

Sophie Richard

Unconcealed

The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-77
Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections

Ridinghouse

Unconcealed

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SOPHIE RICHARD *I'd like to start our conversation with the new galleries that opened in Europe in the late 1960s, which were committed to the innovative artistic tendencies of the day (Minimal, Conceptual, Arte Povera). You were particularly close to Konrad Fischer and Fernand Spillemaeckers in the 1970s. Could you talk about them? How did you meet them, and to what extent did they influence the choices you made in your collection?*

ANTON HERBERT Konrad Fischer and Fernand Spillemaeckers had galleries that strongly made their mark on us. They were two characters who influenced us a lot. Both immediately took us out of our local perspective, a typically Belgian and Flemish situation. With them we entered into an international context: Carl Andre, Art & Language, Daniel Buren. Although each artist had also his own local character: Buren – French, Gilbert & George – English, Carl Andre – American, they presented together an overall perspective, a common vision. Precise activities gave a value to the whole. Fernand had held a symposium on the art situation of that time at La Cambre in Brussels, followed by an exhibition at the Museum Dhont-Dhaenens in Deurle. The location of Fischer in Düsseldorf and Spillemaeckers in Brussels was of no importance whatsoever. On a whim we'd jump in the car to go and see either one of them.

ANNICK HERBERT We didn't differentiate. For example, we bought an Andre with Spillemaeckers from Fischer. Their choice of artists – you can see that in the collection – matched up.

SR *So Fischer and Spillemaeckers knew each other?*

ANTON H They knew each other very well. There's that famous piece from 1973 by Robert Barry called *Invitation Piece*, which explains very clearly that these artists were nomadic, and the galleries in a sense joined in with that nomadic spirit. There was Art & Project, Jack Wendler, Yvon Lambert, Sperone, Paul Maenz, Nigel Greenwood, Konrad Fischer, MTL, Wide White Space, Leo Castelli and Toselli. The art world was so small and these galleries had to make huge efforts to get a few people in.

ANNICK H The artists moved from one gallery to the other. When American artists came to Europe, they

went around all these galleries. They did the circuit.

SR *How was the circuit established? You realise that there were tensions between MTL and Wide White Space. As a result the circuit probably didn't work very well between those two galleries.*

ANTON H Those tensions weren't the essential thing. There were tensions and there weren't. At some points, the tensions were very powerful. There were misunderstandings between Paul Maenz and Konrad Fischer in Germany, too. And between Herman Daled and Anton Herbert! But we had to show, and did show, solidarity to the outsider.

ANNICK H We were so convinced that we were on the right track!

ANTON H There weren't that many of us and there was no way of doing anything other than grouping together, because of the superficiality of the people against us. So we had to group together to defend ourselves. Anyway, we were fanatical, defending the truth and the essence of our beliefs. For that group of people – artists, critics, galleries and collectors (the museums weren't involved so much) – it was vital to stay together, even if there were sometimes small misunderstandings. It was important to group together to define and defend what really mattered, and also to perfect strategies of ideas. We were the opposition.

ANNICK H You mention strategies, but not everyone held that view. You are talking on behalf of yourself and Spillemaeckers, who had that same vision.

ANTON H Yes, there were people, collectors and others, who were part of this group without realising how important it was to defend those artists. For us it was an opposition to the common view from that time: Support/Surface or Pattern Painting. No one talks anymore about Pattern Painting, but it was extremely important at that point in those years. There was also Body Art with Gina Pane and some others. All those movements were as important as the one we thought was essential.

ANNICK H We were a tiny core of people who'd made that choice.

ANTON H That core went on to become essential. Don't forget that at the time there were as many wrong tracks as right ones. Everything was possible. The museums

were given little or no support. There were hardly any contemporary art museums, none in Belgium.

ANNICK H You had to go to Holland: Eindhoven and Amsterdam.

ANTON H Yes, there were only a few exceptions. The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven did a lot already from the beginning of the 1970s onwards. That museum had of a number of people around Rudi Fuchs who dealt with these artists. There was also Martin Visser – a private collector working in a museum structure – at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. It was a little core of people who launched a battle. In Germany, in Mönchengladbach, Johannes Cladders was very good. It is well known, he made these cardboard boxes by way of catalogues, because it was less expensive. The least expensive catalogue you could make then was a cardboard box. And now it's probably the most expensive!

SR *You said in 2000, 'To choose this art is also to choose your friends'. Do you agree with the idea that it was a small group of dynamic, enthusiastic and committed people who led people to the recognition of the movement across Europe?*

ANNICK H Yes.

ANTON H We worked out, very early on, who the people were who weren't our friends, through the fact that it's intellectually very demanding to commit yourself to a work by artists such as Daniel Buren or Ian Wilson or Douglas Huebler. You could tell immediately who was superficial and who was sincere.

ANNICK H You had to commit yourself.

ANTON H Yes, you really had to show your commitment, persuade people that it wasn't something lightweight or whatever. It was clear that the list of people who did the defending, who were very committed to these values, was very short.

SR *When you say 'commit yourself', in concrete terms for you as collectors, what did that mean?*

ANTON H Already from the beginning, for us, it was extremely clear how to work. We wanted to participate in that movement. Perhaps this was different from what others were doing. In France, for example, people who were committed weren't collecting. This is the French mentality. French intellectuals lived out their ideas, pure and noble but without direct engagement. We could not 'not' collect. We could not 'not' commit ourselves.

ANNICK H It was our wish to participate.

ANTON H To commit oneself was to participate and to

participate was to collect. And what was collecting? It was buying a Buren fabric or a Lawrence Weiner phrase!

ANNICK H Certainly not collecting in the sense that you buy paintings to hang on the wall.

ANTON H So we went to Konrad Fischer and came home with a phrase in our pocket and then we had to pay for it! It was pretty crazy, all in all.

SR *Do you remember the first Conceptual work you bought?*

ANNICK H The very first work we bought were some drawings by Sol LeWitt, four small drawings as a group. It was the first timid commitment we made. They're magnificent! That was at MTL when they were in Antwerp with Art & Project. We did that one week and then the next we already started buying something else. That left its mark on me.

ANTON H Everything speeded up very quickly. This didn't happen from one day to the next. There was a long preparatory period of discussions, a 'battle of words' with Spillemaeckers, with Fischer and with the artists. We wanted to know exactly what we were dealing with. We wanted to test the ground. For us, it was a fast-track training. In three or four months, we'd completely changed our way of seeing, which had been fairly bourgeois and local. Let's say we'd been passively prepared by the spirit of 1968. We had a particular attraction to this new world.

ANTON H We were well informed. We travelled a lot. We went to all the exhibitions, till then, without doing anything, without committing ourselves. Our meetings with Spillemaeckers and the discussions we had with him and Konrad put us on the right road.

SR *How did you keep yourselves informed?*

ANNICK H All kinds of ways.

ANTON H There were, at the time, some specific art magazines, like *Avalanche*, which we were able to find un-regularly.

SR *Where did you find copies of *Avalanche* in Belgium?*

ANNICK H There were addresses, you had to find your copy.

ANTON H You had to write to get them. You found some in galleries like Fischer's. There were also *+0*, *Art-Rite* and *Art Vivant*. Irmeline Lebeer wrote for *Art Vivant*. Her articles were fantastic. Later there was *The Fox*, by Kosuth and Art & Language. There was also *Interfunktionen*. And this incredible magazine, *Museum Journaal*, a small brochure published by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam and the Rotterdam Museum. Certain issues

of *Museumsjournaal* are absolutely essential. Also *Opus International*, *VH 101* and *Studio International*, which all published extraordinary issues at that time.

SR So, art magazines were a way of staying up to date?

ANTON H Yes, but some set off on the wrong track.

ANNICK H You had to make a choice.

ANTON H In France, some magazines wandered off into Body Art in a deplorable way, like *Artitudes*. We realised we were being badly informed.

ANNICK H What was absolutely exceptional was the Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972, curated by Harald Szeemann.

ANTON H Before that, there was *When Attitudes Become Form*, and a whole series of exhibitions which changed our way of seeing things. In particular, there were two exhibitions by Paul Maenz, *Serielle Formationen* and *Dies alles Herzchen*. And the two first Cologne Kunstmarkt of 1967 and 1968. There was Prospect 68 in Düsseldorf. Also the exhibition in Eindhoven, *Three Blind Mice*, showing the collections of Martin Visser, Hubert Peeters and Frits Becht in 1968. There was the *Xerox Book*, of Seth Siegelaub in 1968 and all the Art & Project *Bulletins*. And the book that Germano Celant wrote about Arte Povera. There was the exhibition *Konzeption/Conception* in Leverkusen, the different shows of Siegelaub in 1968–69, and *Op Losse Schroeven* in Amsterdam. Not to mention *Information*, which took place in New York in 1970 at the MOMA, and the *18 Paris IV* organised by Michel Claura in Paris, as well as the special issue of *Studio International* in summer 1970.

SR Did you go and see all those exhibitions?

ANTON H Yes, but only from 1971 on, not before. We were on the road all the time. There was Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years* in 1973, which brought a complete overview of all the essential events of those years. My list of important books and catalogues between 1967 and 1977 comes to 87 items. This archive is our Bible today.

ANNICK H From 1976, 1977 on it was the end. When Paul Maenz showed his painting exhibition in 1976 the movement was quickly going down.

ANTON H With *Projekt 74, Kunst bleibt Kunst* in Cologne, in July 1974, we already had a sense that the content had started to change.

SR When you went to the early Kunstmarkts in Cologne, did you go to see what was happening, or also to buy?

ANTON H We never travelled to fairs with the intention of buying.

ANNICK H You didn't do that in those days. It wasn't the way people thought.

ANTON H The first people who did that later on were the Americans. They 'made' their 'shopping tour'.

ANNICK H They came to Europe to do their 'shopping tour', going to the fairs to see what they could buy. But that didn't exist before. Art fairs were places where galleries showed works of art and provided information about what is going on.

ANTON H In those days, you had plenty of time to go back home, talk and think. Now people are under incredible stress. They have their chequebooks and they want to buy straight away. The spirit is completely different.

ANNICK H Art fairs were places where you could meet the galleries and even the artists.

SR When you wanted to buy a work for your collection, did you go to galleries?

ANTON H Yes, absolutely.

ANNICK H But we didn't go to buy an object for the collection. It was the culmination of a discussion, after a long preparation. It was a whole ritual.

ANTON H First of all you had to be in perfect harmony with the artist. You had to know him and have at least three or four serious discussions with him to see if it held water or not. People don't really do that any more.

SR So you didn't go to galleries to choose from the works shown in exhibitions?

ANNICK H We went to see what new things the artist was showing. It was a meeting place for the artist. Then we came back home and the next day talked together about all these works. We took our time.

ANTON H Mostly, nothing was ready at the vernissage. You would get to an opening and would not see anything: the artist hadn't yet arrived, or he hadn't managed to get his work ready. It was chaotic. The idea was to participate in something that was going to happen. When Dan Graham showed his films at Spillemaeckers, he was mostly always crouching under the table trying to get the machine to work. While we waited, we chatted and had a drink. If nothing worked, and it happened all the time, they told us to come back the next day. It was all very good-natured. In fact it wasn't professional. But even if it didn't work, we all went out to dinner together and had some good talks. The discussions were very important.

ANNICK H The content was essential. Now it's superficial and worldly.

ANTON H Today, you have to dress up to go to an

opening. In those days, you'd dress as normally as possible. Today, sometimes you barely dare to go into some galleries, they're so chic.

SR *In your view, what distinguished that set of new galleries from the previous generation of galleries? For example, Castelli, which opened much earlier?*

ANTON H Castelli was part of the movement.

ANNICK H Sonnabend too. They were really precursors.

ANTON H They who started their galleries with Pop art. What you might ask instead is, what distinguishes these two from the others, from Denise René or Claude Bernard?

SR *For me, Castelli and Sonnabend are slightly separate, in the sense that their reputations as gallery-owners were already established when they took on Conceptual artists. Whereas the new generation of European galleries built up their own reputations on the basis of those artists.*

ANNICK H Yes, they're separate. But the Conceptual artists, in those early years, didn't have other galleries in New York. Sonnabend and Castelli were their galleries in the States, while in Europe they were all new.

ANTON H Castelli and Sonnabend are the two exceptions who managed to round the cape of Pop art without problems. They found straight away who was important in the next generation of artists. They had open minds. Castelli showed Lichtenstein, but also Kosuth, Rauschenberg but also Nauman. Look to the historical group photographs of the Castelli Gallery's artists: you see Ruscha, who wasn't at all well known at the time, beside Lichtenstein, or Oldenburg next to Weiner.

ANNICK H In the States, at that time, there wasn't a gallery for those younger artists. And American collectors weren't at all interested in it.

ANTON H Castelli kept all those artists alive. They didn't sell anything.

SR *So it tended to be the Americans who showed at Castelli?*

ANTON H No, not only: Hanne Darboven and Jan Dibbets, both had very important exhibitions at Castelli.

ANNICK H Castelli and Sonnabend were very European. They had a European mentality.

ANTON H An American artist like Baldessari wasn't shown anywhere in the United States. Only at Sonnabend. And Sonnabend tended to Baldessari's career in an extraordinary way. Before, he hadn't sold

anything at all.

ANNICK H She was able to support those young artists with the money she made with Pop art.

ANTON H Fischer had huge respect for Castelli and Sonnabend. Castelli was a God for those European galleries.

ANNICK H They both were the American counterpart for all the young European galleries.

SR *What did they admire about Castelli?*

ANTON H His commitment, his way of giving carte blanche to artists, his generosity, his professionalism with collectors, also his commitment to his artists' survival. He always managed to give the artists their monthly cheque. Castelli and Sonnabend were very correct. For lots of young galleries like Spillemaeckers and Sperone, Castelli was their absolute model. It was often said that Konrad Fischer was Castelli's heir apparent. And he died first! Castelli was a great man, a great gentleman.

ANNICK H Sonnabend started her gallery in Paris in the late-1960s. In comparison, Denise René was really the old guard, the old style, the 1950s.

SR *What's the old style?*

ANTON H People who showed kinetic art in those years in Paris. There was nothing to see in those galleries. You were wasting your time. When we went to New York we would first stop off at Castelli's to see what was happening there. If he was showing Pop art, we respected it, because this was part of his trade. But we knew that a month later he would be showing Douglas Huebler with just as much attention. He was extremely professional and I think people clung on to that. If you received the blessing of Castelli and Sonnabend, it gave an incredible amount of added value. All the artists we were interested in needed a nudge in the right direction in this way. I remember Kosuth talking to us about Castelli in the most incredible terms.

They didn't make any mistakes. There are some galleries that did make huge mistakes. When Cucchi and Clemente showed up, some galleries switched sides directly. They turned to painting and forgot about everything else. Fischer, on the other hand, remained a hard-liner. Those were very bad years for him. Castelli, in good or bad times, had a kind of grandeur, a European panache in New York. You received a kind of consecration from him, even as a collector. For many people, Castelli's name was like a guarantee of quality. Sonnabend too, but Castelli most of all.

SR *Did you go regularly to the States in those days?*

ANNICK H Yes, we went there regularly. From 1971–72 on.

ANTON H I remember we went to Castelli to see work of Nauman and bought our first drawings there and the same week we also bought some Nauman pieces from Angela Westwater who worked close to Castelli. From 1971 onwards, Nauman was extremely important to us. Konrad had told us we had to go and see it. We listened.

ANNICK H We talked about the whys and hows of all those artists, and made up our own minds afterwards.

ANTON H We also could have collected lots of other artists. We had to choose. We didn't have unlimited funds, so we had to be careful. We met the artists and the people running the galleries, some critics too. But we didn't meet any American collectors apart from the Vogels, whom we visited in their little apartment. People in the States were mostly talking about Scull, the big taxi magnate, who was the most important collector from Castelli. He bought large amounts of Pop art but was not at all interested in Conceptual art. In Europe his counterpart at that time was the Ludwig Museum in Cologne.

ANNICK H For us, in New York, Heiner Friedrich's art foundation, later the Dia Art Foundation, was essential and our first priority. They were involved with our artists.

ANTON H There was a system to our visits there. We had a list of addresses and went to see those people who were in the same mode: a small group. At the front of the *When Attitudes Become Form* catalogue, Harald Szeemann printed a photo of his address book: 40 to 45 names. That was how he did his exhibition. Szeemann didn't know anybody at the beginning of his Bern project. Dibbets told him some names, so did Richard Long and Nauman, and then others. He was intelligent enough to ask the right questions and to know where to go. This inspired us in our contacts. It was a close-knit little circle of people.

SR *Some people were very committed politically, like Spillemaeckers, for example. He wrote texts that were very committed and political. To what extent was he radical and critical?*

ANNICK H We used to discuss a lot in those days.

ANTON H These discussions were essential and exciting. They started for us in the wake of May 1968.

ANNICK H One evening, Spillemaeckers showed us a work by Sol LeWitt telling us how extraordinary it was, and he went on and on, for hours and hours, making a masterpiece of that specific work, far into the

night. Then he came all the way down and gave all the arguments that said the piece was absolutely worthless. You had to construct and deconstruct. Radical and critical.

ANTON H Before midnight we bought the work and by the end of the night it wasn't worth anything!

ANNICK H He was critical in the sense that he was able to construct and deconstruct. He saw exactly the strengths and the shortcomings.

ANTON H He was a hard-line intellectual. A leftist. But everyone was somewhere on the left in those days. He had no sense of the bourgeoisie. He scorned conventional bourgeois norms that led nowhere. Every discussion was a calling into question, an in-depth examination of what one has and what one doesn't have. He tried to give as many arguments for as against, to get a complete vision of the problem, whether it was Andre, Judd, LeWitt, Ryman, Mangold or Marden. You had to find out who was the most radical. The idea of figurative art was completely impossible. After Minimal and Conceptual art, going back was out of the question. On the contrary, art was opening windows to other horizons.

ANNICK H Spillemaeckers said there was nothing more beautiful than Stanley Broun's metre line! He was really a utopian!

ANTON H It was magnificent! We were open-mouthed. We thought it was incredible and drank in his words.

SR *How did you meet Spillemaeckers?*

ANNICK H It was at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Deurle, which at the time was very local and very bourgeois.

ANTON H We'd received an invitation to an exhibition that was going to take place there. It had all the names of the artists we were interested in.

ANNICK H This was strange and we had to go along to see for ourselves.

ANTON H That was in 1973. The invitation card mentioned Andre, Art & Language, Askevold, Baldessari, Barry, Beuys, Broodthaers, Buren, Cadere, Graham, Huebler, Kosuth, LeWitt, Paolini, Penck, Ryman, Weiner and Wilson. We turned up and there was absolutely nothing to see, a large empty room and hardly anyone there. There was Madame Rona, Spillemaeckers, his wife Lili Dujourie, Philippe van Snick and the two of us. We asked where the exhibition was and they told us it was laid out on the table: a few covers with paper sheets. We were astonished! The exhibition had been boycotted by Wide White Space

and by Paul Maenz.

ANNICK H They'd cancelled all the invitations except ours. They'd forgotten about us! After that 'opening', we spent a long night in discussion with Spillemaeckers. And went to Brussels the next week to be 'brainwashed' in a short time!

ANTON H We were attracted by those people who were 'outside the norm'. They led us to radical points of view. We were interested in extreme directions.

SR *When did you meet Fischer?*

ANTON H At around the same time. All those things happened together. Spillemaeckers brought us to Fischer a few months later. Daled came to Gent to take a look at those collectors who were starting to move in. He was already collecting actively many years before us and wanted to hang on to his territory.

SR *You said Spillemaeckers was very intellectual. What was Fischer like?*

ANNICK H He didn't say anything. He had another way of communicating but we knew very well what he meant. We didn't have the kind of discussions with him that we had with Spillemaeckers.

ANTON H No, you had to be present. It was a silent communication. We were on the same wavelength, but there was no music! It was through his exhibition programme that we knew what he thought. He expressed himself in little touches, like a painter. He had a very strong physical presence.

ANNICK H When he looked at works of art, you knew exactly what he was thinking.

ANTON H Sometimes he came out with a phrase. With just a few words he was straightforward and absolutely right. Fischer was the first to show Carl Andre in Europe in October 1964. It was even the first show of his gallery. And also the last one: in September 1992.

ANNICK H He was the one who stuck to his guns when painting arrived, with the Neuen Wilden, Cucchi and Clemente. It was terrible. We had to phone him up and give him our support. The arrival of painting was just as dramatic for his artists.

ANTON H In total Konrad did more than 300 exhibitions!

ANNICK H Fischer was the most complete gallery in Europe. He had all the best artists. Here in Belgium they were shared out between Spillemaeckers and Wide White Space.

SR *Fischer was also the one who sold most to European museums.*

ANNICK H That's interesting. I didn't know that. Yes,

he did a great job!

ANTON H Obviously, at the time, this art wasn't worth much.

ANNICK H: No, but after all, museums had to buy works anyway, and it was his job to guide them.

SR *Do you think the private collectors somehow 'validated' this art for the museums, in the sense that the collectors' choices reassured the museums?*

ANTON H Yes and no. We did notice, at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, that the fact that we made some acquisition decisions had a certain influence. We looked at what they were doing and they looked at what we were doing. When in 1984 we showed the collection in this museum, we made a kind of deal. Rudi Fuchs wanted to show our collection, and we were of course interested in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum. So Fuchs told us to choose works out of the museum collection and he chose works from our collection. We put on a mixed exhibition, *L'architecte est absent*. Alongside artists like Weiner, in the same room and mixed in, were historic artists like Mondrian and Beckmann whom, of course, collectors can't buy. It was a symbiosis of two collections at the Van Abbemuseum.

ANNICK H All the same, I don't think museums are influenced by the choice of collectors.

SR *Or reassured?*

ANTON H Museums looked at what the private collectors were doing. For example, Martin Visser had a huge influence on the Rotterdam museum's collection. They even asked him to be on the board. That's an important point. Museums collect a bit later, when they have confirmation that they are not making a mistake. Apart, perhaps, from Cladders, who was already buying for Mönchengladbach, with very limited funds, in the beginning.

SR *Lynda Morris suggested that gallery owners offered different prices to museums and private collectors. Is that true?*

ANTON H Yes, I think private collectors were able to be more demanding to galleries. More demanding on the price as they wanted to buy more works and made fast decisions. Museums often took a long time to decide and they paid late. I remember a discussion with Fischer about the big Richter we have in the collection. The Kröller-Müller Museum had that work in storage for six months with a free view to its possible acquisition. But they couldn't make up their minds and Fischer got fed up waiting. He told us he would

give us an incredible price if we decided within the week. He thought that if the museum had really been interested they would have paid full price straight away. Konrad was positive to us as we went to see him quite often and usually made our minds up quickly, so he gave us special prices. Fair enough. Museums are public institutions, they have to move slowly. Museum directors have to present the work to their committees, and that take time. We didn't have those problems.

SR *Was Willi Bongard's Kunstkompass of any importance to you?*

ANTON H It was a small newsletter. We thought it was unhealthy, as money strategies in contemporary art were spread out. On the other hand, Cadere liked Bongard because his ranking system was so iconoclastic. Bongard proposed a formula to calculate how famous artists are and then marked the first hundred on the basis of economic success. He based his formula on various parameters which meant that each artist rose or fell a notch in the annual *Kompass* list.

ANNICK H It was very fashionable at the time.

ANTON H It has its importance as a first model to try out how to rank power in art. On the other hand, and in ethical opposition, there was Siegelau's Transfer and Sale Agreement. This 'sale contract' is the hard-line vision, in which the added value has to be shared between the collector and the artist. Those two aspects, Bongard and Siegelau, came out at the same time and are completely opposed to each other.

ANNICK H Everyone, in those years, read *Kunstkompass* and nobody worked with the Siegelau agreement.

ANTON H Someone should study the relationship between power and money in contemporary art. In the November 2003 issue, *Art Review* started its first annual 'Power 100', a list ranking the top 100 people in the art world who are considered to have the most power: collectors, galleries, artists, critics and curators. The first of them was Charles Saatchi!

SR *As regards to the value of art, do you agree with the idea that Conceptual artists have challenged the art world and its established system?*

ANTON H I think these artists have partially succeeded. They've set the record straight. They came after the happy years of Pop art, pure merchandise! With Conceptual and Minimal art, starting after Prospect in 1968 and 1969, you discovered complete change. These two catalogues were breathtaking. Wide White Space, Art & Project, Yvon Lambert, Konrad Fischer, all those

people showing together at the Düsseldorf art fairs: there was so little to sell but all to show. These were the times of ideas and content. That's when we turned up.

SR *There was a kind of rejection of capitalism?*

ANNICK H Yes, all this came out of the counter-culture of May 1968, which was a complete rejection of the existing system. But look what that's given us now!

ANTON H We now have reached far-right extremes in the art world. You travel from Miami to Basel and from Basel to Miami, but what for? It's all lightweight and superficial. Alongside that, a new generation will certainly come up, certainly, more thoughtful and aggressive which takes the debate to a different level. But first we will need a large market crisis.

ANNICK H In the 1960s and 1970s, all the necessary changes were made even if you couldn't see the result as a whole. The basic work, the basic thinking was there, so there's nothing new to do today. The new generation can begin on the basis of the work that's been done already. Even that's a skill.

ANTON H Absolutely. If people like you study these early years, the 1960s and 1970s, new opportunities will arise. It's not lost.

ANNICK H You don't realise today what it was like in the years around 1968. At the level of art, but also, for example, for women: I had to ask my husband's permission to open a bank account. That was in 1972. Can you imagine?

ANTON H The shift in mentality in May 1968 was huge.

ANNICK H Young people today do not realise that these important changes happened through the new spirit of 1968. There have been huge social changes. This was an extraordinary achievement. After those essential years, women were at least able to have a say.

ANTON H In any century, there are one or two fascinating periods. In the twentieth century, there were the years around the 1920s and the 1970s, both periods were incredible.

ANNICK H In 1968 we knew very well what we were doing and we were sure that we were right. We knew it was important. What happened in May 1968 was a great challenge.

On the other hand, I remember a lunch with Lawrence Weiner and Carl Andre in Eindhoven in the late 1970s at the time when painting was coming back again. They were all exhausted. They wondered what they'd been doing all those years and what was going to become of them. This new movement was like a great bulldozer slashing all down. Galleries were swallowed

up by it. That was after 1976–77. It was like a funeral.

ANTON H Fischer was abandoned. He was an inch away from bankruptcy. It was a disaster.

SR *So in the end, the art world that those artists had wanted to reject ends up bringing them back in. What about the technological advances that happened during the period, like the fax for example?*

ANNICK H I really can't remember. That was more for offices. It did not have a great impact. At the time, we didn't think that way at all. We didn't even talk about Xeroxes. They were machines that you used and that was it.

ANTON H It's more or less the opposite with the internet and mobile phones of today. Now, you get so much information you can't even deal with it. It's total zapping. Somewhere along the line it stops you being able to think. In Spillemaeckers's time, no one could distract us from our essential concern.

Translation from French: Shaun Whiteside