

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Silvie Jacobi

RP: Hello Silvie, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. You were born in Leipzig, Germany and moved to London to study painting at Wimbledon. You then decided to undertake a PhD on arts schools and artistic communities. You researched this between King's College London and Humboldt University Berlin, being awarded your doctorate in 2019. I wonder if you could tell us a little about what first motivated you to undertake this research and what your discoveries were?

SJ: While studying at Wimbledon I learned how fine art education was largely self-directed and at times quite isolating, being in the studio and working out an individual practice with mostly internal input as the lectures and technical learning was minimal. However, the art world surrounding my art school experience was vast, surrounded by London in the post-YBA era. At the same time, I was fortunate to have studio mates in the year above mostly, who I am close friends with today and who I socialized with and went out with to private views. The self-directed practice of studying was in stark contrast with what I have heard about the study practice at Leipzig Academy back home, where you have foundation studies for two years as part of a five-year diploma programme, which grounds you in various techniques and practices including drawing, film making and graphic design. You can see how this impacts the student community not just through the work they make, but also the initiatives that grow into the urban areas through artist-led spaces.

Somewhat disappointed by the lack of academic learning and with an eager interest in artistic livelihoods and spaces, I decided to pursue a Masters in Geography. In this pursuit I found out how little research there was around art schools and their impact on generating local art scenes. I wanted to fill this research gap but at the same time understand more about the dynamics around artistic learning/education as place-based education. As the art student is located in a place for the time they are enrolled in art school, in which they engage with a material practice which grounds them in place. Painting in particular is a material as opposed to a digital practice, and requires a physical setting.

RP: How fascinating Silvie. My own experience of an art education in the UK back in the 1980's was also much as you describe – very self-directed and with little technical tuition. From the fine art perspective this seems to have been exacerbated by the arrival and wide spread adoption of abstract painting. These early pioneers of abstract painting were of course grounded in a technical training. However, the second generation appear to have largely abandoned it.

Relating to your observation of friendship groups, I was always fascinated by something Frank Auerbach once said – that “artists always come in gangs.” This I think very much relates to your study on artistic communities. As artists do need others to talk to and work on their ideas with. In the past artists used to move to the poor parts of city centers when they were starting out, like Chelsea in

London or Soho in NYC. They could then be close to the action yet pay low enough rents to remain free to experiment. As the areas grew in artist numbers they became more fashionable and new wealth moved in. Thus, forcing the next generation of artists to start over in new areas like Shoreditch and Brooklyn. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century though all parts of all cities have now become so expensive that artists are moving out to the countryside. I wonder if you have studied this phenomenon and if so, what you have noticed about the impact it has had on the artists and their creativity? Has it led to a more dispersed activity or have artists found other ways to group together?

SJ: The dispersal of artist communities to the peripheries of cities or even to the countryside is an inevitable impact of gentrification. Often, I have seen how artists have been instrumentalized as part of gentrification by working with authorities or developers to take over buildings low cost and benefit from affordable studio spaces for a short time up to 18 months, after which many buildings are torn down. Some of the larger studio providers in London have secured buildings either by being given long-term leases by developers or by purchasing properties a long time ago, and then taking them off the market. In Berlin the situation is less clear. From what I heard from Berlin-based artists, the city never really had such a large network of artist studio providers as for example London has. Leipzig has a much stronger reputation for studio provision, as artists are more commonly making large physical works as opposed to the more music and digital arts-based scene in Berlin. I think digitalization has also stretched the boundaries of geography of artistic production and networks. Some of my research focused on how place is inter-connected, with artists often navigating between places of production and exhibiting, and how art scenes are in fact stretched across places. So, a Leipzig scene can for example be found in Berlin, or vice versa surrounding students from a specific course who meet in either of these cities.

RP: That is so interesting. It relates closely to something which has begun to interest me over the past few years. That is, when one looks historically, we notice most cultural output is defined by geography. Whether this is language, cuisine, architecture or art. We see this in countries like Japan, China, Korea, France, Italy, Mexico and so on. Yet over the past few years there has been a growth in a global cultural identity. We might think of say Gay culture, Black culture, Hollywood films and fast food. I think some call it hyper culture while others might say it is a form of American imperialism. My sense is there is a bit of a competition going on between the two. Is this something you have noticed and if so, what are your reflections on it?

SJ: The art world has undergone a major global expansion towards the east, and currently sub-Saharan Africa. You see more shows in London that include artists from these regions of the world, however it is still from the perspective of a western gaze with the way the work is curated in a standard exhibition format with a catalogue. I was always intrigued how in the 90s East Germany has become part of this globalization process, as they didn't have an art world before reunification. Then painters like Neo Rauch become incredibly popular on a global market, and in particular the US. So yes, there is a pull between global and local, which is used to carve out identities of artists and their practice, but also the selling potential of artist's is enhanced by being associated with certain places and art scenes.

I have observed how there is more of an interest especially in painters to understand what regional practices are, such as how art schools can nurture certain ways of teaching so that it influences a style of painting, very much following the New Leipzig School principle where you have a number of successful professor-practitioners who nurture students into the scene.

In terms of hyper-cultures I think they are more prevalent in art practices that utilize digital practices and forms of consumption, as I have seen these impacting aesthetic practice across the UK and Germany, whether that's in fine art or design. I think generally the art world has become less politicized and activist than perhaps in previous generations, and to become or to sustain oneself as an artist is now more challenging than ever, given the cost-of-living crisis and challenges in many countries now to speak your mind. I would like to understand more about the role of local sub-cultures in connection with art scenes, and how they cross-fertilize.

RP: This brings up something quite interesting. Many people talk about the "art world" yet it has largely remained unquantified. There is a vague sense of it being a loose connection of commercial galleries, international museums and critics and curators who promote a globalized art. An art without boundaries whose primary concern is to use art objects as a vehicle for international investment. This is centered in the western world and nowadays aligns itself largely progressive beliefs. If an artist can access this world they can then become very wealthy.

Does this ring true to you? And might you have a more comprehensive understanding and description of the "art world" you can share with us?

SJ: A surface-level understanding of the art world would be thinking it is one unit, which defines itself through white cube gallery spaces worldwide and a jet-setting elite whose status is bolstered by navigating this world. We can develop a much deeper and surprising understanding of art worlds (yes, plural) as a dynamic sociological and geographical concept with multiple identities. It is not just the social norms, roles, and institutions that define art worlds, but through the geographical angle we can learn about its physical constructs and boundaries, also referred to as art scenes. There isn't just one art world, as it is made up of small networked art worlds, which are local and global at the same time. Boundaries are always dynamic in these and recurrently negotiated by specific art practices, for example.

RP: That's really interesting Silvie, the idea of a variety of different art scenes. I think this could be very helpful and encouraging for many new and emerging artists as they seek to find a way in the world with their own practice. Especially with, as you mention, the cost-of-living crisis. So, in essence, rather than asking the question "how do I break into the art world?" the new artist could be thinking about the kind of art scene they would wish to join or where their practice may best fit. It's a much more positive way of looking at things.

Given that with the cost of living crisis it is becoming harder for artists to make a living, do you think there will be an evolution in art which pulls away from globalization? Or do you think the draw of the international scene will always be the most intoxicating?

SJ: I think art world participants including artists as producers, have already and will be navigating multiple places to show work, advance their practice and build social environments for artistic production. Virtual spaces like Instagram have enabled a way of connecting and sharing work seamlessly, and attract audiences to new places. I think the strength of the art world is that it transforms places, whether for short term art festivals and fairs, or long-term through economic investment coupled with art gallery developments, such as in Margate, for example. I think it is this discovery of new places and spaces, whether within global cities or smaller towns that are a breath of fresh air, as they are rooted in artistic practice that is artist-led and not subsumed by any secondary markets that turns art into a gimmick of consumerism. The international art scene at art fairs is a level of an art world that caters a market of elites that have very little to do with the art world of artistic production that transforms places and spaces, in my view. It would be great if some of the wealth of these elites would be distributed to more artists, so they can use their skillsets to develop more transformative art projects on the ground. I suppose through collecting works, they sustain many artistic careers, but not all practices are easily collectible and need further investment – thinking about socially engaged practices and arts education.

RP: That seems a really positive place to end. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us Silvie. It has been really fascinating.

**Interview completed on 31 October 2024**