

The market

The trouble with art fairs

As the sheer number of annual events continues to grow, curators, collectors and dealers are starting to feel fatigued

By Marc Spiegler

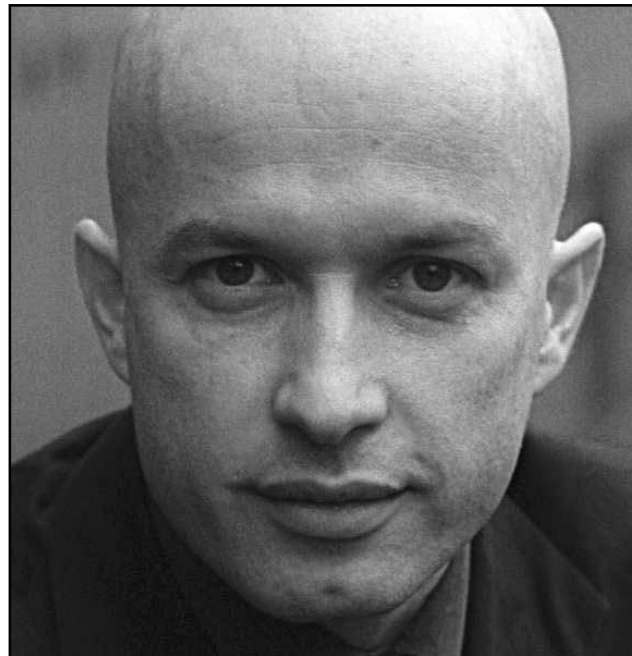
Last year, on the opening day of the Frieze Art Fair in London, the German collector Ingvild Goetz had an epiphany. “I’d queued up for two hours to get in, and when the fair finally opened, I found myself running through the narrow aisles, sweating,” she recalls. “I realised I’d gotten caught up in the competition, fighting for art, and I said to myself, ‘This is not me.’ I left the fair after four hours and never came back.” She skipped this year’s Frieze altogether, despite being invited to the new VIP early opening, after informing the organisers in a letter that she thought it was an “undignified” way to collect.

Fairs have never been more prominent than today, and never more problematic. Following Art Forum Berlin, Frieze, Fiac, Art Cologne, ARTissima, and Paris Photo, the art world’s frenzied autumn climaxes in early December, as 705 galleries set up shop in 11 fairs to coincide with Art Basel/Miami Beach. Even less internationally prominent fairs—such as Fiac in Paris and Art Forum Berlin—now have several “satellite fairs” riding their coat-tails. “Art fairs have proven themselves as an instrument for expanding the art world,” says Sam Keller, director of Art Basel and Art Basel/Miami Beach. “But if the 90s were the decade of the biennial, then today it’s the fairs that catalyse local art scenes and expand networks.” Indeed, October’s Frieze Art Fair activated the entire spectrum of London’s art world, from Tate Modern to the auctions at Sotheby’s, Christie’s and Phillips de Pury.

Once functionally little different from flea markets—albeit with infinitely more expensive merchandise—fairs today are fully-fledged cultural events. They sponsor panels filled with art stars, such as the ubiquitous curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, and work with museums and local collectors to create seductive VIP programmes. Luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Bulgari and NetJets compete to host *the* hot-ticket party.

Nevertheless, fair fatigue has become a common condition in the art world. The biggest complaint is the sheer number of events that suddenly seem compulsory. “Whenever I hear about another fair starting, it’s almost physically painful to me,” says Munich’s Michaela Neumeister, a senior partner at the auction house Phillips de Pury. “It feels like the art world has become a gypsy circus, running around to fairs. When I entered Art Cologne last month, I suddenly felt I had an art hangover—it seemed like the paintings were all melting into each other in front of my eyes.”

Indeed, the more art fairs grow in prominence, the more



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—Sam Keller, director of Art Basel

grouching they seem to inspire among art world insiders—those people dealing with art daily, in roles ranging from artist to critic to auction-house expert. As those insiders became accustomed to the new reality of an event-driven art world, they have also become far more conscious of the costs involved—be it in terms of money spent, attention diverted, nerves frayed or bodies abused. There’s more to it than just a case of art-fair overload. There’s also a fundamental issue with fairs as a venue. “Of course art fairs will never be as good a place to see art as galleries or museums,” concedes Frieze co-founder Matthew Slotover. “But in an art world where it has become impossible to have a global view, fairs are a good shorthand version.”

Following that logic, collectors should use the fairs as a means to discover new artists, but among insiders there’s strong doubt about that notion. “I think many of the people visiting fairs are arriving with shopping lists, rather than making new discoveries there,” notes New York art advisor Kim Heirston. “So many have succumbed to the one-stop shopping convenience of art fairs and auctions. One new collector even said to me, ‘Why should I go to a museum? There’s nothing for sale there!’”

More seasoned collectors perceive a lack of great new material. Hamburg’s Harald Falckenberg, one of Germany’s most active arts patrons, says quality has dipped as fairs have proliferated. “The absolute number of good works available is the same,” he says. “But the percentage of good works in the booths has absolutely dropped. There’s a lot of material for ‘art buyers,’ but not for what I’d call ‘real collectors.’” Though many galleries make “valiant efforts” to assemble interesting material, Ms Heirston says, “Others have become frighteningly predictable, to the point where you can almost guess which artists will hang on which walls of a booth. And there’s a rise in the number of ‘fair-friendly’ works—they’re bold, pretty, domestic-sized and the artist is easily recognised.”

Worse yet for collectors, prized pieces are often sold before they even get installed. Because these days, all major fairs are preceded by a sort of massive virtual fair, conducted mostly via email and telephone, in which heavy-hitting collectors vie for the most sought-after work. The impending fair creates a sense of urgency somewhat akin to that of an auction room—collectors feel pressure to buy a work now or risk losing it forever.

As both a longtime contemporary collector and a dealer, who is now setting up his own fair in Shanghai in September 2007, Pierre Huber of Geneva’s Galerie Art & Public experiences both

sides of this phenomenon. When hunting for new acquisitions at fairs, Huber says, he's irritated by the number of works already unavailable early on opening day. But as a dealer, he does precisely the same thing that vexes him. "My best clients are in touch before each fair, asking what we'll have, and they get upset if they miss something," he explains. "These people have supported my gallery for years, and I don't want to quarrel with them." Frieze's Slotover naturally protests with the perception that the best work is not actually on offer. "People keep saying, 'Everything's already sold!' but it's not true," he says. "Maybe if you're asking for artists like Elizabeth Peyton, John Currin and Peter Doig, but there are only 30 or 40 artists like that. Even on the last day of our fair, there were fantastic things available."

Of course, there is a whole category of recent work that never makes it to fairs at all, instead populating the evening sales of contemporary auctions. "There's a constant competition now for great works," concedes Keller. "Does it go to an auction room? Does it get sold in the backroom of a gallery? Or will it be sold at our fair?" Interestingly, this year's Art Basel/Miami Beach media campaign substituted the names of star artists for those of exhibitors in otherwise unchanged print ads, implicitly spotlighting the material on offer rather than its distributors.

Which brings us to the galleries, those who arguably benefit the most from fairs. With the exception of major dealers in London and New York, most galleries would founder without fair sales. That said, fairs remain by far the most expensive way to sell art. A recent *Art + Auction* calculation estimated the cost of running an 80 sq. m booth during Frieze fair at roughly \$100,000 all told—including \$1,000 for empty crate storage, \$326 for the door to the booth's storage area, \$1,500 for cellphone roaming charges, etc. At Art Basel/Miami Beach, renting a similarly sized booth would cost \$10,000 more; at the Armory it would run an extra \$20,000. And the toll on the gallery staffs is punishing. First come weeks of preparation then the draining days of booth duty and nights of mandatory socialising, and finally the follow-up work of trying to convert contacts into clients and sales into payments.

In a time where some dealers do as many fairs as solo gallery shows, the total time and money invested in fairs is staggering. "One problem I have with fairs is how much energy they take on the part of galleries and their artists," says curator Shamim Momin of the Whitney Museum of American Art. "Some of the booths at fairs are like museum pieces or major gallery shows, but they disappear after a few days. Also, as a museum person, I look at the corporate sponsorship from companies like UBS or Deutsche Bank and think about how much institutions could do with that money."

Of course, while exhibitors may gripe about doing fairs, those who don't get in agonise much more. Among dealers, only agent-provocateur Kenny Schachter has publicly assailed selection committees, but privately the topic engenders endless conspiracy theories. Understandably enough, because a handful of dealers on each fair's committee work behind closed doors to choose which of their direct competitors are admitted, and those decisions often appear either arbitrary or Machiavellian. And the more the market's money flows toward fairs, the harsher the sting of the rejection. "Everyone's desperate to get into fairs, because collectors are not going to galleries as much," points out London dealer Anthony Reynolds. "But some dealers open galleries just to get into fairs, while some excellent galleries don't get admitted because they have the wrong image."

Whatever their faults, fairs remain the perfect platform for today's time-strained professionals. And while the European fair market seems saturated, there's huge potential in the rest of the world, where new collectors are only starting to emerge.



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—Matthew Slotover, co-director Frieze

The problem is that among the 200-odd galleries admitted to major fairs, roughly one-half to two-thirds are truly irreplaceable due to their impressive programmes—galleries such as Marian Goodman, Andrea Rosen and Sadie Coles. But the final few dozen galleries selected are drawn from a much larger potential pool—and are to some degree interchangeable. Which explains why the annual turnover in a fair like Art Basel can hit 20% without a discernible drop in quality. To those who get left out, the rejection feels like a body blow, since presence at fairs is increasingly seen as a signifier of art world status.

Even Keller says the focus on fairs has gotten out of hand:

"I think the importance of fairs is overstated, because they only work as long as the art-market ecosystem is in balance, meaning galleries are flourishing and the interest of private buyers is high." Which naturally begs the question: What will happen to fairs when the art market eventually slows down?

Given the ability of galleries to sell work online, they might hesitate to undertake the expense involved in doing so many fairs. After all, there are less cost- and time-intensive platforms that can provide much of what the art world loves most about fairs: the parties, the networking and high-profile cultural events. Ironically enough, Art Basel/Miami Beach's 2001 debut—cancelled because of 11 September—served as an unintended proof of concept. "The cultural programme continued and 300 to 400 collectors came to Miami, including museum groups," Keller recalls. "The galleries even sold work: Jay



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—Ingvild Goetz, collector, Munich

Jopling and Spencer Brownstone were doing deals by the pool." Likewise, every spring a group of Berlin galleries invites major collectors to the city for studio tours and festive dinners. "We wanted to get people out of the fair booths and back into the galleries," explains dealer Claes Nordenhake, himself a member of Art Basel's selection committee. "They need to see work in an environment that's not only about commerce."

Whatever their faults, fairs remain the perfect platform for today's time-strained professionals. And while the European fair market seems saturated, there's huge potential in the rest of the world, where new collectors are only starting to emerge. At his ShContemporary fair in Shanghai, Huber intends to spotlight Asian artists he has personally selected.

And in fairness, the issues that insiders have with art fairs often reflect a broader malaise with the seismic shifts roiling the art world's old hierarchies. "Many of the people who dislike fairs are either overly romantic about how the art world used to be or suddenly find their power threatened," notes Keller. "People say that fairs are not deep enough, but we're not supposed to be the validation system. The focus on fairs may be a symptom, but it's not the cause."

Ms Goetz agrees on that point, admitting that fairs tend to take the rap for wider problems. "I feel like in today's art world there's more of an emphasis on *having* art than on *loving* art," she says. "There's a lot of greed and power games going on, and the fairs are just the playground on which those games take place. But they still are very useful for collecting new information." That explains why, despite her past experiences, the German collector will travel to Miami in early December to visit Art Basel/Miami Beach for the first time. Art fairs—just when you think you're out, they drag you back in. ■