

THE CORONAVIRUS AND THE ART WORLD

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THE CANVAS

Chaos is a Ladder

As The Canvas's favorite Game of Thrones character, Petyr Baelish, infamously once said, "Chaos is a ladder." Periods of upheaval and uncertainty are filled with countless tales of suffering and struggle, but they also tend to be times of opportunity and advancement for those with the ability – and desire – to approach them as such. The global coronavirus pandemic has clearly precipitated massive shifts in the ways entire industries operate. With national economies essentially on pause until the virus can be brought under control, everything from retail to travel to hospitality has been completely upended. Of course, the art world is no exception.

In this special edition of The Canvas, the first in a series exploring how the coronavirus pandemic is impacting the art world, we'll be unpacking the ramifications for galleries as their physical spaces remain closed for the foreseeable future. Something of a cross between article, analysis piece, and op-ed; we speak with Dominique Lévy, Casey Kaplan, Alex Logsdail, and Alexander Berggruen; four dealers representing four very different galleries that range considerably in both size and scope, to get their thoughts on an instantly altered art business, and what that means for the gallery ecosystem going forward. Each provides The Canvas's readers an exclusive glimpse into how they've responded to the developments of recent weeks in real-time, and offers a sobering – yet cautiously optimistic – assessment of the future of the art market.

Unclear as to how long this new normal will last, many galleries are being forced to reassess their business models and make difficult decisions with potentially long-lasting ramifications. Others though – while recognizing the hardship of the moment – are using this time to experiment with different initiatives, grow their profiles and reach, and position their businesses for the future. It's The Canvas's sincerest hope that after reading this edition, readers will walk away with not only a clear understanding of the challenges ahead, but also with the beginnings of a well-defined strategy of how best to tackle them. Like Brad Pitt's character warned in the unnervingly apropos zombie apocalypse movie, *World War Z*, "Those who move, survive." Movement is life.

The worst thing a gallery can do in this moment is be complacent and helplessly wait for things to revert back to normal. At least for now, this is the new normal. Inertia is your enemy. So, take control of what you can, innovate where possible, and adapt accordingly. And remember: Movement is life and chaos can be a ladder.

A Make-or-Break Time

The first and most important point to keep in mind about the coronavirus pandemic's effect on galleries is that there are essentially three separate problems that dealers are grappling with.

They are:

- The immediate closing of physical gallery spaces for the foreseeable future.
- The cancellation or postponement of many fairs until at least the fall.
- A broader economic downturn that is expected to take hold around the world in the wake of the pandemic.

Despite only briefly touching on the postponement of art fairs and the broader economic downturn that is widely expected to affect the art market down below, both topics will be the subjects of their own editions in the weeks to come (along with the impacts that the coronavirus is having on auction houses, museums, and other art-adjacent businesses). This edition of *The Canvas*, however, will focus specifically on what it means for galleries to have their physical spaces shuttered for an uncertain length of time.

Since March 12th, when both Pace and Hauser & Wirth announced the temporary closings of their New York spaces, the international gallery community has come to a sudden and screeching halt; with galleries in London, Paris, Berlin, and elsewhere quickly following suit due to the closing of all "non-essential" businesses in those cities. While most experts point to late May or early June as the earliest possible timing for social distancing measures to be alleviated, those forecasts are predicated on our national leaders making logical decisions based on hard data and science (in other words, don't hold your breath). And even if some areas are able to open back up sooner than others, that's unlikely to be the case with density-rich cities such as New York and London that are experiencing particularly potent outbreaks. We're then left with the worrying scenario wherein galleries aren't able to truly continue with their programming until September; because barring a drastic deviation from years past – which we should point out, is a legitimate possibility this year – most of the art world shuts down for the summer as everyone goes on vacation.

In this scenario, with essentially no in-person programming taking place for six months (March to September), the most pressing question becomes: How important is a gallery's physical space to its overall business model?

Alexander Berggruen, whose Upper East Side gallery space opened in October, has placed works by artists ranging from Ed Ruscha to Paul Kremer with collectors who acquired the pieces solely based on their digital images. The gallery has an online private view of its current exhibition, 'Quarters: Anne Buckwalter, Dustin Hodges, JJ Manford, Brittney Leeanne Williams'

through its Artlogic platform that it has shared with its clients; and a 3D virtual-reality tour of the exhibition has been made publicly available via Matterport's technology on the gallery's website. "Selling will no doubt be tougher in this environment," wrote Berggruen in an email to The Canvas. "But, it's definitely still possible. An advisor who was already familiar with the work of one of the artists in our current show – which opened March 18th, in the midst of this public health crisis – reviewed our high-res images, install shots, and my own iPhone pictures of one particular painting to get as best of a sense of the work from afar as possible. Her client is now moving forward with the acquisition."

And Berggruen's experience is hardly unique. While most collectors certainly state that they prefer to view a work in person before deciding to proceed with an acquisition, a significant number admit that it's not an absolute requirement and employ advisors for just that reason. From new, young collectors who are used to buying everything online, to experienced mega-collectors such as Martin Z. Margulies – who in the December 'Collectors Issue' of The Canvas Monthly said that with the exception of paintings featuring the brushstrokes of the artist, he's quite comfortable purchasing sculptures and installations off of images alone – dealers would perhaps be surprised at their ability to make sales while their gallery doors remain shut.

In the end, what better way to practice social distancing is there, than by visiting a typically deserted Chelsea gallery at any time other than the opening night of a show? In fact, maybe that realization will eventually dawn on local governments, and they'll allow galleries to open back up sooner, with perhaps the added safety guard in place of limiting visitors to a small number at a time. Because, while it's true that in terms of the economy, art may be deemed a 'non-essential business,' as Dominique Lévy poignantly observed, "In terms of the soul, and its ability to uplift and inspire in difficult times, art is absolutely an essential business."