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How artists, galleries, and art fairs are weathering the storm of the global pandemic.

A dark cloud has loomed over New York's Chelsea neighborhood. It's a Sunday afternoon, and the rainfall and sporadic gusts of wind have made the environment cold, damp, and eerie. There's hardly anyone in sight, save for two police officers at the corner of 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues, a man clutching his parka shakily while walking his dog, and an eager delivery man pedaling feverishly on his bicycle. All are wearing face masks; all are trying their best to deal with the circumstances.

It's a grim scene that concisely depicts the state of the contemporary art industry, which takes up a lot of square footage in Chelsea. Here, some of the biggest galleries in the world have shut their doors, following federal and local mandates to padlock nonessential businesses and social distance as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. The large, clear windows that let viewers peer into their expansive spaces—normally lined with vibrant wall paintings or imposing installations, wooing passersby—are now boarded or covered by metal gates. And there are signs outside the entrances that express how they are, for the foreseeable future, closed, emphasizing their compliance with guidelines so as to flatten the curve of the spread.

New York—with more than 300,000 cases and more than 19,000 confirmed deaths—is the hardest-hit state in the nation. And this is not counting the staggering unemployment rates, dwindling supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), and overall financial and mental stability of citizens. Many galleries and art organizations that are based in the city and beyond had to quickly evaluate how best to navigate this trying time, figuring out a right course of action that will benefit both their firms and the artists they represent. Because however much art is an expression of creativity, an imaginative view of reality through an individual standpoint, it is unequivocally a business that has seriously been affected by COVID-19.

Art & Commerce



J HILL PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

The role of an artist is to express themselves and, in turn, a certain truth about their society in their work. The contemporary art industry is, in large part, built on selling this ideology: that art is not decoration, but a virtual chasm that needs to be entered and explored. But with a lockdown in place, the conventional process of communicating an artist's vision and enticing collectors, institutions, and gallery-goers to buy into it—both figuratively and literally—has been effectively stunted.

“Art does, and always will, offer insights into who we are and what we are experiencing, as individuals and as a society as a whole,” says Maureen Bray, executive director of the Art Dealers Association of America, which represents more than 180 galleries in the United States. “Art is equal parts clarion call and safe haven, and we need both at the moment.”

But art is also an industry that needs to make money, and with the world effectively at a standstill, gallerists, dealers, and the artists they represent are essentially operating without one of their greatest sales tools: human connection.

“The principal effect, of course, is not being able to be present physically in front of a piece of work,” says artist Angel Otero. “Visiting museums, galleries, and having studio visits with artists and interacting with artwork in a personal way is integral to the industry, especially during traumatic moments. And yet, right now,

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we are living in a time when none of this is possible. The physicality of art is not accessible.”

This is especially difficult, because so much of the art experience is intimate and in person.

Indeed, the majority of interactions that artists have with curators, journalists, dealers, and prospective buyers extends beyond the walls of those boarded galleries in Chelsea. These meet-and-greets take place at biennials, galas, and art fairs, which are housed in sweeping venues that normally generate a hefty amount of foot traffic—and, by extension, income. Since the outbreak, however, expositions, including Frieze New York, editions of Art Basel, and The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF), have been effectively moved or taken off the calendar, leaving all the lucrative deals that are made at these events by the wayside.

“This is especially difficult, because so much of the art experience is intimate and in person,” says artist Leo Villareal. “One needs to be present with the work, and many of the relationships in the art world have a social aspect.”

Artist Ramiro Gomez witnessed the abrupt shift from hobnobbing with art bigwigs that could enhance his career exponentially to almost complete isolation in his Los Angeles home. In late February, he attended the opening of the Art Dealers Association of America Art Show, where schmoozing is standard. Just a week later, he recalled hearing news about how “elbow bumps and hand sanitizer became the norm.” Now, such tony events, which are essential in the art industry, have been canceled or brought online, causing a chain reaction that has far greater consequences than what is seen on the surface.

“The art industry is obviously not an isolated industry,” explains Rachel Lehmann, cofounder of Lehmann Maupin Gallery. “It relies on the ability of the public to interact with the expressions of the artists. As such, the first obvious element that has disappeared is being able physically to look at art and engage with it. The face-to-face interaction, as in art fairs, is postponed. Social events such as museum openings or gallery openings have disappeared.”

Yes, the industry may place artists at the center of the universe, but there are other bodies orbiting them that make up the entire solar system. The lack of interfacing is only the tipping point of how the coronavirus has impacted everyone collectively. There are others behind the scenes that are gravely facing hardships—more so than ever before.

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Uncharted Territory



Booms in the art market are often driven by extended periods of economic prosperity, when more people have discretionary income and the population of prospective collectors, investors, hobbyists, and speculators swells. Moments like the one we're in now, however, with rising unemployment, instability, and uncertainty, can have the reverse effect. Many are less concerned with starting or building collections than they are with securing the basic necessities in order to survive.

"I am sure people are being more cautious with their money, including spending and investments," says Otero. "Naturally, this has a huge impact on artists and galleries, as well as others who work in the art community as a whole."

According to a report published by [Statista](#) in November 2019, the global art industry was valued at \$67 billion, based largely on spending in North America, which had its [GDP grow by 2.3 percent](#). These figures are a stark contrast to the art market's [\\$39 billion evaluation in 2008](#) and [40 percent decline](#) between 2007 and 2009, the height of the Great Recession. Examples of precarity certainly exist; there have been other pandemics and distressing situations that caused a downturn. Through it all, the most agile institutions survived, overcoming hurdles that came their way. The coronavirus outbreak, though, is something that many in the community view as completely beyond comparison.

"We have been open since 1983, and there have certainly been other profound moments: the AIDS crisis, multiple recessions, 9/11, and Hurricane Sandy," says Wendy Olsoff, cofounder of PPOW Gallery. "However, this is unprecedented and

uncharted. Being in isolation, the global intensity, and the fear of illness and death around the world is totally unfathomable—even as we live it."

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“We have had colleagues fall ill and die in some instances, staff across the art industry are going on furlough, there is significantly reduced commerce for galleries and artists, and closure and reduced income for nonprofits and institutions,” adds Loring Randolph, director of Frieze New York. “It will have rippling effects for years to come.”

It’s too early to evaluate the overall financial fallout, but other by-products of COVID-19, as Randolph points out, are currently apparent. To taper the spread of new infections, doors have closed. And when doors are closed, employment drops, burdening the masses with financial worry, which sits under the stress that already comes with keeping themselves and their families safe. Heads of reputable galleries and the artists they represent, more often than not, have nest eggs that they can tap into, but they aren’t the only ones working in the industry. There are handlers, vendors, programmers, administrators, marketers, assistants, and more whose means of living rely on galleries, and art fairs being fully operational.

“Art will evolve and change and react to the times,” says artist Christina Quarles. “It always has. I am not worried about art. I am, however, worried for the people who count on a functioning art industry to make ends meet. I worry for people whose livelihood is dependent on museums and galleries being open, on shows being guarded, maintenance being performed, work being shipped, on sales being made, on schools being open.”

Artists are also concerned about unemployment—just not in the typical sense. To wit, paintings, sculptures, videos, and more aren’t always produced by a single hand. There are many, to be sure, that work solitarily in their studios, taking full control of their output. But in this day and age, a good amount of artists have staff clocking in hours to bring their visions to life. So, even if a creative is financially stable, toiling away in their home, they have to agonize over how to pay their labor force.

“These artists are concerned with how long this pandemic is going to last,” says Lehmann. “Social distancing is a serious impediment to the process of production. Not only that, but there is also some very real degree of financial concern for artists who employ others in their studio. It is challenging to everyone right now, not only artists, who feel this responsibility as an employer.”

Mass job losses, venue closures, and, most significantly, the threat of contracting the disease are factors that the art industry—and every other industry for that

matter—wasn’t prepared to face, despite the fact that recessions existed in the past. “The economic hardship might have similarities, but the effect on how we look at art, and how we function as an art community has fundamentally

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changed,” explains Andria Hickey, senior director and curator of Pace Gallery. To her point, nearly everything has been transferred online.

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Virtual Reality



ALEN GO GETTY IMAGES

Digital platforms have become the only safe and viable form of communication, and firms are trying their best to adapt to the virtual landscape. It's an application that isn't only endemic to art, but also to other industries, including fashion, beauty, dance, and theater. Through social media and web portals, all are attempting to stay connected to audiences, creating on-screen alternatives to the in-person experience. Still, some have a better advantage in this arena. The art industry, in particular, has been comparatively slow to embracing digital resources fully, but recognizing no other means of communication, virtual programs have been instituted to give some semblance of continuity in the community.

"There is no person-to-person or person-to-art contact, because galleries have had to close their doors to the public," says artist Jennifer Guidi. "This makes a big difference in how people view and interact with art. Although galleries have frequently used digital platforms, they are now forced to transition into the virtual world even further in order to sell artwork, promote their artists, and just survive." Will artwork that is Instagrammable dictate our taste?

Frieze, for example, is launching a viewing room via an app and its website that, according to Loring, will become "the digital iteration of the fair" after the cancellation of Frieze New York on Randall's Island. Galleries like Gagosian, David Zwirner, Pace, Lehmann Maupin, and others are all hopping on board, taking part in this initiative. They are also offering their own online schemes, filling their social channels with content about artists: Q&As, studio visits, music playlists, tutorials, and more, which allow viewers—and would-be collectors—to stay in touch and, in some cases, bid on works. And while shopping online for art

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is not a novel idea, the coronavirus outbreak has increased these efforts. This, however, isn't a complete saving grace.

According to [2018's Hiscox Online Art Trade Report](#), online sales only accounts for 8.4 percent of the industry's overall profits. There may be an uptick, seeing how face-to-face interactions are no longer tenable, but it won't be enough to circumvent the impending financial collapse. It is not economically sustainable. Also, pushing revenue in this way comes with its set of dilemmas.

"There is a change happening, but we are in the midst of learning what this change is," says Lehmann. "Is viewing art mediated through a screen changing the way we look at certain elements—color, reflection, texture—and perceive art? Will we have more trust in digital platforms as a result of this? Is it changing the very way we value art? This is the biggest question, and we do not have an answer for it yet. There is a world where by looking only digitally at art, I can imagine lasting effects on the perception and taste of art. One can ask: Will artwork that is Instagrammable dictate our taste? Will it determine the trajectory of the art of the future?"

Consensus, as of now, doesn't think that it will. Loring says that virtual programs are not a "replacement for physically coming together and experiencing art." Lehmann believes that all these closures will bring about "an intense longing and nostalgia for the physical experience." Artist Loie Hollowell concurs, arguing that "it doesn't take away the fact that most of our industry revolves around an in-person experience." Even with all the chaos, most are remaining hopeful. They are taking the time to evaluate the industry and how it conducts business. "It is entirely possible to continue and build connections with our colleagues to forge ahead," posits Olsoff. "But maybe there is a chance to actually build a new and better model for a way a gallery can support artists without all the unnecessary lavish spending, travels, dinners, and general hype that actually was very divisive."

As far as creativity, the coronavirus outbreak has also led to much deeper introspection. Artists, by and large, were required to hit the pause bottom, which has revealed a sense of clarity that perhaps wouldn't have been apparent if the industry continued business as usual.

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What Is the Forecast?



MADS PERCH GETTY IMAGES

There is no denying that the art world has its walls. Class and wealth have long set up a divide, barring the masses from fully immersing themselves in the close-knit community. Art itself, though, isn't so insular and esoteric. "I truly believe that artists are visionaries for our time," says Hickey. "In a time of global crisis, they can offer new ways of thinking about what we are experiencing, new ways of seeing the world around us."

Indeed, amid a global pandemic, the news cycle is in overdrive. Reporters, political pundits, health experts, and commentators are all spewing facts and figures, debating over the right course of action to take to move forward. Artists, on the other hand, have the ability to offer a different kind of vision of the future. "There are so many artists in our program who are sensitive to these issues, which inherently also call in question systemic issues surrounding race, identity, income inequality," says Lehmann. And with the art establishment on pause, commerce hindered, the requisite social events nonexistent, and the culture at large in upheaval, there is an opportunity for powerful voices and ideas to emerge from this crisis.

I think nobody cares about art now, but eventually, people will feel the power of art.

"This is a moment for us all to either shrivel or shine; both individually and as a group," says artist Damian Loeb. "Art is the soul of any civilized society, and I love my part in it; but I am no expert in the business of art, only creating mine. The cruel intensity and quiet smallness of this moment is numbing, and yet it is still moving forward, slowly destroying so much in its unforgiving path; much of these losses only to be appreciated much later, or more likely, never."

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The current state of the art world, like that Sunday in Chelsea, is cloudy. Even with certain digital measures put in place, there is no avoiding the storm. The industry is simply weathering it as best they can, hoping for clear skies on the horizon.

“Coronavirus makes people doubt everything,” says artist Sun Xun. “Everyone’s world gets very small and limited. Finally, we know that we never own the reality we see. Art will have to get more profound, and coronavirus speeds up the process. I think nobody cares about art now, but eventually, people will feel the power of art.”

Ahead, 21 artists open up their studios, letting us peer into their practice and how they are creating art in the time of coronavirus.

Sun Xun



How do you feel about creating art during the coronavirus outbreak?

We must do some special work to fight the virus. I will include some elements of coronavirus into my film, trying to get people all over the world to join us and contribute in their own ways to make the film.

Has your process changed since the outbreak?

I think there is no change for me. Normally, I don’t plan my work for more than one week. It is just a waste of time for me. The world or the situation is always changing, and the key is to feel the direction, and that’s enough for me. I am always ready for changes, and just like water flows through a river, changing its shape all the time on the riverbed. The world is like a drunken man. You must be drunk too.