

Champagne and Chutzpah in Cologne

By David Galloway

COLOGNE — Take equal parts of champagne, chutzpah and fashionable frivolity, seasoned with a pinch of low-fat High Culture. Voilà: another opening of Art Cologne, which has now celebrated its 25th birthday. What began as an "Association of Progressive German Art Dealers," born July 4, 1967, has long since swelled to mammoth commercial proportions.

One of the world's first and most influential art fairs, Art Cologne was launched by its 17 founders with a show of 600 works by 300 artists. During the extravaganza that folded its tents on Wednesday, 263 galleries from 20 countries confronted visitors with tens of thousands of "collectibles."

Last year, pressured by the newer galleries that seemed doomed to the waiting-list, the fair's directors added an additional hall which, for all the "integrative" architectural striving, has the air of an unhappy afterthought. Most of the dozen exhibitors from the former East Germany found themselves situated in this Siberia. But even such seasoned old-timers as London's Anneli Juda and Madrid's Galeria Mordo complained that the fair has simply grown too big. Düsseldorf's Hans Mayer, himself a founding father, feels the entire selection policy should be reconsidered and the total participating galleries reduced to a maximum of 90.

It would not be the fair's first crash diet. Twenty years ago, challenged by a more experimental fair in Düsseldorf, Cologne trimmed its roster and reaffirmed its dedication to museum standards of quality. The move was not without opponents, who argued that young, experimental art required precisely this kind of forum. One result was the decision to alternate Germany's annual fair between Düsseldorf and Cologne. By 1983, however, it



Hans Müller's "Fossils," concrete castings made from vacuum-formed packaging.

became clear that Cologne's cosmopolitan flair and its superb museum landscape were more attractive to jet-setting collectors.

Three halls at the Cologne fairgrounds received a face-lift that cost 50 million Deutsche marks (about \$31 million) — roughly the amount spent for each of the new museums built in Germany in recent years. The result was a fresh postmodern profile that suited a new generation of social-conscious collectors. But the costs of participating in the event made many galleries shy of presenting less established talents. In the high-rolling climate of the 1980s, Art Cologne both shaped and reflected the speculative international market. In 1967, dealers registered sales of 1 million marks. In 1984, Cologne's prestigious Gallery Gmurzynska found a new home, at 2.4 million marks, for a single monumental work by Léger. This year, the same gallery offered a small Schwitters collage for 2.6 million marks.

To the casual visitor, the 25th Art Cologne may have seemed unscathed by recessionist tendencies. In part, that impression reflects the fact that dedicated European collectors are still moved more by tradition and passion than by speculative or social motives that sent prices scuttling to such stratospheric heights in the 1980s. On the other hand, comparatively few exhibitors at this year's Art Cologne could move the blue-chip merchandise that would have sold itself, without haggling, two years ago. Most success stories were far more modest, in the 10,000-20,000-mark range, and the tightened purse strings benefited younger artists as well as photography, both contemporary and vintage.

RUDOLF Kicken, Europe's leading photography dealer, reported brisk sales for such contemporaries as Axel Hütte and the conceptualist Jochen Gerz and growing interest in works from the 1920s and 1930s. Toronto's Jane Corkin Gallery, which hardly covered costs a year ago, also did a substantial trade in vintage prints in works by Irving Penn. Photography's profile was further enhanced by Petra Wunderlich, whose black and white studies of a stone quarry combine dazzling technical precision with a stark but oddly moving poetry.

Petra Wunderlich's one-woman show was presented by Düsseldorf's Konrad Fischer Gallery as part of a program in which rent-free spaces are reserved for newcomers, who are

scattered through the fair like raisins in a cake. This year they also included Hans Müller, who makes concrete castings from vacuum-formed packaging and arranges his "Fossils" into intricate ensembles. There is something surrealistic in the results, since the original products — a hair-dryer, a toy tank, an assortment of chocolates — are present only as ghostly allusions, rendered in the same anonymous material.

Collectors have learned that these premiere presentations, where the price for an individual work may not exceed 7,000 marks, is a rich hunting ground. The program is 10 years old, and that birthday-within-a-birthday called for a retrospective exhibition of its own, where the sculptor Thomas Virnich, the photographer Thomas Ruff, and the video-magician Ulrike Rosenbach eloquently demonstrated the importance of Art Cologne as a forum for new talent, though the retrospective itself was installed with the aesthetic sensitivity of a Red Cross bazaar.

These subsidized presentations became increasingly important as more and more galleries sought to cash in on the latest record-breaking trend. A year ago, most exhibitors had skimmed off the crème de la crème for their Cologne presentations. The strategy was only sporadically successful; an overall slump in attendance and sales suggested that new tactics were required.

On the whole, and despite the conspicuous presence of upmarket offerings at this year's fair, more gallerists included gifted newcomers and second-string talents among their presentations. Often the atmo-

sphere suggested cautious compromise, but the fair as a whole achieved a feeling of freshness that had been obscured in a money-hungry decade.

For seasoned art-watchers, there were few genuine discoveries, but those seemed worth the walk. The Parisian gallery Urbi et Orbi showed erotic drawings and photographs of such explicitness that one visitor demanded the presentation be closed. But collectors responded positively to the homoerotic drawings of Tom of Finland, once a porno magazine staple, and to the urinating domina photographed by Gilles Berquet. Other, if more conventional, discoveries were to be made through 12 newcomers from the former East Germany. Those pioneers, most of whom once worked in the cultural underground, were exempted from the standard prerequisite of five years of continuous exhibition experience. Most of the first-timers registered encouraging sales, but their prices also encouraged the timid. Dresden's Gallery Lehmann sold virtually its entire stock, including the inventive combines of Henrik Silbermann. At 3,500 marks for large-format pieces, they were snapped up even before the fair's official opening.

IT is plain, however, that the fair's costly apparatus cannot be supported as a bargain-hunter's playground. While Rudolf Zwirner could celebrate this year's top sales — 680,000 marks for a collage by A. R. Penck and 750,000 for a gouache by Henri Laurent — other newsworthy prices were in the range of 300,000 marks, and there were few enough of those. Not surprisingly, the sales figures, like the estimated attendance of 58,000, reflect the general levels of 1984-87, before the art market began to spin out of control. For some, that stabilization may seem encouraging; for others, who acquired their inventories in an inflated market, the results could be ruinous. Nonetheless, Art Cologne has announced that there will be no major changes in policy for 1992.

That announcement may well be a further example of the art market's skill at whistling in the dark. Plainly, one has yet to find the proper balance between the museum-quality masterpieces, which few museums can afford, and contemporary works that might tempt the younger collector. Perhaps Art Cologne will find the balance, though it will certainly, in the process, have to shed some of its excess fat. But the fair has repeatedly shown that ability to re-invent itself in response to market trends and internal pressures. It has also survived competition — first from Basel, more recently from Frank-