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Report from London: Double, Double, Toil and Trouble

The state of the city's art market as Brexit looms



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Speak no Brexit, see no Brexit. Anna Maria Maiolino, *In-Out (Antropofagia)*, from the “Fotopoemação” series (1973-74) © Anna Maria Maiolino. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Brexit is to the art world what fictional villain Lord Voldemort was to students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: a dangerous nightmare not to be spoken of. The anxiety bubbling away in the British art world surfaces in *sotto voce* whispers during business hours; expressed more urgently only in the hours after dark.

Three years after the referendum took place, dealers at the [Frieze London](#) art fair and at [Frieze Masters](#), which took place in London earlier this month, said they were struggling to guess what impact Brexit will have—mainly because nobody in the UK government seems to know either. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has been sending letters to galleries urging them to prepare for Brexit but failing to explain exactly how they might do so. “It’s Orwellian,” says one dealer. “Like *Monty Python*,” says another.

The UK’s constitutional crisis is both spiraling and slippery—a unique divorce bringing together archaic parliamentary practice, longstanding national resentments, political bloodlust and populism. The governmental chaos is bad for business. “Indecision has an even greater impact than a decision,” says Brett Gorvy, co-partner of [Lévy Gorvy](#) gallery, which is based in London, Hong Kong and New York.

A cloud of indecision

“With a moment of finality—even if it is the wrong decision—at least you know what you’re dealing with. Frankly, we don’t know the tax position or where we will be in nine months in terms of our relationship with Europe and it hangs over everything like a cloud,” he says. “It stops you making decisions. When you have an organization such as ours, you can’t hold up your business on the basis of these decisions in London, so you look for alternatives.”

It is hard to imagine that Brexit might actually hobble the UK’s art scene, many locals say. This is the same country, after all, that conjured a spell upon itself in the 1990s, transforming from a parochial, beige sort of place into a cool cosmopolitan hub for business and creativity. Yet, like any good magic trick, the reimagining of London as a cultural hub required a bit of faith—of a kind that was in abundance for the first decade of this century. But this month, that energy and conviction felt lacking.

In terms of the market, things were fine, if a bit lackluster. The fair was fairly busy, said [Thaddaeus Ropac](#), who has galleries in Salzburg, London and Paris, “but you felt the lurking problems”.

Overall, the offerings at Frieze felt unsurprising. The quality was not bad in any way, but nor was it exciting. In fairness, this conservatism is the state of the market everywhere right now. This is not the moment to take big risks with ambitious or expensive installations that may not sell. Instead, there was an abundance of domestically-scaled paintings, photographs and works on paper: cash and carry art, as a former museum director once termed it.

New (old) European centres

The audience felt thinner—lots of Europeans but few American or Asian collectors. Many collectors and curators with continental distances to travel made a choice about whether to attend Frieze in London or rival French fair [Fiac](#): the events used to run on from each other but are now separated by a week. Lots seemed to be plumping for Paris.

Lévy Gorvy did not take part in Frieze this year, choosing the Parisian fair instead. “If Fiac is very successful for us, the chances of us going back to the London fair become less,” Gorvy says. “You change your future simply by the nature of looking elsewhere.”



"You felt the lurking problems," says gallerist Thaddaeus Ropac. Above, a work he brought to London: Anselm Kiefer, *Mutatuli* (1989-2009). © Anselm Kiefer. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Paris and Salzburg

The French capital is in the midst of a cultural repositioning. Amid the uncertainty in the UK some dealers are looking to Paris. [David Zwirner](#) gallery opened an outpost this month (Zwirner told the *Financial Times* that "Brexit changes the game. After October, my London gallery will be a British gallery, not a European one. I am European, and I would like a European gallery, too.").

Meanwhile, the gallery perhaps most associated with the [Young British Artists](#), [White Cube](#), has also announced plans to open a space in Paris (though the gallery's senior director, the appropriately named Mathieu Paris, says the move is "absolutely not due to the political situation".)

Offshore incomes

"Everyone who has been here for more than 15 years and is rich has left—and that's nothing to do with Brexit," says UK and Hong Kong dealer [Ben Brown](#). "Brexit is screwing up the economy but people aren't leaving the country because of it," he says.

Brown points to the stricter tax laws implemented last year for the super-rich who live in the UK and pay no tax on offshore income. Now, individuals who have been resident in the UK for 15 of the past 20 years are deemed to be UK-domestics. This has impacted the number of so-called "non-doms" (people based in the UK with non-domicile tax status), which fell to a record low in August, according to the [HMRC](#), which reported that there were 78,300 registered non-doms for the 2017-18 financial year—a fall of 13% from the year before, with a consequent £2bn decline in taxes they paid to the exchequer.

Keeping cool



Harold Ancart, *Untitled* (2019). © Harold Ancart / SABAM, Brussels. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner . Photo by JSP Art Photography

Yet some of the original augurs of a culturally Cool Britannia are keeping their faith. “London is a really dynamic city and it is showing its best face—despite the common topic,” says Mayfair gallerist [Sadie Coles](#). She says Frieze week was “surprisingly buoyant. There were such outstanding museum and gallery shows, which attracted a very good turnout of international collectors, critics and curators. There was a fantastic feeling of quality, and business was really good despite the feeling of Brexit anxiety.” Indeed, “it felt like a week where we could forget that and get on with business as usual”.

Speaking on the phone from Fiac, Coles said the French fair was “equally wonderful”. The city is in the ascendant for several reasons, she said, principally because “there are lots of institutions which are either new or repurposed for contemporary art, so there is a real feeling of new platforms in Paris”.

“But for me it is not an either/or,” she added. “If the heat is taken out of London for five seconds, I don’t think it is a bad thing. I have no doubt the froth will be trimmed and it will be better. London isn’t going to stop being dynamic and energetic, because it has this great infrastructure of art schools, museums, galleries and artists. And actually, by the end of the year, I will open a third gallery in London,” she says. “Just to dig deep.”