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CULTURE

# Art Basel Hong Kong Moves Its Art Fair Online in the Wake of Coronavirus

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by Maxine Wally

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In February, during an uprising among Hong Kong's citizens, and China's first brush with the COVID-19 coronavirus, Art Basel Hong Kong, originally slated for late March, was canceled.

It made sense—given the tense sociopolitical situation in the city, and seeing as how the coronavirus has now spread into a pandemic. But the Hong Kong edition of the art fair is one of three Art Basel banner editions, which also take place in Basel, Switzerland and Miami Beach. In its absence, the lost revenue would have been painful: The 2,000-or-so artworks slated for display at ABHK clock in at a total value of \$270 million. The creators of Art Basel Hong Kong still wanted to put on a show in some capacity, so people could participate in the weirdness for which this art fair has become known. Online viewing rooms were originally supposed to be a supplement to the in-person fair—a place where showgoers could find additional information on the artists and their works. But at a time when most of the world is living its collective life online, it seemed right to put the whole show there, too.

Today, for the first time in the art show's history, Art Basel Hong Kong is entirely digital. Works of art are available for perusing (and purchasing) on the internet, through a series of these viewing rooms. Galleries including Perrotin, Pace, and

Gagosian are participating in the launch, which went live at 6 a.m. EST, and will close to the public on March 25.

This concept of casting art galleries and spaces on the internet is nothing novel. Lucas Zwirner, the head of content for Zwirner Galleries, which is also showing at Art Basel Hong Kong, noted that his gallery has hosted 54 online viewing rooms since 2017. But for an Art Basel fair, which relies upon big-name galleries for participation and crowds of people to attend, this is an unprecedented move. Could it be a sign of the future direction art galleries might be heading—a test run for virtual spaces taking over museums and real-life spaces?

Zwirner thinks not. The 29-year-old art scion, who spoke on the phone from a “makeshift home office,” as he described it, woke up at 5:30 that morning to check out the preview of the Art Basel Hong Kong viewing rooms, which were available to VIPs only until today, when it opened to the public.

“I watched people come in, visit, and meanwhile, I’m getting emails from people who are inquiring about artwork, and there’s been lots of interesting sales and reserves that have come over the course of the day. So it’s felt a little bit like being in a booth,” Zwirner said. “But in a booth, there’s this incredible, constant collegial energy. Talking to people, talking to colleagues, constantly checking in. Here, you’re sitting at your computer. You’re not running into lots of people. So the feeling of this, of course, is totally different. But the basic mechanisms are astonishingly similar.”

The rooms themselves resemble the interior of a spare, minimalist gallery. Guests can click through paintings and works mounted on a white wall, with the image of a wooden bench in front of that gives a sense of scale and the uncanny feeling of looking into a real space.

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“Everyone knows that the fundamental art experience is an IRL one,” Zwirner said. “But I also think the artists understand these are extraordinary times. And I think that is a little bit also what our efforts have been over the past couple of years, to communicate and convince our artists that this is a medium which can be taken seriously. The physical objects, as long as the production quality is high and there’s a thoughtfulness to them—that thoughtfulness can be applied to any medium, any outlet. So there’s absolutely no reason why, just because something’s online, it cannot be thoughtful.”

Art Basel Hong Kong higher-ups were developing the online program for several months before launch, and now plan to have future editions coincide with Art Basel’s three shows throughout the year going forward.



Jacolby Satterwhite's "Room for Demoiselles Two," is on display inside Mitchell-Innes & Nash's viewing room at Art Basel Hong Kong.

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This is good news for an artist like Jacolby Satterwhite—whose work is being shown through the gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash at Art Basel Hong Kong.

“I wish I would have known about it earlier,” he laughed, speaking over the phone on a recent afternoon. “I mean, that’s a really weird thing to say, but if I’d known about it, I would have prepared all of my augmented-reality works.” The artist’s medium is almost exclusively digital, and at the moment, he’s focusing on virtual reality, render farms, and the use of a super computer for his new projects.

“It feels like it’s something that suits my language and my lens and my focus,” Satterwhite said. “The works that I’m showing at Art Basel Hong Kong now, they’re really suited, because they respond to the new digital paradigm that we’re shifting into. One that is about quarantining and being at home, the immersive experience being super personalized right now. Me quarantining, it doesn’t change anything about my practice, because I made every piece by myself.”

“The paradigm is just going to continue to shift very drastically,” he said. “I’m here for it.”

The uncertain nature of the coronavirus’s effect on the world in the coming weeks and months has left Art Basel executives and their art-world colleagues unsure of what Art Basel’s June edition in Switzerland will look like.

“At this time, we are hoping to hold the fair as scheduled in June, while also exploring the possibility of postponing the fair until the fall, should it become necessary,” an Art Basel spokesperson said.

In Satterwhite’s eyes, it’s just another example of art responding to societal and economic changes. When the stock market crashed in the 90s, conceptual art came to

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the forefront. Dadaism and Surrealism came about in the wake of the Great Depression. Perhaps a movement toward a more expanded digital art world is this generation's answer to a global pestilence.

"I'm trying my best to move forward," Satterwhite said. "Keep the culture going."