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Fears and Opportunities

What the New York fairs revealed



Artist Maurizio Cattelan at Independent Art Fair in New York earlier this week. Photo by Charlotte Burns

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Two weeks can be an eternity. If [Frieze Los Angeles](#) was characterized by a sunny sense of fun and optimism (see our [21 February](#) newsletter), the recent and ongoing art fairs in New York have taken on a much different tone, thanks to the microscopic virus with the globe in its grip.

As the reality sinks in about the [spread of COVID-19](#), art dealers are girding themselves. Armed with hand sanitizer and the axiom that fear itself is the enemy, dealers are less worried about their individual infection rates than the domino-style disruption on the system. "I'm not worried about getting sick," said one dealer. "I'm just having to work harder to get business done." Pointing at his phone, he added: "We are dealing with all kinds of crazy right now."

The art business is reliant on the mobility of people and paintings, and the widespread cancelation of non-essential travel is having an effect. Attendance at the fairs was noticeably down. There were, for example, fewer finance people at [The Armory Show](#), an event conceived to coincide with bonus season ("Finance guys are squeamish about germs," said one exhibitor, shrugging). But many of the deals that might normally take place in person are now just transitioning to phone and email. One gallerist was handling a client who no longer wanted to travel to view works and confirm a scheduled sale: "We'll find a way to get the pictures to them," he said.



Paul Cadmus, *Seeing the New Year In* (1939). Courtesy of Jonathan Boos

There are new complications on the supply side, too. Major commissions requiring artists' site visits have become trickier to plan. Several dealers have delayed gallery shows scheduled to take place in or close to the harder-hit centers. Museums are discussing postponing exhibitions (or, in one case, requesting an artist be flown privately rather than on commercial airline to mitigate risk. Indeed, private jet companies are one of the true benefactors of the virus: [business is drastically up](#)).

More than anything, dealers in New York were talking about what this means for [Art Basel](#) given that several art fairs have been delayed or canceled because of the virus, from [Art Dubai](#) to [Art Basel Hong Kong](#). Currently, the Swiss government has [placed a ban](#) on events involving more than 1,000 people until at least 15 March, and the [MCH Group](#) that owns Art Basel has canceled shows within that period. Few believe the ban will still be in place by 18 June, when Art Basel is scheduled to open. But dealers are concerned about imminent shipping deadlines given that they ordinarily would have committed to transporting works around ten or so weeks in advance of the fair, by late March and early April.



The Caddy Court (1986-87) by Edward & Nancy Kienholz, which was on view at Anne Ellgood's curated "Platform" presentation. Image courtesy LA Louver

Here is some likely good news. Basel will almost certainly take place in 2020 because the MCH Group owns the halls in which the fair is located. Even if the organizers are forced to reconsider the June timing of Basel (and currently, they say it is all systems go), it is logical to imagine they might simply reschedule. For dealers that rely upon this fair as a bedrock event, this should be some comfort.

Meanwhile, virus aside, this is not a market in which people are taking gambles. Price points at the New York fairs were conservative and so were the offerings—paintings galore, with a frequent smattering of work in the now-hip-again medium of ceramic—as dealers steered clear of big risk. The fairs were mostly as you'd expect: the ADAA show was boutique and elegant and older, if a little predictable. One standout was the superb *Seeing the New Year In* (1939) by [Paul Cadmus](#)—which one fair-goer called "the most depressing painting I have ever seen"—on show at [Jonathan Boos](#) gallery but not for sale (the gallery said the work was on loan from a private collector).



The appealingly weird ceramic work *Big Bowl* (2020) by Sharif Farrag, shown at Adams and Ollman's Independent Art Fair booth

The Armory Show housed a larger group of dealers showing a mix of work that ranged from interesting to the kind of art you'd expect to see in an art fair: solid and saleable, mostly priced under \$50,000 though some sales here and there were in the hundreds of thousands. One of the more expensive works in the fair was also one of the most disturbing: a \$2.5m large-scale car sculpture by [Edward and Nancy Kienholz](#), *The Caddy Court* (1986-87), which comprises a taxidermized-animal version of a hysterical and degenerate Supreme Court. The work was on offer by [LA Louver](#) gallery who were invited participants in the "Platform" section curated by [Anne Ellegood](#).

Meanwhile, the [Independent Art Fair](#) was pleasantly cacophonous with some interesting work on show at relatively low prices. There were some appealingly weird sculptures by the young artist [Sharif Farrag](#) that sold out on opening day through a mix of presales and day-of at prices ranging from \$3,500 to \$8,500 at [Adams and Ollman](#) gallery while drawings of spaceships by [Karla Knight](#) at [Andrew Edlin](#) were selling at \$6,500 each.

Overall, there is a sense of suspended animation. While anticipating some kind of shock to the system, the art world in New York this week was meanwhile continuing with business as normal, albeit with less physical contact.