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## An Art-Fair Survival Guide

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Photo illustration by C.J. Burton

This week, roughly 600 contemporary-art galleries have set up wares throughout New York, taking over hotel lobbies and Soho lofts and a pair of vast piers jutting out from Manhattan into the Hudson River. The citywide swarm of art fairs, up through Sunday and called Armory Week, is meant to draw in collectors from around the world. The event also signals the kickoff of the spring art season.

Trouble is, collectors are heading into the fray this year with a serious case of art-fair overload. A decade ago, art fairs were cloistered events that allowed collectors to sweep through a number of galleries all at once. But as global curiosity about contemporary art has ballooned, so has the popularity of this one-stop-shop model for selling art. Today, at least 200 large fairs now jam the art-world calendar—complete with attendant parties and smaller satellite fairs in tow.

Collectors say the crowded marketplace helps them digest a great deal of new art quickly. But it is also exhausting. In fact, lately the grind is compelling more art buyers to think harder about which fairs they intend to keep attending and which they can skip. New York dealer Sean Kelly said at least 15% of his clients have "jumped off the art-fair treadmill" in the past couple of years, preferring to stay home and shop the

old-fashioned way by going to gallery shows and artist studios. "They're voting with their feet."

The few who attempt to do it all have the worn-out soles to prove it. Gregory Lang, a Paris-based art adviser for a group of European and American collectors, went to a different art fair just about every other weekend last year, a 25-fair gantlet that at one point involved traveling to back-to-back fairs in New York, Barcelona and Hong Kong over the span of a week. Mr. Lang is in town for New York's main fair, called the Armory Show, but he intends to pare back a bit this season: "I've got a child I want to see."



Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, above, at the Armory Show in New York this week. Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

Dallas collector Howard Rachofsky and his wife, Cindy, used to plan vacations around attending far-flung fairs, but lately they have winnowed to a few favorites like Art Basel Miami Beach and Frieze Art Fair in New York—and they don't feel guilty if they don't go at all. "Fairs are like supermarkets today," Mr. Rachofsky said. "You're wandering around miles of aisles looking for new flavors, but I already know what I like. Fairs are not critical to growing our collection anymore."

Michael Hort, who runs a paper-printing company in New York, said he and his wife, Susan, were worried a few years ago when a medical issue caused the couple to delay their trip to the Basel Miami fair by a couple of days—arriving long after hundreds of VIPs might have picked over the offerings. It turns out, "we hadn't missed a thing. A long time ago when there were fewer fairs, getting in first was important. We no longer need to be first," Mr. Hort said.

Dozens of dealers—and collectors—are coping by turning to smaller fairs whose costs and square-footage are easier to tackle in an afternoon compared with the convention-center behemoths. It doesn't take more than a couple of hours to stroll through compact fairs like Liste in Basel, Independent in New York, Untitled in Miami Beach or (e)merge in Washington, D.C., and each has enjoyed increasing cachet in recent years. Some of these fairs have done away with warren-like booths altogether,

and Independent in particular has gained a reputation for creating a funky, studio-like environment. This year at Independent, dealer Joel Mesler is allowing his Untitled Gallery's artists to change and rehang his booth's offerings every few hours, a wry comment on the commercial churn of a fair. On Sunday, the Whitney Houston Biennial—a Brooklyn fair featuring female artists—will run for exactly four hours.



'Sugar Mates' by Aiko Hachisuka at the Armory. Aiko Hachisuka/Eleven Rivington, NY

The nimbleness of these smaller fairs appeals to collectors like Lenore and Herbert Schorr, who live in New York but still try to attend a few major international fairs like Frieze in London. Last October, Ms. Schorr said they spent hours and hours strolling Frieze and bought nothing. Then they ducked across Regent's Park into the 22-gallery Sunday Art Fair and fell hard for the Pop-like paintings of a young artist, Ella Kruglyanskaya.

"The smaller fairs are more manageable," Ms. Schorr said, "but it's impossible to absorb everything. Even your eyes get tired."

Collectors are also being smarter about how they navigate the big fairs. During the Armory Show's VIP opening on Wednesday afternoon, the Horts tried to pace themselves to avoid getting overwhelmed by the 200-plus galleries that have taken over a pair of hangar-like piers on Manhattan's West Side. The couple teamed up to stroll along with a Los Angeles couple, Stanley and Gail Hollander, in part so the

quartet could compare notes on prospective artists and their prices. Dealers and collectors came over every few steps to greet or embrace them. Ms. Hollander tried to keep the group moving by invoking her "four-minute rule" to limit chitchat at each gallery. "Otherwise, we never get anywhere," she said.



Works by Tomás Saraceno at the Armory Show in New York this week. Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

Mr. Hort said he and Susan stuck to their own rules as well, mainly scouring for artists who are still so early in their careers that their asking prices hover around \$20,000— "less than \$10,000 is ideal," he added. Mr. Hort said that is because the couple want to amass these artists' works for a few months or years before their careers take off and their prices spike accordingly. "We can't pay million-dollar prices," he added. "I'm no hedge-funder."

After four hours and as many fair aisles, the couples paused in front of Almine Rech Gallery to assess: By that point, the Hollanders had bought a Scott Treleven triptych of roiling abstracts for an undisclosed sum and a large Matthias Bitzer portrait of poet Anais Nin for \$30,000. The Horts were still empty-handed, but Mr. Hort remained optimistic: "Oh, we'll find something; I'm in no hurry."

Historically, fairs got their start in medieval times when artists would rent stalls in markets and guild halls to sell their creations. But today's top fairs are multimillion-dollar operations run by corporations that, in a few cases, also own the convention centers where they set up shop—meaning there is little inducement for them to downsize. In 2000, when Swiss fair Art Basel, the granddaddy of contemporary art fairs, ran out of room in its two-floor convention center, it started using a cavernous hall next door so dealers could sell museum-scale installations. The addition was dubbed Art Unlimited.





Untitled' by Ann Hamilton at The Art Show. Ann Hamilton Studio

Yet as fairs proliferate, even these older mainstays are feeling the strain. Earlier this week, Art Basel said it plans to move up the dates of its Hong Kong fair from late May to mid-March next year in part because people were struggling to squeeze it in between New York's Frieze fair in May and Europe's early June rollout of can't-miss biennials. Moving the fair to mid-March also means the Hong Kong fair will likely overlap with Europe's nine-day Old Masters fair in the Netherlands, the European Fine Art Fair. Basel director Marc Spiegler said the company couldn't find another fair-free week in March in which to resettle. "It's reasonably insane," Mr. Spiegler said the here-or-there decision for collectors now. "How many different places can we all be at one time?"

All of it has started taking a toll. A generation ago, collectors thronged to every powerhouse fair no matter what because they suffered from "FOMO, or the fear of missing out," Mr. Spiegler added. Now, he said, collectors have started boasting about how little they can be bothered to turn up anywhere. "It's becoming JOMO: the joy of missing out."

New Jersey-based art adviser Clayton Press agrees, saying the fair onslaught reveals how "homogenous and repetitive" the current art scene can be when it's continually being trotted out under a tent. Fairs bill themselves as a way to track the latest art trends, but Mr. Press said this marketing tactic can backfire if the same pieces keep cropping up at fair after fair—a "ship it until it sells" approach that can turn off savvy shoppers.

"There should be an international moratorium on art made with mirrors, Mylar, aerosol paint, and virtually any 'found objects' no matter how esoteric or dear," he added, citing typical art-fair offerings.

To stand out, fairs are under increasing pressure to do whatever they can to offer twists of never-seen-that novelty. This time around, the Armory Show added galleries from Saudi Arabia and Hungary for the first time. Director Noah Horowitz also enlisted a museum director in Beijing to handpick a roster of 17 Chinese galleries for its Focus

section—including hip Shanghai art collective Madeln Company, whose name offers a wry nod to products Made in China.

Organizers for Frieze Art Fair in New York, which coincides with the spring auctions in May, have invited artist Allen Ruppersberg to reconceive one of his best-known art projects from 1971, "Al's Grand Hotel," under its fair tent on Randall's Island: A mock hotel with a lobby and two bedrooms that fairgoers can actually book during the run of the fair. "We've worked out the security issues," said co-director Matthew Slotover.

Spring Masters New York, a reconfigured fair for collectors of traditional, Impressionist and modern art that will open April 30 in New York, is even touting its hexagonal booths, a honeycomb configuration that hasn't been attempted much since the original Armory Show in 1913. Michael Plummer, whose firm Artvest Partners is among the fair's consortium of owners, said, "It's key that fairs try to shake things up."

The underlying tension here, collectors and dealers say, is that the booming art market is continually seeking to reinvent itself to hang onto the splintered attention of the world's 2,000-plus billionaires. Many of the world's top art buyers started collecting art a generation ago because the scene appeared fun and profitable—but they need the party to keep going indefinitely because they are so invested in its continued financial success. With collectors buying and reselling art regularly, the stakes for everyone have grown unnervingly high.

No one is saying art fairs will one day disappear. A 2013 report by Arts Economics researcher Clare McAndrew said 36% of dealers' sales world-wide in 2012 were made at fairs, up 5% from the year before. Attendance figures this year also appear steady—from 20,000 for a small, weeklong fair to triple those crowds for a heavyweight.

But there is just no way to do it all anymore. Connecticut collector Ray Leary said he and his wife, Melva Bucksbaum, have started sticking to fairs closer to home, mainly New York. Dealers elsewhere say they are already beginning to see more of this regionalization, with collectors attending a circuit of fairs throughout Asia, say, and skipping concurrent circuits in Europe or Latin America, and vice versa. São Paulo collector Pedro Barbosa used to fly around the world regularly to attend international art fairs, but now he skips most of them—except for SP-Arte, his hometown fair. Last year, he even skipped Art Rio in nearby Rio de Janeiro. He finds art by going to galleries and biennials instead, he said.



'Presumed Calculated Colour' by Jennifer Lefort at Volta Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Ottawa

Carlos Hurtado, a Bogotá-based dealer, said his gallery Nueveochenta goes to five fairs a year without ever leaving Latin America, a move that cuts costs but also cultivates a tighter network of nearby collectors.

Those fair-related costs can be considerable for dealers: Mr. Kelly, the New York dealer, said he outlays about \$150,000 for each weeklong fair he signs up for, and he does eight fairs a year—including two during Armory Week. Dorsey Waxter, president of the Art Dealers Association of America, said her two New York galleries, Van Doren Waxter and Eleven Rivington, spend as much going to fairs as they would paying rent for an entirely new gallery space.

Wendy Olsoff co-owns a gallery in Chelsea called PPOW, but this week she's also managing gallery booths in three separate fairs spread all over town—the Armory Show, Art Show and a video fair called Moving Image—with help from her harried staffers and "lots of taxi charges," she said. "Last year, we said, 'Never again,' but here we are."

### **Art Fair Do's And Don'ts**

#### **Do:**

Bring a deck of business cards. Want details about an artist or entrée into a cool collector's afterparty? Be ready to swap contacts, old-school-style.

Pack a water bottle and a protein bar. Café seating is invariably scarce at the big fairs, so plan to munch as you stroll.

Charge up your cell. Collectors and dealers take photos of EVERYTHING they see to show and tell later.

Grab a map. Collectors circle their favorite galleries and plot circuitous routes through big fairs, but you'll look important if you simply carry one that looks marked-up.

Wear comfortable shoes. Fair veterans know better than to trek for hours in high heels or pinchy loafers.

#### **DON'T:**

Don't be shy. Step up and ask dealers for prices for anything you see and like. If they demur, scowl and keep walking.

Don't ask the dealer if they personally created any of the art on view. Dealers say this is the most-asked question, but it rarely applies at major art fairs.

Don't wear a navy, pin-stripe suit. Only dealers wear those.

Don't let your children climb all over the art (It happens more frequently than you'd imagine).

Don't try to see everything.