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The ART Cologne fair shifts dates and find new competition

By David Galloway

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COLOGNE: When the world's oldest art fair announced its intention to abandon a 40-year-old autumnal tradition in favor of an April slot, many art-watchers were skeptical. For collectors, gallerists and artists, the autumn launch of ART Cologne was the vigorous, unmistakable fanfare to a new season. But the fair's director, Gérard Goodrow, insisted that the explosion of international venues for modern and, above all, contemporary art required a strategic redeployment. If it is too soon to measure the results of that reshuffling, the installment of ART Cologne that drew to a close on Sunday suggested that the skeptics may well have been right.

First, the attempt to give Cologne a favored position at the starting post was of dubious effect. Indeed, no fewer than four fairs were jockeying for position between April 13th and April 29th: Fine Art Frankfurt, ART Cologne, the new dc (for Düsseldorf Contemporary), and the upcoming Viennafair. Chicago, too, beckons now for many international gallerists. Several old-timers chose to give Cologne a miss, including Hans Mayer of Düsseldorf, one of ART Cologne's founding fathers. He was less irritated by the change of dates than by the general shifting course of the fair's management. "Two years ago, we were forced to move to new quarters on the fairgrounds, and everyone - gallerists and public alike - needed more time to adjust to the new location. A further major change like this is strategically false."

Visitors, too, seemed less than enthusiastic about the rites of spring being played out in this Rhineland capital. A total of 60,000 visitors suggests substantial potential, but overall attendance was actually down by 20 percent, and the two sprawling halls that accommodate ART Cologne often projected the air of ghost towns. Clearly, the new April dates take some getting used to, and, equally clearly, some of the deficits of the revised profile represent a generational shift, as well. Still, the scarcity of leading international galleries hardly bodes well for the fair's future, while the admissions standards (once hotly protested in the courts by unsuccessful applicants) have been relaxed to include newcomers of questionable quality. Furthermore, collectors shopping for contemporary shooting stars like Thomas Schütte, Neo Rauch, Peter Doig and Paul McCarthy went home empty-handed.

All of this does not mean that there were no interesting discoveries to be made, but Cologne is no longer the trendsetter that once drew major gallerists and collectors from throughout the world. The identity crisis is plain, and in response Cologne has developed interesting programs for new talents and forgotten modern "classics," as well as a handsome, lively "Open Space" in which larger sculptures and installations escape the rigid confines of the classic booth. Nonetheless, ART Cologne will have to run even harder just to stand still. It is not classy like Basel, not sassy like London's "Frieze," not flashy like Miami, and it is increasingly squeezed by the competition. A short distance away, Cologne's old rival Düsseldorf inaugurated its own "dc," which ran parallel to ART Cologne. Curated by museum directors and restricted to works produced after 1950, the new, stylish "dc" (with only 85

galleries as opposed to 200 in Cologne) was a fresh and lively anthology of contemporary trends with genuine international flair.

One of the happier surprises here was the discovery of a large relief by the German-Iranian artist Timo Nasser. Originally known for his sobering photographs of the "skins" of bombs and rockets, with their cryptic stenciled formulas, Nasser has now turned to Persian calligraphy as another source of "encoded" information.

Overlooked in the fray was a further fair, a kind of dark horse situated on the same grounds as ART Cologne and systematically unpublicized: "Liste Cologne," where the trend was toward younger, experimental art in a price range especially encouraging to young collectors. There, for example, one could marvel at the pointillistic Berlin cityscapes of Holger Bär on view at Gallery Deschler (Berlin), and **the extraordinary collages of the Japanese artist Syunsaku Hishikari at l'Usine Gallery (Brussels). With thousands of snippets of newspaper, Hishikari creates images that seem, at first, to be conventional photos of conventional events like weddings but reveal themselves as extraordinary examples of trompe l'oeil wizardry.**

Photography itself took a less strident role than in recent years. The Korean artist In Sook Kim's "The Auction," at Gallery Heinz Holtmann in Cologne, was one of the few large-scale, theatrical compositions that rang true. In this powerful composition, a blonde nude stands on the landing of an elaborate double-staircase filled with dark-suited males bidding to take her into their possession. On the whole, though, it was smaller and more intimate photographs that set the tone: Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's eloquent "Ararat" series at Kunstraum Falkenstein (Hamburg); Lothar Wollen's portraits of Düsseldorf artists; and Florian Böhm's witty studies of pedestrian crossings, entitled "Wait for Walk," at Munich's f5,6 Gallery. The eloquently understated still lifes of Shahriar Tavakoli from the Elahe Gallery in Tehran were among the strongest photographic offerings in Cologne, while in Düsseldorf, Ingolf Timpner's haunting portraits shown at dc by the Düsseldorf Gallery Bugdahn and Kaimer are testimony to a highly individualistic vision. For sheer, unexpected beauty, there was no topping the time-exposed flower studies of Michael Weseley at Berlin's Fahnemann Gallery.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the photographic entries was a series at Hamburg's Gallery Sfeir-Semler by Hiroyuki Masuyama, a Japanese artist who through the medium of photography has entered into an intense dialogue with the works of Caspar David Friedrich. Visiting some of the sites Friedrich painted nearly two centuries ago, he took hundreds of photos of each, then fused them into single images that seems to reproduce every nuance of the original. Displayed in light-boxes, these works emanate at once the familiar and the surreal.

The attempt by this Japanese conceptualist to come to terms with German Romanticism provided only one example of a kind of globalization in the field of contemporary art. In recent years, Chinese and Korean galleries have had increasing presence at ART Cologne, many of them in joint-ventures with European or American galleries. At the Pyo Gallery (Seoul and Beijing), Nan Chao, 30, was being shown for the first time in Europe. This virtuoso painter depicts contemporary young people rendered in extreme close-up in a photorealistic manner, then inserts these fragments into faded black-and-white landscapes derived from traditional Chinese painting.

Officially, the focus of this installment of ART Cologne was on sculpture, as it was at the preceding Frankfurt show. In a sense, the aficionados are performing the requisite exercises

that will help them get to Münster in June, where Europe's largest sculpture show is mounted every 10 years, with particular attention to works in public spaces. In Cologne, it was sculpture on an intimate scale that seemed most persuasive. The Gallery Löhr (Mönchengladbach) featured the life-sized, life-like, gently poetic sculptures of the Israeli-born Gil Shachar, who models his works in wax and paints them with epoxy. Heads, hands and torsos suggest rather than depict the entire figure, thus undermining the first, hyper-realistic impression and creating a haunting, enigmatic presence. For many visitors, Shachar's work was a genuine discovery, and interest on the part of public and private collectors ran high.

With the exception of a Georg Baselitz painting sold by Munich's Gallery Terminus for €760,000, or \$1.03 million, sculpture also commanded some of the top prices at this year's fair. Munich's Gallery Thomas found buyers for two Botero sculptures for €65,000 and €75,000. On the whole, though, painting and sculpture accounted for the greater number of sales, at prices starting as low as €150. There was euphoria at Berlin's Gallery Fahnemann, where a canvas by Hans Hartung fetched €90,000, and at Benden & Klimczak (Cologne), where a large-scale "metalwork" by Tom Wesselmann changed hands at €20,000, a painting by Roy Lichtenstein at €480,000.

The lesson is clear: in boom times, such blue-chip offerings will always find appreciative buyers, yet for most of them it is irrelevant whether they make such acquisitions in Cologne or Chicago, Madrid or Miami. Location and special attractions thus play an increasingly important role. In acknowledgment of the geographical component, ART Cologne has now spawned its own subsidiary in Palma de Mallorca, scheduled to open on Sept. 19 in Terminal A of the island's old airport. Whether this heavy-handed imitation of Art Basel Miami will enhance or further weaken the authority of the mother house is anybody's guess. But the anticipated roster of no more than 60 international galleries promises a welcome change from the kind of mega-event that even the strong of heart and "sole" have difficulty in conquering.