Toplessness and Taxidermy in a Bottoming Market

As a newly sobered art world sizes up this weekend’s Armory Show, many are wondering about the fates of smaller fairs with catchier names. What prospects do they have in a crippled economy? A winnowing has already occurred: at least three of last year’s Armory-week fairs have opted out of the festivities.

Those that remain are trying out some new strategies. Volta, which shares a parent company with the Armory, strives to be seen as its younger, hipper sibling (something like the Art Stage section of solo-artist booths at Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach). Pulse, in its most diverse incarnation yet, is banking on globalization. And Scope supplements its accessible, pop-kitbash wares with a packed special-events calendar of music, screenings and parties.

Everywhere artists are mindful of recession economics. At Volta, Alejandro Diaz’s black-marker epigrams on cardboard could be had for 399.99. At Scope, artists hawked T-shirts and other multiples priced from $5 to $250 in a separate pavilion marked “Cheap, Fast and Out of Control.”

In previous seasons we deconstructed the fair environment, taking a buzz saw to the walls of the booth, for example, or leaving it mostly empty, to common effect. This time dealers showed tidy installations of paintings and photographs, mostly of modest proportions. “Small is the new big,” a wall text at Scope proclaimed.

The solo projects at Volta, in particular, exhibited a slightly uneasy self-consciousness of art as a commodity. “Age of Anxiety” is the pre-emptively clever...