

How to Organize an Art Fair in 2021 – and Beyond?

Lessons and best practices from this year's successful events

It has been a tumultuous year for art fairs: the vast majority of organizers had to cancel or postpone their events. Those who were bold, reflective, and lucky enough won not only experience but important lessons for the long run, too. Now the organizers and prominent participants of one such art fair share their 5 tips for a successful art event in the coming years.

The pandemic posed the biggest ordeal in the history of art fairs - it jolted the art industry more than any other crisis of our time. Although most events had to be canceled, the now ending art fair season hasn't been uneventful, and we can learn crucial lessons from those who could organize despite all circumstances.

The consequences of COVID have been catastrophic in the art world. Galleries' turnover [collapsed](#) (sometimes even by 90%) due to closures and the lack of physical sales – even worsened by the mass cancellation of art fairs, from which they [reported](#) only 16% of their income in 2020, compared to 46% last year. Major museums will [struggle](#) to survive into 2021 and 2022: the American Alliance of Museums reports that 30% of US museums are still closed, and even those that are open receive only 35% of normal attendance. In the UK, 60% of museums and galleries are facing an existential threat, according to Art Fund's survey. Most major art fairs (e.g. Art Basel in Hong Kong, Basel and Miami Beach, Frieze in New York and London, FIAC, Paris Photo in Paris and New York, etc.) were canceled or moved online, others were trustingly postponed to 2021. Only a handful of them could stick to their schedule and keep their live, physical events. Those who did had a few months to learn about safe organization, had a strong mission to support artists and galleries before their eyes and shifted focus to comply with the new realities. These successfully held events present important lessons for the future of art fairs.

Art Market Budapest – the largest art fair in the Eastern and Central European region – [organized](#) their 10th edition in October, with a virtual platform running until November 8, for those who could not attend personally. With 80 exhibitors from 20 countries, it lost only 10% of its viewership – with as many visitors as pandemic regulations allowed. The experience – along with the wisdom of fellow organizers and other top stakeholders in the field (such as Georgina Adam – editor-at-large and journalist at The Art Newspaper, Juan Canela – Artistic Director of ZONAMACO Mexico City, Attila Ledényi – founding director of Art Market Budapest, Mandla Sibeko – founder of FNB Art Joburg, and Carlos Urroz – former Director of the International Contemporary Art Fair ARCOmadrid) at the panel discussion of the adjoining [Inside Art conference](#) – shed light on 5 recent expectations of a successful art fair for the upcoming years. As they see it, these are the 5 key trends for a post-COVID art fair in 2021 and beyond.

1. Regionality

Of all art fairs since the outbreak, only those with a regional focus could endure. This shouldn't mean seclusion at all. Instead, we have to be aware of our regional peculiarities, represent them in a global context and find connections between local and global. An illustrative example of this were the two Paris art fairs: while the global FIAC had to be canceled, Art Paris Art Fair of regional interest could run successfully.

Even without COVID-19, many collectors already prefer “treasure hunting” at less overhyped regional fairs instead of global ones, looking for uniqueness and new impulses. Whenever the crisis ends, regional events will retain their attractiveness as an original meeting point of like-minded enthusiasts, who are willing to travel for an exciting regional fair rather than a mainstream global one.

This was already a tendency before the pandemic, consolidated by this year’s developments.

2. Community

Art fairs play a crucial role in creating communities – no wonder 70 percent of collectors [say](#) they still prefer seeing art in person, despite their unbroken eagerness to purchase and the indisputable advantages of online sales. Successful organizers such as Art Market Budapest consider their community-building capacity and the “soul” – its friendly, inclusive atmosphere – to be one of the event’s all-time key features. Its cohesive capacity even helped the formation of a strong professional community around the event which turned out to be a crucial factor in 2020. There should not only be a contractual relationship between clients (galleries) and suppliers (fair organizers) but a cooperation much deeper than that. These partner-like, empathic collaborations at Art Market Budapest established the trust in participants to undertake international travel and other difficulties despite strict quarantine measures and risks, to join hands for a common mission.

This has been a ‘nice-to-have’ until now, but it has now become a ‘must-have’: a social responsibility to bring artists, gallerists, and the audience together. Creating this community has become imperative for creating irreplaceable connections, subsidizing artists’ livelihood, and stimulating the economy. The organizers’ responsibility for a reliable income doesn’t stop at gallerists and artists: it serves all members of a broader community, from technical staff through to framers and builders – many of whom lost all their other revenue streams due to the pandemic.

3. Sustainability

The question which has been up in the air in the past few years: can the world sustain such a huge number of art fairs? Attila Ledényi emphasized at Inside Art’s panel discussion: “An art fair is not just an art event but a commercial and business event, too. Market and demand should decide how many art fairs should exist, how many it can support. Those who can survive in difficult situations can succeed in the long term. It’s a test. The audience will always be there, as there is a hunger for physical art enjoyment. The key question is whether galleries can be there and guarantee the level the audience is used to. I believe they will continue to attend as long as they can gain new audiences and clients at the art fair.”

Carlos Urroz added: “International art fairs have reached their peak in growth and visibility, and the communities they created became too big. Then a consolidation followed, some started pulling back even before the pandemic, holding exclusive views and so on – it’s a danger of halting an already started democratization process. Art fairs should be the center of recovery after the crisis. They have to lose their expensive, exclusive format and find publicity and visibility. Organizers also have to consider environmental aspects, such as the carbon footprint of the art world. We should reconsider the way we travel. The art fairs that will survive will be linked to a community, be sustainable, affordable, environmentally conscious and run by nice people.”

It's an open question whether online versions can fully replace larger events as a more sustainable, environmentally conscious alternative. So far, their popularity and sales volumes are lagging far behind traditional events, indicating that they won't become adequate substitutes.

4. Mission

All art fairs that could thrive despite wartime conditions have a strong mission – from community creation to social causes, such as supporting black communities. 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London was a great example of a successfully organized event, despite the cancellation of Frieze of which 1-54 is normally considered a satellite or even accessory event. 1-54 owes its success to its strong, timely mission: its focus on African art and on supporting African artists – a pivotal cause in the heyday of social causes and movements around racial equality and attention to previously neglected sources of cultural values.

Mandla Sibeko stressed the timeliness of the necessity of this shift: “African art seems to be getting overhyped, but there are 54 countries in Africa, which are not equally represented, and it still has a lot to catch up with. The continent still has a huge potential, and art fairs can be great opportunities for more and more black and African artists receiving the prominence they deserve.”

Art Market Budapest, as an Eastern European fair, serves other, previously discounted groups as their mission: they expose the region's underrepresented art to the global audience – a mission that benefits the global public and the regional artists alike.

5. Hybridity

Despite spectacular results in OVRs, online will never entirely replace in-person attendance and buying. However, online versions bring some benefits that complement physical events. “It brings price transparency – prices are visible at OVRs. Many people would feel embarrassed to ask personally at the booth, they would feel humiliated that they can't afford a work of art. Online can't replace the experience but people are discovering new names, new directions through it.” says Georgina Adam. This brings about a long-awaited democratization process after the over-exclusivity of the largest physical fairs of recent years.

Merging physical encounters with online platforms also opens opportunities for widening both the audience and the selection of artwork and galleries. And, for those who can't attend personally, it remains their only option to stay in touch. As well, galleries on virtual platforms may more easily become physical exhibitors in the future.

The common denominator among these five trends is that none of them came out of nowhere. Industry experts had already expressed their wishes, warnings and concerns on these topics years ago. COVID brought nothing unfamiliar into the picture, it just accelerated the process. It made certain features indispensable, which some events had already implemented before as an 'extra'. Those who can innovate along these values can become big winners in the art fair industry. And those who keep them in mind for the future can thrive in the long run, too.

The year 2020 entails experiences and conclusions that, though often being born amid panic and haste, will last long and change the future of art fairs. Hopefully, this year will not only be memorable for its catastrophic events, but also for the positive changes they consolidated.

About Art Market Budapest

Art Market Budapest is Central and Eastern Europe's major international contemporary art fair, founded in 2011. Every year, it welcomes around 30,000 international visitors, and hosts over 100 exhibitors from nearly 30 countries presenting over 500 artists. Its last edition was held between October 21-25, 2020, with an accompanying virtual edition open until November 8.

About EDGE Communications

Established in 1996, EDGE Communications is a boutique management and communications agency providing a wide range of services in planning, organizing, managing, and communicating art events and business projects connected to fine art. Its aim is to increase public and business engagement in art by bringing art and the public, the worlds of art and business together.