

“Discover and Be Discovered”

START art fair, Saatchi Gallery, 26 June – 29 June 2014,

By: Dr. Zoltán Somhegyi



Andrei Molodkin: YES, 2007, Acrylic block and transparent tube filled with crude oil, 32 x 68 x 9 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Wooson Gallery, **Daegu**.

One of the paintings seen at START art fair, which was held at the Saatchi Gallery from 26 June – 29 June 2014, could coincidentally symbolize the characteristics and the novelty of the whole event. At the booth of the Art Issue Projects from Taipei, on the painting by Dean-E Mei, one could observe three flags painted over each other, their size decreasing from the bottom to the top, i.e. in the style of the famous 1958 painting by Jasper Johns. However, in Dean-E Mei's version the smallest flag, the only one seen in its entirety, is not an

American flag but the flag of Taiwan. In this way, the viewer could recognize a well-known form but could see at the same time particular re-elaborations, significant changes and an inspiring reconsideration of the original work. The painting thus referred to the complex history and cultural identity of Taiwan, that is, according to an earlier statement by the artist: *“Due to the unique historical background of Taiwan, her culture displays an enormous complexity. A cross of Takasago, Chinese, Japanese culture and American and Western European*

culture, she carries a strong political identity that has always been suppressed. This is her true nature. (...) History is converted into artistic material and turned into creative energy."¹ This inspiring work's intertwined relationship with tradition and innovation, and the incorporation of canonized values and experimental forms could also be put in ("a formal") parallel with the START art fair's intentions: redesigning a well-known form – that of the classical art fair – in order to provide new approaches and to generate new interpretations. And, in fact, a new method and strategy is definitely needed in the world of art fairs today. While earlier it seemed to be enough to establish a fair in the right city one that is either already a trendy art centre, or perhaps one that can be transformed through the art fair itself – but today there is an abundance of these "couple-of-days" commercial art events. Not considering the rather passive summer months, which often still host the equally interesting biennales and festivals, at every time of the year there are significant fairs. In fact, this June was also packed with 'not-to-miss' events, like Art Basel and its satellite fairs, or the opening of the Architecture Biennale in Venice. On the other hand, in London, where START art fair took place, the same week also saw, among others, the Masterpiece fair, which specializes in art, antiques and design works, both classical and contemporary. Besides this we can also mention the opening of the new Smiljan Radić-designed summer pavilion of the Serpentine Gallery, which was also a much-awaited art event in London, attracting many art lovers from the city as well as from the wider region. These issues might instinctively lead us to ask: is it not too risky to establish a new fair? Will there still remain enough energy from collectors and visitors to attend the fair; will the potentially interested gallerists be ready, both time-wise and finance-wise, to include another event in their program of fair participation; will the press be welcoming etc. Or, we can say: will the founder have the right instinct to find the missing segment of the market? As Michal Cole put it in his review of the START fair on "artlyst.com": *"In the over saturated world of international Art-fairs one could quite imagine that launching a new event in London would be a dangerous gamble. However, START London's latest contemporary art fair has bucked the trend and come up*

trumps."² Certainly, in this "over saturated world" it is no longer enough to establish a new fair without previously and carefully defining its exact profile: the target group, the component missing in the market, and the innovation in the general "layout" of the event. In the case of START art fair, the key concept was definitely "discovery". As it was often stated in the releases of the event: *"It is a fair in which to discover and be discovered"*. The phrase briefly but efficiently summarizes the aim and novelty of the event by directing us towards both – or, perhaps it is better to say, towards all the three – "components" of a fair: collectors, artists and the galleries representing and exhibiting the artists. "Discover and be discovered" implies that the interests of the two (or three) sides are equally important for the founders of the fair. Naturally, in the case of any art fair "discovering" is among the primary aims – collectors often consider the fair-ground almost as a hunting field to find their new game, and fair organizers all around the globe know this – in fact, that is why VIP and Collectors' Previews are an essential part of the opening days of these events. Thus every art fair has great potential to offer new discoveries, in truth even the most professional and experienced fair-goers can find fresh artists and works at such events. Nevertheless, at START art fair it seemed that the novelty of the offer was really a central focus: the novelty of the artists, of the galleries and partly also of the geographical areas. In the proportion of the exhibitors one could certainly feel a stronger presence from regions and countries that are often significantly underrepresented in traditional fairs, e.g. Korea, Taiwan, Azerbaijan and even Myanmar. Naturally, this was in line with the motto of the fair: *"Young Galleries, New Artists"*. Most of the exhibiting galleries were not older than 5-7 years, however, even though they are really "fresh", a great many of them already have a particular profile, and pursue a clearly-set program. And, as a matter of fact, this is particularly important, especially in the case of a newly established gallery. When following a new exhibition space's program of shows and the direction of its profile, we sometimes see that they "start with everything", i.e. they include too-wide a variety of styles, modes of expressions, or, what is even more risky, provide a very diverse range of quality in order to satisfy, or at least to "test", the



Mohau Modisakeng: Inzilo (Film Still), 2013, single-channel video installation, 4'57", Courtesy of the artist and Brundyn+.

local market. This approach might perhaps be understandable – though presumably not automatically acceptable –, but it is often the case that the focus on something particular (a certain group of artists, a special approach, style or process) can be just as rewarding. Of course, it requires more patience, as the specialized audience of the gallery needs to be found through establishing a circle of followers for the showroom. But, as we know, art business is a long-term investment, both for those who buy art and for those who (try to) sell it – and galleries with a significant profile, with a stable collectors' circle around them, who appreciate this methodical “building-up” of the gallery’s artist are much more likely to develop into a lasting and respectable institution. From this viewpoint, we can welcome the new START art fair and its aim to offer the opportunity for fresh galleries to exhibit in a fair-context in one of the most important art centers in the world. In this way galleries can very efficiently find a solid public for their artists – a public that likes to discover new values and

support promising young talents. This approach might derive from the founders’ idea(l)s as they have been collectors and important supporters of contemporary art since the beginning of the 1990s: the fair was established by the collector couple David and Serenella Ciclitira, in partnership with the Saatchi Gallery, who are the founders of the renowned Prudential Eye Program, which was founded in 2008. This program, sponsored by Prudential plc., a leading financial services group, aims to nurture artistic talent and to support emerging contemporary artists on a global scale by organizing exhibitions, publishing catalogues and establishing art prizes in order to develop arts infrastructure in countries where it is either completely lacking, or is not as established as it could and should be. The Prudential Eye Program is therefore an important platform to show artworks and to help artists find further possibilities, connections to the art-lover public, to collectors, curators, galleries and institutes. The Prudential Eye Program’s projects have so far



Guler Ates: Amer Fort and Orange Yellow I, 2013, archival digital print, 64 x 41.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist and THE LOFT at Lower Parel.

included touring exhibitions in Asia, for example Korean Eye (2009-2012), Indonesian Eye (2011), Hong Kong Eye (2013), and Prudential Malaysian Eye (2014). From the beginning, the founders of the Prudential Eye Program have partnered with the Saatchi Gallery in London and played an integral role in the program, hence why the gallery hosted the inaugural START art fair. Both city-wise and institution-wise, London and the Saatchi Gallery proved to be a good choice: London is not only one of the most important centers of art and the art market, but truly a global and cosmopolitan city that efficiently highlights the aims of the organizers by showing the young and perhaps lesser-known talents from around the globe and allowing them to be discovered in this thrilling center. And, as it is widely known, the Saatchi Gallery, since its foundation in 1985, strives to make contemporary art accessible to the public, not only by organizing outstanding exhibitions

but by presenting works from beyond the usual geographical areas, thus putting new art scenes in focus. Bringing global values from all over the world and showing them in a well-known center was the main goal of the event, thus we can understand why Niru Ratnam, the Fair Director of START quoted the famous 1989 Paris exhibition “Magiciens de la Terre” as an important forerunner for the idea that artworks from different regions – both “central” and “peripheral” – could, or should, be exhibited together. As he formulated in his foreword to the fair catalogue: *“It is twenty-five years since the Paris exhibition Magiciens de la Terre proposed the notion of a globalized art world where artists from very different localities could exhibit side-by-side. At the time it was a contested curatorial idea and generated much debate, but in retrospect it is clear that the exhibition undoubtedly pointed forward to the ways in which the art world would expand over the following twenty-five years. Now new art is being made all over the world responding to both global and local concerns, and this is what START intends to showcase in this inaugural edition.”*³ Hence visitors to START art fair could discover works presented by 46 exhibitors and artists from 21 countries. Apart from the gallery booths, the fair also included the Prudential Eye Zone, a specially curated show, which selected works from the aforementioned Prudential Eye Program, where 19 artist from 5 countries: Hong Kong; Indonesia; Korea; Malaysia and Singapore, were presented. In the exhibitors’ offer, anybody could find works to his or her interest, alongside a wide geographical range, variety of medium and technique, style and approach, as well as all price categories. In the following I would like to mention some of the artists and works that I found particularly interesting due to their reinterpretation of art historical traditions in their questioning of the contemporary practices of creation and of their investigation of the concept of art. At the booth of Athr Gallery from Jeddah, the large-size abstract geometric paintings of Hazem Harb definitely captured the visitors’ eye. The Gaza-born artist, currently living between Rome and Dubai, reinterprets traditional Islamic patterns and investigates their possibility in the process of understanding the notion of (abstract) painting itself. The title of the series, “Al Baseera” comes from the Arabic word “basar” that can mean both



Eric Van Hove: V12 Laraki, Alternator, 2013, yellow copper, red copper, nickel silver, mahogany wood, cedar wood, cow bone, sand stone, cotton, ram's horn, cowskin, tin, Chinese superglue and cow horn, 30 x 30 x 25 cm, Image by Keesja Allard, courtesy of the artist and Copperfield.

looking and seeing through something, thus contributing to the multi-layered meaning of the works. In fact, this multi-layered character can also be taken literally as Hazem Harb's paintings are often extended into the third dimension, not only through the visual effects of the painted shapes, but physically by the mounting of several canvases over each other. For those passionate about photography and about the "birthplace" of art, the works of Leonora Hamill were certainly of deep interest. Presented by the Tristan Hoare Gallery, which is focusing on international photography in London, the pictures show studios of art academies from all around the world. The series, with the title "Art in Progress", clearly refers to the places where the images were taken and to the activity pursued in them. However, each image shows the atelier without any students. Thus the representation of the working space is crowded with tools, artistic materials, and creating utensils but, at the same time, is thoughtfully silent, noble and introspective, or, as the artist suggests on her website: "*simultaneously contemplative and dynamic* and exude a palpable sense of collective energy". The tradition of art and art history also inspired Chang Yoong Chia, an artist of the Kuala Lumpur- and Singapore-based Richard Koh Fine Art, when creating meticulously assembled collages, such as

large-size compositions made of postage stamps. The works stimulate several considerations in the viewer: stamps are tools in a communication process that are gradually disappearing on the one hand due to their frequent substitution with a simple printed sign on the envelop, and on the other hand because of the growing use of digital letters instead of traditional post. Thus, a stamp can increasingly be considered as a reminiscent symbol of communication and of the info-connection of the world. Apart from this however, Chang Yoong Chia gives an inspiring twist in his work titled: "Dear Vincent", where the pictorial world of the collage, with its floating and whirling lines, reminds us of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, of whom it is widely known was communicating mainly through letters towards the end of his life. Copperfield from London, a gallery concentrating on interdisciplinary, often process-based multi-media and conceptual art, showed a selection of the latest works of the Algerian-born, Cameroon-raised, Belgian conceptual artist Eric Van Hove. The works exhibited were part of the artist's recent project, presented also at the 2014 edition of the Marrakech Biennale, titled "V12 Laraki", and they formed a replica of the Mercedes-Benz V12 engine that the Moroccan designer Abdeslam Laraki used for his "Laraki Fulgara" sports car. The artistic replica of the

engine consists of 465 handcrafted elements in 53 traditional material, among others: ceramic; bone; terracotta; different metals and even goatskin, which were created by 57 Moroccan artisans who were given creative freedom when using the materials and working on the parts. The artist's conceptual work (each piece is signed both by the artist and the craftsman involved) becomes a complex web of questions investigating the role of handwork skills, the process of becoming a (conceptual) artwork, and also environmental issues. Questions of individual and cultural identity, gender and our role in society were marvelously intertwined in an enchanting photo series.

Guler Ates, in the booth of the Mumbai-based gallery THE LOFT at Lower Parel showed a series of images of veiled women "portraits". However, the term "portrait" should be used in quotation marks because the face always remains invisible, either by being covered, or by the figure turning her back towards the viewer. Guler Ates's photos are staged in historically loaded places: old buildings; castles; libraries; monuments and palaces. The refined qualities of the context are often further emphasized by the almost calligraphic use of the long veil. The "uncovering" of the figures' identity through the complete "covering" of the body makes us reflect on her position and role in the changing historical circumstances, represented through the aesthetic interaction with the location. Wooson Gallery from Daegu, South Korea, presented some of the works of Andrei Molodkin, one of the leading figures of contemporary Russian art, who was also exhibited at the Venice Biennial in 2009. The artist constantly explores new forms and the use of unusual materials when creating his works. In his series he investigates well-known signs, including global symbols of the consumer world like the Dollar or Euro currency symbols, and reproduces them in acrylic blocks, filled with crude oil. The oil then pulses in fluorescent tubes, adjacent to the signs, thus clearly referring to the phenomenon of how oil becomes almost literally the "blood" of the global economy. In a video by the South African artist Mohau Modisakeng, seen at the booth of Brundyn+ Gallery from Cape Town, traditional forms and rituals are connected to the performance-based artistic research of historical and political questions. In the less than

five minute video, titled "Inzilo" (the Zulu word for mourning), the artist's body is first covered by black wax that he starts to peel away until the moment when he stands up while the wax pieces are thrown in the air. According to the artist's intention, in the performance he reinterprets the traditional ritual of mourning and connects it with the concept and process of starting over. The country's modern history and its people's struggle is symbolised through the artist's body that, according to Ruth Simbao, "*becomes the mediator of the pain of this history*".⁵

As we have seen, START art fair incorporated well-known elements of a traditional art fair with a strong focus on new approaches along the lines of their motto: "Young galleries, new artists", and thus aimed to introduce new talents from around the world. The visitor can certainly welcome this work and claim that it was a good START, now we can but wait curiously for the next edition, planned for 25-28 June 2015, and look forward to discovering more new artists.

About the writer:

Dr. Zoltán Somhegyi is a Hungarian art historian, teacher and writer currently based in Sharjah, UAE. As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he specialises in 18-19 century art and art theory, having written his PhD dissertation on German Romanticism. Apart from being an art historian of classical arts, his other fields of interest are contemporary fine arts and art market trends, with a special focus on the arts of the MENASA-region. He curates exhibitions, participates in international art projects and often lectures on art in Europe and in the Middle East. He is a consultant of Art Market Budapest – International contemporary art fair. Currently he is Assistant Professor at the College of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Sharjah, UAE. He is the author of books, artist catalogues, and more than 200 articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews.

END NOTES

1. <http://www.tfam.museum/Exhibition/crew.aspx?ty=a&id=91&ddlLang=en-us>; accessed 14 July 2014.
2. <http://www.artlyst.com/articles/start-launches-new-london-international-emerging-art-fair>; accessed 14 July 2014.
3. START art fair Director Niru Ratnam's foreword in the catalogue of the event. The catalogue was published by Skira, Milano, 2014, p. 9.
4. <http://www.leonorahamill.com/Art-in-Progress>; accessed 14 July 2014.
5. Ruth Simbao: *Performing Stillness in Order to Move*. Modisakeng's 'Becoming', exhibition publication of Brundyn+ Gallery, 2014.