

Mart gets to ART of the matter

By Shia Kapos
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(Crain's) — Two years after Merchandise Mart Properties Inc. rescued Art Chicago, an annual contemporary art fair that had lost its luster over the years, the show returned last week with strong attendance numbers and positive feedback from exhibitors.

More than 47,000 art lovers, collectors and curators attended the event — which featured five simultaneous art shows dubbed ARTropolis — up from 42,000 last year and 25,000 in 2006.

“We think Chicago is clearly back on the map for a world class art fair. The show is now on solid ground,” said Mark Falanga, senior vice-president of the Mart.

The Mart doesn't keep track of art sales by exhibitors, though dealers have expressed their pleasure with the results, said Mr. Falanga. “Many did very well.”

The most tangible indication of the show's success comes from a poll the Mart takes of exhibitors after the four-day event.

“We found that 96 percent of exhibitors this year want to return next year. And of those, 34 percent want more space for next year's show. We see that a measure of success,” he said.

The positive feedback comes two years after the Mart, led by president Christopher Kennedy, stepped in at the last minute to save Art Chicago, which just days before its opening had problems setting up at Grant Park.

“They were going to close. They had complications and called us. We went in on Tuesday to evaluate and by Wednesday we were moving the galleries in and starting a massive marketing campaign before the show opened on Friday,” said Mr. Falanga.

That year, there were 106 dealers. This year, there were 180 dealers in the Art Chicago show alone — one of five shows that ran concurrently as part of the citywide cultural program named ARTropolis.

The four other shows were Next, featuring emerging artists; Intuit, which highlights folk art; the Merchandise Mart International Antiques Fair; and Artists Project, a show of independent artists that next year will be moved to a different date so as not to get lost in the enormity of ARTropolis.

That's good news to art lovers like Michele Gustin, owner and VP of Fig Media Inc., a creative event agency, who says emerging artists weren't adequately represented at the show.

“They had a lot of artists I had seen at the Venice Biennial (in Italy). They were cool, but they weren't exactly emerging,” she said.

Amy Amdur, owner of Amdur Productions Inc., which produces smaller fine-arts events throughout the Chicago area, praised the Mart for giving attention to the arts.

“It takes a number of years to ramp up any event, so the progression of growth makes sense. Merchandise Mart should be getting bigger crowds every year. They're doing a lot of things right — great advertising and great PR and thinking about building the quality of shows,” says Ms. Amdur, who runs the popular Gold Coast Art Fair in Chicago.

Mr. Falanga says ARTropolis has returned Art Chicago to its status as being one of the best arts fairs in the country, maybe even rivaling Art Basel Miami Beach, which draws as many partiers to its winter show as it does art lovers.