

Ode to An Auteur Gallery

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Gallerists Ciléne Andréhn and Marina Schiptjenko speak of their eponymous gallery which just recently turned 25 years and since its inception has been marked by being ahead of its time, adopting an international approach as auteurs at a time when the art scene in Sweden remained provincial. Moreover, a focal point has been the nurturing of long-term relationships with artists among whom at the gallery are international luminaries like Xavier Veihlan and Tony Matelli. "There is something to cherish about being able to look back with people in remembrance of things that were created together over time", says Marina Schiptjenko.



1991

C.A: I was working at a gallery called Arton A which I was as well involved in founding in 1989 to manage and run the space. Around this time, Marina's path and mine would cross briefly on occasion. At a certain point when the gallery needed to extend its staff, I got in touch with her about coming to work with me at the gallery.

M.S: Around then I was studying at Stockholm university and was working at a traditional gallery that used be called Konstruktiv Tendens and then quit my studies when joining Arton A to work alongside Ciléne.

C.A: From early 1991 we were working together but rather soon, about a month into it, we were both fired from the gallery which was going to be closing down. It was said that we were "too professional". Marina and I had been more vaguely acquainted before but our relationship as it grew was very much built on a very consensual view and approach to art. We just worked exceptionally well together and enjoyed it greatly. Something just clicked for us in this situation.

M.S: It felt clear that we should start something of our own together. From a certain point of view, it was a great time to start, in the height of recession in Sweden. We didn't need this great seed capital because there were no expectations or demands anyway on what you should be able to project and signify with your gallery. Before the recession it would have been much harder to get noticed with such comparatively modest venture.

C.A: We were certainly the only young gallery at the time when we opened on Kammakargatan 21, having been lent 25 000 kronors each by or mothers for the start. Neither Marina or I are originally from the city or come from a cultural background relating to Stockholm, so it really in essence was a question of pulling something entirely out of scratch.

M.S: We were fortunate enough to have a first-hand contract on a 40 m2 residential flat for the gallery. So it wasn't some commercial space adapted particularly for gallery practice that we opened up with.



Claiming position

C.A: Our very first exhibition was titled Position and the idea was for the title work to in a multi-layered fashion. Position for one being our stand as gallerists. We were the only gallery in Stockholm then operating with an auteur approach, where everything derived from our personal taste and view. There had been a number of American gallerists in the late 80's and 90's whom were heard of that were gaining notoriety and recognition as auteurs like Mary Boone, Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend. The show of course as well offered a reflection around the current position of contemporary art then.

M.S: We definitely deliberately and by choice had a focus to look beyond Sweden. It was an early objective of ours to establish strong Swedish artistries that we would be able to see through out in the world. From the beginning, we were setting out to work with long-term representation of nurturing and supporting a band of artists. At this time, you could say a gallery would generally have been a very Swedish concern.

C.A: It's fair to say we were the first young gallery to exhibit virtually unknown foreign artists here whom we introduced to an international art public. Xavier Veilhan had his first exhibition outside of France with us and it was the same with Tony Matelli who first showed outside of the US at the gallery. In fact, like is the case with them, many of the artists we were working with early in the '90s are still with the gallery today. It was possible for us to take great risks because we weren't so heavily reliant on financial outlook since people weren't buying much art during recession anyway. Moreover, we were both working part-time on the side to make ends meet; I for instance freelanced drafting questions for Jeopardy when it first was introduced here on television.

A scene and circuit of sort soon emerged, revolving partly around Andréhn-Schiptjenko. We would even have philosophical evenings and parties at the gallery, using a wooden panel as a bar. Those were the days, or well, times were different. I think it is important though not to be caught up too much in nostalgia and recognize that all time in the end is good time.



Shifts from there to here

C.A: I would like to think that the art scene was much more intense back then. Poignant art critique was literally everywhere, and featured in every big daily around. It felt like there was a very clear ongoing dialogue about art in a way that you don't see today in the same way. Reviews were quite the serious "business" for whomever was writing them, applying something personally distinctive to a text. In terms of running a gallery with the international objective we had, it is important to bring to mind that that the access to information was vastly different pre-internet and it was quite a feat to keep updated about what was going on internationally in the art. More or less you would have to subscribe to art magazines that would arrive some 8 weeks after initial release, or whilst travelling.

M.S: The role that art assumes in people's life has notably changed a great deal over these part years that have we have been working. Art to a larger extent today serves a marker that you ascribe to yourself to signify an array of things about yourself. Before it used to be much more about the art itself.

There is also the change when you think of collectors and who acquires art and why. There are essentially collectors on the one hand and then there are art buyers on the other. There is a clear distinction there I would say. A collector unlike a buyer will buy art with their eyes and from their own sense of taste without an idea in mind to sell the art for profit in a near future.

C.A: Buyers who are more driven by a sense of financial smartness appear to be a recent notion. An entirely new parlance I feel has emerged in the art world when it comes to acquiring art if you take a look at sites, apps and social media. There is an increasing talk about industries, markets and index.

I think a collector understands the distinctive and individual value of an artwork and that their part in the great scheme of things is to support the artistic life and community, which needs this group, i.e. collectors, to continue to be able to create. By putting money into art, it's not only a question of acquiring an object or unit of art, it's also really facilitating the entire landscape that we are all a part of. The feeling that there is both a pleasure, pride and sense of responsibility inherent in acquiring art, I think ultimately is what signifies a real collector.



Nurturing guidance

C.A: There is so much to say on the matter of artists and ultimately all relationships we have with our artists are unique. That relationship also changes over time depending on where the artist is in their life and career. I suppose the difference between being a gallerist and a curator at an institution is the timeline aspect, that you follow an artist and their growth and development over a very long time and become a part of it. I also feel that over time we have gotten better at professionalizing the gallerist-artist relationship in general which is a necessity when at the core you are many times friends with the artists too. I guess you could say that there is a transition from being a curling parent to a more assertive one.

Sometimes to be really doing your job you have to set a mark and offer clear guidance and say that this or that, you believe that an artist could or should benefit from doing. You have to be able to help somebody reaching outside of his or her comfort zone because it is easy sometimes as an artist to get stuck in your practice.

M.S: A characteristic for a gallerist is that you are a part not only of the ups but also the downs, which inevitably occurs for every artist at some point in their career. No career is just a constant rise up. As an artist, you are constantly assessed by the world on what you are doing and it can be harsh.



A note on art fairs

C.A: For us art fairs have in ways really been crucial for revenues, our brand and growth and the exposure of our artists. I would say that art fairs have gained an increasing importance over the years for everyone alike. It used be something more on the side to now where there is a major focus on fair participation which consumes so much time over the year and generally is a very expensive affair. We have been participating in Art Basel since the last '90s and also do the Hong Kong edition and have been doing Zona Maco in Mexico City for the past five years. For years, we also took part in the Armory Show where I also made part in the selection community. In recent time there has also been the ABC Contemporary in Berlin.



Running mates

C.A: People will often ask us about our relationship and rapport with each other and it's generally difficult to answer. It is such a natural and integrated part of both my life and work. Like with all long-term relationships you have times when you relate more or less closer to each other. We also have distinctive private lives that intersect varyingly over time.

M.S: Indeed, it's not super easy to answer but what we always come back to, is that there's a huge advantage running this sort of commercial venture in the arts together with another person whom you're in tune with. What it does is that it demands much of you; you always have to be on your toes to deliver and meet the expectations of the other. Moreover, it is a great support system, being able to make significant decisions together, in times when you sometimes have to act very swiftly. You cannot underestimate the relief of together carrying the burden of solving problems that arise on day-to-day basis.

We've always been motivated in terms of carrying out a struggle together, towards reaching places with the gallery. There's a shared strength which lies also in part in the fact that we are quite frank with our opinions. There's never been a doubt about the other, just like yourself having a staunch and solid focus on the gallery and putting out at the best of the abilities at any given time. Knowing that, also makes it easier making compromises. We're both fun-loving people and at the end of the day we've been always been able to grab a few drinks and share a laugh.

C.A: It's a great thing to always have to structure your mind in words when it comes to various issues that arise at a gallery. Whilst doing that with another person, the issue itself gets much clearer to you as opposed to some abstract cloud in your mind. I can definitely say that I would never want to run a gallery like this entirely on my own. As for us, we've never had a conflict that made either one of us question our collaborative work.

I also think it comes down to give each other room to do things unrelated to the gallery which for me will have been the case raising a family and for Marina, her ventures in music. You have to recognize that there is an identity stretching beyond just being a gallerist. Having interests like Marina's for music, I think generally has been very good and favorable for the gallery and our collaboration together because it offers different inputs and perspectives which isn't always easy in a confined gallery



Today and tomorrow

M.S: The reason you become a gallerist is because you want to convey and offer something to the public. You want to accommodate for a social meeting point marked by art. You want people to come here feeling that they got something from their visit, and for them also to feel that they are most welcome here.

C.A: The feeling of doing something that is generous towards people is one that is very pleasant I think. We moved out here to Hudiksvallsgatan in 2007 and were initially not particularly interested in being located amidst an art cluster but came out to see the space when proposed a visit and we have been here roughly ten years now. It's the first gallery space that we've appropriated using an architect. What has been nice being located out here amidst a cluster, or what is called the art district in Stockholm, is that it generates foot traffic between the galleries and for us also allows to see art conveniently at close proximity.

M.S: On a general note, we enjoy the idea of change and not rooting the practice too much in the physical space. At large in contemporary art there is a shift away from physical venues to a state where art is much more mobile which also gives us reason to reflect on how we can and should relate to that and liberate ourselves. We do think much of how we can extend a scene beyond just where we are now and today.

C.A: We are constantly working on our programme and are looking into a few new artists for the future. Just right now we are presenting the work of Francesca Woodman for the very first time in collaboration with her estate. In spring we are also showing Linder Sterling as a new artist with the gallery.

M.S: We take so much pride in this idea of long-term working relationships with artists and really see a certain beauty in creating history together. For things not to merely be about things like market and freshness of the day. There is something to cherish about being able to look back with people in remembrance of things that were created together over time.



C.A: This type of gallery that Andréhn-Schiptjenko has come to represent, the auteur gallery has come under scrutiny a lot in recent years for being obsolete and static. Everything changes of course which means we also need to change and renew ourselves and that's also part of what drives us in our work, the act of moving forward. We've always aspired to be in tune with and ahead of our time. It brings to mind being early having a website in 1994 when the world wide web was something so incredibly fresh and so novel that Marina was asked to participate on television to talk about the Internet. It still makes for a rather fun anecdote.

At the end of the day we continue to strongly believe that if you have something to say, and that if this really comes purely from the heart, it will find itself reaching out to people. This I genuinely believe.

C-print would like to extend a hearty thank you to Ciléne Andréhn and Marina Schiptjenko.

www.andrehn-schiptjenko.com

Images courtesy of the gallery

Image credits:

- 1) Ciléne Andréhn & Marina Schiptjenko in 1992
- 2) Installation view Peter Hagdahl "Sustained" in 1992
- 3) Installation view Xavier Veilhan "Le Studio" in 1993
- 4) Installation view Tony Matelli in 1999
- 5) ArtCopenhagen 2010 with Jens Erik Sørensen and Bjarne Bækgaard from AROS Kunstmuseum after acquiring the artwork "Yesterday" by Tony Matelli
- 6) Ciléne Andréhn & Marina Schiptjenko photographed by Martin Runeborg
- 7) Installation view Jacob Dahlgren "From Life to Art to Life" i 2009. Photo: Carl Kleiner
- 8) Ciléne Andréhn & Marina Schiptjenko in 2003