

SPRÜTH MAGERS

PROFILE

MONIKA SPRÜTH & PHILOMENE MAGERS

BY ANA FINEL HONIGMAN
PORTRAIT BY ROBBIE LAWRENCE



Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are matriarchs of contemporary art. Their gallery currently has spaces in London, Berlin, and Los Angeles, but it began in the later 1990s when Sprüth mentored Magers and invited her to collaborate on a shared program in Cologne featuring artists Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Sylvie Fleury, and Karen Kilimnik. Although their gallery also represents acclaimed male artists such as John Baldessari, Donald Judd, and Richard Prince, their

program evolved organically from their shared interests, and their artists' own concerns, into a roster representing many of recent history's most intellectually and aesthetically influential and progressive female artists. Revisiting a dialogue we began in *Whitewall*, we met for tea in Sprüth Magers Berlin on the eve of Sherman's 16th solo show at their gallery, to discuss art, activism, feminism, and the future.

WHITEWALL: *When we scheduled this interview, I was excited to carry forward a conversation that we started seven years ago. Today, the week after the Women's March around the world, meeting again feels especially urgent and meaningful. How can women artists be vocal and evoke difference now?*

PHILOMENE MAGERS: It is interesting how our perspective has shifted. A couple of months

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Installation view of "POWER, Work by African American Women from the Nineteenth Century to Now," curated by Todd Levin, Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles (March 29 - June 10, 2017), photo by Robert Wedemeyer.

ago, we thought we had achieved a lot. It felt unnecessary to just focus on feminism. It still mattered to us, but we were focused on many other issues. Now it feels very important to refocus on feminism and women's rights. I am completely pro political correctness. It has led to progressive improvements.

WW: *But those improvements are being recalled and undermined now. What do you think being a woman artist means now?*

MONIKA SPRÜTH: The reality is that there is inequality between men and women. Most women artists are aware of this and understand the necessity to address this publicly and to be a role model for a younger generation.

PM: The different sensitivities are important. Women artists do not transfer economic market structures into the art world that much. I mean for their own production of artworks but also for the art market and pricing.

WW: *In that case, is there a need or value to making political art?*

PM: That is the question! Ever since I started thinking about art, I've been going back and forth asking myself about the necessity of political art. Have you seen the film by Adam Curtis from the BBC called *HyperNormalisation*? What struck me in that movie was his observation that artists in the seventies became spectators. They were passive, like passersby, instead of being rebels and forming a resistance. They would

comment on political issues without physically interfering. They stopped interfering and started taking positions from a distance.

WW: *Thanks to social media and immediate reporting, we've all seen the enormous wealth of extraordinary protest signs at the Women's March. All over the world, the signs were humorous, creative, and even beautiful. It often feels like activism is more artistic than art is politically engaged.*

MS: Yes, this was really great, but I also saw strong political statements in a creative way. What strikes me, and makes me sad, is that so many issues from the seventies and eighties we have to worry about again. I saw the old anti-abortion poster from Barbara Kruger . . .

WW: *I saw that! Her Your Body Is a Battleground work was used in signs around the world. That is really a rare example of an artwork being both.*

PM: Yes! Since I was in my twenties, I've been asking myself whether it is more important to be a political journalist or a political artist. How can we get things moving? I believe art can have a political impact, but its audience is limited. The audience is us. We don't need to be convinced, but maybe we can still help to transport these issues to a bigger audience.

WW: *I don't know about that. There are many collectors whose interest in art, or particular artists' work, is entirely at odds with their politics and behavior in the world. There are many people*

in art's audience who still need convincing, unless they're completely immune to art's message. How much can art do when people with influence live with art without having it inspire their self-reflection or influence their attitudes toward other people?

PM: My confidence in political art is shaken. There are collectors who are deeply involved in art, especially women's art, and some of them voted against women. What does that mean? If only a certain group of wealthy people and intellectuals look at art, and it doesn't even impact those small groups, it's shocking.

MS: Art is mainly a culture for the elite—this is a fact. Even if certain artists are popular, art never has an audience like pop music, but it can initiate discussions and help to create a political conscience.

WW: *Yes, artists should not be insular and create work that only speaks to that microscopic minority.*

MS: You need to be aware of the world. Most interesting artists understand the world's contradictions and complexities. But, as Philomene said, political awareness is so important. Much politically motivated art illustrates ideas that could be expressed better by journalists in a documentary or an article instead. Of course, it is best when artists manage to bring the right idea into the right form.

WW: *I think artists and journalists or theorists work best together. The most meaningful political*

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art needs to compel viewers to question their values and inspire them to research the complexities of different issues or positions.

PM: Yes this is the optimum. Women artists from the eighties like Kruger, Holzer, Lawler, Sherman, and Trockel managed to have a very subtle feminist position in their work . . . this is why men often felt uncomfortable with their work.

MS: Today, younger women artists are more conscious of inequality and they question these imbalances in their artwork. Artists can be very sensitive, so they need to wake up and understand that women can't take anything for granted.

PM: In this last election, young women realized they are not equal. I remember a moment when I started working for a big corporate collection when I was 21. I was the only woman with an academic background in the whole building. The only other women were secretaries, messengers, and women making coffee. They all turned against me because I didn't fit into the hierarchy. My secretary didn't want to work for me. None of them did. They wanted to work for the alpha-animals, not a young woman. I was stunned and confused. That was 30 years ago; I was shocked. But that world still exists today. It is terrible, but I know how young women felt this year. Monika and I want to create an environment in the gallery in which we work with a lot of women; the little universe we oversee will extinguish the laws of inequality.

WW: *We need to look after ourselves first, then the world closest to us. Only next can we expand our values outward. But it is difficult to not feel disheartened. If there is anything positive from all this horror, it might be inspiring an intense dialogue between generations. Younger people are frightened and uncertain about the future, so they're turning to people whose life experiences provide perspective and insight.*

MS: Younger generations of women took it for granted that things would always progress. When I studied architecture, there were a hundred students

but only ten women. Today, it is fifty-fifty. That progress was slow but it was progress. Today we have to be afraid of a backlash.

WW: *The art world was unequal months ago. There are always more women in art classes and studying art, yet men dominate the important galleries, auction houses, academic roles, and other areas of real power.*

MS: There are many female gallerists, but the real power is still with men. This is why it is so important for us to strengthen our position in the global art market and to have galleries outside of Germany in order to be more visible and to take more responsibility. From the beginning we supported women artists whose work we thought was culturally relevant and the past almost-40 years has shown that we were right. We hope that these artists, and the gallery, can become a role model for a younger generation.

PM: It is important to remember that we have only been able to do this because we do it together. Women are still at a disadvantage when they become mothers because they need to take care of their children. There is not enough public support for women. Because Monika and I are both mothers who are working together, we have been able to carry the burden.

WW: Philomene, you said something that I found so interesting at the start. You said that you are "pro political correctness." That term has been misused in public discourse as a weapon against progress and sensitivity. What do you mean by "political correctness"? because I think it's about sensitivity, not censorship.

PM: Exactly! I hate the dry and judgmental political correctness. I think "political correctness" means awareness. It means a certain softness and openness. There are narrow-minded liberals but we need a new political correctness to create new politics.



Clockwise from left:

Julie Mehretu

Untitled

2012

Ink, graphite, and acrylic on linen

36 x 48 x 2 inches

Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

Simone Leigh

Cowrie (Sage)

2015

Terracotta, porcelain, sage, string,

wire, steel

36 x 28 x 28 inches

© Simone Leigh

Courtesy of the artist and Lühring

Augustine, New York

Sonya Clark

Interwoven II

2016

Cotton flags unwoven and rewoven ©

Sonya Clark

Photo by Taylor Dabney

Courtesy of the artist

Right page:

Installation view of "POWER, Work

by African American Women from

the Nineteenth Century to Now,"

curated by Todd Levin,

Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles (March

29 - June 10, 2017),

photo by Robert Wedemeyer.

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