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Big Fairs Dominate the Art World. Small Galleries Are Seeking Another Way.

By Scott Reyburn

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LONDON — Contemporary art dealers, like pretty much everyone else involved in bricks and mortar retail, are struggling to attract customers through their doors. A collaborative event is one way of coaxing them back. It might not be the art world's equivalent of Black Friday, but the Condo group exhibition, whose fourth London edition opened on Saturday, has given smaller dealerships a chance to see new faces in their galleries.

It makes a change from seeing them at art fairs. In today's "time poor," digitally dominated world, convention centers and tents have increasingly become the places where collectors and the public directly engage with gallerists. This year, new "destination" fairs in Los Angeles, Taiwan and Singapore have been added to an ever more crowded calendar.

"There are too many fairs. The ones that work are fantastic and we can't do without them," said Vanessa Carlos, co-founder of the east London gallery Carlos/Ishikawa, which in December sold out its booth at the Art Basel Miami Beach fair. But, Ms. Carlos added, the proliferation of art fairs "creates a culture of not going to galleries, of not seeing shows and having a higher quality interaction with gallerists and artists."

This is why Ms. Carlos came up with Condo. The idea (inspired by the multiple occupancy of a condominium) is simple: For a month, local dealers share their spaces — and, equally importantly, their client lists — with visiting international gallerists. Each guest dealer pays a flat fee of 650 pounds, or about \$830. The idea has caught on, with sister Condo events sprouting in New York, Shanghai and Mexico City, as well as smaller, single-venue iterations in Athens and São Paulo, Brazil.



A silicone and wood sculpture by Vanessa Safavi, dating from 2017,
exhibited by the gallery The Breeder at Condo London. The Breeder, Athens

Incoming dealers can exhibit artworks in an international context for a fraction of the cost of participating in a fair. As a result, they can display more challenging art at approachable price points.

This year's Condo London sees 18 spaces in different parts of the city exhibiting works from 52 galleries, over half of them foreign guests.

Athens-based The Breeder, which hosted last year's Condo event in Greece, was showing photographs and sculptures by the Swiss-Iranian artist Vanessa Safavi at The Approach in East London.

Ms. Safavi, who lives and works in Berlin, takes photographs and makes geometric mixed media sculptures that question "the relationship between the brain and the flesh," according to The Breeder. These were priced at between \$4,000 and \$6,000. At least two sales were made to London-based collectors, according to the gallery.

"It's not about selling, but about sharing, building relationships and expanding contacts," said Nadia Gerazouni, director of The Breeder, exhibiting for the first time at Condo London. Ms. Gerazouni, in common with other participating dealers, said that she saw representatives of all of London's major contemporary art institutions at the event, often with groups of patrons.

January is traditionally a quiet month in London's contemporary art world, but thanks to Condo there was plenty of footfall in the galleries on Saturday and Sunday.

One of the most crowded offerings was a presentation, by the New York gallery Queer Thoughts, of 12 new works by the Mexico City-based artist Chelsea Culprit, hosted at Maureen Paley gallery. Ms. Culprit creates vibrant, large-scale paintings and mixed media canvases depicting female dancers and striptease artists. Queer Thoughts said least six of these sold on Saturday, priced at between \$7,000 to \$12,000.

But others, unused to the codes of the contemporary art world, found Condo a bit bemusing. "We don't know anyone. It seems there are a lot of artists here," said Burkhard Weber, a banker based in Munich, gazing at the hip East London crowd drinking their bottles of Becks beer at Maureen Paley. Condo's almost illegible online and printed map also made finding participating galleries a challenge.

Over in the West End of London, nine dealers were showing works in the raw, unfinished spaces of 22-24 Cork Street, a newly redeveloped office and gallery block in the heart of the city's luxury retail district. These included new pieces by the Korean artist Kang Seung Lee, presented by Commonwealth & Council gallery of Los Angeles, making its debut at Condo. Mr. Kang was showing a hammock-like scroll, priced at about \$10,000, that commemorated Goh Choo San, a Chinese choreographer who died of an AIDS-related illness in the 1980s. Works by Mr. Kang, like those of Ms. Culprit, have yet to appear on the auction market.

Commonwealth & Council was being hosted by the Dublin and London dealership Mother's Tankstation, whose director, David Godbold, was enthusiastic about Condo. "I think it's a game-changer," he said. "It takes all the benefits of an art fair and puts them back into the bricks and mortar space," Mr. Godbold said, adding that it turned going to galleries into an event again. "And it's a model that can be transported across the world."

But can a commercially low-key event like Condo be a serious alternative to a major contemporary art fair? The collaboration connects dealers with London-based curators and collectors, but on the weekend, at least, there was a conspicuous absence of the wealthy international clientele that flies in for Art Basel or Frieze.

"That may come later in the month. London does get international traffic," said Ms. Gerazouni of The Breeder, which also exhibits at Art Basel and Frieze. Ms. Gerazouni, like the other dealers involved with this collaboration, still finds it essential to participate in selected art fairs. "It's a supplement. Condo complements."