

Tribute on the occasion of the 2018 FEAGA prize award to Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna

June 13, 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna,

It is a great pleasure and privilege to speak to you here today. With this award, the Federation of European Art Galleries Association honors outstanding European galleries for their exemplary and enduringly influential promotion and mediation of art. And what gallery has done so at such a consistently high level if not the gallery of Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna? Like virtually no other gallery in Zurich, in Switzerland, or even in Europe, they have unswervingly and persistently distinguished themselves over the last five decades with their rigorous program. This award pays tribute to Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna and the semicentennial of their gallery next year, a lifetime of work and extraordinary achievements.

They began as gallery owners in 1969 – as newcomers, without an existing network of contacts. Annemarie Verna, who trained as a primary school and drawing teacher and had attended the School of Applied Art in Zurich and the Special Education Department at the University of Zurich, applied for an advertised position as a gallery director. A group of committed, well-off individuals had come together as shareholders in a new gallery and offered a minimal share in the revenue as compensation. This episode lasted eight months before ending in disaster with the finances fully exhausted, including the couple's entire savings. After the partnership disintegrated before their very eyes, the Vernas responded not by giving up, but by saying, "Then we'll do it by ourselves – on our own and without compromise," explained Annemarie Verna.

The enthusiasm for the propagation of innovative tendencies in art was already evident in the earliest foundations. This characterized their approach from the very beginning: no compromises. Rather than any concern for financial aspects, the gallery's practice was understood, for the first time, as being about the *type* of art. The orientation was not focused on notions of style, but was marked by an enthusiasm for the manifold changes that were wholly redefining art and questioning the object in general.

In order to fulfill the dream of their own gallery, it was necessary to operate as modestly as possible, with no pretensions regarding the physical space. In the early days, they took whatever was feasible, with carpeted floors, to say nothing about any sort of ideal lighting. As far as possible, they did everything themselves. Gianfranco Verna, who had followed his graphic design training at the School of Applied Art in Zurich from 1964 to 1966 with studies of art at the École Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris – where Annemarie Verna had also studied for a year – was actively involved from the beginning. He designed all the printed matter and publications, such as the characteristic "Informationsblätter" (or Information Sheets), produced until the late

1970s, containing a black-and-white illustration, biography, and short text about the artists, most of whom were then largely unknown in Europe. These Information Sheets, which began to appear less regularly in the 1980s, have been replaced in the last 15 years by the essay-like “Galeriebriefe” (or Gallery Notes). Gianfranco Verna not only designed, but also wrote, the Information Sheets and Gallery Notes – it should be noticed that they are not called press releases. They give an impression of the serious engagement with the exhibited artistic positions, while simultaneously demonstrating a desire to convey information and insights to the public. Until 1975 Gianfranco Verna continued to work as a graphic designer to secure their financial existence and cushion the losses, for in the early 1970s the exhibitions at the gallery typically met with little response and profitable sales were still a far-off goal.

Key allies supported the early stages of their program in their premises on Obere Zäune. In particular, the name Hans Liechti comes to mind, whom the Vernas describe as a “collector down to his fingertips.” He provided them with contacts, such as the mother of Piero Manzoni, and the years from 1969 to 1971 were largely dominated by Italian artists: Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni as well as Antonio Calderara, whose first solo exhibition, in 1969, has been followed by seven more.

Another name in this context is that of Fred Jahn, who then directed Heiner Friedrich’s gallery in Munich and with whom a professional friendship was formed that continues to this day. Annemarie Verna had approached him with her keen interest in showing Walter de Maria’s *Earth Room* in Zurich. This proved impracticable, but led to a key encounter in 1971: works by Fred Sandback – consigned from the Galerie Heiner Friedrich – were exhibited in Zurich for the first time. Just one year later, in 1972, Fred Sandback himself came to install his second solo exhibition at the Annemarie Verna Galerie, which would be followed by twelve more presentations – and I am only mentioning the solo exhibitions. A lasting relationship developed, one that exemplifies the work of Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna with the artists whom they exhibit. They are loyal to their artists, accompanying them throughout the developments of their entire career, following them with great attentiveness and involvement, pursuing a common path, even during more difficult phases. This has given rise to strong and enduring personal relationships of inimitable quality.

Fred Sandback embodies the epitome of an artist for the gallery: he arrived with the sparest of equipment, not requiring any costly transport. A single suitcase holding his tools and materials was all he needed to produce his sculptures on location. “I remember the overwhelming impression of the earliest exhibitions with Fred Sandback. All customary expectations and modes of reception were dismissed; the gallery space was both empty and full,” Gianfranco Verna recounted.

In December 1973 the gallery hosted its first solo exhibition by Donald Judd. Gianfranco Verna wrote about the presentation in a 2007 essay: “Through our friendship with Fred Jahn [...] my wife Annemarie and I were able to present 18 works by Judd in galvanized sheet steel in our

gallery space on Obere Zäune. An important advance effort on our part was our contribution to the production costs of the works. In conjunction with the exhibition, we produced the catalog *18 Skulpturen 1972/73* featuring all 18 objects and my first text on the artist. In retrospect, I am taken aback by the title and the fact that Donald Judd did not raise any objections to it. Even then, he considered the term sculpture to be a wholly inappropriate description of his works.” This quote attests to the empathetic preoccupation with the questions that are of such relevance for artists, and it also reflects the attitude that has characterized the two gallery owners since the beginning. In addition to their writings, which incorporate a measure of critical self-reflection, this statement touches on a further decisive aspect: facilitating the production of works.

This achievement, which was of fundamental importance for new groups of works in the collaboration with Donald Judd, but also with such artists as Sol LeWitt or Dan Flavin, proved to be a tremendous strength of the Annemarie Verna Galerie. Instrumental to their approach, it was not a matter of covering production costs, but of overseeing and accompanying all the stages of production. In the changing art market of the 1980s, this mode of operation was surely a factor that contributed to the gallery’s survival. In the case of Judd, it even went so far that his colored aluminum works – which were produced by the Lehni company, in Dübendorf, near Zurich, from 1984, whose technical capabilities provided Judd with important impetus – are still referred to as the *Swiss Pieces*, even though the artist produced them in the USA after 1988. A second decisive connection was established from 1986 up to Judd’s death in 1994 with the large-scale enterprise Aluminium AG Menziken. As a result, the group of works made of aluminum and colored Plexiglas came to be internationally known as the *Menziken Pieces*. “As conceived by Donald Judd, the place where the works are produced, in this case the factory, is the real studio of the contemporary artist,” wrote Gianfranco Verna. Thus in the 1980s, Judd’s studio was located in Switzerland, thanks to the close collaboration with his Zurich gallery.

In this connection, I would like to mention the artist and designer Andreas Christen, as his technical advice and professional counsel relating to the production in Switzerland were exceedingly helpful and significant for Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna. His first retrospectively-focused solo exhibition took place in 1981 in specially rented premises on Röntgenstrasse, followed by 11 subsequent exhibitions, the most recent in 2014. Andreas Christen’s oeuvre, rooted in an engagement with Swiss Concrete and Constructive Art – reflected in the invitation by Max Bill to take part in his 1960 exhibition “konkrete kunst: 50 jahre entwicklung” (concrete art – 50 years of development) at Helmhaus Zurich – found an important new context in the interplay of the Annemarie Verna Galerie’s program, which has afforded new perspectives on his work. Christen’s lifelong investigation of light and shadow as a vital phenomenon that transpires on the sculpturally treated surface and his investigations of space and the idea of a spatial continuum are in the best of hands within the gallery’s profile.

The conscious handling and incorporation of space and form – structure and shape – as well as precision can be seen as a defining feature of the gallery’s profile. For example, for Fred Sandback, working on site was an integral part of his artistic process. Or to consider another

example: with Robert Ryman it could take months to locate the right screw. Every detail was discussed and contemplated, and the same applies to all the artists in the gallery's program: Carl Andre, James Bishop, Antonio Calderara, Joseph Egan, Dan Flavin, Giorgio Griffa, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold, Agnes Martin, Rita McBride, Ree Morton, Giulio Paolini, Manfred Pernice, Robert Ryman, Richard Tuttle, to mention a few names.

This approach was formative for Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna and simultaneously an interactive dynamic that also holds for themselves as well. A sensitive and precise treatment characterizes not only each exhibition, but also each art fair presentation. Architectural conditions are observed and respected, paired with an aesthetic sensitivity for the space and – this is the decisive point – the definition of thoughtfully conceived proximities and contexts for the exhibited works. While this sensitivity may not be so surprising for exhibitions in the gallery, it is quite astonishing and far from self-evident for art fair presentations. There is no sense of art as a commodity, but rather of entering a place of concentration. It takes a moment to become immersed, but once fully immersed, you find yourself in a place of quiet clarity, even in the turbulent atmosphere of a fair. The reserved yet profound manner of the two gallery owners contributes to this atmosphere.

In 1981 Marianne Matta wrote in the magazine *Du*: “Without publicity, known to a small but persistently loyal public, this gallery took on the proxy function from the outset of the then-lacking Zurich Kunsthalle, as demonstrated by the mere fact that many artists who were later shown by the Halle für Internationale neue Kunst (InK – the Hall for International New Art) in Zurich often had their Swiss debut with the Vernas. The same is true for important figures like the Americans Robert Ryman, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Carl Andre and Robert Mangold or the Italians Mario Merz, Jannis Kounellis and Giulio Paolini.”

In 1974, after a sudden, sharp increase in the previously affordable rent for the Obere Zäune location, the gallery opened a new space on Mühlegasse. The premises were inaugurated with their first solo exhibition of Richard Tuttle. They have realized a total of eighteen solo presentations with him to date. On their first groundbreaking trip to the United States in 1972, they had made his acquaintance and he offered perhaps someday to develop a good idea for a project in their gallery. And in 1974, the time had finally arrived. He came carrying a bag containing eight *Heavy Wire Pieces*, which he proceeded to remove from the bag and within a short span of time had hung on the walls with two nails, or even just one nail. To the couple's great surprise, six of the eight works were sold for around 2,000 Swiss francs. This first exhibition was a model for all further exhibitions with Richard Tuttle. An important moment in their joint working relationship came in 1976 when Tuttle entrusted them with 289 drawings produced from 1968 to 1976. Gianfranco Verna wrote: “He made this decision following our visit in New York. In his small apartment, which also served as his studio, drawings hung from the walls and lay on the floor. The profusion and chaos illustrated how drawing incessantly engaged and occupied him (as has remained the case to the present day) in the studio and on his

many extended travels – and it demonstrated how drawing functioned as the veritable epicenter of the artistic process.”

In 1986 they presented their first exhibition with Agnes Martin in the gallery location on Scheuchzerstrasse, where they had moved in 1983 and for which Donald Judd had created an important new work for the inaugural show. This wish had been a long-held desire of Annemarie Verna’s. The Vernas had paid several visits to Martin, a close friend of Richard Tuttle’s, but it was not until 1986 that they were able to mount the first exhibition with seven of her paintings. The third and last exhibition to date with Agnes Martin took place in 1996 in the current premises on Neptunstrasse, where they relocated in 1993 and whose symmetrical architecture defines the rhythm of the exhibitions.

In the 1980s Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna stated: “Art has to take risks, and so must we too.” They took risks, not only in their willingness to promote contemporary art that had freed itself from traditional parameters, but also in their constancy in continuing to represent and accompany many of their artists up to the present, even when times and attentions have changed. It is their sensitivity but also their unshakeable belief in the communicative power of “minimalist” art. I am putting minimalist in quotes here, for it is fascinating to regard the diversity of the approaches. Think of Sandback and Tuttle. Both traveled light – one with a suitcase and the other with a tote bag – but how unbelievably different were the results in the gallery space!

I would like to conclude this tribute with remarks by Rolf Ricke, himself a pioneer in the propagation of contemporary American art in Europe. When I asked him for his perception of the Annemarie Verna Galerie from a fellow gallerist’s perspective, he spontaneously and enthusiastically gushed: “Tremendous praise. I have always admired them. The calm that prevails. There is much to be learned from them. Many gallery owners would be well advised to study their example. There is no compromise whatsoever!”

From the very beginning up to the present, Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna’s position has been shaped by their conviction that art unfolds and develops its own quiet impact. Their ethos is not primarily about commercial marketability, but rather operates in a Juddian sense that all statements and messages are derived from the work.

Thank you very much for your attention. And to Annemarie and Gianfranco, I congratulate you with all my heart.

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