

EMERGING EMERGENCY

Of mushrooms and emerging countries

When I recently told an art enthusiast friend about the Berlin art fair, Preview Berlin, which describes itself as an “emerging art fair”, he thought the word “emerging” quite amusing. He said he associated the word with mushrooms pushing their way through the earth towards the light after a warm summer rain. He felt it also sounded a bit like “emergency” although it wasn’t quite clear to him what sort of emergency was meant – an emergency because there is not enough art?

Another friend, who works in banking, was also ready with a few associations of his own. He automatically thought of the “emerging markets” of the economically emerging countries. They are, he informed me, often interesting from an economic perspective and offer an opportunity to make a lot of money in a short space of time but with a high degree of risk involved. Like junk bonds, I asked, being intentionally naive. No, he said, less negative than that. But he went on to say that some may never get over the threshold which lies between the highly promising start and a more serious, consistent running of the economy. Bad luck, he added, if, as an investor, you don’t realise this in time.

Hallucinations and discoverer’s luck

The mushrooms and the emerging countries have, besides their sometimes hallucinogenic effect, another thing in common: namely the sense of good fortune that those who discover them experience. It is precisely this that gives an emerging art fair and any up and coming art and gallery scene their appeal. Of course, those who aren’t willing to take a risk and are looking for blue chips, will only get their fingers burnt.

For all others, though – collectors as well as just curious art lovers, curators and critics – it is exciting on such occasions to give the eyes a real feast and to take in as much as possible, to have the courage to make decisions based on your own judgement and not on what the market is saying or to train your eye and so find out why something appeals to you or not. Where else can you do that? When art has landed in a museum, is commented on by important curators between the covers of thick catalogues, or has been included in large collections, there is no longer any art in regarding this as art.

Emerging art fairs as talent shows

Some later regret not having taken the chance when it was given them at such an “emerging” fair and at not having made a purchase. A colleague recently told me that, a few years ago, he could have bought a painting by Wilhelm Sasnal for several thousand francs at the stand of the Polish Foksal Gallery at the Basel Liste. A work by this artist recently fetched more than 330,000 US dollars at an auction. “You’d have no financial worries if you had been able to invest at the time,” he thought. You would no longer have to tediously earn your daily crust with art reviews for which you get paid, in the best case, a thousandth of this sum. But although, at the time, he had noticed the painting by Sasnal he had thought it was too similar to Luc Tuymans. Was it foreseeable that the young Polish painter would, despite this, have such a breakthrough? Such are the eternal mysteries, coincidences and secrets of the art world which are at play here. It is, of course, also possible that Sasnal, like thousands of other painters, would have remained in the second or third league.

One of the first art fairs which took account of this very contemporary desire for the new and exciting, not yet established and speculative, and which even systematically nurtured it, was the Basel Liste which began eleven years ago. Only relatively new galleries were allowed to exhibit and they were not allowed to take part more than three or four times which ensured there was always space for new talent. This quickly blossomed into a talent show for Art Basel. It is now so established that further “alternative art fairs” have sprung up in Basel in order to accommodate the many galleries which do not have a chance in the old boys’ network of Art and which do not meet the criteria of the Liste. At the opening reception, the Liste has long been as full as the mother ship, the luxury liner Art.

New blood and unripe bananas

The art market, as the history of such new galleries and fairs has shown, needs the emerging artists. This is where the much needed injection of new blood comes from. But, as there is more and more art, an efficient filter system is needed at the same time – such as a curated art fair according to the exhibition model, with clear and quite strict rules of access. This is because everyone who works in this field complains, as professionals, about the side effects of the youth craze which dominates here, too – as in the world of fashion and body culture – and which brings to the surface a great deal of undeveloped and half-baked material.

This fixation on youth has much to do with the acceleration in the art world. Experts say that nowadays young artists need to have made it on the international circuit within only a few years. And so, everyone hopes that they have invested well and have picked out the future superstars as early as possible. It is almost as if they were bananas which still need to ripen en route or in the buyer’s fruit bowl until they can be enjoyed. For the artists, this means before they are established and then usually unobtainable for those with less generous budgets.

Those more sensitised, by no means to be equated with worldly-innocent sensitive souls, are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that this development brings

with it certain risks and side effects. Art teachers have often been heard saying recently that future artists are not only to be impregnated against the market, but also that they should be directly warned about succumbing too quickly to its temptations and that they shouldn’t present themselves to the public without a developed strategy.

Such advice is, nevertheless, not always well received. Experienced teachers, often artists themselves, who know what you need in your rucksack to overcome hard times, which may even last years, and also breaks in artistic creativity, are not exactly happy about this. “The young could experiment and be adventurous but they only do what they think will be well received on the market,” lamented one teacher from Zurich’s College of Art and Design recently regarding this development. We discussed this year’s diploma works – and the predominant impression was one of déjà-vu with so many of the works from the fine arts and photography classes which are particularly exposed to the temptations of the art market.

The scholarship career

Despite all the reservations concerning the market’s siren songs, it should also be made known that the structures of the art world as a whole are arranged so as to actually cultivate new talent and blossoming hopefuls.

Even public support measures partly illustrate this tendency. Take Switzerland as an example, the country which operates, together with Austria, what is probably, in international comparison, the most comprehensive support of young artistic talent. Here, young artists are encompassed by a close net of support measures which are mostly accessible until they reach the age of forty. This long-term support strategy is based on the principle that those who haven’t managed to stand on their own two feet by then will never manage it. Only recently have there been certain changes – through the Meret-Oppenheim Prize, for example, judges consciously distinguish middle-aged artists, and in Zurich the age limit for municipal scholarships (formerly 40, which appears to be a magic figure for the art world) has been abolished.

This system has, on the one hand, contributed to the formation of a broad art scene but it has also, on the other hand, and this can be clearly seen in retrospect, encouraged “scholarship careers”. To discuss this publicly is, of course, quite controversial, particularly during times in which the state’s support of art is open to some criticism. Yet people should really ask themselves, even if they agree with this support, whether it makes sense or whether it is not rather cynical to encourage young people to an artistic career in this way. Particularly as everyone who knows the business also knows that there are really only very few exceptions who will be able, one day, to live solely from their art – and not just in a position which is continually precarious. Several artistic careers may well reach their moment of truth if, after the age of forty, the financial fountain is not flowing as bountifully as it should. More than a few artists were, for years, regarded as future hopefuls, only suddenly to disappear into nothingness. Among the phenomena which mercilessly expose

the youth-fixated supportive system, are those turned down, the ones passed by or left out by the state sponsorship commission. In Switzerland, these include famous names such as Thomas Hirschhorn and Dieter Roth.

The renaissance of the new

However much the fixation on up and coming artists may appear as a phenomenon of our time, it is just as much rooted in history. It is firmly linked to the principle of favouring the new in western culture and art since the Renaissance. Many debates and controversies of past centuries, the most prominent being the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” in the 17th century, revolved around the significance of innovation, breaking with the old or at least a refreshing re-interpretation for the respective contemporary situations.

Philosophers such as Hans Blumenberg have shown in ground-breaking studies, for example the “Prozess der theoretischen Neugierde” (Process of Theoretical Curiosity), how this interest, this fixation on what is new and its exploration, became the driving force behind the orientation of cognitive interest and an impetus to modern scientific development. The arts, too, couldn’t and didn’t want to be deprived of this paradigm shift. In this way, they also contributed to a gradual re-definition of a canon of values in which the highest good was no longer the preserving of a tradition but the break with it.

Since then, it is not only the new, or at least that which appears as such, which has become a fixed category in the evaluation of art. The youthfulness of the artist is also one of the fixed components of the “artist’s legend”, as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz analysed in their 1934 study of the same name, long since a classic.

The stereotypes of the artist’s biography include, according to their findings, certain motives such as the “heroification” of the artist and particularly of talent discovered at a young age. One of the most famous stories is that of Cimabue who, according to Giorgio Vasari, discovered the future artist in the shepherd boy, Giotto. This boy was drawing pictures of the animals on stones and in the sand. Kris and Kurz trace these anecdotes back to ancient traditions which also involve an older teacher discovering a younger talent. But Christian (and other) doctrines of salvation are full of tales of how “divine” ancestry is manifested already in the child. Typical of all these anecdotes is that the true artist, indeed the genius, is revealed already at an early point – in the child prodigy – which can even assert itself against all external odds.

From genius to shooting star

Today, the word genius is used only very cautiously and no-one thinks that all the young artists who put their work on the market are little geniuses. There is often revealing talk of “shooting stars” who are catapulted into the skies by more or less obscure forces in the hope that they will stay there and continue to shine. This intoxication which comes from what is new, young and untouched, can only be explained against the background of a cultural-historic tradition which we are not always aware of but which helps to shape our likes and dislikes.

The current enthusiasm for art’s “emerging markets”, therefore, doesn’t appear as ground-breakingly new when viewed from some distance. What is new, though, is the extent and the unclear picture of the market. There have also, never before, been so many different, even competing criteria, relating to how individual groups or persons regard art as good or important. This situation, in turn, creates an opportunity for those forces which simplify access and cleverly and attractively structure what’s on offer. An art fair such as Preview Berlin attempts to do this. As the name implies, it wants to offer a preview of what might soon have a more significant role – and, in this respect, it is similar to the Basel Liste. It is more than simply an alternative in view of the 450 applicants jostling for one of 30 “freestyle”-stands at Artforum; it is based on the principle that courage in embracing what is new is now the new driving force. In doing so, it offers a platform for precisely the type of art which people are currently looking for in Berlin’s creative boom and what they expect here. Art which is young, of the moment and contemporary and which you don’t have to, in contrast to Basel, pay high prices for. This includes art from the artist-run galleries which are so typical of the mood in Berlin, that of breaking from the familiar, going on to something new. Characteristic of these galleries is that they often only exist for a short time, perhaps two or three years, a time in which many new things may happen but which is usually too short to penetrate the structures of older art fairs. Yet it is precisely these artist-run galleries as places of great change and experimentation which cause a real ferment in the art world.

Preview Berlin gathers such dedicated, young and bold initiatives to attract those buyers who are equally curious and prepared to take a risk and who are looking for their own opportunity to make a mark. Their chance lies, not least, in being able to help shape the art of their generation through their purchasing decisions. In this way they can influence the way art develops without risking a fortune. Art is, after all, by no means only a question of budget.

The art world is moody, dependent on trends and times, on trendsetters and issues which can suddenly seem more important or less important. Yet this is part of the game – as is the awareness that this game also has its own rules. As long as the circumstances allow, this game will cast its spell over people perhaps not least because of its mystery which matches the genuine mysteries of art itself. A few of the rules can be learnt best where the threshold – by no means to be equated with standard – is low. Preview Berlin is a place for such experiences and it may be exciting to observe where the galleries and artists exhibiting here will be in five or ten years’ time.

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