easy for such a person to become an art dealer. The knowledge that others have to acquire with more or less joyless toil, he quickly makes his own through single-mindedness and above all enthusiasm.

The true art dealer is an obsessive, passionately on the hunt from dawn till dusk, and if he suffers a defeat, perhaps because he has risked too much, he learns his lesson from it and will do it better next time. “There’s something mad about art. A passion, stronger than gambling and alcohol and women. She’s got me in her grasp, art, and I have to drink to forget. Art is everything to me; I am nothing to art. If I were rich, if I had so much money that I could live as I pleased, I would live in Paris, in the thick of life, as a great merchant amateur in art.” This diary entry written around 1900 by the highly gifted Alfred Flechtheim, who would go on to successfully represent Impressionists and Cubists in Dusseldorf, betrays real passion. Now, there are idealists who ask and object: “but what on earth has art to do with money? If I go to a museum and stand, transfixed, before a painting by Delacroix, I don’t remotely want

to know how much it's worth. That would only disturb me in the purity of my feelings." That much I agree with. But it is the quality, the high standard of the artwork, that transfixes the viewer. And this is where we have to make the leap. Paintings by Delacroix can still turn up on the open market, and the art dealer, on the one hand passionately engaged, on the other coolly calculating, has to consider: what can I pay for it? The art dealer has, even more distinctly than other people, two souls in his breast. Quality, this greatness that is purely to be measured at one's personal discretion and that no computer can determine, must be defined in concrete sums of money. Whoever buys art must express his love in figures. Materially speaking, a picture is nothing but canvas and paint. Ideally it is a value that is translated into a sum of money. In this translation it is not just quality but also rarity, conservation status as well as other equally unmeasurable factors such as fashion, prestige and so on, that play a role. If the art dealer makes a mistake in his evaluation of these circumstances, he will have to pay for it. An art historian, an art critic, a museum director can err – provided he is not repeatedly duped, he will be willingly forgiven. But the art dealer pays for every mistake and, what is more, his reputation is on the line.

That makes the issue exciting and every purchase is a new experience. In addition, it is a completely different feeling to carry a purchased artwork home under your arm, to own it and to see it daily, to defend it if others disparage it, from simply writing or talking about it. Art dealers also talk a lot amongst themselves, but eventually it is a case of: enough words have been exchanged, let's see some action at last. And actions are decisions: what should I buy? What not to buy? In museums, purchases are decided on by voting in committees. The art dealer decides alone and often in opposition to the general trend and the majority. His opportunity lies in boldly championing values, early on, that have not been recognised by the majority. But he also strikes at the right moment, for example at auctions when artworks, for reasons of chance, are not sold at their market value. I would advise anyone who is interested in the art trade to begin with a focus on a limited area. Say someone has a special passion for Hodler. He is of the persuasion that Hodler is one of the greatest artists of his time. He observes the prices paid for his works, whether at auction or in art dealerships. He will soon start to notice disparities and try to explain these to himself. He will know what a high, an appropriate or a bargain price for a work by Hodler is. He will also find out which interested parties, that is, collectors and dealers, are chiefly concerned with Hodler. If he does not have his own capital to start with, he will draw the attention of collectors, and perhaps also museums, to existing opportunities to acquire works. He can earn brokerage commission from this. If he does have a small amount of capital and finds a good drawing at a reasonable price on his forays, he will seize the chance. He will consider: how high can I set the selling price, and if he does find a buyer who is, if he is lucky and has done good work, grateful ultimately that he brought him the beautiful drawing, then a start has been made. If he is successful, he will expand his field. For example, he observes the market for German artists of our century, Kirchner, Macke, Nolde and so on. Soon he is on the lookout for a Klee, and if he has too little money to buy all the objects of his desire that he dreams about, then he brokers in this or that case to a collector, because in the meantime he has met some interesting art lover who has, in turn, shared his wishes with him and to whom he can be useful. And this takes us to another important point in the art dealer's trade.

Psychology, responsiveness to the buyer, or in other words to the collector. Art lovers, like the good art dealer himself, are obsessed by art. They dream of their future art holdings. They are so passionately consumed by their desires that they are driven all over by them, as if in a fever. On average, normal people are uninterested when it comes to art. It is also the case that: he who has no madness is not as wise as he believes. "Qui n'a pas de folie n'est pas aussi sage qu'il croit", said La Rochefoucauld. It is up to the art dealer to intuit how he can help the client who comes to him to still his longing. There are in fact clients, just as there are doctors' patients, who are made almost sick by a nebulous fantasy. They themselves can hardly define what it is that they actually desire. In such a case it is down to the art dealer's

instincts to make the right suggestions. He must give the client the feeling of having discovered the pictures and their special beauty himself. If the dealer, in this way, sells genuinely first-class works that give more and more pleasure even on repeated viewing, he will acquire grateful clients, not to say gain friends. The art dealer's relationship with his customers must unquestionably be one of trust. And this is precisely because in art the values cannot be measured but only felt. The art dealer is a broker of values. Even museum directors are happy when dealers offer them the best that is available. Then they can stand with confidence before their purchasing committees. Woe betide the dealer if a hidden shortcoming emerges! It will be held against the dealer. An art dealer must be an expert when it comes to genuine and fake and in respect of quality; but he must also, and this applies in particular to old paintings, understand a great deal about conservation status and know roughly how a restorer would assess a given object.

Art auctions, which today enjoy significant publicity, and art dealerships are closely related to each other; to an extent they complement each other. But by their nature they are profoundly different. The art dealer is materially and intellectually connected to his paintings, his objets d'art; he buys them or holds onto them for long periods on a consignment basis in order ultimately, and with the aid of all his experience and knowledge, to make a well-aimed sale. That is how he builds up his business and his reputation. For the auctioneer, everything is a transient commodity. He does not buy for himself. His goal is to achieve the largest possible turnover and, after all, the great auction houses sell absolutely everything: art, jewellery, stamps, vintage cars and much more besides. Many of today's younger art dealers come from the auction business. Their predisposition has meant that they are fed up of feeding the great machine, in which everything is just churned through. They wanted to engage more deeply with individual works of art and individual customers. The art dealer must also be an expert on auctions. He must know what the auctioneer does to get the highest possible prices. Moreover: what are limits and what opportunities do they provide to the auctioneer? Who are the potential counter-bidders? Might they join to form a group? Has the work that I want to buy already been put up for auction recently? What conclusions should I draw from that? And much more besides. Both the highest and the lowest prices can be found at auctions. It requires years of experience to know and to be able to read how they operate, even if only to a certain extent. That is why it is mainly dealers who buy at auctions, and why when private collectors do so they are often advised by dealers. Museums only buy at auctions in exceptional cases and even then commission a dealer to do so on their behalf. The level-headed, calm atmosphere and the increased security that art dealers offer are preferable to the hectic, high-risk auction business. In addition, average prices are not higher from serious dealers. Sometimes we can even offer significantly more favourable prices. I myself sell, purely in terms of value, around a half of my turnover to overseas museums, and it is often paintings that I have bought myself at auctions; it goes without saying that museum directors are critical and price-conscious customers! Conversely, if anyone wants to sell a valuable painting, he would do well to draw on the advice of a first-class art dealer, unless he wants to submit himself to the turmoil of auctions. In any case, he then has the advantage that his picture is not made known in advance to all comers – we have the expressive word “burning” for this – but rather is only offered in a targeted way and is properly advocated for and explained.

In the art trade, with its manifold possibilities, there is one area that deserves special appreciation: the representation of contemporary artists. Nothing is more important for an art lover than to ask: where are the outstanding works of our own time? History is all good and proper, and important as a benchmark, but I would like first and foremost to know where and by whom lasting works are being made today. Works that have been prized for decades and centuries by connoisseurs and art lovers, recognised values, are often difficult to evaluate, but everything is still within a certain framework, defined by tradition and general consensus. If someone were to claim that Cézanne or Courbet were artists of middling status, one would

not take him seriously. It only starts to become truly difficult if one attempts to say whether artists between the ages of thirty and sixty are creating work of lasting value. The great art dealers, whom posterity still has to thank for their courage and commitment, were those who stood up for the Impressionists, Cézanne or the Cubists, in their lifetimes. The new, revolutionary, refreshing nature of what was created then had such a direct effect on certain people, including dealers and collectors, that they dedicated themselves totally to the new direction, to new painters or groups of painters, and stood by them throughout all crises, becoming obsessive fighters on the side of the artists. Even debt, insolvency, scurrilous attacks, libel and slander were not enough to stop a Paul Durand-Ruel, the Impressionists' representative in Paris and early on in New York, from exhibiting and defending his artists. The same applies to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, a banker who had emigrated from Germany to Paris and became the Cubists' dealer. I should also mention Ambroise Vollard, a genuine genius at recognising contemporary value. Cézanne, Renoir, Degas, Gauguin, Picasso, Bonnard, Matisse, a seemingly endless series of great artists were recognised early by him. Renewal in art is such a pervasive, revolutionary process that it can only be realised by a small number of highly gifted, creative people and can only be intellectually understood by a few others. If many are involved then it becomes – and this is a fixed rule – a fashion, not a new creative start. It is always the case that the majority only recognises great art late, as followers and hangers-on. There were no queues for the ticket desks at the first van Gogh exhibitions. Individual, autonomous artists, independent collectors and dealers, of individual convictions, are of the greatest importance. Occasionally, combative commentators – Émile Zola and Julius Meier-Graefe should be mentioned in this context – play an important role. In addition to the great art dealers previously mentioned, the collectors who contributed to the renewals were, of course, equally important. Outstanding examples of these in Switzerland were Raoul LaRoche in Basel, Arthur und Hedy Hahnloser- Bühler in Winterthur, Josef Müller in Solothurn and Hermann Rumpf in Bern, to name but a few. Committees and state art subsidies have never achieved anything decisive. One exception to this are certain great museum directors such as Hugo von Tschudi in Berlin und Munich, Kramaf in Prague and Georg Schmidt in Basel. Thanks to their authority, they often disposed of their committees or brought them to heel. They bought, in effect, like private collectors. My remarks may give a partial picture of a profession about which too little is known. But it is not long ago that the auction houses were pompously claiming that art dealers were essentially superfluous, that everything could be done via auctions. The scene has now changed once more. An auction house can never take a position of individual trust such as that of a good art dealer. One might just as well say it is no longer important to go to the doctor when you can go directly to the pharmacy and get your medicine there without any costly diversions. A good art dealer is like a good doctor: he makes his years of experience and knowledge available, whilst remaining fully conscious of his responsibility.

*Published in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 14th December 1985, 'Contemporary Questions' section*

(Text translated from German)