

The coronavirus crisis and its impact on the conditions for artists and arts workers

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The COVID-19 calamity is having the same general effect on artists and the art world as it is on every other workforce and economic sphere. It is devastating the lives of many artists, threatening to drive smaller galleries and related enterprises out of business and resulting in an even greater divide between haves and have-nots.

The great issue is the extent to which the crisis widens the perspective of artists, radicalizes them and encourages their conscious opposition to capitalism, the source of the present misery.

A recent study by the *Art Newspaper* and Rachel Pownall, professor of finance at the University of Maastricht, revealed that art galleries around the world are expecting to lose an average of 72 percent of their annual revenue due to the pandemic.

The mid-April survey of 236 international art and antiques dealers and galleries found that those in the UK forecast the largest drop, 79 percent, followed by Asia (77 percent), North America (71 percent) and the rest of Europe (66 percent).

Approximately one third of galleries worldwide (33.9 percent) do not expect to survive. According to the *Art Newspaper*, “Emphasising the vulnerability of smaller businesses, dealerships with 5–9 employees reported the lowest likely chance of survival (62%), while larger galleries with more than ten employees were more optimistic, with three-quarters expecting to weather the crisis.”

Galleries are also, the survey found, “struggling to pay hefty rents for premises that they cannot even enter, let alone trade from—two-thirds of galleries report they are either ‘very concerned’ or ‘concerned’ about this. For many smaller galleries it is make-or-break time; they say that if they do not get some form of rent relief now—be it a rent reduction, hiatus or total waiver—they will not survive the shutdown.” In New York City, the average art dealer’s rent is almost 40 percent of monthly expenses.

Alison Cole, editor of the *Art Newspaper*, told the *Guardian*, “At the top end, the art world is a luxury industry, but many of the people who work in it—the artists, the handlers, gallery staff—are in very precarious positions. We published an article the other day saying that a third of French galleries could close by the end of 2020. Even if the art market bounces back, it’s

going to be a much smaller world.”

The greatest financial burden, as in every crisis, falls on those least able to bear it. Last month, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that both Sotheby’s and Christie’s, the giant art auction houses, would be furloughing staff and cutting salaries.

The online *Observer* (formerly the *New York Observer*) commented: “Auction houses, which of course rely enormously on the person-to-person dynamics established in sales rooms and offices, are now coping with the challenge of transferring the entirety of the business they do into a digital arena. Unfortunately, their employees are currently paying the price for a sharp decrease in sales.

“Workers from every different industry have suffered due to the immense impact of the deadly contagion, and both full time and part time arts workers are finding themselves scrambling in a new landscape that’s temporarily prevented access to museums, galleries and bustling art fairs.”

In “The Last Days of the Art World ... and Perhaps the First Days of a New One,” *New York* magazine art critic Jerry Saltz argued that the coronavirus disaster “will only exacerbate the inequalities that more and more dominate this universe, with megagalleries and art stars surviving and the gap between them and everyone else only widening, rendering the scrappier artists and galleries something close to invisible.”

The coronavirus is acting here too as an accelerant of processes well under way. Saltz noted that conditions were already difficult “for those not at the top of the food chain. Numerous galleries were reporting being financially strapped by skyrocketing costs and paying to participate in (keep up with?) endless art fairs, always flying to biennials and exhibitions around the world. Artists were leaving smaller galleries in droves for megagalleries. COVID-19 has multiplied this a hundredfold.”

Most galleries, Saltz pointed out, “don’t have cash reserves to go through a lockdown of six months. Or to open and then go through it again in the fall and winter should the virus return. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that many performing organizations don’t have the reserves to go more than a month. The majority of galleries aren’t much more prepared. These galleries will close. Employees are already laid off across the gallery world.”

Art schools “might follow suit,” the critic added. “Last week,” he wrote, “the 150-year-old San Francisco Art Institute announced that there’d be no incoming fall class. Art schools got too expensive, but it’s still possible a century’s worth of educational infrastructure will be decimated, as will the jobs and benefits of tens or hundreds of thousands of people who work in these spheres. These jobs are the only way many artists make a living.”

The commercial art world has grown exponentially in recent decades in line with the stock market surge and the mania for accumulation by parasitism and speculation. The *Guardian* in April pointed to the wealth that has fueled “the art world for the past 20 years—a period of discombobulating growth, museum expansions, soaring auction prices, more art fairs by the month.”

To what extent that entire process will simply come to an abrupt end is unclear. The present stock market rise, based on the Federal Reserve pouring trillions into banks and corporations, may give new and even more unstable and corrupt life to the more exclusive portions of the art world, those catering to the wealthiest buyers and investors.

For the auction houses, even under the present conditions, all is not lost. CNN reported on April 23 that Sotheby’s, despite “shuttering outposts around the world and furloughing staff due to the coronavirus pandemic,” had recently “pulled off its biggest ever online art auction.” Featuring work “by the likes of Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst, the ‘Contemporary Curated’ sale generated more than \$6.4 million—a new online record for the auction house.”

Different social processes are at work. The coronavirus pandemic has provided a harsh dose of reality for wide layers of the population. Associated with that, it seems, has come a burst of interest in art, history and culture, as though masses of people were suddenly, objectively driven by the terrible crisis to look for answers to a host of complex problems.

Like numerous orchestras and opera companies, museums and galleries have taken to putting their work and contents online. The public response in many cases has been great. The British Museum’s online collection page “jumped from roughly 2000 daily visits to 175,000 early last week, and is now averaging 75,000 a day” (*New Statesman*). In mid-March, the Courtauld Gallery in London, an art museum that specializes in French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, experienced an increase of 723 percent from one week to the next in visitors taking its virtual tour. Visits to the Paris Louvre’s website have exploded, going from 40,000 to 400,000 visits per day. The website of the world-famous Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, has been accessed 10 million times since the museum’s temporary closure.

No doubt, much of this is to be accounted for by the loss of access to other means of viewing art and museum collections generally, but not all. The disaster is producing a hunger for knowledge.

Meanwhile, at the other end of society, “Bored Rich People Are Shopping Online For \$500,000 Bracelets,” Bloomberg recently commented.

To the “astonishment” of Catharine Becket of Sotheby’s, in charge of the auction house’s “magnificent jewels” sale, Bloomberg reported, “collectible jewelry sales started to do well—very well. Speaking to her wealthy clients, she discovered they were buying jewels as a sort of pick-me-up. ‘Clients are sequestering at home and, generally speaking, leading relatively dreary lives,’ she says. Some, Becket adds, told her ‘they’re wearing their big diamonds inside their homes because it brings joy.’

“Everyone, she says, ‘is waiting for this to be over, and I suppose knowing that a million-dollar piece of jewelry is waiting for you is a fulfillment of when things return to the new normal.’” This hardly requires a comment.

What will the painters, writers and filmmakers make of the present painful and contradictory circumstances? The current disaster makes the position of the serious and honest artist even more untenable within bourgeois society. Official politics, from right to “left,” in every country can only increasingly generate disgust and horror. The illusions in politicians who, by their brutal “return to work” policies, are condemning hundreds of thousands to death, must largely fall away. Then what?

The pandemic has also exposed the bankruptcy of the politics of gender and race, which has dominated the art world in recent years. What does any of that, the selfish strivings by a handful for more privileges and positions, have to do with the needs of broad layers of the population, whose very lives are endangered by the continued existence of the profit system? In their great majority, those who are suffering and dying belong to the working class or the less privileged sections of the middle class. The class question has once again—in the most graphic and horrifying manner—revealed its overwhelming significance. The most sensitive artistic figures must begin to take note!

The objective situation demands, in our view, a turn by the artists to historical and social reality—the present levels of understanding are utterly inadequate—and a turn also to the working class and its fate. We will develop this theme in future articles.



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