



Lourdes Fernández

Lourdes Fernández is the director of Madrid's ARCO, one of the most important international fairs for contemporary art. After majoring in museology and art history, she was successively a project director for the Musée d'Orsay and head of the Department of Culture in her home city of San Sebastián. From 1988 to 1994, she worked with Madrid's Marlborough Gallery, followed by a spell with the Galería DV in San Sebastián, before going on to ten years as director of Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, also in San Sebastián. In the spring of 2006, while overseeing a communication group's art collection in Madrid, she was appointed director of ARCO, succeeding Rosina Gómez-Baeza, who had been holding down the post for nineteen years.

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For you, what makes ARCO different?

ARCO is part of IFEMA, a self-financing, not-for-profit consortium that organizes over seventy-five fairs a year in Madrid. ARCO's own profits go, for example, into financing all sorts of activities, including a series of conferences for artists and art specialists. One of the things that makes ARCO different is having had a guest country or region present each year since 2004–05, with Latin America and Mexico among them. I think receptivity to Latin America should be a major outreach sector for ARCO: we speak the same language and the Iberian Peninsula is obviously a way into Europe for those countries, with their fertile contemporary art scene.

What are ARCO's goals?

ARCO's first task is to make a name for itself on the art market. I'd like to get the message across about what's happening in contemporary art, both generally and in emerging countries in particular. It's very rewarding to keep in touch with what's going on abroad. Every fair needs its own personality, and for ARCO the key is the variety of its programming: the "Guest Country" feature, for instance, means we can show what's happening in a specific country and attract new collectors, new galleries, art critics, and museum directors with a special interest in that country. In three days, the guest program gives you a whole different idea of things. What the visitor sees—fifteen galleries representing two or three artists each—demands a preparation time of nearly two years. Recently, I was in Mumbai and New Delhi to choose curators for "Performing ARCO" and the other curated sections. The curators get in touch with the galleries and talk over the choice of artists with them. That way we can give a fuller view of the art situation in the different countries concerned.

Are some fairs better than others? And what, for you, is the basic role of a contemporary art fair today?

Basel, Basel Miami, Frieze, and ARCO are among the best. The FIAC has improved now, with the Carrousel du Louvre for the young galleries. I haven't been to Shanghai. In my opinion the true role of an art fair is presenting artists, creating a market, and getting things moving. Another goal is to communicate what's happening on the contemporary art scene. This explains why ARCO includes several programs and why I work with specialist curators. The "Expanded Box" program, for instance, which is devoted to artists working with new technologies, is curated by curators who are

specialists in that field. We also have the "Solo Project," a curated program for single-artist shows by galleries. Every year we work with curators from all over the world who really know what the artists are worth and which ones are likely to have interesting work to show. This brings us a substantial museum clientele. I think working this way helps to give the fair its distinctive personality, establish it as a platform for the market, and at the same time show what's currently taking place in art internationally.

How do you explain the proliferation of fairs around the world?

Looking back, I realized that the current proliferation of fairs worldwide is mainly the outcome of an economic scene that includes a more stable market, together with the globalization of the art world. Clients, galleries, collectors, and experts have much faster and more comprehensive access to information and greater mobility than before. The information comes through much more directly, there are lots of people looking to invest in contemporary art, and the market has really expanded. All these factors contribute to the multiplication of fairs, which above all hinges on globalization. Supply is going global too: an artist working anywhere at all can sell his work anywhere at all. There's been a complete change of roles. There's a greater sense of urgency, and everything's going much faster.

What's the future for the traditional gallery? Does it still have its place in a globalized world?

I continue to believe in the gallery as such: a fair remains a fair, by which I mean a programmed, rapid-fire event where galleries have to give an overview of the artists they're working with. The solo exhibition is something else entirely. I still firmly believe in the traditional gallery as a creative space where the artist shows his most recent work. The gallery doesn't exist just to make its artists work for fairs: it also has to make them work for themselves, make them advance. Artists don't work just to have a picture on show in Basel or at ARCO. There are people who say that the galleries pressure their artists to overproduce, but I don't think this is their fault. I remain very proud of the galleries, because I think it's more the market itself that generates this phenomenon. A lot of artists can't keep up, and if some of them are celebrities because they command very high prices, it's because there are very few of their works on the market.

How do you explain the record prices that have been achieved at auction for contemporary art?

It's basically the same for the market, a question of supply and demand. The greater the demand, the higher the price. To some extent this helps to consolidate the market and broaden demand: there are collectors in China now, and in India and Russia. It's not just Westerners buying any more. The very curious phenomenon represented by Christie's and Sotheby's has totally changed the market situation. Before they came along, the market took its cue from the galleries, like a kind of second market. Right now Christie's and Sotheby's might not be a primary market, but they're able to set certain

prices. Globalization is here, and I'm proud to say I believe in art. I think there's always something sublime about art. We're in the midst of globalization and the market is very powerful, but art's above all that—art's the beginning and the end of everything.

What's your view of the art/money nexus? Has the collector changed and become a speculator? And what's the impact on the fairs?

In my opinion art has always been an elite sector. It's always been part of the private sphere, even if in the old days the Church commissioned art and even if museums are free now and everyone can just walk in. Art is a luxury item. Even though it doesn't cost much for people who love art to visit museums and biennials and fairs, there's an ongoing attempt to "sacralize."

I think the traditional, old-style collector is still with us. Speculation only represents one facet of the market. The market is a very wide-ranging affair, and one part of it has become far too spoiled. I don't have the exact figures at hand, but there are statistics to show that the Chinese and the young were buying "like maniacs" at auction. They were speculating, but I never thought it was going to last—you're talking about another culture and another generation. Market consolidation is a real asset for the fairs. Speculation in the art sphere is surely going to bring the same disillusionment as in real estate. In recent years, speculation has almost overinflated art's status and the buyer's status with it: now you hear people say, "Personally, I'm investing in art."