

The renaissance of Artforum at the hands of a 27-year-old

By Hunter Drohojowska

In 1979, Ingrid Sischy, then 27, was hired as editor of Artforum, considered to be the most prestigious and intellectual magazine of contemporary art in the world. This most revered voice in the larger art dialogue suddenly was being guided by a young woman, which provoked no small amount of concern within the sanctum sanctorum of the art world's intelligentsia. But five years later, Artforum has been transformed — and many think for the better.

Sischy, in town recently with Artforum publisher Anthony Kor-

ner, talked about some of those changes over coffee on the patio of the art deco-style Shangri La Hotel in Santa Monica. She recalled her first priorities as editor: "We had to address two issues at the same time: the writing and the New York hegemony. There was no point in commissioning the first piece on Japan to run in many, many years and have it so no one could understand it."

Sischy is small and round-faced with bright brown eyes, dimples and a mass of curly dark hair, all of which lend her a deceptively girlish aspect. Her husky, intense tone of voice and the careful phrasing of each sentence betray the intelligi-

ence and sharp will that have taken hold of an established institution and made it new. Although she is quick to defend the policies of the past regimes, the Artforum that she inherited had a reputation as a recondite and unreadable publication. The opinions of brilliant critics throughout the late 1960s and '70s were written in language abstruse enough to confuse the most erudite scholars.

"In terms of difficulty of writing, the biggest problem is to disrespect an audience, which means, hey, we have to make it easy. The truth is that Artforum's audience is a highly committed and intelligent audience, who really love and understand art. But there is a difference between accepting that writing about something visual is more than a matter of description or opinion — it's a matter of original thinking, of grappling with visual ideas — and writing which feels its own pomposity because it's so 'difficult.' I'm not particularly impressed that way. I'm not a big fancy art historian who's interested in all that stuff. I love contemporary art and I love writing and I really think criticism is the best system as a means to evaluate art works."

Today Artforum is considerably more accessible, the result of a search for new writers. In the past, the magazine concentrated primarily on activity in Manhattan. Sischy, however, sought contributors all over Europe, as well as the U.S. "We wanted to make a magazine dedicated to contemporary art and a reflection of it. It doesn't have anything to do with geographic boundaries."

One of her more controversial editorial decisions has been to embrace the contributions of popular culture. There have been stories on fashion designer Issey Miyake, breakdancing and Solidarity posters, plus and film reviews. One issue included a soft plastic recording of Laurie Anderson's "Let X = X." "It wasn't an active thing of thinking 'more popular culture,' for the magazine," said Sischy. "It's about pursuing what contemporary art is about: issues such as great film, great design, great fashion. The fact that something would have meaning to an immense number of people does not mean that it does not belong in the art discourse. To have left popular film out, not made an analysis of Hitchcock, and to have only paid attention to structuralist or deconstruction film is a joke. We have to look for the best in what a medium is. There are so few things that have enormous merit, to come up with an elite judgment system, or a system that is based on the canvas, would be inadequate."

Just as the old Artforum was closed, Sischy insists on openness: "We are plural in trying to make a magazine that really is an art forum."

Examples have been in abundant evidence over the past four months. In November, contributing editor Thomas McEvilley attacked the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Primitivism in 20th Century Art" as benign racism. This month, organizers of the show, MoMA's distinguished director of painting



Photo by [unreadable] photographer

Artforum editor Ingrid Sischy and publisher Anthony Korner flew in recently to seek out "increased presence" from the L.A. area and to smooth over old resentments.

and sculpture William Rubin and New York University professor Kirk Varnedoe, defend their position in print, and McEvelley counterattacks. This may seem an arcane business to the general public but it is the sort of dialogue that thrives among art professionals.

Sischy and Korner were in L.A. to search for what they called "increased presence." Although they have three regular reviewers here — Susan Larsen, Howard Singerman and Melinda Wortz — Sischy was talking to more writers and artists, visiting galleries and studios. They were also soothing feelings of local resentment. L.A. art community denizens regularly complain about lack of attention from New York-based magazines: Artforum has been a particular thorn, since many still feel nostalgic about its early years here.

The magazine was moved here from San Francisco in 1964 by publisher Charles Cowles, and its distinctive square format was conceived by an L.A. artist: Ed Ruscha. In 1967, then editor Phillip Leider decided the magazine should go to New York, and in many ways, L.A. has neither forgotten nor forgiven. Cowles continued as publisher until 1979, when British-born Korner and a friend, Amy Baker Sandback, heard the magazine was for sale.

Sischy was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and moved with her family to Scotland when she was 10. She finished high school in the U.S. and went to Sarah Lawrence, where she studied psychology, philosophy, creative writing and studio art. "I did a lot of set designs for theater, and continued in New York after college. I was lucky. I met people who were open and would give me jobs." She did sets for La Mama Theater and Paper Bag Players, then got a summer job in a private art gallery. "I was becoming a member of the art community, meeting artists, talking and doing all that."

In 1974, Sischy began in the subscription department of a small, quality magazine devoted to works on paper, the Print Collector's Newsletter. She was soon writing

reviews and became associate editor. She left in 1977 to become director of Printed Matter, a small non-profit store and distribution center of books produced by artists: "It was training for the commitment to push and fight for artists who are authentic, who are really working in a serious matter, and to be a channel to tell the world that they were there."

She went to a National Endowment for the Arts curatorial fellowship in photography at MoMA. "I'd done a little writing on photography and I'm very interested in multiples, in prints, photographs and artist books, which would tie into my interest in popular art and a large audience which can enjoy these things. I loved art but hadn't really faced the fact that this was my life. But I knew I would learn a great deal if I went to MoMA."

Then Baker Sandback, who had been on Printed Matter's board of directors, approached Sischy about Artforum. But how could she handle such responsibility at only 27?

"I saw it as an incredible privilege and, probably because I was so young, I took it really seriously. I felt as if I'd been trusted enough to really try for something real. I had faith in my publishers, in the writers and in the art community: people all over who really love art, want it genuinely, and an open, serious magazine that would really try and do this impossible job of reporting on art."

During Sischy and Korner's stay here, they were repeatedly asked about more coverage for L.A. Sischy was making no promises: "There is a great deal of creative activity going on here. We need to be able to report on more of it than we are already. This month the lead article is on (San Diego artist and film critic) Manny Farber. Our interest in increased presence is not a question of higher profile but to make a magazine that is sort of an accurate record of creative action. And that does not just happen in New York. But my idea is to produce a magazine so that you can't tell *where* it's coming from. The place that it's coming from is art."