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HOPPING ON A BROKEN BANDWAGON

ESSAYS BY REENA DEVI FROM NOV/DEC 2018



Image of Marina Bay Sands Hotel and Casino, taken from Merlion Park, Singapore, 2015. Photo by Sasin Tipchai.

**When this Essay went to print, MCH Group had yet to announce that they will no longer be involved in Singapore's Art SG art fair. See [here](#) for the news story.*

Despite evidence to the contrary, a network of fair organizers, galleries, so-called tastemakers, and even government bodies in Singapore continue to cultivate an art fair-industrial complex under the assumption that introducing more art fairs is a winning strategy for the local economy and art scene alike. The individuals and organizations in this network will do anything to impress the cool kids of the art world—namely mega galleries, mega fairs and mega-rich buyers—social and financial consequences be damned.

Recently, it was announced that the inaugural edition of SEA Focus, a commercial showcase of around 30 galleries featuring Southeast Asian art, will be held in the gallery enclave Gillman Barracks, during Singapore Art Week next January. Soon afterwards, it was revealed that MCH Group, the owner of the Art Basel brand, will launch a new art fair in Singapore called Art SG, slated for November 2019. These newcomers join a landscape already filled with fairs that have tried to make their mark in Singapore over the last few years, with little to no success.

Art fairs in Singapore have struggled since 2016 as the country's art market has floundered. In 2018, mainstay fair Art Stage Singapore shrank from 170 galleries in 2016 to just 84. This followed the surprise move by Affordable Art Fair to revert to hosting its Singapore iteration just once per year after four years of biannual editions, while the Singapore Contemporary Art Show, after two editions, quietly folded in early 2018.

And then there's the issue of cost. According to Gil Schneider, consultant for a regional rival, Art Jakarta: "Singapore as a fair venue is expensive. The Marina Bay Sands venue is expensive. Show-building is expensive. The Southeast Asian galleries who come to Singapore have to factor all the costs of shipping, booth rental, show building, etcetera . . . What sense does it make for an Indonesian gallery to come to Singapore to sell to their Indonesian collectors? They would rather go to an art fair where they can be assured they will recover their costs."

Yet, almost everyone in the local scene is supportive of the proliferation of art fairs in Singapore. These events are perceived as opportunities to draw new international and regional collectors, which could be beneficial to all involved in the Singapore arts scene. Why does this mindset persist despite high costs and shaky prospects?



Installation view of Art Stage Singapore at Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre, 2017. Courtesy Art Stage Singapore

One factor is the agenda of the Singapore state. The future Art SG is supported by the National Arts Council, Singapore Tourism Board and the Singapore Economic Development Board, the same government agencies that have been supporting Gillman Barracks and Art Stage Singapore since their development. As Khairuddin Hori, newly appointed president of the Art Galleries Association Singapore, told *ArtAsiaPacific*, the explosion of art fairs in Singapore has been mainly driven by government-led ambitions to "industrialize" the arts, presumably in the lofty hope that the sector will eventually sustain itself.

Whether the commercial arts scene in Singapore is self-sustainable without these ventures is debatable, but the economic imperative behind the country's ambitions to become a regional and international art powerhouse is quite obvious. Over the last decade, the government has channeled more money and support toward the visual arts with the SGD 532 million National Gallery Singapore, the ongoing SGD 90 million revamp of the Singapore Art Museum and the SGD 10 million makeover of Gillman Barracks. This is most likely because a single piece of art sold makes far more money than a book, cinema pass or theater-performance ticket. The hope is that the global and regional ultra-rich coming to buy and sell art in Singapore could be a potential source of economic wealth via extended touristic activities as well as dining, shopping, gambling and so on.

It would therefore be easy to mistake the Singapore government's push for art fairs as part of a national economic agenda, but that would ignore how the art fair-industrial complex has become a global affliction. A growing international backlash against art fairs is hardly news. In a *Vulture* article published in May, art critic Jerry Saltz eviscerated today's global mega fairs, characterizing them as "great malls curated to lure people in without focusing on business, employing a stagecraft of entertainments, fine foods, wine-tastings, valet parking, VIP lounges . . . [and] panel discussions . . . with a rotating few of the same 55 movers-and-shakers providing self-congratulatory, self-flagellating gravitas to the traveling caravan."


 The logo for ArtAsiaPacific Digital Library features a stylized 'a' symbol in white on a green background, followed by the text 'artasiapacific' in a lowercase sans-serif font and 'Digital Library' in a larger, bold, blue sans-serif font. The background is a light pink color with white dashed lines in the upper right corner.

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Earlier this year, New York gallerist Jose Freire publicly announced that he would never participate in another fair again, after a final showing at Art Basel Hong Kong, stating that people would be better off scrolling through Instagram to view works of art on sale, rather than trudging through a fair. In an interview with Artnet, he claimed that he hadn't met a single new person at various editions of Frieze or Art Basel in the past decade and that there is no longer a curatorial presence at fairs. Most crucially, his gallery suffered its biggest losses at art fairs due to booth costs, exchange rates, fabrication costs, and shipping. For Freire, at least, fairs aren't the moneymakers they purport to be.

Back in Singapore, Khairuddin, who also serves as curatorial director at Chan+Hori Contemporary gallery, told *AAP* that art fairs are “trading grounds and offer the public a glimpse into the celebrity of art. They are not museums, art centers, biennales or similar events or institutions that are consequential to the essence of art and being of artists.”

So why do we continue this charade of blowout events that do not seem to bring any real innovation, development and sustainable financial benefits to the scene? Why do we keep returning to the same tired format of showcasing art?

Saltz argued that the Basels of the art world will continue because these events benefit those at the very top—high-end galleries, big-name artists and their clientele—more than anyone else. Art Stage Singapore director Lorenzo Rudolf sees the arrival of Art SG as an attempt by MCH to provide “direct and exclusive access to the extremely potent economic elite of one of the world's fastest-growing regions.” Gaining “total market control over the ever-more professional and self-confident Southeast Asian art world,” Rudolf says, is particularly pertinent given the emerging market competition in major Chinese cities like Shanghai, Beijing and Chengdu, which have been welcoming both a growing number of fairs and high-net-worth individuals looking to invest in art. While commending it as a smart step from the perspective of a global player aiming to dominate and control the international art market, he questioned whether the global art market would benefit from diversity rather than the “complete and comprehensive orientation of a global luxury market.”



Portrait of **SANDY ANGUS**, chairman of Angus Montgomery Arts, London. Courtesy Montgomery, London.

Sandy Angus, chairman of Angus Montgomery Arts, which is also one of the organizers of Art SG, spoke openly with *AAP* about the new fair's objective to reach out to the richest collectors and highest-quality galleries. Angus pointed out that there are a lot of high-net-worth individuals in Singapore who have yet to venture into art collecting; these individuals comprise the key target demographic for Art SG. Moreover, it intends to tap major collectors in the region from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia and India, citing Singapore as an accessible hotspot for them. As for the struggling fairs, Angus asserted that any fair is susceptible to being judged by its lowest-quality galleries. In his view, Art Stage Singapore was successful until it allowed these lesser-quality galleries in, causing the initial support from collectors to plummet. This is not a mistake Art SG intends to make.

However, the idea of the wealthiest in the region making Singapore their playground for arts, shopping and entertainment might be a tad whimsical. While the city-state is a destination for some members of the global rich, most expats tend to use Singapore as a place to work and live while traveling across the region and playing elsewhere. Expats whom I've spoken to have described Singapore as “quiet” in terms

of entertainment and nightlife. Tellingly, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore's luxury integrated resort and the venue for Art Stage and Art SG, reported a four percent drop in convention, retail and other business as well as a 4.2 percent drop in room revenue in 2017, despite growing casino revenue at 16 percent. Senior executives also "lamented" the fall in VIP turnover. One of the reasons cited for this dip was competition from other places in the region, such as the Philippines, Thailand and Macau.

So why is Singapore doubling down on an outmoded spectacle like the art fair to attract a demographic that is not really into the locale? It smacks of the naive behavior of a desperate trend-follower. Singapore could invigorate the art scene by shifting taste-making and art appreciation from cultural traders and dealers to local and regional artists, educators and cultural managers. Instead, it chooses to keep up with the global status quo and succumb to post modern vulnerabilities currently faced across affluent cities. Attracting the ultra-rich to our shores could be a happy by-product rather than a primary objective; originality and vision are bound to draw attention. But it looks like Singapore has some growing up to do before it learns that lesson.

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