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## ***Facing the Collector. A Conversation between Marcella Beccaria and Uli Sigg***

### **Marcella Beccaria**

**Marcella Beccaria** Collections are visions of the world and are a unique way of understanding reality through the stories they tell. Each time I visit a private collection, I feel as if I'm getting the privilege of entering into the collector's brain. When I came to visit you in your house in Mauensee, Switzerland, where part of your collection is housed, I was overwhelmed by the variety of the artists and the number of individual languages that it manages to gather in one single place. "Encyclopedic" was one of the adjectives that you used when talking about your collection. "Encyclopedic" is also an adjective that comes to mind when describing the Cerruti Collection, the collection of the Italian entrepreneur Francesco Federico Cerruti that you visited last year when you came to Rivoli.<sup>1</sup> This encyclopedic character derives from the historical span that the Cerruti Collection covers—from the Middle Ages until today—and the variety of artworks, ranging from the paintings and sculptures of major artists to the important pieces of furniture, rare book bindings, and ancient carpets it contains. Now that we're in the process of organizing the exhibition of the Sigg Collection here at Castello di Rivoli, I'm interested in discussing the intellectual pillars that are the basis of your collection. I'd like to start with your understanding of the concept of "encyclopedic."

**Uli Sigg** I was very fortunate to come to the Castello for the opening of the Cerruti Collection. When I entered the villa in Rivoli, I was impressed, as I'm always impressed when I see a collector working with passion and knowledge. His concept was to collect what he really loved, and that's how most private collectors launch themselves into collecting. So did I. However, when it comes to my Chinese collection, I have an entirely different concept. Soon after I started the collection, I realized that no individual, no institution was systematically collecting Chinese contemporary art—not even remotely. I thought this was very odd, given that we're talking about one of the biggest cultural spaces in the world. No one was paying attention to what Chinese contemporary artists were contributing to their own culture.

**MB** When did you realize this? Was this just after your visit to China in 1979?

**US** No, it was later. The collection per se started in the mid-1990s. That was when I consciously imposed this task on myself. My first visit to China, in the late 1970s, coincided with the time we can define as the very beginning of Chinese contemporary art. Before that, there was no such thing. So I followed it from the moment I went to China. I acknowledged Chinese contemporary art, but I

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to an agreement between Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea and Fondazione Francesco Federico Cerruti, since July 2017 the Cerruti Collection is under the safeguarding of the Museum.

didn't collect it because I didn't find it interesting. Looking at it with a Western eye, it appeared to have been made a hundred years too late. This had to do with the fact that Chinese artists had been completely cut off from the flow of information about Western art developments since around the time of early Expressionism. This was the situation. This art didn't look very interesting, at least to someone who was researching the forefront of contemporary art. So I didn't collect it, but I followed it. Later, in the 1990s, when I thought artists in China had found their own language—not just a derivative of Western art, as in the early days—that's when I started to collect a few pieces. At first, I did it as any other collector would have done, I guess. However, when I realized that no one was doing what I thought ought to be done in such an important cultural context, I completely changed my mind. I gave myself this mission: to do what a national institution ought to be doing but was not. I started to collect in the way I imaged a national institution would. This is how I came to the concept of building an encyclopedic collection of Chinese contemporary art—encyclopedic meaning that the collection had to mirror the art production of China, across all media and along a specific timeline. The collection wasn't built according to my personal taste.

**MB** This is a key point. On an intuitive level, it might seem strange to say that a collection doesn't reflect the collector's taste. Do you mean that you've acquired works that you don't like?

**US** I mean that the collection isn't about my own taste. That's the difference from the Cerruti Collection. My collection is truly encyclopedic; I don't think we can use the same word for his. My collection is about how an institution should bring things together in order to write the storyline of contemporary art of the specific cultural space of China. This is how I decided to create what I later called "the document." The collection has enlarged to include something like 2,600 artworks. One day in the future, if we go back to this collection, it will provide a place where we'll be able to understand what Chinese contemporary artists were doing in the 1980s and 1990s and beyond. We're talking about a very important phase in Chinese history.

**MB** "The document" is therefore the conscious result of an approach that we can also define as a "horizontal" concept of collecting, an undertaking connected with the idea of portraying an objective picture of a cultural landscape, as an institution would do. I think it was Alfred Barr, the first Director of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, who once made a comparison between the museums' dynamics and the desk of a big city newspaper editor, with its daily flow of pieces of information to be sorted out. I wonder how much of your past experience as a journalist influenced you in terms of looking at art in this way.

**US** I think it has to do with the fact that, as a journalist, you have to quickly enter a space or an ideology or theory or thought and, without having been exposed to it much before, you need to make sense of it in order to communicate what you see to other people in an understandable language. This is how I've always understood the profession of the journalist. To answer your question, I would say, yes, in a way, I approached collecting like this—sorting through the field, making my choices. But these choices were also informed by my activities as a business person in all strata of Chinese life, as a diplomat, and by my encounter with Chinese contemporary art from its very inception. So, for me, these three sources were also very important. But it is the kind of research a journalist would do.

**MB** Along with the horizontal approach that we just discussed, there's also a strong vertical one that shapes the architecture of your collection. While working on this project, the more I studied the col-

lection, the more I noticed that there are certain artists—and in several cases we're talking about those who are now recognized as key figures—whom you've been following and collecting for a long time. This vertical approach means that the collection allows me, as a curator, to study the development of the work of a number of individual artists and understand the ways in which their research has developed, or changed, or intentionally stayed the same. For example, one of the artists your collection has documented in depth since the very beginning is Ai Weiwei. Did you meet him when he was working as an artist, or in a different context?

**US** I first met Ai Weiwei in 1995. We were introduced by a mutual friend and we immediately had a very personal and deep understanding of each other, so that a friendship developed. At that moment, he didn't perceive himself as an artist. He'd actually given up producing art after his return from the US around 1993. He was doing other things like collecting antiques and antique furniture, as well as publishing books about Chinese performance art. His publications *The Black Book*, *The White Book*, and *The Grey Book* came to be very well known. He was more like an author, art critic, or curator who, in his view, had stopped doing art. But I discovered the *Coca-Cola Vase* at his home.

**MB** I imagine you're referring to the very first example of what then became an important series of works, in which he added the Coca-Cola logo in red paint onto an ancient Han Dynasty urn.

**US** Yes, this first vase was quite a striking object. At that time, Ai didn't think of it as an art piece. I remember he told me: "I was just playing around and I saw that vessel. I took it in my hand and I thought, 'This vase looks so empty, it's crying out for something on its surface'." But he didn't think of it as an art object. That changed when I brought him together with Harald Szeemann. Szeemann was preparing the 1999 Venice Biennale and after my introduction and a number of joint conversations, he decided to show Ai's work in Venice. Ai was actually very surprised. This major invitation put pressure on him to review his art production for that purpose. And we've since done a number of projects together.

**MB** For the exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, at the museum entrance visitors will be welcomed by a piece by Liu Ding, *The Orchid Room: Cerruti's Attic and Earthly World* (2019), a homage to the Cerruti Collection and a piece that you generously donated to the Castello. We have been discussing the fact that this exhibition of the Sigg Collection comes at a specific time in the Castello's history: the entry of the Cerruti Collection into the Museum has brought us to look with fresh eyes at the relationship between the museum collection and private collections. And then, right after this piece, installed in the main staircase on the way up to the exhibition, visitors will encounter *Uli Sigg (Newspaper Reader)* (2004), a portrait of you reading the paper done by Ai. We've discussed your past activity as a journalist and how much it has influenced your way of collecting. And in previous conversations you've told me that you continue to be an avid newspaper reader. The artist is clearly not just portraying a mundane activity of yours—I imagine there's more behind this piece.

**US** Indeed there is. In my view, everything that is going to become important one day will first appear in a newspaper—or now online, under the brand of a newspaper, curated by the newspaper's editor. I'm talking especially about news or pieces of information that appear casually, typically published in the less significant part of the paper. That's why I read the paper front to back, and I read in particular what I'm not interested in. I see this as a way of enlarging my knowledge. This attitude of mine appeared ridiculous to Ai, but impressed him at the same time. He saw me reading the newspaper many times, and this is why he did this sculpture.

**MB** I'd like to go more in-depth into the exhibition project we have been developing during the past months. However, before we do that, we should clarify that it is meant as a focused selection of works from the Sigg Collection, your private collection located at your premises in Mauensee, and from the M+ Sigg Collection, located in Hong Kong. These include Ai's monumental *Fragments* (2004), which functions as the kernel of the first room. In the Sigg Collection, I understand there are a few works from the 1980s and 1990s, some of which will be installed in the first room of the exhibition, but it mainly includes works that you acquired after 2012. The M+ Sigg Collection, meanwhile, is a large group of 1,500 works, dating back from the time of Social Realism and up to 2012, which you donated precisely in 2012 to M+, the museum that's due to open this year in Hong Kong. Not only this is one of the largest donations in museums' history, but also you're probably the only collector in contemporary times who's felt the urge, through his own independent will, to make such a major act of giving back to a country the cultural artifacts produced there. How difficult was it to make the decision to part with such a huge and significant portion of your collection?

**US** At the outset, when I decided to build this collection according to the encyclopedic scope we discussed, I knew that it ought to go back to China one day. I didn't know how or when, or to whom. The destiny of the collection was that it would allow Chinese people to see their own contemporary art, which they actually don't really know. Therefore it would only make sense in China. I never built it with the intention of keeping it. In that sense, the decision wasn't painful, because it couldn't have been otherwise. Around 2010, I saw that, especially in Beijing, ideas for a national museum were developing. I thought this might be the moment to decide the future of the collection and to define the right place for it. My first impulse was Beijing or Shanghai and I started negotiating with both cities and with the Ministry of Culture. These negotiations proved very difficult. For instance, one issue was censorship. I told my negotiating partners that I could accept censorship, but I wanted to know the rules. I wanted to know what could be shown and what was likely to disappear for decades into storage. But despite long conversations, we never came to a satisfactory answer. At the same time, I had been approached by Hong Kong, since they'd read in the news that I was having discussions about this issue. They told me: "Why don't you also consider us? We're going to build this great museum! Wouldn't that be the right place for your collection?" I then started deeper discussions with Hong Kong. While things were going slowly with mainland China because of the issues I just described, Hong Kong was pushing very aggressively, and I had meetings with the Chief Secretary and the Chief Executive of Hong Kong about the future of my collection. They were making me an irresistible offer by presenting me with this ambitious plan for this large museum for Asia and for the world. And let's not forget that Hong Kong is also China. I've been particularly impressed by the fact that something like 45 million mainland Chinese visit Hong Kong each year. So I started to play with the idea that a gift to Hong Kong could lead to a situation in which more visitors would see this collection of Chinese contemporary art there than on the mainland. I saw this as a very attractive opportunity, so in 2012 I donated 1,455 artworks and sold them about 50, a suggestion that had come from their side. They have now 1,505 pieces, which form the M+ Sigg Collection.

I should add that I selected these pieces with the aim that viewing the M+ Sigg Collection would allow one to read the complete storyline of Chinese contemporary art from its very beginning in 1979 to today, or at least to 2012. In this way, there will be a place within the Chinese cultural space where one can go and see this storyline. No other collection can do that. The material simply isn't available anymore, and the cost would be humungous if one were to try to achieve this today.

**MB** You even went back to search for unknown, or at least forgotten works made at the time of the Cultural Revolution.

**US** Yes, there are some works in the collection done before 1979 and the appearance of "autonomous art," as I call it, referring to the time in which artists were free to choose their subject. These precursors were the so-called No Name Group—people who would secretly gather in a hidden place on weekends and create something very different from official painting. In the collection there are examples from this No Name Group of the mid-1970s, and then there are some very prominent examples of Social Realism—the official art until the end of the Cultural Revolution, plus two years after the death of Mao Zedong, when that ethos came to an end. In my view, these works are key to understanding the first generation of Chinese contemporary artists, because this was the only imagery they grew up with. Some of these paintings were reproduced in the form of millions of posters, which were hung on the walls of the average Chinese family home.

**MB** In the exhibition, we're highlighting a few artists such as Wang Keping and Zhang Wei, whose works you've kept in your own collection as key figures who first expressed the idea of an autonomous art. We're also including representatives of Cynical Realism such as Fang Lijun. The beginning of the collection indeed coincides with the emergence of Cynical Realism, the movement that defined Chinese contemporary art after the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989.

**US** Yes, they represent a moment in which artists became aware that, as artists, they had absolutely no power. The laughter that you see portrayed in some of these works stands for their desperation at the time.

**MB** Since we started to talk about the exhibition, I realized there are some key artists who are very important for you and whom you really wanted to include in the project. One of them is Qiu Shi Hua, the author of the almost monochrome paintings we will gather in a solo room at the Castello. His personal story is especially meaningful in the context of your collection. I understand that he grew up during the Cultural Revolution and that his job was to paint posters for the movies, using a language that was totally imposed on him. In the exhibition, we have some of his magnificent and profound landscape works, directly connected with his Taoist beliefs. Another artist you wanted in this project is Shao Fan. In different ways, they both develop ancient Chinese traditions into their own contemporary languages. In previous interviews, you mentioned the possibility of identifying a "Chineseness" quality in the work you currently collect.

**US** These artists are very important to me. It took me some time to find Qiu Shi Hua. I had seen his works, so I was determined to meet him. When I finally did meet him, we had many conversations and he told me his story. He told me that at one point in his life, he could only go to his table in the living room and draw as he wanted to at 3 or 4 in the morning, because it would have been too risky to let anyone see what he was doing. The works that he makes today still hold on to that same language, which comes out of his old Taoist beliefs, and also resonate with Impressionist works that he had seen in the early 1980s. According to this Taoist approach, as visitors, each one of us has to find our own access to his paintings. The painting is there in great detail, but you have to make an effort to enter it. It only constitutes itself over time in your brain—works on paper come faster, while the canvases involve a slower process. For Qiu, it somehow mirrors the Taoist teacher/pupil relationship, where it's wrong for the pupil to ask the teacher a question. Answers have to shape themselves through practice. These are some of the specifically Chinese characteristics in Qiu's work.

**MB** In the selection of works by Shao Fan, we are displaying *Lohan with Long Eyebrows* (2011), a portrait that praises an old man. We also present a sculpture from 2006 made from an ancient Chinese chair. In a 2018 monograph, you published a very interesting conversation with Shao in which you discuss the role this concept of the old has in the artist's research.

**US** Yes, Shao is a very inspiring artist. From the perspective of Western art, it's not easy to contextualize Chinese contemporary art. For me, his work is a very good bridge leading to Chinese tradition, which has become an important resource again for contemporary artists working today—after the 1980s and '90s, when most of them couldn't get enough distance from tradition! You mentioned the painting of the old man, a work that to a Western eye might not be very attractive. And why is that so? In Western culture, our aesthetics have their origins in Hellenistic and Roman art, whose main ideal was youth. This concept of beauty still holds in today's society. In China, the aesthetic criteria give a major role to age not youth. The word "old" appears in many Chinese expressions and has a prominent place in Chinese culture. This work is meaningful because it brings out many of these differences among cultures. The chair is like an explosion drawing of a chair, decomposed and then reconstructed in another way. Shao's means are actually quite contemporary, although the works come across as timeless.

**MB** Another artist we're displaying who sets up a novel relation to ancient traditions is Feng Mengbo. I really wanted his work in the exhibition. Although the show presents a very focused selection of your collection, it should provide a portrait of you, conveying to visitors your role in commissioning new works. When talking about a collection, it's always important to see the way in which certain works enter and are acquired. In your case, rather than just acquiring existing works, you've taken the time and intellectual effort to go through an entire process, commissioning works that come out of the intense discussions you've been having with artists. This is why I was so keen to show Feng's GB2312-80 (2014).

**US** My practice of commissioning works from artists might be a straightforward commission or it might entail my involvement in the creative process, which sometimes the artist desires. In the case of this work by Feng, I was preparing an exhibition about Chinese calligraphy and how contemporary artists view this very important pillar of Chinese tradition. Thinking about this not-so-easy task—to exhibit something that no one in the West would be able to read—I started to reflect on the Chinese script and smart devices. And then, I did as I often do when I have a complex question to research about Chinese society: I talk to the right artist and then study the issue through commissioning an artwork. Here my question was: which characters are in a smartphone, who decides, and what happens to characters that aren't there? It's an interesting question, but no Chinese person I knew could actually answer it. So we dug a bit deeper—it was also new to the artist himself—and we came up with this work, in which we found all the characters that are in a smartphone: slightly more than 7,000. But the universe of Chinese characters is a multiple of 7,000 and the question remains, what will happen to those that aren't included? This work is written with a secret ink on rice paper, which then becomes visible by applying black ink to the back of the paper.

**MB** Another trait of yours that I hope we can convey through our exhibition is your ongoing interest in the new generation of artists, a passion that continues after forty years of collecting. In the collection, alongside these artists looking at Chinese traditions, you have works by artists who are looking at the way the new digital reality is shaping people's lives. One important name in this case

is Miao Ying, who is presented here with *Blind Spot—words censored by google.cn* (2007) and the video installation *Aphasia* (2019), one of the latest to enter your collection. Not only is she looking at the digital world and the reality of the internet, but she's also analyzing the so-called Chinternet, the internet on the other side of the Great Chinese Firewall.

**US** We should remember that at one point the Chinternet was more open, and the Chinese did have access to Google and other Western sources. Before it was excluded from the Chinternet, Google started to be censored and this was the moment when Miao did her project *Blindspot*, which is about crossing out in the Chinese dictionary all the words that had been banned on the internet. Later on, Google entirely disappeared from the Chinternet.

*Aphasia* refers to discussions I had with Miao about the social-credit-score, a rating system for Chinese individuals based on points. You'll get plus points or minus points according to a system that can have substantial consequences for your daily life: immediate compensation or sanction. This system is currently being introduced and it isn't very transparent, nor is it clear what it will be like once in full swing. It's a major issue for Chinese society. *Aphasia* is another example of the way in which I do my research about a certain issue, whether artistic or social, through cooperation with an artist. Miao has found a way of dealing with this complex subject matter, producing a piece that can also be shown in China—where it's currently exhibited, by the way. She has used the metaphor of a shepherd being replaced by a drone, as is actually happening in real life, and the soundtrack is words processed by AI.

**MB** Another artist from the younger generation whom you've been following in depth is He Xiangyu. In the exhibition, he'll be featured with a version of his famous *Coca-Cola Project*. We are also displaying *The Death of Marat* (2011), a sculpture of the corpse of Ai Weiwei, which brings us to the last galleries of the exhibition itinerary, where the work by Sun Yuan & Peng Yu, *One for All (Ash Column)* (2007) is installed. When discussing this latter piece, you said that it's about a lack of spirituality, suggesting a very informed reading of the work that goes well beyond the usual anxiety provoked by the uncomfortable material that's often at the core of Sun and Peng's work.

**US** These works belong to the early 2000s. Chinese society had been going through mindboggling changes. Again and again, people had to adapt to a different set of values, to completely re-think what they had been told. This led to a kind of spiritual vacuum, with mass consumerism and worshipping money as the ultimate goals. The piece by Sun and Peng is a human ash pillar. It suggests to me that this is what remains after life, and not much else beyond that.

As far as He Xiangyu's *Coca-Cola Project* is concerned, I think it's an exceptionally bold work for an artist in his twenties. He bought and boiled about 120 tons of Coca-Cola. We're talking about a huge undertaking that took him over a year, with the involvement of several workers. The work is part of the residuum of this process—a huge pile of dark mass, which is what remains if you boil Coca-Cola. This piece shows us what we consume when we consume, making visible things we may never reflect upon. Coca-Cola has long represented the ultimate product of Western culture for many developing countries. It's a heavily charged process about a heavily charged product.

**MB** It seems to me that the very nature of your collection allows us to reach a double goal with this exhibition. On the one hand, as I mentioned earlier, the goal of the project is to portray you as a collector, and I think we've also managed in this conversation to give an idea of the way you've been thinking about your collection and how it has developed. But at the same time, the exhibition can be read as a view from within of some features of contemporary China. All the works somehow take

China as the main subject matter. That's quite unique, especially to a Western eye, because so few artists today, in Europe for example, focus so intensively on the country in which they live. You once said in an interview that through art, you've probably visited more of China than many Chinese people.

**US** There are works by about 500 Chinese artists in my collection, which indicates that I must have discussed and negotiated with many more. I've probably had contacts and conversations with about 2,000 or more artists in the forty years I've been involved in Chinese art. One could read 100 books on China, yet in my view never even remotely grasp all the tensions, contradictions, as well as the boundless energy and audacity within Chinese society that these artists present to us.