

The case of the receding art fairs

Date of fairs pushed back; Independent at NY's Cipriani; social media sells better than art fairs; Charles Ede's 50th



Tefaf Maastricht has moved this year's fair from May to September © Maastricht 2020 Art Images

Melanie Gerlis 10 HOURS AGO

Groundhog Day came a little early in the art market last week as Art Basel— regarded as the most important fair on the Modern and contemporary circuit — again postponed its 51st in-person edition in Switzerland from June to September (23-26). Last year, the September event couldn't happen either, though naturally that is not the plan this time around. "The decision was taken under the assumption that at-risk people and healthcare workers will be vaccinated by early summer, so lockdown and travel restrictions should then ease, with a bit of a buffer," says Marc Spiegler, director of the Art Basel fairs.

Tefaf Maastricht, the most important antiquities-to-contemporary art fair, then followed suit this week, and moved its 34th edition to September 11-19, having already shifted from its usual March slot to the end of May. Chairman Hidde van Seggelen says "It is all about who can travel. Our community [of exhibitors] feels more confident about September than the end of May." Also postponed from May to September is Photo London, which will now run at Somerset House from September 9 while Liste, Basel's art fair for emerging art, has sensibly moved to join the main event in town.

Art Basel's real-life fair in Hong Kong is still on the cards (May 21-23), though likely in a much smaller form, and three themed Art Basel Online Viewing Rooms are due this year. Tefaf does not plan an online alternative.

We could be forgiven for taking all these dates with a pinch of salt by now, but organisers are sticking to their guns. "I learnt from last year not to dive into alternative solutions too early. It is far too soon to talk about a Plan B for September when we just worked out Plan B for June," Spiegler says. Either way, he adds, "Most people I know in the art world want to go to a fair, to see art in person and to reconnect again."



The Independent Art Fair will take place at the Cipriani South Street, in downtown Manhattan's revamped Battery Maritime Building © 2021 Etienne Frossard, All Rights Reserved

Another fair with alternative plans for September is New York's Independent, which usually happens in Spring Studios in March. Instead the fair will be the first such event in downtown Manhattan's revamped Battery Maritime Building, a ferry terminal that is undergoing a \$100m redevelopment into a swanky membership club by the architect Thierry Despont and funded by the Cipriani family, Centaur Properties and Midtown Equities.

The fair will open on September 9, to coincide with the also-renewed Armory Show at the Javits Center, and for what chief executive Elizabeth Dee calls "a reunion in New York". She plans just 40 exhibitors (there were 68 at Independent's 2020 edition) in the building's single-level, three-gallery space. This offers high windows and swift exit routes to reassure those who might still be wary of larger gatherings. Dee says she expects as much interest from overseas exhibitors as from those closer to home: "A lot of international gallerists won't have seen their clients here for 18 months." She compares this next edition to Independent Projects, a highly curated spin-off from the main fair in 2014, though she is not committing to making it a regular or alternative event in the future. "This is a maiden voyage for us, so we are keeping all possibilities open. Right now, it just feels good to have something to work on," she says.

Social media overtook art fairs in a ranking of the top sales channels for galleries in 2020, according to a survey of 1,758 worldwide respondents, conducted by the online marketplace business Artsy. Whereas in 2019, 16 per cent of the surveyed galleries said that their top source of sales were art fairs (after outreach to existing clients and in-person gallery visits), come 2020 this had fallen to just 5 per cent. Outreach to existing clients still took the top spot last year (28 per cent), followed this time by sales via a gallery's own website (up from 10 per cent to 17).

Worryingly, the report finds that 8 per cent of galleries made no sales at all in 2020, up from 2 per cent in 2019. Dustyn Kim, Artsy's chief revenue officer, notes that a high proportion of these galleries had no online presence and that there was a direct correlation between making sales and making prices publicly available.

Overall, the proportion of galleries using an online marketplace such as Artsy fell 10 points to 76 per cent, although the total numbers were higher last year on a bigger sample size, Kim notes. The report cites several possible reasons for this, including social media, investment in galleries' own websites and a lack of budget in a tricky year.



Roman statuette of Dionysos and Pan, sold by Charles Ede to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for about £3m in 2009

Fifty years is a relative blink of an eye for a business dealing in antiquities, but congratulations to London's Charles Ede, which celebrates its golden anniversary this year. Ede thrived despite the growing taste for contemporary art at the time but, notes the gallery director Martin Clist, "Ancient art may have been more a part of the vocabulary of professionals in 1971, but it still carries resonance for people today."

To mark its anniversary, the gallery will gradually post 50 works that it has sold to museums on to its Instagram account and website. Fittingly, these started with an image of an Egyptian flask, c664-525BC, with hieroglyphs that read “Ptah and Amun wish you a happy new year”. Other treats to come include a 2nd-century Roman marble statuette of Dionysos and Pan that the gallery sold to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for about £3m in 2009.

Antiquities don’t have to be so spectacular (or pricey), Clist notes, and of course do not need to be in museums. “People are often awestruck by the age of some items and surprised that they can own these themselves,” he says. Items for under £10,000 on its website include a bronze Greek plate fragment (c720-680BC, £4,000); a Roman ring (3rd century, £1,200) and an Egyptian scarab (305-30BC, £480). charlesede.com

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