

ArtReview

Newsletter No 54

Art Basel – LISTE, ‘Unlimited’

It’s pre-opening Monday at Art Basel and *ArtReview* has just spent the afternoon at the preview of LISTE, the long-established younger galleries art fair, down the road. And *ArtReview* must admit that in recent years it’s found LISTE a bit listless: a few too many galleries showing too much work that panders too easily to the distracted tastes of too many casual collectors, leaving *ArtReview* wondering where all the edgy, tricky new art had gone, as it chewed dolefully on the wrong end of a wurst. This year, though, LISTE seems sharper, more focused, benefiting, no doubt, from the smart refit of the old Brewery building it occupies each year. And the galleries have mostly opted for solo or two-person presentations, which makes *ArtReview* want to stick around and pay attention, and even bother its readers with what it thinks of it all.

If there’s a theme to *ArtReview*’s LISTE faves, it’s something to do with art which does smart conceptual things with limited or unassuming materials, work which hovers between polemics and poetics. Like British artist David Panos, at London’s [Hollybush Gardens](#). Panos’s *The Dark Pool* consists of two video screen sequences on stands and three lowly sculptures, made of nondescript shop-bought furniture materials (bits of lacquered IKEA table legs, stood on their ends, sheets of foam rubber rolled and curved). On the screens, fragments of performers’ bodies twist and turn, slipping in and out of view as greenscreen superimposition absorbs their efforts into an undifferentiated surface. Panos’s ongoing political interests in commodity value and labour poke through, constantly at odds with the subtle and somehow optimistic exuberance of the materials and their crafting - it’s conflicted, but not necessarily in a bad way.

Making and labouring pops up again in American Frank Heath’s dry-as-a-bone laser etched wall metal panels (at New York’s [Simone Subal](#)) that record on their surfaces transcripts of the awkwardly dragged out telephone conversations Heath has with hapless fabricators who are trying, cheerfully or quizzically, to satisfy this solemn customer, who seems very particular about what he wants and why he wants it. The panels embed the story of their own creation, and the artist as client, somewhere between Robert Morris’s *Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making*, 1961, and the long conceptual history of art-by-telephone. But Heath’s panels – and a video in which he commissions a sky banner of a 40-digit sequence of numbers in order to realise a dream that has been bugging him, much to the puzzlement of the sky banner rep – are as much about social, human relations in a service-sector, customer-support-by-email world in which human dialogue is constantly boiled down to nothing more than order fulfilment.

If Heath’s work is serious while producing an uncanny humour, New Zealander Oscar Ernberg (at Auckland Gallery [Hopkinson Mossman](#)) makes apparently goofball sculptures that draw one into a circuitous reflection on money, power, paternalism and alcoholism. Assemblages of crafted objects and images drawn from the Monopoly boardgame’s top-hatted ‘Uncle Moneybags’, with sideways references to US sitcom *Roseanne*, work like stage props for a disquieting, darkly comic reverie about intoxication and austerity, reckless riches and self-denial.

ArtReview isn't always bothering about ideas, work and politics and stuff, though. It likes paintings too – although it turns out the paintings of Danish artist Morten Skråder Lund (at Copenhagen's [Christian Andersen](#)) are, in some way, also about the idea of work. Large canvases, dribbling and running with vividly coloured streaks and pools of lacquer and acrylic, are overlaid with slabs of Polystyrene, itself burned and corroded by various solvents. Lund manages to keep the question of intention and chance event dangling in the balance, and what to pay attention to most – colour and composition, or process and decomposition – is a constant ambiguity. The hard work of art, Lund seems to suggest, is knowing when to stop intervening, to let something be.

Big is not necessarily better, is what *ArtReview* is thinking, as it chugs another glass of Ruinart at the opening of Art Basel's vast 'Unlimited' special presentations hall. Better is better, like this Ruinart champagne. But big? *ArtReview* is not so sure. Now, you can't accuse Art Basel of letting things be, as it piles on the big-name art in the huge exhibition space right next to the commercial fair itself, the section of the fair appropriately titled 'Unlimited'. Snapping out of its LISTE reverie, *ArtReview* always finds it tricky to focus on the art in this bonkers hangar, so big you could park a passenger jet or two in it. *ArtReview* likes wandering its peculiar configuration of open spaces and enclosed booths, which has evolved over the years into a particular architectural style you might call 'white cube favela'.

'Unlimited' is a ritual of status display; selected by Art Basel out of applications from the fair's participating galleries, who then pay for the privilege. It's a sort of indicator of the kudos galleries think their artists have at a given moment. It's also a kind of shop window for curators, simulating what the work might look like in a nice museum show.

It's not too subtle, and given the size of the space and the fact that galleries are footing the bill, there's always the risk of gigantism – blowing up the scale of a presentation for no particularly good reason, puffing up the art like a meringue. Particular offenders this year seem to fall into the category of big-name old timers, itself a bit of a trend, as galleries assert their claim on art history; Carl Andre's tedious tract of metal floorplates *Steel Penepain*, 1982, the late Hanne Darboven's over-extended and indulged installation *Kinder Dieser Welt*, 1990–96, Jim Shaw's daffy hanging 'backdrop' painting *Capitol Viscera Appliances mural*, 2011, and Giuseppe Penone's massive barrier of stripped-back tree trunks standing on a carpet of leather skins *Matrice di linfa* (2008), all do a great job of getting in the way. With a certain generation of post-1960s artists starting to get really old now or finally shuffling off this mortal coil (the closing event in the talks programme is 'In Honour of Elaine Sturtevant, 1930–2014'), the business of securing their legacies is hotting up.

The positive flipside of 'Unlimited' is nevertheless seeing the younger generation of artists having their growing reputations confirmed by their inclusion; biennial darling Hague Yang can do no wrong with her featherlight and playful cascade of multicoloured venetian blinds, at the entrance of the space, while Turner Prize-winner Laure Prouvost entertains with her loopy video narrative about her (fictional) Kurt-Schwitters-resembling artist grandad, *Wantee* (2013). Fictional narratives are equally consummately handled by Saskia Olde Wolbers in her eyepoppingly weird video [Pareidolia](#) (2011), a circuitous fable about a Japanese archery master and his German translator, in which what one chooses to believe is more powerful than what might actually be true.



Alex Prager, *Face in the Crowd*, 2013, installation view Art Basel Unlimited, 2014. Lehman Maupin. Courtesy Art Basel

Maybe it's that the little rooms that much of the video works are presented in are more hospitable to paying proper attention to them, or it may be that a particular type of high-production video is now coming into its own in art – Alex Prager's beautifully over-the-top mini-movie (starring American actress Elizabeth Banks, no less) *Face in the Crowd*, 2013, pastiches 1960s Hitchcock-era Technicolor, with Banks as the Grace Kelly-like blonde protagonist, lost in a bustling street throng of late-twentieth-century Americans, which, while losing itself slightly in its own camp revel, also – with its odd genre jump from documentary talking heads to movie melodramatics – sounds a strange note of sadness for a nation and a society whose raw metropolitan energy and sense of popular self-confidence appears now like distant history.

But no, it's not just video that does well in these little rooms. Sculpture, too, needs time and space and a bit of quiet, away from the crowd on the boulevards: London-based group Troika's metaphysically strange hanging sculpture *Dark Matter* (2014), a large black object that looks like a circle, a square or a hexagon depending on where you're standing, probes (like Olde Wolber's video) a very contemporary disturbance about the irreconcilability of subjective point-of-view and objective truth.

But maybe, *ArtReview* thinks, art doesn't need to worry too much about reconciling the two, and is just as great when it accepts that aesthetic experience is what doesn't correspond to a rational explanation of what's in front of you. Okay, it may be the Ruinart talking, *ArtReview* muses as it contemplates the late Anthony Caro's generous, optimistic sculpture *River Run*, 2013. It may be made of chunks of rusted welded steel angling around and traversed by a massive plate of frosted pea-green Perspex. But, as *ArtReview* looks at it, it starts to become something else; the experience of sunlight, playing on running water. Puzzled and a little giddy, *ArtReview* steps back out into the bustling throng of the artworld 'favela'.