Prix Meret Oppenheim 2016

Adelina von Fürstenberg
 Schweizer Grand Prix Kunst
Grand Prix suisse d'art
Gran Premio svizzero d'arte
Grond premi svizzer d'art

Christian Philipp Müller

Martin Steinmann

"The artists are my family."
Samuel Schellenberg in conversation with Adelina von Fürstenberg

A passionate believer that art can transform perceptions, the director of ART for The World has little time for frontiers; she sends her art projects all round the world. From the Geneva offices of her organisation, the founder of the Centre d'art contemporain in Geneva who recently won a Golden Lion for Armenia at the Venice Biennale looks back at some of the key events in her career, and casts a lucid and critical eye over the art world.

Schellenberg

You were born in Istanbul. Do you have any memories of the city?

Fürstenberg

I spent the first nine years of my life there. I had a delightful childhood on the Bosphorus and the islands in the Sea of Marmara. After that things became more difficult: my father suffered from serious heart problems and we had to move to Milan, where an uncle of mine was a cardiologist. Once my father had recovered we settled in Lugano, where he established the first synthetic textile industry in Ticino. It was there that I completed my secondary education before moving on to the University of Geneva.

Schellenberg

Was that your first encounter with Switzerland?

Fürstenberg

No, I'd already visited my parents when I was seven. We went to Graubünden and Ticino but also the Borromean Islands. Since then Lago Maggiore, and especially its islands, has been very important to me. In 2009 and 2007 I completed two lovely open-air projects on the Isola Madre with ART for The World (AFTW). It has a botanical garden where Jaanis Kuusell, Bob Wilson and William Kentridge, among others, created sublime installations that confront nature with culture.

Schellenberg

What did you want to study after you left school?

Fürstenberg

Archaeology. I'd been fascinated by it since my adolescence. I wanted to know about my origins, the origins of the Armenian people (Adelina von Fürstenberg's maiden name is Cilenyan). Every Sunday afternoon I studied the Sumerians, the Babylonians and that whole area of the Middle East—I still have many books from that period. Then my passion turned to the rest of the world, including India and the Aztecs. Archaeology allowed me to understand who I was and where I came from. I couldn't find that kind of grounding through the painful history of the Armenian genocide; I had to look to a much older past. Those explorations laid some very fertile groundwork for my future activities in the art world. Over the years I came to understand that before you can listen to others you have to learn to listen to yourself, even if it's not always easy to do so.

Schellenberg

So last year at the 56th Venice Biennale, the Armenian Pavilion that you curated was evolving a past that you'd tried to escape from.

Fürstenberg

That project was extremely tough for me. For the first time in my life I had to deal not with a glorious past conveyed via the history of my origins but with real suffering and the reasons for the Armenian diaspora.

Schellenberg

Your exhibition talked about identity, but also about adaptation, resilience and reconcilation.

Fürstenberg

It was the most difficult exhibition of my life. I had to balance the past, the cultural diversity of the countries the artists came from, the demands of the diaspora and the mother country. The very specific context of a biennial like Venice, and my reputation as an international curator, I think I managed to stage a fine exhibition that was hailed by the press and visitors, and received the Golden Lion for Best National Participation in the Biennale. But I must admit that if at some time in the future I had to do another exhibition with Armenian artists I'd like to do it there, in Armenia, and not necessarily focus on issues of diaspora, memory and identity.

Schellenberg

Coming back to archaeology: why did you want to study it?

Fürstenberg

In Rome, at the Academy, but my parents didn't agree. Because I was their only daughter they sent me to Geneva, where my aunt Melinde lived with her husband Richard Gueldi, the linguist. It was an extraordinary family, with intellectuals and poets who were all heavily involved in the social issues of their time. That gave me a different vision of the one that demanded engagement. I embarked on my archaeology studies but I found it all a bit frustrating, because it seemed to me all I was doing was running through the list of Pharos [daubs]. I wanted to use some action and quickly decided to opt for political science instead.

Schellenberg

Why that field?

Fürstenberg

This was the period around May '68 and 'imagination in power'. Political science had a dimension of openness to the world that allowed me to take an interest in and pursue different areas. But I only got half a degree, because I very quickly made a final choice to dedicate my life to art. Thanks to some friends from university I often went to Amsterdam, where one day I met a curator of the Stedelijk Museum, Marie Bloem, who offered me the chance to do some internships in her museum. A new world opened up to me; I got to know Gilbert & George, Markus Raetz, Claes Oldenburg—extraordinary artists. And I spent...