

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

Galleries Try to Find Their Niche

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Art

By **SCOTT REYBURN**

BERLIN — Is the commercial art gallery obsolete?

Fairs and auctions increasingly dominate the ever-expanding art market, attracting wealthy collectors who want to browse as wide a range of works in as short a time as possible. Yet the centuries-old model of the one-person show in a commercial gallery is still the way that most new artists are discovered and their works bought at approachable prices. The challenge for gallery-based dealers is to create a destination event that can rival a fair and make today's time-strapped buyers walk through their doors.

Gallery Weekend Berlin is one creative response to the challenge. This year's 10th anniversary edition, which ran from May 2 to 4, included exhibitions at 50 of Berlin's leading contemporary dealerships. The event, spread across the four main art trading districts of the city, had previously been organized by the gallery owners themselves. Now a company, abc-gwb Veranstaltungen UG, has been formed under the directorship of Maike Cruse, the former communications manager for the Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach fairs, to organize both the Gallery Weekend and the Art Berlin Contemporary (abc) fair in September.

This new setup, with BMW as a corporate partner, seems to have turned Gallery Weekend Berlin into a serious alternative to the treadmill of fairs, judging by the impressive checklist of international collectors who attended. These included Richard Chang (China), Faruk and Fusun Eczacibasi (Turkey), Peter and Mari Shaw (United States), Tony Salamé (Lebanon), Juan Vergez and Patricia Pearson-Vergez (Argentina) and Anita Zabludowicz (Britain).

“For me, this is as good as the Art Basel fair,” said the London-based collector Charles Asprey at a gala dinner for 1,300 in the neoclassical main

hall of the now-defunct Berlin Tempelhof Airport, whose terminal was built by Hitler in the 1930s. “It’s just a different model. The city is the fair, and the galleries are the booths. Contemporary art has deep roots here, and the event is a proper cerebral exercise,” he said.

Despite the cataclysmic interruptions of two world wars, the German capital has been a hub of avant-garde creativity for more than a century. According to the Berlin mayor’s office, the city has about 5,000 artists, many of them foreigners attracted by Berlin’s affordable rent, and they are supported by an infrastructure of more than 400 commercial contemporary galleries. But unlike the Rhineland cities of Cologne and Düsseldorf, or indeed Paris (which will be inaugurating its own gallery weekend, “Choices,” on May 23) or London (coming up with its own version on July 4-6), Berlin doesn’t have a deep client base of wealthy local collectors. As a result, it has never been a successful venue for a major international art fair. The last edition of Art Forum Berlin, in 2010, attracted about 40,000 visitors, 20,000 fewer than attended that year’s Art Basel fair.

But the absence of an art fair can be an advantage. Last October, during London’s “Frieze Week,” visiting collectors struggled to find time to view dealer’s exhibitions as well as the two Frieze Fairs, auctions at Sotheby’s, Christie’s and Phillips and that month’s round of must-see museum shows. Gallery Weekend Berlin, by contrast, is all about looking at art in these galleries.

As ever, some artworks are more commercial than others. The Rio de Janeiro-born artist Christian Rosa, 31, was the toast of the Berlin weekend with his show of 11 abstract paintings at Contemporary Fine Arts. Mr. Rosa makes large, spare canvases that remind viewers of Joan Miró, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Oscar Murillo. Given that he’s also young, Brazilian, divides his time between Los Angeles and Vienna, and his works have already been snapped up by major collectors such as Charles Saatchi, there isn’t much to dislike about Mr. Rosa from a contemporary art investor’s point of view. The show quickly sold out, with prices ranging from 19,000 euros to €42,000 (about \$26,500 to \$58,600).

Works by young abstract painters, like Mr. Rosa, are driving the market at the moment, and the Cologne-based artist David Ostrowski is another name in demand. Peres Projects unveiled four unusually large examples of Mr. Ostrowski’s minimalist canvases that had been made specifically for the Gallery Weekend, priced at €50,000 each. The Swiss media magnate Michael

Ringier was among Peres's four carefully selected buyers. Smaller mixed-media abstracts by the New York-based artist Seth Price were selling for €50,000 to €67,000 at Eden Eden, a new space opened by Isabella Bortolozzi.

Those in search of more cerebral exercise headed to Sprüth Magers to look at Peter Fischli and David Weiss's "Accumulation of Objects." The product of more than 30 years of work, this installation, consisting of a dusty room cluttered with hyper-realistic polyurethane casts of D.I.Y. tools like a chain saw and a wrench — clever 21st-century inversions of Marcel Duchamp's readymades — drew a line of people waiting patiently to view it. Sprüth Magers wouldn't divulge the price of the installation, but they have previously asked up to €2.5 million for individual sculptures by the Swiss duo.

"It's so much more rewarding to go into galleries to see works that are made for specific spaces rather than go round an art fair," said the Düsseldorf-based collector Julia Stoschek, who has one of the world's largest collections of media art. "It's also fun to go round with artists. They don't really go to fairs."

Andreas Gursky, Anton Henning and Neo Rauch were among the artists spotted at the galleries, a minority of which were mounting exhibitions of older, postwar works to give the weekend historical ballast. Mr. Rauch was a visitor at Aurel Scheibler, who was showing works from the estate of the American "artists' artist" Philip Guston, who died in 1980. Three large-scale charcoal drawings Guston made in the late 1960s while painfully navigating from abstraction to figuration were among the highlights, priced at €200,000 to €250,000.

"Berlin is a good place to be an artist," said Mr. Henning, who has a studio in the countryside outside the city. "It's affordable, so you don't have to run around jobbing, as you do in London. It's not so much about the money."

In the eyes of many collectors, Berlin's more relaxed attitude toward financial imperatives enhances the appeal of the art it produces. Mr. Henning seemed genuinely surprised when he was told by an assistant at Loock — one of dozens of Berlin galleries holding exhibitions in conjunction with the official Weekend event — that nearly all of his new painted self-portraits inspired by 20th-century modernist sculpture had found buyers, priced at between €18,500 and €80,000.

The gallery system might be an old dog, but there's life in it yet.

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