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Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Transcript #60 David Zwirner Needs No Introduction



Guest David Zwirner. Photo by Matthew Magelof

Published 6 June 2019 in [Podcast Transcripts](#)

Charlotte Burns: Hello, and welcome to *In Other Words*, where we cover everything you ever wanted to know about the art world but didn't know who to ask. I'm your host Charlotte Burns and today I'm joined by David Zwirner, who founded [his gallery](#) in New York more than 25 years ago and now has bases in New York, London and Hong Kong.

David Zwirner: *I feel very much aware of the fact that we've grown quickly, and I want to be really smart moving forward, and not do things that I regret. It's quite easy to do that when you have momentum.*

Zwirner has changed the way the gallery business is run and regularly tops lists of the most powerful people in the art world.

We're also joined by Allan Schwartzman, who's the co-founder of Art Agency Partners and a chairman at Sotheby's.

Allan Schwartzman: *There are certain artists for whom we would never do a purchase without actually seeing the work, but that has to do with the experience of the work.*

Before we get started, here's your regular reminder to visit [artagencypartners.com](#), where you can subscribe to our bi-weekly *In Other Words* newsletter. Now, onto today's show.

Thank you both so much for being here.

I was looking at your 25th anniversary catalog, David, and you write in here how you were researching the soon-to-be-opened gallery in 1992—the gallery opened in 1993—and you received the 25th anniversary catalog for [Konrad Fischer's](#) gallery in Düsseldorf. You wrote about the impact of that on you, this ultimate artist-centric space and said that for you, the message was simple: “Pick your artists well, make every single show count, rarely schedule group shows and most importantly, be loyal to your artists and work especially hard to earn their loyalty in return.” Are they the foundational principles of the David Zwirner gallery?

David Zwirner: Absolutely. It really is the bedrock of what we do: try to do good shows and work hard for our artists and make sure that their message and their work is seen and understood.

Charlotte Burns: You moved here for a year when you were 14, didn't you?

David Zwirner: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: I read a great thing about how you became the star soccer player at the school you were at on the Upper West side. You said you could take the ball from anywhere in school because nobody knew how to play the game.

David Zwirner: That is correct. The soccer coach was a very tall African American man who was really a basketball player. And I was able to put the ball between his legs every time. And the rest of the Americans were just discovering the sport and I had a lot of fun. It was actually an incredible, wonderful school. Walden High School. It's no longer there. They were very, very liberal—incredibly liberal and brought forth a whole bunch of great actors, [Matthew Broderick](#), [Kyra Sedgwick](#). I was playing with the Beastie Boy drummer, I forget his name right now.

Charlotte Burns: [Mike D](#)?

David Zwirner: Exactly, Diamond, whose dad was a [famous art dealer](#). So, it was a great, great experience that year in New York. I met my wife.

Charlotte Burns: Oh, right! Amazing.

David Zwirner: Exactly.

Charlotte Burns: So, it seemed to me that that was in a way, a kind of fun metaphor for the gallery that nobody else knew how to play the game in the way that you did, by which I mean, you've taken an existing structure—

David Zwirner: Oh, Charlotte, that's very clever of you and I'm going to run with that moving forward. That's a lovely metaphor.

Charlotte Burns: You're going to run with the ball?

[Laughter]

David Zwirner: Except I don't know how fast soccer gets in this country, even today.

I like the soccer metaphor, but I think you're overshooting a little bit because what we do is a giant piece of teamwork and you're really not in a vacuum. You're actually constantly connected, and I think social skills, people skills are also bedrock of what we do. I'm sitting here with one of my great colleagues and great clients, we've known for what? 20 something years, Allan Schwartzman. It's really one of those things that, if you just want to take the ball and dribble alone through the whole field, you're not going to get anywhere so you got to pass it and you got to pass it plenty.

Allan Schwartzman: Very often, more often than not, the person whose name is on the door is the person who's in charge and the person who makes the major decisions. But from the start, every director at David's gallery has had a significant presence and authority. Everything is oriented toward serving the client in the best way.

Charlotte Burns: You've worked with management consultancy over the decades, beginning in 2006 and facing these questions of how you restructure a growing organization, and deal with the new challenges of that kind of rapid growth. And you said, in one interview I read: “For example, compensation and recruiting tools are crucial, and our industry isn't set up like that.”

You seem to have consciously tried to bring in those models to the art world—which is not very good, usually, at HR and recruitment and those kinds of things.

David Zwirner: Yes, I mean one of the hallmarks of the art world—and Allan just touched on it—is that they really have a “mom and pop” quality. It's usually a proprietor or somebody who has a vision for a certain type of art or a certain group of artists, and they will hold their vision pretty close to their chest and run the gallery like a little kingdom or queendom.

I felt, quite early on, that that's very limiting and you really have to bring strong people into the gallery and delegate decision-making power. I got very, very lucky because I found wonderful people early on that are still with the gallery, over 25 years later. They helped me grow it. So, I thought if there are all these great thought models out there used in the corporate world: why not find out what they are and see whether something's applicable? Many things are not applicable because we are not a corporate environment, but a lot of good ideas you can take and run with them. We've done that.

Charlotte Burns: What would you say has been one of the most impactful ideas that you've taken or models that you've adopted?

David Zwirner: Retention is probably absolute key. How do you keep great people? How do you motivate them? How do you stimulate them? How do you remunerate them, so they feel that they are at the top of their class in our field? And of course, we have decided to bring some of the colleagues in that worked with us as partners, make them partners. We have five senior partners; three partners, so eight partners all together. I certainly couldn't do what I do without them.

Charlotte Burns: You opened in New York in 1993, and that was in the middle of a recession. The next big move was really [partnering with Iwan Wirth](#) in 1999, and then in 2002, you moved the gallery from Soho.

Then after that, there was [a period of rapid expansion](#) beginning in around 2012 with the London office; 2013, the New York office opened the five-story building to mark the 20th anniversary; and in 2017, a new Upper East Side space; and in 2018, the two floors on the H Queen's building in Hong Kong.

That's kind of a lot of rapid growth concentrated in the past six years, in tandem with growth in the art market. How do you manage that?

David Zwirner: It felt much more organic as it was going on. We sort of did a project every other year. You're looking at the results but of course, the planning, the finding of space, the purchasing of property takes much longer, so this really a ten-year project.

I guess, without consciously knowing it, I really felt ten years ago that there was a huge opportunity for me at different levels in the art world. Some older galleries were retiring. I felt there were changes afoot that I could take advantage of and so we started going and then of course, expansion fuels expansion. You have a good idea and you execute it and it turns out well. You want to go somewhere else. At the same time, I think there's huge risk. There's definitely a 'too big' possible, so we want to make sure we are very smart moving forward.

Allan Schwartzman: How big can a gallery get?

David Zwirner: To be totally honest, I don't think it should get a whole lot bigger than the scale and size we have. And you always have to go back to what the artists really want. That's really what should drive your expansion. Shouldn't be an ego-driven expansion. It shouldn't be just a market share grab. It should really be what is the logical next step for the artists that we serve, that we work with? And right now, for sure, they want exposure in Asia, so having a gallery in Hong Kong was almost necessary. We got very lucky, the H Queen's building is beautiful, very conducive to what we do, so we found a good home there.

Right now, I'm thinking about Europe. I have a gallery in Europe as of this moment but as of October, my gallery will no longer be in Europe. It'll be in London and in England. So, I'd like to be in Europe as well and I think so would the artists that I work with.

Internally, I get a lot of pressure. A lot of folks that work in the gallery would like us to open on the West Coast, but I'm not quite there yet conceptually. But I think those are the things that might make sense in the future, but just doing it because one can do it would certainly be a mistake.

Charlotte Burns: When you talk about Europe, are you circling around a particular place? Are you thinking of France or Germany, Italy?

David Zwirner: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: Anything else you can tell us?

David Zwirner: No.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: And the West Coast, why aren't you there yet? What's your thought process?

David Zwirner: It's a very strange emotional thing that maybe doesn't make even sense to talk about and you can cut it

out if you feel like it. But I was very, very, very connected to the West Coast when I started my gallery. Really the artists that made the gallery, [Jason Rhoades](#), [Toba Khedoori](#), [Diana Thater](#)—they were working on the West Coast. I flew there every month, more or less.

And then when, in 2006, Jason Rhoades passed very unexpectedly. He was not just an artist of the gallery but really a close friend and for me, an especially important artist because he was such a great, innovative, wonderful thinker. It's been much harder for me to go there. And that's now a long time ago, so you could say get over yourself, which I think I am. But for a while, I just wasn't like, "Let's jump on that plane and go to the West Coast." I guess that's a not very business-y answer, but it's sort of an honest answer.

Charlotte Burns: I was working at Hauser & Wirth in 2006 on the [Jason Rhoades show](#) and it was such a shock. He was such an interesting artist, who had so much more to give.

David Zwirner: Yes, I think he would've been a leader right now. He was sort of like a [Joseph Beuys](#) figure. A figure that's transformative. He was never a market-focused or driven artist. He was really somebody who thought much bigger than the collector's home. He thought about what art can do, the transformative power of art and I think the way I look at art, to a large extent, I was taught by hanging out with him. So, he was a really important part of my coming of age as an art dealer or gallerist, I should say.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, that makes sense.

You've had long-term relationships with almost all the gallery artists. The only notable defection was in 2001 when [Franz West](#) went to Gagosian. In other profiles of you, people have spoken about the impact that that had on you as a gallerist, that you became more interested in selling and becoming more competitive as a gallery. Is that true, or is that a simplification?

David Zwirner: When it happened, the gallery was young. It was 1999, 2000, so we were just seven years old. And it was traumatic. I mean, it's an understatement. He was our most successful artist. We worked our butt off to get him an international audience. He was kind of a star locally with curators. And then he did, which in hindsight makes perfect sense, he said, "Okay, David, you did a great job but now I need a much bigger gallery." So, he just kind of stepped off and moved to the Gagosian gallery.

First, I had to digest that as sort of just a tough blow, a body blow, but of course it also set me straight. I realized, if I want to work with the best artists I have to have one of the strongest galleries. And I have to grow to do that. So, it really was an amazing wake-up call. While it was incredibly difficult it was also kind of great, in hindsight, because it changed the course of what we were doing.

Charlotte Burns: It was a formative experience.

David Zwirner: Exactly.

Charlotte Burns: When you first began in 1993, I read that more than 95% of the sales revenue came from the gallery shows. You said this in the [Wall Street Journal](#) last year. You also said in that same interview that the gallery last year had made around 1,400 sales for well above \$500m, and that just around half of those sales were derived from the shows, with a remainder divided between art fairs and private sales. That's a huge shift in several ways, it's a huge shift in the volume and also the way of doing business. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

David Zwirner: Yes, I mean, it's been a journey. We started with exhibitions and sales from exhibitions and now I want to think of it as a third; a third; a third—meaning a third of our business is generated by the exhibitions; a third is generated by the fairs; and a third is generated by outreach to clients, offers on specific artworks or things that happen in the physical viewing rooms.

Really interesting is what's happening right now we are trying to understand better how we can engage the [online platforms](#) for our business. We've seen in the last two years, since we've developed an online strategy, crazy growth there. So, I think, looking forward, it's going to be I would say, 10% to 20% online and then the rest will divide itself between the brick and mortar parts that we're doing.

Allan Schwartzman: Could you talk more about the online growth? Because this is an area that so many in the field saw as having a cap to what could be achieved there, but clearly you're moving forward in a more active way.

David Zwirner: I was joking in 2017 that we were dabbling. The truth of the matter is we stopped dabbling. We really have a team in place. We are very serious about it. We've done, I think, 40-something online viewing rooms. They really are now increasingly thought of amongst us in the gallery as a sixth space—I'm counting my physical space—it's really a gallery. We are curating what we offer. We are more and more ambitious in what we offer, and I hope—and we're not there yet—we're working closely with artists on what we're presenting.

I would like to see that artists see that as an opportunity to make original work, work that has not been seen or perceived for this sixth gallery and maybe even things that we can't sell. I'm very open to that, too, and artists haven't—they're circling around. So, that's going to happen, too.

Allan Schwartzman: So how much of the online clientele is existing clientele and how much is new?

David Zwirner: So, that's what's most encouraging. I knew you were going to ask me, so I got the numbers today: 52% of our sales are to new clients. So, we are rapidly approaching an inflection point where this is a much better way for us to work, in terms of finding new clients, than running around the world and going to far-flung places and doing art fairs there.

I think the branded art fairs are going to be great and safe, whether that's Frieze or Basel, but the ones in smaller cities and maybe secondary fairs, they're going to have a harder time attracting those galleries that take their online business more seriously.

Charlotte Burns: And when you say it's 52% new clients, is there a geographical leaning to that?

David Zwirner: There is. And, of course, with online business comes great data. I give you one fact that was shared with me today of the ten largest sales that we've done over the last 18 months were all made to clients that are not in places where we have galleries. So, we're obviously reaching out and that's the argument: there's commerce, but there's also the idea of reaching a new audience for our artists in places that we can't go to.

Charlotte Burns: How are they finding you?

David Zwirner: Of course, there's all kinds of digital outreach that we're doing. They're finding us through the various activities that we're engage in but to be honest, we got to do more. There's a whole other round that we will have to tackle.

We're really excited about our next online viewing room, [Basel online](#). We're essentially creating a parallel art fair that will be living online only. We'll have a much higher price point objects. We've sort of been much more conservative when it's come to the price point, and that's been a good strategy because I feel we have real organic growth. But now we're trying an online art fair model that has an aggregate of close to \$5m of art on it. So, that'll be a very interesting experiment.

Allan Schwartzman: Are there price points beyond which you cannot sell online, where the live experience is essential?

David Zwirner: I think you can sell all kinds of stuff online if you engage your existing clients. It's quite easy. We are selling to existing clients. They love our online platform and we're working with them, as well.

I'm really looking at the platform that we're working with as something that is embraced by people that we know and people that we don't know. So there, I felt, there's been resistance once you push the \$100,000 mark. But, as people are more comfortable with us, with the artists that we are presenting online, they are also more comfortable spending more money.

Of course, one incredible truth about the art world that has played out over the last five, but very much more the last ten years, is that the electronic offerings—such as our Basel preview that's hitting you, Allan, on Thursday—are enormous business drivers for all the galleries.

So, we're already doing all this business electronically, but it's still sort of an old school offer. I'm sending the offer to you, Allan, you will open it up and look at what's there. You're not just looking at essentially gallery space where you wander in whenever you feel you want to. So, it's slightly different. But people are very, very comfortable to look at a work of art only electronically and make multi-million-dollar decisions, as you well know, Allan. You've done it many times, and your clients.

Allan Schwartzman: We have actually, and it's interesting that there are certain artists for whom we would never do a purchase without actually seeing the work, but that has to do with the experience of the work. [Luc Tuymans](#) is a perfect example. There was a show at [Wiels](#) a number of years ago. You sent me images of the works in advance. I had a list of three to five works that interested me the most. Then when I went to see the show several weeks later, I had a completely different list. So, in that instance, scale, touch, the presence of the work—it has to be seen in-person, to me, at least as an advisor, to feel totally confident in recommending it to a client. With other artists, there is a much easier way to read the work from afar.

David Zwirner: Couldn't agree more.

Charlotte Burns: Like Allan was alluding to, are there certain artists who perform better online in terms of sales?

David Zwirner: Oh, of course, I mean photography is a fantastic vehicle. But what you see on the screen is somewhat what you get. Of course, then you have to scale it up and then there's very often a print quality that is important but with contemporary photography, you can really imagine what that object is going to look like. Vintage photography is a different thing. And we're not that active there anyways.

Allan Schwartzman: Can I ask some nuts and bolts questions?

David Zwirner: Sure.

Allan Schwartzman: So, with the kind of growth that you have, how do you stay on top of what's going on where at what point? You're in an art fair, you have eight directors in the fair, each of whom is meeting with a significant collector at the same moment. How do you keep on track of what's available, what's not available?

David Zwirner: Okay, we think about that a lot and we have a system that really is conducive to a) informing each other of what's available and also managing our clients of what might be available to them. There's a lot of high demand work that we manage, so it's not easy to always get what you want, as you would know.

But how we do that is so well thought out that I'm considering it a trade secret. I'm going to keep it there.

Allan Schwartzman: To me, the sign of a great dealer is one who leaves you feeling good about yourself when you can't get what you want and where you don't feel as if you've been slighted.

I actually had an experience quite recently with a gallery that we've done a lot of business with through the years but had been, for whatever set of reasons, was making it increasingly difficult for us to get access to the work of a couple of artists that we had a strong commitment to and had been engaged with early on.

At that moment of frustration, I said, "You know, when I go to David Zwirner and he can't sell me what it is that I want, I still leave feeling like I'm well serviced and cared for by the gallery, rather than dissed." To me, that was the difference between a great gallery and an aspiring gallery.

David Zwirner: That's a very, very nice compliment that I really appreciate because we put so much thought into this and very often, we actually start a conversation, not how we can sell work but how we can manage expectations. We do it in reverse. There are many different ways to go about it, but one thing that I'm happy to share, because it's just such an interesting way of dealing with high demand exhibitions.

If you have a show where you have ten paintings and you have 50 buyers, first of all, make sure you've identified 12 people, maybe 14, that you say, "We'll try to get you something," rather than telling 50 they can have something. Then try to coax out of them to at least give you two or three choices in that given show.

Then a magical thing happens. Everybody really gravitates somewhere else. Rarely do I have a show where everybody wants the same painting. I mean, that happens too, of course, but I've seen it so many times that you have a show where you have 10 works, and everybody walks away with their first or second choice.

The moment you let somebody know that there's a work that they can't have, you can be assured that that's the painting they want. Very often we go into that and say, "There's a great chance for you to get something, but only if you give us three choices. If you don't give us three choices, then there's really not much of a chance."

People respect that and sometimes people say, "You know what? Can't work like that. I need the one painting that I want." But at least we had a constructive dialogue, and everyone feels they were part of what was going on.

Allan Schwartzman: We feel listened to in those discussions.

David Zwirner: Exactly.

Charlotte Burns: Do you feel that collaboration defines the gallery? I'm thinking here too of ways in which you've worked with other dealers that you've collaborated with. You've partnered with [Andrea Rosen](#) after she closed her gallery to represent the estate of [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#).

You worked with [Maccarone](#) on [Carole Bove's](#) work; [Victoria Miro](#) on artists including Kusama and [Njideka](#) [Akunyili Crosby]. Glenn Scott Wright of Victoria Miro said, "It can be a trying experience working with a New York gallery. They can be aggressive and competitive. With Zwirner it's collegial. They want the best for the artist."

Is that something you find comes to you innately or is it something you've adopted as a kind of management strategy?

David Zwirner: A little bit of both. Of course, I'm a competitive guy and sometimes you want it all, but if you want to be good at this job, I think you really have to always revert back to a point of view where you think about what is best for the artist. Because if you start thinking what's best for you, you will make mistakes and you will not serve the artist properly.

Very often, what's best for the artist is actually a collaboration with different galleries and while that might be a little less for me to sell, the long-term picture, we have a happy artist the way where the career is blossoming and growing and you have

also sometimes the opportunity to share the problems: let's say bidding at auction together on something that needs to be protected, paying for production that's unusually expensive.

Glenn, I mean, these guys are amazing. Victoria Miro Gallery, they're really, really great partners. [Stan Douglas's](#) new film that's premiered in Venice, we co-produced. It was just clearly something we should be doing because that's great for Stan. We can both promote the film, we have different collectors, different institutional collectors.

Back to your soccer analogy, you want to dribble a little bit, but you want to pass plenty. I think that's really how you're going to be most effective.

Charlotte Burns: There's always been this idea about New York that it's very hard to be accepted by New Yorkers. I remember when I worked for Anthony d'Offay, I asked him why he'd never opened and he said, "It's very hard to come from London and not have the ranks close around you."

Of all the dealers who has a European background, you're embraced by the New York community and I wanted to ask you why that is, and do you feel American, European, both?

David Zwirner: There's such an incredible history of Europeans coming to New York and starting galleries here. I never, ever thought it would be a problem to not be American in New York and have my gallery here.

I think what you have got to remember is that it's a service industry. What you have to do is you have to be a nice guy, you have to project friendly attitudes, you have to listen to people when they want to be listened to and you have to cater to them, when that is possible. Of course, if it's unreasonable, then you can't.

It's so much easier to be friendly to somebody than not, ironically. A friendly conversation with somebody you don't like ends relatively quickly. An unfriendly conversation with somebody you don't like goes on and on and on.

I feel that people that work with me understand that too. As a nice side effect, you become part of the community and people respect what you do.

Allan Schwartzman: You also began the gallery in New York when you were young, so you were a New Yorker in a sense.

David Zwirner: Sure.

Allan Schwartzman: You also began as a primary market gallery, representing both American and European artists, but with a very strong American presence. I don't think there was ever a sense of you as outside. You were always in the center, even in your early days.

David Zwirner: [Monica](#) is American, my kids are American. There's plenty of American roots in the family, but it's interesting what you say, Allan. When the gallery started, we showed Franz West, that was the opening show and it was a complete flop. We showed Stan Douglas, a Canadian artist which was a critical success but very little sales activity.

Only when we showed an American artist in New York, namely Jason Rhoades that September—and that was a sensation that show—were we embraced by the New York collector world. At the time, I realized, oh my God, of course that's what it is. If you're an American gallery, primary market gallery, what your collectors expect is that you bring a really, really interesting artist to their field of vision, that you bring a career in front of them that they didn't know about.

Once we did that, it was easier to go and then bring Luc Tuymans over and all of the sudden, we were respected.

Allan Schwartzman: Could you talk a bit about the interconnection between the primary and secondary market in your business?

David Zwirner: Yes. That's a good question. I started my gallery very much as a primary market gallery. However, right from the very beginning, I embraced the idea to be available for secondary market transactions. I always felt that that would be an amazing way to fund some of the things that I wanted to do in a primary market that were not necessarily profit-yielding. As you well know, there's some great artists that make wonderful works that are not easy to sell.

There's this really interesting dialog between a historic work of art and a brand-new work of art. And that, actually, the artists that I worked with appreciated seeing historic work in the gallery.

You also very quickly meet different clients. In the primary market, it's the excitement of the hunt, whereas in the secondary market, very often people are filling gaps so you have much more specific requests that you can work with. I really, really enjoy doing both. I think a direct result of our work in the secondary market is the comfort level that estates have to work with us because, of course, we work with living artists and we worked with artists' estates.

Charlotte Burns: Something we discussed in a [recent podcast](#) with Allan and Paula Cooper and Steve Henry was the idea that the market is increasingly comfortable with works being sold outside of the gallery, with secondary market and—as the middle market shrinks and contracts and the next generation struggles to make its footing—is the primary market in danger?

David Zwirner: That is an interesting question. It seems to be that, right now, it's harder for galleries that are strictly operating in the primary market to make ends meet. The secondary market is a commitment. You can't be sloppy in a secondary market. If you work in a secondary market, it will take time. You have to do research, you have to know what you're talking about or the collectors that you're dealing with, who are mostly more knowledgeable about a certain artist that is not with the gallery than yourself, will not take you seriously.

I find it strange that there's so few younger gallerists also putting their activities into the secondary market. It almost feels like it's a clear choice from the beginning that you're going to be a primary market dealer and that's it. Then maybe eventually start selling some of your more successful artists in the secondary market.

The financial security and strengths that we've gotten from the secondary market over the years is amazing and it's made so much possible and made it so much easier for me to do what the artist expected me to do from them.

Charlotte Burns: One of your first deals shortly after opening, [Barbara Gladstone](#) trusted you with a Richter painting to sell on consignment that you sold to a young collector, Iwan Wirth. It is interesting when you think of the names and the partnerships that went on from there. But that was the founding of the gallery, was to do secondary and primary.

David Zwirner: Yes, and again, to your point earlier that being collegial is something that really pays off. I remember going to Barbara, I think 1993, the year I opened the gallery and the market was very, very thin and she had a beautiful Gerhard Richter painting, [Antlers](#) (1967) from the 1960s. I remember the painting well. Maybe Allan remembers the painting.

Allan Schwartzman: Very well.

David Zwirner: But you didn't buy it.

Allan Schwartzman: A few times around.

David Zwirner: We literally carried it down the street, because my gallery was on Greene Street, and then I sold it to Iwan. I think it was one of the first things that Iwan and I did together. It was a great experience and paid for the rent that month, for sure.

Allan Schwartzman: But you also grew up around the secondary market.

David Zwirner: Of course.

Allan Schwartzman: So, you had a comfort that most primary market dealers would not naturally have had.

David Zwirner: That's correct, that's correct. I had the great privilege, my dad [[Rudolf Zwirner](#)] was an important gallerist and art dealer in Germany, and we literally grew up above the shop. The gallery was on the ground floor and my dad had built a gallery and a home. Coming home, you would peek into the gallery and see what was going on and going upstairs.

The viewing room was really a half-living floor and half-gallery floor. You'd see a big, big [Morris Lewis](#) or you'd see an incredible [Andy Warhol](#). I remember seeing a [Cy Twombly](#) "Bolsano" painting there and being really taken by it. That was a great initiation that, of course, not everybody has.

Charlotte Burns: You had initially thought you were going to go into the music industry. You studied music at New York University and worked briefly in the music industry in Hamburg but weren't totally happy.

You looked back on your father being a gallerist, and said, "Look, that's an advantage that's unbeatable. The analogy would be you're a musician and your mum's in the church choir and your dad's a jazz musician and by 14, you're sitting in with [Miles Davis](#). When I was trying to be a musician, I felt the disadvantage. These guys were not any better, but they were steeped in it." How did you make that decision to move away from music? Was that painful for you?

David Zwirner: Yes. I mean, yes and no. I really loved the idea of leaving Germany and I came to the United States to study music. I had a blast. I studied at NYU and there were great musicians there, but I think probably if I'm honest, halfway through those—I did it in three years, relatively quickly—halfway through those three years, I realized that I'm probably not good enough to really cut it.

It's an incredibly competitive and incredibly difficult world, the world of jazz. I wanted to be a jazz musician. So, when I finally let go, there was also a sense of relief because if you're not really that good and you have to try so hard, it's a struggle. So,

it was somewhat traumatic.

Charlotte Burns: Had you ever had that sensation of not being good enough at things? Was that the first real—

David Zwirner: —Well, every day, right?

Charlotte Burns: But in that way, that profounder way where you realized you'd have to shift your aspirations?

David Zwirner: You know what's so interesting? I'm looking at this younger generation of millennials, a lot of them are working with us now in the gallery. It feels like a lot of them are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. It seems to be a lot of pressures. I just remember being much more happy-go-lucky, "Yes, that didn't work out. I'm going to try something else." It wasn't like the next day I woke up and the world was about to end. It was almost a gradual process, this is not where it's going, it's going somewhere else.

Allan Schwartzman: But to be able to be self-critical in that way already sets you up well for being a dealer because, if you can be critical of yourself, it's that much easier to be critical of those around you.

David Zwirner: Yes, I think that's a really good point, Allan. I think one of the things you have to keep doing is questioning your judgment and be comfortable doing that and try to take your ego out of the transaction, whatever that might be, whether that's talking to an artist that you want to work with or talking to an artist that you are working with.

Yes, being self-aware I think is definitely a strong tool that one should have in this business.

Allan Schwartzman: You have a long history of working with artists that you believe in, whether they sell well or they don't, and that long term commitment is one of the strongest kinds of safety nets that an artist can have. Do you also have moments where you step back, and you look critically at the stable of artists and rethink things?

David Zwirner: We did a little bit just before we turned 25. We looked at careers where we felt we were just not getting traction or we were just not able to do what we set out to do. And then spoke to a couple of artists and parted ways.

Mostly, I feel it's really our job to stay the course. Artists can really surprise you. They can have terrible valleys where there's very little happening and all of a sudden come back and do the most amazing work. I think as long as you feel the artist is really committed to what they're doing and they're pushing themselves—and the work is interesting—whether there's an audience or not... it isn't secondary; of course it's not secondary because we want an audience but I feel then you owe it to the artist that you keep pushing with him or her. You talked earlier about this issue of loyalty. You earn the loyalty by really kind of being with the artist, especially when they need you.

Allan Schwartzman: Do you find looking at the work of younger artists and considering adding younger artists to the gallery is implicitly different from when you began? Are we living in a substantially different moment in that regard?

David Zwirner: Very much so and it's an interesting question that's a little nebulous for me right now, what makes it so different. Artists when I started were working mostly in semi-isolation.

The art world was far away—the idea of a gallery show or a sold out show or even an art fair. Now the art market is so on top of the young artist, and that must be incredibly difficult. So, I have very different conversations with young artists than I would have had 25 years ago, but right now is a really exciting moment. The show that Ralph Rugoff did in Venice [["May You Live in Interesting Times"](#) until 24 November] where he brings a lot of interesting young artists together has been a real eye-opener for me.

Every once in a while, there's a show that you feel really is going to mark territory for a generation that's about to break out and I feel he's kind of done that. I'm energized right now to look at a younger generation of artists.

Allan Schwartzman: Is there a spirit to a younger generation today that you're seeing that differentiates it from other periods of time? Or is this a more difficult period, at core, to have clarity on what defines its spirit?

David Zwirner: I'm going back to this show because it was very thought provoking for me. Ralph Rugoff's show, "May We Live In Interesting Times"—great title, too. Technology has been infiltrating the creative process, but I feel like mostly what I've seen is technology for technology's sake.

This show, for the first time I felt that artists were using technology as they should, as material. There was almost not a single artist that was not using technology in one way or the other. It was very interesting. This younger generation is using what's out there and making something new with it. That's very exciting. A really interesting example of that type of thinking and work would be Jordan Wolfson, who is using technology to make a new kind of sculpture; sculpture we've never seen before. But for the first time, I felt confident that he isn't an outlier, that he's leading a generation and other artists will come and will do really, really interesting things using technology.

Charlotte Burns: You came of age in the gallery in a recession and you spoke about the 2009 recession saying, “Everything fell apart. Values came down and I thought, ‘Shit, this is going to be rough. This is going to last years.’ But the structure of the art world was absolutely intact. We all flew to the fairs, showed up for the dinners. Collectors weren’t buying, but when they were, they were in our net. When I saw the mechanisms in place and I saw the pull that what we do has on people’s lives, they don’t want to miss out.”

You said this in around 2013 and I was thinking that it’s quite interesting because you were discussing, too, the shift away maybe from art fairs towards online. Do you see those mechanisms having shifted over the past six years?

David Zwirner: If anything, the art world has just gotten so much bigger. What’s been so exciting is how much more international it’s become. Our clients used to be American and European clients. Then maybe there were Russian clients, but now we can really comfortably say we have a global audience. We have clients in all the major Asian countries now, certainly across South America.

What the art world has to offer is really, really seductive. It is a reservoir of people that are thinking very freely and very creatively on the artist side. It is a place where we can hide from a corporatization of the world because, with the exception of Sotheby’s which is publicly traded, in the art world, there are no corporations so we can make our decisions long-term, short-term, silly, good. People are gravitating to that as more and more of what they are being offered is pretty much cookie cutter. There’s a lot of originality in the art world and I think interesting, smart people are gravitating to that all over the world.

Allan Schwartzman: Are you seeing a different kind of originality in newer generations of collectors?

David Zwirner: I see an informality in newer generation of collectors, which is very interesting. I’m always amazed how much people rely on their phone to make aesthetic decision. So much art is bought looking at a phone.

I’m a little dismayed that connoisseurship is sort of discounted right now. We would like to work with collectors that are well informed, that would like to know if we offer work of art, what else has the artist done? What shows has he been in? What is the career trajectory? That is not what it used to be. There are more collectors, but it’s a little more towards the entertainment part than the scholarship part.

But, so be it. Who am I to judge what the audience wants and how they want it? We’re going to be rolling with those punches.

Allan Schwartzman: For example, does that mean it’s harder to sell great drawings than large-scale paintings? Is it that simple?

David Zwirner: Maybe. I’m worried about the day where I’m finding out that images that translate better on the telephone are easier to sell than images that don’t. I think we’re probably there already, I’m just in denial.

Allan Schwartzman: Are more things that are vertically oriented selling than things that are horizontally oriented?

David Zwirner: Well, you’d have to ask Sotheby’s that question—you will have more data but that’d be really, really interesting.

Charlotte Burns: And also, not great for Minimalists. When I was at *The Art Newspaper*, there were adages that you don’t want anything on a screen that’s a fairly neutral background—an Agnes Martin was never going to be the lead image on the front page of a newspaper. You wanted something sculptural, bold, bright. Those images sell papers. Maybe now they actually sell.

David Zwirner: Let’s hope it’s not like that.

Charlotte Burns: One quick question about the art fairs, you talked about proposing a different taxation system for galleries, with larger galleries shouldering more of the cost. You also recently brought 30-something galleries into your New York locations when the Volta Fair [suddenly closed](#) at the last minute. Can you talk a little bit more about that? That support of the middle market.

David Zwirner: It’s been incredibly nice how much feedback I got for those two things that were really not much in terms of me actually doing anything. I mean, last year, [this conversation that we had](#) with *The New York Times* where I talked about larger galleries spending a little more, is really been a conversation that’s been circling around. I guess it hadn’t really come out up front. It makes perfect sense. Why not? We bring higher price point to a fair, we make more money at a fair, so we pay a little more and we support a system that’s bringing up artists where prices are lower. If anything, it’s so funny that there’s been all this weird resistance.

Charlotte Burns: That’s sort of like everybody quotes [Warren Buffett talking about taxation](#) because he’s one of the few

people that does. It's a similar thing. You're saying something that not many other people are saying, and it may be logical to you, but it hasn't become the norm.

David Zwirner: Yes, that's right. The fairs have to drive it, obviously. It's easy for me to talk. Implementation is the hard part. Somebody else has to actually do it.

There's this big art market report that comes out once a year and I looked at it this year. I did pick up a few things. One of them is that there's quite a bit of gallery closings on the lower end, and that it's definitely a harder time to have a gallery, which is counterintuitive to me because the art world is very vibrant right now. It should be a great time to open galleries and make your way.

Where's the next guy that's starting now? That passage has to keep going.

Allan Schwartzman: It doesn't seem like it's going. It seems to be the first generation that was younger than you who are not maturing with their artists.

David Zwirner: It's sort of an interesting phenomenon. I feel that, too. I don't see the really, really strong younger galleries that are growing so that they can support their artists in much bigger careers. What they're doing right now, they're bringing careers into the mainstream, and very often the artists decide to then jump ship. It's a vicious cycle, but it's a little bit what happened when Franz West left: what am I going to do now?

I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that there's very little interest in engaging in the secondary market just to make yourself financially more stable, but there are probably all kinds of other things as well.

Charlotte Burns: Do you think it's to do with the locality, too? There are more buyers around the world, but you need to probably have a bigger brand for them to find you. It seems that it's to do with the shifting patterns of wealth around the world, too. There's more disposable income at the top, and the art world and the art market seem to have mirrored that. There seems to be bigger galleries at the top, and then a reducing at the other levels below that.

David Zwirner: I'm not the guy to make that analysis, but it would be interesting to look at our industry *vis-a-vis* the film industry, the music industry, and look at the patterns of consolidation that has happened in those industries, where you have many, many smaller players and then less and less, and more big ones. That's probably what we're going through right now in the art world, for better or for worse. I hope it's for better.

Allan Schwartzman: I think in part it has to do with a difference in how newer collectors collect new art. It used to be that a collector entering into the field of collecting focused on contemporary art in the primary market, and they continued to follow it season after season. I think you don't have that same kind of long term engagement with individual artists. You have collectors who are collecting more broadly across different price levels in the market, and artists at different stages of their careers. And so, I think you find, with a lot of these galleries, that you have a smart dealer with a great eye who really knows how to speak about work well, but their market gets saturated at a certain point.

David Zwirner: Yes. One of the things is that the art market got so much bigger. When I opened 25 years ago, we said that earlier, there were no art fairs to speak of, and the auction market was really still a wholesale market mostly—

Charlotte Burns: For the trade.

David Zwirner: Which means it was an auction house to dealer market, and you would never, ever see a work of art that wasn't at least 20 years old. Right as I started, right in the early 1990s, the auction houses really thought of themselves as let's sell direct to consumer. Let's embrace the collectors, and that has created a velocity that has really pressured younger careers in a really difficult way.

You spoke about Luc Tuymans. It took years for a painting of Luc's to show up at auction and break a million dollars. He had been making art for 20 years by the time that happened. Now, you have artists who sell a million-dollar painting within two years of making it and selling it for \$80,000. And that, of course, will change buying behavior on the collectors' side dramatically. That's always in people's minds now when they buy art. It's like the lottery win, and it's unhealthy and it's not good, but, again, who am I to say? It's just the fact. We have to work with it. It's here, and it's probably here to stay.

You know, I feel that the art market really doesn't help the artist. It does one thing. It can set prices, so it can help quality of life, but other than that, it really doesn't deliver much more because if you've been to an artist's studio, it's a pretty lonely space. It's a very quiet environment, and it's a space where creativity hopefully happens. If the art market hangs around that studio space just by atmospherically infiltrating, it's not a good thing. And artists who I respect tremendously—[Marlene Dumas](#) is a great example: I don't think she would know the prices of her own work. She has never been to an art fair. She appreciates how incredibly hard it is to make a work of art, and all that noise that's out there is not going to make it any easier and better.

That's easy for an artist to do who's worked for 30 or more years, and it's really hard for a young artist to do. They believe the noise and the stuff that they hear, and they feel that it actually matters. So, they're in the studio and reacting to an audience or to expectations and maybe not making the best work in the process.

Charlotte Burns: There's one thing I wanted to ask you, David—which is in the catalog, the curator Rob Storr writes about his relationship with you from very early on, and he remembers receiving a catalog for your first five years. What impressed him, when he received that back in 1998, was that you were a young dealer who was thinking about your legacy from the get-go. I guess I wanted to ask you, what do you want that legacy to be, and how are you planning to build up in the next few years or consolidate?

David Zwirner: Almost a little early to ask that question. I'm 54 years old. I feel I'm in the thick of things right now, so I'm not quite ready for the legacy conversation. But I love what we have built. I love the people I work with.

Two of my three children have joined my business in the last four years. They enjoy what they're doing. So, if all goes well, then there would be a succession, or the idea of one, but it's too early to tell. I've changed courses in life, and maybe they'll want to at a certain point.

Right now, we're just going to stay the course and grow this gallery intelligently, hopefully. The most important part of the gallery are the artists. I want to make sure, as we grow the stable, we do that not looking at short-term bursts of careers, but really long-term careers. I'd love to bring some young artists into the gallery to set the stage for the next 20 years, but I would like to bring really interesting careers to the gallery, rather than just the latest and most exciting name. That's not always easy, so we're working on that.

Charlotte Burns: Do you think you'll stay in London with Brexit?

David Zwirner: Oh, for sure. I absolutely love London. It's the second largest art market, still. I mean, China will eventually take that away but it's still a great, great art market for us. But I do feel it'd be great to have something in Europe as well, as I said earlier.

Charlotte Burns: And how many artists do you think a gallery can reasonably represent? You talk about taking on a younger generation.

David Zwirner: Yes, a generation would mean you take a few artists. Exactly. I'm not sure there's a magic point. You have to grow your staff. So, there's no real limit, but I feel once you reach the 100 number, you're probably pretty full. We have 66 artists and estates: two-thirds of those are living artists, and one-third estates, which I think is quite a healthy mix.

I feel very much aware of the fact that we've grown quickly, and I want to be really smart moving forward and not do things that I regret. It's quite easy to do that when you have momentum. You're like, "Let's do this, let's do that," and we are in a pretty fortunate position that quite a few artists that are thinking about changing would like to talk to us. So, there's some great opportunities, and sometimes we just have to say no. And we try to do that.

Charlotte Burns: You mentioned your son and daughter have joined the gallery recently. What have they brought to the gallery? What are they focusing on?

David Zwirner: My daughter works with artists and with sales, and my son is doing our book publishing. He launched a [podcast](#) for the gallery last year, which has been great fun. We did eight episodes. I can say that the next one will be [Art Spiegelman](#) and [R Crumb](#).

Charlotte Burns: I love Art Spiegelman.

David Zwirner: So that should be a good one. Exactly. So that's coming out this fall. We love this new form of publishing. It's an extension of publishing, and I'm so happy to be here on your podcast for that very reason.

Charlotte Burns: Do you find it's bringing in a different audience for the gallery?

David Zwirner: Absolutely. Absolutely. Clients like it and I get some feedback, but I feel we're reaching artists, we're reaching people that would not necessarily even know the gallery because they might know the artist. Many more people know Jeff Koons than know my gallery.

Allan Schwartzman: I think we're seeing, even in contemporary art, that people are starved for content.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

David Zwirner: Absolutely.

Charlotte Burns: People are reading less but listening more.

David Zwirner: That's where we're going.

Charlotte Burns: Well, you also have the publishing arm, where there are great publications that you've produced. You have the [deal with Simon & Schuster](#). Why is that an area of focus for the gallery?

David Zwirner: Oh, we love books, and artists love books, and our clients love books. You memorialize an exhibition in the book. The show comes and goes, and is done in five to six weeks, and the book sits around for a much longer time. You also can get so much deeper in a book in terms of what the artist wants to say, and what other people think about the artist's work. So that is never going to go away. It's always been a niche. Obviously, artist books are artist books, but you can't put them online.

Charlotte Burns: The growth of that publishing arm, is that at odds with the trends we're seeing in the art market specifically, that people are moving away from connoisseurship?

David Zwirner: I think with the books, you reach a much bigger audience. You reach, obviously, the collectors of the work, but you also reach artists. You reach critics. You reach curators. I feel, while there's some change in connoisseurship on the collecting side, I think the art market as a whole, there's a lot of thinking going on. I think books are really welcomed.

Charlotte Burns: Allan, anything else you wanted to discuss, or David, was there anything you felt we didn't cover that you'd like to?

David Zwirner: I want to throw one out that I've been thinking about as another little thing that maybe could be changed in the art world. That gets me to the institutional world. Of course, as we all know in America, a lot of the institutions that we work with, almost all of them, are privately funded. There's these fantastic trustees and donors that help do that. However, there's this other thing that happens, and that is the annual, biannual art auction.

I find that a rather strange way of funding public museums. I'm happy to give my side of the deal as the gallerist, but the artists very often don't have that much money, and they give paintings that are very often sold under their actual value to folks that are actually doing nothing philanthropic when they're buying that work of art. All they're doing is buying a work of art, very often at a slightly lower value than they would normally pay.

There's a lot of soul searching around how the system can keep going. More and more, we have to say no to museums because we just don't have the inventory, or the artists don't have the inventory. I thought it would be interesting to think about making these auctions matching: you get the artworks—the artists give the artwork—but then there's a corps of trustees and collectors that support the institution that will actually match what the auction brings home. I'm not sure this is the right forum to talk about it, but—

Charlotte Burns: No, it's definitely interesting because it brings us to so many of these questions. When you have institutions that are privately funded, if those private donors aren't funding enough, then there perhaps needs to be more invention in how that—

David Zwirner: —I think so. Just leaning on the artists year after year to give works over and over again, very often the artist is then in the end forced to not give their best work because their best works are going to the Venice Biennial. And then works circulate that maybe shouldn't. Then sometimes you have the opposite. A strong work gets sold at an auction, then gets flipped, and somebody else makes a bundle. Very often the gallery has to give the work, and then actually protect it by buying it, because it's a small market.

All of that would be so much better if one would know that the people behind it would be matching what the artists are bringing.

Charlotte Burns: I think it's a great idea.

David Zwirner: So, it feels like it's really a win-win. There's a little more skin in the game rather than just making that call, "Please give me a piece for my auction."

Allan Schwartzman: You're also pointing to gaps and challenges within the institutional world, which is a whole other topic of conversation. But in reality, even the biggest museums, the most well-funded in this country, as soon as they complete one capital campaign, they're about to launch the next capital campaign. So, the cost of what it takes for institutions to sustain themselves over time keeps increasing, perhaps at a greater velocity than their ability to raise funds.

If we had more innovative approaches to philanthropy, and to a knowledge base about how patrons can function creatively in a philanthropic environment, we probably would find somewhat fewer challenges.

There are few institutions like [MoMA](#) where you have a great depth of very wealthy patrons who give at the higher end of the scale, but you'd be surprised how many major museums in this country have a relatively low threshold of financial expectation for their board members.

But I also think at other parts of the ecosystem, I've been on the boards of various small-scale non-profits. For example, [Artist's Space](#), whose board I serve, their greatest support base has always been from artists. It was created for artists.

Charlotte Burns: A lot of institutions, I think, have been struggling. Those legacy institutions that typically took up the lion's share of attention and funding, there has been a trend away from that: this individualistic move where a lot of philanthropy increasingly is going towards those smaller institutions. Rather than give money to a legacy opera or ballet or museum, people are giving money to a small, quirky operation in Red Hook because they feel they can be directly involved in shaping that.

So, there's a lot of funding challenges that museum directors talk about on the show often. The costs of maintaining an organization outpace the money coming in, essentially, with people wanting to fund the big capital campaigns rather than fund the crumbling infrastructure.

David Zwirner: This idea of a matching grant for a charity auction that a museum does, I think, shouldn't apply for non-collecting institutions such as Artist's Space or Wide Column, that artist-driven—artists are actually excited to help. It's a very different ask.

But once an institution's strong enough to collect work and have permanent structures for their collections, I think they should not lean on the artists in the way they have in the past, but should really use these charity auctions as a matching grand vehicle that brings in twice as much money and makes everybody feel better.

Allan Schwartzman: It's an interesting idea to rethink that model in a way that ultimately strengthens the institution's capacity to raise funds, and that also protects the artist and puts it all within a credible balance.

Charlotte Burns: Essentially, changing the expectations that you have of the board and the trustees.

Okay, so just final question. We're recording and broadcasting this just before the [Art Basel](#) fair opens. This is a question for both of you. Where do you feel that the market is now? Do you feel strong going into this season?

David Zwirner: I think it's very strong right now. Allan, what do you think?

Allan Schwartzman: It's very strong where the supply is fresh. While on the one hand the market has been consolidating what it's been interested in, nonetheless, there's a broadening of the kinds of art and periods from which people are collecting. Both in the primary and the secondary market, it's quite strong when it's the material that people are looking for.

I think there are parts of the market that are very challenged, that will have as much to do with shifts in taste and focus than anything. But I don't see the appetites decreasing. I see maybe a greater level of selectivity, which is natural when new generations of collectors reach a certain level of security.

Charlotte Burns: Do you agree with that?

David Zwirner: I would second what you said. If you have good things to offer, there's a strong audience for those right now.

Charlotte Burns: Well, thank you both so very much. David, it's been an absolute pleasure having you on the show. Thank you for taking part. And, Allan, of course, it's always a pleasure.

Allan Schwartzman: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: Thank you both very much.

David Zwirner: Thank you very much.