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The pandemic is changing the world of art, and fast
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13 March 2020

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● *Fairs and museums are forced to go online in the face of global cancellations and develop new ways of exhibiting*

The coronavirus has thrown the art world into disarray. Three weeks after the virus was first picked up in Wuhan, the Chinese government ordered that all museums and art galleries be closed.

After China's example, an unprecedented shutdown has affected art institutions around the world. In Europe, museums have been forced to close in top tourist destinations such as Paris, Venice and Milan. In Japan, the Tokyo National Museum has locked its doors and the highly anticipated touring exhibition Masterpieces, from the National Gallery in London has been postponed. Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* is in museum quarantine with other cultural icons.

It's a sticky situation for the organisers of the show. On top of the significant time and costs of putting together an exhibition of this magnitude, they must deal with thousands of frustrated visitors who pre-bought tickets.

Art fairs are getting hit too. Art Basel Hong Kong, which was due in mid-March, has been axed. Art Basel takes place annually in Basel, Miami and Hong Kong. It was cancelled only once before – in 2001 for the first edition of Art Basel Miami – after 9/11. It reportedly



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cost the business about \$4m. Art Dubai, scheduled for March 25-28, has just been postponed. The fair organisers have agreed to reimburse or credit exhibitors the full amount of the booth fees.

Meanwhile, important fairs such as TEFAF in Maastricht and The Armory Show in New York have gone ahead. The Asia Week auctions that take place around Art Basel Hong Kong got scrapped. Christies was meant to host its inaugural 20th Century and Contemporary Art evening sale but postponed it. Sotheby's and Bonhams similarly pushed their sales back.

The art market was already

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challenged in 2019. The latest Art Basel-UBS Art Market Report records a 5% drop in global art sales, totalling \$64.1bn. In China and Hong Kong, where soaring political protests caused further disruptions, the auction market fell 9% and 25% respectively.

Last year, dealers made 45% of their income at art fairs, where sales reached \$16.6bn. At the same time, the art industry is getting criticised for its ecological impact. Artworks are shipped around the world while collectors, exhibitors and other art professionals zip the planet to attend fairs. The art world's carbon footprint is being called seriously into question.

The preventive measures against the coronavirus are hitting at the core of the art economy, which is reliant on the punctual gathering of thousands of people in a physical place. It is the very physicality of the art trade that is now being challenged.

Interestingly, Art Basel is going live in March with the digital platform Online Viewing Rooms. It is getting launched earlier than planned, partly to compensate for the cancellation of the physical fair. Hong Kong exhibitors will be able to show, free of charge, the works they were going to show at the fair.

The organisers say that the platform "will give visitors the



Start lowercase: Yinka Shonibare's 'Skipping Girl' 2019, fibreglass mannequin/Stephen Friedman Gallery/Yinka Shonibare

opportunity to browse thousands of artworks presented by Art Basel

participating galleries". The fee structure will be developed at a later stage but the model follows

that of the physical fair with VIP only preview days followed by general access. Viewing Rooms will run in parallel to the three shows in Basel, Miami Beach and Hong Kong.

Museums face similar challenges. What can they do when they've lost their physical space to stay relevant and connected with their audiences?

With the museum shutdown, China's National Administration of Cultural Heritage encouraged museums to share their exhibitions online. In Italy, the museum Castello di Rivoli had to cancel the private view of the new Sigag collection show.

Instead, it streamed a conversation between the collector Ulli Sigag and the artist Ai Weiwei on YouTube.

In Japan, the Mori Museum posted a curator-led tour of its new exhibition on Instagram and received more than 36 000 views in the first two days. In the face of the crisis, museums have quickly pivoted to innovative platforms.

While not meant to replace the physical experience, these digital experiments are introducing new ways of engaging with art and trading it while inadvertently answering questions of ecological sustainability. In the wake of the coronavirus, can the art world operate more remotely?