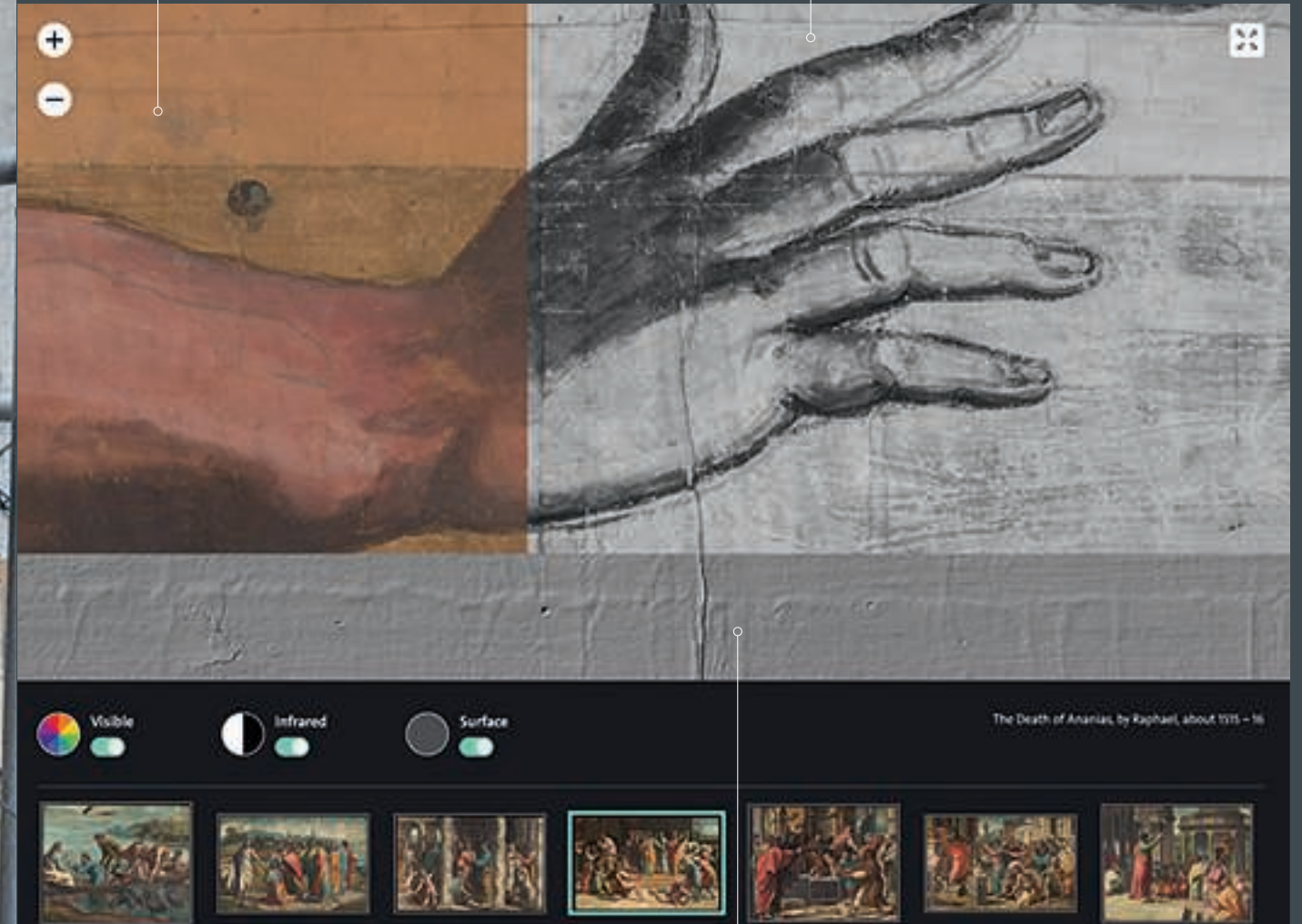




Visible – Explore Raphael’s brushstrokes

Infrared – Explore Raphael’s hidden underdrawing



BACK TO REALITY?

Over the past year, London’s art galleries, museums, auction houses and fairs have had to become broadcasters, boutiques, educators and communities, offering digital versions of their physical selves. As we emerge from the pandemic and they open their doors once more, where will the balance between digital and real life lie?

WORDS EMMA O’KELLY

Surface – Explore the cartoon’s textured landscape



“The real gain, digitally speaking, has been that we have broadened our understanding of who our audiences are and what they want”

the gallery’s artists, curators and exhibition co-ordinators to better prepare shows without travel and transportation, but during Covid we have seen its potential beyond the gallery,” Wenman says. “Using AR, we are working with a handful of collectors to display their works in situ at their homes.”

Technology is not only shaping the way we display and share art, but also how we conserve and preserve it. This year, to mark the 500th anniversary of Italian painter Raphael, the National Gallery had planned a blockbuster. It has been postponed to 2022, and the V&A has stepped in. As the owner of the only full-scale tapestry designs by the late maestro still in existence, the museum worked with digital conservationists Factum Foundation to scan all seven cartoons, created as templates for weavers circa 1513, and present them online.

As well as Raphael tapestries, Factum Foundation has created facsimiles of many famous artworks and sites, among them the ancient Saudi Arabian city of Al-Ula. Its founder Adam Lock explains: “It is clear that some fundamental decisions need to be taken about how to preserve, share, classify, archive and engage with diverse forms of cultural heritage. Our work to provide online and offline access is at the heart of this discussion.”

Greater collaboration will be key. During the pandemic, larger galleries and auction houses stepped in to support smaller ones, while others joined forces to create hybrid shows. David Zwirner’s Platform series, launched in lockdown, showcases emerging galleries in different cities around the world. A dozen galleries from New York debuted with one work and the invitation has been extended to those in LA, London, Paris and Brussels. For London gallerist Stephen Freidman, a January collaboration with Swedish design gallery Modernity to show contemporary art and Nordic mid-century design together in a Grade II-listed mansion made perfect sense. “It gave us an opportunity to reposition works in a grand domestic environment alongside furniture and design,” says Friedman. “This felt particularly relevant in the current situation because collectors were becoming a little

Faced with no choice but to invest more energy than ever before into their online offerings, cultural institutions have spent the past year testing out new ways to stay relevant and draw in new visitors. They might have seen revenues tumble, but as digital visitors, we have definitely benefitted.

Thanks to The Royal Academy’s partnership with Google Arts & Culture, we can jump right into *The Last Supper* or piece together a puzzle of Hokusai’s *Great Wave*. The National Gallery’s website, meanwhile, offers five-minute guided meditation sessions in front of famous works such as Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield with Cypresses*. Private galleries have turned into documentary makers, filming artists at work and recording behind-the-scenes interviews with restorers and curators.

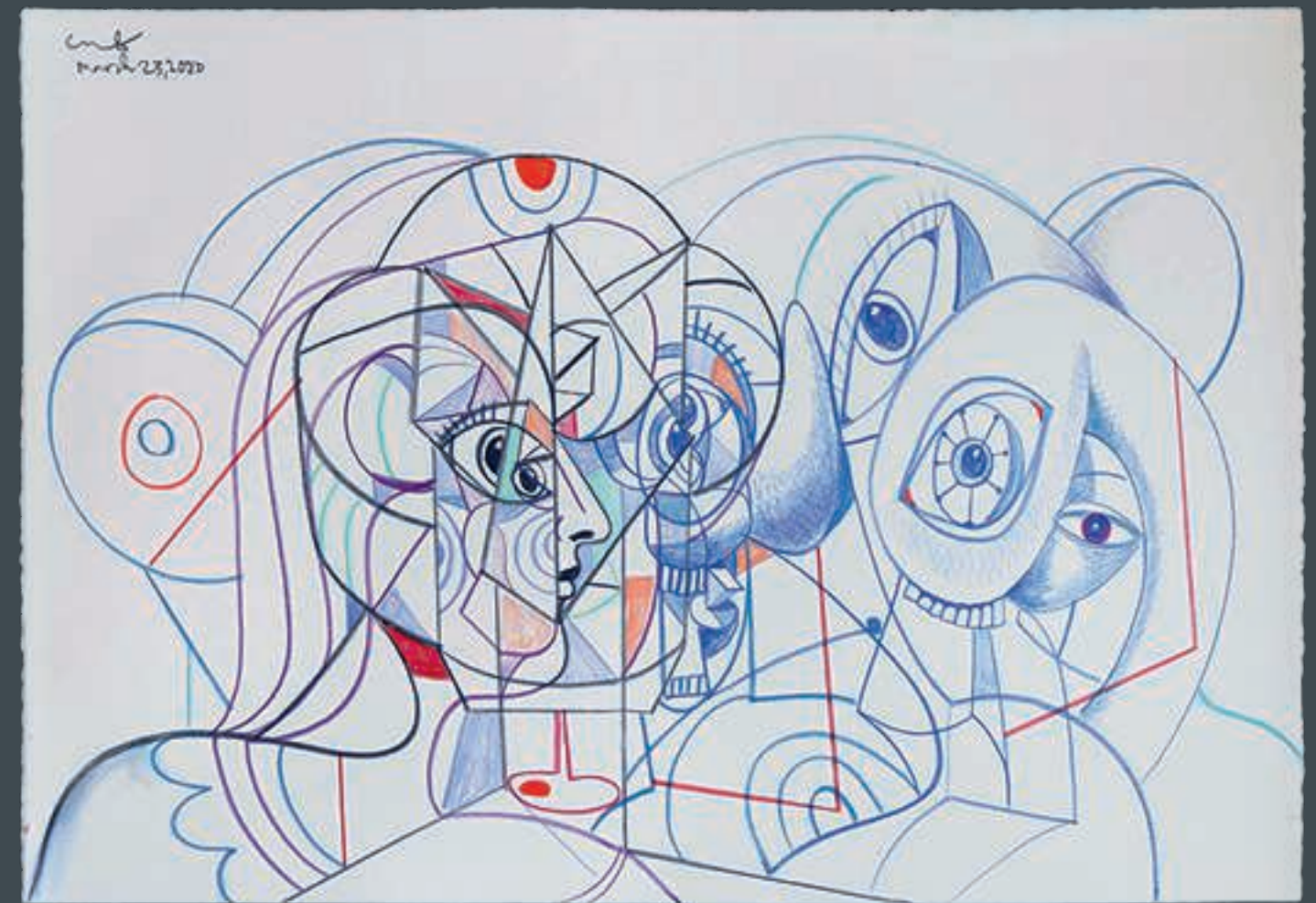
Museums have bolstered their learning, offering masterclasses, courses and workshops. At the V&A Academy, students can enrol on art history courses, or sign up to workshops in photography and dressmaking. Its famously date-friendly Friday Late sessions, meanwhile, have increased in popularity. Commercial galleries are getting in on the act, too. The latest works by The Connor Brothers, for instance, were recently staged in an “exclusive virtual reality space” courtesy of

Maddox Gallery, thereby marking the largest digital arena ever to be dedicated to the artists’ work.

Since last March, Hauser & Wirth has seen website traffic double and an 80% increase in new visitors to the gallery. Neil Wenman, a London-based partner, explains: “We have noticed that people are spending longer looking at shows. They want to learn, so we have adapted content to be richer, more in-depth and editorially driven. It has opened our eyes to the full reach of digital programming. We’re now being approached by our artists who are keen to do online shows and contribute to larger editorial films as they love to share their stories.

“Nothing can replicate seeing a work of art in the flesh – its texture, smell, physicality and the emotion that goes with that – but zoom-ins, narration and soundtracks are all pluses,” he adds.

To this end, the gallery has changed its strategy, typically opening shows first with a digital view and a film, followed by physical opening, while working to a flexible timetable that allows for Covid measures and closures. The pandemic has also accelerated the efforts of its new technology division, ArtLab, which since 2019 has been developing Virtual and Augmented Reality (AR) software that enhances texture, precision and light accuracy. “Initially, it was born of a desire for



Previous page: to mark the 500th anniversary of Italian painter Raphael, the V&A worked with digital conservationists Factum Foundation to scan all seven of his full-scale tapestries. **Left:** Ibrahim El-Salahi, *The Tree*, 2003, courtesy of Vigo Gallery and Wassily Kandinsky, *Montée des Grilles*, May 1939, courtesy of Alon Zakaim Fine Art and Fredrikson Stallard, *Armchair 'Species III'*, 2015, courtesy of David Gill Gallery from the Eye Viewing Room, May 2020. **Above:** George Condo, *Symbiotic Fear*, 2020, courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

fatigued with the standard online viewing room and, as we are all working mostly from home, we are noticing the dynamics between objects in our living space.”

Using technology to bring art to the many, particularly to those who can’t, or won’t, travel is a win-win, but it also addresses some difficult ecological concerns. The back-to-back schedule of art fairs, in ever further-flung locations, was becoming increasingly contentious. “Fair fatigue had set in before the pandemic,” explains Nazy Vassegh, art advisor and founder of boutique fair *The Eye of the Collector*. “There was a lot of talk about waste.” Taking place in the London residence of the late William Waldorf Astor in September, *The Eye of the Collector* features 20 galleries, each of which will show a maximum of six works. “It’s smaller, greener and easy to get to,” says Vassegh, who sees this as a priority for fairs going forward. Those in remote locations, such as the Helsinki Biennial, which debuts on Vallisaari island 5km from the capital in June, will need a strong online offering to survive. It is currently developing a VR element allowing participants who might

not be able to travel to explore the art and the island’s nature reserve. This will be added to the existing Virtual Helsinki platform, which encompasses a virtual tour of Amos Rex museum.

Fairs such as Frieze and Art Basel, which launched successful digital iterations this past year, will continue as hybrid events, with fewer physical visitors and a strong online presence that lasts well beyond the fair dates. This year, Frieze is opening a permanent gallery on London’s Cork Street to ensure it has a visible platform at a time when producing large-scale art fairs is problematic. Design Miami, meanwhile, has founded an online marketplace that brings contemporary design to collectors in partnership with leading design galleries. More than 800 pieces from 52 galleries are on sale, from \$100 works on paper to the *6x6 Demountable House* by Jean Prouvé, listed at US\$1.5m.

“Before Covid, many collectors were buying works from JPEGs and this will only continue,” says Wenman. “We are all desperate to travel again, but the real gain, digitally speaking, has been that we have broadened our understanding of who our

audiences are and what they want. Post pandemic, we won’t reduce our digital offering. It will be an expectation.”

What sort of art will we want to see and buy? Wenman and Vassegh have both noticed a shift in interest towards more optimistic, escapist works – utopia not dystopia. Last March, Hauser & Wirth launched its lockdown programme with *Insomnia*, a series of drawings created in the small hours of the 1990s by Louise Bourgeois. These, and new works exploring themes of anxiety and isolation produced in lockdown by American artists Rashid Johnson and George Condo have sold well. “They represent a moment in our collective history and are relatable,” says Wenman.

But it will be time for a new chapter. Enter morale-boosting British legend David Hockney. The 83-year-old spent lockdown in Normandy painting the unfolding of the spring on his iPad. Throughout the year, he has released glorious images of the French countryside along with messages of hope. All 116 works, on show at the Royal Academy until August, are a colour-drenched paean to the natural world and new beginnings. Book your tickets now.