

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Financial Times

Could the art world's experiment with online fairs force a healthy rethink?

Melanie Gerlis

1 May 2020



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As Frieze New York launches its online viewing room, it might be time to reassess unsustainable practices

Frieze New York has hosted tens of thousands of visitors from around the world in its trademark tent on Randall's Island every May since 2012. Now, in the Covid-crisis world, the thought of travelling to visit one of the world's most populous cities in order to gather in a crowded venue could not be further from anyone's minds.

So Frieze has done what others have had to do already this year and taken its 200-plus gallery exhibitors online.

Like other fair organisers, Frieze's management underlines that its virtual offering is an alternative forced by Covid-19, rather than a replacement for its real-life fairs, and certainly exhibitors are under no illusions on this front.

"There is no substitute to seeing art on the walls," says Rakeb Sile, co-founder of Addis Fine Art gallery in Ethiopia. This is true in particular for lesser-known, emerging artists, she says. So her gallery's Frieze New York debut showing of the Ethiopia-born, US-raised painter Tariku Shiferaw is bittersweet.

"This was meant to be his big break in his home town," Sile says. Yet, she adds, the shift to online has forced a healthy rethink of how best to give a context to Shiferaw's work — videos on Instagram are among the planned accompanying features.



Image: 'Holy Terrain (FKA twigs)' by Tariku Shiferaw (2020) © Dario lasagne

We don't yet know what exactly the Frieze Viewing Room will look like, but while there are only so many variables on a flat screen, Loring Randolph, the director of the New York fair, says she has been focused on "recreating the community aspects" of the event as much as possible. For example, there will be live conversations offered each day and curators will present highlights of the fair via video.

When we speak just ahead of the launch, Randolph's plans also include a visitor book function for each gallery, "to help create a more personalised experience". Organisers have also added an augmented reality feature to enable would-be buyers to try the works around their homes and gardens, something that will be new to the virtual art fair experience — and may even encourage some Instagram moments.

There have been some changes to what galleries will show, now that the fair has gone virtual. Randolph acknowledges that "certain works don't translate digitally so well" — such as those made of delicate materials or, of course, anything experiential — but says that galleries are pretty clued-up already. "They've been sharing works as jpegs for years, a Viewing Room is just a different context."

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Image: Loring Randolph, the new director of Frieze New York, by Courtney Dudley

The problem is more that the available content has been a bit overwhelming to date — few people have the attention span to stay in a flat Viewing Room for very long.

“Visitors can’t wander around at their own pace and see what catches their eye, as they would at a real event. So galleries have to distil it right down. You can’t have 20 different works by 20 different artists in hundreds of online viewing rooms, it’s too daunting,” says David Cleaton-Roberts, a partner at Cristea Roberts gallery.

Plus, he notes, there’s the reality that as shippers, photographers, framers and other suppliers have shut down, the ability for artists to complete works to art-fair perfection has also been challenged. He therefore had a rethink about what his gallery will show for the virtual Frieze fair and decided to focus on geometric abstraction — a style that he finds resonates online. Artists will include Anni Albers, Josef Albers and Sol LeWitt alongside living artists such as Rana Begum and Ian Davenport.



Image: 'Lines in Four Directions, with Alternating Color and Gray Bands' (1993) by Sol LeWitt © Courtesy of Estate of Sol LeWitt and Cristea Roberts Gallery, London

Very few gallerists believe that an online viewing room is the best way to experience art, but most are grateful to have some sort of business ticking over. And there seem to be some buyers still out there. The London gallerist Stephen Friedman reports a couple of sales from the Art Basel Hong Kong fair alternative, held in the thick of the global Covid-19 panic in mid-March, including a Yinka Shonibare sculpture priced around £100,000.

Sile of Addis Fine Art says there was a “flurry of interest” on the opening day of Art Dubai’s Viewing Room the following week, plus a couple of sales at around \$20,000. That’s much less than she would usually make at the fair but, she says, “Once we’d accepted the situation, we didn’t have huge expectations. We were pleased to have a reason to reach out to our clients in the region.”

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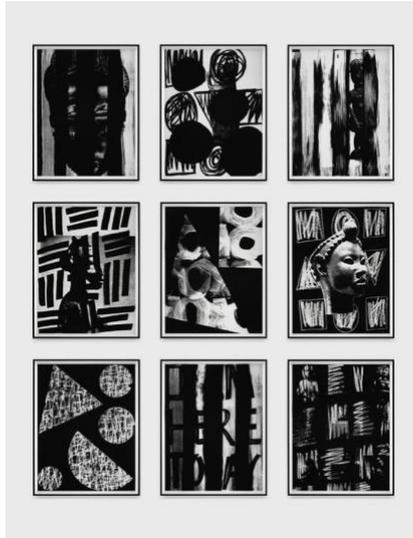


Image: Adam Pendleton's 'Untitled (OKOKOKOKOKOKOKOK)' (2019-2020) © Adam Pendleton, courtesy Pace Gallery

“Art fairs are not going to move completely online — the point of an art fair is to get people together — but that doesn’t have to be every three weeks” - Marc Glimcher, president of Pace gallery.

Marc Glimcher, president of Pace gallery and one of a handful of dealers to speak openly about contracting the virus, says it has been a “reality check” for him in many ways.

“We’ve yet to see that online is a powerful selling tool, especially for very, very expensive things. But it is easier to turn a profit as the costs are less than putting up an exhibition or organising an art fair. Plus, while the process for selling art may not work so well online, the

process for selecting and curating has a potentially unlimited richness.

“We should take advantage of that, rather than trying to burn every last dollar of the art economy,” he says.

His gallery’s online exhibitions will include work by the artists Nigel Cooke and Loie Hollowell made in direct response to their life in quarantine. A new work by Cooke — “Oceans” (2020, \$250,000) — also features in the gallery’s virtual booth for Frieze.



Image: 'Oceans' (2020) by Nigel Cooke © Nigel Cooke, courtesy of Pace Gallery

All dealers recognise that the current situation has accelerated a realistic reassessment of the sustainability of their businesses in the previously relentless art market.

“No one would have wished it, but something had to change anyway,” Cleaton-Roberts says. This applies as much to art fairs as to other parts of a gallery’s business. Glimcher finds that “The art market was kinda crappy already going into this, yet people were in expansion mode, fighting over a pie that was getting smaller.” Now, he says, “I don’t expect a dramatic, post-Covid world, but things will adjust. Art fairs are not going to move completely online — the point of an art fair is to get people together — but that doesn’t have to be every three weeks,” he says.

Sile agrees. “The fair system was getting out of control and we were pressured to do more and more,” she says. “Of course things will be different,” she adds, “It’s a sort of reset of the world.”