



Business

Design Galleries Adjust to New Realities

As relief efforts circulate in the art world, gallerists like Zesty Meyers and David Alhadeff consider their options

By David Sokol

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Last night, the White House and Senate Democrats finalized details of an [economic stimulus package](#) to help counteract the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. But while Americans wait for this deal to go into effect, leaders in the art and design gallery world already have their work cut out for them.

As gallerists have shifted to working from home, work has all but stopped for the often-freelance art handlers, photographers, technicians, and other professionals who serve them. “I can’t employ them right now,” Zesty Meyers puts it simply to AD PRO. The principal of renowned New York-based design gallery [R & Company](#) says that most current projects are proceeding in spite of the coronavirus and that sales inquiries have even increased since Governor Andrew Cuomo shuttered nonessential businesses this past Sunday. Even so, he explains, “If I made a sale right now, I could hire them back, but they can’t come to work, because what if they got sick or a client got sick? These jobs can’t get going again until we get the all-clear from Governor Cuomo. It’s a global problem.”

According to a [change.org initiative](#) launched last week by the [New Art Dealers Alliance \(NADA\)](#), “The continued loss of revenue [generated by galleries’ sales] will make it increasingly difficult for these businesses to support their full-time, part-time, and contract employees as well as their artists.” The petition highlights that galleries do not qualify for the current New York City small-business relief programs, [NYC Employee Retention Grant Program](#) and [NYC Small Business Continuity Fund](#). It further calls for the creation of relief initiatives designed expressly for businesses that operate according to an art-gallery model.

In a statement provided to AD PRO, Zack Tornaben, NADA's director of partnerships and communications, writes that in addition to advocating for art galleries, artists, and art workers, the petition "support[s] design galleries, along with a large number of small business in the cultural sphere not included in the scope of NYC Small Business Continuity Fund and the NYC Employee Retention Grant Program." NADA's regular membership includes several art galleries that also represent designers. Tornaben adds, "We are now concentrating our efforts on supporting [Senate Bill S8125](#) to suspend rent payments for residential tenants and small business commercial tenants and certain mortgage payments for 90 days in response to the outbreak of COVID-19."

[Maison Gerard](#) principal Benoist Drut thinks design gallerists may benefit from NADA's advocacy even more than the visual-arts community "[G]alleries much like ours are tied to the work of designers, who we work with very closely as they are creating interiors for their clients," Drut says to AD PRO. "If those projects are placed on hold temporarily, then there is a direct domino effect." Acknowledging that circumstances could very well change tomorrow, Drut notes that it just recently began moving forward on the commission of a Niamh Barry light sculpture for Thanksgiving delivery. In contrast, "we have received a request for a refund, despite the fact that the order stated 'no refunds.' What can you do but be accommodating in times like this and issue the refund?" Maison Gerard's art handlers—whom Drut calls "our trusted friends"—are based in New Jersey and prohibited from work.

Citing the [Design Miami](#) fairs as the most important event on design gallerists' business calendars, Meyers says he has heard from the event organizer that it is coordinating a tremendous social media push "to show how people live with design right now. It's pretty beautiful to see things in situ versus how they appear at a gallery or a fair, and the more people who do outreach about design collecting, the better it is for all of us."

These lobbying and marketing efforts are part of a broader movement dedicated to stimulating the culture economy. Museum executives have issued a letter to Congress requesting [\\$4 billion in aid](#) to nonprofit museums, and private philanthropists established a [New York-based fund](#) offering grants and loans to nonprofit arts and cultural organizations. Last week, the [American Institute of Architects](#) appealed to Congress to support the design community, as well, while aid packages to the creative professions have already rolled out in the [UK](#) and [Germany](#).

David Alhadeff of [The Future Perfect](#) is also contending with these uncertainties. "I have been so busy reacting to the circumstances at hand, I haven't had much time to explore relief for our business," he comments to AD PRO. "That said, I know we will need access to some relief! This has been a major hit." While Alhadeff feels it is premature to comment on governmental efforts, he adds, "Frankly, it's a shame that the NADA petition even needs to exist—but I'm certainly glad it does! Businesses should be able to apply for and receive financial support with relative ease. Most creative business operators, like art and design gallerists, aren't going to necessarily be finance experts. However, that doesn't mean that we should be precluded from [such funds]."

Ultimately, there could be a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic, both Drut and Meyers predicts. Self-isolation may awaken consumers to the value of design excellence in their homes, and compel them to initiate or expand their collections in turn. Meyers also hopes that in the meantime, this week's mishmash of advocacy efforts will inspire someone to start a professional alliance standing up on behalf of design gallerists.

AD PRO is currently offering free access to all news stories about the [coronavirus outbreak](#).