



Charles Avery. Courtesy Galleria Sonia Rosso, Torino, and Frieze Art Fair 2007

*Untitled*, (Theodora/Dorothea)  
and *Untitled* (Mr. Impossible)

# Frieze-fame

The contemporary art market is enjoying a period of extraordinary growth thanks to an almost insatiable appetite for buying art. London's Frieze Art Fair seeks to satisfy demand in its own subversive and dynamic way as co-founder **Amanda Sharp** tells Christopher Kanak.

London's Regent's Park on a crisp autumn morning and a trail of immaculately dressed metropolitanites walk in the piercing sunshine through the trees, behind which sits an immense, pristine white marquee, a surreal flower in this most traditional of London parks. Well groomed men in designer sunglasses and dark slim fitting Dior suits mix with extravagantly turned out, magnificently coiffured grande dames. Accents from as far afield as New York's upper east side and Berlin's eastern fringes colour the morning air.

Entering the vast gazebo past the security brings you to an extraordinary open space. As far as the eye can see are endless aisles of art, all tightly packed into booths, each one a pocket gallery. One half of the Chapman Brothers walks past. People try not to look like they have noticed. The Frieze Art Fair has landed.

## The art of the matter

Just five years old, Frieze has come a very long way since founders Amanda Sharp and Matthew Slotover decided London was missing a contemporary art fair. The co-directors, publishers of the art magazine *Frieze*, which they started when they were just 22, were in a unique position to develop a fresh fair that reflected the times.

'We wanted to do a very high quality international contemporary art fair in which the art was the most important element of it,' says the 39-year-old Sharp, from her base in Manhattan. 'It seemed obvious to Matthew and myself that a fair was necessary in London. To be honest, it was probably just frustration that no one else did it that pushed us to do it.'

Sharp is currently in the process of working with the Frieze selection committee to choose which galleries will be setting up camp in Regent's Park for the fair's sixth outing this autumn. Slotover and Sharp work with ten staff all year round on the fair, which cost £2.5 million to set up last year. The venue itself is a work of art, with its sense of theatre and spectacle. It is a place to see and be seen. British architect David Adjaye designed the first three fairs. Every year the physical space provides an immersive artistic experience.

Frieze is certainly a very different experience from a curated gallery, and there is something decidedly liberating about its bustling informality and the fact that you don't know what awaits you around each corner. Art might be autocratic but Frieze has its own sense of democracy: the brilliant and the plain extravagant sit under one roof. For the latter, take pioneering American painter and photographer Richard Prince's *Untitled*, a souped-up 1970 Dodge Challenger with a riot orange paintjob that came complete with its own real life glamour girl. Skimpily attired in boots and hotpants, her job was to rub the machine provocatively with a cloth while it rotated on a silver disk.



Frieze visionary:  
Co-founder  
Amanda Sharp





## The shock of the new

In the late 90s, London was riding high in the art world with young British artists Damien Hirst, Gavin Turk and Tracey Emin simultaneously wowing and shocking the public across the globe. Art was moving swiftly to the forefront of popular culture. 'It is a completely different cultural landscape now, in the sense that contemporary art is something that the media takes as being central to the arts,' says Sharp. 'I don't think people are intimidated anymore. Art is something they feel that they are entitled to have an opinion on and can own.'

Given such an atmosphere, it seemed inevitable that somebody would launch a contemporary art fair. It was just a question of time. 'The night that it became clear to me that it was actually possible was when Tate Modern opened in 2000 and I realised that the international art world would travel to London for an event of that magnitude so perhaps they would also travel to London for a contemporary art fair.'

Simple, subversive and dynamic is what Frieze wants to be according to Sharp. 'I think there were no expectations at the beginning. No one had any clue whether it would work or not,' she says. While undeniably the footprint of the fair has got bigger – Frieze started with 125 galleries and now there are 150 – the fair has remained true to its roots believes Sharp. 'If Frieze had a manifesto at the beginning, it would be exactly the same today.'

The manifesto might not have changed itself but the resulting "Frieze effect" has been considerable. While Frieze has become a fixture of the international calendar, perhaps its deepest influence has been in London. 'It has been so strongly embraced by its city that it is, I think, of its city,' explains Sharp. The fair's extraordinary, uncontrived influence can be felt just by looking at a London listings guide during Frieze week last year. At the same time as Frieze, Tate Modern opened its Louise Bourgeois retrospective as well as its new Turbine Hall installation *Shibboleth* by Doris Salcedo, the National Portrait Gallery its Pop Art Portraits show and the Barbican its exhibition celebrating sex in art *Seduced*.

It's boom time if you are a gallery owner. Contemporary art has never had a higher value, and has exceeded the prices for renaissance masterpieces. Last year, contemporary art prices jumped 55 percent in the year through June, according to Hiscox's index. In August 2007, Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*, a human skull encased entirely in 8,500 diamonds was sold for \$100 million to an investment group. Despite the stratospheric prices, or perhaps in spite of them, there is an almost insatiable demand for work. Given the current financial turbulence, it will be interesting to see whether collectors still have a big appetite by the end of the year.

The buoyancy in the art market is, according to Sharp, due as much to a greater cultural confidence as to buyers looking for a new form of investment. 'There hasn't been a massive growth in the choices of where they put their money,' says Sharp. 'At the same time, we are living in a world where information flows more rapidly, where people are no longer held back from ideas and where art doesn't seem any longer something that is unreachable but is accessible.' Unsurprisingly, galleries wanting to be part of Frieze are legion. Sharp tells me that more than three times the number of galleries than the fair can accommodate applied in 2007. 'Our intention is to keep bringing the number of galleries down,' says Sharp. 'It is not about how many galleries, but whether they are the right galleries. And, in terms of quality, this is something that has definitely improved year on year.' So, you never have a bad year? 'Not yet, we can have that conversation 20 years from now.'

## On demand

As Frieze's profile and reputation grows, so does the number of buyers, who are becoming more diverse by the year, reflecting a growing demand in places like India and China. 'From the outset we have had a lot of people from around the world,' says Sharp, who adds that the biggest growth of all has come from people in Britain. 'There has always been this idea that there are not as many art collectors in England and over the five years of the fair it has definitely shifted a lot faster than any of us would have ever expected.'

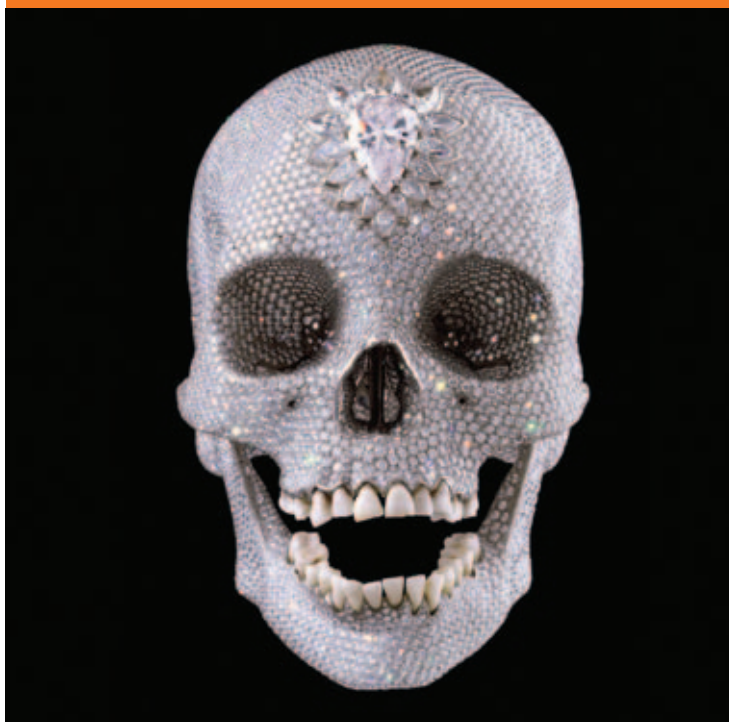
Despite this, the visitors attending for the pleasure of it all, outnumber the buyers. Last year, of the 68,000 people who visited, 85% had no intention

of buying. Of those who do come to buy, many are first time buyers, who trust what Frieze has to offer. 'We are seeing a lot more people dipping their toes in the water,' Sharp says. 'They believe that if they buy art here, it is not a silly decision to make with their money and they will get something of value whether they are paying £2,000 or a lot more.'

They have to have an international programme of artists and do a minimum of four shows a year. Frieze has a committee of seven gallery owners who are responsible for choosing which galleries can have stands at Frieze. It's a decision taken solely by galleries, the business side of art. 'You could bring in curators, critics and artists,' explains Sharp, 'but in a way I think it makes more sense to get people who understand the business best to make that selection, to understand what needs to be done at an art fair and for them to judge whether or not someone is able to do that.'

One of those on the selection committee is Maureen Paley, who owns a gallery in East London. One of the prominent contemporary art galleries in London, it represents 24 artists including Wolfgang Tillmans and Gillian Wearing. 'The committee has been very careful in combing through all the galleries of the world and really trying to ensure that they have extended this to the crème de la crème,' explains Paley from her East London gallery. 'To do that is not a popular position. It is also a challenge to galleries. The ones that come to Frieze are the ones that have dared to be and in daring to be they have kept a level of excellence.' When the galleries eventually get to Frieze, they get selling. In 2007, the galleries aimed to sell as much as \$375 million of art according to estimates given to Bloomberg. Has art become commerce?

IN 2007, DAMIEN  
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## AMANDA SHARP'S GUIDE TO BUYING ART AT FRIEZE

'The most important thing is to buy art you really like. Perhaps go to a smaller stand and one of the younger galleries, where the prices may be slightly lower.'

If you want to get into art in a big way then you should really spend time looking. The more you look, the more homework you do, the more you go to galleries the greater the overview you will get. Spend a year or two really looking to get confident about what you like. If it is less a serious life change and you feel 'Gosh I want to buy some art once a year' then walk around the fair and don't be afraid to ask questions.'

The sheer numbers involved even led one *Guardian* journalist to describe Frieze as 'The best advert for capitalism I've ever seen'. Paley disagrees. 'Art is not like shopping,' she says. 'Art is unlike anything else you would buy. I always talk about it being part business, part magic. It's not stocks and shares.'

There is always something happening at Frieze, whether it is exciting, intriguing or plain odd is up to you but it's a lot of fun. The *enfants terribles* of British art Jake and Dinos Chapman came to Frieze last year to make art not to sell it. Visitors handed them their money, £5, £10, £20 even £50 notes, anything that had the Queen's head on it. The two brothers grim drew on it, gave it back to the owners, now worth many times more than the original and with the monarch's visage defaced.

Frieze is more than an art fair and encompasses a host of other events from talks to music. Last year Glenn Branca directed his 'Symphony No.13' for 100 electric guitars at the Roundhouse, while the Sculpture Park at Frieze had nine sculptures including a collaboration by leading artists Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

The fair sits in an interesting position alongside the others like Basel and Miami. In stark contrast, Frieze has focused on being rigorously contemporary and more international, showcasing living artists whatever their medium, as long as their work is relevant and avant-garde. 'Frieze is much more artist driven than the other fairs and that reflects in the environment,' says Sharp. Frieze is certainly a hipper fair than Basel or London. 'London has this incredible energy whereas Miami and Basel are bit more staid.' Frieze has an interesting symbiotic relationship with London that seems to have benefited both considerably. 'There is much more of an embracing of the fair by people in London,' believes Sharp. 'There is a broader spectrum of people, a lot more students, plenty of artists and young people.'

The very fair itself is worth a lot today. This has made Frieze an attractive target for outside parties and there have been rumours that Sharp and Slotover might sell it. 'I have heard these rumours since before the fair opened for the first time,' says Sharp. 'If someone is interested, fine they can come and talk to us, but we really like what we do and it's not our agenda to try and sell the fair.'

At its heart Frieze is all about the art. 'A lot of people get the bug and become completely obsessed,' says Sharp who tells me her favourite Frieze moment from last year. 'A Belgian artist called Kris Martin announced on the opening day of the fair when it was at its busiest, that he wanted to stop everything for one minute. It never occurred to me that it could actually be possible to stop 10,000 people in their tracks for one minute. He did it by sending out a PA announcement asking people to 'refrain from activity in respect of the moment'. He stopped the whole fair. You could have heard a pin drop. You can argue it in lots of different ways but I thought it was beautiful to see art win over anything else.' ■

**Frieze Art Fair, Regent's Park, London**  
16–19 October 2008

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