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ars nova

Do cutting-edge art fairs still cut it?

AT THE EDGE of the Alison Jacques's booth – one of the 52 galleries chosen to participate in the 'Art Nova' section at last year's Art Basel Miami Beach – there hung a painting by Jon Pylypchuk which bore such chromatic vulgarity that I felt compelled to go in for a closer look. In addition to the glistening blacks, yellows and reds, that inspection revealed a surface encrusted with what appeared to be something close to those crushed nuts one is more likely to find on a deluxe chocolate fudge sundae. 'Sickly sweet' might serve as an apt description and quick dismissal. Then I caught the title: *let's just pretend it's the end times and I still love you* (2005). Brilliant. What better testament, I thought, to the sensibilities that seem to govern this entire place? Or at least to the various sides of its many transactions?

There should be no need to rehearse once again how giddy were the first days of last December for the artists, dealers and collectors that descended upon South Beach. For all the looming talk about bursting bubbles and bottoms falling out, the market for contemporary visual art has never been in better shape. Around every corner could be heard professions of wonder at the energy of it all and the only thing missing was the shame that often accompanies any overt intrusion of commercialism into a supposedly rarefied field of culture. As Hernan Bas told Brett Sokol of the *New York Observer*, 'Sometimes I think artists are the only ones who treat the artworld as if commerce wasn't involved.'

We must remember, however, that the art fairs in Miami are for the dealers, in the way that biennials are for artists: selection committees are involved, and some make the cut and some do not. For those that didn't get tapped for Basel, there was NADA and Scope and Aqua and Pulse and a variety of smaller fairs feeding off Miami's manufac-

tured congruency of all things related to contemporary art.

But if Basel is the big show, if it is supposed to represent the very best on the contemporary stage, then some kind of cultural drift has occurred, because increasingly it was not ABMB but the other fairs and exhibition locales at which the energy of artistic gravity was centred, and this even in the face of Basel's sizeable crop of galleries supposedly dedicated to the 'young art scene', all of which were arrayed around the perimeter of the convention centre hall and gathered under the title of all things 'Nova'.

'Young' would seem to be the key qualifier here, but it is also the most misleading. Certainly there were galleries that took seriously the directive to show no more than three of their 'hottest, most in-demand artists', but some dealers took 'in-demand' a bit more seriously than most, which is why it was odd, for example, to come upon Stuart Shave Modern Art giving pride of place to Barnaby Furnas and Barry McGee when these artists were well represented by Marianne Boesky and Jeffrey Deitch, dealers who cast no short shadow in the main fair. Strange, too, was the recreation of Rikrit Tiravanija and Superflex's *Social Pudding Factory* (2003–4) at the booth of 1301 PE, where boxes (some of which were stacked in a mirrored corner as an homage to Robert Smithson) of the eponymous stuff were selling for \$0.99. At one time the intervention of such 'relational aesthetics' into the space of the art fair may have provided

Rikrit Tiravanija • Superflex
Social Pudding Factory,
2003–4, refrigerator,
moulds, electric kettle,
electric burner, pudding
mix, table, wall painting,
dimensions variable
PHOTO: FREDRIK EISEN, COURTESY
TIRAVANAJA



a much-needed jolt to the growing sense of total administration, but now such theatrics have the taste of near necessity: quota filling for what Jack Bankowsky recently dubbed and disowned as 'Art Fair Art'.

What, I am tempted to ask, is so 'Nova' about all this? Not that I wish to suggest that any of these artists are 'old'; but simply to point out that, given an ever-growing specialty section dedicated to the newest work by the newest artists presented by the newest galleries, the onset of establishment requires that dealers and fair organizers

actually attempt to cede some space to the young and undiscovered, and to the old and overlooked. Failing this, 'Art Nova' should be scrapped altogether.

Perhaps this is too hasty a judgement. Perhaps such redundancy, borne of the elasticity of the notion of what's new, is to be expected. Galleries cannot be faulted for wanting to sell their most saleable works, or to show artists who are going to land

the gallery's name on the cognitive maps of collectors. Nevertheless, the situation is an unfortunate (because high pressure) one for those galleries who do show their newest prospects – I was particularly impressed by João Onofre's *Untitled (Masked Tap Dancer)* (2005) at I-20's booth – artists who no doubt deserve to be in a line-up that includes such well-established names as Tiravanija, but artists (and dealers) who might have done better at a place like NADA, where it was widely agreed that the feeling was 'fresh' rather than claiming to offer an aesthetic counterpoint (in the guise of a lower price-point) to ABMB's centre-ring attractions.

As with 'Nova', qualifications like 'young', 'emerging' and 'cutting

edge' remain regular symptoms of the fraught relationship between time and capital. Yet other adjectives jump into the mix between such equivalents as well: 'alternative' is a term one hears quite a bit, though more in reference to the spaces that show artists' work than to either the artists or the work itself. And at fairs like NADA and Aqua, 'young' galleries and 'alternative' art spaces are increasingly billed as places not so much to 'see' but to 'find' the 'emerging' and the 'cutting edge' art of today. This emphasis on 'finding' implies that the spectator's (and the critic's) work has merged with that of the collector's: the effort must be made in the seeking rather than in the understanding. Travelling further afield than one normally would is enough to represent one's duty to the cause of art. (It is thus to NADA's credit that it is located in Miami's Wynwood Art District, 20 minutes across the bay from South Beach). Call it the continued fetishization of the margins, but if you weren't up to travelling, Basel claimed to provide a little 'Nova' within walking distance.

The 'seek and experience' model of contemporary aesthetic consumption, however, is undoubtedly of a piece with the increasing pervasiveness and prominence of performance. What better climate for the fairs, which, after all, are just broad stages for performances of every kind, ranging from the holy aesthetic to the wholly commercial. From the earliest 'First Looks' to the latest of the late-night parties, the collective desire that accompanies any art fair may be best described as an hyper-attenuated *dasein*, a 'being there' stretched beyond all recognition. Even if one saw nothing, talked to no one, or remembered nothing (which is the case more often than not), 'being there' serves as its own legitimation. Within this constellation, the attraction of the 'new' is usurped by that of the 'scarce'. The scenes, events and performances often go unrecorded and unrecoverable. In their wake, whatever is 'Nova' is in no position to compete.

When the Whitney Biennial and the Armory Show open at the beginning of March in New York, 'being there' will be in the air once again. The organizers of Scope New York are placing a wager on it by trading-in last year's floors at the Meatpacking District's Gansevoort Hotel for 30,000 square feet in a gem of a refurbished industrial building in Hell's Kitchen, an easy walk from the Armory's west side piers. One can be sure that there will be numerous satellite scenes, events and performances that will have to go unattended, either because there just isn't enough time to get to everything, or because it's impossible to know exactly what 'everything' is. New York, however, is not Miami. Much of the US artworld calls the former home, and it is a place where one is accustomed to the ambivalent anxiety of this sort of *dasein*. It is also a place where whatever is 'Nova' is often encountered, but rarely named. ●

Jon Pylpetchuk *let's just pretend it's the end times and I still love you*, 2005, mixed media on panel, 153 x 122 cm
COURTESY ALISON JACOBS GALLERY, LONDON

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