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# Can Art Basel Take On Coronavirus COVID-19?



Following the cancellation of Art Basel Hong Kong, announced last month, the fair has asked participating galleries to showcase works digital

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As major art fairs around the globe are being cancelled and postponed, and Europe grapples with the new coronavirus, the spotlight is now on Art Basel and whether it will go ahead as planned in June.

TEXT: Reena Devi  
IMAGES: Courtesy of various

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AUTHOR

(https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/art-

(https://www.cobosocial.c  
devi/)

Reena Devi  
(https://www.cobc  
devi/)

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(https://www.cobosocial.co  
devi/) 95760 1962

Reena Devi  
Shanmuga  
Retnam is a  
Singaporean arts  
journalist and

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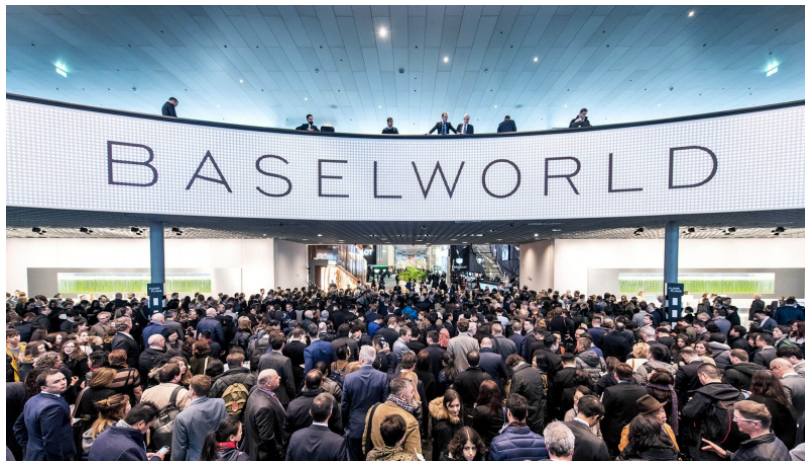


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Following the cancellation of Art Basel Hong Kong, announced last month, Art Basel has launched online viewing rooms for participating galleries to showcase works digitally. Image courtesy of Art Basel.

As international art and trade fairs are cancelled or postponed due to the globally spreading novel coronavirus COVID-19, there is growing speculation whether Art Basel, the biggest and most important art fair on the art world calendar, is likely to take place as planned in Switzerland from 18 to 21 June.

The Swiss government banned all gatherings of more than 1,000 people (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/guymartin/2020/02/28/swiss-government-bans-gatherings-of-more-than-1000-people-forcing-cancellation-of-the-geneva-car-show-slated-to-run-march-2-15/>) till 15 March. In response, on 28 February, Art Basel's parent company, MCH Group, postponed (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/anthonydemarco/2020/02/28/baselworld-is-postponed-to-january-2021-as-switzerland-bans-large-scale-events/>) the company's most profitable trade fair, Baselworld, from 30 April to late January 2021.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Baselworld-communication-e1583723662860.jpg>)

MCH Group announced the cancellation of Baselworld on 28 February, just a week before the physical preparations were set to take place. Image courtesy of Baselworld.

In a press release (<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/03/06/1996629/0/en/Media-Release-MCH-Group-Coronavirus-Update.html>) announcement on 6 March, MCH Group stated the fair “is not affected by the current Federal Council ordinance. If the situation requires, an alternative date later in the year will be considered.”

However, the question is still worth asking given that Europe is only three weeks into the virus hitting its shores and as of 10 March, there are 9,172 cases and 463 deaths

(<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/09/europe/coronavirus-italy-lockdown-intl/index.html>) in Italy (making it the second biggest spread outside mainland China), 1,412 cases and 25 deaths (<https://www.france24.com/en/20200309-france-s-culture-minister-has-coronavirus>) in France (with French Culture Minister Franck Riester is reported also been infected

(<https://www.france24.com/en/20200309-france-s-culture-minister-has-coronavirus>)), 1,175 cases

(<https://www.foxnews.com/health/germany-coronavirus-outbreak-no-deaths>) in Germany, 1,050 cases in Spain and 28 deaths

(<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/coronavirus-cases-in-spain-jump-to-over-1-000/1759996>). The European countries with lower numbers include Switzerland with 370 cases and 2 deaths (<https://www.thelocal.ch/20200308/cases-top-300-as-coronavirus-spreads-across-switzerland>).

All of Italy is going into lockdown

(<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/09/europe/coronavirus-italy-lockdown-intl/index.html>) mode, with Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announcing on 9 March the extension of previously announced restrictions in Northern Italy to the rest of the country.

It is an observable fact that the bigger the art fair, the more heavily reliant it is on international visitors, galleries, curators, collectors and media to participate in the event. As such, while museums, biennials and art spaces deal with their own fair share of challenges, travel intensive (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/art-fairs-coronavirus-plans-1202679368/>) international art fairs are undoubtedly facing the brunt of COVID-19's adverse commercial impact.

Milan's Salone del Mobile, an internationally renowned trade fair for design, has been postponed (<https://archpaper.com/2020/02/milans-salone-del-mobile-postponed-until-june-over-coronavirus-fears/>) from April to mid-June. Last week, Milan's international art fair miart was also pushed till fall with Milan Art Week also rescheduled from April to September. Art Paris has postponed from 2 to 5 April to 28 through 31 May instead.

The European Fine Art Fair went ahead from 7 to 15 March in Maastricht, Netherlands but with a decrease (<https://news.artnet.com/market/tefaf-fair-quiet-coronavirus-fears-1795797>) in attendance from 5,500 to 4,000 visitors this year, and three galleries dropping out. Other well-known fairs in Europe, Art Brussels and Art Cologne, are planning to go ahead as of last Friday but this could change, given the newly announced restrictions and increasing wariness of travel in general.



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The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) is taking place as planned this week from 7 through 15 March. Image courtesy of TEFAF.

Just last week, Art Dubai announced that it would be postponing its 2020 art fair, slated to take place from 25 to 28 March, “in consideration of the on-going global health implications of the coronavirus.” Instead the fair will be staging a slimmed-down programme focused on the local cultural community.

Last month, Art Basel Hong Kong, also owned by MCH Group, announced (<https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/art-basel-hong-kong-announces-cancellation-amidst-coronavirus-outbreak/>) its cancellation, citing “severe logistical challenges facing the build-out and transit of artwork to the show; and the escalating difficulties complicating international travel, all arising as a result of the outbreak of the coronavirus.”

This was followed by the cancellation of Art Central HK which runs at the same time as the bigger fair. Beijing’s trendy emerging JINGART fair slated to run from 21 to 24 May was cancelled in February. Design Shanghai, held at the Shanghai World Expo Exhibition and Convention Center, known as Asia’s largest international contemporary design fair has been rescheduled (<https://www.designshanghai.com/breaking-news>) from March to May. Last week, Art Fair Tokyo announced (<https://ocula.com/magazine/art-news/art-fair-tokyo-cancelled-art-dubai-postponed/>) its cancellation.



However, art fairs such as the Armory Show in New York went ahead and even though Brazil reported its first coronavirus case last week, SP-Arte in São Paulo, slated for 1 to 5 April reportedly (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/art-fairs-coronavirus-plans-1202679368/>) told ARTnews it was “too soon to decide on the fate of the fair.”

While Art Basel seems to be taking a similar stance for now, given that cities like Hong Kong and Singapore which were hit by COVID-19 in January and are still reporting new cases two months later (albeit with an encouraging number of discharged cases), the threat of the virus and public aversion to large gatherings and travel is not likely to abate.

Also, the possible cancellation or postponement of the biggest commercial art platform of our time could have far reaching ramifications for the already vulnerable MCH Group.

MCH Group has been reportedly struggling with financial issues (<https://news.artnet.com/market/mch-group-live-marketing-1670869>) over the last few years, pulling out of regional fairs such as ART SG, India Art Fair and Art Düsseldorf in 2018, dissolving its Live Marketing Solutions division and then suddenly cancelling the expensively ticketed, newly launched art conference Art Basel Inside in Abu Dhabi in late 2019. Most recently, a memo obtained by artnet (<https://news.artnet.com/market/mch-group-woes-continue-1725453>) details efforts to deal with “quarrels concerning the general strategic direction of the company.”



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The first edition of Singapore-based international art fair Art SG had been postponed last year to 1 Nov 2020 this year. Image courtesy of Art SG.

However, in the latest press release by MCH Group on 6 March titled *Stability of the MCH Group not endangered*, the statement reads: "The postponement or cancellation of a number of events ....has economic consequences for the MCH Group but does not endanger the stability of the company."

The press release explained that the early cancellation of Art Basel in Hong Kong allowed the MCH Group and its customers to save costs with the MCH Group submitting its claims to its insurers. It has additionally launched a new digital initiative with the "Online Viewing Rooms," which has been very well received by the market.

For now, it seems the art world will have to wait and see what kind of impact COVID-19 has on the iconic Art Basel and the rest of the global art fair-industrial complex.

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**Reena Devi Shanmuga Retnam** is a Singaporean arts journalist and critic who writes for regional and international media such as ArtAsiaPacific (HK), Hyperallergic (NY) and Artsy (NY). Previously she was a full-time reporter with Yahoo Lifestyle Singapore and TODAY newspaper (SG), breaking stories and exploring issues such as leadership, race, funding and censorship in the Singapore arts scene.

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