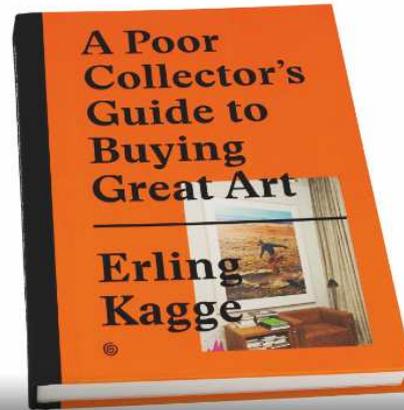




Erling Kagge – The “Poor” Collector Who Knows How to Buy Great Art



A Poor Collector's Guide to Buying Great Art, Copyright Kagge Forlag 2015, distributed by Gestalten



Norwegian collector Erling Kagge is the author of the book “A Poor Collector’s Guide to Buying Great Art”. At home both on the top of the Mount Everest as well as around Art Basel’s booths, this man has a clear vision on how to collect. He shares his ideas with CoBo, including nurturing a healthy obsession for art and buying artists when they are young.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

Erling Kagge is the living paradigm of Oscar Wilde's proposition of making life a work of art, and making art part of one's own life. A lawyer and a publisher, Kagge was also the first person in the world to walk alone to the South Pole and to surmount the "three poles" – North, South and the summit of Mount Everest, setting new standards in exploration. His love for adventure, however, doesn't prevent him from sitting with a glass of good Pauillac and enjoying a newly purchased art installation.

Kagge's life philosophy is all laid out in the beautiful tome "A Poor Collector's Guide to Buying Great Art". In the book, Kagge doesn't claim that his rules are everywhere true. He is well aware that each collector needs to follow his own path. He says that "building a collection is much like living life or writing your autobiography – it is intensely personal."

You describe collecting art as something that pushes you to continually expand your boundaries aesthetically, emotionally and even in terms of budget. Where does this desire for collecting come from?

To be an art collector you must be obsessed. It is beyond rationality and there is a bit of insanity in it, I think [laughs]. Many people have hobbies, they might collect stamps or cars. I personally don't have hobbies, for me both expeditions, art collecting and publishing are different aspects of the same thing called "lifestyle". I'm all in and I don't set boundaries between my private life, my life as a collector, or as an explorer. I considered myself a very passionate and romantic guy. I believe in big ideas and great missions. For me the meaning of life lies in fulfilling your potential.

Speaking of romanticism, the 2015 exhibition of your collection at Astrup Fearnley Museum was titled "Love Story". Why this title?

I see collecting as a love affair, in the sense that I fall in love with the art I have. You can of course be more commercially-minded and less romantic about it, but as a general rule I buy art with my heart. For the same reasons I'm not necessarily against people who choose to make art as a career move, but I find it a bit boring. I think being an artist is not necessarily something you choose. You must have it in you. It should be art or nothing, I believe.

Do you look at art differently when you are in a museum, where you appreciate it in a disinterested way, versus an art fair, where it is possible to buy?

Not entirely but partly. At an art fair it is mostly about competition, about spotting the best pieces and be able to buy them first. Of course you don't see this competitive, commercial side in museums. I appreciate a well-curated show, but I also enjoy the playful aspect of the art market.

In the book you describe the art world as a beauty contest where everybody cares about what everyone else thinks. Is it possible to really tune into one's own sensitivity in such a noisy scenario?

I think it is impossible not to be influenced at all. After all you don't collect only with your eyes, but also with your ears; you listen to people, and sense what's going on. No collector is totally independent, but if you are completely reliant on other people's opinions, then you will end up with a very boring collection. A collection needs to have a personality, you need to make a few mistakes, you need to own some strange pieces. If you only have the right stuff I find it uninteresting. That is why I think for an oligarch it would be very difficult to build an interesting collection. With an unlimited budget it's way too easy to end up only with trophy pieces.

When you buy new work do you ever think of it in relationship to the other pieces in your collection?

Not really, in my collection the only red thread is me. Then of course when I hang or place the art in my house I try to draw a connection, but in general I don't think too much about it. I buy everything.

You like to collect artists when they are young, often right out of art school. Do you also follow them throughout their career?

Yes, I like to buy artists very early on. It is not the case with all the artists in my collection, but definitely with more than half of them. I try to collect in depth, but sometimes some artists get too expensive. Other times I stop collecting because I think the artist is not making great art anymore.

What is the most important first step for a young collector?

I think young collectors should first and foremost follow one or three galleries whose program is close to their heart and concentrate on these relationships. Whether you live in Hong Kong, Oslo or London, you should find a local gallery and get to know the people who work there, get to know the program better, and start to support it. I think this is wise whether you are a budding collector or an established collector.

Is loyalty an important quality in your relationship with galleries?

Yes, I believe in loyalty in general and as an art collector I think the most important person to be close with in the art world is precisely the gallerist. Often you have to offer something to the gallery, perhaps something as simple as paying invoices on time, or if they give you a deal, not selling the piece straight away in the secondary market. It pays off in the long run and this way you might be able to have preferential access to fantastic pieces.

You stress the importance of being informed both marketwise and from a critical standpoint. What does your information diet look like when it comes to art?

I always read Art Forum, Frieze, the Art Newspaper and Parkett. But I don't necessarily read every issue. I read them every now and then, and my favourite part is the advertisement because I see what is going on. Of course I also read some of the most interesting articles too. Especially if you live in Oslo, it is important to read magazines to follow the art world. I can't go to Chelsea or the major galleries weekly, so I'm beyond the gossip scene.

What are the international art events collectors should attend?

You know, I have three blond spoiled daughters so I need to be around Oslo. I also have a job, so I can't attend all the art fairs. But I make sure to never miss Art Basel in Switzerland. And then of course Hong Kong, London, New York, Miami, the biggest fairs are definitely important appointments for collectors.

Who are the artists that you are keeping an eye on at the moment?

I love the work of Ceal Floyer, Matias Faldbakken, Hanneline Røgeberg, Josh Smith, Klara Liden, Peter Wächtler, Trisha Donnelly. Their works are not so cheap anymore, but also not crazy. I believe the best is yet to come from these artists.