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An Art Show Returns With Paris as a Main Attraction

The French capital is ready to welcome visitors back to FIAC with a new venue, new exhibitors and a new status as an art marketplace.

By Farah Nayeri
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Alexander Calder's sculpture "Flying Dragon" (1975) installed in the Place Vendôme, one of the outdoor venues being used by FIAC this year. Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Paris's flagship art fair, the Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain, also known as FIAC, is back after a pandemic-induced absence. This time, the venue is not the domed Grand Palais, which is undergoing a top-to-toe renovation, but a temporary edifice at the foot of the Eiffel Tower: the Grand Palais Éphémère.

Designed by the French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte to the tune of 40 million euros (about \$46 million), the 107,000-square-foot structure is getting an extra wing to fit the 171 exhibitors at FIAC this year (down from 199 in 2019). That still leaves FIAC with 30 percent less floor space than usual, according to FIAC's director, Jennifer Flay.

Ms. Flay said the French government, the museums and the city of Paris had "pulled out all the stops so that France and Paris could benefit from a prestigious venue in the epicenter to house the events that usually take place in the Grand Palais."

“We all do need these real-life exchanges,” she said. “We need them very much, we crave for them. The place that art plays in people’s lives has been really revealed in a way that perhaps was a little bit underestimated previously.”

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There will be more than 30 first-time exhibitors at FIAC this year, including the [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#) of New York and Marfa’ Projects of Beirut, Lebanon.

The off-site cultural program includes an exhibition of the contemporary artist Jean Claracq at the Musée National Eugène Delacroix; live and filmed performance-art presentations at the Pompidou Center and elsewhere; and a series of outdoor sculptures in the Tuileries Gardens and in the storied Place Vendôme.



Another view of Calder’s sculpture, a monumental piece produced a year before his death. Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

The sculpture on show in the Place Vendôme is Alexander Calder’s 1975 “Flying Dragon,” a monumental piece produced a year before his death. Made of bright red sheet metal, it looks like a giant toy airplane. (It is an uncontroversial choice compared with Paul McCarthy’s “Tree,” an inflated sculpture reminiscent of a sex toy that was exhibited in the same spot as part of FIAC’s outdoor program in 2014, then vandalized and taken down.)

This year’s edition of FIAC is the first to take place since Britain’s exit from the European Union, commonly known as Brexit. In the meantime, France — which remains a member of the 27-nation union — has experienced a boost in its status as an art marketplace. Several international galleries have opened Paris branches. And the capital’s allure as a destination has

been enhanced with the opening of private museums such as the Bourse de Commerce, inaugurated this year by the billionaire collector François Pinault, owner of Christie's. "Until recently, Paris was somewhat overshadowed by London. But then London chose Brexit," said the French academic Alain Quemin, who just released a book on art galleries titled "Le Monde des Galeries."

"The art market hates uncertainty," he said, "and Brexit introduces a major dose of it." For London to bounce back, Mr. Quemin suggested, Britain needs to introduce low-tax, low-regulation measures, because as things stand, post-Brexit, "all of the import-export paperwork in the art market is happening in London, not in continental Europe." Brexit spurred one New York-based gallerist with a strong foothold in London to open a Paris branch in October 2019: the German-born dealer David Zwirner. "With Brexit, opening a second gallery in Europe felt like a much more logical move," he explained at the time.



Grand Palais Éphémère, the fair's primary venue this year. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times.

Now, in a move that is not correlated to Brexit, Gagosian is opening a third space in Paris: an eye-catching boutique space in a historic shopping arcade leading to the Place Vendôme, near some of Paris's top museums and hotels. The gallery's inaugural show will be a maquette of, and archival materials related to, Calder's "Flying Dragon" (which Gagosian is exhibiting).

Serena Cattaneo Adorno, director of Gagosian Paris, said the space recently became free and was taken over because of its attractive, central location and its architectural flexibility: a 50-foot street-level vitrine and high ceilings to accommodate works of all shapes and sizes.

The Gagosian chief operating officer, Andrew Fabricant, said "sophisticated collectors of enormous wealth and taste" — such as Mr. Pinault and the billionaire Bernard Arnault — were setting up private museums in Paris. "In concert" with them, he added, "we are expanding, too, because I think that kind of level of collecting will beget other collectors and inspire other people to get involved," making Paris "more profitable and more interesting as an art world destination."

Mr. Fabricant described the current situation in London as “dire” because of “postpartum spasms from Brexit” that he called “really very frustrating.” Gagosian is “losing more and more time” on paperwork, such as for the import and export of artworks more than 50 years old, and has had to hire extra staff members. This is not the open-trade environment promised by the British government, he said, and there are “a lot of growing pains to get through before we get close to that.”

Thaddaeus Ropac, another international gallerist with a strong presence in both London and Paris, confirmed that the post-Brexit process of doing business in London was logistically “complicated” but described it as “not the end of the world.”

He explained that cities went through cycles. Paris was, in the first half of the 20th century, the undisputed epicenter of the international art world. The epicenter shifted to New York after World War II, and “Paris could never reclaim this,” he said.

Meanwhile, London was for a long time even less of an art hub than Paris was, until the 1980s, when, with the rise of the Young British Artists, the British capital “took center stage.”

“People started to be very oriented between London and New York, and Paris kind of faded,” he recalled. “The more London became successful, the more Paris took a back seat.”

Today, the situation is changing again, he pointed out. “What I think is different this time is that the rise of Paris will not be at the cost of London, because the entire market is growing,” he said, and “Paris now demands part of that growth.”

“I really don’t think London will lose.”

Ms. Flay, of FIAC, voiced a similar view. She said many people in France had been “staggered by the decision of the British people to withdraw from the European Union, and that’s something that I consider to be very sad.”

“That said,” she added, “one city’s greatness should not be at the detriment of another.”