

A TALE OF TWO INTERNATIONAL ART CITIES

By Cornelius Myers

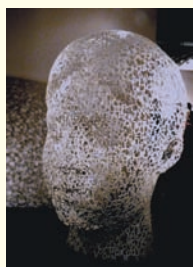
Logically the two cities involved should be Basel, Switzerland and Miami, Florida, but that is not the story of this year's Art Basel Miami. The two cities are Miami 2008 and Miami 2009—two dramatically different venues for this venerable, international art exhibit.

In 2008, the usual suspects—collectors, galleries and investors in fine art—poured into the Convention Center in Miami Beach to act out what had become an elitist dance of ostentation and acquisition. That past year the number of private jets flying in for the show was larger than that of the rain drenched Miami Super Bowl.



The champagne corks popped, the private parties paraded their celebrities and the paparazzi took their pound of flash for the world's press; while the average passerby was relegated to pressing against the private UBS VIP lounge velvet ropes, in wonder at the conspicuous consumption going on for the insiders inside.

Warhol's \$87,000,000 soup can was prominently on display—yes, we accept checks—emblematic of the other impossibly priced items of debatable value. What should be a glorious celebration of art at every level had once again arrived as an El Dorado of impossible dreams and unthinkable price tags.



Enter the mad, malevolent Mr. Madoff as a dark winged harbinger of the collecting financial doom. As the news coverage unfolded concerning his investors—real victims—the pillars of the highest platforms of the art world's elite began to shake until the entire house of credit cards crashed, taking the movers and shakers down with it.

Even UBS, the primary sponsor of Art Basel was deeply wounded and ridiculed, as the United States forced the bank to divulge the private accounts of hundreds of their clients for tax retribution. Fears arose that Art Basel Miami 2009 would



be a sponsorless shell of its former façade. The organizers and the art world responded admirably and courageously to this doomsday scenario by retrenching and redefining its product.

As a result, Art Basel Miami 2009 was regarded as the most successful edition since its inception on the 4th of December 2003. At the same time, there was no downsizing of what is universally regarded as the most important art exhibition in the world. Instead, there was a refocusing and re-evaluation that took into consideration the sensibilities of the art-watching public; the needs of the exhibitors and artists; and extended a more accessible and less exclusive invitation for all to attend, wonder, and even to acquire art.

The numbers serve to tell the story: 2,500 artists were exhibited; 250 of the world's leading galleries—the same number as last year, but minus 75 from '08 who were scared off by the dip in the economy—33 countries represented; 65,000 attendees; 19 satellite fairs; 500,000 square feet of exhibit space—up 120,000 from the last year. An astounding 93% of the galleries reported profit. No small wonder that the universal comment from participants was, "...the optimism is back!!"

Perhaps the best example of a successful retrenching would be the Cartier Column as seen on the February cover of *BoomerTimes*. In 2008, the Cartier exhibit was conducted under a huge, elaborate dome in the garden across from the Convention Center. It was next to impossible to gain access to unless you were credentialed as a glitteratti level client. (Photo by Gary Mercer)



For the 2009 exhibit, Cartier approached Alessandro Mendini, a renowned Italian architect, to create a single object d'art using precious gems. He created an incredible column of perfectly matched pearls, emeralds, sapphires, mandarin garnets, moonstones, diamonds, chalcedonies and rubies in an 8 foot high column of 20 vertical, crystal flutes. The piece incorporates 50 pounds of 18 karat pink gold and more than 17,000 karats of gems. It stood as the most magnificent piece at the exhibit.

Truly, it was the worst of times and the best of times for Art Basel Miami. Lessons were learned—hotel prices were dramatically lowered; and awareness sensitized—easier public access and transportation provided; and perhaps most importantly, the broader range of prices made buying a possibility. The positive results, hopefully, will be carried over into 2010. The world of art awaits.

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(Photos by Charlotte Otto-Bruc)