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Art Basel Hong Kong, 2019. Courtesy of Art Basel.
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ART BASEL HONG KONG WEIGHS OPTIONS AS CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK LEADS TO GLOBAL HEALTH EMERGENCY

As Hong Kong works to contain the spread of the coronavirus, which has already killed at least 171 people in China with more than 8,000 taken ill, tensions are rising in the art world as dealers call for Art Basel Hong Kong to pull the plug on its eighth edition, slated to run from March 17 to March 21. The embattled fair was already trying to anticipate the challenges presented by the ongoing pro-democracy protests, which have roiled the region since June of last year, and made an effort to mitigate extra costs for participating galleries.

In an email sent to fair organizers on Wednesday, which was viewed by Bloomberg, the London-based dealer Richard Nagy wrote: “Regretfully, we believe this situation needs decisive leadership and the fatally wounded Art Basel Hong Kong 2020 needs to be put out of its misery and quickly. Having taken soundings and we can tell you, not one of our foreign clients will be attending and they are surprised the fair is still on. There is absolutely no doubt in our minds that this art fair is now commercially on artificial life support.”

In response, Art Basel emailed exhibitors today in an attempt to ease their anxiety. The email read: “This is a challenging time for all of us. Our team is working hard to review all possible options. Needless to say, the contemplation of postponing or cancelling an event of this scale—which takes a full year to produce—is a complex process.” For some, the email signals that the cancellation of the fair is imminent. “I love Art Basel but this is a real pandemic and I am just guessing they know already it’s cancelled and are figuring out how to deal with it,” art advisor Lisa Schiff told Artnet News.

Hours after Art Basel’s letter reached dealers’ inboxes, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a “public health emergency.” The number of people infected with the virus has surpassed the total infected during the SARS epidemic, which last from 2002 to 2003. Ten cases of the coronavirus have been reported in Hong Kong and six cases in the United States. According to the *Washington Post*, the virus has also reached France, Japan, Nepal, Cambodia., Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, Taiwan, Canada, and Sri Lanka.

Museums and other public spaces including schools across Hong Kong and China, where the coronavirus outbreak originated, have already announced temporary closures. On Thursday, the CAFA Museum also postponed its inaugural triennial, which was expected to open next week. As the number of cases continue to grow, governments are now faced with decisions over whether they should close borders and place limitations on travel. As of Thursday, China has barred travel to and from Wuhan and airlines have drastically reduced flights to the country.

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