



Culture Arts

ART OF THE GEEK GODS

— San Jose

Preface

The heart of the global tech industry was something of a contemporary art desert until Rick Friedman decided that the cash-rich, time-poor computer kids might just respond to an art fair that brought the best works right to their door. Or not?

Bitcoin, Contemporary Art, KM Fine Arts, Rick Friedman

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On the opening day of Silicon Valley Contemporary in April, 52 galleries from 10 countries scrambled to put the finishing touches to their booths before the vip invitees arrived at the massive San Jose McEnery Convention Center that evening. The exhibitors, anxious and excited, were waiting to see if the area's tech-industry heavyweights had their sights set on would take the bait – hundreds of pieces from artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter – they had so skillfully dangled. Among the visitors was self-proclaimed cultural entrepreneur Stefan Simchowicz along with executives from Apple, Adobe, Applied Materials and Cisco. They arrived with the laid-back, casual vibe the Bay Area is known for. As they sipped their glasses of wine, those in the booths wondered if they were ready to open their deep pockets. The art world flocks to where the money is and at the moment that happens to be Silicon Valley. Tucked away in the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay area, the region is a global tech capital comprising cities such as San Jose, Mountain View, Palo Alto, Menlo Park and Cupertino. This is the home of the world's leading tech innovators including Facebook, Apple and Google; according to Forbes, it has the most millionaires and billionaires per capita in the US.

"I always say if you look at the arc of western and, really, all civilisation it is simply inevitable that, as people amass wealth, they begin collecting art," says Trevor Traina, a longtime art collector. He is founder and ceo of IfOnly, a tech company that sells experiences and uses the proceeds to help a charity or a cause. "The Romans pillaged Egypt for statuary. There were the Rothschilds and the Medicis; any time great wealth has been created in history, art collecting ensues and – last time I checked – great wealth is being created in Silicon Valley."

For the most part this Californian region, so bursting with innovators, tech industrialists and wealth, is uncharted territory for the art world. It should come as no surprise then that two art fairs and a blue-chip gallery are staging events in 2014 in an attempt to woo its affluent denizens. Rick Friedman, an art-fair producer and media entrepreneur who owned a slew of tech publications in the 1990s, decided to give the area its first major art fair, Silicon Valley Contemporary. "The more research I did, the more I was convinced that the timing was right and that people, even software developers, are focused on art, imagery, design, graphics and colours. And I said, "This could be a good marriage right now," says Friedman.

Unsured of what would appeal to the art fair's target audience, dealers brought a mix of works. There was a video installation by Aziz + Cucher at the booth of London gallery Gazelli Art House; New York space The Hole arrived with abstract canvasses sprayed with paint by a drone thanks to anonymous artist Katsu and a €3.6m painting by the late abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning hung above a couch at the booth of New York's Mark Borghi Fine Art. "There will probably be an appreciation for us bringing the mountain to them rather than them having to go to the mountain," said Claudia Altman-Siegel, owner of one of San Francisco's leading spaces, Altman Siegel Gallery.

Friedman appointed Paul Young of LA-based Young Projects Gallery as the fair's moving-image curator, assigning him the task of creating new media programming. He selected pieces that included "Depth Charge", an installation by Gary Hill in which a projected blue figure with a guitar hauntingly serenades another, and "The Mutual Wave Machine", an interactive experience from the Marina Abramovic Institute that fuses art with technology using neurofeedback displays. "We were hoping that people in Silicon Valley, as the very makers of this hardware, would relate to works from a technological standpoint, not necessarily a content standpoint," says Young of the works he selected. Within hours of the fair's opening, KM Fine Arts, which has branches in LA and Chicago, sold what it claimed to be the first work to be purchased using the digital currency bitcoin, a piece by Dana Louise Kirkpatrick that an anonymous buyer acquired for 41 bitcoins, the equivalent of around €13,400.

Silicon Valley was already home to a small number of experienced collectors with sophisticated tastes, some of whom, such as Traina, sit on museum boards. Others include Google senior director of marketing Jeffrey Whipps and his wife – interior designer Susan Greenleaf – and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen. The area's younger techies seem occupied with long working hours and are more concerned with coding than cultivating their cultural tastes – but that's not to say that progress isn't being made.

Andrew McClintock, publisher, editor-in-chief and founder of sfaq, is also the director of San Francisco's Ever Gold gallery, a space that caters to the younger members of the tech crowd. "One of them is Christopher Griffon, who is the ceo of Betable," says McClintock. "He just raised a tonne of money for his online gambling thing and he really supports the arts. I'm building relationships with those kind of people."

Sabrina Buell is an art adviser whose San Francisco-based firm Zlot Buell + Associates has many tech-world founders and executives among its clients, including Whipps. "The bulk of the tech community is really young," she says. "We're talking about people in their twenties and thirties who are working their tails off doing 80-hour weeks. So it's not like they have tonnes of time to be out there travelling to see art."

That's why Facebook, located on a 100,000 sq m campus in Menlo Park, is bringing art to its employees through its artist in residence programme. The project, housed in the company's Analog Research Laboratory, invites artists to create installations throughout the Facebook complex. Last year Val Britton dangled pieces of laser-cut paper that were meant to represent an exploded map, while Stefanie Posavec traced a couple's Facebook interactions through a series of pink-and-white dance steps charted out on a concrete floor. "I'm trying to find artists whose work can challenge and provoke this community as opposed to please them," says the programme's coordinator, artist and designer Drew Bennett. "It's not to decorate the campus. We believe in art as a utility that is going to inspire people to do better work and to think more openly here."

Traina, too, tries to engage his employees in his art collection at the San Francisco headquarters of IfOnly. A Nan Goldin photograph hangs across from his desk and an image of maraschino cherries spilled on a sidewalk by Paul Graham perplexes staff as they pass by. "I tell my younger engineers, 'Just keep looking at it and when it finally means something to you, come talk to me about it,'" says Traina.

"Even though several older members of the tech world are on museum boards, in terms of people who are in start-up mode or entrepreneurial mode, I think it's hard for most of the cultural organisations to get their attention," says Susan Krane, the Oshman executive director at the San Jose Museum of Art. Her institution lures in tech-industry visitors through new media art, such as Doug Hall's two-screen video homage to the Golden Gate bridge, as well as through after-hours events and team-building programmes. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, now in the throes of renovation, recently brought art to Silicon Valley through Project Los Altos, an off-site exhibition located in the sleepy Peninsula city from which it got its name.

A week after Silicon Valley Contemporary parachuted into San Jose for four days, the blue-chip Pace Gallery opened a show of Alexander Calder's primary-coloured mobiles. Pace has locations in the major art capitals of London, Beijing and New York and now a new pop-up space housed in the former Tesla Motors headquarters, complete with entertaining Silicon Valley accoutrements such as a ping-pong table, disco ball and bar. Set to stay open until 30 June, Pace Menlo Park will follow its inaugural exhibition with a show of works by Tara Donovan, whose large-scale canvas of circles formed with silver pins graced Silicon Valley Contemporary's vip lounge. "Every 10 or 15 years, a group of fresh eyes comes into the art world," says Pace president Marc Glimcher. "When I was a kid, it was all the property developers who were the collectors. Nobody in the finance world collected contemporary art and then, in the late 1980s, the make-up of the financial world started to change and they came into the art world. They gave the art world a huge shot of energy and this group, the tech industry, is poised to do the same." Buell thinks it may be too early for Silicon Valley to have a large, established collector base that reflects its wealth. "It's a really long-term, great journey that you go on and you get engaged with the art. Maybe it's not moving as quickly as people in the art world would like to see it moving in terms of them spending money. But if you have a long-term view it's a really positive thing," she says.

At Facebook, Drew Bennett is equally enthusiastic about the area's potential. "It's exciting that a lot of the conversation around tech-community people collecting art or not collecting art has to do with access. The art community is wondering, 'Why aren't these people collecting our work?' The tech community is wondering, 'Hey, where's the art that we want to learn about and engage in?'" he says.

Now that the art world has officially landed in the tech capital it's possible that an increased desire on the part of its inhabitants to spend their wealth on art will follow. With Pace Menlo Park open for two and a half months and the fair Art Silicon Valley set to take place in San Mateo in October, there will be plenty of opportunity for them to do so. On the Friday that followed Silicon Valley Contemporary's opening night, gallerists sat at their booths hoping to see some customer traffic that never showed. The weekend fared better but the deep-pocketed tech-world heavyweights the galleries were hoping for never appeared.

Overall the exhibition attracted 6,500 attendees during its three-day run, which culminated in sales of works by Jasper Johns, Mark Flood and Hans Hoffman. "I keep saying the tech community is just like the people in Hollywood," says Young. "They're very cloistered, they're in their own world."

It's clear that Silicon Valley has both the money and the interest to become the art world's next big market – it's just a matter of figuring out what it will take to get new collectors into the fairs.

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