

FOR THE LOVE OF ART

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ETHAN WAGNER

Collectors and patrons



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Lecture published on:
www.fundacionarteymecenazgo.org

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For the Love of Art

Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

THEA: Ethan and I started collecting in the eighties but in separate universes. Later we got together, got married and became a couple in art as well as in life. We have donated somewhat more than 850 works of art, 350 of which are going to the Pompidou and 500 are going to the Whitney Museum. Each body of work goes to the institution that was most in need of what our collection had to offer their current collection. This was an important aspect of the decision-making in terms of what we gave and to whom. This gift to the Whitney was made in 2012 and I regret to inform you that we have not stopped collecting! So there will probably be another gift coming unless Ethan can control us, which I doubt very much! We continue to be inspired by the art of our time so there is little or no hope that we will ever stop collecting. What you will be seeing in this slide presentation are images of the exhibition that the Whitney did this year and which closed in March. A different exhibition will open this June at the Pompidou. What will be interesting for the viewer and certainly for us will be how the respective institutions view the collection. Both institutions have or will exhibit together the American and European art in our gift. When the Whitney did their collection presentation it included a number of works that were European made along with the American art. The Pompidou will do the same.

ETHAN: What you are about to see are images of the way the work from our collection looked at the Whitney, and mixed in are images of some of those very same works as they hung in our residence in Manhattan. So let us begin. This is the perspective you have as you come off the elevator on the sixth floor of the Whitney Museum (a new building designed by Renzo Piano, which opened a year ago). Our exhibition took up the entire sixth floor. It is appropriate that we start with the first painting that greets the visitor, *Untitled* (2002) by Christopher Wool. He is a central figure in our collection and in our collecting. Thea collected his work long before we were a couple. Christopher is somebody that Thea knew in the early 1980s and a friend we are both very close to today. We've always been very compelled by his work. The sad fact is that there are artists in our collection that we start out with when they are just beginning their careers and frequently they reach a price point beyond the price that we can afford to buy.



From left to right: Installation view of the works *Monument for V. Tatlin* (1964-1990) by Dan Flavin, *Food Kill* (1962) by Andy Warhol, *Untitled* (2002) by Christopher Wool and *Untitled Film Still #30* (1979) by Diane Arbus, at Westreich Wagner's residence in New York. Photo by Jason Schmidt. Courtesy Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

With Christopher Wool that took place in the early 2000s. This happens to be the last large painting that we ever acquired of Christopher's. To the right is a diptych of photographs by a British artist named Josephine Pryde. The chandelier is by the Vietnam-born artist named Danh Vô.

Let's talk about Danh Vô's work, as he is a young artist and this acquisition typifies the way we go about collecting. We were in Paris around ten years ago and we had an agenda of places to go and things to see and one of our destinations was the Kadist Foundation, simply because we had read about their curatorial programming and wanted to see what they were doing. So Danh Vô was exhibiting there at that time. We didn't know the artist but as soon as we set eyes on the work we knew we had to own it. The chandelier that we acquired, called *16:32:15, 26.05* (2009), is a great and well-known example of his work. It is one of three that hung in the Hotel Majestic, where the Vietnam peace treaty (1973) was signed. Danh, through his galleries, bought the three chandeliers and has exhibited each of them in a different way. This is the first time, following his directions, that the work was actually hung from the ceiling. We originally bought the work (and saw the work for the first time) hanging in a wooden frame sitting on the floor. I kind of prefer it that way but Danh asked the curators at the Whitney to put it in this format for the exhibition there.

THEA: I would like to add two things. One, going back a moment, that Christopher Wool was a really great teacher for me. In the very early and mid-eighties, he and I would go to galleries together and talk and argue about art. Occasionally we went to see more historically important work: though I had known Andy Warhol in the sixties and thought I really understood his work, it wasn't until we went to a monograph exhibition of Warhol's work at MoMA in 1989 that I began to fully understand. Christopher took me through and he would say 'lean forward, lean forward, look at the way' and he would begin to describe what this screening process was and how deliberate Warhol's efforts were to create the surface and the screen print. So he was a great guide for me and though we don't always agree, we are constantly generating ideas and he is a learning source for Ethan and me. One funny story: he was at dinner one night and we had just rehung the house with the work of mostly younger artists. He didn't respond to what he was looking at. So he was walking around looking at the works of art and there was a painting by Merlin Carpenter that said 'I like Chris Wool' splashed in paint. So Ethan is walking around with Christopher with wine in his hand and Christopher is walking around with his wine in his hand and they stop before the Carpenter painting that says 'I like Chris Wool' and Christopher says, 'Now THAT is a great painting.' And let me add about Danh Vô: when we were at the Kadist Foundation, as Ethan was discussing, Danh and his family, which consisted of his brother's children who were all running around the Kadist Foundation putting

their feet on the wall (I'm sure they repainted!). All their little footprints were there and that was when we got to meet Danh. It was a turning point for us as not only were we convinced about the work, and indeed we were, but also he was there to amplify the experience through what he said about the work. It was the compilation: the family and their relations as well as the small drawing that can be seen beside the chandelier. This work consists of a letter from a French missionary sent to his father in 1861, explaining that he was going to be executed as a prisoner in Vietnam. He explained how he was going to be killed. It is a very touching letter. Danh paid his father, who has very beautiful handwriting, to copy this letter. And to this day if you want to buy the letter you go to Danh's gallery and say, 'I would like to buy the letter,' and his father is commissioned to draft another copy. It's a very beautiful idea, and the work of art is only 300 dollars (Danh has never changed the price).

ETHAN: There is a moving aspect of what Thea is mentioning about the letter from the missionary to the missionary's father saying 'the sad truth is that I'm going to be killed tomorrow by these people in Vietnam,' (because he was held as a prisoner there). I believe this is one of the most important expressions of Danh's, in that he takes the money he receives from his gallery and pays his father to write out each letter. And that is part of the conceptual approach that he has in his work that for us is so moving. Also in this particular image is seen the diptych photographic work *Relax* (2004) by Josephine Pryde, who mostly works with a camera. There is a reference in the work to the early twentieth century Muybridge, but the backstory of this particular work is that she had just broken up with her boyfriend and this is her boyfriend's car, so there is not only an art historical reference but also a personal reference in her work. Jo's images are invariably rich with meaning.

THEA: You need to meet her; she is absolutely brilliant and tough as nails. You can see that in the work.

ETHAN: This is a work by Robert Gober, *The Ascending Sink* (1985), that Thea acquired before we were a couple and it is not dissimilar to the work in the Collection "la Caixa" called *Untitled* (1985). Thea why don't you tell the story of when you first acquired this work? Thea was living in Washington at the time.

THEA: So I see this shell on the floor in the backroom of the Paula Cooper gallery and at this time Christopher Wool was working for Cooper as an installer. And I said, 'hey Chris what is that,' and he said, 'Oh, that's Bob Gober, he's a friend of mine and you should meet him.' Christopher introduced us and Bob invited me to his studio. I was also consulting at the time and we bought every piece. Not me

personally but four of our clients. And this piece is the one I selected for my own collection. I was living in Washington at that time with three teenagers and their friends would come over and throw popcorn into the sinks. Later on I actually got notes from some of those kids, who are of course now obviously adults, saying – ‘Ah, we might have been wrong to have treated the artwork the way we did!’

ETHAN: So this is an image coming off the elevator in our loft in SoHo. The wallpaper you see here on the walls of the room is by the artist we were just talking about earlier, Robert Gober. We have since changed it and hung wallpaper again in the same place. The wallpaper is now installed is by Danh Vô. It wasn't our intention particularly, but Robert Gober was a very big influence on Danh Vô, so when Danh saw the wallpaper hanging where the Bob Gober wallpaper was, he was really thrilled.

THEA: The Gober paper work is called *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* (1989), and it is an essential part of his work because it is a photograph of a black man hanging while the white man is sleeping. It is a very touching work.

ETHAN: It may be appropriate to say that when we did the interview with the Pompidou and Whitney for the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, the curator from Pompidou, Christine Macel, who is a very knowledgeable and keen curator, mentioned to us that there appeared to be a lot of political content in the work that we collect. Our response was yes, we are aware of that – we have our political and social views for sure. But we don't necessarily look for political content when we are engaging with art. It just appears time and time again. So this wall painting that greets visitors at the Whitney to the left is *Food Kill* (1962), a work by Warhol. The sculpture *Monument for V. Tatlin* (1964-1990) by Dan Flavin is there as well and to the right of the Christopher Wool is the photograph *Untitled Film Still #30* (1979) by Cindy Sherman.

THEA: I should say one more thing about the *Tatlin*: we acquired it in the eighties from Leo Castelli who let me pay it off at 300 dollars a month, unbelievably. It hung in the dining room and all the children wanted to do was unplug the *Tatlin*, and all of their friends did too! It was the first thing they did walking into the room!

ETHAN: If you're standing here where the *Tatlin* was and you're looking out in the loft at the living room there on our largest wall for eight years we had hanging the painting *Junkyard* (2002) by Jeff Koons. This was also the last work by Jeff that we could afford to buy. We've heard Jeff's name discussed here during our stay in Barcelona. We are very confirmed fans of Jeff Koons' work and believe in it wholeheartedly. We knew that price-wise this was probably the last work we were



Installation view of *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* (1989) by Robert Gober and *Yellow Slicker Cowboy* (1989) by Richard Prince at Westreich Wagner's residence in New York. Photo by Jason Schmidt. Courtesy Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

going to be able to afford and we were invited to come by the studio. He paints of course and is primarily known as a sculptor. You'll see a work in the Whitney exhibition momentarily. Anyway, we went to the studio and as you may know he works with a large number of assistants and they're painting these paintings. The painting was perhaps only three quarters done, and we said to the studio manager, 'how can we make a choice as these paintings are not completed.' Gary said, 'there is so much demand that I'm afraid if you want to get one of these paintings you're going to have to make a choice now.' So we looked at around 6-8 paintings and we both felt that this was the one, crossed our fingers that it would come out the way it came out, and it did. It is one of the works we've enjoyed living with the most. I mean we love living with all the works we've collected but this particular Koons we've lived with for a long time and we really love it.

THEA: Mercedes [Basso] explained to us that in Spain people feel that Jeff is wedded to money and he is only about the market. I'm here to say that is absolutely not the case. I met Jeff pretty much at the same time as Christopher Wool in the early-eighties. He had a tiny little studio maybe the size of three of these tables, in which he also lived. In the studio and apartment where I came to visit, he said, 'you should get one of these works.' And I said, 'Jeff there are no works here!' And he said, 'yes there are!' And he showed me all these boxes of vacuums and I said, 'help me Jeff to understand, what are you going to make?' And he said, 'I'm going to encase these vacuums because they're about cleanliness. I'm going to encase them in large Plexiglas containers; some of them will be one on top of the other. The important thing is that they are pristine and clean and that they represent not only cleanliness but the sexuality of mankind.' So you have to take a leap. I took the leap! He said, 'select one.' I said, 'how do you do that Jeff?' He said, 'pick your vacuum!' And I picked two vacuums. I paid 2,600 dollars to his gallery. Five years later Jeff delivered them to my little office in SoHo. Jeff believes in his work, it is almost naïve the way he talks about the work. He still talks about the cleanliness, the perfection, the quality of presentation and also about sexuality. I think Ethan actually remembered what happened with the painting a little incorrectly if I might correct you: Ethan walked into the studio and said, 'I want that painting.' And it was this painting, and all that was there were the green peas and the outline of the golden hair, which Jeff described as being a 'golden shower'. I didn't know what that meant at that time so when we went home Ethan kindly explained it to me quietly and I went, 'AH!' And this was to be our painting. We knew it right away.

ETHAN: You're giving me too much credit! So this is view of the second room. On the right there is another word painting by Christopher Wool called *Untitled* (1990-1991). The photography triptych *Rollerstacke* (2005) is by Christopher

Williams, whose work we also saw in the exhibition *The Weight of a Gesture* at CaixaForum. On the left is the photograph *Creation of a False Feeling* (2000) by the Bernadette Corporation, then the photograph *Cut* (2009) by Anne Collier and the sculpture *Danica* (2008) by artists called Reena Spaulings.

THEA: Reena Spaulings is a gallery and also a literary group: they write and publish books.

ETHAN: This is a little unfair! I'm doing the mundane part of this presentation – this is this, and that is that. Thea, you're telling all the interesting stories. So now you start describing what is in the images we are seeing and I'll tell a story or two!

THEA: Ok, so this first painting on the right is Jeff Koons's *Come Through with Taste - Myers's Dark Rum - Quote Newsweek* (1986). It is a very early painting from his first show at International With Monument Gallery called *Luxury and Degradation* (1989). Next to it is the painting *Yellow Slicker Cowboy* (1989) by Richard Prince, one of the earlier prints that I know of. To the left of that is the large Christopher Wool painting, which Ethan has already talked about. To the right of Richard Prince is a small Diane Arbus. Now, Ethan, you be funny and entertaining!

ETHAN: The Christopher Wool painting is a funny and interesting story actually. It became ours about the time that Thea and I started dating. She had another word painting that she loaned to a museum, and the painting came back damaged. We called the insurance company and said, 'you need to pay us for the painting.' Of course this was a terrible experience and the insurance company said, 'we won't replace the painting but we will pay to repair the painting.' So we called Christopher and asked him if he could repair the painting. And he said no he couldn't, because the surface of the painting is so important to him that replicating the surface in the damaged area would be impossible. So he said no he wouldn't do that! So we went to the insurance company again and finally they said they would pay to replace the painting.

THEA: No they did not! And this is why Christopher is such a good human being. Christopher said, 'I won't repair it and I won't take the money for the repair, but I will give you another painting.' And he did! And that was the painting.

ETHAN: The painting has hung in a pride of place position in many of Christopher's retrospectives: at MOCA it was the first painting you come upon at the retrospective there. At the Guggenheim it was also the first painting you come across. So our relationship with him and his generosity paid off because it's a great work of art.

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Installation views of *Junkyard* (2002) and *Poodle* (1991) by Jeff Koons at Westreich Wagner's residence in New York. Photos by Jason Schmidt. Courtesy Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

THEA: And the text is: ‘THE SHOW IS OVER THE AUDIENCE GET UP TO LEAVE THEIR SEATS TIME TO COLLECT THEIR COATS AND GO HOME THEY TURN AROUND NO MORE COATS AND NO MORE HOME.’ It’s a situational text; Christopher is a great admirer and scholar of the Situationists.

ETHAN: This is a painting by Richard Prince. The photograph is by Bernadette Corporation. This image is of the Diane Arbus’s *Puerto Rican Woman with a Beauty Mark*, N.Y.C. (1965) in the exhibition – we gave the Whitney three or four of her works. She is one of the classical American photographers that we admire the most. The graffiti-like painting, *He Said She Said* (2001), is by Christopher Wool and on the left is a painting by Steven Parrino, *Untitled* (1997). Wait, why am I doing this again?

THEA: Oh, sorry! And the work in the middle is a piece by John Dogg. Ethan, can I tell the story about John Dogg?

ETHAN: She’s showing off! She never asks permission to do anything. This is so funny.

THEA: John Dogg was a made-up name – I know this from experience, but it subsequently became historically evident. So ‘John Dogg’ comprised of Richard Prince and Colin de Land. Colin de Land was one of these off-to-the-side New York figures. He had a major reputation as a gallerist, a thinker and ultimate weirdo. Everyone adored Colin. This body of work is called *Ulyssess (Dogg)* (1987), a part of a group of works and one of them was GOD (dog backwards), literally a tire and metal cover that it would presumably travel in.

ETHAN: This continues the same room. The reddish work is *Demonic Options (large format #1)* by Jutta Koether. The painting next to it, *Boogey* (2004), is by Charline von Heyl, the smaller blue painting *Les bisch ja nicht im Stich* (1992) is by Michael Krebber, and the sculpture *Untitled (Locker Sculpture #01)* (2010) is by the Norwegian artist Matias Faldbakken.

THEA: Interesting that the three paintings are all by artists who lived and worked together in Cologne in the eighties. That was where Christopher went to hangout, as that was where the art scene was. He was a very close friend of Martin Kippenberger, as were we, and all of these people were related and dealing with the post-Polke, post-Richter, moment.

ETHAN: This is a closer look at the Faldbakken sculpture. The series of thirteen photographs on the left, *Incident on 9th Street* (1997), is by Christopher Wool.

They are simply photographs of the aftermath of a fire that took place in a studio on the Lower East Side. One day we were out with Christopher and he had his camera with him. I noticed that he didn't focus the way that we focus a camera, he just would have it on his hip. He would take photographs on his hip! He wasn't looking for a perfect photograph; he was looking for another kind of essence, which he achieved. His photography is under-known, but he makes great images. The works on the right are by a Swedish artist called Klara Lidén. What you can't tell is that on the bench of the work *Untitled (Basel Bench #3)* (2011) is a slide machine that projects on the wall. Here is a close up of Christopher's photos. Here is the photograph *Untitled* (1988), a collaborative work by Christopher Wool and Robert Gober. And photographs like *Colorado* (1973) by Robert Adams, *Failed Portrait* (2013) by Eileen Quinlan and *Untitled* (1989) by David Wojnarowicz. The video in the middle is an artist we met in the early nineties, Gary Hill. The work is typically shown in a room this size, projected on a screen. Gary lives in Seattle, and we have two or three of his works in our collection. Before the Whitney show, the curators said there wasn't an adequate sized room to show this work, which is called *Remarks on Color* (1994). The work is a video of his daughter at the age of about seven reading a book she couldn't have understood at that age. So it is this ironic situation where his daughter is reading this text. Anyway we called Gary and told him that the Whitney wanted to screen *Remarks on Colour* once a week in their auditorium. And Gary said, 'why only once a week? Why can't they screen it every day?' And we explained, on their behalf, that there were circumstances that prohibited it being seen every day. So he said, 'why don't you take the Jeff Koons and show it every seven days.' So we went back to the Whitney and said, 'here is what Gary said about showing his work every week.' And finally Gary said, 'I would prefer it is up all the time, it is ok to show it on a small monitor.'

THEA: He's actually not as difficult as he sounded at the outset!

ETHAN: Now we are in the other room and the work above the doorway is *White Marquee* (2008) by a French artist from Paris call Philippe Parreno. The figures on the left are the *Puppets* (2009) by Philippe and Rikrit Tiravanija. The image on the right is a self-portrait by the young artist Alex Israel. And the suite of photos titled *Talent* (1986) is by David Robbins.

THEA: The interesting thing about this room is that it plays on notions of portraiture, and the doubly interesting thing is how curators will see things in a collection that we don't necessarily see. This is one of the reasons that we always felt dedicated to giving the collection, so that it could live in the eyes of other curators and intellectuals and find its importance in the history of art. For example, the David Robbins works are photographs of the then prevailing art people of the early to



Installation view of *Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year it's an Artwork and in December it's Christmas* by Philippe Parreno and *Tête de femme* (1942-1943) by Francis Picabia at Westreich Wagner's residence in New York. Photo by Jason Schmidt. Courtesy Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

mid-eighties and the puppets are all part of Philippe Parreno's group of relational aesthetics. Alex's *Self-Portrait* (2013) is interesting in two ways: one because that is Alex, and two because he's wearing sunglasses. He actually has a business where he designs and produces these sunglasses. They are very popular. Many times you walk around and see people with his sunglasses.

ETHAN: The case of Philippe Parreno will shine a light on the way we go about collecting. We typically try to find work early in an artist career. In the case of Philippe, it was about eight or nine years ago that we first recognized his importance. It's fairly common for us once we respond to the work to want to get to know the person who made something that so moves us and intrigues us. So we got to know Philippe and have since become very good friends of his. Inevitably when we are in Paris we have dinner together and he typically starts the day of dinner with a visit to his studio. That kind of experience of being in an artist's studio, away from the cocktail crowds and the hubbub of other kind of art world activities, allows us to engage with the artist and ask questions and to see how the artist responds. In the case of Philippe, it's normally what he's been reading recently, which is typically piled up on the floor if it hasn't been knocked over by his son who kicks a football around. That kind of experience – the interchange with the artist – is what has defined our life, apart from our family. To hear what the artist is saying, not only about his own practice, but what is going on in the world, commenting on social, political and cultural issues is very meaningful to us. And there are a lot of artists that we have gotten to know, a lot of artists that we both like very much and a few artists that we love. And Philippe Parreno is one that we truly truly love.

THEA: Why don't you tell the truth! He makes the best steak you have every tasted in your life!

ETHAN: Here is a work in the foreground, its title is *Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year it's an Artwork and in December it's Christmas* (2008).

THEA: The paintings behind are so interestingly compared with David Robbins' photographs. All of those paintings are of art world dealers.

ETHAN: So David Robbins photographs, which you saw earlier, are headshots of artists taken in the early eighties, and this is a work of art by Reena Spaulings. It's a commentary on the times because in the mid-2000s, 2009 maybe, the art dealers became so important that the artist Reena Spaulings was making a commentary on the state of the art world so that the subject matter of a work of art would now be not the artist but the art dealers.

THEA: Just before we leave this image, the *Poodle* (1991) on the plinth is also by Jeff Koons. That was one of the last pieces of Jeff's we could buy. We basically decided to celebrate our anniversary by buying it together (I don't know what not doing something together is, we do everything together!). One time Jeff was over for dinner and when he saw the work in our living room he said, 'that is one sexy dog.' It was always a sexy animal for him. It is something that runs through his work, as I said earlier, the notion of everything having to be perfect, clean, rendered precisely, and it has to communicate this kind of sexuality because he feels that this is essential to humanity, in a very profound way.

ETHAN: So again Philippe's *Fraught Times*, Jeff's poodle and a work called *Praying* (1980) by Gilbert and George, two artists that we deeply admire. We had the privilege of visiting them a few times in their studio in London. An experience with Gilbert and George, Thea, I think you'll agree, is like walking into their art. You feel that you are not observing the various works or images that they've made, but you actually feel like you are living in the world of Gilbert and George – in their art.

THEA: They are like a performance, the two of them. Their life is a performance as well. They dress alike each day and complete each other's thoughts; they sit and talk in the most predictable ways unlike the two of us. We are very unpredictable!

ETHAN: Actually yesterday we did an interview here and at the end of the conversation it occurred to me that the way we were completing each other's sentences made me feel like we were Gilbert and George! [Laughter] This is an image of Philippe's Christmas tree in our loft some number of years ago and the small painting on the left is the painting *Tête de femme* (1942-1943) by Francis Picabia. This is the work *Deux Coiffeuses (peut-être pour adolescents)* (2008) by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. And here on the dresser is Thea's reading for a given evening. [Laughter] The painting on the left is *After G. Hobe, Salon Library for the Great Exhibition, 1902, Turin* (2006) by an artist from Glasgow named Lucy McKenzie. The vase of arranged flowers is *Bouquet III* (2004) by the collaborative artists called de Rijke and de Rooij, one of whom passed away tragically a few years ago. The work on the right is *Horological Promenade* (2008) by an artist from London named Pablo Bronstein, we adore him, personally, and his art.

THEA: He actually has an exhibition opening soon at Tate Britain. He is an unusual artist. He stages performances, makes drawings and sculptures, all with a dedication to past architecture, decoration and social manners. This is a good room because the Lucy McKenzie is opposite the Chaimowicz and Marc Camille and Lucy are very good friends and have also worked collaboratively together.



Installation views of *Deux Coiffeuses (peut-être pour adolescents)* (2008) by Marc Camille Chaimowicz at Westreich Wagner's residence in New York. Photo by Thea Westreich Wagner. Courtesy Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner



Installation views of *Chronochrome 11* (2011) by Cheyney Thompson and *Untitled 5* (2012) by Scott Lyall at Westreich Wagner's residence in New York. Photos by Jason Schmidt. Courtesy Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner

ETHAN: In this image you see two works by Simon Starling. The one on the left is a panel called *Weeding Aralia*, and the sculptural work in the center is *Work, Made-ready, In Light of Nature* (2003). In the case of these two works we actually acquired them in the early 2000s and these are among the works (I refer also to the dark panel *Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists relevant to Homo-Social Culture V / American Male Bodies / English Lads / Melancholy* (2007) by the Danish artist named Henrik Olesen) that we never had the opportunity to live with.

THEA: This is a work called *Red Alert* (2007) by Hito Steyerl, a student and sometime collaborator with Harun Farocki. Hito is one of the most exciting, original artists that we've met in the last few years. We saw this piece with Wilfried Lentz, a gallerist from Rotterdam who showed us her work, and we started to read about her and we said, 'we'll take it.' The more you get into Hito's work, the more profound it becomes. If ever you have a chance to read something that she's written or see a performance of hers, it is remarkably fecund and very much of our time. We went on to collect some films of hers and I wish we could buy everything she makes!

ETHAN: One day we were at the Whitney walking through with a group. Let me explain the context: the Whitney put on a dinner for the us for the outset of the exhibition there, and happy to say there were something like forty-five or fifty artists in attendance, including a couple from Paris who took the trouble of flying over to New York just days after the terrorist attacks in Paris. So anyway there are a number of artists at the dinner. It happens that Hito however was not at the dinner, but on this occasion we were walking through the exhibition and saw Hito coming towards us. We are such big admirers of hers and it was a thrill to see that she was delighted to see the way her work had been installed. She's a pretty tough lady.

THEA: We've known her for a fair amount of time; she's been to our house for dinner. She's understated in her expression. When you see her as a performer she is giving it her all. But to see her in the Whitney excited by the show and hugging us I thought, 'no! That is not Hito, that is somebody else!'

We are in the last room now, so you'll be happy to know it is almost over.

ETHAN: This is a work by a woman whose name is Liz Deschenes. We've collected Liz in depth, this is a work called *Green Screen* (2001). The painting on the left is by the young artist from New York Cheyney Thompson, who we got to know around 2002. Immediately we were persuaded by his work and have collected it in depth. He has subsequently introduced us to his circle of artists – artists he is

constantly in dialogue with. When we first started meeting these artists and seeing their work we were both so impressed. I kept on thinking to myself well I get it if a group of seven or eight artists is good, but it's impossible that more than one artist of that group is historically important. I have since changed my mind: the painting to the right is by one of those artists. He happens to be from Toronto but is in New York every two weeks because he is close to these artists. In the last dozen years this group of artists including Liz Deschenes, Cheyney Thompson, Sam Lewitt, Sean Paul, Scott Lyall, Blake Rayne, Eileen Quinlan, Jutta Koether have become very important people in our life, and artists in our collection.

THEA: Cheyney, Gareth James and Sam Lewitt had decided to do a program, which was going to be titled 'Scorched Earth.' It was going to be a magazine and would come out once every month for a year, being bookended at the end of the year. They said, 'we need to raise funds for this magazine,' so we said, 'how can we help.' We decided that we would contribute ourselves and get friends to give a small amount of money in exchange for a limited edition copy of the twelve month magazine. The long and short of it was that they happened not to produce the magazine. However, Cheyney and this group would conduct lectures, performances, and programs every Sunday afternoon. I have to say that my husband is glued to anything with a 'ball' on Sunday (football, basketball, baseball), whatever it is. But he would go every Sunday afternoon to this tiny little place on Ludlow Street where every seat was filled. Mostly we had to sit on the floor, but every Sunday you would be blown away by the program. In one case it was Alex Waterman, a cellist, in one case it was Scott Lyall talking with another group of people. It probably taught us as much as you could possibly learn in a year about most contemporary art that for us has moment. Like we said earlier, there are certain artists that are really high in our regard because of how grateful we are for their time and their attention to our learning, as well as their patience.

ETHAN: This is a close up of the painting *Chronochrome 11* (2011) by Cheyney Thompson. And that's the painting as it hung for years in our living room. That's the Scott Lyall's *Untitled 5* (2012) while that was at the Whitney, and another painting by Cheyney Thompson called *The Production of an Unevenly Distributed Surplus Results from the Facticity of Format and Ground* (2006). To the right is the painting *74-75-C-113x105* (1974-1975) by a French artist named Martin Barré. His career is kind of unusual for us, he's a much older artist who first appeared on the Paris scene in the late 1950s and we didn't know of his work until about ten years ago. Thea was actually telling the story of the work here in Barcelona a few days ago: the two if us were in Paris about ten years ago, and we were going to meet some friends at the Pompidou to see an exhibition and had about thirty minutes to kill in some way, so we were looking through the gallery

guide and saw there was a group exhibition at a gallery called Nathalie Obadia. Included in the exhibition were works by Christopher Wool, so we thought we've got some time so we can go and see what this exhibition looks like. Typically, when we go into an exhibition together, Thea – goes in one direction and I go in another. And so Thea walked to the left and I walked to the right and in minutes we were calling out, 'Thea come here you have to see this' and she was saying, 'no you come here you have to see this,' and it was about the work of Martin Barré. The show itself was an homage to Barré and included works by Albert Oehlen and Christopher Wool. Subsequently we wanted to acquire the work of Barré and we bought two paintings, not this one but two others. We got back to New York and spent time with Cheyney and we said, 'Cheyney we discovered the work of Martin Barré,' – he died in 1993 which is why we didn't meet him. And he said, 'no, no, I told you about that a couple of years ago, I said you have to see the work of Martin Barré!' Well, we became so enthusiastic about the work that we subsequently acquired five or six or seven works by Barré. More importantly, we also decided subsequently to publish a monographic catalogue of his work and as Mercedes said we very often produce artist books. This is a little different, as it is kind of a retrospective of the work of Martin Barré. In researching the material, we got to know Martin Barré's widow Michelle. Today Michelle is one of our closest friends. Thea talks to Michelle virtually every single day, and maybe it's a little exceptional in the personal way that this developed, but it is not entirely atypical of the magic has filled our life. We are not making the claim that getting to know artists personally and intimately is the only way to collect. That is not our claim, it is just the way we collect. We are interested in creative minds, and compelled by what creative people do. We think they are mostly highly intelligent, more intelligent than we are. But we can kind of keep up with them. It has allowed us to see things and experience things that on our own, as wonderful as my wife is, I don't think we could have. We could not have learned and experienced so much without the intelligence and insight and perspective of really great creative minds.

THEA: There is also something to be said about knowing a human being and their interests and passions. It just expands your knowledge. It doesn't necessarily have to be what they are reading critically or what they're thinking critically it is sometimes just about attitude. And you pick it up. That has been the case with many artists and one of the reasons I will defend Jeff Koons until the day I die.

ETHAN: I want to mention that this painting by Barré was executed in the early 1970s and Barré's practice was focused very significantly on the surface of the canvas – he was magical that way. If you look through his work he accomplishes extraordinary images and yet you would only be dealing with two dimensions. Cheyney Thompson's painting is worth mentioning in terms of how he executed

it: what he did was photograph the weave of the linen canvas and blew up or magnified the weave of the linen. With that as his image he then painted the surface onto the surface of the painting. So it is yet another commentary on that age old issue of two-dimensionality.

ETHAN: This is a work by the British artist Keith Tyson. It's called *The Thinker (After Rodin)* (2001). Of course we all know Rodin's sculpture. In the case of Keith's work, Keith manifests the idea rather than illustrates the idea. Keith's thinker is actually the housing of several computers that are continuously working out mathematical problems, so thinking.

THEA: So one computer asks, then the other computer asks and that's why it goes back and forth. When it's turned on you see a blinking light, you know it's on and that they are in the process of asking and answering – the process of thinking.

ETHAN: And that's the Dan Flavin seen from outside of the sixth floor, on one of the rooftops of the Whitney. And now we're done!

THEA: Time out! The only thing I want to say is that the most important thing that we have not discussed is patronage: the reason we gave the work away that we had collected is that we believe in the artists and their historical significance. And if we keep it in a foundation, which we could never have afforded or done, or had given it to a disparate group of children who aren't interested by it, you're not respecting the artist and you're not respecting the work of art and you are not dignifying the importance of the historical essence of each work of art and group of art. We believe from the bottom of our hearts that to own art, to have had the experiences that we've had, has been remarkable. And I wouldn't give it back for the world. Those experiences are ours, we don't have to give that away, but the art, does need to be given away – turned over to the public.

ETHAN: So we hope you have a question or two, and thank you for being so attentive. It's wonderful to be here.

CaixaForum Barcelona, 6th April 2016



THEA WESTREICH WAGNER and ETHAN WAGNER began collecting art individually in the 1980s and have continued their life-defining passion since they became a couple in the early 1990s. They recently donated some 850 works to the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Centre Pompidou. Each institution has described their donations as ‘transformative’. In their book *Collecting Art for Love, Money and More* (Phaidon Press, 2013), which has had a wide impact, they talk about collecting, their history and passions.

THEA WESTREICH WAGNER worked for a number of years as a volunteer in the visual and performing arts before opening her art consultancy, Thea Westreich Art Advisory Services, in 1982. As an advisor she worked with private collectors throughout the United States and Europe, helping build distinguished collections focused variously on modern art, contemporary art, photography, and film and video. In support of her firm’s dedication to research and analysis she assembled a thirteen thousand volume art library, which she and her husband are gifting in large part to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York. The couple handed over ownership of their art consultancy to two long-time colleagues in 2015.

ETHAN WAGNER began his professional career as a senior staff member in the California Legislature. He later worked on several election campaigns. In the mid-1970s he co-founded a public-policy issue advertising firm and an election campaign company, each of which soon attracted a nationwide clientele. In the early 2000s he sold his public affairs business interests and joined his wife in the management of her art consulting firm. Individually and together they have published twenty-four artist’s books, with several new projects underway.

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