

# New Fair Founders Are Testing What Gallerists (and Collectors) Want in an Alternative



The entrance hall of the Estonian House. *Courtesy of the Estonian House*

BY ANGELICA VILLA

In September 2021, when **Rachel Mijares Fick** and **Rebeca Laliberte** launched the first iteration of Future Fair, they intended it to be a cooperative space where they could minimize the hierarchies so conspicuous at the major fairs. Their first in-person edition, held at the Starrett-Lehigh Building in Chelsea, featured 34 galleries. For this year's edition, held at Chelsea Industrial, the number of participating galleries is 60, almost double, and features more than 100 artists.

That expansion reflects the growing popularity of boutique fairs, each of which follows its own model. Future Fair runs on a communal model: the founding galleries adopted a five-year profit-sharing agreement under which 35 percent of the fair's profits, generated from visitor traffic or sponsorships, are distributed among those galleries that collectively fund the fair.

In the case of hotel fairs like Felix, held during Frieze Los Angeles since 2019, and the Dallas Invitational, which held its second edition during Dallas Art Fair this month, their chief attraction is a chic, fun venue and more modest fees (participation in each runs around \$10,000).

But the buzziest alternative model thus far may be Basel Social Club (BSC), which launched in 2022 as a satellite space during Art Basel. Organized by Parisian gallerist Robbie Fitzpatrick, the fair was first held in a 1930s villa; last year, when 90 galleries participated, it took place in a former mayonnaise factory. The atmosphere at both editions was casual, and there were no booths. Participating galleries hung works throughout the space, and films, performances, pop-up restaurants, bars, and a makeshift nightclub kept things lively. The success of BSC inspired others: for Art Basel Hong Kong this year, Hong Kong gallerist **Willem Molesworth**, together with two other local dealers, **put on their own version**, called Supper Club, an evening-only salon-style fair including 20 galleries at a 19th-century heritage site. Molesworth told *ARTnews* in March that he saw the Basel event (and their own) as serving a dual purpose: it was effective transactionally, but also had a fluid element, calling it "a process of hanging out" that felt more organic.

"That's what contemporary art is all about," Molesworth said at the time. "It's about connecting, networking, chatting, and, ultimately, making sales, of course. But, when you're showing really boundary-pushing stuff, it's difficult to pull the trigger. You want to learn, you want to chat, you want to talk about it."

This year, New York will get its own salon-style fair with Esther, debuting in May at the Estonian House in midtown during Frieze. Of some 20 presentations to be shown there, most will be site specific, and some artists will show new works that respond to the site's 1929 interior. When announcing the launch, cofounders **Margot Samel**, a Tribeca gallerist, and **Olga Temnikova**, a Tallinn-based gallerist, **cited Basel Social Club** as inspiration.

"Something that's important to us is the social element," Samel told *ARTnews*. "What was important for us was creating an environment where galleries can take risks and think about it as a complementary platform versus a more competitive one that fairs tend to be. I feel like, in a lot of ways, it's an experiment."

In addition to the social atmosphere, these types of fairs are attractive because they are far more economical, with participation fees a fraction of, say, Frieze or Basel. For Esther, exhibitors paid a \$1,500 fee; at Supper Club, the fee was around \$3,800. By comparison, booth fees for participation in Art Basel Miami Beach **run between \$11,000 and \$45,000** for the prestigious Nova, Positions, and Survey sections. Booth costs obviously go up from there.

"There's so many galleries in New York who don't do any art fairs during Frieze and Armory week because they feel like they've already paid the high costs of being in New York, and it just doesn't really make sense," Samel said.

Boutique fairs typically cater to emerging galleries unable (or unwilling) to spend on the big events. But as the alternative fair model matures, so too does its exhibitor base and appeal. Laliberte, the Future Fair cofounder, told *ARTnews* that this year's fair is no longer meant to be collectors' first look at new artists. Future's focus is instead on appealing to New York City's established old guard collectors interested in finding artists previously unknown to them. There's a selection committee now that didn't exist for previous editions, and sales are often in motion via social media months before opening day.

"The goal is to introduce our audiences to the presentations before we even open our doors," she said.

Samel and Temnikova, meanwhile, aimed to fill Estonian House with a range of galleries from the start, not just emerging firms. Veteran mainstays like Richard Saltoun and Andrew Kreps Gallery sit alongside such new kids on the block as New York's Someday and London's Gathering galleries.

What unites the gallerists who show in the alternative fairs, it seems, is a common belief that a better experience for art and art collectors lies outside the convention center.