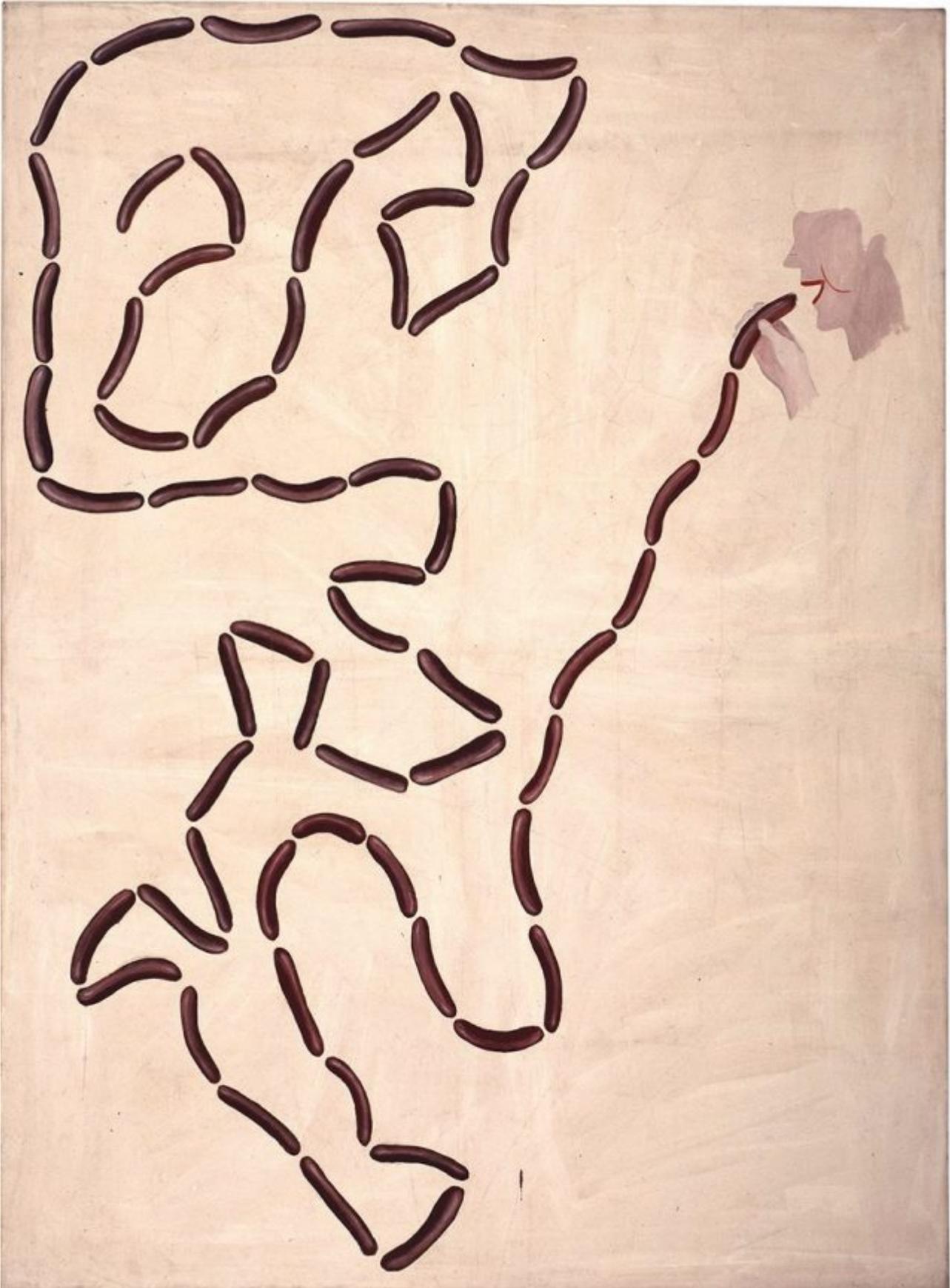


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Get Your First Wurst at Noon

Rules for Art Basel



Sigmar Polke, *Der Wurstesser (The Sausage Eater)* (1963). Friedrich Christian Flick Collection © The Estate of Sigmar Polke/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

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I have been attending [Art Basel](#) since the 1980s and—over the course of countless miles walked around the Messeplatz—have honed my technique. Here are my top tips for previewing one of the world's most important Modern and contemporary art fair.

Rule #1: During the first four hours of opening day, don't stop to talk

Keep your head clear by remaining in continuous motion. Weave in and out of every booth in sequential order so you can efficiently see as much as possible before all the good stuff is sold.

Rule #2: Much of the great stuff is already sold before the doors open

In the past 10 years, the vast majority of great things I've acquired at Basel were works I was already made of aware of in advance of the fair.

Rule #3: Don't be a preview junkie

More and more galleries are sending out previews of what they're bringing to the fair. But usually the most special things are already on hold, so while previews can make you feel like you have a psychological gain, you're not really at any actual advantage over other buyers.

Rule #4: Make a choice

Choose whether to begin on the first floor or the second floor

Rule #5: If you see anything appropriate for a client, put it on hold

Call or text the client so they can go and look at it. But don't get stuck in negotiations in these critical early hours, unless your client is ready to close.

Rule #6: Get your first wurst at noon

You don't want to waste time waiting in line—which can take longer than viewing a whole aisle of booths—so go as soon as it's legitimately lunch-time. Eat quickly and get back on the floor. If you are truly dedicated to scanning the floor within the first few hours, take a snack bar (I have had several different favorites throughout the years).

Rule #7: Establish the rules of constant motion

Make sure your clients and team are clear on the rules of play. If there's that one client who can go with the program and keep up with you, not slow you down and knows you well enough not to consider you rude when you keep moving, then take them along (you will usually lose one another within the first 30 minutes, maybe even the first five). For example, if you work with polite Texans who are obliged by culture to reply to a "How are you?" with a stop and a lengthy pause to chat, don't slow down. Let them know the first time this happens that you are moving on. After that, it is up to them to keep up with you. Also, encourage them not to wear flashy clothes that will cause them to be even more easily spotted—inevitably resulting in those unwelcome lengthy pauses.

Rule #8: Bend the previous rule sometimes

Make sure your client understands that you can break the rules of constant motion—because usually to put something on hold, you have to talk.

Rule #9: Work most closely with dealers who play by similar rules

They will appreciate that your need to be succinct also serves their need to deal with everyone important who enters their booth—and everyone is important, to someone, even if principally to themselves. (This also saves you from the occasionally shattering reality that there is always someone more important than you). Which leads us to rules ten and eleven.

Rule #10: There is always someone more important than you

Don't take it personally. Equally, don't try too hard to make yourself that person. Some things you can't simply buy your way into, even though money talks a lot.

Rule #11: There's usually a reason why some people have time to talk

Chances are, those dealers who seek to engage you in too lengthy a conversation in the opening hours have property that will not be of interest to you.

Rule #12: Don't be disappointed when everything you covet is already sold

Except for works costing above, say, \$10m, the choicest works have already been offered to specific clients before the fair opened. Even if not, some galleries may make it appear that way.

Rule #13: Go into the booths of galleries you are unfamiliar with

Some of the most important acquisitions I have found for clients were works that fell outside our then-current areas of focus. They were those door-opening Eureka moments that can only happen at a fair, where you find yourself in the path of things you would ordinarily not know to put yourself in front of.

Rule #14: Art fair time is the opposite of dog time

A day of normal time is the equivalent to an hour at a fair. Respect galleries' need to transact. If you abuse this rule, your rights to put work on hold will be taken away.

Rule #15: Embrace chaos

The fair is too crowded nowadays. You will not be able to stick by these rules. Usually, before I have finished the first floor, my ability to focus and see has succumbed to the stops and conversations. And, by then, a seat at the gallery desk is a welcome break—unless someone more important than you is already in that one empty chair.