

Die fine art fair frankfurt zum Beispiel gerierte sich im Frühjahr als Messe, die keine Messe sein will, sondern lieber eine handverlesene Societyparcoursloungeausstellung. Alles Händlerische und Marketenderhafte sollte draußen bleiben, nur einige wenige Galerien wurden zugelassen und sollten für ein Flair des Besonderen und Exklusiven sorgen – was dem Ansehen der Messe aufhalf, den Umsatzzahlen aber nur bedingt. Auch die Art Cologne will sich in diesem Herbst kräftig ausdünnen, ein Drittel weniger Galeristen werden zugelassen, in der Hoffnung, dass am Ende aus dem deutlichen Weniger an Ausstellern ein spürbares Mehr an Qualität werde. Im Vorteil sind da natürlich jene Messen, die ohnehin klein und abgelegen sind und bislang munter im Orbit um die Großen kreisten. Jahr für Jahr gibt es mehr von ihnen, sie locken mit dem Versprechen auf das Junge und Unbekannte, auf Subkultur und Authentizität. Hier begegnet den Besuchern, was nicht bereits auf den Wellen des Erfolgs dahin- und davontreibt. Und hier liegt wohl auch die Zukunft des Marktes. Denn so wie die Kunst selbst, die immer neue Formen und Farben annimmt und nach anderen Erscheinungsweisen sucht, wird sich wohl auch der Kunsthandel verändern und verstreuen, wird sich aufteilen und spezialisieren. Die Grenzen des Wachstums sind erreicht, auf den Hype wird der Anti-Hype folgen, auf das Marktmonster ein Schwarm kleiner Fische, wunderbar glitzernd, herrlich unberechenbar. Natürlich, einige von diesen Kleinfischen rasch verfetten und von Großsammlern an Land gezogen werden. Und doch bleibt Hoffnung, dass die kleinen und verkleinerten Messen auch eine Chance bieten. Die Chance für eine Kunst, die sich dem Diktat des schnellen Erfolgs entzieht und die darauf pocht, dass sie vieles sein darf – nicht immer nur vorlaut, gedankenschlicht und marktfromm.

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BUY! BUY! BUY!

Collectors on buying sprees and unbelievable sales: how the art fair boom is changing art.

The present has never been as expensive as it is today. Suddenly, Monet, Rubens, Beckmann and Turner can hardly keep up. They are now being outstripped by young artists such as Damien Hirst and Maurizio Cattelan. And even unknown artists achieve record prices in one go – for example David Smith whose massive sculpture, Cubi XXVIII, was recently auctioned for a whopping 23.8 million dollars. A Vermeer, by comparison, doesn't even get close – one of his paintings was recently auctioned for 14.5 million. Such escapades are not unusual in art buying where market value and artistic value are often far apart. But they have never been as excessive and as far removed from reality as at the moment. The aesthetic world is allowing itself, without restraint, to be dominated by finance and money is becoming a driving almighty force. And, whether we like it or not, this is changing our view of art. It is changing art itself.

It all began in 1998. Until then, auction houses only auctioned art which was older than 10 years. But then came Gérard Goodrow who also introduced works fresh from the studios into the rooms of Christie's and, in doing so, achieved unheard of success. »We gave birth to a monster,« says Goodrow today.

This »monster« might, at first, appear like a fairy godmother who takes the small unknown artists and makes them into great market heroes ensuring fairytale sales figures. At Christie's alone, turnover for contemporary art almost doubled in 2005. Elsewhere too, the growth rates have been colossal – it is almost as if contemporary art is the final booming business sector of the West. »The desire to get the latest work, almost before the paint is dry, is so strong,« says Frankfurt gallery owner Michael Neff, »and it can't be satisfied.«

What once vanished with the New Economy, today lives on in the art world: the enthusiasm for the market and the idea that even meagre ideas can lead to a bountiful future. Even the new casualness seems to have come from then. For a long time, the art buying business was seen as something discreet. Today, thanks to the new auctions, updated price lists for contemporary art are continually being brought onto the market. Since then, the discussion on art has transformed itself into a discussion about record sums and investments. It is, in fact, money, which is sneakily luring many to get involved in art in the first place.

»Last year, people were still holding their breath,« says Amanda Sharp. »They

couldn't believe that the market would continue to grow. But now they seem to have stopped asking the question.« Now they are buying and buying. And they are doing this with particular emphasis at the art fairs, especially at the Frieze Art Fair which Sharp founded together with her partner, Matthew Slotover, two years ago in London. Almost all the gallery owners who were there this autumn raved about it and reported unimaginable sales and collectors on buying sprees. Almost everyone says that the main business today no longer takes place in their galleries, but that the art fair stands are now the real place for art.

Although art fairs are not exactly relaxing and intimate affairs – as many paintings and sculptures as possible are crammed into pokey little coops and visitors get equally squashed. With bad air and dim light, they have to push their way through the crowds and are overwhelmed by a sea of endless impressions where they see everything, but don't really see anything. Yet it is precisely these challenging places which are spectacularly successful. It seems that many art buyers can no longer stand the quietness of the galleries. Here there is more in-depth observation, the buyer is alone with the art and with his decision and he has to rely on knowledge and intuition – on his own eye. There is no fevered frenzy to be felt here.

At the art fair, on the other hand, visitors are carried along by the great buying wave. They must decide, and quickly, otherwise the painting will go to someone else. The places are teeming with collectors who are all egging each other on. All are talking about the latest names and mega prices and, in this way, art acquisition becomes quite simple. Here you can buy with your ear, you don't need an eye for it.

Until now, this type of mass euphoria could only be found at the auctions where some bidders drove each other on into endless figures. Now, many buyers are hurling themselves into a real fevered frenzy at the art fairs, too, where they all compete with each other. Even a billionaire like François Pinault isn't afraid of making a fool of himself. Disguised as a workman, he managed to get advance access to the Art Basel fair in June where he managed to get the best bargains. Others storm in as soon as the stands are open and, already after the first few minutes, the first paintings have been sold.

Here, art collecting becomes a type of art hunt or, better still, that's what it should look like. Even though many paintings and sculptures are sold off in no time, the really prized works are often sold weeks before. Some time before the art fairs begin, the collectors call the galleries, negotiate and agree on a price. And, in this way, some works only go to the fairs for appearance sake – the new owner does, after all, want to be assured by the many envious looks and celebrated with his great purchase.

This may be regarded as sales folklore, but the craving and passion with which many works are courted also reveals a changed relationship to art. Buying has become, for many, a public act and, for some collectors, the act of buying becomes more important than ownership itself. They have so many different types of works they call their own that it's similar to people who have overflowing wardrobes: they no longer know what they

actually have. And some actually don't want to know what they have, as it's the buying which fuels them.

Some of these art collectors are, in fact, art shoppers. And they shop even more freely as art, in comparison to an evening gown, for example, promises them a double added value: firstly there is the prospect that they might be able to sell it with a profit one day and, secondly, there are generous social dividends. Those who acquire a work of art are active in the arts and can feel as though they are the artist's sponsor, even though they are only a consumer. Nowhere does money transform itself so rapidly into cultural wealth as here. And, it is only in the art world that the product gains value through consumption. Unlike to a car, whose reselling price decreases from day one, the young unsecured work of art is only valuable when money has been paid for it. As Andy Warhol predicted: »Good business is the best art.«

It is precisely towards this appetite for art – a mix of eagerness to own and a desire to serve a charitable cause – that the new Frieze Art Fair is geared. In contrast to, for example, Art Cologne in Cologne where this year's visitors felt as though they were in a gloomy department store with wrinkled carpet and crooked pasteboard walls, the Frieze places great emphasis on mood. It sells art, but especially atmosphere: the feeling of being in the right place at the right time.

The fair celebrates itself in the middle of Regent's Park, in a big white tent which promises relaxation, party and glamour. The Frieze organisers consciously only allow those gallery owners who represent young artists. Everything should be wild and colourful and transitory – a playing field open to real discoverers. The fair has also attracted many stars for example, this year, Gwyneth Paltrow and Elle McPherson as well as many young and also older collectors. Here, a seventy-year-old can, provided he has the necessary finances of course, also mingle with the young. Unlike, for example, the disco, the art fair is a place which doesn't turn away any age group and gives everyone the feeling that they are young. It's as if all time and generation boundaries cease to exist in art buying.

The Frieze is also working on doing away with another boundary, as are other new art fairs such as the Art Forum in Berlin and the Art Basel Miami Beach. They want to come across as being as open for as many people as possible, for general use, like a museum or a centre for contemporary art. The »Frieze-Museum«, for example, is staging, directly next to the fair tent, a large sculpture show. It awards grants to artists and wins sponsors for a buying budget of 150,000 pounds which the Tate Modern then benefits from. Tours are also offered for school classes, there are concerts with Karlheinz Stockhausen as well as a talk by Jacques Rancière. And then the fair makes itself into a subject by having many discussions with prominent figures. It's not by accident that there is also a great deal of money for all this from the EU Culture 2000 fund. Big sponsors also get involved with the Frieze which seems quite matter of course for everyone, but is also quite odd. Deutsche Bank doesn't, after all, sponsor the Kaufhof department store or the Saturn electrics chain.

At some art fairs, the cultural side programme now eclipses the actual works

themselves, for example at the Art Basel Miami Beach. Here, at the beginning of December, guests are invited to a tropical artistic delirium with big beach and pool parties with many special museum shows, a new design fair and collectors who open their private houses to present their art and, of course, themselves. Here, even more than in London, the fair seems to have become the big catalyst. Everyone of name and standing wants to be there and every opening is so overrun that people who would normally only have to snap their fingers in a top restaurant, are here fighting for a few carrot sticks.

It is precisely this scramble, the feeling of belonging to a body of people who so desire art – a movement which is gripping and culturally enlivening entire cities like Miami – which the art fairs are exploiting. They become like a type of fixed star, filled with meaning and contribute, on their part, to every presented work of art appearing with great significance.

In this way, the unfettered market tries to remedy the self-inflicted damage. First it robbed art of much of its power, made it into a quick pastime, and made the carousel of names go faster. It also willingly accepted that, in the mass of what's on offer, not easy to oversee, all outstanding works go under. The new art fairs are now to stand up to this leveling-out process. In a sea of aesthetic arbitrariness, they seek to be islands of a more permanent nature. Here, art is not to be questioned, but affirmed. You come to take part and meet like-minded people. The fair in distant Miami manages this very well. Here buyers and sellers and artists and critics spend their days and nights together. Like a trans-Atlantic school trip, everyone is together in exceptional circumstances.

The art avant-garde once promised a similar experience. It wanted to unite life and art. Absurdly, this promise is now being realised by the new fairs – where you can feel rich, beautiful and free. Life and art fuse – to become lifestyle.

Of course, all this means that the paintings and sculptures end up on the sidelines. What the art fairs are really about, besides all the money, fun and generating importance, is power – power over art. »Museums and art history used to influence the market, today it is the reverse,« says Gérard Goodrow, who also manages an art fair – Art Cologne.

It is here that the monster becomes completely visible. It is, indeed, a monster which decides over art – on what is recognised and what is not recognised and this begins already with the question of who is allowed to go to the big fairs. Three times more galleries always apply than can be accepted. And it is not a neutral jury which decides but established gallery owners. It's like in the Middle Ages – it's a guilded system in which the unpopular is kept small, even if this leads to the art fairs appearing very limited and provincial, compared to the Frankfurt Book Fair, for example.

Even though there may be opposing and alternative fairs everywhere, most of the paintings and sculptures on offer are still from the western world. Galleries from Asia or Africa cannot afford the 100,000 euros needed for taking part in the fair. Many also simply don't have the necessary contacts. But many galleries from the West also apply in vain, especially if they don't meet the tastes of the select inner circle. Or if they, for example like

the Anita Beckers Gallery in Frankfurt, work with video art or other art forms which are difficult to compress into art fair stand format. Every fair does, after all, want to be good and it is only good if it sells well. The results: the big fairs look frighteningly similar. »There is practically nothing more to discover what is off the commercial mainstream,« says Pierre Huber from the Art & Public Gallery in Basel.

Much of what is today seen as bold, contemporary art is scrawled together and knocked up. It somehow appears bold as brass and wacky, but only if it's for sale at a high price. But art shouldn't get too unmanageable otherwise things get difficult. For this reason, even artists such as John Bock and Andreas Slominski, who used to be known for their passion which was far removed from the market, now produce »cash and carry« works. The freedom of art – here it is chained to the commission to maximise profit.

But artists can, of course, also create beautiful and great works of art in these chains. That good money is being made with art is not objectionable and leads, by no means, to an aesthetic void. But the new monster-like feel-good factor of the fairs and the omnipresent lust for money is also transforming many gallery owners and artists into cynics. They spew forth whatever goes – it always turns to gold. But, like all cynics, they also suffer from the superficiality craze and feel the emptiness of it all.

Even those who have really profited from the boom, like gallery owner Bruno Brunnet, have recently warned of the artist creativity seizing up and the art fair hype. »We are sliding into the entertainment industry,« he says. »There is a lack of intellectual nourishment.« His influential colleague, Tim Neuger, also a gallery owner in Berlin, urgently calls for a »little less decadence and wacky good mood.«

It is this decadence which is, indeed, making things difficult for art. There are currently many rumours circulating as to when the price bubble at the fairs and auctions will burst. More likely, is that the market will, at some point, quietly collapse in on itself, suffocated by the excessiveness of itself.

And so, quite a few collectors were disappointed by this year's Art Basel because, also here, the usual hype was unleashed, the prices rocketed absurdly and art buying became a hunt. The danger of arbitrariness grows and this at almost all the big fairs. The charges can barely be missed: too difficult to get an overview, too hollow, too shallow. Many fairs are already reacting to this and, in the midst of all this euphoric growth, are striving to downsize.

The fine art fair Frankfurt, for example, endorsed itself in the spring as a fair which doesn't want to be a fair, but more a hand-picked lounge exhibition. Anything to do with market and business should stay outside and only a few galleries were allowed to enter which should provide a special and exclusive flair. This all helped the fair's kudos but not really the turnover.

The Art Cologne also wants to cut down this autumn, and a third less galleries will be allowed to enter in the hope that fewer exhibitors will result in a clear plus in quality. At an advantage here are, of course, the fairs which are already small and which, until now,

orbited around the big ones. Year for year, there are more of them which all lure with the promise of the young and the unknown, of subculture and authenticity. Here visitors will encounter what is not already being driven here, there and everywhere by the wave of success. This is where the future of the market probably lies. Like art itself, which is always assuming new forms and colours and looking for different ways of expression, art buying will also change and scatter and divide itself and specialise. The growth limits have been reached, anti-hype will follow the hype; the market monster will be followed by a swarm of small fish, wonderfully shiny and incalculable. Of course some of these small fish will quickly get fat and be hauled on land by the big collectors. Yet there remains the hope that the small and smaller fairs will also offer a chance, a chance for a type of art which frees itself from the dictation of quick success and which insists that it can be many things - not always only cheeky, simple in thought and true to the market.

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