

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



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Basel: Fun and Fancy Free

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My watch stopped last Monday, just as the VIP opening of Art Unlimited got underway. There couldn't have been a more appropriate way to dive into the vortex of Art Basel, where time stands still and thousands of high-priced objects and images come at you from 285 different directions.

That's the number of galleries exhibiting in the fair's forty-fifth edition. It included Art Unlimited, Design Miami/Basel, and Art Parcours (public art), plus film and talk programs, and—special for this year—"14 Rooms," a separately ticketed, close encounter with performance art curated by Klaus Biesenbach and Hans Ulrich Obrist. In addition to Gerhard Richter and Wolfgang Tillmans shows at the Fondation Beyeler, Charles Ray and Kazimir Malevich at Kunstmuseum Basel, and Paul Chan at the Schaulager, this fun house provided daily escape from the pressure cooker of the fair. But no one hoping to pull in a year's income in three days' time could afford to stay away long.

In the cavernous Unlimited hall, oversize artworks that have never found a proper home have a chance to seize the day. On Monday afternoon, however, the space was so jammed with people that it was a while before the diagonal path underfoot revealed itself as a three-hundred-meter-long, steel-tile floor sculpture that Carl Andre made for the 1982 Documenta, and remade for sale at Art Basel.

It's like that here. A massive 1996 circle of driftwood by Richard Long and a 1966 installation of steel squares by David Lamelas were other site-specific ghosts returning for a run at the current market. Next to Christian Marclay's sixteen-channel, rattling and rolling video homage to Fluxus, the buzz-worriest artwork at Unlimited was Hanne Darboven's obsessive, witness-to-history environment, *Children of This World* (1990–96), which involved more than two thousand pages of notations.

Nevertheless, it was a hanging, hammock-like swatch of orange polyester that curator Gianni Jetzer gave a commanding central position. A collaboration by Sam Falls and the California sun, which had bleached a grid pattern into the fabric that had sat for some time under industrial pallets, it swooped down from two points on the ceiling and divided opinion as it did the space. Some called "sensational" what others termed "unnecessary," but as a whole the show won Jetzer high marks.

Andra Ursuta's wicked Transylvanian hair salon brought rare humor into the proceedings, but it was hard to believe that colossi like the Mylar balloon that Trevor Paglen will launch into orbit in outer space were really for sale. "People buy stuff like this all the time," reported Protocinema's Mari Spirto. Isn't it wonderful the way collectors support the ambitions of artists who want to take us places we wouldn't otherwise go?

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“14 Rooms” opened to the Basel public a few days before the fair, but it was invitation-only for a cocktail reception that evening in the former design hall, which architects Herzog and de Meuron had retrofitted for the live peep shows within. They included notable new pieces by Ed Atkins and Otobong Nkanga and one—Jordan Wolfson’s scary, pole-dancing robot—attracted a surprise guest, Marina Abramović, who broke from her current show at the Serpentine Gallery in London to attend a dinner in her honor at the Beyeler. Tino Sehgal was also on the scene, outside the room where pairs of dealers from his various galleries were performing *This Is Competition*, “showing” Sehgal works requested by spectators and then, adopting the stilted cadence of David Mamet characters, attempting to sell them. Hilarious.

As darkness fell, the troops scattered to gallery dinners all over town, though Sadie Coles, Konrad Fischer, Barbara Gladstone, Xavier Hufkens, Anton Kern, Yvon Lambert, Michele Maccarone, Giò Marconi, Eva Presenhuber, Shaun Caley Regen, and Sprüth Magers combined forces for an all-in-one, power buffet at the former stables on the Reithalle Wenkenhof estate. After that, the nightly revel in the Kunsthalle garden seemed redundant, but because a thousand other people were drinking and chattering as if there were no tomorrow, it almost wasn’t.

Inevitably, tomorrow came, bringing no fashion designers, and no Kanye or Leo to add a touch of glamour to the First Choice preview of the main fair’s opening. Nonetheless, the ranks of privileged VIPs gaining early entrance seemed to have swelled since last year. “It’s awfully crowded for the first hour,” said superstar advisor Allan Schwartzman, browsing the nearly impassable ground floor with his new business partner, Amy Cappellazzo. “I think it’s more crowded but less active,” ventured Sam Orlofsky from the bench outside the thronged Gagosian booth, where a new Mark Tansey still life tucked between the big-name resale items proved one of the standout works in the fair.

“Everyone wants to be in the art world now, I guess,” said Marian Goodman, deftly negotiating the traffic in her stand to greet LA MoCA’s new director, Philippe Vergne. Since hiring Helen Molesworth as the museum’s chief curator, his approval rating has shot to an all-time high, at least for a director at that institution. “I’ve got two more weeks of honeymoon,” he estimated, extolling the virtues of the stripped-down Charles Ray show before inquiring about a primo Julie Mehretu painting in the booth. “It’s sold,” said the indefatigable Goodman, who at eighty-three is opening a new space in London this fall. “I might be crazy,” she said. Not really.

With increasingly fewer dealers of modern art in the fair, more of their contemporary counterparts—dealers identified as primary market leaders—devoted their inventory to lucrative secondary market works by artists or estates they either represent or don’t, making their booths into consignment shops and altering the profile of the gallery.

Overall, the king of art fairs felt like just another trade show, one that marched to a decidedly European beat. “Where are the Americans?” wondered LA MoCA trustee Kathi Cypres. They have Miami, perhaps. They have Frieze. For goodness’ sake, they have LA.

Prices here were up but, with such heavy rebranding going on, the excitement of discovery felt diminished. That’s what the Feature and Statements sections are supposed to be about but succeeded only here and there, as Raffaela Cortese did with an inspired pairing of Ana Mendieta and Martha Rosler, Pippy Houldsworth with

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Mary Kelly, or Kate Werble with **Anna Betbeze**. If you poked around, you could find material that rarely shows up elsewhere among the Picassos and Warhols that people keep dumping on the market. Massimo de Carlo, for example, had an accordion-folded painting from 1966 that was one of Alighiero Boetti's first efforts. "For me that is the single best artwork in the fair," said *Mousse*'s Stefano Cernuschi. Of course, he's not a collector.

"I don't work here," a woman seated in the packed Thaddaeus Ropac stand told an inquisitor. "I'm just a big Tom Sachs fan." Xavier Hufkens was also swamped. "It's a day to be busy, no?" he said between sales. "If I'm not busy today, I'm doing something wrong."

No scandals erupted, but Wade Guyton caused a ripple by printing out five identical black canvases for each of his dealers. "It's like a solo show within the fair," said one of them, Giò Marconi. News of the imminent closing of Yvon Lambert's gallery in Paris hit the air, while Lisson Gallery announced it would build a spanking new building in Chelsea, Emmanuel Perrotin picked up the Jesús Rafael Soto estate, and Casey Kaplan confirmed his upcoming move to Manhattan's flower district. "It's bigger than the space I have now," he said. "And it's near the NoMad Hotel."

Strangely, the contemporary floor was a refuge of serenity from the madness below. Galleries where artists designed their dealers' presentations stood out from the pack: Lily van der Stoker's wall drawing perfectly framed works by Thea Djordjadze and Latifa Echakhch at Kaufmann Repetto. "We don't do this for money," Francesca Kaufmann said, not quite joking. "We do it for the glory."

Damien Ortega did the honors at Kurimanzutto by supplying the floor with patterns abstracted from the architecture of Bauhaus buildings at Dessau, circa 1926. There were other things to consider: at Macarrone, a functional chimney sculpture by Oscar Tuazon that you could "activate" by burning leaves in it; a Tal R sofa at Contemporary Fine Arts; a speedboat at Franco Noero that Daren Bader plopped onto a Ping-Pong table and kitted out with objects from the titles of twenty-one short stories he found in an abandoned FedEx envelope—and a live actor to go with them, always.

Gavin Brown, who thinks increasingly like an artist, had allover wallpaper by Sturtevant. "She was a queen, you know," he said. "A real queen." Fake baguettes and fruit by Rob Pruitt supplied the doors of working momma, papa, and baby-size refrigerators with human faces and stocked them with real cheese, dried sausage, chocolates, and soft drinks. "Just what you want to see at an art fair," Cappellazzo observed. "I love cornichons." As word of the fridges got around, the booth became a meeting point. "I feel in my element here," exulted MoMA curator Stuart Comer, while collector Christian Boros hid in the back alcove perusing Bjarne Melgaard drawings. "I can't afford anything downstairs," he said.

"It's been an *extraordinary* day," Maureen Paley reported as evening came on and one had to choose one's poison from a menu of gallery dinners. At the Kunstmuseum, Matthew Barney submitted to the annual dog-and-pony conversation with Tina Brown, who bravely asked stupid questions that Barney dignified with serious answers before a crowd that included Beatrix Ruf and Bart Rutten; curator of the permanent collection at the Stedelijk Museum (her new posting); Richard Chang; artist Pamela Rosenkranz; and

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many suits who had not yet seen Barney's new, six-hour film, *River of Fundament*. To wind it up, Brown said, "You've used Vaseline, tapioca, and salt in your work. Is there any material you'd like to work with that you haven't so far?" Barney gave it serious thought. After a silence long enough to make the unflappable Brown nervous, Barney replied: "Radiation." Perfect.

Paul Chan spent three months preparing his retrospective at collector Maja Oeri's Schaulager, which is both exhibition space and open storage for the collections of her family's Emmanuel Hoffman Foundation and her own Laurenz Foundation (coproducer of Barney's film). "I'm enjoying this!" she said, during a VIP brunch that she hosted on Wednesday morning—Chan wasn't there—pulling out the show's three catalogues. "This is the first exhibition where we've published three books, not just one," she said. "I'm a missionary—and I love to show off."

One of the books reproduced the 1,005 book covers Chan had used as canvases for paintings and was exhibiting in toto for the first time, along with new works that involved a number of shoes attached to electrical cords that were plugged into each other but not to any power source—Chan's commentary on the disconnects in our culture today. "I really wanted to change the plugs," Whitney Museum curator David Kiehl admitted later. "It was really tempting."

That night, Toby Webster led a small group to the Trois Roi hotel to celebrate Modern Institute director Andrew Hamilton's birthday. It had a suffocating crowd and bouncers so unfriendly that even Art Basel director Marc Spiegler was denied entrance. He was lucky.

A few steps away lay the discovery of the week, an empty bar that Mark Handforth dubbed the One King, after noticing that the trophy head of a bearded royal on one wall bore an uncanny resemblance to Gavin Brown. Next week, the dealer will make his New York debut as an artist in his own gallery and richer or poorer, summer will be upon us, fair-free.

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