

Perrotin

Emmanuel Perrotin, über Gallerist

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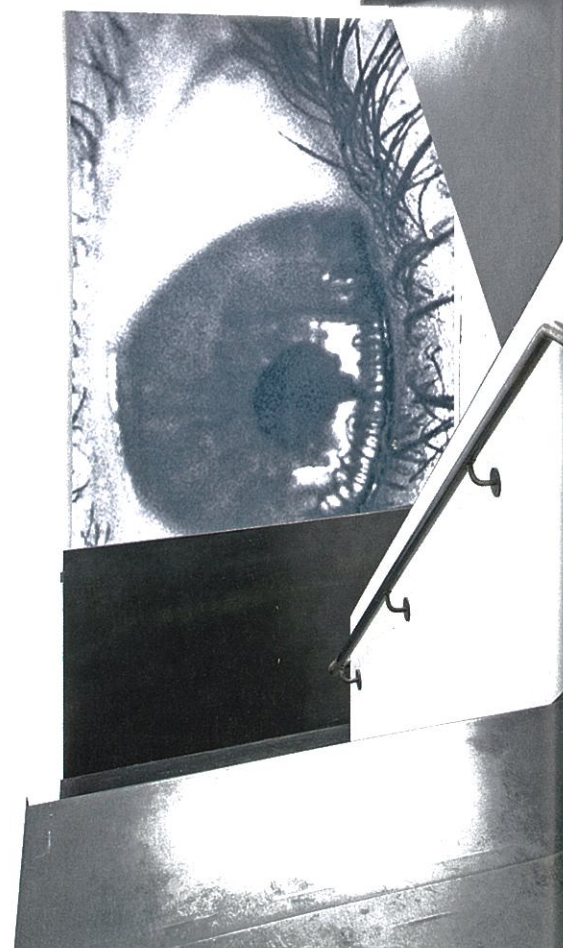
One year after the opening of his New York gallery, his name is emblazoned on a brand-new space in Shanghai. A conversation with Emmanuel Perrotin, whose rapid expansion is making waves in the art world

BY AYMERIC MANTOUX

Ten years ago, Emmanuel Perrotin first appeared in the top lists of the 50 most influential people in the art world. Since then, he has been one of the rare gallerists and Frenchmen to figure in all of the art-scene rankings year after year. This is to be expected for someone who now has six galleries on three continents (Paris, New York, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong and Shanghai) and who represents artists such as Wim Delvoye (who did the opening show in China), Takashi Murakami, KAWS, Maurizio Cattelan, Daniel Arsham and Sophie Calle, just to name a few of the 55 artists in the Perrotin stable. But what's spectacular is the acceleration of the expansion of his galaxy in the last two years.

These developments have led rivals to criticize Perrotin for his "taste for the spectacular," "love of big names" or his "outsize ambition." But most ignore the fact that he did it all by himself, out of his love of art. In the past he has had business partners, but now he alone leads his 137 people team. We sat with this self-made man for a sincere talk about Contemporary art: a business, but above all a passion.







View of the exhibition
of JR "Horizontal,"
Perrotin, New York,
(June 28–August 17, 2018).

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How do you react to being called a "steamroller" in the art market?

It's not a very nice expression. It's even quite pejorative. I know some of the biggest actors in the art business are very sincere people and they are passionate about what they do. Their intention was not to rock the boat and take it all. But, of course, the bigger they are, the easier the caricature. It's easier to attract compassion when you are smaller. But having been a tiny gallery myself when I started, I know perfectly well what I'm talking about. And clearly, there is a difference between galleries like us who have grown and become big, and others who, the moment they open, already are art colossuses, because they are backed financially. One must never forget that opening an art gallery is an adventure. I built mine step by step, year after year.

People who criticize the rise of worldwide galleries such as yours accuse you of emptying the smaller ones.

This is absurd! It would be giving us a power we don't have and would never want. And let me tell you it's even the opposite. The pyramid of interest in Contemporary art has never been so large. There have never been so many artists represented by a gallery who are able to live by their art. And some live very very well. In art history it's a unique period. This is a very hard and demanding job. I understand that some galleries choose to resign considering the difficulties of challenges to overcome. The paradox is that there have never been as many galleries as there are now! The more new galleries appear, the more galleries close.

What has changed then?

Some journalists or curators also tend to forget

that we are not the first ones to open different spaces in various countries. A century ago, the greatest merchants who sold Impressionists, Picasso and a few others, already had two or three offices around the world and relied strongly on family links to do business. Why would things be perceived differently today? Contemporary art speaks to many more people in many more places around the world than before. Today it's much easier with the Internet to unite art lovers.

Hasn't the art market has always been sustained, in one way or another, by the richest collectors?

Certainly the richest collectors are very important in this ecosystem. But we don't work only with them. My gallery represents major artists but also emerging ones. That gives us the opportunity to work on developing artists' careers and to deal with a larger base of new clients. In a way, to be part of art history! We also have bookstores — in Paris, New York, Seoul and soon Tokyo — where you can buy items starting from €5. The audience is pretty large, considering that we have an average of 650 visitors a day in the Paris gallery for instance! We don't do that for the small profit we can expect but to give a louder voice to our artists and the opportunity for them to reach a larger audience.

So you're saying only passion guides you?

We are not there just for the bottom line. Of course we have a passion for what we do. Our main goal is to pass on information to the general public, to collectors, but also public institutions, museums. But also to help produce works that couldn't exist without the support of the gallery. We publish numerous catalogs,

LEFT: © GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI RIGHT: © PHOTO: GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PERROTIN

Takashi Murakami,
 "Untitled (detail)," 2018,
 acrylic on canvas mounted on aluminum frame,
 300 x 1500 cm./ 118 1/8 x 590 9/16 in.,
 (15 panels).



"My job is to enable all our artists to make a living from their work and make sure no one is left behind. And unfortunately we don't succeed every time. We take nothing for granted!"

booklets, organize talks, events, workshops for kids.... I am just a small gallery that has grown. Of course, in my 30-year career, I have opened 18 different spaces, but my job is still the same. The main difference is that I am no longer alone. Amongst the people who work with me, there may be 10 potential gallerists. We defend the artists' work, try to explain to the press why they are important, and to clients why they have to buy them.

Big is still not the same as small!

We do the same thing. There is just a multiplier effect in terms of possibilities. Having various galleries in the world enables the different teams to be more efficient, to work together. We are capable of putting up 5 to 15 exhibitions a year in each town. Now, we are able to envision things we never did before, because we did not have enough staff. When you have three employees, you can't have people specializing in communications or high-tech infrastructures, which is the case now. My passion, my ambition,

my dream was to offer more and more services to the artists. I have been trying to reinvent the job of a gallerist and the way we do it. A modern gallery is not a "salon" like during the 19th century. At that time, the gallery could live on one or two artists who sold well. It's not the case anymore, I can assure you. My job is to enable all our artists to make a living from their work and make sure no one is left behind. And unfortunately we don't succeed every time. We take nothing for granted!

How do you react to the financialization of the art business?

I am not sure I am the best person to answer that question. I am not financed by anyone. I come from a middle-class family, so people never stop asking me who my financial supporters are! That's probably because they can't imagine me building all this on my own. I had an associate in the past from 1992 until she passed away in 2001. It's over now. All I know is I had to fight extremely hard to be where I am now, even

putting my private life in jeopardy, but I have never ceased being a gallerist and doing my job. I have now three partners, long-time directors at the gallery: Peggy Leboeuf, Etsuko Nakajima and Alice Lung. The best associates I have are my dream team.

In less than one year you have opened two new spaces, what's next?

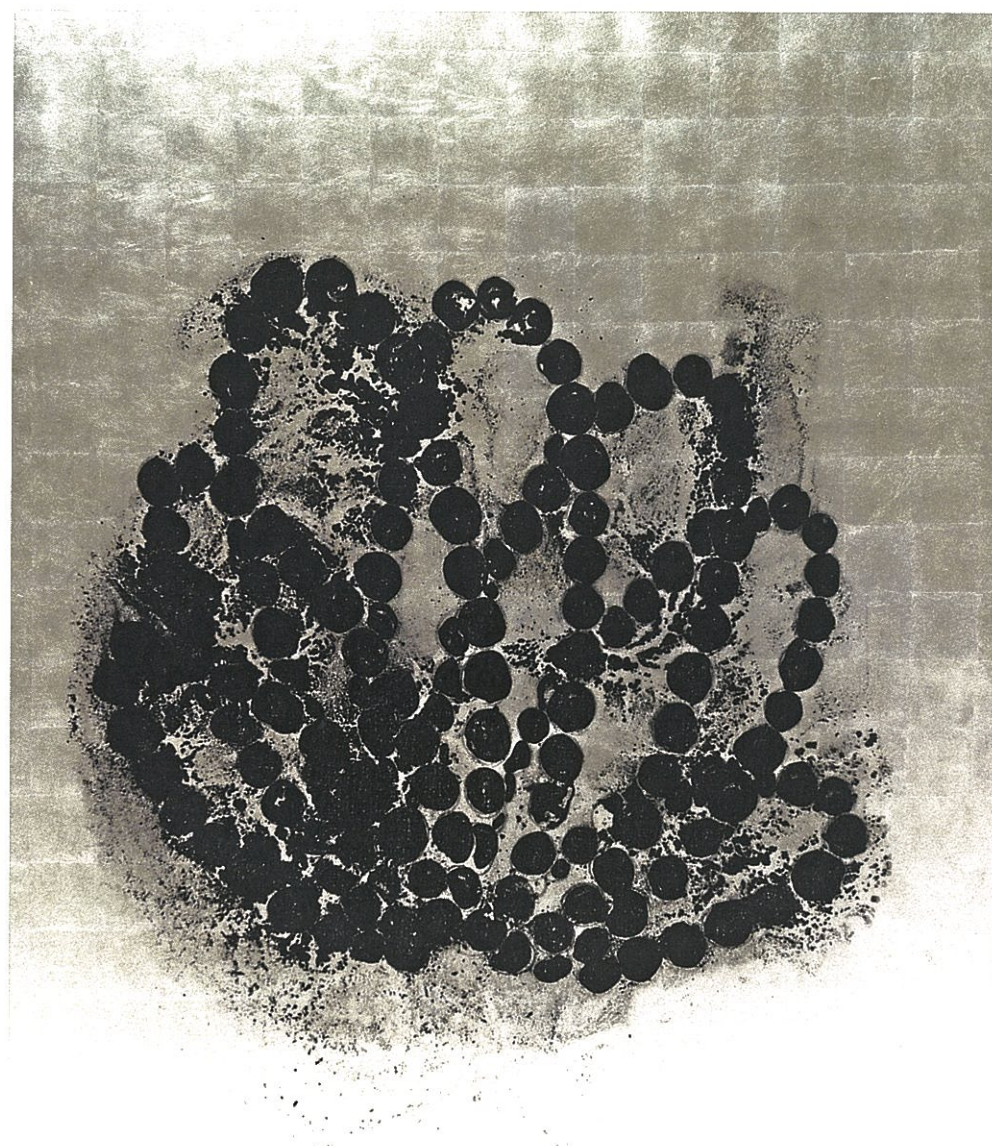
Right now I am in a consolidation phase. I want to test my model to see if it works. I am not in a race. In fact it just happened because I have very solid people in my team in New York, Tokyo and Shanghai and they pushed hard to move on. I just contributed to pushing the movement of my gallery directors who built the strategy for Shanghai themselves. We have been doing fairs in Japan and China for years and the interest for Contemporary art has grown tremendously there, so we felt it was the right moment to open.

It seems crazy, given the size of the galleries you have?

It is. Now we have to digest that and reinforce ourselves on different levels. There are lots of things we need to improve. Our aim is not to have small embassies of a French gallery. We want to prove to our artists that we have a real local tool, with local people who know the market. I now have more foreign staff in my team than French people. In New York, a bigger space was needed, because it's the n°1 hub in the art market and we needed to show our artists we could provide a full service there. Otherwise why advise them to work with us locally? They would have been better served in another gallery.

For example, in Seoul, Jean-Michel Othoniel continues to work with his local gallery. But you know, most artists we work with have very few galleries, because they have grown with us, not because we didn't want them to.

Now many of our artists are very successful and we have the opportunity to exhibit them in many different cities. If I had built the



reputation of my gallery on very established artists, I could claim that I have a very good programming, very recognized, but I would be a big fish in a small pond. There is nothing better than gaining the trust of an artist when his career was just starting.

What interests you when you sign an artist?

I have a very eclectic taste. I am proud to help artists develop their careers, not just sell works quickly. When I started working with Maurizio Cattelan, Takashi Murakami, Daniel Arsham, KAWS, Paola Pivi, I had to fight for a long time

Jean-Michel Othoniel,
"Black Lotus," 2016,
ink on white gold leaf,
lithographic monotype
on canvas,
160 x 120 cm./
63 x 47 1/4 x 15 15/16 in.