

ART BASEL 2016

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When collectors think big

Sculpture Art Basel shows work

too large for most fairs. But who

buys it? By *Griselda Murray Brown*

Anyone who has been to a few art fairs will know that they tend to look the same. Often housed in large tents or convention centres, they are divided into long aisles lined with galleries displaying their wares, each booth a white cube.

Entering Unlimited at Art Basel, then, is a bit like drinking Alice's shrinking potion: suddenly everything is very big.

Housed in one of Messe Basel's vast exhibition halls, this section of the fair typically contains large-scale sculpture and installation, performances and purpose-built environments for viewing video art. Each year its internal architecture is designed around the exhibits – no cramped gallery stands here.

"Unlimited started in 2000 because more and more of the work that the best artists were making simply didn't fit in a

fair booth," Art Basel's director Marc Spiegler explains. "It was too big or too loud or too smelly or involved fire – you wouldn't want that on a booth, because of the effect on your neighbours."

Unlike in the main section of the fair, galleries often bring a single artist to Unlimited. This year over 200 pieces were submitted – all by galleries already exhibiting elsewhere at Art Basel; no outside applications allowed –

and a record 88 were accepted by the committee.

El Anatsui's "Gli (Wall)" (2010), which consists of five delicate curtains woven from recycled materials, is one of the works to make the cut. Another is Davide Balula's "Mimed Sculptures", in which performers, with the aid of a series of empty plinths, mime the

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shapes of sculptures by Giacometti, Louise Bourgeois, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, “challenging the viewer’s visual memory to make out the form as a whole”

There will also be salad for hungry visitors. Yes, that’s right. Fluxus artist Alison Knowles will be restaging a performance, first seen at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art in 1962, in which she prepares a large salad and serves it to passers-by.

As Gianni Jetzer, the curator of Unlimited, puts it, gallerist James Fuentes “takes a risk to bring Alison Knowles to Unlimited”. It’s expensive to show here: Unlimited charges exhibitors SFr19,000 (£13,510), on top of the cost of taking a booth in one of the other sections (which ranges from SFr755 (£537) per sq meter to SFr11,500 (£8,177) per booth) and shipping and staffing. Indeed, it’s not unusual for galleries to club together to show a piece at Unlimited. But it can still be a gamble. “There are a lot of risky pieces from a markets point of view,” Jetzer says of Unlimited. “These are not easy to sell.”

But Jetzer, who is curator-at-large at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC, believes that this section of Art Basel isn’t only about sales. “It’s much more about positioning artists within the art world,” he explains, adding that it’s the exposure to career-making curators, critics and collectors that counts. “That’s really what Unlimited can offer.”

Yet the art here is most definitely for sale. Spiegler tells me that Unlimited sees “significant sales every year – dozens of them”. So who’s buying?

Collectors have historically favoured domestic-sized works of art – private sculpture parks notwithstanding – and fairs have catered to this by providing domestic-sized booths. When Unlimited opened 16 years ago, the market for large work was dominated by the public museums. But times have changed. “The notion of what a private collector acquires has completely changed in the

last 20 years,” Spiegler says. “Not only do private collectors have larger apartments than they ever used to, because many people are living in large former industrial buildings, but also many more have built private museums now.”

He cites the Indonesian collector Budi Tek, who bought a Fred Sandback installation – “Untitled (Sculptural Study, Seven-part Right-angled Triangular Construction)” (1982/2010) – from David Zwirner for around \$500,000 in 2011. Sandback’s pieces

play with perceptions of space by stretching multiple lengths of string or wire across empty rooms. And Tek has just the place for this kind of work: his Yuz Museum in Shanghai, a vast former aircraft hangar that opened in 2014.

For most galleries, the dream is still to get their artist into a public collection like that of MoMA or Tate – but it is private museums like Tek’s that are driving the market. According to Spiegler, nowadays most buyers at Unlimited are private individuals. Last year, Hauser &

Wirth sold all four of the works it exhibited. Three were bought by private collectors – a film by Martin Creed, Pierre Hughe’s “Cambrian Explosion” and a room-sized installation of paintings by Jakub Julian Ziolkowski – and the fourth, Zhang Enli’s “Space Painting” went to the K11 Art Foundation, a non-profit museum in Hong Kong.

Yet it’s still rare to see monumental sculpture at art fairs: Basel is unique in having such a large section devoted to it. And beyond the fairs, displaying, storing and selling such work can prove challenging for galleries. For most of her career, the sculptor Phyllida Barlow destroyed her work after exhibiting it: the cost of keeping large and often unwieldy pieces was simply prohibitive. Relatively few of her sculptures therefore exist today, but there is a rich archive of drawings.

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Art Basel calls itself a “show” – a term which is usually shorthand for “exhibition” Like all fairs, it aspires to display art of “museum quality” – the highest possible compliment for a work, and one you’ll hear bandied around by gallerists – in an environment that feels more like a museum than a trade fair.

As curator of Unlimited, Jetzer seems philosophical rather than commercial in his thinking. “When I think of the notion of ‘unlimited’” he says, “it’s really the experience of losing your relationship to space and time and to dive in to the art reality. You enter into this unlimited space of artistic thinking.”

The exhibiting galleries, too, are hoping visitors will dive in – heart, soul and wallet.

Art Basel, June 13-15 (invitation only) and 16-19 (open to public), artbasel.com



Chiharu Shiota’s ‘Accumulation: Searching for Destination’ – Galerie Daniel Templon