

SAMM'S PLACE

Text by **Marc Spiegler**. Photography by **Todd Eberle**

It's a wintry Wednesday night in Manhattan's Meatpacking district, the night before the Armory Show. The scene: a book launch for artist Janet Cardiff, in a club with no sign out front. The party's hostess, Salzburg collector Francesca von Habsburg, has shanghaied a jazz band she discovered the night before in Harlem. In the mix is the spectrum of artworld notables, collectors such as Craig Robins of Miami and Amir Shariat of London, MoMA/PS1 curator Klaus Biesenbach, auctioneer Simon de Pury and his contemporary-art huntress Michaela Neumeister. Even Eighties painting behemoth Julian Schnabel makes an appearance. But many of the guests were invited by another person – and an hour into the party people are wondering: where is Samuel Keller, the director of Art Basel?

As usual during such events, and despite the Montenegrin driver he always hires to zip him around New York, Keller is running late, the result of the collective art world wanting him to be in three places at the same time. When he finally arrives, after sprinting through the Armory Show's official VIP party at a Midtown club, it takes him 20 minutes to negotiate the gauntlet of handshakes, hugs and kisses and make it to the bar.

And so it continues for three days, his business bringing the fair director all over Manhattan, from Ronald Lauder's MoMA-

quality home collection to artist Terence Koh's ad hoc gay-sex backroom on the Lower East Side. 'In most cases when I travel, my entire day is strictly scheduled, from breakfast onwards,' Keller says. 'Well, after midnight it's not so strictly scheduled.'

Such socialising lets Keller constantly take the temperature of the art world, gauging its trends and tendencies by using a Clinton-esque gift for so focusing his attention on people that a few minutes' conversation builds a bond that would take others hours to forge. Never slowing down during such events, Keller can move across huge swathes of the art world in a few hours. Two weeks later, for example, he starts his Berlin evening at veteran dealer Max Hetzler's dinner for the Berlin Biennial crowd and works his way around the fellow guests which include fellow fair organiser Matthew Slotover of Frieze, book publisher Benedikt Taschen, artist Mona Hatoum and London collector Anita Zabludowicz.

From there, Keller progresses eastward by increments, first a few hundred metres to drop in on the German art establishment (and Pace Wildenstein president Marc Glimcher) at the Paris Bar. Then comes the Pan Am bar – an unmarked nightspot in a residential building, where you enter by saying 'Pan Am' to the dour Teuton at the security desk. Here the fair director swings through a younger Berlin bourgeois crowd led by dealer Volker Diehl. Finally comes the Weekend club, a techno dancefloor high above Alexanderplatz, where Keller crosses paths with night owls such as artist Pierre Bismuth and private dealer Nicolai Frahm.

ArtBasel's leader travels three weeks a month, not only to major events but also to emerging markets. He spends a week per year touring South America, makes an annual Russian excursion and also goes even further off the art world map when necessary. Last year, having heard interesting things about the Indian market, he dispatched an emissary to check out the scene. After Nature Morte gallery of New Delhi was selected for Art Basel's new Art Premiere section, Keller himself ▶





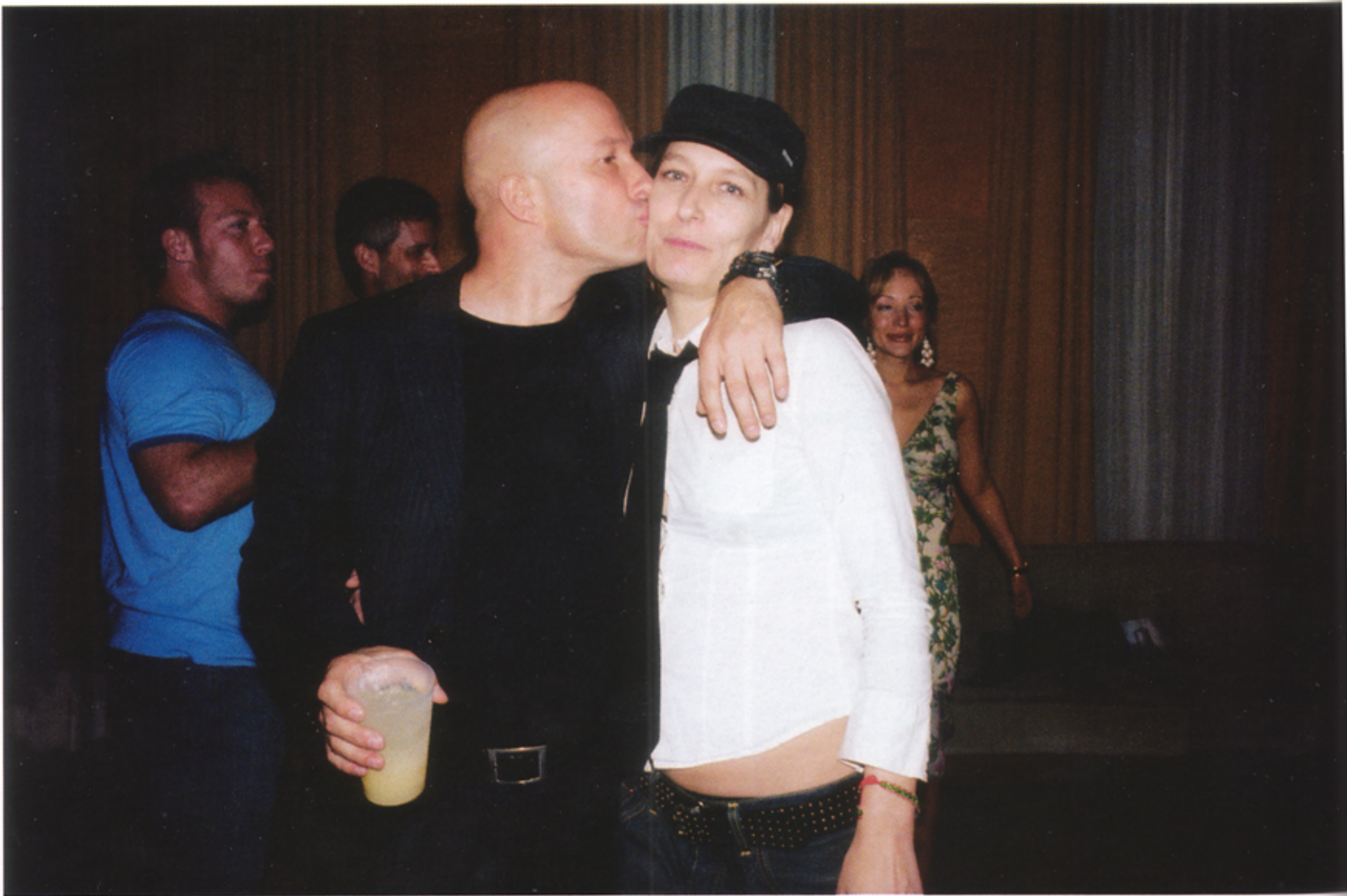
'I spend a lot lot of time talking to hotel owners to make sure they never give a block of rooms to some dentists' convention during the fair'

All photographs from a new series, 'Super Stars', 2006, by Todd Eberle

◀ travelled to India in January, meeting with advisers, museum executives, artists and collectors to wrangle them into coming to the fair.

This is the public role of Basel's major-domo, the side memorialised in dozens of profiles and observed everywhere from international biennials to regional events such as Art Rotterdam. But it takes much more than a strong liver and fatigue immunity to run Art Basel, which, as the world's most prestigious fair, manages to combine Microsoft's market dominance with the constant innovation of Google. 'People don't see me when I'm in Basel, directing an entire organisation,' says Keller, who never misses a chance to credit his staff for the fair's success. 'I spend a lot of time there on activities like talking with local hotel owners to make sure they never give a block of rooms to some dentists' convention during the fair. And also on things like making sure that if there's an opening during Art Basel at the Schaulager, where you would never get a cab normally, collectors will find 50 taxis waiting outside.' He also works the local political and business scene, to pull off coups like this year's screening of *Zidane: A 21st-century Portrait*, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's new film about the French football star at the FC Basel stadium designed by Herzog and de Meuron.

Basel is also the nexus for meetings of the fair's selection committee – currently Zurich dealers Victor Gisler and Gianfranco Verna, Xavier Hufken of Brussels, London's David Juda, Stockholm's Claes Nordenhake and Esther Schipper of Berlin. From October to December, Keller moderates (but has no official vote, which is not to say no influence) during the day-long debates that determine which galleries get to play on the art market's premier stage the following June. ▶



◀ The selection is less a one-time event than a rolling process. 'Choosing the galleries for 2006 started on the opening day of last summer's fair, when we went around to see how good a job people did with their booths,' explains Keller. He tours a section of the fair every morning with the entire committee, plus a squad of staffers who document each booth in detail for later reference. As Galerie Mai 36 owner Gisler explains it, 'We're looking to see if they have a concept or are just hanging stuff to sell. If we find primary-market dealers featuring too much secondary-market work, for example, their chances for next year aren't high.' That grading process continues right through the autumn, which means that galleries on the edge of acceptance can seal their fate with a stellar showing or a boring booth at the Frieze Art Fair or even Art Basel Miami Beach in December, when the final cuts are made.

This winter, the committee's job grew more complex when the fair added Art Premiere, a section for young galleries that have never appeared in the fair but have a particularly compelling programme, such as London's Herald Street and

Catherine Bastide of Brussels. Integrated into the main hall, the dozen Premiere spaces will bring the sort of edge for which many collectors had started to gravitate towards the Liste Young Art Fair. As Gisler explains it, 'We didn't want to make Art Basel feel like some sort of status quo fair, and with Premiere we added some stars from the younger galleries.'

Once it becomes clear which galleries have made the cut, Keller and his staff start soliciting information for the next stage: the floor plan. Imagine having to do a seating plan for a dinner party with 297 extremely demanding business clients, all with grand notions about their place in the world. Some clients have strong alliances; between others reigns a scarcely contained animosity. Each area of the party must have a distinct character, yet under no condition can it dissolve into cliques. The seating plan must feel familiar to previous partygoers, yet not so familiar they get a sense of boring déjà vu. Such is the brain-twisting task that the fair director confronts every January.

'I could never delegate this job, because it's my role to know what each gallery wants,' Keller says. 'New galleries come in and others are not re-accepted, so it's never a stable situation. We have to create a platform for the galleries to shine. Dealers like Gebrüder Lehmann who mostly show painters need a lot of flat walls, but I know Jeffrey Deitch can conceive something great even with a very challenging kind of space.'

Keller also strives to create a geographical mix within the 'neighbourhoods' on the fair floor, so that a collector from one continent who visits a favourite local gallery will stumble on to similar ones from distant places. 'We have to make sure that the galleries not only sell well, but sell to new clients,' he explains. 'That is what makes the fair worthwhile to them. And for that the fair must look great. But Art Basel itself has no art. We only have walls and lights. Our "product" is our clients.'

'If we find any primary-market dealers featuring too much secondary-market work, their chances for next year aren't high'