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## **Meet Me In Miami**

by Jane Richlovsky

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There are worse things than having too much art. That's my conclusion after spending four exhausting days looking at art, hawking art, having art hawked at me, talking about art, feeling oppressed by art, and ultimately accepting all of it, the good, the bad, and the pretentious. This year I made my first visit to the phenomenon known only as "Miami" in artistic circles, characteristically timing my introduction to this festival of art-mongering to coincide with a worldwide economic near-collapse, and amid much talk about the recently-booming art market going bust. Making my living as an artist, I'm invested in, ambivalent about, but ultimately fascinated by the symbiotic, historically protean relationship between Art and Commerce. The economic milieu surrounding this year's fair cracked the bedroom door open a bit and provided me a glimpse into some of the ambiguities of that relationship.

"Miami" usually refers to Art Basel Miami Beach, the large and prestigious international art fair that takes place in the Miami Beach Convention Center each December since 2002, along with the numerous satellite fairs that have since sprung up in its immediate vicinity, as well as in an outlying colony across the bay in Miami's Winwood district. These fairs range quite a bit in size and flavor from those nearly as tony as Art Basel, to tiny fairs of unaffiliated artists crammed into beachfront hotels. In the vast middle category, many respectable commercial galleries set up shop in hotel rooms, sportingly making the best of the bad draperies and carpet. This year the Miami Herald counted 23 fairs, but some I'd attended were not listed, so the number could be much greater. I was embedded with one of my galleries at Art Now, my own work being exhibited along with other gallery artists in our booth in the lobby of the South Seas Hotel. I came along to help out my dealer with the booth, to do what I could to promote the gallery and myself, and to observe the parade of humanity and its creations on display in this legendary tourist trap.

My first impression of Miami Beach was that it was the kind of tacky old-school beach town I adore, and my second was that it was the perfect setting for hawking wares of any kind on a massive scale. Everywhere I wandered hucksters were huckstering, peddlers peddling. All along the oceanfront street

where I was staying, for example, the seating for the restaurants spilled out over the entire sidewalk all the way to the street, forcing all pedestrians to walk through what is essentially the middle of the restaurant, where invariably someone waved menus in their faces and attempted to seat them. After walking through five of these on the first night and at least ten more the next morning, I not only got used to ignoring the menu-wavers, but also began to feel a kinship with them. Really, what else was I, or my dealer, or any of the high-brow art brokers, there to do ourselves? Similarly, at dinner one night, my companions and I, seated at an outdoor table, were approached by a roving illusionist trying to sell us a tableside magic show. He specified he did not work for tips, because he did not trust the public, but instead charged a ten-dollar fee. We laughed, but who could blame him? What artist has not encountered the boorish lout who balks at the cost of a moderately priced piece of art, oblivious to value of the artist's time and skill invested in it? I could relate, although we did decline on the magic show. Peddling illusions was getting a little close to our turf.

Walking home that night, I noticed that someone had outlined in colored chalk the long, streetlight-cast shadows of lightposts, newspaper boxes, parking meters and the bikes locked to them. The outlines lent substance to the ghostly shadows and had the urban, spontaneous feel of unofficial public art that isn't commissioned by panels of art-history majors. However, as I walked along, I eventually noticed that the artist's name had been added in chalk in places, along with the number of the booth in which to find him at the Aqua fair. My spontaneous unofficial public art was yet another sales pitch.

I'm not complaining, exactly. Art has been intimately connected with advertisement of one kind or another for millennia, and quite blatantly so since the Renaissance. Artists have pitched religious views for the Church, or served the secular interests of their patrons, and the art that manages to give us something beyond those sponsored messages is the art we still value after the messages themselves are no longer so pressing. I will venture that a contemporary work of art is first selling the idea of itself as art. A Duchampian readymade or a DeKooning drawing erased by Rauschenberg is practically shouting to you that it's art, dammit. Many contemporary installations and performances are pitching their case for themselves as art by their very opacity to the average viewer, sometimes by the prestige of their settings or the identity of their sponsors.

And we are as overloaded with art as we are with its redheaded stepsister advertising, as we are with the products that the stepsister peddles. Even as economists worry that we are not buying our usual glut of those products and doing our part to maintain the unsustainable model of more, more, more, we apparently haven't gotten enough of either buying stuff or looking at art. In past years Miami's been described as a veritable feeding frenzy of collectors fighting

with each other to buy, buy, buy, the newest, the latest, the hottest. This year, in a depressed economy, there were still plenty of people from around the world, and some were buying, but it was more of a viewing frenzy, in which a wide cross-section of people took part. In the few hours a day I wasn't tending our booth, I joined groups of brightly-clad retired New-York ladies, shiny Europeans with fashionable eyeglasses, local Cuban families with small kids, in looking at art, taking in eight fairs in all myself.

I hit Art Basel first, determined to see the entire exhibit, and I stayed for three hours, knowing full well that my ability to make sense of visual phenomena would give out after an hour or so. The huge convention hall was divided up into a labyrinth of interconnected exhibition spaces, occupied by 250 galleries in all. Here the aproned restaurant barkers were replaced with tiny blond underpaid MFA grads in pointy heels and black dresses, but the idea was the same. They enticed you by ignoring your presence, and their menus had no printed prices because if you had to ask . . . well, you know the rest.

Playing it safe, many of the galleries had opted for pulling out secondary-market stuff by known artists, so there were a lot of Chuck Closes, Cindy Shermans, Barbara Kruegers — it sounds like a who's who of the '80's — and of course an abundance of Rauschenbergs since he died this year. But I gravitated toward anything that might hold promise in the way of painting, and I remember, in no particular order, Barack Obama (one of several) in a Grant Wood style, and plenty of those Neo-Rauch-influenced German Figurists with their clashing primary colors out of the tube and thin, loose brushwork. I also paused to look at an installation consisting of twenty plaster people wearing 3D glasses and watching a movie of geometric shapes engaged in loud sex with a miserable-looking Slavic woman in attendance.

As I pressed on through the aesthetic smorgasbord, I was haunted by a creeping sense of futility. We've known about the image glut for decades, yet we, and I implicate myself here, keep adding to it. Onward through a blur of resin-coated paintings, pointless installations, more Rauschenbergs, and the giant C-prints that seem to be everywhere these days, I started to resent photography in particular, with its capacity for high image emissions, for being the equivalent of an SUV in the rapidly warming visual environment.

Just outside the nearly-last booth of the last aisle of Art Basel, and well past that day's saturation point, I had an epiphany of sorts. In the cubicle of a Tokyo gallery, a man and woman were seated atop a wooden structure. Whatever constituted the artwork they were peddling was apparently behind and under them, and they were wearing puffy moon booties over their shoes to protect it. In spite of my indifference to most installation art and my mental and spiritual fatigue, I gamely entered the passageway encircling their platform. It was

unremarkable even as far as installations go — you enter the plain hall made of untreated 2x4's and plywood, squat down to look in a round window, and see yourself on the other side. (How's my lipstick holding up.) Keep walking and there's a small picture of a forest hanging on the wall. (Whatever.) Keep walking and look through a window opposite the one you looked in earlier. (Oh look, another window). Garden-variety installation art, one of hundreds of artworks I'd looked at in the past three hours, and thousands I'd loved, hated, or been annoyed with in my lifetime. But I look anyway. I'd walked through the damn thing even though I was nearly certain it would provide no enriching aesthetic experience.

People I know who've gotten tattoos, piercings or other forms of voluntary self-inflicted pain talk about getting past the agony of having their skin poked full of holes to the ecstasy of the endorphin rush. I was having mine now, in that dumb plywood hallway. I had hit the metaphorical plywood wall at the intersection of Too Much and What's the Point, and pushed through to the other side. Bad art, good art, lame or pretentious art, I couldn't help but admire our human beings' persistence. Shiny things! Piles of household objects! Another Obama! Japanese people in booties on raw plywood! Bring it on! Go, Art!

Suddenly I wasn't depressed anymore about the overabundance of art, nor existentially angst-ridden about continuing to contribute to it myself. The planet is melting, people around the world are killing each other over old tribal grudges, the world economy is on the brink of collapse . . . there is no rational reason why we should be stuffing ourselves with attempts at beauty and meaning, but there never has been. The fact that we are, even badly, could make a person think twice about writing off the species.

That evening, at the Art Now opening, the day's revelation made me feel a bit more solid about my own role as huckster. As I repeated my schpiel about my own work to fairgoer after fairgoer, I could recognize the glaze in their eyes from overindulgence in art. Yet I continued to serve the intoxicated, because that is my job, and I'm beginning to embrace it.

The next day I continued to overindulge, trudging through booths covered in newspapers, graffiti, and duct tape, all the tribal markings of "alternative" at the more indy-flavored New Art Dealers' Association (NADA) fair. In a booth covered in video screens, a young blond Italian woman texted ferociously next to a white pedestal that was tipped at a rakish angle by a roll of caution tape. There were the obligatory eviscerated mattresses, piles of household junk, manga-like cartoon characters on ragged paper taped to the walls, boxes of ammo, more duct tape, a guy on a lawn chair in a khaki suit, bunnies, big-eyed girls, piles of dirt, more graffiti.

I was still feeling oversaturated despite making my peace with oversaturation, and a little jaded, when I spotted two bearded men on folding chairs crocheting a soft pink undulating object and gravitated toward them. They were Dutes and Stan, a married couple / performance team from Chicago, and they had been working on their big pink tube since 2003, working out from the middle in opposite directions. They estimate it to be about 50 feet long and consider it a kind of metaphor for relationships, particularly their own. According to the artists, "when it was shorter it had a more phallic quality, and as it's gotten longer it's become more of an umbilical cord." While more fiber connects them today than when they started, one could also say they've crocheted their way apart. But they were sitting close, the tube heaped in piles around their chairs, and the overall effect was rather cozy. Most of their work, it turns out, is done in public spaces for the non-art crowd. I found their amiability a refreshing antidote to the audience-alienating, interiority-fetishizing vibe of much highbrow Performance Art, and to the stridently avant-garde art quality of much of the art surrounding it at the fair.

If it had seemed a little weird for mainstream commercial galleries to be setting up in hotel rooms, as they were at most of the Miami Beach fairs, soliciting the business of moneyed collectors, then the idea of individual artists in various states of desperation displaying their wares in lower-rent hotel rooms, beckoning to passers-by, gave me a slightly unwholesome feeling, and perhaps hit a little close to home. So naturally I wasn't going to miss the Artist's Fair, nestled in the dilapidated grandeur of the Sagamore hotel, its spacious marble lobby smelling of stale cigarette smoke, hanging in the air like bad performance art since the 1970's when the place was apparently last redecorated. Up an almost-grand marble staircase, the artists were crammed into the myriad corners of what looked like a succession of small party rooms, jammed together in a maze that I gave up on navigating about halfway through. Much of the mediocre painting went in one eye and out the other, like most everything else I'd viewed that day. But again, I had to admire the enterprising spirit of people going to great personal expense and risking humiliation just to give it a shot. Some were probably hoping to be discovered and attain commercial success, others, armed with dense, wordy manifesti, just wanted the world to hear their message. I paused at the booth of an "artist and open-heart surgery nurse", a tiny space stuffed with 33 numbered gold-spray-painted suitcases long enough to pick up the intriguing press release/ manifesto she proffered. In it she described the suitcases, which contain her patent application, as simultaneously an art installation, invention application, business plan, marketing ploy, spiritual quest, and self-portrait.

That pretty much sums up Miami.

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