



## Her dark materials

Britain's only truly international art fair is in its second year.

**Adrian Searle** picked his way past the poo to find some real talent at Frieze

**T**here was a very nice young woman sitting quietly at the rear of the empty white space at the second annual Frieze Art Fair, which

ran from Thursday until last night in a large temporary building in Regent's Park. To pass the time, she was reading Philip Pullman. On the first day, she was coming to the end of *Nocturnal Light*; by my last visit, she

was part way into *The Amber Spyglass*, the final volume of Pullman's excellent trilogy. Although happy to answer questions, no one was much interested in asking how she was getting on with *Lyra* and her adventures. There was really only one question, and it related to her own, rather than Pullman's, dark materials. Is that your poo?

There it sat, innocuous, odourless, a neat pile, a little in front and to one side of her chair. Every day a fresh

one. A rigorous diet ensured its healthy composition. This was the

most recent version of *The Home-Crafting of Navel Strings*, by Japanese artist Noritoshi Hirakawa. A further work of his, a tinted magenta photographic print depicting a human sphincter, decorated the wall behind the girl, completing the peculiar ensemble. Some long-term denizens of the fair would pay a visit every day, to see how she was 'getting on'.

Now, it would be easy to say that this was an attention-grabbing gesture as much as an artwork, though we might strain to connect it to the venereal if grabby Kurt Schwitters, and the bemused parts of his 1920s Merzbau, but this would be going too far. Once again, the Wrong Gallery, really just a doorway in Manhattan run by the current bad boy of current art Maurizio Cattelan and his chums, got it right. Last year, the Wrong Gallery had two precocious children in there,

performing the "sculptures" of *Tino Shogal*. This time, Hirakawa created not one whiff of scandal, but a little macabre amusement. Mostly, the Frieze Art Fair is pure business.

Cattelan himself – as far as I could tell from the thousands of exhibits by hundreds of artists, at more than 100 gallery stands – was absent from the fair, though a slightly dull but Cattelan-ish work, by Jota Castro, had near life-like mannequins of the three Bs, Blair, Bush and Berlusconi, squatting. Beckett-like, not in clay urns but in flag-ceremonized oil drums. Oil Skanes II was one of the novel highlights of the fair. These are always the near-indefinable low points of this kind of jamboree. How about a great ape, skewered with hatchets, screwdrivers and further assorted domestic weaponry? Or a coloured Pteridax tabloxa of *The Simpsons*? Much as I adore the cartoon lives of this most normal of dysfunctional families, they can hardly claim the soul-wrenching seriousness of Gregor Schneider's latest project *Die Familie Schneider*. In fact, there is always a lot of stuff at art fairs that barely looks like art at all. There are always terrible jarring moments, when everything teeters



into meaninglessness and visual overload. Art fairs are not always the best places to make comparative judgments, or to have any kind of meaningful relationship with artworks beyond their possible value as commodities. These places are temporary department stores, shopping malls, with every booth a different franchise. As one galleryist opined condescendingly, it's a seller's market. And business was booming.

International art fairs matter, not least because they are where well-heeled collectors like to congregate and buy art. These same people are often museum board trustees or major benefactors. Last year the Americas came. This time a posse of Russians joined the throng. There is safety in numbers, in the social game of travelling and buying and partying and rubbing shoulders, not so much with artists, who for the most part keep their heads down, as with museum people, gallery owners, and the wandering tribes of curators, talent scouts, bureau directors, critics, the art magazine crowd and the nefarious hangers-on who make up the art world.

The public also seem to like the big fairs, from Basel to Miami, Madrid to

Paris. They come alone or with their families, struggling against the human tide. They come not so much to buy but to look, not just at the art but at the excess of it all, all that human and commercial traffic. They want to feel close to something, whatever it is. They even join queues for nothing at all, especially when the queue has been started by one of the on-site artists. Roman Ondak, who, with a team of collaborators, formed impromptu lines beside blank walls, emergency exits and other meaningless points over the weekend. This project is one of 13 works bought from the Frieze Art Fair Special Acquisitions Fund during the fair and presented to the Tate. The fund is sponsored by a group of British collectors, the works chosen by a free-wheeling curatorial team. How you

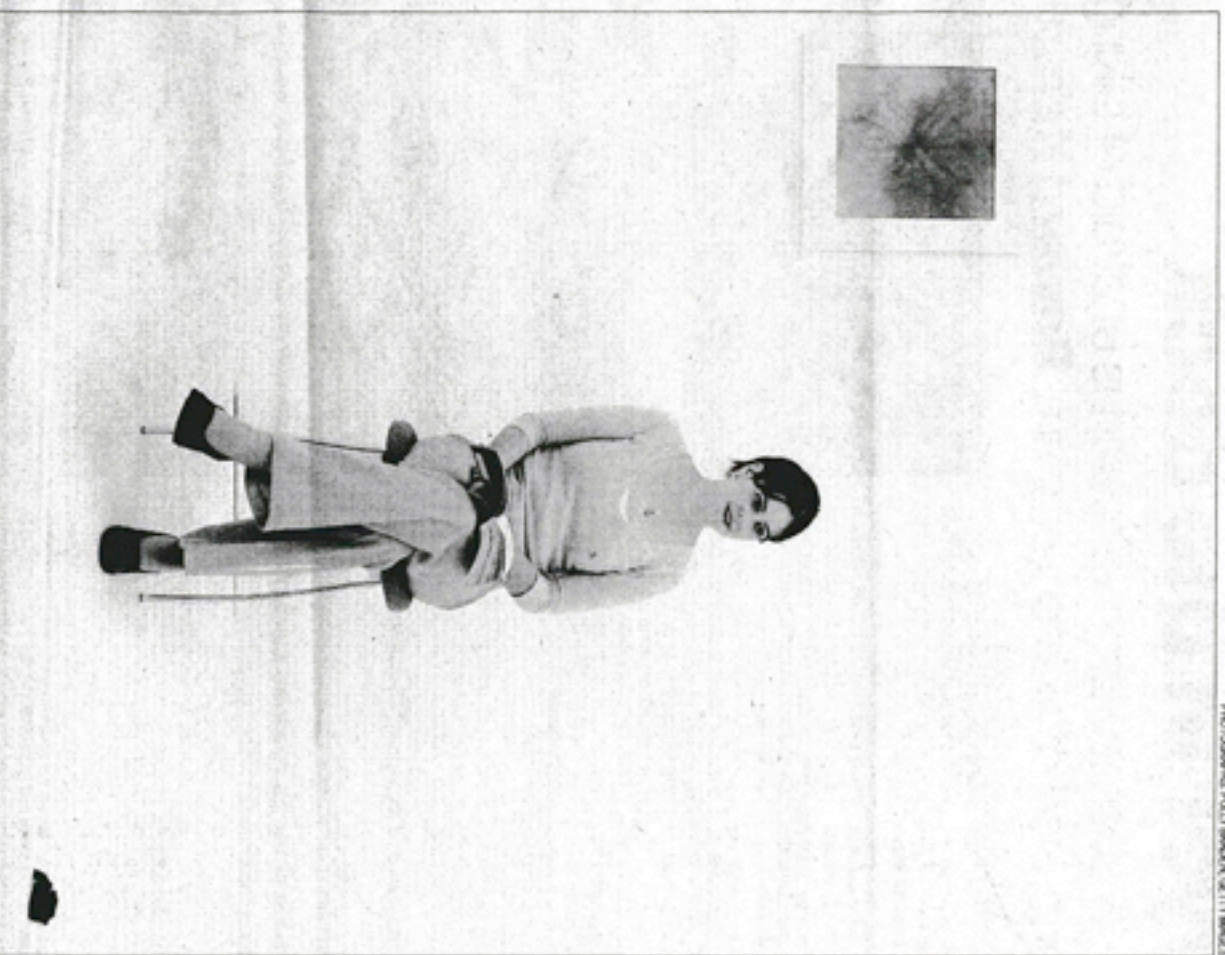
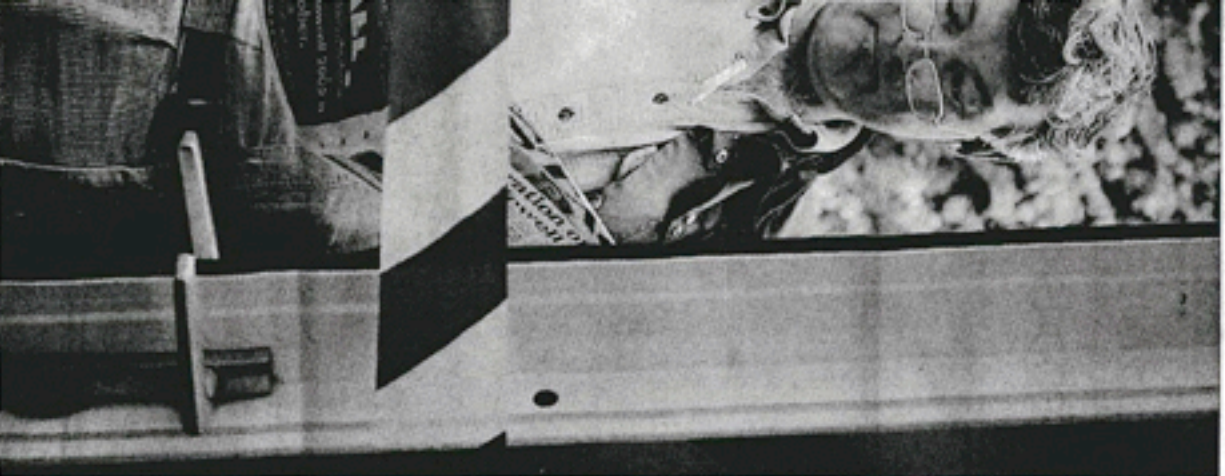
**One video shows a Japanese man in bunny ears and lipstick, buried up to his neck and shouting for help**

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The fun of the fair... from far left, Oil Shame II; Roman Ondak's queuing work, which has been given to the Tate; and The Home-Coming of Narel Strings

actually purchase a queue, unless it is a Platonic queue, the Ideal Idea of Queue. I'm uncertain.

Although one might laugh at the poker-faced seriousness with which even the most stretched ideas are treated, triviality is not king of the fair. I managed a smoochy tango in the Snow Dance Club, presented by the improbably named 'Los Super Elegantes & assume-vivid astro focus', getting lucky for a moment between bouts of hard looking and deep inner conflict. Getting up close and personal, there is a lot of interesting work to look at. This is where the smaller works on the stands hold their own. You look into the exquisite and little-seen collages of John Szarkar, at the Approach gallery. I am true of the perfect pencil copies of faded and uttered old photographs, ancient invitation cards and other sentimental ephemera by Robert Kusnirowski, at Warsaw's Foksal gallery. I know nothing about this artist, but was instantly captivated and intrigued.

Then I took a VIP courtesy Rover 75, sprayed in a frightening slick of garish colour-fades by artist Pae White, round to London Zoo, where

the Zoo Art Fair, mounted by younger London galleries, was held. This was a great setting, though the bears looked a bit bored. In the Film and Video Yurt, a tent near the monkey houses, I watched a video of a Japanese man with bunny ears and hipster, buried up to his neck in leaf-mould in a forest, shouting for help. Then the camera got fed up with him and made its way into his mouth and down his throat, making him retch.

But the collectors kept on coming, because at the heart of all the partying, gossip and deals is the art itself, to be bought, bartered, fought over, contested, not so much for any intrinsic value it might have, but as talisman and proof that there is, somewhere, a point to all this jumbling.

Fairs are fashionable events, inasmuch as they appear to be taking over biennales worldwide. This has been termed the "biennialisation" of the art world. Whenever that word crops up, I hear banalisation. We have to remind ourselves that most art, most places and most of the time, is more or less mediocre, whatever the medium, and whatever it might look like, whatever claims it makes for itself or are made on its behalf. This

is always true. What is mediocre will, largely, be forgotten.

The business of the artist is, in any view, as much to do with creating the climate around their work as it is selling and promoting things, which has always also been part of an artist's job. Dealers don't invent artists, though business has always been business. For those artists whose work is intended to do more than merely entertain, art fairs look brutal.

The Frieze Art Fair, and all the satellite events around it, looks set to become a permanent autumn feature. Clearly, there is a hunger for contemporary art, and people are prepared to queue in the rain, pay high prices, suffer crowds and discomfort to see it, however the art is displayed. They also enjoy walking with the sound works of Bruce Nauman, through an otherwise empty Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.

This is because art is more than fashion and silliness, though there's always plenty of that around.

After a weekend at the art fair, one might wish to reach for that old modernist sawdust, Less is More, and spend some time alone in an empty white room with a chair and a book. And I'll take a dump in the usual place, thanks very much.

The Guardian is a media partner of the Frieze Art Fair.



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