

Madeleine Mendell
CAML
Prof. Howard Besser
March 12 2020

Observational Study: Spring/Break Art Show and New York Antiquarian Book Fair

This report concerns an observational study and comparison between two fairs: the Spring/Break Art Show (Spring/Break) and the New York Antiquarian Book Fair (Antiquarian Book Fair). Both fairs take place annually around the same time every year - around the same time as the Armory Show and countless other art and (art) book fairs. This year, 2020, Spring/Break took place March 3-9 and the Antiquarian Book Fair took place March 5-8. Each fair features a roster of exhibitors who showcase materials to public and private audiences. Additionally, the intention, if not the primary intention, of these exhibitors, is to sell the materials exhibited in their collection. Both of the fairs as organizations also feature online catalogs for items, although Spring/Break and the Antiquarian Book Fair employ different levels of shopping. Both events are also ticketed, both at \$25 for a single day pass, with different price structures for VIP and multiple day passes. Only the Antiquarian Book Fair offers a student price.¹ On another superficial note, the Antiquarian Book Fair this year celebrated its 60th year, while Spring/Break is only in its 9th iteration, although they recently (last year) expanded to Los Angeles with a separately curated LA fair.² The following pages of this report will first look at a description and overview of Spring/Break and then of the Antiquarian Book Fair before concluding by observing similarities and differences between the two.

The Spring/Break Art Show was conceived of by Andrew Gori and Ambre Kelly as an art fair that prioritizes both independent curators and smaller galleries to give them a large platform during this important week. Every year, sometimes consecutively, Spring/Break is housed in an abandoned or temporarily open New York landmark and is therefore able to offer curators space at a large fair for no exhibition cost. In the past, Spring/Break has been housed at the former Condé Nast offices and at the former James Farley Post Office; this year, Spring/Break occupied two floors of the former Ralph Lauren offices in Midtown East. Spring/Break offers a platform for emerging curators to think around each year's theme and create an exhibit with no rental fee; Spring/Break also houses an online platform for purchase for all the items exhibited, "giving artists unknown, emerging, mid-career, and beyond a virtual compliment to their tactile exhibition."³ Because each curator is given only a free space - a corner office, a set of cubicles, an open space, a lobby, etc. - it is up to them only to fill that space with their own show. Therefore, the show is a bit of a mess, uneven, and wacky; especially with this year's theme, *In Excess*, that asked of the curators to composite maximalism against minimalism, there was a level of over-the-top and mess that was expected of the show instead of a given.

When I entered the lobby of 625 Madison Ave, I gave the desk my name, and I received a wrist band and was shuttled up to the 10th floor in a corporate elevator with no buttons. Immediately, a sense of disorientation overtook us when we left the elevator; seemingly a regular office, the lights were turned off and Jeila Art's knit jungle crept into the lobby area. As we went

¹ "New York Antiquarian Book Fair," <https://www.nyantiquarianbookfair.com/>.

² "Spring/Break Art Show," <https://springbreakartfair.com>.

³ "About," Spring/Breat Art Show, <http://www.springbreakartshow.com/about/>.

into the larger part of the office where there were cubicles and offices, it became clear that there were more or less two kinds of curators: ones who had completely transformed the space from an office or a cubicle into a jungle, or a cardboard shtetl, or a gingerbread house with snow and those that kept to the cubicle or office structure, playing with it or not. Joey Frank curated Georgica Pettus⁴ and Luisa Alcantara to perform “Real Corporate People,” a performance art piece centered in the cubicle area around two existential Ralph Lauren employees constantly vying for HR’s attention by sending them laminated pieces of paper rubbed in food stuffs painted on an anonymous male body. Curiously, their performance is listed online for \$1500.

Spring/Break hands each visitor a map with a list of the curators and their booth numbers, which serves as the only guidance throughout the fair. Bathrooms are not listed on this map. There is additionally a coffee stand and a merch stand, but most of the money is made through art sales and ticket sales. As with most fairs, there seems to be two general camps of people: those who have no intention of buying, and those who do. At Spring/Break, however, unlike other Armory Show events, there are lower-priced art pieces, though these sell out very quickly, probably because there are a lot less people with the intention of buying who can be lured into spending under \$100 for a painting or a sculpture. To that effect, most people are put off by the exhibits that have the curator or an attendant sitting in the small room because of the implication of selling money. Those smaller office rooms received less traffic than the ones out in the open or unoccupied by an attendant. For that reason, curators were very friendly and asked people to come into each room separately. Once in the grips of a curator or attendant, usually they will have some kind of collection guide with prices, images, and artist information, like at any gallery, although some opt out of that routine in favor of more unconventional information delivery. In any case, all exhibitors rely heavily on browsing in order to entice viewers into their domain. Sometimes, curators or present artists engage in conversation - we stood in one booth for approximately 30 minutes chatting with the curator who also turned out to be the artist, which was not an uncommon occurrence. The majority of works were sculptures and paintings, with some sound art which had sculptural elements, but with not that much video art. Video art can be a difficult type of art to sell.

The New York Antiquarian Book Fair has the air of a fair that has taken place for 60 years consistently. It has been housed at the Park Avenue Armory for some time now, and year to year has a similar round-up of exhibitors. Unlike Spring/Break, exhibitors pay for their stalls and are not curated themselves (i.e. they do not submit). Like Spring/Break, though, exhibitors feature a wide array of different kinds of items, with varying degrees of specificity. One exhibitor may specialize only in maps before the 20th century, while another may have a variety of items considered rare - signed first editions, ephemera with established provenance, rare art items, prints, etc. The New York Antiquarian Book Fair has a higher level of security and the dress code is perhaps the most immediately different thing about it and Spring/Break. Instead of the colors and styles that come with an art show, the Antiquarian Book Fair’s guests and exhibitors are much more serious in their dress, with a large percentage wearing suits and kitten heels. Similar to Spring/Break, the Antiquarian Book Fair also has two main types of attendees: people who browse and people who buy. I would also add another category, which is other booksellers looking to gauge prices and perhaps buy to re-sell. For that reason, there is also a decent amount of haggling and inter-bookseller interaction, whereas most of the inter-curator interactions at Spring/Break I witnessed were cordial, polite, and amicable.

⁴ Disclaimer: a friend

I would also say that, unlike at Spring/Break where items range from the \$10-\$10,000 range, items at the Antiquarian Book Fair range from \$50-\$200,000. Part of the experience is looking at items that would otherwise only be available to the public in a museum: a one-of-a-kind Yves Klein print, a Patti Smith edition of 100 first pressing, medieval manuscripts, unique Communist pamphlets, an autograph from Rasputin with the message “he must get well”! For that reason, many booths rely heavily on a combination of pamphlets, information cards, signage, glass cabinets signifying expense, catalogs, as well as browsing. Additionally, these exhibitors group their items more conventionally, forgoing adventurous curating: children’s books grouped together, autographed ephemera grouped together, tintypes, prints, etc. with some value items receiving special attention with information cards and stands. On average, people spend a longer period of time observing these items than they do the art pieces at Spring/Break, not just because they are books and therefore readable and take up more time but also because of their unique and historical values. The Antiquarian Book Fair also has a much stricter policy on security than Spring/Break. There are no bags allowed into the fair and any bags that leave the fair (from purchase) are thoroughly searched.

All in all, neither the Spring/Break Art Show nor the New York Antiquarian Book Fair is a cultural memory institution; they are both platforms for curators and exhibitors to hock their wares in a public arena. On that same note, they are both avenues for the public, which might not usually have an interest in buying art or \$25,000 manuscripts to have an insider’s look into these items. Most people attending both Spring/Break and the Antiquarian Book Fair are not shopping, but are instead having the same experience that one might have in a museum or at a special library or exclusive reading room. With respect to pricing, at both fairs, pricing seems completely arbitrary to the outsider’s (and perhaps insider’s) eye. By the very virtue of being at the fair, exhibitors and curators are able to price items which may not be financially worth much of anything at a very high price. A case in point: one exhibitor at the Antiquarian Book Fair specialized in 19th and early 20th century ephemera was selling books by children (yes, a 9-year-old’s crayon drawings from 1935) for over \$100, where that kind of material elsewhere might be a lot less.

Lastly, with respect to observation. While much of the people present at these fairs are attendees, the show of it all is less the tourists and users but more the organizers, curators, and exhibitioners. One thinks of these people existing in a bubble maybe within an institution or by themselves, but at fairs, they all come together with each other on a public stage, and that is perhaps the best part of going to a fair, especially one like the Antiquarian Book Fair, where booksellers compete with each other but also share a camaraderie. Tellingly, there was much advertisement for the new film about booksellers,⁵ *Booksellers*, at the book fair, despite booksellers having similar or near-similar items, judging each other’s collections and more. Similarly, curators rarely co-exist in such numbers, and the presence of curators who not only have to install an entire show in less than a week in semi-hostile conditions (again, where were the bathrooms!) and have therefore bonded with each other to some extent and are supporting each other’s work is also something to be observed at one of these fairs. This is, of course, an semi-outsider’s optimism.

⁵ Which my friend Arthur Fournier is in!