

Small galleries adjust as screw tightens

by Rachel Spence

Auction prices in the topmost echelons have never been higher, yet galleries are closing with alarming frequency. There are many stunning exhibitions yet how often do you leave a much-hyped show or glossy fair shaking your head at the shoddy quality? The contemporary art world has never been more capricious than it is today.

And large is certainly lucrative. According to art economist Clare McAndrew, galleries with a turnover of more than \$14m in 2012 reported a growth in sales of 55 per cent whereas all the others reported a decline. Menacing too is the growth in private sales by auction houses. In 2012 both Christie's and Sotheby's turned over close to £1bn, a comparable figure, to Gagosian.

The situation was brought home to me when the closure of Bischoff/Weiss was announced this February. I first became aware of the space when leaving a private view at David Zwirner's gallery in Mayfair, London. People were queuing on the pavement to enter the palatial townhouse where sculptures by Donald Judd were displayed on the ground floor and contemporary minimalism upstairs.

Zwirner's show had museum heft yet I was more excited by the ethereal abstractions in the window of Bischoff/Weiss, a small gallery on nearby Hay Hill, which I passed on the way home. Having opened in 2009, it was establishing a reputation for emerging artists with a poetic sensibility. The abstracts, which turned out to be photographs, were the work of Iranian artist Sheree Hovsepian. Bischoff/Weiss also nurtured the career of the Bangladesh-born British minimalist sculptor Rana Begum, now an international star, when she was unknown.

The death knell sounded when the gallery's landlord announced a tripling of its rent. One might think that the mistake was moving into the West End at all. (Previously the gallery had a space in Shoreditch, east London.) But it only made the transfer when the financial crash made it impossible to continue in the original location. "So many galleries closed around us at that time," recalls Paola Weiss, naming Hotel and Dicksmith Gallery as examples of east London casualties.

So what is going wrong? Blame has been laid at the door of new super-galleries such as Zwirner (which now has three vast spaces in London and New York), Gagosian, White Cube, Pace and Hauser & Wirth. These megastores trade not only on their artists' names but also on the cachet of their own. "Today you can go to a super-gallery and for £3,000-£3,5000 get an artwork. And maybe for buyers what is important is the brand," points out Weiss.

Aside from lost sales, the big boys can offer resources and access to collectors that tempt artists away from smaller players. "If an emerging artist is offered a solo show in a major gallery, even in their secondary space, they will take it because they have a better chance of reaching a big collector pool," observes Weiss.

Recent examples of the super-galleries' appeal include Mark Wallinger's defection to Hauser & Wirth from low-profile Oxford Street gallery Anthony Reynolds, the signing of youngster Eddie Peake by White Cube – although Peake still remains attached to his original champion, Lorcan O'Neill in Rome – and Zwirner's decision to invite Colombian artist Oscar Murillo into its stable at the tender age of 28.

Art fairs are another factor. "The primary means to build opportunity for small and mid-level art galleries is continual participation in art fairs while maintaining a rigorous exhibition programme with a small staff and budget," explains Kristen Dodge, whose eponymous gallery in New York's Lower East Side closed earlier this year despite acclaim for its support of talents such as British-born multimedia artist Ellen Harvey. "A common consequence of continual overproduction for small galleries is financial over-extension and burn-out," Dodge continues.

The fairs' custom of corralling young galleries into special sections has disadvantages.



Works by Lubaina Himid at Hollybush



Raphaëlle Bischoff, left, and Paola Weiss of Bischoff/Weiss


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"It's very hard that they request us to have brilliant booths, usually in a non-commercial way, and then put us in a corner and expect us to be successful," observes Weiss. "If I go to Art Basel, say in the Positions sector, I will have the costs of my site-specific installation at £5,000, the cost of the booth at \$12,000 – which is cheaper than a normal booth but still expensive – my ticket and my shipping costs. The total cost will be £20,000. But I can't really say to a collector this installation is \$50,000 when the artist is still only a certain age."

Fair organisers are aware of the problem. "We have heard this [complaint] over the last year, and so for Frieze London 2014 we have actually changed the structure," says Amanda Sharp, co-director of Frieze. The old system, whereby young galleries were asked to proffer solo projects for the Frame section, and more mature spaces could show up to three artists in Focus, has been scrapped. Now there is just one section, Focus, with options for solo, curated and group shows. Although all are cheaper than the main fair, those with solo projects will receive "the deepest discount".

Sharp is wary of an over-emotional response to galleries' plight. She points out that until the boom in contemporary art in the 1990s, running a gallery was always considered "a very high-risk business". The sheer number of new galleries opening in the past two decades skews the picture, Sharp says. "If you looked at the percentage of galleries closing now in comparison to the 1980s, I wonder if it would be [much greater]." She also notes "really great younger galleries coming through".

Those small galleries that are thriving say realism is essential. Malin Ståhl is director of Hollybush Gardens in London's Clerkenwell, where artists include Andrea Büttner, who is currently the subject of a display at Tate Britain. Ståhl explains that the gallery will exhibit at just three fairs this year. "You have to think about where you are trying to develop your market. We will do Art Cologne because Andrea has a show at the Museum Ludwig later this year, Liste [in Basel] and Frieze London." One foray to Frieze New York was enough. "At least for a while. It's too difficult for us."

Yet to exercise such restraint is challenging. "It's sad but you have to do art fairs because collectors are visiting galleries less," observes renowned London dealer Victoria Miro, whose stable ranges from Chris Ofili to rising fabric star Maria Nepomuceno. Collectors' disinclination to travel led Miro to open a satellite space in London's West End recently to complement her bigger east London venue. Thanks to her established name, it is working well but she wonders how young galleries manage. "It must be so difficult even to find a space," she says. "I think it is better to buy than to rent [but] you will probably need a backer."

Striking the right balance with a location that is affordable yet not too marginal is key. Ståhl thinks she has cracked it with her Clerkenwell space, which is much less expensive than Mayfair but much more central than her previous gallery in Bethnal Green. "For a lot of collectors, Clerkenwell is as far east as they ever get!"

Few deny that the carousel of fairs, exhibitions and biennials is taking a toll on art itself. "It is dangerous," says Miro. "Younger artists have a certain success and are encouraged to make more work because the market is favourable. They don't have time to experiment and [they] lose something by overproducing."

For small galleries the temptation to push emerging stars is strong. "In our last year, we did seven or eight fairs, which is a lot for a gallery with only 10 artists," says Weiss. "You risk showing work which is not the best." The mega-galleries are not necessarily the answer. Recent critical maulings for Matthew Day Jackson at Hauser & Wirth and James Franco at Pace (both in New York) reveal that the super-stores are sometimes longer on commercial than curatorial skills. An older artist can weather the storm but younger artists can't afford high-profile mistakes if their reputations are to solidify. "We are losing the curatorial eye," says Weiss. "The real work of galleries should be grooming young artists to build a portfolio."

A former employee of Christie's, who asked not to be named, said she left the auction house because she was appalled at its habit of directly commissioning young artists whose names were becoming fashionable, to make work for the private market.

"There are incredible pressures for artists who achieve commercial success," observes Dodge. "If an artist is overbooked, there isn't time for risk, and when there isn't time for risk in an artist's practice, art is at stake."



Kristen Dodge, whose New York space closed earlier this year