

# DOWN TO A FINE ART

In an exclusive interview with *The Peak*, Iwan and Manuela Wirth of Hauser & Wirth gallery talk Swiss patriotism, Celtic spirituality and hint at expansion plans for the East.

STORY CHRISTIE LEE

**T**he first order of business when I meet one of art's most famous gallerists isn't art, but industrial food production and Swiss patriotism.

"We farm all our livestock, aside from the chicken, which is sourced from local farms," Hauser & Wirth gallery's co-founder and president Iwan Wirth announces when I meet him after a hearty lunch at Roth Bar & Grill, Hauser & Wirth Somerset's in-house restaurant, located deep in the rolling British countryside. The restaurant is named after its architect Björn Roth (son of the Dieter Roth, the late Swiss artist known for his works made of rotting food).

"I really need to know where my meat comes from, as it's being fooled around with so much these days," continues the boyish-looking 47-year-old. "Industrial food production is poisoning you. I don't eat on planes at all." He pauses before adding, "though Swissair is actually pretty good." The gallerist, whose art empire boasts five spaces in Somerset, Zurich, London and New York (there are two spaces in New York but they will soon combine into one), is clearly proud of his Swiss heritage.

"When Swissair collapsed [in 2001 due to a cash shortage], it was a low point for our country. It was supposed to be our flagship brand, our global ambassador!" I interject, pointing out that many would consider Swiss watches to be the country's greatest flagship brand. "Well yeah, that too," he says. "You couldn't imagine that Swiss watches

were once considered a thing of the past. My wife [Hauser & Wirth co-president Manuela Wirth] and I keep giving each other vintage Swiss watches, though my daily [one] is this," he says, gesturing to the Rolex Oyster Perpetual Explorer on his wrist. "The watches from the 20s and 30s, they are divas. I used to trust my Patek Philippe from the 50s, but the hands just wouldn't move. I missed a plane once."

Born in Zurich, Iwan grew up amid his architect father's construction sites in St Gallen, at the foot of the Swiss Alps. His mother was a primary and secondary school teacher who descended from a lone line of northern Italian stone masons who moved to Switzerland at the turn of the 20th century. Iwan's moment of epiphany came in 1976, when he visited an Alberto Giacometti exhibition with his grandmother at Kunsthau Zurich – "I remember reading the captions. It was also my first memory of reading," he recalls.

An exhibition by Jean Tinguely, a Swiss sculptor known for his Dadaist-inspired kinetic sculptures, and a Henry Moore show at a community outreach centre also made strong impressions on a young Iwan. "[The Moore show] was my first time seeing a reclining nude. It was very powerful for me," he says. The Wirth family's extensive collection of Giacometti books and prints underscore an unlikely encounter – Iwan's father had struck up a friendship with the formidable Swiss sculptor as a Swiss Army officer in the late



1960s. "My father used to tell me how much a Giacometti cost back in the day, but he didn't buy any!" he chuckles.

This highbrow early visual stimuli provided fodder for Iwan's first exhibition of his own art. "I was inspired by Moore and Giacometti to make some sculptures of my own," says the gallerist. "Then I used my father's copy machine to make some posters and hung them around the village."

While Iwan's artistic career was nipped in the bud shortly after – "that dream died when I was 10. I knew I didn't have it in me" – he rechannelled his energy into his opening his first gallery only six years later.

"I loved the art world," Iwan says simply. "[Opening] a gallery was a way to be surrounded by art." Training his eye on a Swiss painter by the name of Bruno Gasser, Iwan opened his first art space in 1986. Adroitly straddling his academic duties and gallery business – "it was a one-man show! I did the framing, hung the

**OPPOSITE**  
Iwan and Manuela Wirth strike a pose next to a Elisabeth Frink sculpture at Hauser & Wirth Somerset.

**ABOVE**  
Iwan at Franklin Street, New York, in 1993.

COURTESY (LEFT) ALEXANDER BEER; AND HAUSER & WIRTH





**ABOVE**  
Hauser Wirth & Schimmel

**BOTTOM LEFT**  
The breezeway at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel offers a plethora of exhibiting options

**BELOW**  
Mark Bradford's *When the Hilltop Gets Heavy* takes centre stage at Manuela restaurant



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

## “AFTER THE EXCESSES OF THE EIGHTIES, THERE WAS A GENUINE SENSE THAT THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD WAS NEVER GOING TO RECOVER”

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works and poured drinks during openings!” – the precocious art dealer ran the space for another three years before returning to his birthplace, where he set up a private practice in 1991. A year later, he partnered with retail magnate and fellow art lover Ursula Hauser to open Galerie Hauser & Wirth. Ursula introduced her daughter Manuela to Iwan, and four years later they were married.

In person, Iwan is the more gregarious of the two, while Manuela, who joins us from her office across from her husband’s, is decidedly more contemplative. Where they intersect however, is with the wide-eyed curiosity they still have for the world around them.

Art in the early 1990s was a very different scene to nowadays. The Japanese, who’d been driving up contemporary art prices in the mid-80s, suddenly stopped buying after the plummet of the yen; Europe’s largest art spaces were run by teams of fewer than ten and New York was considered the only global art hub. “When I first moved to Zurich, everyone was saying, ‘what a pity, you missed the greatest party art had ever had!’” recalls Iwan. “After the excesses of the eighties, there was a genuine sense that the contemporary art world was never going to recover.” But the trio gave little heed. And it paid off.

### AN ERA OF CHANGE

In the last 25 years, Hauser & Wirth has risen through the ranks to become one of the world’s largest galleries – not just in terms

of size (it’s a 200-head operation) but reputation, with Iwan and Manuela topping Art Review’s Power 100 List in 2015. In the last 25 years, Hauser & With has amassed a covetable roster of artists, mostly from the modernist and contemporary eras, including the previously “unsaleable” Louise Bourgeois, still-controversial Martin Creed, Eva Hesse and Paul McCarthy and Elisabeth Frink. The latter’s retrospective, which I’d taken in at in Hauser & Wirth Somerset’s Rhoades and Bourgeois Galleries that very morning, is brilliant – having witnessed the horrors of World War II with her own eyes, Frink’s sculptures – beautifully tactile despite of – or perhaps because of – the distorted forms and tattered wings – and eerie *Soldier’s Head IV* in bronze were conceived in a darker period, but the themes they convey – particularly the vulnerability of man – still resonate in these socially turbulent times.

Looking back, Iwan believes that the early 1990s – when the art market was deep in a slump – was also when the art world had its biggest moment. “Things were changing dramatically, politically, socially and economically,” he says. “It was the beginning of a new cycle, and we are still in that moment. The world as we know it today has a lot to do with the social and political changes at that time.”

The art world has also changed dramatically, having absorbed the glitz and grandeur previously exclusive to the entertainment industry; with artists, collectors





and auctioneers becoming celebrities in their own right, and opening nights often hedonistic affairs where champagne is swilled more than art is critiqued.

“The business has lost some of its innocence, a bit of intimacy. [But] we all do it. It’s the story of everyone’s lives,” says Iwan – unabashedly wistful when asked how the industry has changed in the past two decades. “The one thing we regret the most is having less time for our artists. We used to be in artists’ studios once a week, now it’s once a month.” The gallery – which Iwan and Manuela runs with their partner Marc Payot – has long gotten too big to

take in emerging or mid-career artists, though the couple tell me that they’re always adding new names to their personal art collection. Recent acquisition includes a work by Swiss sculptor Loredana Sperini.

Iwan and Wirth has also recently fallen prey to New York’s dog-eat-dog developer’s mindset. Pushed out of their 18th street Manhattan address – “the landlord is tearing it down to build some shiny condominium,” Ivan explains – Hauser & Wirth’s New York operations will soon move to a new home on 22nd street.

As I took my last walk in the courtyard later in the afternoon,

I truly realised the ingenuity of the Wirths’ Somerset space. With one of Yugoslavian artist Djordje Ozbolt’s oversized gnome, a riff on Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void*, shooting off the end of the roof, and a last ray of sunlight catching the sleek surface of Paul McCarthy’s *Henry Moore Bound to Fail (Bronze)* you feel exempted from these waves of change, if only momentarily. After all, the small Somerset town of Bruton where the gallery is based has, in centuries past, housed civilisations dating back to the 7th century.

“The earth is full of artefacts. One of our sons has a metal detector and he’s found hundreds of Roman

**ABOVE**  
Subodh Gupta’s  
*When Soak  
Becomes Spill*  
(2015)

**TOP RIGHT**  
Paul McCarthy’s  
*Henry Moore  
Bound to Fail  
(Bronze)* (2004)

**RIGHT**  
Djordje Ozbolt’s  
*Brave New  
World* (2017)

COURTESY THE ARTIST/HAUSER & WIRTH



**“THE EARTH HERE IS FULL OF ARTEFACTS. ONE OF OUR SONS HAS A METAL DETECTOR, AND HE’S FOUND HUNDREDS OF ROMAN COINS, BRONZE AGE SPARE HEADS, CELTIC COINS AND ROMAN BROOCHES IN OUR FIELDS. BRUTON IS A SPIRITUAL PLACE”**

— Iwan Wirth



coins, bronze age spare heads, Celtic coins and Roman brooches in our fields. [Bruton] is a spiritual place,” Iwan says, gesturing out the window excitedly. “Do you know why the graveyards are much higher than the other buildings?” Before I get the chance to formulate a sensible answer, Manuela jumps in. “Graveyards have been stacked atop one another throughout the years,” she says. Time halts in a place like this, where it has been compressed to such singularity.

The move to their new Somerset home was a decision ultimately made more than a decade ago, when the Wirths, having moved to London from Zurich in 1998, were looking for a weekend house within proximity of London. They found one – a farm on the edges of Bruton – but by the time the extensive restoration was completed, they’d fallen in love with the place. In 2006, they’d made the official move, put their four children into local schools and proceeded to build a property portfolio in the area, the site upon which Hauser & Wirth Somerset is now located being one of them.

“We bought [the farm] without knowing what to do with it,” says Iwan. “I mean, who would come to see art in Bruton? It was pretty much a dead town – there were only two strands of Christmas lights on the high street! We definitely weren’t thinking of turning this into an alternative art space so we could market it as such.” In July 2014, Hauser & Wirth Somerset, complete with a gallery, restaurant, gift shop and farm, opened its doors with Phyllida Barlow’s exuberant sequence of installations, “GIG”. It’s been a highly successful model, one that the couple would, in collaboration with power curator Paul Schimmel, replicate in downtown Los Angeles two years later.



## LOOKING EAST

At a nearby plot – which Iwan says they’d “salvaged from the doomed fate of being turned into a solar panel facility” – Manuela has planted some grapes. “We are producing sparkling wines,” she says, clasping her hands in excitement. “The first harvest will be in three years.” A lifestyle brand, launching this year under a new name, is also in the works. And, as if they didn’t already have enough on their plate, the pair, under their hospitality group Highlands Hospitality, has also recently acquired the rights to a seven-figure restoration of The Fife Arms, a hotel dating back to the 19th century, in the Scottish village of Braemar, where the Wirths have a home. “We got to know the locals and fast became passionate about Scotland’s rich cultural heritage...sadly one restaurant after another has closed and young people are moving to Aberdeen or further south,” notes Iwan. Drawn to The Fife Arms’ fading beauty, it’s the couple’s wish to restore it to its former glory.

Yet, while it appears that the Wirths are conquering the world,

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they are – save for the week when they descend upon the city for Art Basel – noticeably absent in Hong Kong – a place that has seen the likes of Larry Gagosian, Jay Jopling and Emmanuel Perrotin drop million-dollar art shows in the last five years. “We haven’t had a lot of time, with the new spaces in the US,” says Iwan.

The couple recall their first visits to the Frangrant Harbour. “It was a modern metropolis that had some archaic basements,” says Iwan. “You had the Foster building, then you had the wet markets.”

“My first visit was in the 80s, with the other backpackers,” recalls Manuela. “I slept in a youth hostel. There were the Chinese antiques ... and the food! The food was just amazing.”

All that nostalgia might be about to change, with the gallerists declaring 2017 to be their “China Year”. “We’ve done what we could in the West.” Iwan ruminates. “Asia, particularly China, is one of the fastest-growing markets. But I need to find the right set-up and people. I could easily just rent an office in Hong Kong, but



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH



**ABOVE**  
Phyllida Barlow’s *Dock* (2014) installation at the Duveen Gallery in Tate Britain

**FAR LEFT**  
Philip Guston’s *Looking* (1964)

**LEFT**  
Faustro Melotti’s *Con gli specchi* (With Mirrors) (1979)

that doesn’t interest us. If we were to do anything, we’d need the time and energy to infuse it with authenticity.” It’s not all just empty talk of course – the gallery is kicking off its 25th anniversary with a flurry of celebrations in Hong Kong this month: aside from hosting a party at a yet-to-be-disclosed location, where a dozen artists from their portfolio will be flown in, Hauser & Wirth’s Art Basel booth will be anchored by the three artists who’ll be showing in Venice this summer – Philip Gaston is set to open a solo at Venice’s Gallerie dell’Accademia while Phyllida Barlow and Mark Bradford will represent the UK and US at this year’s Venice Art

Biennale respectively. A website (hauserwirth.art) dedicated to charting the gallery’s journey over the last 25 years, will also make its debut during the fair. Prior to that, the couple will drop into Shanghai and Beijing; the itinerary, chock-full of “meetings with collectors and artists”, comes courtesy of Vanessa Gao, Hauser & Wirth’s Director of Asia Development.

So might we be seeing a Hauser & Wirth space in Hong Kong soon? “Who knows?” Iwan answers gleefully. “We might start with a restaurant.”

“Or a bar,” Manuela adds, right on cue.

And that would work marvellously well. ☺