

# Regional Is the Way: Art Stage Singapore 2017

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Do you remember high school trips? Some kids enjoyed learning about their local heritage, looking at paintings and mummies in the city museum. Others were excited to be spending a day out with school friends in a different setting. Most were just happy to skip lessons.

Now, imagine bringing the same hyperactive pack of teenagers to an art fair. An art fair? Art fairs are for selling, not for educating. That would never happen in Europe. But, this is Singapore. With this in mind, we approach what has become the most important art fair in Southeast Asia. Singapore is the port city with the most prosperous economy in the region. The island-state is investing heavily in contemporary art as an economic factor by building museums and creating a positive environment for commercial galleries and supporting artists.



Art Stage Singapore, where our students are heading, has been central to the development of the local art ecosystem. The fair was founded by former Art Basel director Lorenzo Rudolf, who had been responsible for transforming Art Basel from a classical trade show to the international art event we know today. The quality of the fair was achieved through a strategic partnership with a top-tier financial institution (UBS) and created a new model of cooperation. Prior to Rudolf's direction of Art Basel, art fairs gave a lot of emphasis to the galleries. Rudolf decided to focus instead on the experience of the art collector and the potential art buyer, introducing an extended VIP program. In 2010, with Art Stage, he created his own art fair, bringing that successful model to the Asian art world.

Fast forward seven years. Art Stage Singapore has changed. What the students experience is quite peculiar. Less dynamic and crowded than the previous year, Art Stage 2017 presented a smaller and more manageable line-up. We are accustomed to the bulimic effect of the events surrounding art fairs that offer more appointments than can possibly be crammed into a diary – not to mention the counter-fairs and collateral events. A downsized Art Stage was, in that respect, better-paced. In conjunction with Singapore Art Week, which is still a tour-de-force for those willing to dive in, Art Stage 2017 maintained human proportions.

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Speaking of hectic art calendars, we know that if you were to attend every art fair in the world,

July 2016



you wouldn't have a single afternoon at home to catch your breath. In this regard, galleries, collectors, and visitors have to make choices. For example, Art Basel Hong Kong has been moved forward to the end March eating up part of Art Stage's program – especially the international galleries eager to access the Asian market. The major surprise at this edition was how many non-Asian galleries deserted the fair.

The overwhelming presence of galleries from the local region gave Art Stage a different flavor compared to previous years. The strong regional element, which is also found in the gallery and museum scene, is what makes Singapore such a unique place for an art traveler. Globalization makes the art world, and the art fair, in particular, a little boring at times. Enough of Koons and Kapoor! If we find ourselves in this part of the world, we want to see Heri Dono and Ronald Ventura!

As for the regional market, the decision to open an Art Stage off-shoot in Jakarta in the summer was also relevant, as this basically served breakfast in bed to the biggest Southeast Asian collectorship – the Indonesians. Art Stage Jakarta proved to be exciting and successful by luring the batik-shirted collectors with the knowledge that they could simply wait for Art Stage to knock at their door. No need to travel all the way to Singapore to buy work by Indonesian artists (to be shipped back to Indonesian addresses anyway).



That being said, this year's Art Stage Singapore still proved to be the big networking space for Southeast Asian art operators which has so helped the Singaporean contemporary art ecosystem to grow throughout the years. From Seoul to Surabaya, with a few Japanese and Korean galleries and a small group of international galleries, it was an opportunity to gather and create community – though an elite one. As regards elitism in contemporary art, many talks were held on the subject at the special 'Art Asia Forum' section of the fair, where



speakers were not holding back uncomfortable opinions and making them accessible to a varied audience. This year the Forum was titled ‘Net Present Value’, in reference to the method commonly used to forecast the profitability of future returns on investments made today. For this second edition, the Southeast Asia Forum explored the idea of value in contemporary art, the role of imagination and the idea of progress, and how these can survive in the global capitalist system.

The dichotomy that I’d call ‘Market versus Spirit’ was discussed by anthropologists, financiers, curators, and insiders as well as art world outsiders who brought contrasting viewpoints. Lorenzo Rudolf, who moderated the talks, seemed open to input and criticism.

In a nutshell, Art Stage 2017 was a good overview of what the region currently offers in terms of talent and market potential. The way the fair is acclimatizing to the rapidly-changing art ecosystem in Asia is an important marker of Singapore’s success in positioning itself as a market hub. It seems that for the next few years Singapore will stay a safe, lively harbor for our students to drop by for their school trip.







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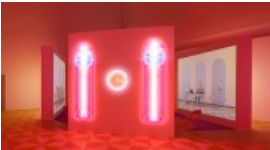
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