

Rupert Goldsworthy  
In Interview with Aftershock Winter 2018/2019



**Rupert, tell us about the genesis of this exhibition at Marcus Ritter Gallery in Leipzig?  
Where did it start?**

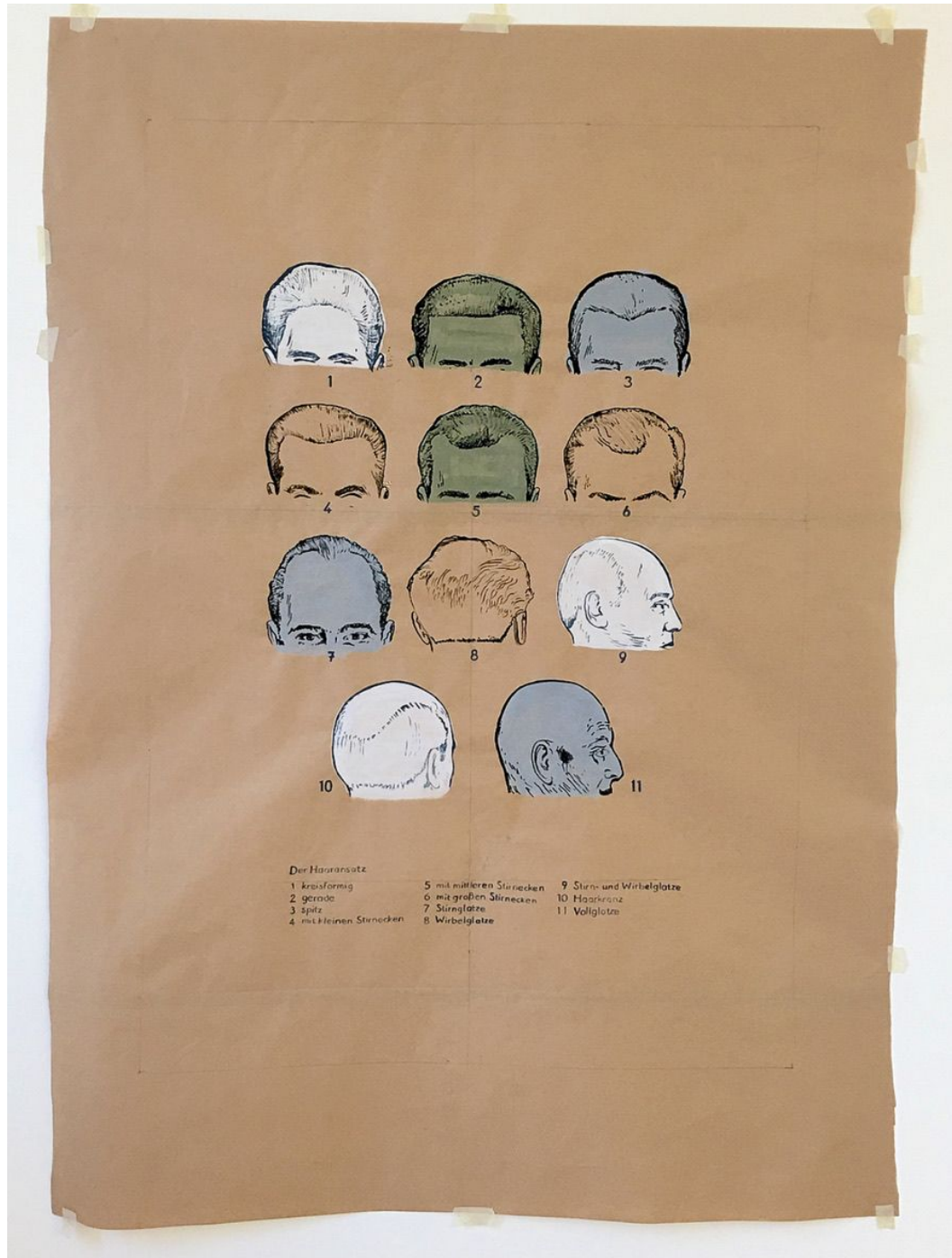
The Leipzig show began as a book project for Billy Miller at STH Editions in New York. He invited me to make an artist's book for their "Pictures and Words" series, and I decided to do it with the British musician/artist Mark Stewart.

Artists' books often end up being about relentlessly plugging one's "brand," so it seemed more interesting to make the book a dialog. We both have a similar interest in how systems work.

Mark and I have worked together before on a number of projects. He edited a book of mine. I have made some videos for his band The Pop Group & his solo work. We did a collaborative art show at Marcus' gallery in London in 2012. I've been a big fan of The Pop Group since the late 1970s, and I was at their legendary last gig at Trafalgar Square in 1980. One of my favorite bands of all time. And I'm a big fan of his solo work. He's brilliant.

A lot of the paintings in the Leipzig show are inspired by images we picked for the book. In the book, Mark came up with text on the left-hand page and I came up with an image for the right-hand page.

Can you give us a brief tour of the Leipzig show?



As you enter the front gallery there are five large-scale paintings, all are approximately 7' wide by 10' high, four of them are on paper, and one is painted directly onto the wall.



Two of these works reproduce and blow up drawings from an East German secret police manual that I found in Leipzig. These are sketches of a range of archetypical head shape types and hairstyles of adult men. They range from round heads, to square-shaped heads and from oval to triangular faces. These sketches were used by police informers to describe and identify suspects they might see on a street corner. This is from an era before biometrics. They are professional-looking sketches by a graphic artist of the era. Initially the images seem quite innocent, but then you realize how they were used to create suspicion of certain types of dissident people in the society based on how their heads were shaped. They remind me of Nazi phrenology illustrations from the 1930s. But the drawing is more whimsical, these characters look like cartoon figures from the cover of a 1950s pulp novel or from a Brooks Brothers ad. It made me think how Bond movie villains are always immediately identifiable by the way they look.





Another large-scale work in the front gallery on red paper is a text piece based on the manifesto for “The New Banalists” artist group. This is a group Mark and I founded in 2012. The text is in black gothic script and the rococo background behind is taken from a Chinese medicine package.



How do you intend this juxtaposition to function?

Hard to explain briefly... I always like an awkward juxtaposition. Two codes that seem mutually exclusive. The cognitive dissonance in this piece is that the Chinese text on red conjures up

Mao and Communism and black gothic script on red simultaneously suggests 1930s right-wing German graphics.

Another large work on brown paper combines drawings of two Indian yogis in yoga poses and Sanskrit text against a sociologist's map of outsider groups in the DDR.



This is arguably the central piece in the show. The map namechecks well-known figures who had an awkward presence in East German communist history. Figures like Dean Reed, an American communist musician who moved to East Germany in the 1960s and became known as the "Red Elvis," and later killed himself in the mid-1980s, disillusioned with the system. Also mentioned are the members of the West German Baader-Meinhof (Red Army Faction) terror



group who fled West Germany after attacks made in the 1970s-80s and who were living in hiding in the DDR with the state's help. Another group that particularly interest me are the punks in East Germany, who were often harassed, apprehended and/or sent into psych wards under Communism. They became an awkward element in the society and difficult for the authorities to control. They openly showed their contempt for the state. In the same way, the situation for gay people in East Germany at that time was difficult. There was tacit tolerance of homosexuality in some settings in the DDR but it was not easy. This painting is a think-piece on how the existence of all these unresolvable marginalized groups within East Germany--and their presence in the country--led to cracks in the society and ultimately to the collapse of the "all-inclusive" DDR government.

A wall drawing in the front gallery reaches from floor to ceiling. It features the word ABRACADABRA, moving from eleven black letters at the top down to a single white letter at the bottom. The word simultaneously fades in color as it shortens in length.

### **Not to be too obvious, but is ABRACADABRA about magic?**

ABRACADABRA has been known as a spell for protection. The word has an interesting history. Here it's repeated as if it moves from speech to a whisper. But it's not just about a magical invocation...I just felt the need to paint it. It's a visceral thing, firstly it's about enormity, it's meant to be overwhelming, mysterious, possibly occult. It's my Kosuth-meets-Paul-Bowles-Neo-Conceptual-Relational-Aesthetics piece. I always try to make a labor-intensive piece in every solo show I do--something that's not on canvas or paper. A work that's specific to the location.

For the 2014 show in Whitechapel I painted the entire gallery floor with a Muslim tile pattern. I like to make a work where you actually have to come to the gallery to fully experience it. You can't just get a sense of the work from looking at an installation shot.

In the back gallery are two more large-scale works on paper, and five smaller pieces also on paper. The first big piece in the back gallery features an illustration of the Kaballah system, with text in Hebrew & English.

Next to this is another large piece, on silver paper of a yogi sitting in lotus position, which displays the Chakra system in Sanskrit letters. This image is combined with individual large-scale gothic script.

The smaller works on paper feature designs and flowers from Islamic tiles combined with some Victorian lettering in various colors. One work reproduces the exterior of the gallery with a sculptural/architectural addition by the legendary Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer which is currently under construction. This architectural addition to the gallery building will be completed in September 2019

## **What were the specific challenges of doing this show in Leipzig?**

The work for this show was made in situ. I got to know the gallery space in advance of the show because I was invited to do a residency in Leipzig for five weeks leading up to the opening. So I was able to immerse myself in the environment and then plan out the show as a site-specific project.

I have worked very large-format on kraft paper in earlier exhibitions and it's always challenging in a particular way. When you work on canvas you can build up atmosphere in the overall piece by using layers of background paint, shifting space and the viewer's eye around the work. But working on kraft paper at this huge scale you have to find other methods to create a dense and interesting overall image. You don't want the brown paper to overwhelm the image. So it's about creating a balance. It's like painting on a fragile skin, it's delicate and it buckles a lot if you use too many layers of paint or too much water, so you have to create deeper space in other ways, using grids of polka dots or areas of Flasche paint. Paper at this size is like a sail, you have to drop in each element purposefully, you can't alter a lot or rework or rethink areas. But working in this way on large-format paper also means it can look fresh, confident, not hesitant or tentative. You don't have the option of overworking a piece endlessly. I like the discipline and concentration this particular type of medium requires. I find the inherent difficulty of the task a challenge.

## **Your medium suggests the temporary, the ephemeral, a deliberate embrace of “impoverished” materials. This is of course not just a matter of convenience; you often work with similar material. Can you speak to this practice?**

Interesting point! I guess there's a relation in my work to Arte Povera. I like simple materials. Often I go to art shows where I leave thinking that a huge sum has been spent on fabrication whereas a similar effect can just as easily be achieved on a much smaller budget, which would be much cheekier. To me, that overspending can be distracting from the ideas themselves. Wasteful too. I think simple materials are sufficient for my subjects.

I see these pieces on kraft paper as blueprints for wall murals. They exist as drawings, but also as plans for further works.

## **Talk to us about your choice of subject matter?**

When I was younger sometimes I tried to intrigue or shock my audience with edgy subject matter (taken from porn or related to political groups) or just show off technical skills, but nowadays I tend to just focus on what has a visual magic for me. At the age of 57, after thirty-five years of showing, now I am not so focussed on trying to win over or startle my audience.

I find an image that intrigues me, and I try to reproduce it as an artwork as a way of unpacking



it, understanding it better. I get fascinated by certain shapes and forms; I want to travel over these shapes with the paintbrush, map them, reproduce them, decode them. And I like combining certain visual languages (Islamic & Chinese, Hindu & Victorian). I choose these subjects on a very instinctual level. What I paint isn't particularly hard to paint. I use a projector, I sample images that I choose. I try not to be too obscure in my subjects. It's not labor-intensive, not rigorous. I want it to be challenging but pleasurable to paint. I'm sceptical of painting shows where you can see the same highly developed technical skills like airbrush repetitively displayed in each painting. It's like a one-trick pony.

One elephant in the room is my use/borrowing of found imagery which some might say I simply project & then copy...that's something I wrestle with. Am I just plagiarizing an existing image or extending an idea? Does my shift in scale and context render it new and destabilize it? Sometimes I'm successful and I create something original or de-construct an object in a revealing way, out of context--other times I look at some pieces I've made and it seems entirely unnecessary and just a tracing, a copy.

But I prefer not to heavily re-purpose everything that I borrow. Sometimes just a small subtle shift and re-use is more interesting. Fair-Use considered.

**You make thoughtful work. Could you describe the process of creating your work? Do you need breaks between painting sessions to consider what you have done? Do you have it all figured out in advance and just plow through it?**

I don't paint the whole time, day in, day out, year in, year out. I admire people who do that. But I don't find it necessary. I like breaks. But I'm always looking, always consuming, always snapping photos on my iPhone of ideas or images that interest me or making notes. Before a show I warm up for a couple of months, get my eye back in practice, do some technical painting exercises to get back up to speed.

I have particular strategies I usually return to when I begin a painting. Sometimes I start with a central image that grabs me, and I think of a few tricks for framing it, or I begin by setting up a juxtaposition between two types of images, then I may get halfway through the painting and stop and wait a day or two. Maybe work on another painting and then return to it. If I work at night, I will wait and then look at a new section in daylight.

Sometimes I plow through. Usually if you can just plow through it can all look very harmonious. Like it's all the same brushstroke, there isn't the sense of re-cooking the painting on multiple re-visits. If I want to slow a painting down, I will find something in the background that's laborious or time-consuming to slow it all down a bit. I will work on a supporting detail. That can help me to not rush it all.

The best part of a painting for me is the last quarter, when it's 75% done. It's like guiding a large sailing ship into port. You know what you still have to do, how long it will take, you have to concentrate a lot, but you just go into autopilot and bring it home. And then sometimes you think

you've got it at that point, but then you later realize you have to come back in and tweek parts of it more into shape later. That requires some delicacy. That very last part is almost the hardest.

My work these days is playful, quick, not labored. It's quite light, some of the subjects or subject-combinations are "political" in a subtle way. I'm not interested in directly "political" art in the Leon Golub sense. It's more about combining awkward and revealing strands of history. I slip content into the painting like a Trojan Horse. It has to work visually first and foremost, and the other content is just slipped in.

**The painted texts in your work flip back and forth between English and German and other languages. You have discussed your interest in "random dadaist speech." Could you elaborate?**

In Japan and China you often see local people who wear T-shirts with phrases in English that make no sense. They like the language, they don't know what the text means. Often it's something very simple or nonsensical. I like that element of miscommunication or misheard speech in a foreign language.

I've always been fascinated by how individual letters exist as discrete objects and by the beauty of their shapes. I'm also equally fascinated by how combinations of particular letters or words can trigger people's anger--the power to potentially offend (or please) the public by assembling certain letters in a particular order. There's definitely a magic to language formation and the random element of collaging.

I also love the accuracy of professional hand-painted signs. They remind me of hard-edge abstract painting. There's something so disciplined, uncannily precise yet human about hand-painted signs, as opposed to vinyl lettering. Sign-painting is a dying art. It has pathos. My mom trained professionally as a calligrapher/sign painter at art college in the 1950s. So I've always been interested in figuring out that skill, always considered it a great display of technical grace and brush control. It's all about the flow of the paint and having the brush charged with enough but not too much paint, at the right fluidity. It's very precise.

The New Banalist Manifesto states that "Technique is a refuge of the insecure," and yet you obviously have an appreciation of the human touch. Do you consider you are having a personal communication with your viewers?

I like technique, but I don't think technique should be the central focus of a work. There needs to be content too.

I think people enjoy the humanity of painting in an era where almost everything is printed or it's flashing at you on a touch-screen. Looking at the delicacy of touch used in a drawing or



useable post-graduation in the outside art world. And secondly, after the economic crash of the late 1980s, art collectors seemed to move towards buying paintings rather than brainy Neo-Conceptualism. And the people who had been dismissed in art school for the cardinal sin of painting suddenly started showing & opening little artist-run galleries and in those spaces everything started mixing up together. That stylistic partitioning was over.

I think I make paintings that work on a number of levels. You can just enjoy them as paintings, as images, or you can also read into them as having some historical or political content if you are interested in those subjects.

**Your last solo exhibition at Ritter-Zamet in London in 2014 seemed very concerned with the iconography of Islam and life in NYC in the 1970s. How does this show, more focussed on East Germany under communism, relate? Is there a relation?**





They are related in certain ways.

In 2014, Marcus' gallery was located in Whitechapel in a very Bangladeshi-Pakistani community with quite a devout and traditional Muslim religious presence all around. So I found that setting fascinating and there was a lot visually to work with in that situation--ideas of what is allowed, what is forbidden in that culture, about what you can say, and what you can do. In the same way, a place like the leather club The Mineshaft in 1970s New York had very specific masculinist codes about what was allowed to be worn. I'm intrigued by how strictures work in those two societies, and how they define and then control space. Albeit they have radically different permissions and ideologies. But putting those two subjects together is interesting to me.

Now in 2018 Marcus moved his gallery to Leipzig, to Spinnerei, an art scene area which is currently very buzzy. Neo Rauch is there and others. There is a lot of excitement about Leipzig. Leipzig is a town with a surprisingly important place in world history, from Martin Luther, to Bach, to Wagner, and to the Stasi, and then in 1989 the Peaceful Revolution that ended Communism which started there. Protestantism begins in Leipzig. It has a history as a city that grows out of rebellion.

In both 2014 and 2018, the shows were much inspired by their locations. Leipzig has all this interesting submerged Communist-era history which sometimes pops up.

**A lot of the paintings in this current exhibition seem to concern mapping systems of religious belief, or social/political systems. Can you talk about the connections you are making here about the body in society? The connections between the Kaballah & Yogic chakras maps?**

I've always been intrigued by how religious or ideological systems compare and contrast, and how what is normal and acceptable in one society is outlawed in another. As far as I'm aware, there is no direct connection between the Kaballah from Jewish Mysticism in relation to Yoga's Chakras system and Hinduism. But when you put their imagery together, they appear to work with parallel logics and body mapping systems. I'm interested in the similarities or disconnects between these systems and how their conception of the body becomes accepted as factual.

**Can you talk about the arc of your career? You seem to have worn many different hats during your thirty years in the art business.**

I studied Fine Art Painting at Stoke-on-Trent in the UK in the early 1980s. I moved to New York in the late 1980s and did an MFA at NYU and studied with Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Felix was starting to become famous at that time. I remember going to his first shows in Soho, and through Felix I met a lot of key people. During grad school I worked at the front desk at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, and I got involved in ACT-UP and AIDS activism. I was in a few group shows.

But working at the front desk I learned little about the business, so I really wanted to open my own gallery to understand how galleries worked. I was fascinated by the history of the gallery as much as by individual artists. I found a cheap storefront in Berlin-Mitte in the early 1995 just as the gallery scene started emerging there. I taught English four days a week and ran the gallery Friday to Sunday. I organized an alternative art fair in a deserted department store in Berlin-Mitte in 1996, and with money raised from that, I moved the gallery to Chelsea, NY, NY. Luckily this was just as the galleries were moving there from Soho. I always ran the gallery project on a shoestring. I didn't really have a backer and I taught undergrad at NYU. Nate Lowman was one of my students. I think I put him in his first ever show. I still considered myself an artist and included myself in my gallery's program. I didn't want to become a dealer. I saw the gallery as a time-based project. I did it for two years in Berlin and then five years in Chelsea. In 2002 I ended that five-year lease in Chelsea and took time off and did a PhD at NYU. I've curated shows since that time and I briefly did the gallery again in Berlin in 2009-2010, but I reached a point where I felt I had done what I wanted to do. I had achieved the goal of the gallery project. The gallery wasn't in debt and I had always paid all my artists for all the work I sold. It funded itself but I felt it was time to stop. If I continued, I would have to expand and that was not my goal.

**If you were approached by a backer with deep pockets, what would you like to do?**

I never really had a backer or sought one for the gallery. I didn't think that was/is the goal of my project. The artist-run gallery should ideally support itself as a business through selling the artist's work or one's own work and if it grows, it grows organically. Your role is to sell. Your "best" artists get poached by the bigger galleries but there are always other new interesting artists coming up. Once you have a backer, you lose that impetus to sell. You start making decisions based on other criteria.

I'm always interested to gather a bunch of former or current artists who have run galleries and discuss what can be achieved in that forum and when is the time to stop--Eric Heist at Momenta, Joe Amrhein at Pierogi 3000, and Michelle Grabner, and other people like that. How is it possible to survive in the artist-run gallery situation, and what is the point or the factor that changes the gallery's goals? In some cases, the artist-gallerist just stops thinking of themselves as an artist, and/or the artists they show start to persuade the artist-gallerist to become their "dealer." I never really approve of that development.

There are a lot of galleries where I loved their early days but then later they lost that openness.

Someone recently saw the poster for the art fair I organized in 1996 and said to me jokingly "How the mighty have fallen, you were really someone in the 1990s/early 2000s." But I never saw things in those terms. I needed to explore new things. I always need a new challenge, a new system to figure out. I respect the people of my generation who started galleries and institutions when I did in the early 1990s and who keep going (people like Joe Amrhein, Galerie Neu, Andrew Kreps) but I think maybe my goals have always been different to theirs. I never wanted to work my way to be at the center of it all. I just wanted to understand it. Probably that makes me sound like a dilettante! But I felt increasingly trapped in that situation.

I think the artist-run gallery can usually only last for a while. By its nature, it can't remain in that state too long.

Two artists-turned-dealers that I loved were Hudson at Feature and Pat Hearn. I loved what they showed. I loved them as people. And I liked how grassroots they remained. Both died relatively young. Part of me always feels they both got destroyed by the difficulty of their positions in the business and the stresses it gave them. They became their gallery. They were so immersed in that world 24-7 for decades. I wanted to do a gallery as a project but not be consumed by it.

If I had a backer now I'd more interested to do a series of artists' books.

**Could you speak about some other contemporary artists you like?**

I don't really think in terms of "today" because a lot of the artists I am inspired by are dead or made work in earlier eras.

I like the work of Trevor Paglen and Johan Grimmonprez now. I don't physically make work like them, but I like what they do.

In photography I am always a huge fan of Peter Hujar's lighting.

In terms of painting and painting technique I return to some works (but not all) by artists like Michel Majerus, Fiona Rae, Inka Essenhigh, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Wayne Gonzales, Patrick Procktor, and Luc Tuymans. Often I just like some particular technique they use really efficiently, or just a completeness or the uniqueness of their particular style. I like to return to their works and remind myself of them.

**You have been quite involved in the practice of yoga. You have described your interest coming out of a desire to find means to recover from injury.**

I broke my ankle climbing in 2003 and yoga was the only thing that helped in rehab. I have been very immersed in studying yoga, it's fascinating to me. Particularly Ashtanga Yoga, the rather fast aerobic kind. It's a great way to learn how to concentrate the mind and body, and that parallel concentration is something I try to use in my paintings.



### What's next?

There will be a launch party for the book at the gallery in Leipzig on January 12th during the Rundgang there, and then a similar event for the book at the gallery in North London in the Spring. We will also work with STH Editions on a similar event in NYC later this Spring.





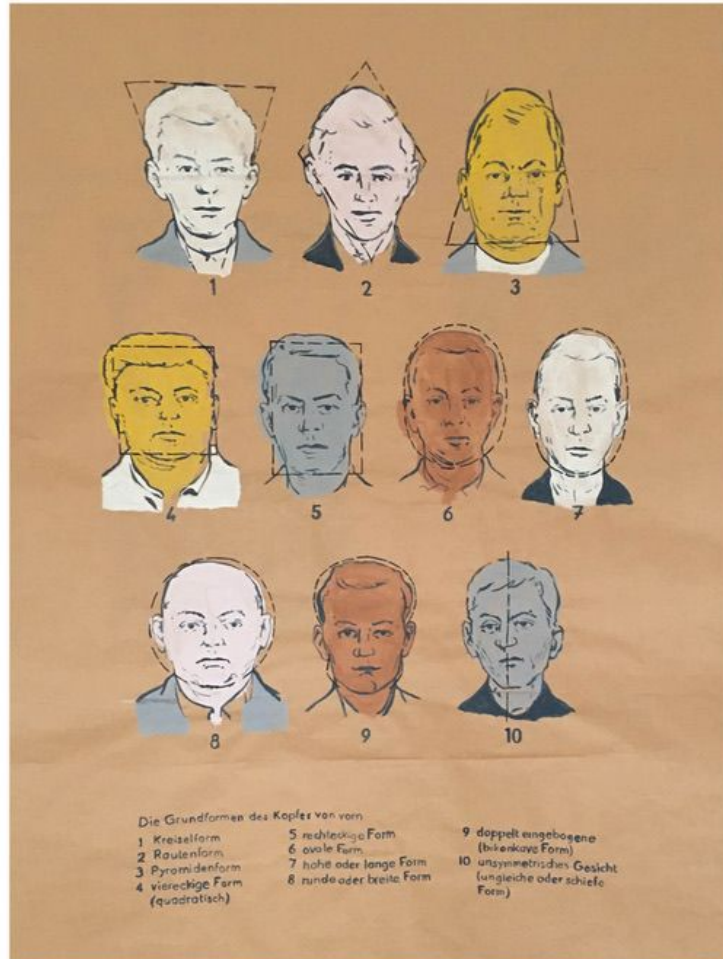
**And what about projects—what is capturing your interest these days? In what way might you respond?**

I am very immersed in studying the recent past; I am not focussed on the present or future. I am obsessed with finding out more about the social scenes around particular periods in music, early Punk in London in 1976-80 or the New York club scene of the early 80s. Those scenes I find endlessly fascinating, the era right before AIDS hit. Lots of autobiographies from survivors of those scenes keep coming out. And Instagram throws up all these rare and amazing photographs of these periods. People are still researching it all. Fascinating stuff. I grew up in and around London during that time in the mid-to-late 1970s and remember some of it, but it's intriguing to later find out exactly how that music scene all interlocked socially, and in business, who knew who, how it all came together, and then how and why it all fell apart. So that's what I am interested in. I want to write a book about growing up in that era.

# RUPERT GOLDSWORTHY

November 25 2018 - January 6 2019

Opening Reception: Sunday November 25, 2-5pm



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Image of Niemeyer sculptural addition on the gallery building



**Sophienstr.13.10178 berlin**

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