

# AMA

— Art Media Agency —



# BASEL

2017

NEWSLETTER

**284**

13 June 2017

# ART BASEL OR SHOCK AESTHETICS

An ardently arty atmosphere that anticipates the arrival of 100,000 art enthusiasts... Basel – the place to be in June, the fair where the art elite show their stuff. The spot where a mere thought can, in just a few hours, go viral. Welcome backstage at the world's biggest contemporary-art supermarket.

It's difficult to find anything that tops it in the art world... Let's just say that the Basel fair is like a VIP lounge where elegance reaches its peak. Everything smacks of luxury, from the Ruinart champagne to the chic dress code. In short, an ideal world that oscillates between the post-conceptual and the neo-Platonician. This is utopia, Swiss-style. And a megafair that is like no other. Because it's the biggest and the best. To get a picture of this 48<sup>th</sup> edition, just imagine a penthouse with full view of the ocean of the avant-garde!

And so we find ourselves in Switzerland for this planetary fest of the ultra-contemporary, in the oh-so Calvinist city of Basel, where – according to a certain Max Weber – Protestant ethics first started flirting with the spirit of capitalism. And since nothing happens by chance, it's in the same city (whose symbol is a bishop's crozier) that you'll get a big shock: a large-scale service of worship, drawing 291 state-of-the-art galleries from 34 countries and six continents. From aesthetic bliss to irritation, from works that will get under your skin to those that will make your hair stand on end, you're going to love it.

As mentioned in the press kit – that doesn't hold back on superlatives – all of the art elite from across the globe will be converging in Switzerland for four days of jubilation. A geotropism that, season after season, assembles smooth dealers and moneyed collectors, crotchety curators and all kinds of art advisers, in the name of art. Because it's in Basel that it all happens – rather than Miami Beach, better than in Hong Kong – because here, a mere thought can, in under 24 hours, go viral. Contradicting what's commonly said about Swiss sluggishness, it's in this unlikely canton that the contemporary-art market ticks... at high frequency and with millions changing hands. Indeed, rather than ticking, art here is counted. And it's not by accident if the fruit of efforts is recorded in dollars either.

## A transgressive platform

Around 100,000 visitors are expected, 15% of them VIPs, barons of high finance and captains of industry, Russian oligarchs and Emirati investors... The cream of the Forbes ranking seems to have spread the word among themselves: "From 15 to 18 June, we'll be doing the fair!" Or rather, the two days before, 13 and 14 June, for a far more exclusive preview: one of those glam rendezvous – by invitation only – that fill the agendas of sophisticates and where red "sold" stickers pop up everywhere. This is how Art Basel pulls off yoking together creativity and profit. An equation which, from stand to stand, increasingly legitimises the idea of the financialisation of art, like shares in listed companies. You'll find blue chips valued by conservative investors but also by speculative market players who dabble in risk. The choice is open.

And the offer, here, is literally "unlimited". And this is precisely the name of the most spectacular section at this extraordinary fair, presenting works in XXL format in Hall 1. Curated for the last six years by Gianni Jetzer from New York, this hall is worth the visit. Monumental sculptures, endless paintings, outrageous performances... This 16,000 m<sup>2</sup> platform

*Shelter #3 – 7% gold (2017), Sarah van Sonsbeek.*

© Sarah van Sonsbeek. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery. Photo Gert Jan van Rooij



is transgressive, like a challenge raised to excess. Insolence on the verge of provocation, pushing up the estimated global value of the works at the fair – said to be around 3 billion dollars!

### High-powered good-looker

In this cutting-edge atmosphere savvily cultivated by the fair's global director Marc Spiegler, the world's biggest contemporary-art market gets into swing. With a diamond stud in one ear, Marc is a man of networks, a jovial strategist as well, whose motto is summed up by four words: "No risk, no fun". Succeeding Lorenzo Rudolf and Sam Keller as global director in 2012, nothing is impossible for him. So what's the Spiegler method? With his rugby player's build, he wields an address book without equal. The 49-year-old Franco-American grew up in Chicago, studied political science, and worked as a journalist. A high-powered good-looker, he gained a reputation for harbouring ambitions – which he didn't deny either – for example, of promoting 4,000 artists over six days... and then resting on the seventh. Ranked number 22 in the 2016 Power 100 listing the most influential figures in the art world (*ArtReview*), Marc Spiegler goes merrily on his way. Otherwise said, he cuts to the chase: over a thousand galleries aspire to being counted among the fair's stands every year, but under 300 are chosen.

And so we find gallery heavyweights manning the booths, from A (as in Acquavella) to Z (as in David Zwirner), via Paula Cooper, Larry Gagosian, Marian Goodman, Sean Kelly, Emmanuel Perrotin, Thaddaeus Ropac... Of course, all this would come to naught if a battalion of big-shot collectors weren't on hand as well. But on this matter, Spiegler exhibits no particular anxieties... The Basel fair is no doubt the only place on the planet where you can hear, in one alley, "How much for the Christopher Wool?", with the answer "5.5 million dollars" leaving the asker unfazed. All in a day's work, right?

## FOCUS

### Museums out celebrating

To mark Art Basel, and to ride the wind of madness blown in by the fair, the city's museums are offering a series of major exhibitions. The Department of Prints and Drawings at the Kunstmuseum is unveiling "The Hidden Cézanne: From Sketchbook to Canvas", showing over 150 works on paper – in other words, the world's largest collection. Not far off is another show, "Cosmic Communism", devoted to German painter and sculptor Otto Freundlich. Meanwhile, the Fondation Beyeler is paying homage to Wolfgang Tillmans, and the Museum Tinguely is celebrating the irony of Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, in a solo show presenting his emblematic digestive machine, *Cloaca*, alongside more recent works. In collaboration with the magazine *Brownbook*, the Vitra Design Museum is showing "Mudun: Urban Cultures in Transit", a rendezvous dedicated to contemporary culture in the Middle East and North Africa. And if you have any time left, head for the Kunsthalle, which is presenting an installation by Yan Xing: *Dangerous Afternoon*, designed as a fictional exhibition by an imaginary curator. A combination between an autobiographical narrative, aesthetic criticism and pure chatter...





*Jaguars and Electric Eels* (2017), Donna Huanca.  
Courtesy Peres Projects and Julia Stoschek Collection



### From Kassel to Venice

Talking of a day's work, some dealers can notch up as much as 60% of their yearly turnover at the fair. In German-speaking Switzerland, it's not surprising to see most gallerists smiling more than usual. Last year, Hauser & Wirth sold, right at the start of the fair, a Paul McCarthy installation, *Tomato Head*, for the tidy sum of \$4.75 million. Here, one morning might see a Calder go for \$20 million (at Van de Weghe), or a major Rothko from the 1950s (at Nahmad) for no less than \$50 million... Attractive prices, especially when it is possible to pay in instalments (as for household whitegoods, in three parts without expenses).

Given that the number of art fairs held all over the world comes to over 300, and also given that the secondary market of auctions brings severe competition, Art Basel does pretty well. It's a solid trading post for everyone that falls in the category, in financial jargon, of HNWI's (high net worth individuals). In other words, individuals with at least \$1 million of assets to invest, outside of their main residence and collector's objects. There are 14.5 million of them worldwide, making up global wealth of 58,700 billion dollars. Enough to have a bit of fun! And then there are the Ultra-HNWI's, each weighing in at least \$30 million... At that level, anything

is possible. Between a weekend at the Documenta in Kassel and a trip to Venice for the Biennale, these "big collectors" (read mega-rich) will drop by to do some shopping.

### A question of taste – and sometimes means

Around the fair, you'll find the sublime and the banal, works that are hypnotically beautiful and others that are more common, even hideous. It's a question of taste, and sometimes of means... The main section, "Galleries", welcomes 226 stands this year, including ten brands that are showing works for the first time, from Campoli Presti to Tornabuoni. Next, the section for limited-edition works, "Edition", is gathering around fifteen leading specialists, such as Brooke Alexander featuring Robert Longo's *Les Hommes dans les villes*. Meanwhile, the "Feature" section offers 32 galleries with a fine selection of Max Beckmann works at Jörg Maaß Kunsthandel. Loving it! And also Lea Lublin's four emblematic works at Deborah Schamoni, the Mazzoleni stand with works from Piero Manzoni's *Achromes* series whose power is as fresh as ever. The Jenkins Johnson stand is focusing on militant works by Gordon Parks while at the Peter Blum stand you can go crazy on early Robert Rymans. Otherwise, emerging



*HAHAHA* (2014), Claudia Comte.

Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy Gladstone and König Galleries

artists and young galleries can be discovered at the “Statements” section: eighteen stands including eight newcomers. Of note: a sound sculpture by Antonio Vega Macotela at Labor, a stop at the Dawid Radziszewski stand facing Joanna Piotrowska’s choreographed happenings, and why not, while you’re at it, buy a series of three large Lui Shtini works at Kate Werble’s stand with your eyes closed? Because by this stage, everything might start to look hazy. To regain your composure, head for the central hall where the enormity of “Unlimited”, with its 76 works on display, will restore your sight. An immersive installation by Subodh Gupta, a body-painting performance by Donna Huanca... Eye-popping stuff! We finish with “Projection”, a section reserved for artist’s films, staged for the third year running by curator Maxa Zoller, a high priestess in experimental film. And a final word goes to “Parcours”, the set of sculptures and urban works organised around the Münsterplatz by Samuel Leuenberger.

#### **56.6 billion dollars**

There you have it... and as we need to finish up somewhere, we’ll just slip in – for pleasure’s sake – at the end of this article one dirty word: monetarisation. Put more simply, the transformation of art into monetary

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#### **Art Basel**

From 15 to 18 June. “Collectors” preview on 13 and 14 June.  
Messe Basel, Messeplatz 10, Basel. [www.artbasel.com](http://www.artbasel.com)

#### **Design Miami Basel.** Global forum for collectible design.

From 13 to 18 June. “Collectors” preview on 12 June.  
Messe Basel, Hall 1 South, Messeplatz 10, Basel. [www.designmiami.com](http://www.designmiami.com)