

Activism the ‘Hot New Trend’ at NADA New York? Au Contraire, Art Fair

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By Carol Schaeffer



Jeremy Couillard/Whitney Oldenburg (Photo: Anaka Kaundinya)

Desperate times call for desperate art. But unlike the Spring/Break show, with its trash-tastic pop politics and unabashed and urgent ruggedness, NADA 2017 felt prim, proper and pleading for normalcy.

And yet, Christian Viveros-Fauné wrote for Artnet that activism was “the hot new trend” this year at the New Art Dealers Alliance’s New York fair. In comparison, the gallerists of last December’s Miami art fairs “seemed stuck in limbo, or, more charitably, confused about how or even whether to respond to news of Donald Trump’s election win.” But this is gritty and battered New York City, not glittering and gleaming Miami. Politicism should be expected, especially here and especially in the times we live in. If not here, then where? If not now, then when?

For the dandiest dudes, the crowd at NADA may have a whiff of the hoi polloi about it, at least compared to other art fairs. It was more or less family friendly. There were Modelos floating around, though in true appropriative style they were sold for \$7.60 for no apparent reason. It was also easy enough to see a constellation of expensive-looking platform shoes paired with drapey and architectural overcoats.

For a gallerist, an art fair is admittedly largely an economic opportunity. It’s a chance for investors to buy physical artworks, as well as invest in the brand of a gallery. The curator may have a variety of priorities in how it selects art to be viewed at the fair. And it is unfair to expect every artwork ever made to be unequivocally of and for The Revolution. That would be just as soulless as pure commercialism. Sometimes art just wants to be a visual and emotional pleasure, and that’s a legitimate thing for art to be.

Viveros-Fauné’s strongest argument for the “Activism” of the NADA art fair is its donation of 50 percent of door sales to the ACLU. Even NADA’s spokesperson, Adam Abdalla, apparently told the Artnet reporter that the overall trend was “Activism,” which I imagine him sweetly whispering while sipping a Modelo. While this is absolutely a highly commendable gesture, it struck me as perfunctory without the willing decisions of the participating curators to mine their collections for art that is provocative. It may be unrealistic to expect artists to create works that thoughtfully engage with the contemporary moment after a period of just a few months. But challenging work did not begin or end with Trump’s election, nor did many of the issues that fueled his win.

Between the exhibition spaces emerged a focus on play and playfulness. This did not come with the heavy burden of satire, but was really meant just to delight. Hungarian gallery Trapez had one piece prominently on display: a miniature city with absurdist details by artist Andi Schmied. I was told the piece was meant to encourage an absurdist and playful engagement with the city, to foster exploration “like a child.” Last year, the leader of the second largest Hungarian political party openly called to put all Jews on a list and faced no apparent consequences. The insistence on play is not only unconvincing and disappointing but also dangerous if it precludes more serious works from appearing in its stead.

There were examples of politically conscientious works, or at least works that maintain some reference to political themes. Consider works at Manhattan gallery Fort Gansevoort by Josh and Benny Safdie. The former displayed an “enigmatic photo of the presidential seal on the jet black door of a limousine,” titled simply “Presidential.” What is this suggesting? That presidents ride in fancy cars? That the obsidian obscurity of the door is a gleaming barrier (literally and figuratively)? This is neither a denouncement nor an intervention nor even praise. It’s just a frustrating tease of a thought never formed, the artist coyly pretending like they know something that you don’t.

Or Chris Dorland’s presentation at Brussels’ Super Dakota Gallery, which was described by Artnet as “protest art.” He contributed scrambled and pixelated advertisements abstractly composed onto aluminum sheets, intended to portray “a dystopian vision” of “consumerist society.” Honestly, is this 2004? Are people still talking about “consumerism” as if it is the ultimate ill of contemporary culture? Are you still mad at mall kids from high school and your mom, all brainwashed by SoCiEtY? Go listen to a Green Day song and report back to 2017 where real shit is happening.

While these works may flirt with political themes, each one left me with a dry taste. In their insistence on being coy or playful, their “politics” is ultimately only palatable suggestion rather than sincere engagement.

One of the most talked-about pieces of the show was a lonely alien, sitting at a work desk chatting with its alien partner in a location far, far away in gallery yours mine and ours’ permanent location. They send cryptic messages back and forth on a largely blank screen. What a new boundary being broken: technology alienates us from our labor. My feeling throughout the fair was that it just stopped short of presenting anything challenging, preferring to hedge its bets on the conservative tastes of the art world’s patron class. It was silly, but never satirical.

To play and delight is a crucial part of art’s function, but it rarely stands alone in this function and can often inherently be a dissenting act. Art can be funny but also fearless, mirthful but also malicious. In this dark moment, I crave art with acidity. Even Yayoi Kusama’s giddy obsession with dots reveals a much darker pathology that is at once mesmerizing and unnerving. So let’s call a spade a spade. A celebration of frivolity is just that: frivolous.

Most critical is who buys art, and who buys art are the world’s wealthiest. In the Trump era, we face increasing threats of oligarchy and corrupt businessmen controlling the state. In American artist Andrea Fraser’s 2011 essay, “L’1% C’est Moi,” she illustrates how the art market is not dependent upon the overall wealth of a nation, but rather it functions best in environments of wealth inequality. As the wealthy outbid each other for art, much of its economy seems to be solely in the interest of wasting capital. “How can we rationalize our participation in this economy?” she asks.

One work by video artist Ryan Forrester at David Petersen Gallery seemed intentionally toothless: a 40-second video of iPhone shots of the January 20th inauguration protests in New York City, set to a stock Apple soundtrack. It was, in typical Forrester style, a deliberate refusal of artistry. Where his stock soundtracks are deployed with humor in his other works, this felt like an open mockery of a significant political moment. Is this Forrester’s version of a Piero Manzoni, making his own canned Artist’s Shit? Is this piece, in its obvious bad-ness and un-artistry, an intentional critique on the vacuousness of the art world to accept a piece by an artist as political because it even mildly engages with a current event? If so, then it may be the most political piece of them all. And you get a shot of whiskey at the end of the video to boot.

Over at The Observer, Scott Indrisek contends, “Who will buy the sexually confused hot dog, the verbose Martian, the lactose poesy? Let’s not worry about that. If the art world sometimes seems like a cabal of the undeserving rich lustily slurping the blood of the creative class, from NADA’s vantage point in 2017 it looks more like an energetic mob of friends trying their plucky best to amuse and astound each other. In these dark American days, that’s achievement enough.”

That may be in part true, but if art fairs are acceptable sites of monetary waste and apoliticality, then we miss an opportunity to hope for real intervention. If the art market is going to play for the 1 percent, it might as well say something while it’s at it. Until we confront its problematic economy in a direct and meaningful way, we should stop pretending that the art world is a progressive social force.

But one way to continue to scrutinize art fairs is to understand that by doing so, we scrutinize fantasies of the elite. Instead of giving intellectual credence to decorative frippery, or inversely expecting to read sincere subversions, art fairs themselves should be read as sites of elite whimsy. And in that sense, a toothless activism may actually be the fad-du-jour after all. As long as it doesn’t ask too much of us. As long as it’s all fun.