

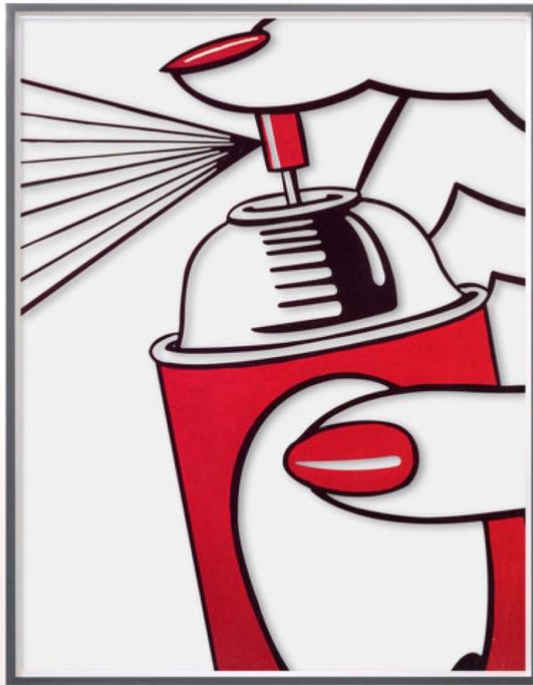
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Yerebakan, Osman Can. "Is Art Basel Hong Kong's Online Edition the Future of Fairs?" *Galerie Magazine*. March 20, 2020.

Galerie

Is Art Basel Hong Kong's Online Edition the Future of Fairs?

Visitors can browse 2,000 artworks spread across "booths" by 235 international galleries, with an estimated value of \$270 million



Jose Dávila, Untitled (Spray), (2020). Photo Courtesy of Sean Kelly New York and the artist

Back in early February, before the global art calendar all but shut down due to the rapid spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), the cancellation of Art Basel Hong Kong was the pandemic's first major hit on the art market.

The fate of the fair's eighth Hong Kong edition was already unclear thanks to the city-wide political uprisings of 2019, but the virus made the decision inevitable.

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Amidst the steady stream of news about art fairs and biennials being called off or postponed around the world, Art Basel Hong Kong officially launched its inaugural [Online Viewing Rooms](#) to VIP guests on Wednesday, March 18 with some 2,000 artworks spread across “booths” by 235 international galleries, totaling \$270 million in value. Ninety percent of galleries originally confirmed for the fair are taking part.

“We hope to inspire new and thoughtful conversations around how digital tools can be used to foster a healthy art world ecosystem,” Art Basel Global Director, Marc Spiegler tells *Galerie*.

Each gallery exhibits ten artworks “hung” in a slideshow format, photoshopped onto a white cube wall, faced by a minimalist bench. Usually a dynamic social occasion, the fair’s networking and handshakes are instead replaced by keyboard taps and email correspondences. A “More Info” button, for example, provides visual details and background about each piece, helping collectors to further contextualize the work before they hit “Sales Inquiry,” which substitutes for typical VIP-day exchanges overheard at every booth.

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Despite an unfortunate 25-minute crash in the system, the inaugural day saw heavy traffic and notable sales, such as [Galleria Continua](#)’s placement of British sculptor Antony Gormley’s *Slump IV* for \$482,000 or Marlene Dumas’s oil-on-canvas painting, *Like Don Quixote* (2002), for \$2.9 million at [David Zwirner](#). As Spiegler acknowledges, while “nothing can replace personal interactions with art or the dialogue those experiences stimulate,” there are a number of new opportunities the initiative offers. The fee-free booth format, for example, alleviates a common issue at fairs, allowing mid and smaller size galleries to exhibit work alongside the big fish, presenting young talent from across the globe on the same platform with the international powerhouses.

It also shakes up the traditional hierarchical arrangement where emerging galleries are clustered together under special segments (and usually in the back). Here, Jeff Koons’s \$3 million *Gazing Ball (BotticelliPrimavera)* (2017–20) is a click away from 37-year-old Indonesian painter [Uji Hahan Handoko](#)’s *Black Prince on 4.0* (2020), available for a modest \$10,000.

“As the art market continues to evolve, the digital sphere continues to play an increasingly important role in connecting international audiences with exceptional works of art,” Spiegler says.

Without the fun-filled spectacle, bold fashion statements, and free-flowing champagne, the virtual alternative could also be seen as a timely wake-up call for the potential future of the art market, which has long been under fire for its large carbon footprint.

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We attended the “VIP day” of Art Basel Hong Kong’s Online Viewing Rooms and talked to a number of participating dealers over the phone to hear their views.

See the highlights below.

Sean Kelly

Bypassing in-person viewing allows galleries to exhibit newest artworks from across the globe, unburdened by usual logistical sanctions and spatial limits. At [Sean Kelly's](#) booth is *Untitled (Spray)*, Guadalajara-based artist Jose Dávila’s 2020 archival pigment photograph of a woman’s hand spraying an unknown substance, responding to the current anxiety around hygiene and sanitation through Pop Art’s commercial aesthetic. Alarm and risk-taking also prevails in Marina Abramović’s photograph, *Artist Portrait with a Candle* (2013), in which the performance artist calmly positions her index finger on a burning candle, donning a deadpan expression. Gallery partner Thomas Kelly shared his approach for the fair, saying, “we responded to the digital medium of the viewing rooms and selected works that we felt would be graphically engaging when viewed on a screen.”