

The pandemic and the online viewing room

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The pandemic of 2020 and 2021 interrupted the fair business for almost two years. Art Basel Hong Kong in March 2020 was cancelled, followed by the Basel edition in June 2020 and the Miami Beach edition in December 2020. In response, Art Basel launched online viewing rooms, in which galleries could present the works they would have shown at the fair, with prices and contact options. The first online viewing rooms opened in March 2020 in place of the Hong Kong fair. The response was considerable in terms of visits, although galleries reported that sales through the online rooms were modest compared with sales at physical fairs. The Basel edition of 2021 was moved from June to September. In Hong Kong, the edition of 2021 took place in a reduced form with many galleries represented by local staff.¹

The experience of the pandemic showed both the possibilities and the limits of digital art trade. Online sales grew strongly during the pandemic and have remained higher than before 2020, according to the art market reports, particularly at lower price levels. At the top of the market, collectors continued to prefer to see works in person, to meet dealers and to experience the social atmosphere of the fair. When the fairs reopened, collectors returned in large numbers. The pandemic thus confirmed the importance of the physical fair, which the end of Baselworld had seemed to question. The difference between the two fairs lies partly in the product. A watch can be ordered from a catalogue, whereas a unique work of art must be seen.²

1 Notes

1. On the cancellation of Art Basel Hong Kong (March 2020), Basel (June 2020) and Miami Beach (December 2020), the launch of the Online Viewing Rooms in March 2020, and the postponement of Art

The pandemic and the online viewing room

Basel in Basel 2021 to September, see the press releases of Art Basel and MCH Group. Dates to be verified. ↩

2. On the development of online art sales during and after the pandemic, see the Art Basel and UBS Art Market Reports 2021–2025. Figures to be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-the-pandemic-and-the-online-viewing-room