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Art
Frieze Art Fair Feels a Big Chill
By ROBERTA SMITH

LONDON — They hoped for the best, expected the worst and took what came. Art is selling at this week's Frieze Art Fair, but nothing like before. After several weeks of financial havoc in stock exchanges across the globe, the feeding frenzy is over.

"You certainly didn't have to fight to get into the building," said the American art adviser Allan Schwartzman a few minutes after the start of the top-tier V.I.P. opening at 11 on Wednesday morning. "The days of the three-minute reserve are over." He was referring to the amount of time dealers have sometimes given even first-rank collectors to consider a purchase in the recent art-boom years, while competing buyers wait.

"Our committed collectors showed up," said Joel Yoss of the gallery Hauser & Wirth. But by the end of the first day, there were intermittent reports of sales, along with rumors that more than a few collectors were merely looking — not buying.

Underneath it all was a sense that if the art world had dodged a bullet, it was a momentary reprieve. More pervasive was a grim sense that a shake-out of world markets was just beginning, and in the end art would probably be the least of anyone's worries.

In other ways it was London Frieze Week as usual — that is, more than a bit out of touch with reality, with the fair surrounded by eddies of ancillary exhibitions, opening parties and other festivities vying for attention.

The fair itself, with 152 participants, continues its quest to meet all conceivable art cravings while behaving as much as possible like the nonprofit organization that it isn't. Front and center of course are the art dealers and their booths, which presented an enormous

range of product and anti-product, including an art performance or three.

But there is also a program of workshops for schoolchildren, and dispersed among the booths is the usual slate of somewhat subversive Frieze projects. Most of these are in the realm of the ephemeral, participatory genre called relational-aesthetics.

Visitors to the fair could get foot rubs from the artist Bert Rodriguez (who conducted therapy sessions at the Park Avenue Armory in this year's Whitney Biennial), or sit around the Kling and Bang collaborative's "Sirkus," a dark, noisy, utterly convincing rendition of a bar in Reykjavik, Iceland, that figured prominently in the country's alternative arts scene.

In Tue Greenfort's "Condensation," a dehumidifier in the form of a dark, quiet room collects moisture exuded by visitors' bodies, converting it into water that is funneled into discarded plastic bottles. A Frieze staff member informed me that when traffic is brisk, a bottle can fill in under 10 minutes.

An artist known only as Norma Jeane has made it possible for smokers to put themselves on display while having cigarettes in three clear plastic booths, each outfitted with a chair, a water cooler and an ashtray. But my favorite relational-aesthetics moment was provided by one of Frieze's forays into new-design and product placement: the two-sided hand dryers in the fair's restrooms, courtesy of Dyson, creator of the bag-free vacuum cleaner.

The booths divide logistically into those that put up display labels and those that do not (making it necessary to ask), and between those that attempt a modicum of curatorial thought and those that just put out the merch.

There are the usual gimmicky showstoppers, like Petroc Sesti's "Perpetual Void," a large glass sphere of clear oil in which a braidlike vortex twists perpetually, seemingly down the drain. But with first-time exhibitors from China, Turkey, India and Argentina (from Buenos Aires, Appetite, where the work of about 10 artists is displayed in a kind of continuous trash heap), Frieze still managed to provide a random snapshot of an increasingly global and youthful art world in transition.

There are paintings galore, from a beautiful new Picabia-esque abstraction by Albert Oehlen at Juana de Aizpuru to Merlin Carpenter's latest put-downs at Reena Spaulings (cashmere Burberry throws, genuine and knockoff, on stretchers). Nonetheless, a great deal of what is most worthwhile here falls under the heading of adventures in appropriation, 21st-century Conceptualism and art mediums formerly designated as craft (especially ceramics and tapestries, including some by Gobelins).

One of the fair's best-looking booths is Eva Presenhuber, lined on the outside with paintings by Josh Smith. Inside, two imposing perforated sculptures by the ever-inventive Ugo Rondinone are fashioned from an aggregate of plastic pebbles and concrete and set on big bases of wood-textured concrete. Giant Brutalist versions of Chinese scholars' rocks, these sculptures share an apocalyptic title that makes them suddenly resemble distorted skulls: "We Run Through a Desert on Burning Feet, All of Us Are Glowing Our Faces Look Twisted."

At Francesca Kaufmann, downsizing carries the day. Visitors enter through a small door by the Dutch artist Lily van der Stokker that is scaled to her own height. Framed by a cartoonish wall drawing that proclaims "No reason, no goals," it suggests a shrunken or more selective art world.

Across the aisle, flamboyance resurfaces at Salon 94, where an expanse of red carpet is dotted with 16 sculptures by the Italian artist Martino Gamper that in their own formalist way suggest mangled bodies. They are made from the parts of 24 red leatherette side chairs by the modernist designer Carlo Mollino, known for imbuing furniture with a certain suggestive anthropomorphism.

Modernism is also treated as a dustbin rich with ideas at the Modern Institute, a Glasgow gallery where blurry, atmospheric paper in a color-separation palette by Simon Starling covers the walls. It looks great, but the explanation is the main point: The pattern is based on a gigantic blow-up from a photograph of a late-'60s performance by the first-generation Conceptualist Robert Barry in which he released various gases into the air.

At Cabinet, an eerie interactive piece by an unknown named Tris Vonna-Michell presented a variation on the image-text duality of Conceptual art. One part is a large reel-to-reel tape on which can be heard (on headphones) a work of word-art: The artist races through disjointed phrases with Tourette's-like speed and repetition, as if narrating a solitary, slightly terrifying journey. The other part is a box of black-and-white photographs of anonymous sidewalks, streets and parks that the viewer can browse through. Proceed fast enough, and the images form a cinematic flip-book of the trip, with headphones increasing the sense of isolation.

Also impressive is the Conceptualized Surrealism of Goshka Macuga, a Polish-born, London-based artist who is a finalist for this year's Turner Prize in Britain and whose bizarre combinations of found images and objects were featured at Kate MacGarry. One piece, on a pedestal, is a kind of half figure cobbled together from a cut-out image of a woman's head, an old book and, for a torso, what appears to be a large chunk of glazed ceramic. The effect becomes stranger still when it emerges that the torso is actually fossilized wood, a piece of nature as wild as the book and image are not.

Work in this vein, with its balance of the sensuous and cerebral, seems to point forward and away from the overactive art market that has held sway for the past few years.

Yet some booths seemed so mired in that market as to almost resemble period rooms. The mood of art-as-trophy was almost unbearably thick at Gagosian, where nearly every work on view was by an artist whose career had largely been shaped by their previous dealers: Richard Prince, Mike Kelley, Tom Friedman, Piotr Uklanski and Mark Grotjahn. You could call it an object lesson.

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Steve Forrest for The New York Times

A doorway decorated by Lily van der Stokker at the Frieze Art Fair.