

Thoughts on *artgenève*, Geneva's Contemporary Art Fair

By: *Lesley Lawson Botez*
Professor of Luxury and Design

EU Business School, Switzerland
 February 2020

In early February more than 90 galleries and museums that exhibited at the 2020 edition of *artgenève*, Geneva's art fair, pack their precious wares ready for ArtMonteCarlo in May. They can congratulate themselves on yet another successful event.

Switzerland has three art centres – Zurich, the aristocratic Basel with its iconic art fair and, increasingly, Geneva. To add credibility to Geneva's position, two heavyweight international galleries have opened their doors here, eager to attract the city's international clientele: Larry Gargosian opened in 2010 and Pace Gallery in 2018. Both were present at *artgenève*.

Over its eight years of continued development and consolidation, *artgenève* has taken root in the Geneva Lake region, establishing itself as a high end, internationally renowned contemporary art fair. It is unusual in welcoming public and private collections such as Geneva's MAMCO, the British Royal Academy of Arts or Art of Egypt, as well as international galleries promoting a dynamic dialogue between institutions and galleries.

While contemporary art is considered by many as reserved for an elite, *artgenève* maintains a certain

democracy: while expensive works of art are for sale, so are some priced at less than CHF 10,000. Not for all budgets but still reasonable for this exuberant market.

Visitors to *artgenève* include art lovers, collectors, art professionals and the general public. In a city that is often associated with a luxury lifestyle, it is no coincidence that the event is held in late January when luxury tourism in and out of Geneva is at its apogee. Visitors can pick up some quality art work to decorate the chalet in the Alps, or even be one of the first to spot a rising star.

The association between art and luxury is not new for the two are natural partners. Both create pieces that help define those who own them, those who aspire to or have attained a particular lifestyle. Both have a deep understanding of quality, patience, skill and design. They are the masters of bespoke production. In some ways, luxury products can be called the ultimate art of the retail world.

As companies strive to create uniqueness in an ever-burgeoning market of products both on and off line, high-level creativity and customization remain the single most profound way to establish significance, scarcity and exclusivity.

Consider the impressive list of luxury brands that have forged their own highly credible art foundations. It includes Fondation Louis Vuitton with its recent remarkable exhibition celebrating XXth century designer Charlotte Perriand, Fondazione Prada, Gucci Museo, Fondation Cartier and Rolls Royce Art Programme.

In Switzerland, many banks and even supermarkets have impressive art collections. The Swiss retail giant Migros owns an important collection of contemporary art based in its museum in Zurich. True to the values of its founder, Gottlieb Duttweiler, the collection is accessible to a wide public.

Against this background, a visit to Geneva's contemporary art fair seemed the perfect place to take luxury and design students so that they could form their own opinion. For the last two years I have invited them to the VIP opening night.

On the night, briefed and prepared for lots of walking, we got to Geneva's Palexpo exhibition centre by 5:30 pm. Last year we arrived at 7 pm and the queue to get in went around the hall and back so this year we were earlier. Pausing to pick up maps and plans we were stopped in our tracks by a David Hockney iPad piece covering an entire wall. It set the scene. The British artist now in his 80s whose work sells for more than any living artist, began using the iPad some 10 years ago. He focuses on nature and the outdoors and claims that using an iPad as his canvas facilitates his work. While Apple, designers of the iPad, is not a luxury brand, its strategy is.

Still in the realms of technology and in place of the much-missed design pavilion stood LOOP Barcelona, an interesting series of video exhibits.

We walked by sponsors' stands including Gubelin with its slippers on steps, surprisingly Le Raphael beauty institute and the Gandur Art Foundation, together with established institutions like Paris's Centre Pompidou and Milan's Fondazione ICA.

Prestigious prizes are another way business, particularly luxury, intertwines with contemporary art, supporting yet-to-be discovered artists. This year's winner of the Ruinat/Paris Photo prize, photographer Elsa Leydier, was showing her work, 'Heatwave' and was happy to explain how she had photographed the Ruinat champagne bubbles to best effect. Meanwhile insurance company, La Mobilière's tent contained Maya Rochat's prize-winning installation. Visitors were invited to contribute by walking over broken mirror, a sickening crush testifying to the works' change in structure. Since 1996 this prize has been attributed to promising Swiss artists.

VIP opening night was packed as ever. Deals take place behind the scenes too, at the various sponsors' dinners and other exclusive events set up to entertain a demanding public.

In the evening, tables are laid up and down the passages, between the stands. Lucky guests are treated to dinner and spicy conversation surrounded by works of art.

Several local businesses and sponsors take advantage of the concentration of art lovers to stage special events. Private bank Piquet and Galland for example hosted a brunch and private view of the BCV

collection on loan in their offices. It was a chance to see Anoush Abrar's photos of Geishas and listen to him explain his experience photographing these exclusive and illusive subjects.

Students claimed that their visit to *artgeneve* was an amazing experience. They were impressed with the diversity of age and nationality at the opening, expecting it to be older and stuffier. They were surprised by the friendliness of the gallery owners and relaxed atmosphere. Unlike some art fairs, it was in no way intimidating but open and welcoming... and the food was good too.