

Memory as Medium: on Past Lives and Future Meanings

By Kelly Taxter

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I co-founded Taxter & Spengemann Gallery in 2003 with Pascal Spengemann after graduating with a master's degree from the Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS) at Bard College. The gallery has now been closed longer than it was open for business, and I've since moved on from selling art to working as a curator in museums and non-profit institutions. I fell more or less into being an art dealer, largely due to the fact that in 2003 the curatorial field was not as expansive as it is today.

My classmates were taking jobs in places like Columbus, Ohio, or Memphis, Tennessee; the Europeans were returning home to live and work. I couldn't imagine leaving New York City, which I had briefly abandoned to attend CCS and had often escaped to while growing up in suburban Connecticut. Moving away felt like winding back the clock, needlessly delaying my inevitable future, throwing in the towel. Pascal was also a CCS student, and we took a class with art historian Patricia C. Phillips about public art that often met in the city. We were morbidly obsessed with the idea that we would need to take jobs in "somewhere USA" and were determined instead to find a cheap rental and present exhibitions by our artist friends, loosely understanding that this was opening a business, for which we were woefully underprepared.

Regardless, we found space on a prime block in Chelsea, the most commercially robust gallery neighborhood in the entire world. While I was working six days a week (part time at the gallery and the rest as a personal shopper at Bergdorf Goodman), Pascal had yet to graduate. I slept on a futon behind the kitchen, located behind a false wall that carved out our 150-square-foot gallery in the parlor of my street level apartment on 22nd Street between 10th and 11th avenues.

Much to our surprise, that first year went well. There were New York Times reviews and profiles, sales to people whose names we had only read in magazines and a little spending money to buy our friends drinks at the bar. The following year, we were flush enough to move across the street to the ground floor of a commercial townhouse, and I rented a proper apartment elsewhere. Two years later we expanded, taking over the second floor of that same building. It was around this time that I first met Dennis Scholl.

Dennis and his wife Debra were among a handful of collectors – scattered across New York City, Los Angeles and their hometown Miami – who were fiercely dedicated to supporting emerging artists and by extension the young art dealers who represented them. Dennis came to see an exhibition by Adam Putnam, a show that I can still crisply visualize. Deftly executed charcoal and pastel drawings of vaulted, labyrinthine spaces lined the white walls, and “Sundial (Eclipse)” sat on the ebony-stained oak floor. It comprised two diminutive plywood obelisks, one left plain and the other mirrored. An adjacent tin-hooded lamp was positioned so that its light caused their shadows to cross, producing a singular, shadow-lined obelisk on the wall. Dennis bought this piece, priced at \$3,500, which in its humble, ad hoc form was notably less polished than the works on the walls. I remember that he asked for “the family discount,” which to him meant 10 percent but to me took a moment to decipher since we didn’t know each other all that well. But I got the sense he would be coming back. The Scholls exemplified the type of collectors who sustained the gallery for almost a decade. Similar to how Taxter & Spengemann shimmied into the sliver of space between the most established and powerful galleries of its day in the heart of Chelsea, the people who bought work from us steadfastly traipsed along and bolstered its edges, looking into the scrappy corners of the art world where people were busy fiddling with shadows.

In those moments, when a work’s quiet brilliance met a collector’s discerning eye, I began to understand how access and recognition circulate within the art world. The Scholls’ support was more than financial; it reflected years of carefully cultivated taste, knowing where to look and attunement to the nuances of value. That sensibility would later become central to Dennis’s own artistic practice, transforming the act of collecting itself into a form of making.

He began this pursuit as a child, collecting milk caps and baseball cards with an obsessive fixation to complete whole sets. Ideas of investment, access and currency — which complicate any notion of a “pure” conception of art — are central to works like “Untitled (Bottle Caps)” and “Untitled (’65 Yankees).” Consumption, competition and primacy shaped the creation and circulation of the works’ compositional elements, dynamics made even more pronounced when re-presented as art more than a half century later. While those pieces were drawn from Dennis’s longstanding personal archive, others like “Untitled (No, No, No)” were more recently assembled through online auctions and Google deep dives for back issues of the New York Post announcing the deaths of beloved female pop icons, from the Queen of England to Whitney Houston. Here, Dennis compels contemplation of the near-worthless media that saturates daily life, flattening all subjects it touches, no matter how profoundly they may have

once moved the public. In its creation and display, especially if the artwork enters a collection, “No, No, No” functions as a sort of memorial: to the women pictured, to collective joy and grief, and perhaps most of all to meaning itself. In this work, collecting is less about acquisition and more about how meaning manifests and attaches to things. After all, collecting *is* an act of meaning, an exchange that converts currency into value lifting an object from the endless flow into the realm of art.

I think it’s fair to say that Dennis and I share a restless energy that has led us both to a series of consequential turning points. Our paths, though distinct, trace the porous boundaries between making, presenting and contextualizing art, lines that once felt fixed but now seem increasingly fluid. I started out in 1995 as an art student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where I surmised that I wasn’t a great artist but believed I could do something with my peers that would be important to art. The role of art dealer and the pace of gallery-work never quite suited me. Shows came and went with only a press release and brief reviews to add depth or academic rigor to artists’ practices that I felt were deserving of scholarship and sustained contemplation as well as sales. Accepting that my job was limited to commerce and management was hard, and as a result I was frustrated for many years. When the gallery closed, I finally pursued a curatorial path, and became the Barnett and Annalee Newman Curator of Contemporary Art at the Jewish Museum. This in turn led to an overarching interest in the importance of art institutions, and while I still organize exhibitions, I also lead the venerable downtown New York nonprofit Artists Space as Deputy Director.

The Scholls also started something new and began collecting Aboriginal art in depth. Dennis joined the Miami-based Knight Foundation, and he also started producing documentary films. He now adds artist to his résumé, taking on a role I lacked the confidence to pursue. While making art and being embedded with artists inspired me to make exhibitions, Dennis’s deep and prolonged engagement and investment in the field spurred his interest in making art.

Speaking about his work “Sundial (Eclipse),” Putnam noted that “Shadow and light cancel each other out,” that he was “trying to make a shape completely disappear, an eclipsed image.” I’ve often thought about that idea of disappearance, of one form, artist or movement eclipsing another, or when considering how roles in the art world tend to overlap yet remain distinct. While steeped in the language of interdisciplinarity, the field is still structured by boundaries: artist, dealer, curator, collector. Each role casts its own shadow, arguably necessary to carry whatever power each one has to confer and delineate meaning and, ultimately, value. Dennis’s

evolution from collector to artist invites its own kind of scrutiny, yet both paths stem from the same curiosity, a sustained engagement with art that seeks not just to observe but also to participate.

Lately, Dennis and I have discovered a shared love of the artist and art dealer Betty Parsons (1900-1982), who championed such figures as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman through her eponymous gallery. At the same time, she was quietly pursuing a dedicated studio practice and produced hundreds of paintings, works on paper and sculpture that are only now coming into view. Parsons surely faced skepticism and a sense of unseriousness toward her work during her lifetime, and while she had many exhibitions, they were never as prominent or influential as those of the artists she exhibited. This lack of acknowledgment was undoubtedly compounded by the misogyny of her era. Her commitment to making art mostly in private, even while shaping art history in public, suggests the rarity of such crossings and how meaningful they become when they occur. Mobility, whether between object and idea or maker and collector, suggests that meaning is never fixed but continually reimagined through the roles we inhabit.