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The rise and whys of the contemporary art fair

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The rise and whys of the contemporary art fair



Can artists, critics and curators play a role in the contemporary fair? Or are the fairs solely commercial ventures, without thematic or aesthetic interest? Will the future bring a consolidation or an even greater proliferation of fairs? What are the politics of these new art fairs? How do they influence the changing power alignments and subtle relationships of taste and prestige that define the art world?

For the exhibiting galleries, the most vital aspect of the art fair is sales. Rental of booth space, transportation and shipping costs, and hotels are not negligible expenses, and no dealer wants to go home losing money. But the relative importance of sales varies with each dealer and his particular program. Some galleries habitually bring their back rooms and use the fair as a concentrated venue for selling work by well known artists, or by the hot artists of the moment. (Of course, the notion of "hot" varies according to time and place. At last year's Cologne fair, the "stars" were Beuys, Warhol, Picasso, Miro, Fontana, Lewitt, Penck, Polke, Knoebel and Arnleider, whose work each appeared in a minimum of ten booths. Except for Warhol, Picasso and Miro, the priorities at FIAC last year were very different, with a Gallic tendency to Arman, Yves Klein, Dubuffet, Leger and James Brown.)

Those galleries who approach the art fair as a brokerage are very careful about what work they bring to each venue: only proven sellers will do. This orientation is particularly suited to those private dealers who, lacking their own gallery space, employ the international network of fairs as a travelling showroom for resales. Other dealers follow a more subdued, programmatic approach, presenting a statement of gallery aesthetics and priorities and advancing a particular stable of artists, sometimes exhibiting one-man or thematic shows. Such galleries intend to break even on sales as against expenses, but are really participating in the fair to spread their influence, make contacts, meet collectors, establish solidarity with other dealers and with curators and critics, arrange foreign exhibitions for their artists, perhaps pick up an artist from another gallery.

This dichotomy of aims — the supermarket vs. the kunsthalle — rarely exists as an undiluted polarity in any one dealer. Most exhibitors partake of some gradation of the two poles, as do most art fairs themselves. Basel and Chicago, for example, are the prototypical supermarket expos, but allow for special projects and one-artist exhibits. Cologne lies somewhere in the middle, latering to the German market while maintaining fairly rigorous selection standards for exhibitors, whereas FORUM, with its mandate for one-man shows, curated themes and uniform booth sizes for all exhibitors, is designed as a smaller, more thoughtful, utopian alternative.

Hosting an art fair, as with any large trade show that brings a professional audience to town, has the

Several art fairs have been in existence for twenty years, but it is the last decade in particular that has witnessed the rapid proliferation of the international art exposition as an integral part of the contemporary art marketplace. The current roster of ongoing annual expos includes Basel, Art Cologne, Paris (FIAC), Madrid (ARCO), Hamburg (FORUM, formerly in Zurich) and Amsterdam (KUNSTRAI) in Europe, with American entries from Chicago (CIAE), Los Angeles (Art LA) and New York (IGI). Milan, Nice and Gothenberg (Sweden) have all fielded art fairs, as have London, Washington D.C. and Montreal. Frankfurt is planning its first art fair in 1989, and Tokyo is rumored to be developing one for the near future.

What is the impetus behind this burgeoning mini industry? Is the current glut of art fairs symptomatic of the exponential growth of the entire art market? Or does it indicate new priorities, new ways of doing business within that marketplace? Have we reached the point, ruefully expressed by a dignified but distressed German art dealer, when galleries can literally close their doors and take to the road, conducting business from fair to fair? Could these expositions, conceived as beneficial to the needs of the art establishment, actually serve to undermine the gallery system in the long run? Could these expositions, conceived as beneficial to the needs of the art establishment, actually serve to undermine the gallery system in the long run?

immediate economic advantage of tourist dollars. But an art fair has extra cachet, for rather than exhibiting lawn chairs or automobiles, it is perceived as existing in some rarefied, elitist sphere, conferring instant prestige and cultural maturity upon the host city and nation. Hence the respective participations of the French and Spanish governments in FIAC and ARCO, as expressions of civic pride. But the particular benefits of sponsoring an ongoing expo accrue not to the public at large, and not even to the interested cultural dilettante, but to the small community of art professionals within each city.

The German situation is instructive. Could Cologne have become such an important art center were it not for Art Cologne, now entering its 22nd year? The heightened visibility of this annual Kunstmarkt helped to focus energy and financial attention upon Cologne, and drew artists and dealers away from Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, Berlin and Hamburg. Cologne became the art capital of Western Germany, the site of over forty contemporary galleries, an estimable Kunstverein, and the Ludwig Museum. In the last several years, Frankfurt, the center of West German banking and finance, has been undertaking a major, concentrated effort to become the German center for art as well, thus challenging Cologne's hegemony. Art does tend to follow capital, whether private, corporate or government, and capital for its part, needs art as a buffer and genteel camouflage for its brutality (see Hans Haacke). From various parts of Germany, Frankfurt has recently recruited such personages as Kasper Koenig, Gerhard Richter and Ulrich Rueckreim to become the core of its academic/artistic establishment. Jean-Christophe Amman is leaving the Basel Kunsthalle to direct the new Frankfurt museum of contemporary art, now under construction. And an art fair is being planned for April 1989, under the direction of Anita Kaegi, the heart of the Basel fair for the last fifteen years. Frankfurt's rapid importation of an art intelligentsia has created quite a buzz, but the city can only be regarded as a true center for the business of art after it has developed a viable market situation of galleries and collectors. A successful, annual art exposition is seen as essential to this purpose. The public battle for domination of the German art market could resolve into a battle of Kunstmesse, Art Cologne vs. Art Frankfurt.

The situation is different in America, since no exposition is necessary to establish New York as the undisputed center for art, both nationally and worldwide. New York's first serious art fair, IGI (International Gallery Invitational), took place earlier this year, and was a qualified success, featuring a program of seminars that involved artists, critics and curators, special events, and thirty exhibiting galleries. IGI needs to grow, and could become a valuable forum for European and American regional galleries, but the



future of the fair is uncertain, since it has recently experienced changes in personnel. Certainly, any expo based in New York should not attempt to postulate an alternative to the pervasive art market that exists every day in New York, but should rather try to find its niche within that marketplace. In order to be taken seriously by the international art establishment, a New York fair would need to demonstrate pristine aesthetic judgment and an ability to assemble the best galleries worldwide.

The major American art fairs occur regionally, where the marketplaces are generally unsaturated relative to New York. The Chicago International Art Exposition, now entering its tenth season at the Navy Pier, has become the Basel of the West, a major American arena for sales and dealmaking. This fair has spurred the growth and influence of the Chicago art establishment over the last decade. Chicago will never be New York, but the large concentration of galleries in the Superior/Huron district, the increased quality and maturity of the art exhibited, the growth of the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Art Institute, the international reputations now enjoyed by a number of Chicago galleries and artists, are all outgrowths of the annual expo. Which is certainly what the Chicago galleries had in mind when they rallied behind the Lakeside group in 1980 to make the first expo a reality. Of course, the Chicago expo could not have become influential without first engaging the participation of

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certain prestigious tastemakers, the New York and European exhibitors. Luckily, Chicago was perceived as a new marketplace worthy of cultivation and as a good central location through which to approach other North American regional art centers, so some of the top New York and European dealers did become involved at the outset of the expo, encouraging others to follow their example.

Los Angeles has also fielded an art fair for the last two years, but unlike the experience of the Chicago expo, Art LA was not formative in developing its own scene, but rather hoped to capitalize on the increased visibility and strength that was already apparent in the LA art community. The new contemporary art museum, the opening of a new wing of the LA County Museum, the establishment of galleries in Santa Monica, the growing international influence of certain LA collectors (Fred Wiseman, Ed Broida, Eli Broad), and the marketability of the California sensibility, of art produced by graduates of CalArts in nearby Valencia, all led a British trade fair company, Andry Montgomery, to set up shop in LA and organize an art fair. Since it was perceived as an imported project and not indigenous to the local scene, the fair was unable to secure the participation of several major LA galleries, although many LA and San Francisco museums, art institutes and artists did collaborate in a large program of seminars organized for the fair. During the last two years, Art LA was able to recruit some New York and European exhibitors who wished to cultivate a West Coast market, but attendance was small and sales correspondingly slow. Art LA is scheduled for a third

season, but needs to grow before it can rival Chicago as a meaningful venue.

Despite the pervasive influence of art fairs, there are certain galleries who choose not to participate, either as exhibitor or audience or who only participate with reservations, under duress. The implicit criticism is that, while fairs are often commercially rewarding, their context tends to cheapen the perception of the art object, reducing it to the level of sheer commodity, stripping it of meaning and of its unique internal history of production, setting it adrift in a sea of dollar signs. This is a difficult criticism to counter, except to observe that ironically, the direct confrontation of the art object with the late capitalist marketplace, brought into high relief at art fairs and auctions, is very close to the subject of much neo-conceptual art, which comments on the interface between the projections of corporate power (advertising, mass media) and the individual (artist) psyche. The abstracted nature of capital today, when the production and delivery of information is power, as exemplified in computer terminals, magazine photographs, TV advertisements and billboards, serves as a model for the new art object to simulate and reify, and in this way critique. Well, where in the art world do we find a more concentrated spectacle of projected information than at the art fairs, which can be viewed collectively as one vast, multifarious and hyperreal performance piece on the true nature of the contemporary art commodity.

Steven Kaplan