

Will the coronavirus change the art market for the better?

The crisis has forced galleries and fairs to turn to technological solutions. The result may be a more sustainable industry

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There has been nothing like this in the art trade. Auction houses, galleries, exhibitions and art fairs have shut down worldwide as the coronavirus paralyses this event-driven and relentlessly international market. But could the pandemic also prove a necessary catalyst for an industry that desperately needs to modernise?

Cancellation and closure emails have been coming in thick and fast. On March 12, the day that President Trump announced a travel ban on 26 European countries, an Artnet News log recorded some 80 shutdowns. Many of these were US museum shows but disappearances from the calendar also included art fairs in São Paulo, Cologne and Dallas, all due to run in April. Prestigious galleries such as Pace, David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth have also closed their doors in New York, epicentre of the global art market, as well as elsewhere in the world.

The first major event to cancel its real-life version was Art Basel Hong Kong, a fair that normally occupies two enormous floors of a waterside convention centre and attracted a record 88,000 visitors last year. [...]

When the Tefaf Maastricht fair was cut short last week after a gallerist tested positive for the virus, several exhibitors, including Omer Tiroche and Robilant + Voena, immediately offered virtual viewing rooms to clients.

“I’d been looking at private viewing room options for a while, and we quickly had to adapt during Tefaf, as did many of the other dealers. The feedback from clients and others has been very positive,” says Ben Tomlinson, gallery director at Robilant + Voena. Unlike a public website, online viewing rooms require a user’s data to enter, another possible silver lining for the galleries.

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