

ALMINE RECH

BAZAAR
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ART

Switzerland's national treasure artist tells you: the only constant in art is change!

August, 2021

Written by **Jing Yumeng**
Translated by **Huang Banyu**

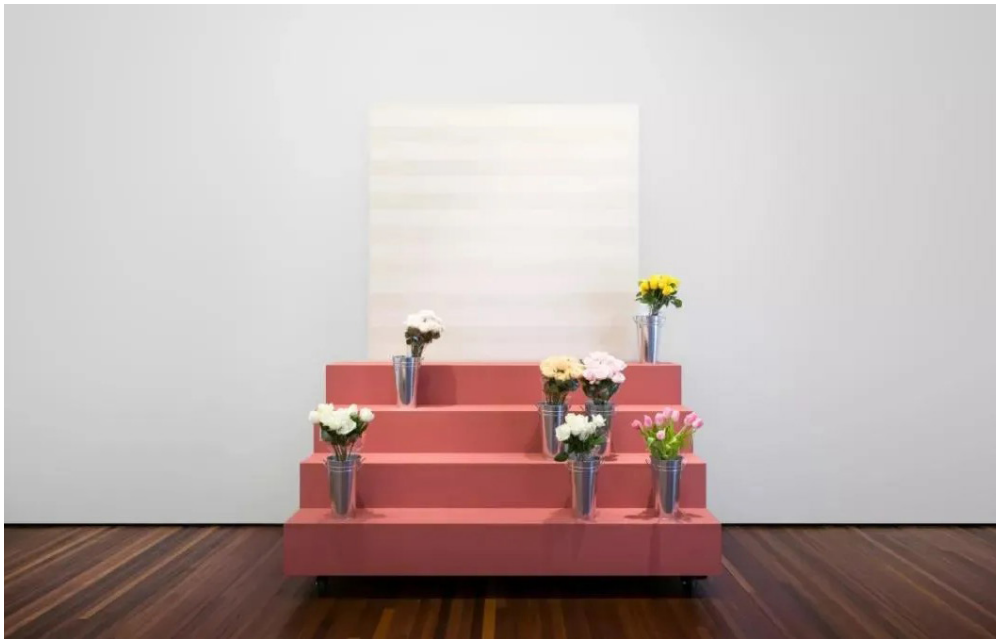


Portrait of John M Armleder / © John M Armleder -
Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech.

From July 9th to August 14th, 2021, artist John M. Armleder's solo exhibition "Sequitur" is held in Almine Rech Shanghai. In his long artmaking career, this Swiss national treasure artist has never ceased to explore the versatility of contemporary art with an open attitude. He always maintains a level of doubt and scrutiny both towards himself and the world around him, creating a large body of cross-disciplinary and iconic works of art amidst great uncertainty.

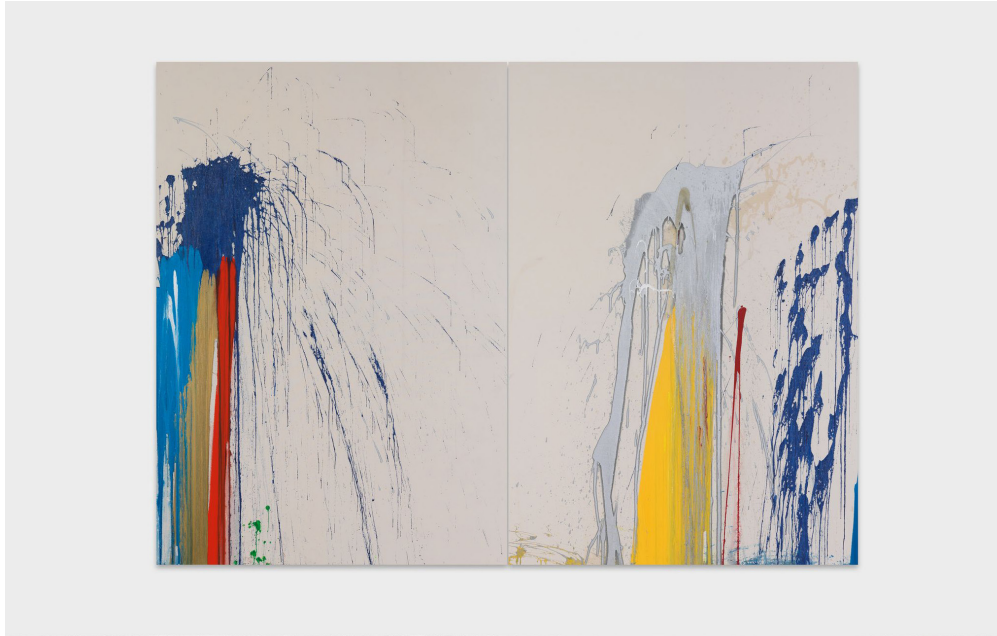
Rebellious nature

This is the artist's fourth solo exhibition hosted by the gallery. Two years ago, his work participated in the group exhibition "Abstraction(s)" at Song Art Museum in Beijing. Armleder is well-known to Chinese audiences for his color abstract paintings, made while in motion. Such emotionally-abundant works are eclectic in expression, highlighting the artist's vigorous desire to create, which is closely related to the environment that he grew up in.



Exhibition view of John M. Armleder in "Abstraction(s)", Song Art Museum, Beijing, 2019

During the First World War, a large number of literary and artistic youths from other European countries flooded into Switzerland. They gathered together, their anti-war sentiment growing more and more; at the same time, there was a heated discussion over how to break the shackles of the old social and cultural order, and find a new way out for literary and artistic creation. In 1916, a group of artists, represented by Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, and Max Ernst, published the "Dada Manifesto" in Zurich, which immediately garnered widespread response. From this, Dadaism started spreading from Switzerland to all of Europe.



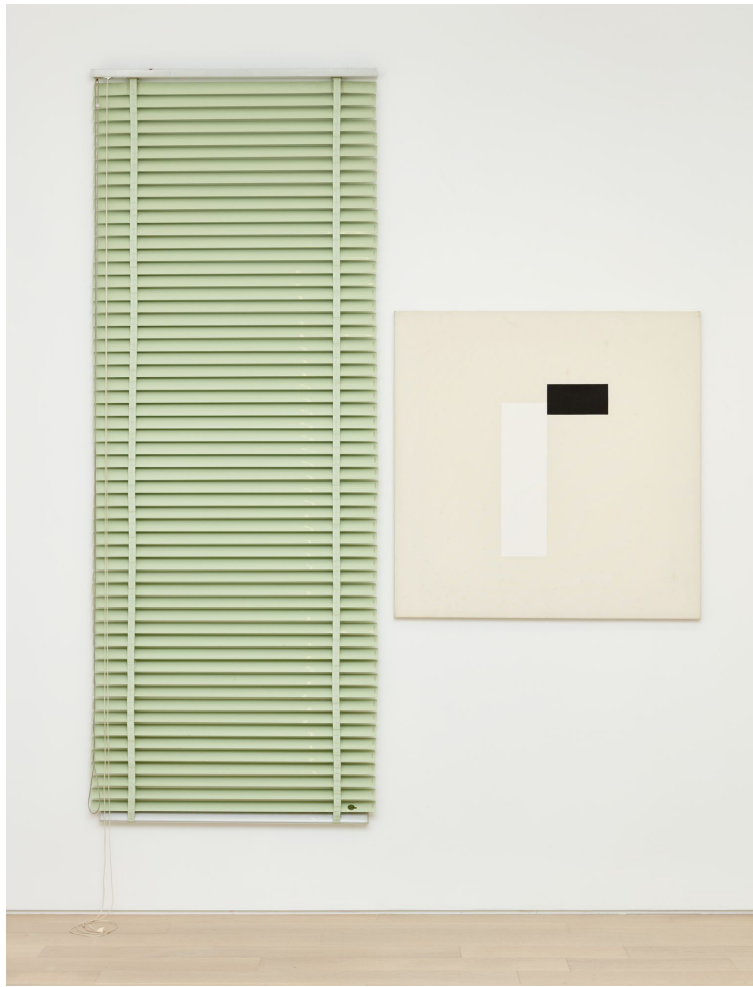
John M Armleder, *Cinquième lune*, 2018 - Mixed media on canvas
- Diptych - 215 x 300 cm, 84 5/8 x 118 1/8 in © John M Armleder -
Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

For Armleder, his artmaking is also rooted in his hometown, and it has gradually become more rich and developed in its continuous communication with the outside world. He graduated from the Geneva School of Art and was deeply shaped by postmodernism--he once met John Cage, a representative figure of the Fluxus movement at a music festival, and it became a vital turning point in his creative career.



John M Armleder, *Haejanguk*, 2016 - Mixed media on canvas - 150 x 215 x 8 cm, 59 x 84 5/8 x 3 1/8 in © John M Armleder – Photo: Annik Wetter - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

The term "Fluxus" comes from the Latin word for "flow"--referring to the multiplicity of identity and the fusion of different artistic media and expressions. Armleder was deeply impacted by the concepts and creative approaches of the movement, which changed the way he thought about art and opened a brand new direction in his artmaking. In the late 1960s, Armleder and his friends founded the ECART group in Geneva, creating yet another bridge between Switzerland and the outside world. Over a period of ten years, Armleder has inherited the creative spirit embodied by Fluxus, carrying out a series of diverse artistic activities.



John M Armleder, *Blind Venetian Piece (FS)*, 1987 -
Acrylic on canvas and green Venetian blind – 246
x 200 cm, 96 7/8 x 78 3/4 in © John M Armleder -
Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

From publishing to curating exhibitions, from bookstores to the stage and galleries, Armleder has collaborated in-depth with the most influential artists of the time, including Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol and so on.

Harper's BAZAAR ART has conducted an exclusive interview with artist John M. Armleder, looking back on his creative career, and imagining more possibilities for the future development of contemporary art.



Portrait of John M Armleder / © John M Armleder
- Photo: Collier Schorr - Courtesy of the Artist and
Almine Rech.

BAZAAR: When you founded ECART, what was the contemporary art environment in Switzerland like at the time?

Armleder: Switzerland is a very small country. At that time, the main gathering places for art were mostly in German-speaking areas such as Basel. In the city where I lived, the environment for artmaking changed very slowly. In 1967, I held an exhibition at an old building in Geneva, which later was covered by almost all the local newspapers. But to a certain extent, society's attitude towards contemporary art was more one of curiosity and interest than strong artistic support. In the mid to late 1970s, a small number of international galleries opened new spaces in Geneva. Since then, the creative environment in which artists are immersed have transformed with each passing day.



John M Armleder, *Furniture Sculpture 230*, 1989 - 3 upholstered chairs on an acrylic-painted pedestal - 112 x 180 x 150 cm, 44 1/8 x 70 7/8 x 59 in © John M Armleder - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

BAZAAR: In addition to artmaking, why did you choose to experiment with different forms of event programming with the group members?

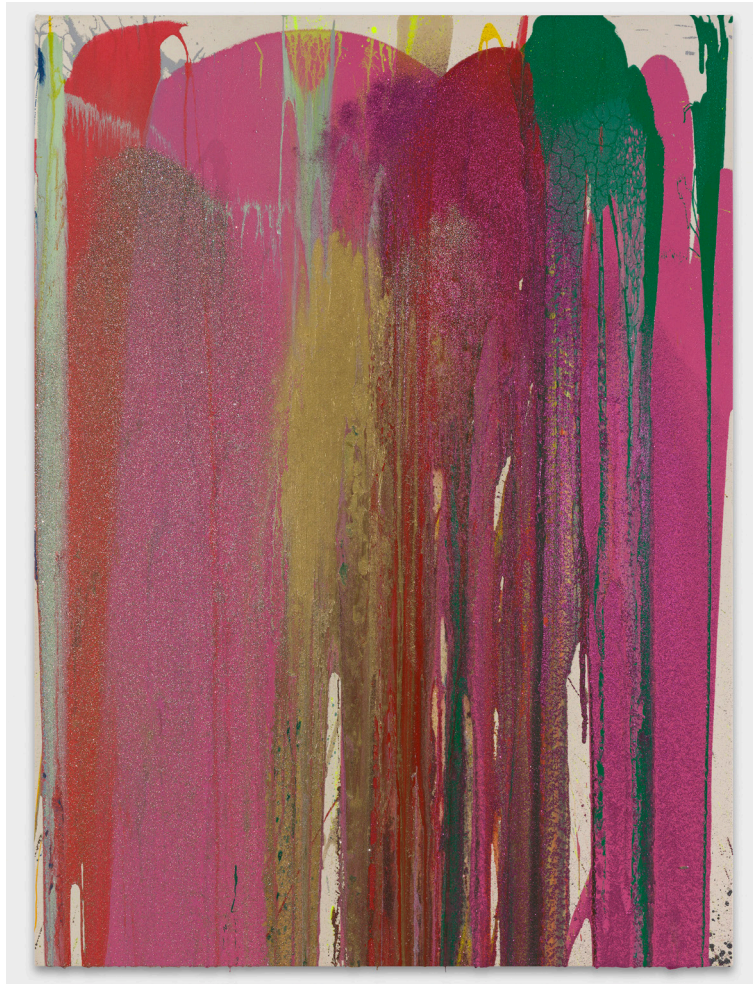
Armleder: In order to get to know other artists from Germany and France, we normally needed to travel there and communicate with them; but my friends and Fluxus artists all said to me: "Why not bring them into Switzerland?" So my friends and I found a space and started to organize exhibitions, theatrical performances, and recitals, among other activities. Later, when the timing was right, we opened a formal exhibition space.



John M Armleder, *Smoothie II (furniture sculpture)*, 2019 - Acrylic on canvas, two sofas by Ubaldo Klug & Ueli Berger, 1972 - Canvas: 150 x 280 cm - 59 x 110 1/4 inches, sofa: 180 x 140 x 100 cm, 70 7/8 x 55 1/8 x 39 3/8 in (each) © Foundation Cab and Lola Pertsowsky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Process is art

"If I knew how the work would turn out from the very beginning, it would be meaningless to create it. In that case, the artwork is just about myself and acts as a psychic mirror." Armleder's creative practice has always prioritized the process instead of the result. He uses multiple perspectives and creative forms to introduce random and accidental factors in the dynamic process of continuous development, providing his works a fertile ground for independent growth.



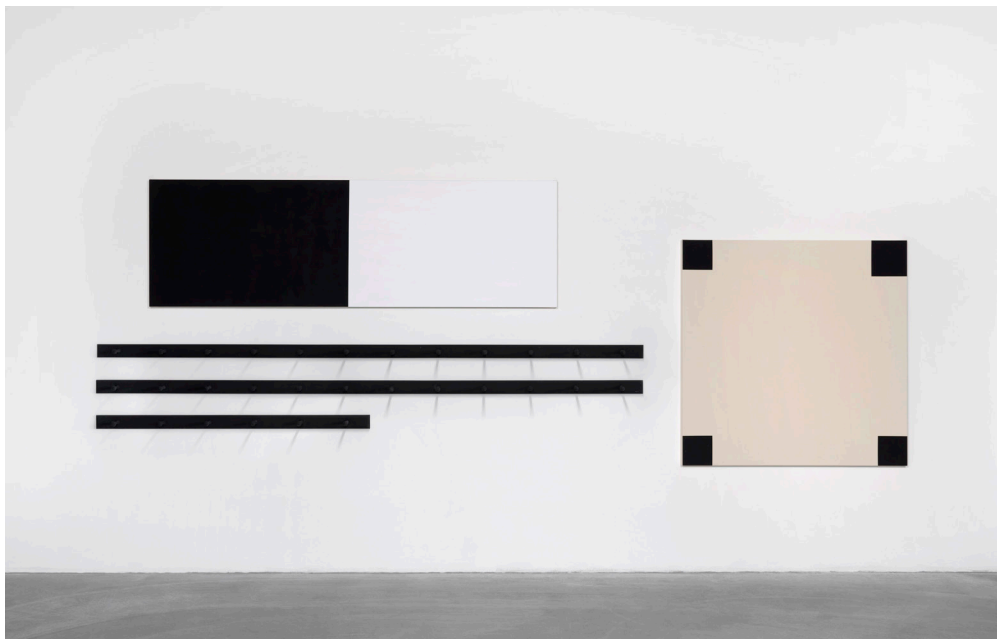
John M Armleder, *Oloroso*, 2021 - Mixed media on canvas - 150 x 110 x 4 cm, 59 1/8 x 43 1/4 x 1 5/8 in
© John M Armleder - Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

In the mid-1970s, Armleder began to outline his own definition of "Para-Suprematist" works, based on principles of "Suprematism" founded by abstract master Kazimir Malevich. He separated abstract geometry away from its original aura of mystique, and regarded it as the symbolic language of modernity, which could be re-used freely, so that both he and the audience could understand the world that we are currently living in.



John M Armleder, *Calcareus Sponge*, 2016 - Mixed media on canvas - 225 x 280 cm, 88 5/8 x 110 1/4 in © John M Armleder - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Therefore, these abstract geometric works not only carry with them the historical-cultural value of foundational visual symbols, they also acquire new meanings in Armleder's re-creation--rather than replacing the old with the new, his artmaking facilitated dynamic exchange and dimensional change.



John M Armleder, *Hibiki*, 2021 - Cloth peg and painting on canvas — 1 canvas of 70 x 225 cm, 1 canvas of 125 x 125 cm, 2 cloth pegs 300 cm long by 8 cm high by 10 cm deep, 1 cloth peg of 150 x 8 x 10 cm, 158 x 446 x 10 cm, 62 1/4 x 175 5/8 x 4 in / © John M Armleder – Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech.

In the appropriation of elements and symbols, the artist has mastered the combination and juxtaposition of different signifiers, to create works with breathtaking appearances. In his internationally-renowned series "Furniture Sculpture", he combined abstract paintings with furniture, turning furniture into sculptures and paintings into decorations. A role reversal took place between everyday objects and the artwork, subverting the viewer's preexisting perception of art formats, and establishing an unstable dynamic relationship between the symbols invoked by the work, the work itself, and the viewer.



John M Armleder, *Untitled (Furniture Sculpture)*, 2002 - Acrylic on canvas, vintage Egg Chair by Arne Jacobsen - 200 x 300 x 130 cm, 78 3/4 x 118 1/8 x 51 1/8 in © John M Armleder - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

In Armleder's work, experimentation and uncertainty have been a constant thread. He actively embraces change and seeks innovation. His creations have long broken free from the limitations of a single style or movement. In the process of free association, his works unconsciously referenced a variety of postmodernist styles, generating different degrees of resonance with them: " Every time people classify my art into a new movement, I think it's a good thing. Even if this definition limits the understanding of my art; any art movement is like a gust of wind, and this kind of classification will bring change to the work."



John M Armleder in his studio, 2021 / © John M Armleder - Photo: Julien Gremaud - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

BAZAAR: Do you deliberately avoid all kinds of modernist styles in your creation?

Armleder: One of the characteristics of my artmaking is that I don't have my own style or a fixed method of making. I prefer the symbols behind the style. When extracted and refined, they are completely equal--as a result, I can use them more easily in my works. It's even hard for me to tell when I am doing things deliberately and when I am not. Most viewers and critics have different preferences, and position my work in different ways, but I don't. Although there are works of mine in galleries and museums that are drastically different, they may be visually diverse, and provoke different responses and behaviors from audiences. But to me, they are all languages, art has a lot to do with language.



John M Armleder, Shishito Peppers, 2016 - Acrylic on canvas, lacquer sprayed composite board, living flowers, metal buckets - 233,7 x 731,5 x 121,9 cm, 92 x 288 x 48 in © John M Armleder - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech



John M Armleder, A Spring, 2014 - Mixed media on canvas - 240 x 190 x 4 cm, 94 1/2 x 74 3/4 x 1 5/8 in © John M Armleder - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

BAZAAR: What have you always wanted to do but haven't tried yet?

Armleder: Many years ago, I went through a serious illness and was on the verge of death many times. This gave me a lot of perspective on the world. Everything is constantly enacting change on me. You will find that life is also a mystery, a fascinating experience in itself. What we need to do is to turn life into a thought-provoking artistic subject.



Exhibition view of *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, John M. Armleder, Museion, Bolzano, 2018 - Courtesy of the Artist - Photo: Luca Meneghel

Timeless Experiments with Art

At the same time, Armleder's artistic experiments have expanded to a wider domain. When artists participate in the planning of their own exhibitions, they often focus on how to accurately achieve the desired effect of the work; but Armleder is keen on turning the exhibition space into a more dynamic site for experimentation.



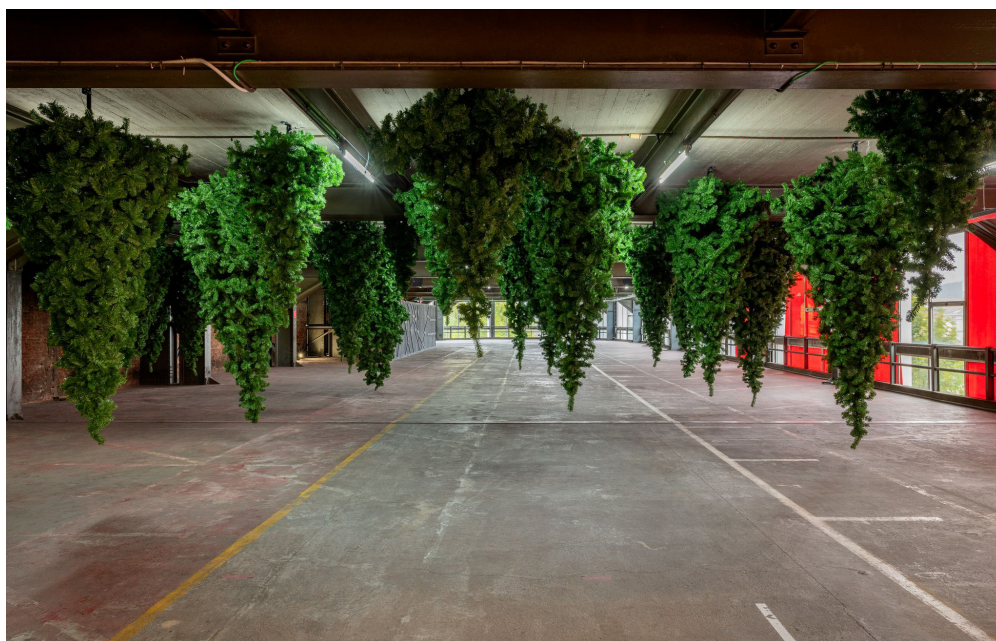
Exhibition view of *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, John M Armleder, Museion, Bolzano, 2018 - Courtesy of the Artist - Photo: Luca Meneghel

He would often include works by other artists in his exhibitions, making them a part of his creation: he has stacked up objects used by other artists in their works in the exhibition space, such as bicycle wheels, neon lights, etc., as well as relinquished the power to pick objects to curators, who were asked to either add or take away from the content.



Exhibition view of *Stockage*, John M Armleder, Instituto Svizzero, Rome, 2017 - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Armleder has developed another interesting way of creating, he would deliberately place the same artworks in different exhibitions, and produce humorous contrasts through changes in time, location, lighting, and audiences. And this art experiment is by no means conclusive, the experiment itself has become an artwork in perpetual flux. After this presentation at Armine Rech, another solo exhibition of Armleder, "Again, Just Again" will be held at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai in the fall. The artist and the curator commissioned photographer Leslie Zhang to design the entire space on the third floor. Different artistic languages come together here to bring a brand new viewing experience to the audience.



Exhibition view of *It Never Ends*, John M. Armleder, KANAL - Centre Pompidou, Brussels, 2020 - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Two consecutive exhibitions in one city undoubtedly provides a rare opportunity for the audience to truly experience Armleder's long-term avant-garde art practice. For art museums and galleries, it will undoubtedly provide new inspirations for future exhibitions featuring major artists.

Harper's BAZAAR ART interviewed Ms. Almine Rech, founder of Almine Rech Gallery, to discuss the future development of galleries in China.



Portrait of Almine Rech-Picasso / © Almine Rech -
Photo: Jouk Oosterhof - Courtesy Almine Rech.

BAZAAR: From your point of view, what are Armleder's most precious creative qualities?

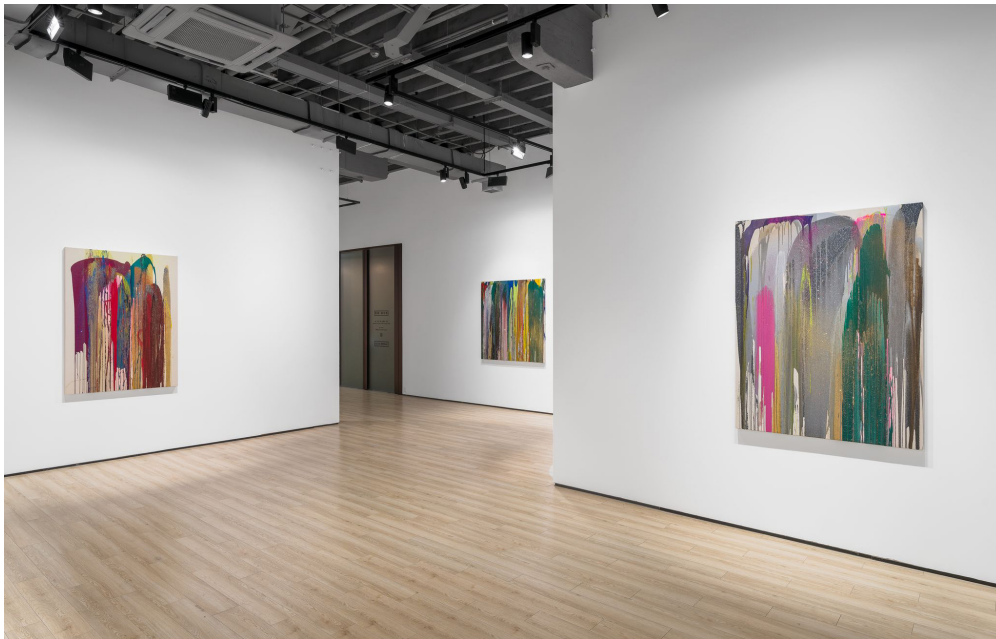
Almine Rech: John Armleder's work is loaded with influences and references that elude any singular form of classification. I have always been particularly fascinated by his creative versatility and unique artistic approach. Although Armleder upholds the Fluxus philosophy, according to which the artwork is never fully completed, I feel that label is reductive to define the entirety of his oeuvre. Armleder puts the viewer's experience and subjectivity front and center in a way that few artists have ever done before.



Exhibition view of *Sequitur*, John M Armleder, Almine Rech Shanghai, 2021 - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

BAZAAR: How do you determine whether an artist is suitable for the gallery through communication?

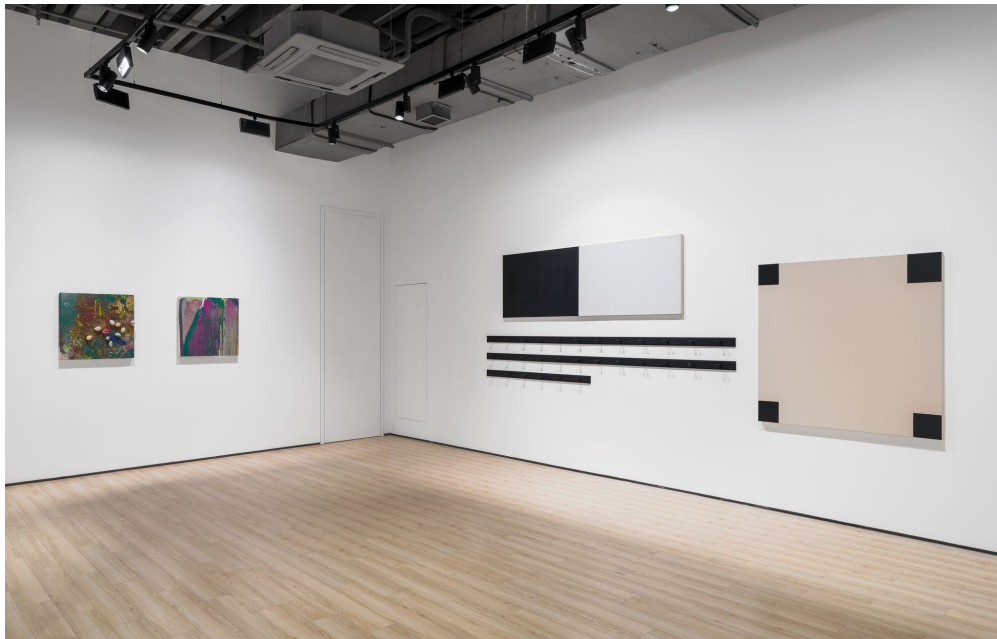
Almine Rech: As an artist-driven gallery, we are constantly seeking out artists with a unique perspective who reflect some of the most pressing artistic currents and perspectives. It's essential to honor each artist's vision, especially when cultivating close and authentic working relationships—the connection may begin with a studio visit, but it is built over many conversations, to ensure we are able to support our artists in the most meaningful way possible.



Exhibition view of *Sequitur*, John M Armleder, Almine Rech Shanghai, 2021 - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

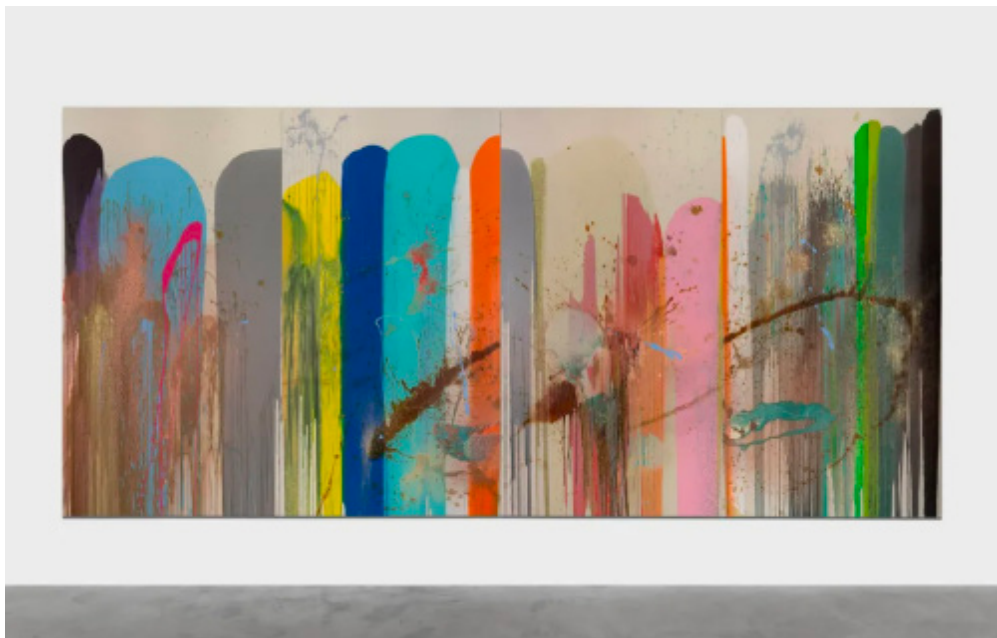
BAZAAR: The gallery has been settled in Shanghai since 2019. What do you think of the current atmosphere of the contemporary art market in China? The gallery now has established spaces in five cities. Has there been any emphasis or differentiation in the planning of exhibitions, especially under the current circumstances of the pandemic?

Almine Rech: Over the past two years, the pandemic has affected the global art ecosystem and changed the way we experience and collect art. However, Shanghai remains very resilient and continues to hold an important position as an art epicenter for culture and business. While we remain true to our core vision and Paris origins, each of our spaces allows us to showcase our artists in an exciting context with programming that is tailored to that environment, as well as the broader cultural landscape.



Exhibition view of *Sequitur*, John M Armleder, Almine Rech Shanghai, 2021 - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

As a top gallery dedicated to exploring the connection between modern and contemporary art, Armine Rech is undeniably deeply attracted to Armleder's pioneering, incisive creative daring, as well as the continuity of early conceptual art.



John M Armleder, *Stetson*, 2019 - Mixed media on canvas – in 4 parts - 280 x 600 cm, 110 1/4 x 236 1/4 in © John M Armleder - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Armleder once said: "The brilliance of Fluxus artists is that you can hardly tell which of their works are pulling a joke, and which of them are worthy of veneration." For us looking at Armleder's works today, we need to put aside the constraints of experience and immerse ourselves in interaction. Everything changes, such is the eternal charm of contemporary art.



Exhibition view of *Sequitur*, John M Armleder, Almine Rech Shanghai, 2021 - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

John M Armleder
Sequitur
July 09 — August 14, 2021
The gallery is open from 11am until 7pm.
27 Huqiu Road, 2nd Floor, 200002 Shanghai China

Edited, Interviewed and Written by Jing Yumeng

Photo courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

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