

**Art Fairs**

## Dealers Have Long Had a Love-Hate Relationship With Art Fairs. Here's Why They Are Growing Fonder Lately

While still a huge lift, fairs are more important than ever, dealers say.

**Eileen Kinsella**, September 20, 2022



A visitor at the Armory Show, 2022. Courtesy of the Armory Show.

In 2018, many in the art industry painted art fairs as the big bad wolf. The events perpetuated, some said, a system that failed to support small and mid-size dealers, who had to pay the same rates to participate as large dealers but sold art for a fraction of the cost.

In response to the pushback, fair organizers unrolled a series of initiatives: Art Basel launched what was effectively a progressive taxation system for exhibitors in the main section and reduced the fees for other sections. Frieze, FIAC, and other fairs developed similar programs.

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But before they had much of an opportunity to put these changes into effect, the world shut down. And many dealers enjoyed not having to dedicate hundreds of thousands of dollars to travel, shipping, booth rentals, and other fair-related costs. Sales may have been down, but thanks to the savings from fairs, margins were up.

Now, the treadmill is back in full swing. And dealers have to decide what they are going to do about it.

In September alone, there was Frieze's inaugural Seoul edition (September 2–5), along with the Korea International Art Fair, followed by the Armory Show (September 9–11) and its satellites in New York. Next up, there's Frieze London (October 12–16), the inaugural edition of Art Basel's Paris+ (October 20–23), and, later on, Art Basel Miami Beach in early December. That's not to mention smaller, regional fairs like Unseen in Amsterdam (September 16–18), Art Athina in Athens (September 17–19), the Tbilisi Art Fair (September 22–25), and the British Art Fair in London (September 29–October 1), among others.

We asked a range of dealers if the physical and financial strain of fairs had returned in full force. The answer? Yes. But there is also growing recognition that these events are also necessary, especially after this extended period of isolation and travel restrictions. Digital initiatives—both virtual fairs, marketplaces like Platform, and online viewing rooms—have failed to make up for the value of in-person, IRL promotion.



Frieze Seoul, 2022. Photo by Let's Studio. Courtesy Frieze and Let's Studio.

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“We still need them,” New York dealer Cristin Tierney told Artnet News of fairs. “With the rise of the mega-gallery, the visibility of all other galleries and the effectiveness of our outreach has been diminished. We are constantly trying to tweak our social media ‘presence,’ or marketing, PR, whatever, in order to compete. Everyone talks about how important programming is, but that’s not entirely true, is it? The concept of ‘gallery program’ has been reduced to sound bites. It is really just code for branding. I think most of us have continued to participate in these fairs—despite rising costs and sometimes diminished returns—simply because a more effective alternative has not arisen.”

Tierney admitted her recent solo booth by Chilean-born Jorge Tacla in the Focus section of the Armory Show gave the work as much, if not more, visibility to the public than its concurrent gallery exhibition. “Many people who have never been in my gallery saw his paintings this past week. Representing artists means more than just selling paintings. Expanding audience, encouraging dialogues and producing art history is part of the job.”



The Armory Show 2021. Photograph by Casey Kelbaugh.