



A F I E L D G U I D E F O R W O R K I N G A R T I S T S

The Honest Art Fair Guide

Hi, I'm David. Four years ago I became a full-time artist with zero collectors, no gallery representation, and absolutely no idea what I was doing. Since then I've shown at two Affordable Art Fairs, been picked up by galleries across the UK, won awards, and had my work featured in publications. None of it came easily. I made mistakes, lost money, and learned almost everything the hard way. Being a creative is tough enough as it is — so if I can save you some of the pain I went through, this guide is my way of doing that.

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Before You Commit

1 Is this an area where people buy art?

Location isn't just about footfall — it's about whether the people walking past can actually afford what you're selling. Research the area. Is this a high-spend neighbourhood? A tourist corridor? A commuter town? A deprived high street? The answer changes everything about whether it's worth your time and pitch fee.

2 Know the space: dimensions, height and lighting.

Before you book, confirm the exact pitch size and — crucially — the wall height. Most events are 2.4m high, but some are only 2.1m, and that difference matters enormously for how you hang your work. Also check whether lighting is included. Some venues are naturally lit; others will leave your work in shadow and you'll need to bring your own spots. Don't assume. Ask.

3 Know the demographic — and be honest about the fit.

If the fair draws an older, traditional crowd and you make large-scale modern abstract work, there's a mismatch. That's not a judgment on the work or the audience — it's just reality. Go where your style of work has a genuine audience, not where you hope to educate people into buying it.

4 Footfall — how many, and who exactly?

Raw numbers matter less than who those numbers actually are. A busy fair drawing lots of tourists is brilliant for prints and pieces under £150 — things small enough to carry away on the day. That same crowd is unlikely to commission a large canvas. Know which fair brings which kind of visitor before you invest. A smaller artist-led fair at Truman Brewery might not attract the right clientele — but The Other Art Fair, backed by Saatchi and at the same venue, is a completely different proposition. The building doesn't determine the audience. The fair does.

5 Talk to artists who've done it — but filter what they say.

Ask about overall atmosphere, attendance numbers, and whether visitors were engaging and buying generally. But don't put too much weight on whether a specific artist had a great or terrible sales day. Take their experience as one data point, not a verdict.

6 What do you actually want from this fair?

Sales? Mailing list sign-ups? Exposure to new collectors? Press coverage? Be clear with yourself before you go. If your only measure of success is sales, you're setting yourself up to feel like every other outcome is a failure.

7 Does the fair take commission?

Some art fairs charge a pitch fee only. Others take a percentage of your sales on top — sometimes 20–30%. This changes your break-even calculation significantly. Always check before you commit and factor it into your pricing.

8 Sharing a space can keep costs down.

If the pitch fee is steep, consider whether there's another artist whose work complements (but doesn't compete with) yours. Splitting costs makes borderline fairs more viable, and a well-curated shared stand can actually look stronger than one artist trying to fill the whole space.

9 Check the fair's social media before you book.

Look at their Instagram and Facebook. How many followers do they have? Are posts getting real engagement? Do photos from previous years show busy, vibrant stands — or empty aisles? A fair with 400 followers and low engagement is a warning sign worth taking seriously.





PART TWO

When You're There

THE MINDSET SHIFT

An art fair is not a shop. It is a live, in-person extension of your practice and your brand. Sales are one possible outcome — not the only one.

1 Make it easy for people to follow you.

Your Instagram, website, or wherever you live online should be visible and scannable. QR codes on your wall tags and bio card are non-negotiable now. Someone who doesn't buy today might become your best collector next year — but only if they can find you again.

2 Collect names and email addresses. Every single day.

This is your long game. Social media followers are rented. An email list is yours. Have a sign-up sheet or consider running a small giveaway to encourage people to leave their details. The mailing list you build at a fair that doesn't sell is still a win.

3 Business cards. Have them. Always.

Simple, well-designed, with your name, website and contact clearly on them. People still ask for cards. Don't be the artist who has to scribble their Instagram handle on a receipt.

4 Offer payment plans — and say so clearly.

Buy Now Pay Later services like Klarna can be the difference between someone walking away and someone buying a piece they genuinely want. If you offer it, make it visible on your stand. It doesn't devalue your work. It makes it accessible.

5 Your stand is part of the work. Less is more.

A professional, considered stand tells people your work has value before they've even looked at it properly. Don't clutter. Edit ruthlessly. Breathing space around the work makes each piece more powerful — and makes your stand feel like a gallery, not a car boot sale.

6 Talk to people. That's why they're here.

Visitors come to art fairs specifically to meet artists. Don't go in for the hard sell. Just introduce yourself, talk about the work, ask them what they're drawn to. Don't be on your phone, don't look like you'd rather be somewhere else. Be present. Warm. Human.

I try not to sit down. Yes, it's a long few days — but sitting signals that you're off duty and people will walk past. Keep the energy up. Standing and being visibly present makes you approachable in a way that slumped in a chair simply doesn't.

7 You get out what you put in.

If you stand behind your stand looking uncomfortable for two days, you will probably have a bad event regardless of the quality of your work. Energy is contagious. Engagement creates sales — but also connections, followers, future commissions, and word of mouth.

8 Meet the other artists. They are your community.

Fellow exhibitors are often your biggest supporters and most genuine cheerleaders. Follow them, ask them to follow you back, share each other's work. The relationships you build at fairs outlast the fairs themselves.

9 Bring a high table and a low table.

A high table is great for business cards and sign-up sheets — it keeps them at eye level and easy to grab. A lower table works well for browsable items and packaging. Having both gives your stand functional layers without looking messy.

10 Get photos and video — that's content for months.

Document your stand, the venue, your work on the walls, the other artists, the crowd. Film short clips for Reels. Get someone to photograph you with your work. A single fair event can fuel your social media for weeks.



Logistics & Hidden Costs

The pitch fee is never the full cost. Work out your actual break-even before you commit.

→ **How are you getting there?**

Van hire, fuel, parking, train tickets, shipping — it adds up fast. Factor this in before deciding whether a fair is financially viable.

→ **Where are you staying?**

For multi-day fairs away from home, accommodation is a real cost. Book early. Budget it in. Don't let it be a nasty surprise.

→ **Be there yourself. Non-negotiable.**

Nobody else will know your work the way you do. Nobody else can answer the questions, tell the stories, or close the sale. Don't send a friend to cover. Show up.

→ **Curate and plan your stand before you arrive.**

Map out your stand layout to scale beforehand — even on paper — so you know where things are going before you're standing in a cold venue at 7am. The less you're winging it, the better your stand will look.

→ **Make sure every piece is ready to hang, signed and dated.**

Check this before you load the van, not when you're setting up. Every piece should have its hanging fixtures attached and be signed and dated on the back. A collector who turns a piece over and finds nothing there will notice.

→ **Hang properly. Don't risk your work falling off a wall.**

Use the right fittings for the surface. Most of the time this means screws and a screwdriver. Tacks, sticky tape, or improvised solutions are how pieces end up on the floor. If you're unsure about the walls, ask the organisers in advance.

→ **Think about packaging before you go — not when someone's buying.**

Foam edge protectors are faster and neater than bubble wrap for canvases and framed work. You can also get protective print bags and artwork sleeves that look clean and professional. Bring enough — running out mid-fair is a real problem.

→ **Ask the fair if there's storage for extra pieces.**

Find out whether there's a back room where you can keep spare work. Always bring a couple more pieces than you plan to hang — leave extras in the car if there's no storage. A sold gap on a wall is a good problem to have; being able to fill it is better.



The Art Fair Kit List — Don't Forget

- ☐ Card machine
- ☐ Screws & raw plugs
- ☐ Screwdriver
- ☐ Drill
- ☐ Allen key
- ☐ White tac
- ☐ Ladder or step stool
- ☐ Business cards
- ☐ Browser / print display
- ☐ Wall tags / price labels
- ☐ Artist bio with QR code
- ☐ Prints

- ☐ Power bank
- ☐ Phone charger & cable
- ☐ Pens (always disappear)
- ☐ Tape / command strips
- ☐ Foam edge protectors
- ☐ Print / artwork bags
- ☐ Water & snacks
- ☐ Float / cash change
- ☐ Banner / logo signage
- ☐ Artist bio with QR code
- ☐ Paintings & Spare Stock
- ☐ I-pad



KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

Artist-Led vs Gallery-Led Fairs

→ What is a gallery-led fair?

The Affordable Art Fair is a gallery-led fair. The stands are sold to galleries, not individual artists. To show at one, you generally need to be represented by a gallery — they pay for the space and take commission on anything you sell. As an independent artist, these fairs are usually not directly accessible to you.

→ What is an artist-led fair?

An artist-led fair sells its stands directly to artists. You pay the pitch fee, you run your own stand, and you keep your sales — though some also charge commission on top. If they do, it should be no higher than around 25%. Anything significantly above that, question it.

→ How much should you expect to pay?

For a standard UK artist-led fair — typically a 5m wide by 2.4m high stand over a 4-day event — pitch fees generally range from £1,000 to £4,000 depending on the fair's profile and location. On top of that, budget roughly another £1,000 for everything else: travel, accommodation, food, packaging, and kit.

If the fair is outside the UK, those costs will be significantly higher. Before you commit, work out exactly how much you need to sell just to break even. If that number feels unrealistic, it probably is.



Pricing Your Work

Don't underprice your work to make a sale. If you do, you set a precedent that's hard to walk back, you devalue what other artists are trying to charge, and you will feel resentful when someone walks away with something you poured yourself into for £30. Know what your work is worth. Stand by it. The right buyer will pay the right price — and that sale will feel good in a way that a desperate discount never does.

Galleries attend these fairs — especially events like The Other Art Fair. They are actively scouting. If your prices are too low, it signals that you don't value your own work, and they won't pick you up.

Pricing consistency is non-negotiable. You cannot have the same piece on your website for £1,000, at an art fair for £500, and in a gallery for £2,000. Collectors talk. Galleries check. Your price is your price — everywhere, always. You are free to negotiate privately at a fair if the moment feels right, but that's never a public markdown.



MY HONEST OPINION

I've made a lot of mistakes so you don't have to. My first year I did three art fairs and only one was a success. I lost money overall. But I learnt more from those losses than I ever would have from a lucky first run.

Sometimes outside London is better. London is oversaturated with art shows and fairs. The competition for attention is intense, the costs are higher, and the audience can be surprisingly transient. A well-chosen regional fair can outperform a prestigious London show in every way that matters.

Always speak to everyone, and always be building that mailing list. Even at a fair where you sell nothing, you can leave with 40 email addresses of people who genuinely connected with your work. That is not a failure. That is the long game.

Think carefully about timing. An indoor fair in August will likely disappoint — people are outside, on holiday, not browsing art. And if your fair clashes with a nearby event that draws a very different crowd, you may find the footfall is there but the buyers aren't.

A NOTE ON LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Art fairs are long, loud, socially intense days. If you're neurodivergent — and many artists are — they can be genuinely a lot. That's not a weakness, it's just reality. Give yourself permission to take breaks when you need them. Step outside. Sit down. Eat something. Drink water. Being kind to yourself on the day is not self-indulgence — it's strategy.

WORK WITH ME

Love my work? Come see it in person.



You've read the guide. Now come and say hello.

If this guide has been useful, it's because it came from real experience — the shows, the mistakes, the conversations, and the work itself. If you're curious about the work behind the guide, I'd love for you to see it in person. I show regularly throughout the year — there's nothing quite like standing in front of a piece and feeling whether it's right for your space.

If you're looking for something for your home, the best thing you can do is reach out. Whether that's a studio visit, a home consultation where I bring work to you, or just a conversation about what you're looking for — there's no pressure, no hard sell. Just two people talking about art.

Come to a show — As part of my Colour Club Newsletter you'll be informed about upcoming shows, VIP tickets and new work.

Visit the Studio — Come and see the work in the space it's made, straight from the easel.

Book a home consultation — I'll bring a curated selection to your home so you can see how pieces work in your space before you commit to anything.

Just want to talk? — Drop me a message.

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