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Exhibitions axed as recession bites

US worst hit as sponsorship withdrawn and endowment wealth shrinks

By Jason Edward Kaufman and Martin Bailey | From issue 203, June 2009

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NEW YORK/LONDON. An Art Newspaper survey suggests that a growing number of exhibitions are being cancelled because of the recession. We have identified over 20 important shows that have been axed (or, in a few cases, postponed) later this year or in 2010.

Our list almost certainly represents the tip of the iceberg. Many venues have not yet published their 2010 programme, and some unannounced shows that had been provisionally scheduled are being quietly dropped. Decisions may have been influenced by a number of factors, but according to our research financial concerns were key.

The situation seems considerably worse in North America than in Europe. This is probably because North American museums are much more dependent on private sponsorship and endowments—particularly hit by the recession—while European institutions receive more government funding.

Among the worst-hit institutions is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma), with at least three major shows being lost. In August it was to have presented “Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan”, coming from New York’s International Center of Photography, where it was shown last year. This has now been cancelled.

In November, an exhibition on Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles was due to come to Lacma after first showing at Tate Modern in October 2008 and the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (where it closed in April). The entire North American tour has been cancelled, including presentations at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts (originally scheduled for June) and Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario (in March 2010).

Meanwhile, a retrospective on the Armenian-born American artist Arshile Gorky who died in 1948 had been scheduled for Lacma in June 2010, but has been dropped. Organised by the Philadelphia

Museum of Art (opening October 2009), Tate Modern is now the only other venue for the exhibition (spring 2010).

In some cases, late moves have been made to rescue shows. Tate Britain had long planned a major exhibition on Zoffany for autumn 2010. Earlier this year it was dropped, partly because of its financial viability in the present economic circumstances.

The Royal Academy has now stepped in and has taken the show for spring 2012. It is notable that the Academy felt it could make the project viable, despite Tate's concerns.

Tate Britain, therefore, has a gap in its programme, and plans are being considered to extend its yet-to-be-announced Henry Moore exhibition. This large show will look at the sculptor's place in modern art, supported with loans from the Henry Moore Foundation. The proposal is to extend it from a normal three-month run to six months.

Even if it is mainly American museums that are cancelling shows, this can directly impact on European institutions, in the case of touring exhibitions. Presenting an exhibition at several venues spreads costs or brings in a fee to the originating museum. The Victoria and Albert Museum is touring "Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design", which was due to have been presented at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in February 2010. This has now been cancelled. V&A director Mark Jones told us that "we have seen some cancellations of our travelling exhibitions, and it would be foolish to pretend there are no problems".

Another example is the French 19th-century artist Jean-Léon Gérôme, which opens at the Getty in late 2010 and will then be presented at the Musée d'Orsay in early 2011. The showing at Baltimore's Walters Art Museum in spring 2010 has been cancelled. Walters' director Gary Vikan said that the show would have resulted in a net loss of \$300,000. "In normal times, we could have lived with that," he said.

Shows cancelled or postponed

- Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, "Jean-Léon Gérôme", February-May 2010, cancelled
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, "Subversion of the Images: Surrealism and Photography", spring 2010, cancelled
- Chicago, Field Museum, "Lucy's Legacy: the Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia", planned for 2009-10, dropped
- Denver, Denver Art Museum, "Imperial Mughal Albums from the Chester Beatty Library", July-September 2009, cancelled
- Honolulu, Contemporary Art Museum, "Japan Fantastic" (11 contemporary artists), December 2009-March 2010, cancelled

- Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, “Cildo Meireles”, June-September 2009, cancelled
- Kansas City, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, “Rafael Lozano-Hemmer”, February-May 2009, cancelled
- London, Tate Britain, “Johann Zoffany”, autumn 2010, cancelled and moved to Royal Academy
- Los Angeles, Getty Museum, “Franz Messerschmidt”, September 2009-January 2010, postponed
- Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan”, August-November 2009, cancelled
- Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Cildo Meireles”, November 2009-February 2010, cancelled
- Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Arshile Gorky: a Retrospective”, June-September 2010, cancelled
- Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, “Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design”, February-May 2010, cancelled
- New York, Brooklyn Museum of Art, “Donald Saff and the Art of Collaboration”, September 2009-January 2010, cancelled
- New York, Metropolitan Museum, “Duncan Phyfe: America’s Legendary Cabinetmaker”, January-April 2010, postponed
- Paris, Centre Pompidou, Indian contemporary art, 2010, postponed to 2011
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, “The Kingdom of Aragon” (15th-century Spanish painting), spring 2010, postponed to 2011
- Reykjavík, National Gallery of Iceland, “Off the Beaten Track: Violence, Women and Art”, September-December 2009, cancelled
- Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, “Cildo Meireles”, March-June 2010, cancelled
- Vienna, Albertina, “Jörg Immendorff”, October 2009-January 2010, cancelled