

Art Fairs

Will the Launch of ARCO Lisboa Perk Up Portugal's Sleepy Art Market?

Fair participants and members of the local scene weigh in.

Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, May 24, 2016



Pedro Maisterra and Belén Valbuena from the Madrid-based gallery MaisterraValbuena. Photo: Courtesy the gallery.

Tomorrow, the first edition of ARCO Lisboa, the Portuguese outpost of Madrid's long-established art fair, will host its preview at Lisbon's historical Fábrica Nacional da Cordoaria. Gathering just 45 galleries from 8 countries, ARCO Lisboa aims to be a so-called "boutique art fair," and thus vastly different from

ARCO Madrid, which hosted over 224 galleries from 29 countries during its latest edition in February.

Yet, when the launch of the new fair was first announced last November, the news raised quite a few eyebrows. Portugal, which is only now slowly starting to recover from a deep economic crisis that plagued the country from 2010-2014, seemed like an unlikely location for any fair to branch out.

ARCO's new outpost, however, might not be such a big surprise for those in the know, for Lisbon has been a cultural destination for years, quietly hyped by many as the "new Berlin" or the "new Brussels."

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The beautiful and sunny city attracts flocks of tourists all year round, and with its high-quality art museums (including the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, directed by Penelope Curtis, former director of London's Tate Britain), and an expanding network of commercial galleries and artist-run spaces, Lisbon's art scene has been building up over the last decade despite a persistent lack of financial means.

But is having a high tourism value and a vibrant artistic community enough to jump-start a slow art market? Will the arrival of ARCO in Lisbon have any impact at all? And will the fair survive its first edition? We spoke to people directly involved in the fair and with various members of the city's art scene to find out what they think.



Carlos Urroz, director of ARCO Madrid and ARCO Lisboa. Photo: Courtesy ARCO.

Carlos Urroz, director of ARCO Madrid and ARCO Lisboa, spoke to artnet News about the motivations behind the launch of the Lisbon fair.

“ARCO Lisboa is being launched at a moment when the city is going through a good moment, hosting some of the best artists of the world. Lisbon was our best option to expand, and it is also the place where people want to be. A lot of people are buying second houses there and the city receives wealthy visitors,” he said, stressing that Portugal has an “increasingly dynamic market.” Urroz also revealed that the idea for this fair had been in the works since 2012, but that it hadn’t been implemented until now because of the difficult economic period that both Spain and Portugal were going through at that time. “A number of local initiatives didn’t work out,” he said, responding to the question of why it took a Spanish

company to launch a local fair, rather than a Portuguese initiative. “A number of collectors, curators, and other art professionals, who would probably not visit Lisbon otherwise, have confirmed they will attend the fair. The fair has made a great promotional effort on an international level, bringing over 100 guests as part of the VIP program, which invites collectors from 27 countries, museum directors, and curators,” Urroz explained, making it clear that he wants the fair to become a catalysts for the Lisbon art scene and art market.



Pedro Maisterra and Belén Valbuena from the Madrid-based gallery MaisterraValbuena. Photo: Courtesy the gallery.

One of the galleries participating in this first edition is MaisterraValbuena, a young Spanish gallery that enjoys visibility on an international level, and a regular exhibitor at ARCO Madrid.

“We have decided to participate because we wanted to support ARCO. It’s a moment of uncertainty and doubt, but we want to give it try together. We know the Portuguese scene, we are friends with

local collectors and gallerists, and the country has top art collections and institutions, so we are sure the fair will generate a lot of interest,” Pedro Maisterra and Belén Valbuena, founders and directors of the Madrid-based gallery, told artnet News. “We know of a number of Spanish collectors who are looking forward to spending a few days in Lisbon, which is a city that everyone loves, and home to a great number of French and Brazilian expats. It’s a city full of vitality and we think the fair might be a great tool to channel that energy towards contemporary art,” they added.



Installation view of Renato Leotta’s “Aventura” exhibition at Madragoa, Lisbon.
Photo: Courtesy the gallery.

Matteo Consonni, meanwhile, is a young Italian dealer who’s just opened a commercial gallery in Lisbon called Madragoa with partner Gonçalo Jesus, after spending five years in Turin as director of the Italian blue chip gallery Franco Noero. “The art market in Portugal might be small but there are very good and serious collections here already. Surely in this particular

moment, with the incredible attention that this country is creating abroad, there is the potential for the market to grow and develop, but not every place needs to be London or New York,” he told artnet News.

“[Lisbon] is a city with enormous potential of attraction, with a limited number of galleries but a high level in the programming, with a vital and curious art scene, lower costs, a slower pace, that offers great possibilities of local production, well connected to the rest of the world by a good international airport, and with a lot of good artists.” Consonni explained, speaking of his motivations to open a gallery there.

“The galleries are small in number, but there are colleagues who are bringing forward a wonderful discourse since years, such as Cristina Guerra, Galería Filomena Soares, Pedro Cera, Vera Cortês, and Murias Centeno. In terms of young galleries, we are happy to be part of this scene with colleagues such as Pedro Alfacinha, and waiting for the opening of a new space by Francisco Fino. Moreover, there are rumors of young galleries from abroad thinking of opening here,” he said of the local gallery circuit. In terms of the potential of the fair to shake things up, Consonni told artnet News: “ARCO can be one element that will make the market more dynamic here, but I also think it’s the responsibility of all the galleries here to participate in this process and shape it with serious work throughout the whole year.”



Pedro Gadanho, director of the MAAT museum in Lisbon. Photo: ©David Farran.

Pedro Gadanho, director of Lisbon's soon-to-be-opened Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT), which launches in September, also spoke about the highly dynamic moment that the art scene in Lisbon is seeing.

“Although the Portuguese artistic scene is vibrant, it is well known only to a select group of curators and art professionals. There has been a deficit of Portuguese artists who are present at major art

fairs, for example,” he told artnet News.

“But with the work of a few great galleries, and the role of institutions such as Serralves and the upcoming MAAT, the knowledge of Portuguese art is on the rise, as is a bigger interaction with the international scene. With some relevant foreign artists and collectors moving in to Lisbon, we may be looking at a quick transformation of what has been a relatively peripheral scene,” he added. “We want to be part of this transformational moment in which Lisbon is seen as a new hotspot for art, music, technological start-ups, and creativity in general.”

But, when asked to point out the less flattering aspects of Portuguese culture, Gadanho didn’t mince his words: “The last remnants of an established culture of bureaucracy, old school nepotism, and occasional lack of vision.”



Installation view of Jacopo Miliani’s “A Slow Dance Without Name” at Kunsthalle Lissabon. Photo: Bruno Lopes, Courtesy Kunsthalle Lissabon.

Luis Silva, co-director of the acclaimed Lisbon-based non-profit art space Kunsthalle Lissabon, which opened in 2010, has witnessed

the transformation of the local art scene from the front line.

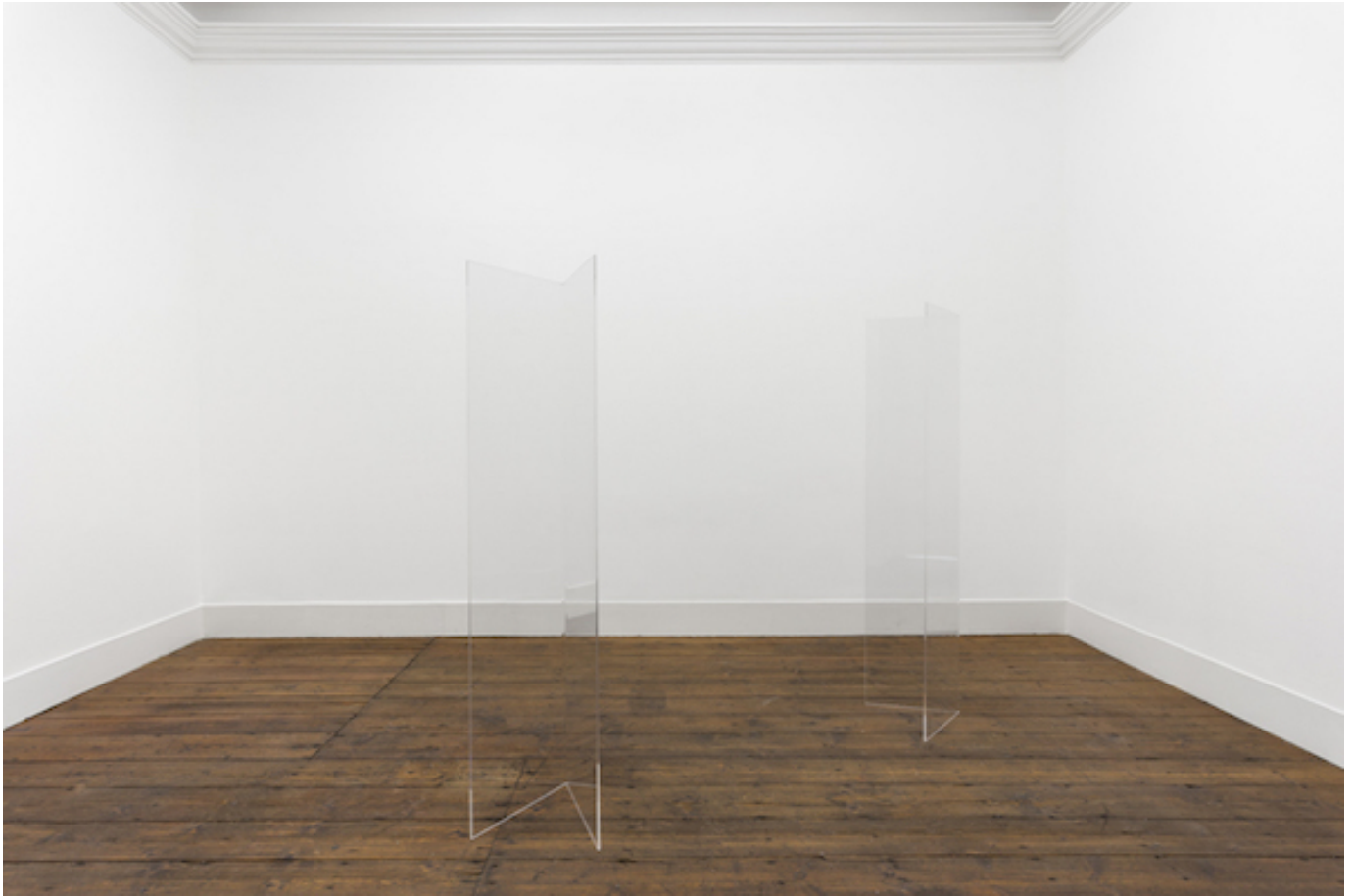
“The scene in Lisbon is definitely gaining momentum, which is very exciting. New galleries have or are about to open, and new curatorial spaces have been developing programs and strategies which are committed to specific interests and points of view, avoiding a certain mainstream flatness, which could be identified as one of Lisbon’s main criticisms in terms of contemporary art. Larger institutions such as Culturgest or Museu Coleção Berardo have also been developing a very strong temporary exhibitions program, and all these things combined create a very exciting landscape which wasn’t at all the case when we created Kunsthalle Lissabon,” Silva told artnet News.

“Lisbon is a very appealing city. The living costs are still very low, which means if you are getting your income from elsewhere and you move to Lisbon, you will have great living standards. Many people have indeed moved to Lisbon in the past couple of years, either from other places in Europe or from Latin America, so the scene is growing in numbers and in diversity, which is extremely exciting for us,” he added.

“I do believe however that ARCO Lisboa can play an influential role, not immediately just by setting up shop in Lisbon, but in the long run, as it happened in Spain, in expanding the reach of private and corporate collecting,” Silva said about the impact that the fair could have on the local market.

“Art fairs are part of the artistic ecosystem as much as museums, biennials, galleries, artist-run spaces, etc. And Lisbon needs one, of course. Lisbon has had other art fairs, with varying degrees of quality and relevance. There was life before ARCO Lisboa arrived, one should not forget that. But it’s also true that having ARCO setting up a branch here can be a great opportunity to have a relevant art fair, given that they do possess the expertise and the knowledge on how to run a successful art fair,” Silva added.

But what about the artists that live there? How is the gentrification process that is taking place in the city, which ARCO Lisboa could accelerate, affecting their own ecosystem?



Andre Romao, *The illusion of anti-productivity and A state of permanent euphoria (ghosts)* (2015) at Vera Cortes Art Agency, Lisbon. Photo: Bruno Lopes Courtesy of the artist and gallery.

André Romao and Pedro Barateiro are two successful young artists, who are very active in the Lisbon art scene. Besides their individual artistic careers, they were both part of a group of eight artists who ran the renowned space Parkour, which hosted exhibitions by (mainly) young Portuguese artists.

Starting in 2012, Parkour was in the same building that hosted the original Kunsthalle Lissabon and a number of artist studios, until in 2014 it was sold to be turned into luxury apartments. While Kunsthalle Lissabon relocated, Parkour folded.

“Lisbon has had a number art fairs before, but they always failed somehow to create something interesting for galleries and collectors. I don’t know if Lisbon needed a fair, I don’t think anyone *needs* any more fairs, the calendar is insane, but I do think that if ARCO Lisboa manages to create some sort of platform here, it may be important. I think everyone here is just waiting to see,” Romao told artnet News.

“The economy of tourism, of foreign investment, and of real estate that has created the bubble we are living in right now, with extremely high prices pushing Lisboners out of the city center, and giving space to hotels and Airbnb’s. The country was under a long financial crisis fabricated by central European economies in order to save French and German banks. And what do we get in return? An art fair and tourists who come to enjoy themselves in the cheapest—yet fun and sunny—best ‘new’ spot in Western Europe,” Barateiro, in a more critical tone, told artnet News.

“I don’t take for granted any sort of investment that is taking place in Portugal, it’s all necessary. But the country’s financial system is still recovering, and the measurements should be taken on a much deeper level,” he added.

The inaugural edition of ARCO Lisboa will take place at the Fábrica Nacional da Cordoaria, Lisbon, from May 26-29, 2016.