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Iwan Wirth: Building a Blue-Chip Name

ZURICH-From a distance, Iwan Wirth hardly projects power. His thick black glasses frame a soft-edged face. At important events, his two-year-old son often plays about his legs, distracting him from the goings-on. But appearances deceive: In the last four years, the 29-year-old has launched two major Zurich galleries and is now teaming up with SoHo dealer David Zwirner to form a new gallery in New York.

First came Hauser & Wirth, a public gallery for blue-chip contemporary art that Wirth opened in 1996 with his partner, Ursula Hauser. (The two had been dealing privately since 1991.) Then, in 1998, the pair opened Hauser & Wirth II to show edgier contemporary work, hiring away Eva Presenhuber, founder of the Galerie Walcheturm, as the new gallery's director. All of the Walcheturm artists followed her, and the gallery was later renamed Hauser & Wirth & Presenhuber.

In May 1999, between the Venice Biennale and Art Basel vernissages, Wirth traveled to Saint Gall, a town near Zurich, to oversee the debut of the massive Sammlung Hauser & Wirth, a museum built to display the dealers' private collections. And this month, on February 22, he and SoHo buzz dealer Zwirner, 35, are opening Zwirner & Wirth at 32 East 69th Street in New York, specializing in the secondary market for such big-name postwar artists as Bruce Nauman, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter.

The two dealers first met in the early '90s. At the time, Zwirner mainly represented contemporary artists and Wirth only dealt privately. Since then, Zwirner has gone into the secondary market, while Wirth has opened his galleries. "We were on opposite curves, but we've met in the middle," says Zwirner, who will direct the Manhattan space's day-to-day operations. "Today, we're in competition with the auction houses, and the only way to beat them is to join forces."

Zwirner is the most recent in Wirth's long line of business partners. At 16, Wirth established a small gallery in Saint Gall, with a local architect as his partner. Wirth's father handled the legalities for his son, who was still a minor. It was then that Wirth first met Hauser, a collector and founder of a Swiss retail empire who not only became his business partner but later his mother-in-law. After Wirth finished university, he and Hauser formalized their relationship as Hauser & Wirth, which bought and sold on the secondary market. The business's first staffer was Manuela Hauser, Ursula's daughter. Eventually, a workplace romance ignited; she and Wirth married in 1996, ensconcing Wirth in one of Switzerland's great commercial fortunes.

Wirth admits that the Hauser family fortune gave the business an initial boost, but some of his colleagues suggest that it gives him more. "He's very clever, but he's also lucky," says one prominent Zurich gallerist, who requests anonymity. "Nobody else can collect so many paintings from an artist or fund so many catalogues raisonnés. With that sort of money, any smart gallerist could do the same sort of things."

One factor that distinguishes Hauser & Wirth in Switzerland is its American-style marketing. In 1998, when it first participated in Art Basel, the gallery cosponsored a riverboat gala on the Rhine, drawing a crowd that tilted toward Americans and younger collectors. Last summer, the gallery sponsored the Swiss luncheon at the Venice Biennale, and its name appeared on the invitations.

But perhaps money counts most when it comes to landing such hot artists as Pipilotti Rist, who was previously represented by Basel's venerable Stampa gallery. Wirth reportedly offered Rist, among other things, an assistant and a promise to finance some of her cost-intensive projects. Another gain is installation artist Sylvie Fleury, now with Hauser & Wirth & Presenhuber. She was lured away from the neighboring Galerie Bob Van Orsouw.

A leading European dealer in contemporary art, Pierre Huber of Geneva's Art & Public, places Wirth among other "next generation" dealers such as New Yorkers Matthew Marks and Jeffrey Deitch. "In the past, gallerists bought and showed finished works," Huber points out. "But now the gallery often must produce them. Many traditional galleries haven't understood that, or simply cannot afford it."

But Huber also wonders whether Wirth is overreaching. "He's like a soccer-team owner who can buy all the great players," the Geneva dealer says. "But there are only so many spots on the field. And, personally, I wouldn't want three galleries. It's too much like running a multinational."

In a sense, Wirth's operation is the Microsoft of the Swiss art world-seeking to dominate every tier of its market. Wirth's multi-million-dollar secondary market dealings at Hauser & Wirth and now, Zwirner & Wirth, give him leverage with the wealthiest collectors. It also gives him a client base for Hauser & Wirth's sales of works by living giants such as Louise Bourgeois as well as On Kawara and John McCracken, both of whom came straight from Zwirner's stable. At the same time, working at a somewhat lower price point, Hauser & Wirth & Presenhuber represents Sue Williams, Fischli/Weiss and several lesser-known artists.

Financial analysts would call this a vertical-market business model. Indeed, Wirth makes no bones about running the gallery as a business and has aggressively snapped up good staffers at every level, from art handlers to art historians. "Our competitors don't sit here in Zurich, they sit in London and in New York," says Wirth, "so we have to compete at the international level."

Marc Spiegler