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Get Lost! Victims and Victors of the Art Fair Grid

by **David Cohen**

How to stand out at or among art fairs: Art Basel Miami, Aqua, Seven

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Events like Art Basel Miami are staged in vast convention centers which are bizarre equalizers: top galleries that ordinarily inhabit swank, architecturally distinct real estate are barely distinguishable from country cousin private or provincial dealers willing to rent a booth of the same size. Visitors, meanwhile loose their bearings. There are few visually meaningful landmarks. You make a brash artwork into one and next thing you know, its gone.



Installation shot of L&M Arts booth at Art Basel Miami, 2011, with works and wallpaper by Andy Warhol.
Photo: artcritical

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The organizers of New York's upcoming, 2012 Armory Show are savvy to this problem: they have contracted architects Bade Stageberg Cox (of National Academy Museum make-over success) to "spatially contextualize" the piers' fairs next year, which means creating memorable sightlines and trails.

Art Basel Miami know they have a problem too: they are victims of their own success. Miami-goers just love the overload, but still suffer its consequences. Basel opts for neat Swiss taxonomy. Their "sectors" help chop up the sprawl, either conceptually or geographically. Art Positions and Art Nova function as mini-exhibitions within the exhibition and get their own corner quadrants and placard color-coding. But their discreteness is more evident on the map than on the ground. Positions has booths for single artists presenting work on a singular theme, such as Sven Johne at Klemm's with three circus projects in different mediums: photos he took of empty plots once the circus left town, pictures he found online of sleeping (or dead) circus animals, and an enticingly rousing video of an actor announcing acts that on't actually materialize. Nova is for new work by small groups, such as Murray Guy's complementary presentation of Barbara Probst and Lucy Skaer. Art Kabinett, meanwhile, is a trail you can follow of space delineated within participating booths for solo concentrations. It is more an honorific – like landmark status from a monuments commission- than a tangible display within the display. And Art Video (to be reviewed here soon) is a segment of film work from participating galleries, curated by Artprojx of London's David Gryn.

And yet, however much such sub-categorizing tries to negotiate overload, it actually contributes to it, sorcerer's apprentice-style. Rather than dividing the mass it creates a matrix of intersecting grids.

One way for booths to defeat the white cube effect is to wallpaper their way out of the problem. As luck would have it, two spectacular efforts in this direction ended up next door to one another, almost defeating the purpose of the exercise. L&M Arts used Warhol's legendary cow and self-portrait wallpapers inside and out for their mini-drawings retrospective while Mary Boone had Barbara Kruger "textorate" their exterior with an excoriating statement about money making money worth less. Although both visual statements yearned a sea of white to help them pop, the sightlines of one to the other were actually amusingly sumptuous. Another way to subvert the ubiquity of the white walls – besides painting them black, as London's Alison Jacques Gallery did to exquisite effect for her moving two-woman Lygia Clark/Hannah Wilke display, or inviting one of your artists to make a wall drawing, as in the case of the Viennese Galerie Nacht St Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder and Ernst Caramelle – is to have your artist puncture holes in your walls. No one does that more artfully than Sarah Oppenheimer at Annely Juda.



Sarah Oppenheimer, W-13, 2011. Aluminum, glass, dimensions variable on view at Annely Juda Fine Art at Art Basel Miami. Photo: artcritical

And yet, however seasoned a fairgoer one is, the booth effect is draining upon aesthetic experience. The pleasures of getting lost in the stacks wears off after a while. The Seattle-based boutique fair Aqua offers an antidote. Recalling “The Waves” in its name and “A Room of One’s Own” in its organization, it achieves a stream of consciousness. This courtyard-accessed two-story motel on Collins Avenue is perfect for Aqua’s 45 domestically-oriented galleries. Each gets a similar, nicely-proportioned, emptied-out deco bedroom. And this means they get what no one paying exponentially more in a convention-center fair can wangle: real walls and natural light.

As if in emulation of the modest modernism of these surroundings, stand-out exhibits at Aqua included McKenzie Fine Art’s salon hang of Don Voisine; the subtle understated architectural white reliefs of Sarah Bostwick at San Francisco’s Gregory Lind Gallery, who was also showing Sarah Walker and others; precisionist matchbox-sized grids based on Artforum ad page layouts by Norwegian Lisa Liedgren at Seattle’s Prole Drift; and the funky abstractionist stable of Conrad Wilde Gallery of Tucson, Arizona, amongst them the sensual

encaustic monochromes of Joanne Mattera and the biomorphic reliefs of Ruth Hiller.



Valerie McKenzie and works by Don Voisine at McKenzie Fine Art's room at Aqua, Miami Beach, 2011.
Photo: artcritical

But some dealers are determined to go yet further in their bid to beat the grid with its relentless compartmentalization. For some years Soho gallerist Ronald Feldman and Brooklyn's Pierogi Gallery shared warehouse spaces in the Miami Design District. This year, for the second year, they have expanded to form Seven, with Postmasters, P.P.O.W., London's Hales Gallery, BravinLee programs, and Winkelman Gallery. In a raw, sprawling industrial space on the North Miami Avenue gallery street (Diana Lowenstein, Bernice Steinbaum, Hardcore et al.) the seven galleries have created a show where the labels alone identify gallery affiliation. Curating is by "passive-aggressive consensus" according to one participant. The fortuitous juxtapositions that arise by serendipity in a big grid fair are aesthetically composed here: the way a painting by Veteran West Indian-born abstract expressionist Frank Bowling sets off a dialog with a Fabian Marcaccio, for instance, or a Ward Shelley speaks to a David Diao.

Writing these notes prompts an observation about journalism that relates the strange equalizing power of fairs to the ubiquity of booths: Fairs are like states in the UN or the senate. However much the critic reminds himself that Art Basel is the main event and Seven is, well, just seven, one unit gets at least a paragraph the way Seychelles or North Dakota get a desk in the plenum. But really, does Red Dot even warrant observer status?