

No Neutral Spaces: Material Art Fair 2015



Perhaps no one in Mexico City is more fully engaged with the praxis of merchandise display than the street vendors. Stands hawking nearly identical goods—plastic water guns, cigarette packs stamped with cautionary images of fetuses, striped socks packed in crackling cellophane, and the endless assemblages of Mexican candy (Duvalin, Pulparindo, Lucas Muecas)—are distinguished only by the particular dialogue among the objects. What draws you to this vendor and not to that vendor isn't a certain stick of gum, it's the gestalt.

In its second year, the Material Art Fair has relocated to the commerce-driven street Insurgentes Sur, a short walk from the wide, bucolic avenues of the bohemian Colonia Condesa. Rows and rows of street vendor stalls, conjoined by red vinyl awnings, wrap around the Auditorio BlackBerry like a moat. Steam rises from the grills. At the discrete entrance to the fair, guards in black T-shirts peek casually into your bag before nodding you through the velvet ropes. The stage is set for a metonymous experience of Mexico City. We have a concentric model, wherein the city, the Condesa, the perimeter of vendors, the Auditorio BlackBerry, the interior architecture, and the artwork are all involved in a complex renegotiation of culture and commerce. More than most contemporary art fairs, this one is in dialogue with the exigencies of its own city. As much as it is an international fair, it is undoubtedly a Mexico City fair. The organizers, Isa Natalia Castilla, Daniela Elbahara, and Brett W. Schultz, sourced locally to produce it; for exhibition design, they turned to Savvy Studio in collaboration with Pablo Limón, and for

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graphic design, Anagrama.

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A music venue, the Auditorio BlackBerry reads contemporary cool—cement floors, pendant Edison lamps, unfinished wooden acoustic paneling—and the organizers used every quirk as opportunity. A floating platform served as the VIP area; the space below the stage hosted an art lounge. Working through the fair feels like walking through a series of modulated mood-pods, from underground spaces lit by neon to the ground floor’s fluorescent glow, to the sunlit space of the second floor. The majority of the booths are lit with bars of fluorescent bulbs, hung on tresses, mirroring those of the auditorium’s elevated ceiling. Schultz explains the lighting choice: “You don’t have the spotty yellow incandescence, it’s a more generalized lighting. It’s clearer, whiter, trying to reflect how galleries typically light their own spaces with general bright light. For the generation that is following galleries on Contemporary Art Daily, it’s how they expect these works to look. You come here and you see it in real life, but it also has that relationship to the screen.”

On the second floor, gleaming in the natural light that passes through a glass wall, two of Sean Raspet’s *Texture Maps* (2015) glisten like hard candy at the New Gallerie’s booth. Suspended vertically from the wall by articulated TV mounts, these luminescent Plexiglass panes refract trippy pastel colors in dichromatic film—now pink-yellow, now blue-green—depending on where you positioned yourself. These are prepositional paintings: *through* which and *into* which you perceive shape and color. I wanted to move around them to see the colors change across their glossy skein like a transparent lava lamp, a relief composition of silicone globs, polyurethane bubbles wobbling in and out focus. The ridged linearity of lenticular transparent film creates a depth illusion often used for holographic novelty cards, corrective bifocal lenses, and computer privacy screens. Though the language is borrowed from flat-screen entertainment systems, which invite passive, immobile viewing, these screens resolve themselves optically by means of actively moving to and fro, walking while watching how the light registers here and there. Franklin Melendez, TK, told me, “Sean is certainly aware of the screen, but he also mines how the idioms of display structure our existence outside the virtual. From shelving systems and wall-mounted brackets to window banners and even aisles at grocery stores, our experience is always mediated by these systems of presentation.”

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Any art fair challenges the illusion that artwork floats in this weird Platonic white space. The fourth wall disappears. The white cube becomes a vendor stall. What is an art fair but a temporary stage for verisimilitudes of galleries, all lined up and writ small, clinging to the hope that the artworks meant to be seen against the white walls of the gallery still hold up against these flimsy, makeshift ones. The most successful booths are the ones that say, “Oh well, let’s play with a new set of signifiers. Let’s renegotiate the terms of display.” These consider the politics of the spectacle and how we look at art when we know we are looking at art that is for sale.

Tucked into the pit of the performance space, the artist-run studio and project space helper, from Brooklyn, staged a sensually vivid environment of wind gust, a quiet odor of nuked pewter, and the digital murmur of a drone, all surrounded by naked brown drywall. There was zero effort made to establish the bogus aura of the pristine artifact. In Gavin Kenyon and Jeff Williams’s *Microwave Mint*

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(2014–15), two back-to-back microwaves, ajar and aglow, rotate on a site-sourced pedestal. Hung casually, on a pegboard, are products from a live-casting process involving pouring pewter into impressions made by visitors onto the surfaces of cuttlefish bone, which gives as easily as a foam board and can absorb the shapes of objects such as bottle caps or bottle openers, but results in gorgeously deformed abstractions. On the floor, a monitor shows a short film by Berlin-based artist Marco Schmitt titled *Panopticonthera Subobscura: or the second coming of Tezcatilpoca*, produced during his residency in Mexico City in 2014. This psychedelic drone-shot narrative featuring a wheelchair-bound shaman and baton-flailing police atop the Disco Solar works in dream-sequence logic. By extension, other objects on the floor—an assortment of tubular, animalistic ceramic batons/dildos in beautiful luminous glazes, featuring textures erotic and reptilian—appear to have oozed out of the video.

The strongest piece in this booth, and one of the best in the fair (full disclosure: I want it), is Ben Dowell’s wall-mounted light machine, a whirling dervish of white glow, giving off the speed and thrust of a propeller and the optical suck of a solar eclipse. *Cripler* (2014) beckons you in to question its mechanism, which, as it turns out, is a wand of fluorescent light—just a line that, with movement, becomes a solid. Nearby, Dowell’s abstract paintings offer the most delicious clumps of oil paint. The booth was spectacular spectacle. Sam Stewart, who operates helper along with Nathan Gwyne and Zerek Kempf, explained their response to the materiality of the booth: “We are trying to find a balance between this nuanced approach that we’ve taken—with the walls, the way your eye moves along the booth—and this institutional critique trope that often happens when you try to do something different.”

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In the oft-maligned context of the art fair, the bodily experience of inhabiting the gallery’s space can offer us newly radical means for challenging and reinvesting in outmoded presentational systems. Because hardly a month passes when there is not an art fair happening somewhere in the world; because, when not seeing art digitally, we are inside booths, for better or worse, we’d be remiss not to reckon with new apparatuses for display. (Here’s Judith Barry, in her catalogue essay “Dissenting Spaces” for the New Museum’s *Damaged Goods* in 1986: “One way to do this might be to make threatening the assumed neutrality of the exhibition space itself.”) Seduction is not neutral. Sure, a booth inside a fair is designed to make us want to possess as well as be possessed. The reality of commerce is real, but the spectacle should threaten your reality, like when you stand before a diorama of apes and wait for them to blink.

Done well, a display can “follow the logic of context-specificity to an uncomfortable conclusion.” As salvo, P! gallery, New York, offered what was unquestionably the most direct confrontation to, in their words, “undermining the easy commodification of the art fair object in favor of a complex investigation of authorship, hierarchy, aura, and influence.” Prem Krishnamurthy, founding principal of Project Projects and director of P!, set up shop at the fair through a complex taxonomy of practices: sculpture, painting, printing; assemblage, installation, curation; graphic design, exhibition design, art.

At P!, Mexican artist José León Cerrillo produced two display sculptures, lean geometries of steel that support the works of two iconic artists, Elaine Lustig Cohen and Karel Martens. Conceptually and empirically, these structures are both spindly and Mack-Truck strong. Architecturally, they serve as two walls, completing the illusion of a cube with two existent, bare white walls. Neither shelves nor vitrines, slipping in and out of utility and abstraction, they resist fully inhabiting either definition. Both are titled *Environment 1* (2015). One has been built around three Lustig Cohen paintings of such individual power

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as to merit their own discussion, illustrating the problem presented in this artwork, which is both a system and a thing in and of itself. When we talk about a painting, there is no world beyond the frame, so how do we talk about these discrete works, say, when a piece of steel, albeit thin and cocked at a right angle, in conversation with the geometry of the painting, is nevertheless obstructing the line of sight to the canvas? We must invent another verb—not “obstructed.” We must invent another way of looking, while Clement Greenberg rolls over in his grave. Anyhow, the paintings are superb and undiminished, even as they rest on the floor, upright in a vertical cage, as though in storage, as if in a permanent fungible state of desire.

The second, more horizontal structure supports, in the manner of a bookshelf, the delicate framed works of Martens, vibrant letterpress pictures monoprinted on discarded Belgian identity cards. First you see the prints, then you become aware of the armature, and from then on, your attention is pulled between the two, utterly unresolved. The pieces, says Krishnamurthy, “underscore the indelible link between object and armature, raising questions of autonomous and contingent display.” Indeed, going back to Barry, the vitrines here are non-neutral, enacting control. Here is “an artwork-specific display, which is itself a work of art.”

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Nowhere were artists given as much license as at Beverly’s basement outpost, organized by Leah Dixon and Dan Sutti, founders of the eponymous New York project space and bar. And nowhere else was Mexico City most used as a material. A found cement street fragment is transformed into a printing press by Amanda Wong (*Dog in Camouflage*, 2015). Hugo Montoya’s delicate white paint interacted with a potted plant. But the strongest works in this space were by Miami artists. I might speculate that they possess some innate understanding of the vagaries of Mexico City, or the implicit concerns of interacting with tentative spaces. Sneakily nestled in a sunken understairs nook is Daniel Feinberg’s delightful bag o’ *LSD* (2015) aglow in pink and leaking. Misael Soto’s ongoing goings-on of subtle interventions with art and audience, *Spatial Awareness Exercises (for an art fair)* (2015), was the silent magic at the pulse of the neon-lit den. He performed small, spatial-awareness exercises, like pacing, or offered consultations resulting in customized instructions to be performed in an art fair. Art fair-specific artwork. For Soto, “Moving a work like an inch, things that don’t matter in the real world really start to become an obsession to curators and artists and people in this profession. I’m taking that to the extreme. For instance, rehanging Michael Assiff’s paintings.” When gallerists let the artist take control of the politics of display, the politics of display can become art.

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