

Tea with Elizabeth Dee

A few weeks prior to Independent's 10th edition, I sat down with the fair's co-founder and CEO, Elizabeth Dee, at Spring Studios, the home of Independent since 2016. An outspoken advocate for smaller galleries, with a, shall we say, less capitalistically-motivated drive, Dee makes her support known far and wide. She participates in panels, writes op-eds, and utilizes every opportunity afforded to her to be a passionate evangelist on behalf of the gallery community.

After greeting me in her trademark, statement glasses, and offering me a cup of tea, Dee walks me through how she thinks the art world will define the future gallery audience at a time when more people are staying home, and galleries enjoy less foot-traffic. Throughout our conversation, she emphasizes how gallerists can be financially successful while also being innovators and "activists for the future of culture."

When The Canvas questions people about their favorite fairs, Independent invariably comes up. Referring to Independent in terms that include "community," "club," and "anti-treadmill," it becomes clear that Dee sees the things that set Independent apart as the keys to its popularity. Boldly stating that Independent boasts a higher per-attendee acquisition rate than any other art fair, she takes The Canvas step by step through the fair's success these past ten years, and cites numerous examples of specific artists finding both tremendous curatorial and financial success in the years after gallerists brought their work to the fair.

The following interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity purposes.



Photo by Kelly Taub

● **The Canvas:** Let's start off by talking about the recent op-ed you wrote for Artnet. In it, you wrote "Defining the future 'gallery audience' at a time when more and more people are staying home and not going to galleries as much as they were a decade ago seems to be critical to a gallery's future vision." To me, it sounds like you're more focused on creating new opportunities for galleries to reach audiences than you are worried about bringing in foot traffic. Could you elaborate on that statement a bit?

Elizabeth Dee: Well, I think this ties in to the larger picture, in which we have a shifting landscape in terms of what defines the future audience for culture in general. What does it look like? It's been interesting for me to sit with gallerists of every generation and location and discuss these questions, and I've found that galleries are deeply engaged in the discussion in a very active way. They're kind of like activists for the future of culture. With a critical eye, they're seriously questioning the cultural relevance of having a gallery in the first place. In the last ten years, we've seen some galleries grow exponentially; we've seen galleries participate more in art fairs and more actively focus on their digital presences. And, we've seen all

sorts of other changes take place, such as partnerships and strategic multi-discipline collaborations.

The Canvas: Like Condo...

Elizabeth Dee: Condo is one of them, absolutely. So, I think it's quite an interesting time to have a gallery. You have to be clear about your voice and those specific things you are doing that no one else can do. That's ultimately the connective tissue tying successful galleries together – regardless of the generation or stage they're in. Those gallerists are asking these questions and making certain to clarify their individual voices.

The Canvas: There are a lot of people who feel that the art world has become too focused on financial success and, as a result, we're losing sight of the idea that there is curatorial value in and of itself...

Elizabeth Dee: I'm so glad you brought that up, because this is something I think about a lot. I would love to reframe the conversation about what success means – what it means at different stages of an artist's career, what it means for different kinds of artists, and what "innovation" really means. The phenomenon of the mega-galleries has shifted the conversation away from innovation because a lot of the galleries at the top end of the market aren't necessarily developing new artists. That work is still being done by the other 95% of galleries in the world, and I consider them to be the true innovators.

It's also important to remember that the other 95% of galleries aren't non-profits. Non-profits are important because they are involved with introducing and supporting new art. However, there is a big critical distance between first being introduced to the art world, and then rising to the top of a vertical pyramid structure or some other art world hierarchy.

I've been in this field for fifteen years, and I've clearly seen a lot of innovation and many partnerships with artists in the evolutionary processes of their work, their careers, the curatorial and consensus elements, which is a time-based process. It's not a non-profit endeavor, but it's also not working within traditional corporate systems, so I'm a real proponent of the class of innovators.

The Canvas: I wasn't around in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, so I don't know what it was like back then. But everyone seems to agree that there's an increasing trend in which the biggest galleries use everyone else as a farm system to funnel them the most successful artists. How do you think smaller galleries are able to combat that trend?

Elizabeth Dee: Well now you're talking about the artists...

The Canvas: Yes, but they're the ultimate deciders, right?

Elizabeth Dee: Artists have- and should have- a lot of power in making their own decisions about what representation means to them today. And you're going to have artists for whom reaching a very large-scale audience is either the ultimate goal from the beginning of their careers or it becomes a goal over time. And there are various individual reasons why those artists want that mass audience. Some might view it as part of their mission to reach a certain level of respect and regard, while others may see it as part of a more democratic, broader exchange. I do think we tend to focus more on this minority of artists who are looking for that mass audience because it's become so dramatically

“Independent really functions as a community, a club, a place for like-minded people to come together.”

successful over the past ten years.

But in the larger scheme of things, I don't think it's necessarily what most artists are looking for. For instance, I don't think it was Donald Judd's mission to have a million people flock down to Marfa and experience his work en masse, but that might be the mission for Studio Drift's. If you think about what Pace is doing with that kind of wide engagement, it's really going for that mass scale.

***The Canvas:* 100%. And Marc Glimcher has been very open about that. He views the entire world as his audience.**

Elizabeth Dee: I think he's asking an interesting question, which is "I have 800,000 Instagram followers. And if I'm being generous, I'd say I have about 1,000 clients. So how do we reach the other 799,000? Are they really going to come to the gallery in Chelsea, or is there another way?" And that's an interesting question that deserves to be asked.

***The Canvas:* Agreed. I spoke to Marc for the February edition of The Canvas Monthly and if I had to guess – and I don't want to speak for him – I would say that his view of the market and the broader art world is on one end of the spectrum, and Elizabeth Dee's is on the far opposite end. For instance, he rejects any kind of blame that the mega-galleries receive for causing the struggles of medium-sized or smaller galleries...**

“The phenomenon of the mega-galleries has shifted the conversation away from innovation because a lot of the galleries at the top end of the market aren't necessarily developing new artists. That work is still being done by the other 95% of galleries in the world, and I consider them to be the true innovators.”

Elizabeth Dee: Well, the mega-galleries certainly represent one model, and that system's working really well for them. But that's not where the majority of my thinking is these days. I'm concerned with finding the best system to bring forward new work and move it to levels in the museum and collector communities that fulfill its true course and value. I'm interested in a certain kind of pace and a certain kind of inquiry about work. And, I think the majority of gallerists who are really thinking about bringing people to the campfire and having real conversations about the art share this idea with me, because we know it's not yet fully formed. It's something that is developing and I think 99% of the artwork made today deserves that kind of read before it gets determined, classified, and processed by the broader culture.

There are galleries that exist to represent things that have become determined by the culture, and there are galleries that want to take art through a series of passageways that are conducive to the practice of creation. And the innovation side of it is really important. While the artists are the innovators, the galleries that collaborate with the artists are also innovators. In some ways, the biggest activists are the people who run galleries where the culture is all about that collaboration. You can see it when you're lucky enough to spend a day going through galleries in Berlin, London, New York, or L.A. You see a clar-

ity in certain galleries – in their programs, their relationships with the artists, and in how they develop their practices – and that’s ultimately what Independent was built on.

Independent is about being able to say, “Together, let’s frame the conversation about the future of culture for those artists we believe are extremely important, need to be seen, and need to be recognized in both the collector and museum communities. Let’s create that equilibrium so that things are sustainable and healthy and move forward.”

***The Canvas:* Let’s drill down on Independent for a bit. In my conversations with various people in the art world, Independent is continuously listed as a favorite stop on the art fair circuit throughout the year. The art that the galleries present is superb. The collectors and curators who come are serious. And for the most part, it’s a pleasant experience for the visitor. What factors do you think have contributed to the fair’s success over the past ten years?**

Elizabeth Dee: I think there are three main factors. First, Independent really functions as a community, a club, a place for like-minded people to come together. Before Independent began, we were already participating in the market fairs and we felt that something else was possible. So, we started Independent to try and provide this different, interesting, anti-treadmill experience for gallerists, and it became that for a number of like-minded galleries.

The second success factor is the diversity of the participating galleries in terms of regions, different generations, the historical material presented, and the various emerging artists the galleries bring. It’s about the balance of all of that. It’s a project-driven fair and we deliberately rotate 30% of the exhibitors each year to keep it fresh. So, we have outliers, hybrids, mavericks...

And then the third factor comes from the participation and buy-in of the museums, curators, collectors, and the artists themselves. Matthew Higgs is one of our co-founders and he speaks regularly with the non-profits and the artists so there’s always this dialogue that takes place at Independent. The fair can play – and has already played – a role in a number of artists being discovered and reaching the next stages of their careers.

***The Canvas:* Do you mind elaborating on that a bit? Do you have specific examples that come to mind?**

Elizabeth Dee: This is truly one of the wonderful things about coming of age as a project, and how we’ve curated with the galleries this sense of adventure for the collector and for the audience. Though purchases are certainly made, it’s really more of an art experience than a shopping experience. And while that was always discussed from the beginning, it’s not to say that the galleries aren’t doing really well in making markets for their artists at the fair. Now, after ten years, people really trust the platform that we’ve built. In fact, Independent has the highest rate of acquisition per visitor than any other art fair.

In terms of examples, there are just so many. Last year David Kordansky brought Ruby Neri. She didn’t have New York representation at the time. The presentation at Independent really raised her profile in New York, and now she’s represented by Salon 94. Everything has changed for her career. It was sort of like a launch pad.

In 2016, Donna Huanca had her first solo show with Peres Projects at Independent, where the Marciano Foundation in Los Angeles got their first opportunity to view and acquire her work. This June, she’ll have a solo show at the Marciano Foundation. Oscar Murillo is another example. His first solo U.S. show with Stuart Shave took place at Independent in 2012 and was quickly followed by a solo presentation at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami. David Zwirner has gone on record saying he’s discovered artists at Independent – Jordan Wolfson, for example.

There are hundreds of these stories – from emerging artists who came to Independent, captured the art world’s imagination for the first time, and within three to five years landed serious foundation or muse-

um shows, to more mid-career artists who presented at Independent and saw their careers catapult into the museum sphere.

The Canvas: Speaking to three separate constituencies – dealers, collectors, and, let’s call them the ‘other 799,000’ – what would you say to each in terms of convincing them of the merits of Independent?

Elizabeth Dee: For gallerists, it combines everything that’s wonderful about having a gallery or museum show with the benefits of actually being a part of the exchange. It’s an opportunity for them to collaborate with a museum on behalf of one of the artists they’re showing or do something similar to what they do in their galleries – bringing the culture of that exchange and the quality of that audience engagement into a place where they’ll have real impact.

For collectors, Independent is a chance to not be bored, to get off that treadmill, to get away from the formula, and have the opportunity to really look at art again. Collecting is, in many ways, a social act and setting up the right environment is part of what Independent does. And we do it in a very specific and particular way that works for serious collectors. There’s an ability to have space, think, and reflect on the art itself.

As for the other 799,000, I think the general audience we get is a pretty sophisticated one. The people are engaged, they’re multi-generational, they work in different cultural and creative fields and industries, and they’re really omnivorous about the culture in a larger sense.

The Canvas: Based on our conversation today, it seems fairly obvious that you don’t agree with Marc Glimcher that gallerists “in today’s market, in order to be successful, need to have that interest in accruing power and projecting [their] vision no matter what...”

Elizabeth Dee: I disagree 100%. I think that’s just one of several versions of success, and they all co-exist right now, and they should continue to co-exist. I think we’re really losing our sense of reality if we think that the only way culture can move forward is by accruing power and creating this tyranny of the mainstream. I definitely don’t see that. That’s not where the innovators are. That’s just one pack. There are others.

Take Paula Cooper for instance. She’s one of my ultimate role models for this. She was always an exception to the rule, but it wasn’t about her individualizing her own voice. It was about where the art and the ideas led her. When she and Matthew Marks were the only people going out and buying old taxi garages in West Chelsea, it wasn’t because Chelsea was “Chelsea” back then. It was their desire to provide a context that they thought would be fitting for the artists that they wanted to show. And they weren’t looking to leverage a million people to go there. They wanted to have the right conversation in the right context and let the rest – history and the process of consensus – take care of itself.

“ I think we’re really losing our sense of reality if we think that the only way culture can move forward is by accruing power and creating this tyranny of the mainstream.”