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SINGAPORE

THE FALL OF ART STAGE

BY REENA DEVI



Installation view of Art Stage Singapore, 2018. Photo by Lucas Schifres. Courtesy Art Stage.



One thing was made abundantly clear following the last-minute cancellation of Art Stage Singapore in January 2019: industry players had seen the red flags months in advance. The fair was offering space for free to 20 local and regional collectors to show at Collectors' Stage, suggesting that organizers had trouble finding galleries to take booths. In 2017, 131 galleries rented booths in Art Stage, down from 143 the year before. In 2018, the number fell to just 97, followed by a decrease to 45 galleries scheduled to participate this year.

The fair had also lost the support of key sponsors. United Overseas Bank Limited (UOB) was originally listed as the main sponsor for Art Stage Singapore 2018, but was not included in the official press release for the fair in 2019. AAP has reached out to UOB for comments about its partnership with Art Stage twice in the last six months, but it declined to comment both times. UOB was, however, listed as the lead partner for new boutique fair SEA Focus, which was held at Gillman Barracks from January 24 to 27—the same time that Art Stage Singapore was meant to take place.



More telling signs of the fair's struggles included the May 2018 announcement that the Jakarta edition of Art Stage would be postponed until August 2019. According to a fair insider, the event's venue operators, Sheraton Grand Jakarta Gandaria City Hotel, had requested a deposit to book the deferred 2019 slot for Art Stage Jakarta. However, Art Stage never got back with the funds, so the hotel released their annual art fair slot to Art Moments Jakarta, former banker and art collector Leo Silitonga's new fair, which is scheduled for May 3 to 5. AAP could not confirm whether exhibitors from the 2018 Art Stage Jakarta have been reimbursed as of today.



Installation view at Art Stage Jakarta, 2017. Image via [Art Stage](#).



Yet, in spite of these red flags and because of the last-minute notification, many exhibitors and partners involved in Art Stage Singapore 2019 were caught off guard when fair founder and director Lorenzo Rudolf sent out an email on the morning of January 16, announcing the event's cancellation. On the evening of the same day he sent out a press release and letter to VIPs and stakeholders citing the "difficult market situation in Singapore" and "unequal competition situation," referencing SEA Focus.

According to industry experts, Art Stage Singapore would have to cover the following approximate costs per year: SGD 850,000 (USD 630,000) for venue and production costs; SGD 250,000 (USD 186,000) for marketing, travel and miscellaneous expenses; the conservative estimate of SGD 180,000 (USD 133,300) for office rent and staff; and SGD 144,000 (USD 110,000) for the COO's presumed pay, amounts to a total of at least SGD 1.5 million (USD 1.1 million) in basic costs for the art fair.

The rates for booths at Art Stage Singapore ranged from SGD 26,250 (USD 19,400) for a 35-square-meter space to SGD 67,500 (USD 50,000) for 90-square meters, according to the fair's application form. Exhibitors were required to pay the fair 50 percent of the booth cost within two weeks of acceptance and the full balance within four weeks. Installation of the fair was set to begin on January 20.



Installation view at SEA Focus, Singapore, 2018. Courtesy SEA Focus.

The cancellation of a fair can be financially disastrous for galleries. Installation of the fair was due to begin on January 20–21, just five days after Rudolf announced the fair had been canceled. Harry Hutchison, director of Aicon Gallery, New York, said to *AAP*, “I understand the competitive nature of art fairs can lead to difficult business decisions but letting international galleries know with only five days to spare is not ethical. We should have been told three weeks ago at least. We have booked non-refundable flights and hotels, and our artworks are already in Singapore, so to say we are disappointed is an understatement.”

Another exhibitor, Kevin Troyano Cuturi from Mazel Galerie, Singapore, said, “I don’t know what the issue is. They are not telling the galleries yet, and I doubt we will ever get the full picture. I have never heard of a major fair cancelling an art fair one week before its opening. It’s something unthinkable.”

On the evening of January 16, Singapore government agencies National Arts Council, Economic Development Board and Singapore Tourism Board—which support both Art Stage Singapore and SEA Focus—also released a statement saying the fair was cancelled due to commercial considerations. Marina Bay Sands, the venue for Art Stage, published a statement saying they would reimburse ticket holders.

The financial woes that took down Art Stage Singapore were compounded by other issues. One possible reason is public opinion of Rudolf and his outspokenly negative views on Singapore. In November 2017, at a press conference for Art Stage, he described the Singapore art market as “very, very weak.” Then at the opening of the 2018 edition of Art Stage Singapore, Rudolf presented further downbeat descriptions of the Singapore art market—citing the city-state’s “stagnation” compared to other countries in the region—which was subsequently brushed aside as a tantrum.

A regional fair organizer who chose to remain anonymous pointed out: “The reasons given by Lorenzo for the cancellation—including the new SEA Focus fair being ‘unfair competition’—are ridiculous [...] This new fair is a direct result of the negative comments Lorenzo made about Singapore after the 2018 edition of Art Stage. As a consequence, and in order to make sure that there is a fair in case Art Stage did not happen in 2019, SEA Focus was born.”



Collector Wiyu Wahono viewing an artwork at Art Stage Singapore, 2017. Courtesy Art Stage Singapore.

However, collectors including Indonesian collector Wiyu Wahono acknowledged that the fair's initial success when it launched in 2011 was largely due to the founder's ability to "create a fair atmosphere." He understood the "difference between an art fair and an art bazaar" and that an art fair was not just about bringing "40 galleries together and selling art."

Khairuddin Hori, president of the Art Galleries Association Singapore, said: "Art Stage quickly became the go-to art fair in Southeast Asia and acted as the region's beacon in attracting the attention of international collectors and art world professionals interested in its art and artists."

During the aftermath of Art Stage Singapore's cancellation, one overarching narrative emerged: [the local art community rallied together](#), offering exhibition spaces and services to support the affected artists and exhibitors. Moreover, Singapore Art Week 2019 reportedly more than made up for the cancellation with its diverse programs. After all, a single art fair does not define an art scene, even one as small as Singapore's.

There are larger concerns among local and regional cultural stakeholders with regards to the sustainability of art fairs in general. For example, a gallerist who sold out their booth at SEA Focus might not break even if the works sold were mostly by young Singapore artists with low price points.

Khairuddin, who is also curatorial director and partner of Chan + Hori Contemporary, which exhibited at SEA Focus, stated about the downfall of Art Stage: "The unfortunate episode also calls for deep reflection from all involved. It could have been a result symptomatic of administrative and professional short-sightedness in its pursuit to frame, elevate and create value through the arts. A high reliance on market-based engagement in the 'arts industry' is not enough to propel or sustain its creative vision and energy. Perhaps this is the key lesson learned for all."

AAP reached out to Art Stage via email and in person for responses on why the fair was cancelled but was told the company is dealing with post-cancellation issues and may speak with the publication at a later date. As of publication, exhibitors have not heard back from Art Stage Singapore regarding reimbursements for their booth fees and other expenses.

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Portrait of Khairuddin Hori. Image via [Chan+Hori Contemporary](#), Singapore.

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ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmaq.com