

# Welcome to the Armory Fair. It's Huge. It's Hectic. Would You Like an Audio Guide?

Like sex with a new partner, my first audio tour was not all I imagined it would be.

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How far will art fairs go to make themselves educational affairs on par with museum exhibitions? What can these events, where dealers convene to sell their wares to well-heeled collectors, do to set themselves apart from their competitors? As fairs proliferate, to about 300 worldwide, their organizers introduce new features, like panel discussions and concerts, meant to add intellectual heft and to cultivate and entertain broader audiences. (Confession: I myself recently served as the inaugural “writer in residence” at the Untitled San Francisco fair.)

Enter the Armory Show, taking place in Manhattan through Sunday at Piers 90 and 94. The fair is offering, for the first time, a museum-style audio guide that connects through your cellphone — a potentially welcome gesture at a frenetic event with nearly 200 dealers offering thousands of artworks, and hordes of visitors (nearly 60,000 last year). “It’s an easy way to give the public access to the voices of tastemakers curators and artists,” said Eliza Osborne, the fair’s deputy director and the producer of the guide. “People come to fairs to learn. This is a way to turn the key.”

It seems simple: pick up a brochure at the information desk when you arrive, then look for the phone icon on signage at 49 selected gallery booths (and at all of the presentations organized by museum curators and directors). Dial 646-291-2407, punch in a code, and the commentaries begin. The upsides? There’s no app to download and no handling a clunky headset that infected patrons have coughed on. Among the downsides? It gets tiring to call the number again and again, and cell reception can be choppy.

Like sex with a new partner, my first audio tour was not everything I imagined it would be. It is a well-intentioned, seriously ambitious, mixed success, with some 60 comments from a highly credentialed bunch, including Nora Burnett Abrams, director at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver; José Carlos Diaz, chief curator at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh; Jamillah James, curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (and a curator of the Focus section at this show); and Christie’s postwar a sales specialist, Isabella Lauria.

For a project meant to cater to non-experts, some of the language can be off-putting. Ms. James sometimes employs modish jargon, saying that the artist Sky Hopinka’s video at Bockley Gallery in Minneapolis “troubles” the ways information is circulated. (Unfortunately, the recording also focuses on a different video than the one that’s on view, which is a bummer.) The guides sometimes focus on a single work in a crowded presentation but don’t suggest that you “look for the big red painting on your left as you enter the

booth.” You have to ask the harried dealer where it is, which kind of defeats the purpose. Humdrum readings remind you why there are professional voice-over actors.

But some commentators excel. Mr. Diaz offers a refreshingly personal voice. “I really love Wendy White’s exploration of Americana,” he said at the Los Angeles gallery Shulamit Nazarian — where couches are upholstered with denim jeans — signaling to the newbie visitor that taste and enjoyment are valid criteria

Ms. Lauria, a polished saleswoman, likewise offers punchy and personal observations free of art-world patois. Of the Iranian-American artist Sheida Soleimani’s photographs at the gallery Edel Assanti, from London, she points out how the work lures you in with its beauty but then seems mysterious on closer inspection. “Her practice is incredibly personal and heavily inspired by her parents’ experiences as political refugees in Iran in the 1980s,” she adds, cueing the listener in to the fact that even very conceptual modes can be highly subjective.

Ms. Ellegood, executive director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, who curated the Platform section of this fair, offers observations on the pungent political commentary in “The Caddy Court,” a huge 1986-87 work by Edward and Nancy Kienholz that casts taxidermied beasts as Supreme Court justices holed up inside a vintage Cadillac. She economically connects this historical work to the current-day court, “which faces one of its most controversial benches and consequential dockets in recent memory.”

It’s a patchy but promising first effort. So if you’re looking for a new way to experience an art fair, charge up your phone battery, put in your earbuds, and head to the Piers.

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The Armory Show 2020, through Sunday, Pier 90 and Pier 94; [thearmoryshow.com](http://thearmoryshow.com).

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