



Photographer Constantine Manos captured Art Basel Miami Beach's crowds and art—seen here and on the accompanying pages—in 2008.

EXHIBITIONISM

ART BASEL

An Oral History

What began as little more than a swanky block party has grown into a major international art fair. **MARK ELLWOOD** reports from its humble beginnings to its current global fanfare.

It was the early 1990s when Art Basel began mulling an outpost stateside. The question was where to try out its offshoot.

Sam Keller, director, Fondation Beyeler, and founding director, Art Basel Miami Beach: *The art market was very much down in the beginning of the 1990s, but when it came back, it was the American art market that was the strongest.*

Mera Rubell, collector: *Basel has similarities to Miami—Basel represents a neutral zone for a lot of Europe, and Miami does the same for North and South America.*

Michele Oka Doner, Miami-born artist: *Miami was like a blank canvas—pardon the metaphor. An art*

fair, unlike most industry gatherings, is focused on people coming there on vacation. If collectors are going to be spending their own money, and giving up their free time, it makes a lot of sense it should be in a place where people enjoy themselves.

Rubell: *It took a lot of persuasion to make the Convention Center give up a week during the winter. The idea of an art fair was nothing special to them.*

Craig Robins, CEO, Dacra Development; co-owner, Design Miami: *In December, we have enormous hotel inventory; Miami is empty. It's the only time that Art Basel would have worked.*

After much discussion with the city, Miami was confirmed for December 12–16, 2001.

Keller: *The right place at the right moment? It turned out to be the wrong moment, with 9/11 and the anthrax scares.*

Robins: *Forget about all the other issues—art could not be transported because it was uninsurable.*

Angela Westwater, owner, Sperone Westwater: *I got a call from Sam, and he said, "What do we do?" And I said, "I think you should cancel."*

As a makeshift alternative, local collectors like Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz and Don and Mera Rubell threw open their homes to showcase recent acquisitions—and inadvertently began a tradition.

Westwater: *It's kind of strange to say, but that first year when it was canceled was really memorable. None of us were in our booths, because we had no booths, and it was rather cozy.*

After that fitful start, the fair debuted in 2002.

Westwater: *In those early years, there was a marvelous opportunity to talk to collectors, have discussions about how the artist's ideas fit into contemporary culture. That's the way great collections are formed.*

Teresita Fernández, Miami-born sculptor: *At that point, in Miami, young artists were excited that people from elsewhere would come here.* **CONTINUED»**

Seth Brownnik, founder, World Red Eye: *That first year? We shot 10 or 15 events, total. In 2013, we did close to 300.*

Nadine Johnson, publicist: *We knew we were onto something when an art reporter told me, "Nadine, I cannot believe this is going on. I saw my first transaction in cash [on a gallery stand]."*

Brownnik: *Early on, Karl Lagerfeld hired me to follow him around for a weekend. It was his first time in Miami since Versace was shot. He was locked in his hotel, and he wouldn't come out without a bunch of security. He was freaked out he was going to get killed like Gianni.*

Nonetheless, compared with the blockbuster show in Switzerland, it retained a small-scale focus relished by art world insiders.

Shamim Momin, former curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, and founder, LAND: *I associate those times with staying up all night talking about art. We'd go sit on balconies with all the artists. I often recall Terence Koh, Javier Peres, Anne Ellegood, Agathe Snow, Dash Snow. It was a giddy feeling, all these art nerds in one place. It most definitely was not fantasy or fashion.*

Sam Orlofsky, director, Gagolian Gallery: *For the first few years, what was remarkable was the opportunity to have young European gallerists and dealers all together in one place. It was a valuable incubator for relationships with people like Martin Klosterfelde and Thilo Wermke.*

As for Miami Beach, it offered the art world an enthusiastic, if somewhat haphazard, welcome.

Mark Hughes, art advisor and former director, Galerie Lelong: *The first year? The Miami hotels seemed never to have had guests before. I was at the Beachcomber, and I got in the elevator and*

there was a quarter-eaten beef patty on the floor that had obviously dropped off a room-service tray. In the morning, it was still there.

By 2004 there was such cachet around the fair, VIPs were specially chartering jets. Henry and Marie-Josée Kravis, for example, received a preview before it opened in 2004 from Larry Gagolian, returning home within 24 hours.

Eric Shiner, director, Andy Warhol Museum: *I remember opening days, when you watched the mad rush as people literally came running into the fair. There was this competitive mentality to get the good stuff, like at Filene's Basement.*

Keller: *Jeff Koons was one of the first major artists to come down and bring his family. He didn't stay for a couple of hours, but for several days.*

Sara Fitzmaurice, U.S. representative of Art Basel; founder, Fitz + Co.: *NetJets was there that first year, with a small space in the collectors' lounge. Now it's one of their top three events for takeoffs and landings.*

As ancillary fairs, like Design Miami, began appearing—and succeeding—they helped Art Basel Miami Beach become a pop culture bonfire.

Johnson: *It became a cross-marketing initiative. I got a call one day from a tech company, a month*



When in Basel, Watch Out for...



Improbable Headgear



Jennifer Rubell's Food Art



Group of People Dressed in Black



Grossly Overpriced Bad Food

before, saying, "We want to be associated with Basel." I don't like sponsors—they give you five cases of Champagne and then bring 28 executives [to the party]. But this company offered \$25,000 to have a logo on the invitation.

Orlofsky: *There was a marked shift, three or four years in, when everybody in New York started to figure out it was a good excuse to get away for the weekend. That's when it became a runaway train.*

Rubell: *It's become like Burning Man, an adventure you have to take. People who don't collect art are embarrassed to say they haven't been. My attorney from Baltimore said, "Omigod, we've been thinking about going."*

Fitzmaurice: *By 2006 or so, even the general public—the people who buy a ticket to come in on Saturday—had stopped mispronouncing it as "Bay-zull."*

Crowds swelled so much that some of the impromptu events of the earlier years were discontinued—notably some of the free public events.

Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, collector: *We had a show of William Kentridge's work, and 4,000 people came. I thought, "Wow, this is not going to happen next year." An open party for everyone? Impossible.*

Takashi Murakami, artist: *The less serious it was becoming just made me want to be involved more. I love a good circus.*

The fair, too, was booming—and attracting waggish stunts as a result.

Keller: *One gallery said someone came in, in flip-flops, with children from the beach and asked about the Picasso [on their stand], a picture worth several million dollars. The next day, the woman came back and said, "If you can deliver it by January 17, I'll buy it." It sold.*

Fontanals-Cisneros: *I bought a piece by [Brazilian artist] Jac Leirner and then went for lunch with some friends. And one goes, "I bought this piece from Jac Leirner"—and it was my piece! I called the gallerist, who told me, "No, no, the piece is yours." I was like, "Omigod, I won the lottery."*

Marianne Boesky, gallerist: *It hit a crazy peak when I found Paris Hilton in an elevator drunk, and I thought, "This is not about art anymore."*

Jeffrey Deitch, founder, Deitch Projects: *A friend of mine, Tara Subkoff, who's famous for the fashion line Imitation of Christ, wanted to do an*



art performance under my auspices. She wanted to drop hot dogs from an airplane above the art fair audience, but I said, "I've got my hands full." She was miffed, and got a bunch of white rabbits and somehow smuggled them into the fair. She released them, and each one had a sign on the collar: "Jeffrey Deitch says I'm not an artist."

Just as the art world peaked during the boom of 2007, and Art Basel Miami Beach was cresting, Keller announced he was decamping to Art Basel founder's Fondation Beyeler.

Marc Spiegler, former art journalist, now director, Art Basel: *I was announced as the director in June [during Art Basel Switzerland]. There was a real crowd at the door, and it was impenetrable; I was with some friends, and we thought we could hop over the wall. We looked at each other and thought, "Oh, Marc can't hop over the walls anymore."*

Under his stewardship the fair weathered the downturn, and further embraced the social element with which it had become synonymous.

Jeanne Greenberg-Rohatyn, owner, Salon 94: *One thing that Marc has done quite well is understanding there is this other nightlife he is creating culture around.*

Bill Acquavella, gallerist: *The parties? Oh, I'm too old to go to all the parties.*

Oka Doner: *People are party animals. In a way, it's seeing how many Medicis there are at this point.*

Johnson: *The hardest thing is to find your car—the valets usually bring you the wrong car.*

Westwater: *[White Cube owner] Jay Jopling's parties are pretty great at Soho House. I remember celebrating with Damien Hirst as well as Theaster Gates.*

Carter Cleveland, founder, Artsy: *Our party with Chanel was wild. We underestimated how much awareness had grown, and it was not our plan to*

have people waiting in such a long line on the beach. There were women in \$10,000 dresses almost falling into the ocean!

Boesky: *Two years ago a friend and I walked out of the Convention Center on opening night and there was a little Cuban guy behind the wheel of a taxi. We asked, "Can we keep you for the night?" Our itinerary was 14 parties—something at the Versace mansion, couple of different private home parties. At the end of the night, we had 13 people stuffed into that taxi. She still talks about it.*

No one's Rolodex is more envied than Jeffrey Deitch's, whose parties at the Raleigh Hotel on Wednesday after the opening, the only night when true VIPs are guaranteed to be in town, are the stuff of legend.

Keller: *Jeffrey is the one who totally got it from the beginning. Not only did he do a great booth, but he also organized concerts and things.*

Deitch: *Our parties were like art performances. We didn't bring Lionel Richie. I never had a promoter, a guest list, a consultant. It was our circle. The most infamous incident would be one of the gallery girls having a tumble under the stage with an art handler—one of my staff found them in flagrante.*

Murakami: *In Japan the art world is expected to be strictly academic, so the scale of the parties was beyond my imagination.*

One major difference between the original Basel and its Miami out-

post: the celebrity quotient, which impresses even art-world VIPs.

Greenberg-Rohatyn: *A few years ago, I presented Nate Lowman in Alex Rodriguez's batting café; we hung one of Lowman's paintings of bullet holes and joked about Rodriguez hitting the baseball through one of the holes. The mix of people who came was Alex's friends, the art world, young artists, a total mash-up. You could only do that in Miami.*

Fitzmaurice: *I walked Leonardo DiCaprio around last year for four hours—he was engaged, talked to dealers. But people kept trying to talk to him, when all he wanted to do was look at the art.*

Boesky: *I don't get enamored with celebrities, but I gotta say: Meeting Jay-Z and Beyoncé was pretty awesome. They were walking around the fair, and I was just gawking at them.*

Despite the star wattage, though, Art Basel Miami Beach has had a democratizing impact.

Greenberg-Rohatyn: *People who might not have made the pilgrimage to an art fair come for the parties. They start out as lookers and become buyers. It's reverse engineering.*

Helen Allen, artist: *It opened things up; it's more than the one percent who go to Basel [Switzerland]. The art in Miami is different. It has more oomph—not from a conceptual standpoint, but from a visual one.*

With its 13th edition looming, Art Basel Miami is firmly established and its local impact has been seismic.

Fitzmaurice: *Many collectors have bought homes in Miami—look at the Faena residences. They've sold to a who's who of the art world. Everyone got together and made Miami an art city now.*

Fernández: *When I was growing up, Miami had few cultural institutions—in high school, the thing was to go to the little divey bars along Ocean Drive with a \$5 cover. It was not glamorous. In the last 20 to 25 years, Miami has turned into something that looks like a real city.*

Rubell: *Sometimes it takes an outsider to make you aware of who you are. Art Basel profoundly introduced Miami to itself. ♦*

This year Art Basel Miami Beach will take place December 4 to 7; artbasel.com.

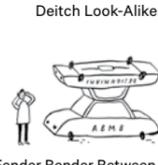
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Towel with Artful Design



Group of Jeffrey Deitch Look-Alikes



Fender Bender Between Design Miami Car and ABMB Car



Peter Marino Walking Through a Peter Marino Retrospective