



How Chinese museums are coping with coronavirus: an in-depth report

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As museums remain on lockdown in China, we reveal the full extent of the crisis for both state and private institutions and their innovative short-term solutions

As of today, a total of 80,270 cases of coronavirus (Covid-19) have been diagnosed in mainland China and 2,981 deaths have been reported. Struggling to control the epidemic, the Chinese government ordered museums and art galleries across the country to close on 23 January and they have been shut ever since. Although staff at some institutions have gradually returned to work, almost no museum has announced a reopening date.

Warning shots

On 22 January, two days before the massive museum shutdown in China, the Shanghai Museum's staff at the coat check room were paying close attention to things that were handed to them. The letters on the tag of a bag one visitor was checking in that morning caught their attention. A member of staff was able to identify from the letters that the visitor had flown in from “one of the most affected areas”, according to an article published by Shanghai Museum.

A popular destination located in the city centre, the Shanghai Museum is a relatively small institution compared with many other grand Chinese museum projects of recent years. The museum, therefore, caps daily admission to 8,000 people, which often leads to queues of people in summer and for blockbuster shows. Its three-decade-old ventilation system is no longer as effective as it should be. Sometimes the smell of the paint used for preparing exhibition spaces stays weeks after a new show opens.

Upon spotting the luggage label, the attendants at the Shanghai Museum sounded the alarm and reported the case to the museum's senior staff.

The next day, on the 23 January, without any official instructions from the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, the government body that oversees museums in the city, the Shanghai Museum opened its doors to the public. All the staff were required to wear masks, and visitors had to present their identification and have their temperature taken at the entrance. For those who reported that they were from those “most affected areas”, more detailed personal information was recorded. According to one article published by Shanghai Museum, ten people from these areas were admitted into the museum and those who showed high temperatures were dissuaded from entering the museum that morning.

A few hours later, the Shanghai Museum became the first museum in China to post an announcement of its closure “under certain circumstances” on Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. By then, the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism had issued an array of announcements to affiliated institutions, which required that each take pre-emptive actions against the epidemic.

The 23 January was one day before the Chinese New Year’s Eve, around which time people travel across the country and the globe to reunite with families. This year, it was also that same time that the lockdown of Wuhan, the epicentre of Covid-19, began. Around 10 pm that day, the Shanghai Museum formally announced on Weibo that it would remain closed from 24 January to 8 February. The period for closure was extended without a definitive end on 5 February.

A new exhibition at the Shanghai Museum in celebration of the Chinese New Year, *Relics with Rat Design*, had been open for less than two weeks at the time of closure, and many had planned to see two other major exhibitions, *A Blessing Over the Sea: Cultural Relics on Jianzhen and Murals by Higashiyama Kaii from Toshodaiji* and *La Naissance des Beaux-Arts: du Grand Siecle a la Revolution*.

Not everyone returned home after the museum closed. Members of the Shanghai Museum’s leadership team were taking turns to be on 24-hour duty at the museum; those responsible for museum security and administrative affairs were summoned to sanitise public areas and office spaces every two hours during the day. The ventilation pipes were also properly disinfected. According to the museum, extra care was taken to make sure that these preventive measures did not jeopardise the objects on display.

The public and private museum divide

The state-run museums seem to have reacted to the Covid-19 outbreak in no time and have been fully prepared for it. Perhaps the lessons learned from coping with the 2003 SARS outbreak left a useful institutional memory.

Gong Yan, the director of the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, the first state-run museum of contemporary art in China, told *The Art Newspaper China* that the government order to close the museum came during the early hours of 24 January. Foreseeing the closure, Gong said that the museum had taken preventive measures to ensure the safety of its staff and the artworks on display at the museum.

When Sars broke out in 2003 it was the dawn of China’s private museum boom. The great majority of institutions that are most active in today’s museum scene in China had not yet been established. It is, therefore, the first public health crisis that many private museums face.

When *The Art Newspaper China* spoke to Lei Wanying and Lin Han, the co-founders of M Woods in Beijing, the two were frank in admitting that, at first, they did not realise that the situation was so serious. “Things changed every day, and we were making adjustments according to the most updated information. It’s hard to be fully prepared.” Lei and Lin recalled that the government’s order to close the museum arrived right after the Chinese New Year.

The decision to close has very different consequences for China's private museums, as they are by definition self-sustained and do not receive funding from the government. The ticket sales and sponsorships of various kinds are, in normal circumstances, their lifeblood. With the Covid-19 outbreak, both come to a halt. The pressure is on private museums themselves to fight to survive.

After the exhibition *David Hockney: Works from the Tate Collection* ended at M Woods on 5 January, with a closing party sponsored by Land Rover, there were two exhibitions lined up for the Beijing museum's spring schedule. One was a solo show for the Belgian painter Raoul De Keyser (originally scheduled for 10 March to 1 June), and the other was the US artist Austin Lee's first museum show *Human Nature* (originally scheduled for 13 March to 22 June). In Lei's words, both shows have been one or two years in the making and were well into the last phase of preparation before the museum closed. The current international travel restrictions on those who have recently visited China as well as flight cancellations have also slowed down or interrupted some long-term international projects at M Woods.

Long-term implications

While the museum remains closed, earning minimum revenue, if any, both staff and rents still need to be paid. The good-time supporters for museum exhibitions and events in China, such as luxury and automobile brands, are faced with their own uncertainties and challenges.

According to a recent online survey carried out by a group of 20 art organisations and art media in China from 5 February to 11 February, 90.9% of the 514 respondents in the visual arts industry report that if the current situation continues, their organisations or their careers as freelancers of various kinds will not last for six months. Additionally, 73.8% report that they are only able to support themselves in the current circumstances for less than three months. The support that they say they need the most is "tax reduction" (70%) and "payment, water and electricity and rent subsidies" (67.5%).

Lin of M Woods also mentioned that the relocation of some categories of the auction and a change of schedule of the big auction houses might affect the museum's plans for acquisitions. He estimated that the effect of the museum closures and the ensuing uncertainties will last for three quarters of the year, with only the quiet winter period left.

Museums will not be allowed to reopen without an official government mandate, which more than likely come at short notice. This means that China's private museums, that often do not hold or display their own permanent collection, need to be ready to reopen with an available exhibition at any moment, without any hint at when exactly that will be. "This is the most difficult part", Lei of M Woods points out.

Online opportunities

However unfavourable the situation may seem, the shutdown is not the end of the story for museums. Guided by a new top-down policy initiative at the national level, many museums have quickly shifted their focus to innovate on the internet.

On 28 January, China's National Administration of Cultural Heritage requested that museums share their online exhibitions and content with the public to "encourage the determination and morale of the local people to fight the epidemic, and accompany all to spend a special and

unforgettable Spring Festival”, the official statement says. The Shanghai Museum’s staff responsible for information technology and digital content went back to work during their prolonged staycation to meet that goal.

Soon after, Beijing's Palace Museum, the Shanghai Museum and a great many other state-run museums launched 3D virtual exhibitions, either recapping past shows or providing online access to works in their permanent collections. The Power Station of Art in Shanghai took a more subtle approach. In its official WeChat account, the Chinese social media app, architects and architecture enthusiasts have been invited to cite their favourite passages from the museum's architectural publications and artists and musicians have been invited to share their skills to create a sort of online mini-zine. The account is also highlighting hygiene-themed children's songs and asking musicians to create contemporary adaptations. Some museums have also partnered with live-streaming platforms and offered online tours of their museum’s highlights behind closed doors.

Private museums have also joined the trend. M Woods has designed a brand new and ongoing virtual exhibition *A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum*, which was launched on its social media channels (WeChat, Weibo and Instagram) on 13 February. It is organised around the themes of ecology, nature, isolation and familial ties, which resonates well with people under quarantine. Lei of M Woods says that the museum team responsible for this project wasted no time after the museum's closure to reach out to artists in China and abroad and invite them to show their works in this virtual exhibition. At the time of the launch, 44 artists including Lin Tianmiao, Lu Yang, Na Buqi, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Oscar Murillo, Michael Najjar joined, and the list is still growing.

Another innovator, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, partnered with Kuaishou, a video streaming platform, and presented *Voluntary Garden Online Concert: Sonic Cure* on 29 February, in which nine performers from around the globe live-streamed musical performances via cellphone screens to tens of thousands of viewers. Participants included Zhang Meng in Shanghai; Feng Hao in Hefei; Liu Yucao and Guo Yazhi in Boston; and Ryuichi Sakamoto in New York. The concert was an extended project for the exhibition *Voluntary Garden*, a multimedia art project of both performance and exhibition by the artist Colin Siyuan Chinnery, held at UCCA before the museum closed.

These creative efforts help the private museums stay relevant and connected to their audiences, who it will be important to win back once it is safe to visit a museum again. It also helps to restore more than a semblance of normality, which has become a luxury to enjoy.

Art for the cause

Some resourceful private museums have also co-ordinated charitable auctions. In Shanghai, HOW Art Museum, together with the video-sharing-turned-e-commerce platform Yitiao, Modern Media Group (of which *The Art Newspaper China* is also a part), and ART021, the organiser of ART021 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair, launched a series of online charitable art auctions called *Standing Together Through Thick and Thin* to raise funds for the [Shanghai Soong Ching Ling Foundation](#). The charity is donating children’s masks, digital thermometers and other protective equipment to over 100 schools in China affected by the coronavirus epidemic. The works being auctioned have been donated by artists and more than 80 major art institutions and galleries, including Hauser & Wirth, Edouard Malingue, BANK, Perrotin and Lisson. The pieces that How Art Museum is offering include Jeff

Koons' *Balloon Dog (Yellow)* (2015), Takashi Murakami's *Inochi Doll: Victor* (2009), Daniel Arsham's *Hollow Mickey* (2019) and more.

When *The Art Newspaper China* asked Gong Yan, the director of the Power Station of Art, about the biggest challenges the museum faces under the current circumstances, she said, "How can a public cultural institution do something when it loses their physical space and ground? This is what we are thinking about and doing. Art is by no means a vaccine, but it gives people hope. It may make one seem impractical, but it leads us towards the truth. Art allows us to see the world not as disintegrating nor isolated."

- *This article originally appeared in The Art Newspaper China's January/February print issue.*

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/analysis/behind-closed-doors-how-museums-in-china-are-coping-with-coronavirus>



Ongoing Coverage of COVID-19's Impact on the Art World

Mar 13, 2020 by Artsy Editorial

The COVID-19 virus has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Because of COVID-19's global spread, museums, art fairs, galleries, and many other art institutions and industry events have been faced with the decision to cancel, postpone, or alter their 2020 editions or planned programming. Artsy has been covering this developing story across many articles. Below is a resource to navigate all our coverage of the COVID-19 virus's impact on the art world so far.

March:

March 17

Sotheby's postponed many upcoming auctions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sotheby's has updated its spring auction schedule and closed the majority of its offices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight auctions have been postponed, including the Hong Kong spring sales and a run of Paris auctions originally set for late April, while 17 will still run as scheduled. Most of the still-running sales are either online or London-based; the design sale, scheduled for March 31st, will take place in New York as planned. Sotheby's London office will also remain open to the public, and its Hong Kong office will be open by appointment, but the auction house's offices in Dubai, Geneva, Milan, New York, Paris, and Zurich are all closed until further notice.

The Tate museums closed to help curb the spread of COVID-19.

The Tate museums group—the largest conglomerate of art institutions in the U.K. gathering Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool, and Tate St Ives—are closing through at least May 1st due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Tate's trustees and director, Maria Balshaw, decided to close “for the welfare of all our visitors and staff.”

March 16

London's hotly anticipated Artemisia Gentileschi exhibition was postponed due to COVID-19.

London's National Gallery has decided to postpone its upcoming Artemisia Gentileschi

exhibition due to heightened fears surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally set to open on April 4th, this will be the first ever major U.K. exhibition of the Baroque master's work. According to *The Art Newspaper*, Gallery staff emphasized that the show will go ahead, but stated that “due to the rapidly changing worldwide situation we cannot currently give a specific date.”

Christie's and Phillips postponed their upcoming auctions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Christie's and Phillips have postponed the majority of their upcoming spring sales indefinitely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sotheby's, meanwhile, has yet to announce plans to close any of its galleries, salesrooms, and offices, or reschedule any of its auctions.

March 13

The Art Brussels and Art Cologne fairs were postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The forthcoming editions of Art Brussels and Art Cologne have been postponed as the COVID-19 pandemic worsens. Both of the fairs were originally set to run concurrently, from April 23rd to 26th; Art Brussels has been pushed back to run June 25th to 28th, while Art Cologne will run from November 19th to 22nd. In Brazil, the forthcoming edition of SP-Arte, set to run from April 1st to 5th, has been suspended without a reopening date.

Museums in New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C. closed en masse to limit COVID-19's spread.

Some of New York's largest and most renowned cultural institutions announced they will temporarily close to curb the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). The museum closures— including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Guggenheim Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New Museum, Frick Collection, Jewish Museum, The Shed, and others—came after cities in Europe, and others around the world, called off their regularly scheduled programming.

March 12

The Metropolitan Museum will close after two employees showed symptoms of COVID-19.

New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art will temporarily close all three of its locations—The Met Fifth Avenue, The Met Breuer, and The Met Cloisters—starting in order to help contain the spread of COVID-19 in New York. The museum did not announce when the closure would end, but said it plans to “undertake a thorough cleaning,” and will announce further plans.

Paris Photo New York and the Dallas Art Fair were postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The inaugural edition of the Paris Photo New York fair has been postponed due to growing concerns over the spread of COVID-19. The fair, originally scheduled to open April 2nd on Pier 94 in Manhattan, will take place at a later date that is still to be determined. The Dallas Art Fair has also postponed its 2020 edition, originally slated to run April 16th to 19th. The 12th edition of the Texan fair will now take place from October 1st to 4th.

After canceling its Hong Kong fair because of COVID-19, Art Basel will host virtual booths for 231 galleries.

Art Basel in Hong Kong was one of the first major art world events canceled as the COVID-19 outbreak worsened last month. The fair's organizers subsequently said they would offer exhibitors the opportunity to showcase the works they'd intended to bring to Art Basel in Hong Kong through new online viewing rooms, for free. Art Basel announced the 231 dealers who've taken them up on that offer. All works in the fair's online viewing

rooms will be listed with either a specific price or a price range—their total value exceeds \$250 million, according to Art Basel.

March 11

The TEFAF Maastricht fair closed early after an exhibitor tested positive for the coronavirus.

The 2020 edition of the TEFAF Maastricht art fair, which opened to VIPs on March 5th and to the general public March 7th, will close four days before its planned conclusion amidst growing fears regarding the COVID-19 epidemic. The Dutch art fair came to the decision in consultation with the city of Maastricht, the venue MECC Maastricht, and local health officials, and after it was revealed that an exhibitor who'd attended the fair last week had subsequently tested positive for COVID-19.

March 9

Italy closed all state-run museums and cultural sites as coronavirus cases surged.

The Italian government decided to close all the country's state-run museums and cultural sites, from the Pompeii archaeological complex to the institution hosting one of the year's most anticipated exhibitions. The nationwide closure is set to last until April 3rd.

March 4

The Louvre reopened after closing due to staff concerns about the coronavirus.

The Louvre has reopened its doors following conversations between museum management, union officials, staff, and the Ministry of Health, after concerns about the COVID-19 outbreak forced the Paris museum to close for 2 days.

March 3

Art Dubai postponed its 2020 fair due to concerns about the coronavirus.

Art Dubai announced that the 14th edition of the art fair, set to take place from March 25th to 28th, will be postponed due to growing concerns about the coronavirus. The event will take on a new format instead and focus on holding a smaller lineup of events and exhibitions focused on the local arts scene.

Despite three galleries dropping out due to the coronavirus, the TEFAF Maastricht fair will proceed as planned.

The 33rd edition of the TEFAF Maastricht art fair will still open as scheduled, but several exhibitors have dropped out over coronavirus fears. The fair's decision to continue comes amid increased tension over how the international art market will handle the spread of the disease.

March 2

The Louvre closed amid staff concerns about the coronavirus.

Staff members of the Louvre, the world's most visited museum, have voted to close the institution's doors indefinitely as fears surrounding the coronavirus continue to rise.

February:

February 24

Museums in Italy shut down amid the country's coronavirus outbreak.

Museums in Venice, Turin, and Milan have closed as a result of the recent outbreak of COVID-19 in northern Italy. Seven Italian regions have been directed to close their museums, including Lombardy, which is home to most of the more than 200 individuals infected with the virus in Italy. The ministry of culture has also revoked free entry to state museums throughout the country, which is normally offered on the first Sunday of every month.

Sotheby's relocated its Hong Kong auctions to New York as the coronavirus crisis worsened.

Sotheby's is relocating its marquee spring auctions in Hong Kong to its New York City headquarters amid fears of the growing coronavirus epidemic. The move will impact the house's evening sale of modern art and its evening and

day sales of contemporary art, all now due to take place April 16th in New York; the rest of the planned Hong Kong auctions have been postponed until the first week of July.

February 20

After canceling its Hong Kong fair, Art Basel will launch online viewing rooms.

Art Basel will launch online viewing rooms in March timed to what would have been the 2020 edition of their Hong Kong fair, which was canceled earlier this month amid fears about the coronavirus outbreak. The first iteration of the initiative will run from March 20th to 25th; all the galleries that had signed up for this year's Art Basel in Hong Kong have been invited to participate for free.

February 6

Art Basel canceled its Hong Kong fair in response to the coronavirus crisis.

Following weeks of pressure stemming from the outbreak of the deadly coronavirus in China and, before that, the ongoing pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, Art Basel's parent company MCH Group announced on Thursday that it is canceling the 2020 edition of its Hong Kong fair.

February 5

Gallery Weekend Beijing postponed its upcoming edition due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Gallery Weekend Beijing will either postpone or cancel its 2020 edition due to concerns about the coronavirus outbreak in China. The organizers said they will make a final decision by March 15th.

February 3

Hong Kong galleries voiced support for Art Basel amid calls to cancel its local fair due to the coronavirus outbreak.

After international exhibitors called for the cancellation of Art Basel in Hong Kong due to the coronavirus outbreak, local galleries are rallying around the fair organizers and the region's arts scene. The Hong Kong Art Gallery Association, comprising over 50 Hong Kong-based galleries, released a statement defending Art Basel and saying that overseas galleries are misinformed about the situation on the ground, in part due to sensational media reports.

January:

January 30

Gallerists called on Art Basel to cancel its Hong Kong fair due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Exhibitors at Art Basel in Hong Kong have asked the fair to cancel its upcoming eighth edition in March due to concerns about the fast-spreading coronavirus.

January 28

Museums in China and Hong Kong closed indefinitely in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Museums in mainland China and Hong Kong are shutting down indefinitely as part of the efforts to contain the deadly coronavirus. In Hong Kong, all facilities overseen by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD)—including the Hong Kong Museum of Art—will be closed from January 29th onward, according to a notice on LCSD's website.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-ongoing-coverage-covid-19s-impact-art>



In the Midst of COVID-19, Chinese Galleries Adapt and Persevere

Mar 17, 2020 by Sonia Xe

Since the viral outbreak of COVID-19 in China in January, the art world has come to a sudden halt. With major museums, fairs, and galleries canceling events and exhibitions all over the world, the industry as a whole is experiencing the strain of the global pandemic. However, it is easy to forget how the gallery ecosystem in China felt the first, immediate impacts of COVID-19.

Art Basel in Hong Kong, arguably the biggest art world event in Asia, was set to open to VIPs on March 18th. When the fair was canceled early last month, it was the first major industry event to be stricken from the calendar—sending reverberations through the country and the art market at large.

Artsy spoke to over 20 galleries in order to examine how the gallery ecosystem has been altered by COVID-19 and how many dealers are coping with the impact the virus has made on the art industry in China.

The cancellation of Art Basel in Hong Kong

On January 16th, 24 galleries—including Lévy Gorvy, Lisson Gallery, and Sprüth Magers—co-signed a letter that petitioned Art Basel in Hong Kong to take into account the impact the city's months-long pro-democracy protests were having on market confidence. Hong Kong's economy went into a recession last fall tied to the ongoing protests, and in October 2019, the Asia Contemporary Art Show canceled its spring 2020 edition due to a decline in attendance and sales at its fall edition. The 24 galleries wanted Art Basel to make concessions on costs for participating exhibitors. At around the same time, a dozen galleries decided to pull out of the fair entirely, as the spread of COVID-19 became a global concern.

After the virus was first identified in the beginning of 2020, reports of cases in China, throughout Asia, and then Europe and the United States began to

increase. On January 23rd, the entire Chinese city of Wuhan was placed under lockdown, and Hong Kong confirmed its first COVID-19 case. Mass protest activities in Hong Kong have been suspended ever since.



Between news of COVID-19 and lingering distress from the protests, the majority of those petitioning the fair to cancel were Western galleries. For international galleries with multiple spaces around the world, Hong Kong makes up a small piece of their business. The prospect of showing at a fair with a lowered turnout of collectors was clearly a losing venture for dealers. Faced with a choice, those galleries would have rather eaten the sunk cost and turned their attention towards other markets.

But for many regional galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong is the most important fair of the year. The cancellation always had the potential to affect local Hong Kong galleries the most, which explains why in the midst of demands to cancel, some local galleries called for the fair to go on. On January 31st, the board of the Hong Kong Art Gallery Association, whose members consist of over 40 local and international galleries, released an open letter that expressed how the situation in Hong Kong had been misrepresented to galleries overseas and urged the organizers to consider input from participants other than international galleries.

Of course, we can anticipate some effects on the art market, but like SARS in 2003, we are confident Hong Kong will bounce back and remain the leading arts hub in Asia.

However, at the end of the day, COVID-19 presented a public health crisis that concerned not only those in Hong Kong and China, but internationally, as well. Regardless of the specific reasons that eventually drove the actual cancellation, on February 6th, Art Basel announced that the Hong Kong fair would be canceled.

Wei-Wei Wang, the Asia representative for the Zurich-based gallery Mai 36 Galerie, understood why the fair had to be canceled. “As a gallery that has been participating in Art Basel in Basel for 30 years, we encountered a similar situation in the ’90s during the Gulf War,” she said. “At the time, the whole show was deserted and there were very few visitors. In the end, [Art Basel didn’t] have a choice, and we support their decision.”

The response to cancellation



Bosco Sodi, installation view of “A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains” at Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020. Courtesy of Axel Vervoordt Gallery.

Beyond Art Basel in Hong Kong, a series of additional large-scale events during the city's major art season in March were also canceled or postponed: Art Central, Hong Kong Arts Festival, museum exhibitions, and a slate of music and dance concerts featuring both local and international performers.

Despite those cancellations, a cluster of galleries in the Wong Chuk Hang area of the city, such as Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Rossi & Rossi, Pekin Fine Arts, and Blindspot Gallery, united in solidarity to open their new shows on February 15th.



Bosco Sodi in his studio. Courtesy of Axel Vervoordt Gallery.

“During the hardships and challenges like this, it’s great to see the solidarity of the community here,” said Boris Vervoordt, founder and director of Axel Vervoordt Gallery. The gallery also has a space in Antwerp.

Moreover, almost 70 Hong Kong art and culture organizations—galleries, museums, auction houses, and universities—have joined forces to launch the nonprofit ART Power HK, an online platform to showcase events and exhibitions that were planned for this month. The Asia Society and the Hong Kong Art Gallery Association have also partnered to put on a month-long sculpture exhibition that is set to open on March 26th. The exhibition will include works from 21 local and international galleries.

But the epidemic's impact on galleries will extend well beyond March and April. The Fine Arts Literature Art Center, located in Wuhan at the center of the pandemic, delayed its planned gallery opening and made adjustments to its exhibition programming for the first half of 2020.

The realities of COVID-19



Installation view of “空间图” at Fine Arts Literature Art Center. Courtesy of Fine Arts Literature Art Center.

As the world's priority has become combatting the virus—with entire countries, like Italy, and cities, like Wuhan, remaining under lockdown—it seems increasingly impossible for society to resume business as usual in the coming months.

“A lot of us in the local Wuhan art circle have been working hard at things like transporting supplies to hospitals or fundraising donations through charity auctions,” said Liu Ming, founder and director of the Fine Arts Literature Art Center.

“During the hardships and challenges like this, it's great to see the solidarity of the community here.”

Because of the pandemic, the center has shifted the priorities of its gallery accordingly. “Since its founding, Fine Arts Literature Art Center has been juggling media and nonprofit projects,” said Ming. “We have a large collection of books, documents, and materials in our warehouse and archives. During this time, we will concentrate on organizing and researching these materials, as well as planning online activities.”

All galleries in mainland China and Hong Kong have been set back in one way or another, which has made many in the industry anxious. “We are all in a state of feeling tense,” said Chao Lu, director at the Beijing location of Chambers Fine Art. As public events have been canceled and regular business activities have come to a standstill in Beijing, the gallery might focus on its presence in other markets.

Galleria Continua, which recently opened its fifth location in Rome in addition to spaces in San Gimignano, Beijing, Moulins, and Havana, has also felt the virus’s impact on its business. “The biggest impact [is that] it reduced contact and interaction within the industry,” said Jinle Shi, Galleria Continua’s Beijing sales manager. “For galleries, the direct loss is the loss of connections to clients.”

David Tung, a director at Lisson Gallery, said that at the moment, the priority at its Shanghai space is to ensure “the safety of our staff and artists, as well as our customers and audience,” and to “follow the protocols set out by the national and local government and work to defeat this virus.”

At the same time, he keeps his clients abreast of the gallery’s updates through the internet. “The Shanghai space’s purpose is to better serve our mainland China customers and to take Shanghai as the center, extending to other parts of Asia,” Tung said. “For us, the function of the Shanghai space during this period remains exactly the same and even allows us to provide better service for our clients.”

“A lot of us in the local Wuhan art circle have been working hard at things like transporting supplies to hospitals or fundraising donations through charity auctions.”

International galleries without a physical space in Asia, but which have representatives on the ground, confront their own set of challenges. Sales at these galleries—such as Mai 36, Salon 94, Pilar Corrias, and David Kordansky, among others—rely overwhelmingly on their participation in regional fairs such as Art Basel in Hong Kong.

“Art Basel Hong Kong, Gallery Weekend Beijing, and West Bund Shanghai are the few shows where Mai 36 exhibits our artists’ works in Asia,” Wei-Wei Wang said. “Mai 36 has also initiated the exchange program between Gallery Weekend Beijing and Zurich Gallery Weekend. Before the opening of our permanent space, these shows are very important showcase platforms for us.”

For the rest of the first half of 2020, the gallery will focus its energy on shows outside of Asia that will go on as planned. It has no other plans to show in Asia since Art Basel in Hong Kong was canceled.

The benefits and complications of moving online



1. Frog King 蛙王 / *Some kind of Frog Dialogue 1*, 2019 / 10 Chancery Lane Gallery
2. Xiao Lu, *One*, 2015 / 10 Chancery Lane Gallery

The epidemic has increased the strain on galleries that have felt the effects of a slowing brick-and-mortar economy. Whether or not it is part of their active strategy, galleries must now devote more energy to their digital platforms.

The powerhouses have already been focused on online strategy. Gagosian started making digital sales at the end of 2018, with an online showroom that operates alongside the gallery's presence at annual art fairs. Despite the temporary closing of its Hong Kong space, Gagosian has increased promoting buying and selling online through frequent updates on its WeChat account and other social media platforms.

On February 11th, Hauser & Wirth announced on its WeChat channel that the gallery's Hong Kong space would postpone its March exhibition, while opening a brand-new online viewing room in the meantime. The online viewing room would present past exhibitions at its Hong Kong space and new commissions by its artists.

To keep up with the rapid market changes in this new decade, galleries can no longer solely depend on physical showrooms and art fairs for sales.

Even though Art Basel in Hong Kong will not physically take place this year, the fair and its participating galleries have moved online as well. Last week, Art Basel announced the galleries who will be showcasing works through its new viewing rooms digital initiative, including local dealers like 10 Chancery Lane. Art Central, too, is bringing sales online for its participating galleries. (Full disclosure: Artsy is partnering with Art Central and will be serving as the platform for its online sales.)

More galleries will utilize third-party online art sales platforms (including those such as Artsy) to reach a wider community of collectors. It goes without saying that there are advantages to a gallery space in real life, but to keep up with the rapid market changes in this new decade, galleries can no longer solely depend on physical showrooms and art fairs for sales. Unlike physical galleries, buying and selling art online is not bound by geography, and it can happen around the clock.

On the other hand, it is impossible for the virtual to truly replace the brick-and-mortar experience. Many in the industry are trying to strike a balance between the two. "Buying and selling online is definitely a trend, but the physical gallery can't be replaced, because art itself requires a certain intimacy and looking up close," Ming Liu said. "But we do have collaborations and experiments on the online front."



Installation view of "Scaffolds of Meaning" at MINE PROJECT, 2019. Courtesy of MINE PROJECT.

Chao Lu echoed that sentiment. "Even though the art market is putting more and more emphasis on regional fairs, the physical galleries in mainland China, big or small, are still integral," he said. "Combining online and offline sales may be the most practical approach to the business. Most clients still prefer to see the works for themselves, even if they are already familiar with the artists' history and past works."

Emerald Mou from Hong Kong–based gallery Mine Project said, "We are passionate about any channels that could help promote young artists. Many of the artists we work with are exploring the internet and how the internet affects our contemporary world, so naturally, the gallery cares about and is active in fields that relate to the internet, whether they are directly connected to digital sales or not."

There have been more than a few enterprises that are trying to capture a piece of the digital art sales market, but the challenges of popularizing art collecting, building platform users, and cultivating online collecting habits might be more difficult to solve than the technology alone.

The outlook for the Chinese market



Zheng Haozhong, installation view of "TAKI" at BANK, 2019. Courtesy of BANK.

While no one has the answer, the question on everyone's mind in the art world remains: When will the market recover from the effects of COVID-19?

Of course, it depends on how quickly the pandemic will be contained, and despite the industry's optimism about the speed of return to normalcy in society, it will take a lot more time for the market to bounce back.

"I have confidence that the Chinese government and global efforts will quell the disease, but the repercussions of this will last at least till the fall," said Mathieu Borysevicz, founder and director of Shanghai-based gallery Bank. "The Chinese art market was already sluggish the past two years. This outbreak will only adversely affect anyone doing business in or with China and subsequently the art market. The art market only flourishes when the economy at large does. I think it'll take at least half a year to recover."

Others are more optimistic, such as Dominique de Villepin and Arthur de Villepin. The two are planning to open their first space in Hong Kong on March 20th, even amidst the fear and concerns over COVID-19. "Over the past several months, Hong Kong has experienced significant political upheaval and is now faced with a serious global health concern," the de Villepins told *Artsy*. "Of course, we can anticipate some effects on the art market, but like SARS in 2003, we are confident Hong Kong will bounce back and remain the leading arts hub in Asia."



Christopher Le Burn, installation view of "Diptychs" at Lisson Gallery, Shanghai, 2019. © Christopher Le Burn. Photo by Alessandro Wang/Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

"It's not only the art industry, but our entire society is facing an enormous challenge. The global economy will most likely be affected and it is still early for us to predict its consequences," Wang said. "In the face of a matter of life and death, many artists are also reflecting deeper on the question of existence. These are the invisible but positive aspects of what is happening right now."

While the "live" aspect of art has been interrupted, most would agree that it is an opportunity to reflect on the present and the future of the industry.

"While large-scale events do bring attention and large audiences, the focus on these over the past few years had taken us further away from the essence of art," David Tung said. "In this sense, I don't take slowdown in large-scale events as a negative....It is actually an opportunity for us to quietly think about the future development of the art industry in China."

This article has been updated, edited, and translated from a previous version that appeared on Artsy's WeChat channel in February 2020.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-midst-covid-19-chinese-galleries-adapt-persevere>

“Imaginary Museums”: China’s Art Institutions Go Online in Response to Coronavirus

"It's about continuing to have art present, despite the difficulties"

March 4, 2020 by TOMÁS PINHEIRO

The [Covid-19 outbreak](#) hit the art world hard — virtually all art institutions in China face temporary closure, with little clarity on when they will be able to resume regular operations, or when visitors may feel it is safe to return. Faced with such uncertainty, museums and art galleries have, just like [music venues](#), [schools and gyms](#) across the country, turned to digital means in attempt to keep interest in art — and their businesses — alive.

“Do we need walls? What’s the use of architecture in art?” asks Victor Wang, Artistic Director and Chief Curator of [M WOODS Beijing](#). The museum took the lead in early February by inaugurating an online exhibition born from the concern of how audiences can experience art during times of closure.

[Art Is Still Here: A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum](#) is a series of videos gradually released on the museum’s social media accounts. They take viewers through a guided tour of a virtual gallery showing multimedia works. “During the quarantine period, social media is a potent tool not just for sharing information of all kinds, but also to connect communities,” explains Wang.

Similarly, and inspired by André Malraux’s notion of the “[imaginary museum](#),” small independent space BANK Gallery has developed [Pure Beauty](#), an online exhibition using livestreaming for performances and WeChat posts for visual art. For the latter, they combine photos of past shows with images of “imaginary installations” of real artworks Photoshopped into their exhibition space. It’s a taste of what the show would look like in the bunker-style Shanghai gallery.

Some institutions have found that they were fortuitously prepared for unexpected closures. In 2016, the state-owned Power Station of Art in Shanghai began photographing panoramas of each of their exhibitions and publishing the material on a [link](#) accessible via WeChat (though it also works in a web browser). Previously underused, it now turns out to be a useful tool for engaging with audiences trapped in their own apartments. It’s a similar experience to taking a walk on Google’s Street View, but in a higher resolution; the detail of the works was not taken for granted.



Wang Xu's poster for Power Station of Art

The museum is also posting regular content on social media, [including an exhibition](#) for which they invited ten artists to design relief posters on the theme of Covid-19.

Ürümqi's Gaotai Gallery, the first contemporary art gallery in Xinjiang, features artists from all regions along the old Silk Road whose works revolve around environmental, cultural, and gender concerns. With the advent of the virus and the partial lockdown in the regional capital, the gallery organized a series of online keynotes to be livestreamed on their [official WeChat account](#).

All of the speakers were born in Xinjiang and their talks look at local themes spanning art, art institutions, and literature. Hosts include notable photographers [Hailun Ma](#) and Zhang Boyuan.

Related:

More than a month of living under some form of quarantine or confinement has seen [outbreaks of creativity across the country](#), with many documenting their own takes on "installation art" at home. The [Shanghai Center of Photography](#), SCoP, is exploring the facets of artistic creativity in times of partial or complete lockdown by inviting photographers to create new works from their homes.

"In the hope all will be over soon, we all work from home," says SCoP Artistic Director Karen Smith in an introduction to the project. "But it doesn't stop the creative juices flowing, so we asked our photographer friends how creative staying at home has been for them." Daily, SCoP posts a short set of photos for each artist, including a personal account of their experience. It's an intimate and engaging series.



冯立

一头猪的日常

Feng Li

A pig's daily life

Feng Li's works, as presented by SCoP

As masks became the inevitable symbol of the epidemic, Wuyuan-born artist Coca Dai, whose photography work revolves around impulsive documentation, started a project taking spontaneous shots of people wearing masks in the streets. The project is called [*100,000 People Wearing Masks*](#), but due to stricter closure regulations, he's still to complete the total figure. Nevertheless, he has already posted a preview of the series online in collaboration with the Shanghai self-publishing studio Same Paper (linked above). The post follows a mobile-only design; viewers need to hold their phones horizontally to see the photos properly.



From "100,000 People Wearing Masks" by Coca Dai

Other institutions are also engaged and looking for ways to provide practical support in the fight against coronavirus. Along with more than 80 art institutions, Shanghai's HOW Museum is organizing [*Stand Together*](#), an online art auction to raise funds to buy prevention supplies for primary school students. Participating artists include renowned figures such as [Cai Guo-Qiang](#), who is famous for his work with gunpowder.

The cancelation of Art Basel Hong Kong came as a hard-hitting surprise for many in Asia's art circles, particularly in mainland China. Over the last years, the number of exhibitors and buyers from mainland China flocking to the art fair has become significant. However, the organizers will now provide online viewing rooms for exhibitors to present the works they planned to show; these will go live from March 20-25, with two days of VIP previews.

Shanghai-based Korean art space Arario Gallery, who planned to participate in the fair, have opted to offer [online viewing of their works](#) a bit earlier, going live on Tuesday 3 March. They also have an [online viewing of the sculpture-based works](#) they had planned for the Shanghai West Bund outpost.

The concept of a digital museum is not new. But for the first time, the art industry has to rely exclusively on digital means to keep its audience engaged. "There is always a challenge of representation," Victor Wang says. "Duration, format, and engagement are difficult when navigating the digital sphere. This is also heightened by the mannerisms of the online culture and the 'like' culture established by social media. But in the end, it's about continuing to have art present, despite the difficulties."

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