



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Art Basel: 15/06/16

Collectors take a long hard look at themselves

At Art Basel, artists hold up a mirror to everyone who makes the art world go round

Artists are holding up a mirror to the art world at Art Basel, its biggest tribal gathering, which opened to invited collectors yesterday. Collectors, art advisers, dealers and the rest of the art market's elite arrived to find its rituals (and sometimes themselves) represented—though not necessarily in the best light.

"Artists are working with all kinds of social tissue, and the market is one form of this," says Gianni Jetzer, the curator of the fair's Unlimited section. But do such works court or critique the world they invade? The conflict is part of the reality, Jetzer says. Artists may not like the market, but "they need to generate an income; they need to live".

On Skarstedt's stand, one of Eric Fischl's new paintings of art fairs, *The Wall* (2016; around \$500,000), shows a couple with their backs to the art. "Same crowd, different clothes. Always the same experience" is how Fischl describes the series, in which no one looks directly at any works.

At Campoli Presti, *Advisors* (2016), by the artists' collective known as Reena Spaulings, comprises 14 portraits of art advisers. Some, such as Lisa Schiff and Thea Westreich, are identifiable to those in the inner circle. The work is by a collective that likes to expose the blurred lines of the market; two of its artists run the Reena Spaulings gallery, which is also at the fair. One of these, John Kelsey, says: "Art advisers dominate the conversation more than ever before."



Someone's paying attention on Skarstedt's stand—unlike the disengaged couple depicted by Eric Fischl in his latest art-fair work

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In *Unlimited*, Elmgreen & Dragset's installation *Secondary* (2015; priced at €200,000), which sold yesterday to a private collection in Denmark through Galería Helga de Alvear, features two auction-house lecterns and the sound of rival auctioneers' voices clashing at almost unbearable volume. "It's a message about art not being about art any more, and then presented in the centre of an art fair," says Alberto Gallardo, a director at Galería Helga de Alvear.

Also in *Unlimited* is *Palimpsest* (2016; priced at €250,000), a monumental 15-part drawing by the Romanian artist Ciprian Mureşan, who has copied 50 years of adverts in *Artforum* magazine. The art is barely visible in the frames that include the market's boom years, in which too many adverts compete for space. "You can't look at art history today without its commercial aspects," says Mihai Pop, the founder of Mureşan's European gallery, *Galeria Plan B*. In the main fair, an advert for Sotheby's in the *New York Times* has been copied in ink by Paul Sietsema for *Painted coins* (white on green) (2015), priced at \$150,000 with Matthew Marks.

But can such works appeal to collectors who avoid the art-fair circuit? Bona Montagu, a director at Skarstedt, says that Fischl's art-fair works have many supporters who are not necessarily market insiders, and who can see the connection with his earlier scenes of suburban America.

Meanwhile, at Campoli Presti yesterday, the art-adviser portraits sold for five figures to a private buyer – through one of the consultants on its wall. Melanie Gerlis