

## Art Basel Hong Kong 2016

The plane descended in zero visibility. I looked out the window and there were just clouds, much like a tiny framed grey-white Rothko painting. It was just before six in the morning when our plane touched down onto wet tarmac at Hong Kong International airport. We took the airport express into Central. Our taxi weaved through Wan Chai's quiet streets and dropped us off at our hotel, an hour before check-in time. We went for a walk. Most of the shop fronts were still shuttered but the little eating houses, dotted all over Wan Chai were open and big pots of broth were on the boil. Commuters were forming short lines at the bus stops and the Ding Dings (trams) were ringing their bells. We bought takeaway cappuccinos and headed to Wan Chai Park where large groups of people were doing Tai Chi; others were using the exercise equipment installed in the park, their handbags dangling from the handlebars of the stationary bicycles. A group of men were squatting around a board-game, laughing and shouting loudly. The park connects Wan Chai Road with Queen's Road East; those using the park as a shortcut only had eyes for their mobile phone screens, as if on remote control, they did not look up. We sipped our cappuccinos and enjoyed the moment. In a few hours time, our comfortable trainers would be exchanged for black sharp pointed shoes, black pants, black shirts and black jackets. And another must have? A handbag with a small pouch on the outside, large enough to fit a credit-card size VIP pass to Art Basel: Hong Kong.

The opening on Wednesday afternoon, 23 March 2016 was to my partner (a first timer to Art Basel Hong Kong) 'low keyed', meaning considerably fewer people in attendance than he had expected. I, on the other hand, appreciate slow opening events: without crowds one can note the subtle changes affected each year by Team Art Basel. The layout of the first floor (the only floor we managed to view that afternoon and early evening) seemed more generous, with more neutral spaces. The most notable change was definitely the layout of the booths; there were very few white cubes. The standard stock room to the side of most of the big-name-gallery's booths had now evolved into either a small office with a desk and shelving lined with books, or just a mobile library or a private viewing room with a desk, library and functional doors, and in one case, a very elaborate set of double doors. It makes sense; at this level of collecting supporting literature can definitely close a deal.

The Art Basel 2016 catalogue, *Year 46*, is its usual chunky self, with seven hundred and eighty five pages of interviews, essays, photographs and gallery listings, translated into several languages and beautifully designed in alphabetical order. The leading essay is an extract from artist Seth Price's new novel, *Fuck Seth Price*, which should become compulsory reading for all artists, particularly art students and those at the start of their careers. It is a sobering piece of text and the main threads of freedom, craft, money and scene which are listed as the "four main motivations that emerge as artists progressed in their careers" becomes evident as one pages through this tome.

One should not attempt to attend Art Basel Hong Kong without an itinerary; there is simply too much on offer. But sticking to a plan is equally challenging. Hong Kong may not be known for its year-round frenetic nightlife, but during Art Week in March there is no early night. Trying to stick to our program we made it to a 10:00am talk on Thursday morning with N'Gone Fall (Independent Curator and Co-founder of the Dakar-based collective GawLab, Paris), Anne Pasternak (Director, Brooklyn Museum, New York), Defne Ayas (Director, Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam), Thomas J Berghuis (Director, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara (Museum MACAN, Jakarta) and moderator Andras Szanto (Author and Cultural Consultant, New York) talking around the issue of Public/Private Building Platforms. The audience may have been slow and late in arriving, but this stimulating conversation about how art institutions/museums are rethinking and, to a measure, extending their established mandate was worth an early rise. Szanto's remark that not so long ago we only had the museum and the Kunsthalle as institutional models is absolutely correct. We now have collectives, platforms, private museums, non-profit initiatives, biennales and art fairs which have all upped the ante of how the art world can function. The urgency and need to redress historical imbalances, particularly in the established museum format, is a definite global issue; and according to Berghuis, the only way to effect change "is through penetrating the constituency".

The problem with sticking to a schedule is there is no room for catch-up. I had not seen N'Gone since 2007, and before that, last in 1999. A quick hug and hello later, and it was time to head over to the shuttle bus for a visit to the South Island's initiatives and galleries. The Spring Workshop is one of my favourite cultural destinations in Hong

Kong. “Spring serves as a platform and laboratory for exchange between the vibrant artists, organizations and audiences that define Hong Kong’s rich cultural landscape and their international counterparts who seek to engage in far-reaching dialogue.” The shuttle bus was late and instead of waiting, we split into groups and hailed cabs. By the time we arrived at Spring in Aberdeen new friendships had been made: as a result we did not see much, other than meeting everyone else in the group who had originally waited for the shuttle bus. I barely had time for a quick visit to Blindspot, Hong Kong’s premier photography gallery. We dashed back to the convention centre for Tracey Emin’s talk. But it was too late. The auditorium was full, with crowds of people including one of her gallerists, Jay Jopling, hanging around at the entrance. It was then that we decided, twenty four hours into our carefully planned itinerary, to throw caution to the wind: we would do Art Basel Hong Kong at our own pace.

The fair is hosted in two large halls at the Hong Kong Exhibition Convention Centre and is spread over two floors. It is divided into **Galleries** (with 187 galleries), **Insights** (28 galleries from Asia and Asia-Pacific region presenting solo and curatorial projects developed specifically for Art Basel), **Discoveries** (here the spotlight is on emerging talents from across the world, featuring solo and two-person projects presented by 24 galleries) and **Encounters** (which is dedicated to 16 large-scale sculptures and installation works, offering visitors an opportunity to see art that transcends the confines of traditional art-fair stands). The art fair’s presentations and activities extends onto the concourse inside the convention centre, and its Film programme is presented off site, just down the road, at the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

By Friday morning the fair, which concluded on Saturday afternoon at 6pm was officially sold-out. But this did not deter the lines of people snaking throughout the convention centre and down into an adjacent street from remaining positive and hopeful. Inside, the halls were packed with visitors, and never mind which aisle one selected, it remained a slow meander. My partner finally understood the value of his VIP pass and that “low key” opening of Wednesday afternoon!

I keep my eyes peeled for contemporary photography, and each year at Art Basel Hong Kong I walk away with a new list of absolute and latest favourite photographs and photographers, and they largely remain Japanese. This year it was no different, three

undated Nobuyoshi Araki photographs displayed on a side wall at Kamel Mennour's booth stopped me in my tracks. Mennour is known for having a good eye for photography, but the main section of his gallery's booth was set aside for three dimensional works, including an Anish Kapoor which attracted crowds of people. They were patiently bundling in front of Araki's portrait waiting to take a selfie with Kapoor's shiny sculpture.

Talk of a weakening Asian art market may have influenced the selection process for many participating galleries. Art fair platforms have developed into a meditated balancing act of mercantile versus spectacle. Warhol or Kusama prints were plentiful in Hong Kong, and considering their performance and traction on the secondary market, having a couple of these prints on the wall safeguards that option for something more spectacular elsewhere in the same booth.

There were a lot of well curated booths, but I want to single out Hong Kong gallery Ora-Ora. Their minimalist booth featured a selection of works informed by movement and included a large and impressive work by the young Chinese artist Huang Dan. Spanish sculptor Juame Plensa's large marble sculptures, which were on offer at more than one booth, also deserves a mention. Eko Nugroho, a young Indonesian artist whose works are informed by global popular culture also stood out, particularly his embroidery work entitled *We Enjoy our fake History*.

On the final day, just as I was slipping out of Art Basel Hong Kong to head over to the new kid on the block art fair, Art Central, I spotted a beautifully curated booth with a single presentation of predominantly ceramic works by the eighty three year old Japanese artist, Kimiyo Mishima. The exhibition was presented by MEM from Tokyo who also produced an accompanying exhibition catalogue, with additional information about the artist and her practice on their website. "Mishima's work makes great comment on contemporary society's propensity for consuming and discarding in excessive amounts. It could be said that contemporary society no longer values the printed word, especially in lieu of such inventions like the iPhone, where the Internet can now follow you with the touch of a screen. We discard information as fast, if not faster, than the speed we receive it and wastage is never given a second thought. By building her pieces to almost comical sizes Mishima embraces this almost selfish act to

magnificent effect. The sheer weight and grandeur of her work seizes our collective consumerism and holds it in time and space. However, through a medium like ceramic, there is still a sense of danger, an idea that it could crumble at any time.” On that note we exited Art Basel Hong Kong.

It was a beautiful sunny afternoon in Hong Kong, so we decided to walk to Art Central which was being hosted in a large and impressive custom-built tent at the Harbourfront. There were only five hours left before the closing of the fair, but here too were lines of people waiting to get in. It is a small fair with a good selection of artworks on offer and most notable is its refreshingly edgy vibe. Korean artist Seungmo Park’s portrait, constructed from layers of stainless steel mesh was striking and I enjoyed Sin Sin Man’s intervention. Instead of a regular booth, she had created a narrow grey passage and displayed a series of small works by two Indonesian artists, Bob Yudhita and S. Teddy Darmawan. She gave her primary wall space to another Indonesian artist, Dwi Setianto who created a large multi media work during the course of the fair. And perhaps not so surprising after all, there were more Yayoi Kusama prints on offer at Art Central too.

We needed a change of scenery; it had been four long days of viewing art. We headed over to Sheung Wan and visited the Man Mo Temple on Hollywood Road. It was half an hour before closing time, and inside were only a handful of people. Gigantic coils of burning incense hung from the ceiling, filling the dimly lit interior with the smell of incense; it was quiet and calm. On the altar were bowls of ripe oranges, and it was then that I realized I had seen thousands of artworks in the past four days, but not a single Rothko.

Heidi Erdmann - May 2016