

FOCUS



Getting into the FRAME

Hong Kong is preparing to launch its first edition of Art Basel next year, but the city has far to go before it can present an event on the scale of the Swiss one

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On a breezy night by the banks of the Rhine in Basel's St Johann neighbourhood, around 2,000 people of all ages from around the world cheer for the acrobats painted in gold and a man squeezing himself into a gigantic green ball.

The performances are part of Art Parcours, a section of the Art Basel fair that features site-specific artworks, exhibitions and performances free to the public, a foretaste of what may be expected in Hong Kong next year when it hosts its first edition of the Basel event.

"It's not only the people coming to the fair, but also the people in the city," says Jens Hoffmann, director of San Francisco's Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts at the California College of the Arts, the curator of Art Parcours.

Call it great marketing or synergy,

the Swiss city is buzzing with other events for people, while affluent art collectors make multimillion-dollar purchases of works at Messe Basel, where Art Basel is held.

A multitude of museum exhibitions were staged during last month's fair, including works by American Jeff Koons and Paris-based Algerian artist and filmmaker Philippe Parreno at the Beyeler Foundation, early paintings from the Impressionist

2,500
The number of artists represented in the various sections of Art Basel's Swiss show this year

master Renoir at the Kunstmuseum and Kunsthaut Baselland showing works by international as well as Swiss artists.

The fair joined Theatre Basel to present the Swiss premiere of the *Life & Death of Marina Abramovic*, the exceptional and haunting stage show on the living "godmother of performance art" Abramovic, which was commissioned by the Manchester International Festival.

Satellite fairs such as Liste showing works by international young artists and galleries were also staged during the week.

"Travelling for an art fair is not enough. There should be other things going on - good museum shows, satellite art fairs. The city has to create an agenda," says Turkish collector Fusun Eczacibasi, who has been visiting Art Basel for 15 years.

"It is very important for me to go to museums to see the local artists, and then you can understand what's going on. Just going to an art fair is not

interesting at all. The Hong Kong fair will need other events to attract international [visitors]. We are not here just for buying."

Art Basel will hold its first Hong Kong event after the fair's mother company, MCH Swiss Exhibition (Basel), last year acquired 60 per cent of ART HK organiser Asian Art Fairs with an eye to Asia's booming art market.

Next May, the Hong Kong fair will be relaunched, officially joining the stable of Art Basel after the original Swiss fair and its Miami Beach edition launched in 2002. Art Basel attracted 65,000 visitors this year.

Optimism about Hong Kong is apparent at the Swiss fair thanks to organisers' active promotion, and the fact that Hong Kong has sealed its spot on the world's art map thanks to the thriving market.

ART HK staged its first edition in 2008 and has grown into one of the most reputable fairs in the world in just five years, recording an attendance of more than 67,000 this year.

Headline-grabbing auction results have also helped make the city the third-largest art auction centre after New York and London; more in-

ternational galleries are launching their first Asian branches in the city.

But Hong Kong's newfound reputation as an arts hub has been criticised for its poor connection with the local scene. Artists are still struggling with high studio rents in industrial buildings and independently run spaces lack support. Students at Baptist University's Academy of Visual Arts have been protesting for being forced to leave the Kai Tak campus at the end of next month after the government put up the rent from HK\$50,000 to HK\$300,000 a month.

However, arts critic Oscar Ho Hing-kay says Hong Kong is "getting there". There have been many non-commercial, community-based events such as forums and seminars at ART HK, he says. Commercial galleries are seizing the chance to stage blockbuster shows and openings during the fair in May. But it is the public who has to catch up.

M+, the visual culture museum opening in 2017 at the West Kowloon Cultural District, staged Mobile M+, a site-specific group show of Hong Kong artists in Yau Ma Tei during the ART HK fair. Ho said this year the fair coincided with Le French May festival, which brought a Picasso exhibition to Sha Tin's Heritage Museum as part of its 20th anniversary. Thematic exhibitions on Chinese painter and cartoonist Feng Zikai opened on May 25, missing the art fair week but coinciding with Christie's auction week.

While Ho is confident the new museum management team at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department has a good understanding of international practice, in particular at the Museum of Art now led by chief curator Eve Tam Mei-ye, he believes more work needs to be done.

Museum exhibitions can take three years to plan, which explains why many haven't been fully collaborative during the fair, says Ho.

"The Leisure and Cultural Services Department should put more effort into ART HK," Ho says.

Ho says non-profit-making venues like IASpace and Para/Site do not have the money to put on great shows. "Independent organisations have a great desire to become part of this. The Arts Development Council should support them to take advantage of the art fair," he says. "The future Culture Bureau has to co-ordinate with the Arts Development Council, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the commercial sector."

Art Basel, on the other hand, built on a rich history. Gallery owners Trudi Bruckner, Balz Hilt and Ernst Beyeler founded the Swiss fair, staging its first edition in 1970.

Sam Keller, the former director for Art Basel and now director of the Beyeler Foundation, says Switzerland has a tradition among its citizens of more than 400 years of collecting art, with many museums built over the years.

"It's not only for commercialism. It's also for cultural [purposes]," says Keller. The fair helps stimulate "a bigger commitment to art". He says that while public museums were long established in Switzerland, their private

Hong Kong artist Morgan Wong's performance *Deciding Whether to Worship His Own Power or the Power of His Own* at satellite fair Liste 17 in Basel, Switzerland.
Photos: SMP Pictures

counterparts were built only after the art fair was inaugurated.

Keller says the fair is more than just a trading platform, but a festival, a meeting point for arts and culture professionals as well as creative minds to seek inspiration and exchange. He says the fair has helped "democratise" art, making it accessible to the people - not only to the locals, but also internationally.

Art Basel has various sections featuring more than 300 galleries and works by more than 2,500 artists, from curatorial booths at Art Feature to large-scale installations at Art Unlimited. Seminars and discussion forums are also held.

The fair's programme guides show visitors where to see art. A similar approach is believed to be planned for the Hong Kong edition, for which fair organisers have promised a 50:50 ratio of Asian to Western galleries.

Art fairs and commercial galleries are useful platforms to see works, says Swiss collector Uli Sigg, who will donate HK\$1.3 billion worth of his collection of Chinese contemporary art to M+.

Sigg reminds Hong Kong that the thriving art market is only one of the many components of the whole picture. "Hong Kong is ready to see the best art," he says. "We have to be aware that art showing at the fair is not the full picture of art being produced. There's a lot of art ... that don't fit in with the fair. There is a lot of room outside the art fair."

The city scene is just as important. "A fair might not be the best place to see art, but it is a meeting place for opportunities," says Hoffmann, explaining that museum directors, curators and even book publishers meet new contacts at art fairs.

"Art biennales are more intellectual ... museums or biennales have a particular vision," says Hoffmann. But an art scene dominated by commercial activities can lead to a "one-dimensional understanding of art". He hopes Hong Kong can have show art outside the commercial context.

Australian collector Lisa Paulsen, board member of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art who has visited Hong Kong several times, says the city's arts sector has developed rapidly. Making art accessible to the public is important, and she hopes the Hong Kong fair can expand public programmes, she says.

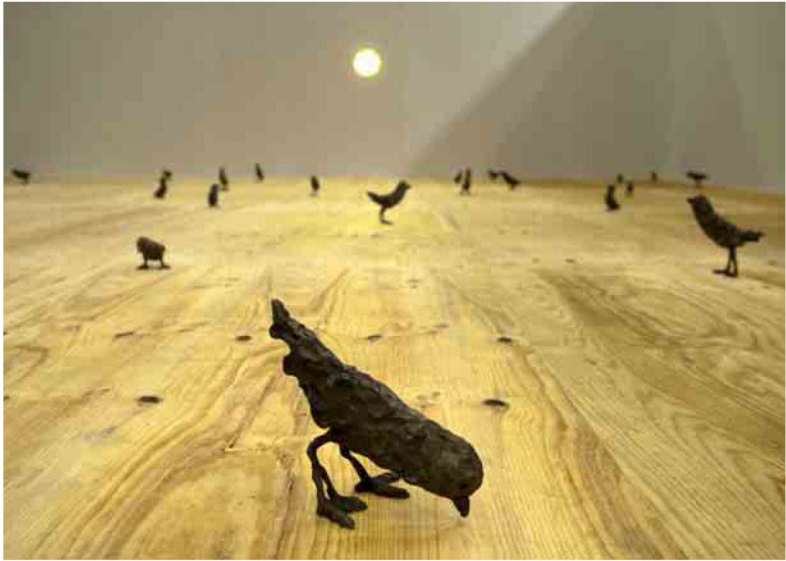
Paulsen has even higher hopes for cultural institutions like museums, as they serve as important reference points not just for learning about art, but also the city.

"But there's no need to rush," says Claire Hsu, a co-founder and executive director of Asia Art Archive. "You can see that things are already becoming different. It will be interesting to see how the performing arts [sector] responds."

Hsu is worried about the overemphasis on the fair in the city's development of art. "Don't put all resources into that one week," she says. "There is a lot of hope, but we cannot place that responsibility on an art fair. I hope the government can take a more holistic view."



Evan Penny's 2012 work *Self* (above left), *Architecture Without Architects* by Damian Ortega (top right), Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone's *Primitive* (right) and British artist Phyllida Barlow's *Untitled: Stage* show the variety on display during Art Basel. Photos: EPA, Reuters, AP



Oscar Ho says Hong Kong is "getting there" but groups need support.

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TURKISH COLLECTOR FUSUN ECZACIBASI