

EXPO Chicago: What Comes After the Art Bubble Bursts?

by Phil Barcio

Google the phrase “too many art fairs,” and you’ll see a consensus is building about an impending “art fair bubble.” Dozens of recent articles contemplate the glut, not just in art magazines, but in publications like *Forbes*, *Bloomberg*, *The Economist*, and *The New York Times*.

Last January, *Artnet News* published “the Definitive Calendar of International Art Fairs for 2018.” It listed 80 major fairs. Where once there was an art fair season, the season now lasts 12 months. For now, Chicago’s showcase fair—EXPO Chicago—is holding its own. But history suggests that will not always be the case.

If you travel to multiple fairs, even on multiple continents, you notice many of the same dealers and see work by many of the same artists. Yet even as novelty wanes, new fairs continue popping up.

For dealers, the economics are dire—booth fees can top \$100,000 if they are lucky enough to be invited to show. Add shipping costs, travel expenses for employees, and factor in a 50/50 revenue split with artists, and the break-even mark for galleries can surpass \$200,000. A fair with 100 participating dealers must

generate \$20 million in art sales just to maintain the myth that profits are possible.

Here’s some historical context to show how far the art fair phenomenon has come. If anyone had published a “Definitive Calendar of International Art Fairs” in 1980, it would have listed only two entries: the Chicago International Art Exposition and Art Basel.

Art Basel was the mother of the modern art fair concept. It was founded in 1970 in Basel, Switzerland, by Ernst Beyeler, Trudl Bruckner and Balz Hilt, three art dealers who believed that if they invited enough prestigious sellers to show their best stuff at the same time in one place, wealthy collectors from across the globe might consider it worth their while to travel there to take advantage of one-stop shopping. The first Art Basel included 90 galleries and 30 publishers and attracted around 16,000 visitors.

Michigan-based print dealer John Wilson was the first to believe Chicago could support a similar fair. His inaugural Chicago International Art Exposition in 1980 included 80 dealers and attracted around 10,000 visitors. Over time, however, the Basel and Chicago art fairs evolved in quite different ways.

Art Basel grew steadily, becoming the most prestigious annual gathering of art dealers and buyers in the world. After being purchased in 1994 by the multinational Swiss bank UBS, the brand expanded to Miami Beach and Hong Kong and sprouted other fairs focused on luxury assets besides art, like cars.

The Chicago International Art Exposition (CIAE) meanwhile, lasted 13 years of which, at least half the time, it was recognized as the top American art fair. For the first nine years, it was held in the strangely cool, rickety old barns of Navy Pier.

Panorama of Expo Chicago 2018 during Vernissage. Photo by Justin Barbin.





A guided tour group at Expo Chicago. Photo by Jasmine Shah.

It earned both local and international respect from artists, dealers and collectors alike. When it was forced to move after the 1989 fair due to the pier's planned renovation, CIAE lost its cachet.

By the time Navy Pier reopened in 1992, it was a sprawling network of malls and convention spaces, and the fair found itself attracting more tourists than collectors. Facing pressure from two rival upstarts—the International Gallery Invitational and Art Chicago—the Exposition folded.

One of those upstarts—Art Chicago—did not stay in Chicago for long. The organizers moved their fair to Miami, where they renamed it Art Miami and grew it into what is now the most attended art fair in the US, predating Art Basel Miami Beach by a decade.

After Art Chicago left Chicago, the organizers of The International Gallery Invitational, headed by Tom Blackman, confusingly appropriated its name. The “new” Art Chicago reclaimed Navy Pier as its home and, for a while in the mid-1990s, returned Chicago to a place of prominence on the international art fair scene. By then, major art fairs were popping up everywhere, and competition to attract top dealers was becoming stiff.

Rather than opting for exclusivity, Art Chicago opened up participation to essentially any dealer who could afford the booth fee. By the year 2000, more than 200 dealers participated. The quality of the art was not competitive, and again the reputation of the city as a serious art fair destination declined.

The end for Art Chicago came in 2005, when organizers advertised that instead of being held indoors at

Navy Pier, the fair would be held outdoors in Grant Park. They stiffed the contractors, who thus refused to set up the tents. Dealers arrived with crates of art to an empty park. At the last minute, the owners of the Merchandise Mart, which was already hosting the Chicago Antiques Fair that same week, made room for Art Chicago to share the space. The following year, Merchandise Mart Properties, Inc., bought Art Chicago and rebranded it as Artropolis: a multi-faceted modern, contemporary, folk, outsider, and emerging art fair extravaganza.

Some people welcomed Artropolis, while others despised it. All that mattered, however, was the bottom line. In 2012, the organizers abruptly canceled the fair, stating in their press release, “It is our conclusion that the great majority of the art fair market in the United States has gravitated toward the coasts.”

Our current fair, EXPO Chicago, emerged from the ashes of the ruined Artropolis. EXPO's founder and director, Tony Karman, returned the fair to Navy Pier. He recognized the location's iconic status and also returned to the idea of a smaller, curated fair. A select group of Chicago and international galleries cajoled other galleries and were instrumental in pulling the new fair away from the brink. The seventh edition of EXPO Chicago, which wrapped up in late September, demonstrated, undeniably, that wealthy collectors, blue chip dealers, and interesting and important contemporary artists once again regard Chicago as a serious competitor on the international art fair circuit. Over 38,000 people attended the 4-day event.



Panorama of Expo Chicago 2018. Photo by Jasmine Shah.

How long can it last?

Perhaps the right question to pose now is not whether EXPO will survive when the bubble bursts, or even necessarily how to protect it, but rather what can we learn from history to build off of EXPO's current status to create something bigger and more relevant to the entire city.

Stephen Eisenman, Professor of Art History and Past President at Northwestern University, says, "Let's have a 'People's Art Expo', supported by the city, the museums and the commercial galleries. It could have juried and unjuried exhibits in various media, booths for social practice, political and performance art, lessons in various media by volunteers, areas of expressive, political protest, and information about how to obtain free/reduced price admission to museums and galleries all over town."

Eisenman suggests expanding to sites like Millennium Park or "a closed-off Michigan Avenue in front of the Art Institute," to reach beyond commercial interests and appeal to a wider demographic representative of this city's actual population and culture.

Michelle Grabner, esteemed artist, writer, curator and Crown Family Professor in Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, agrees. She notes that it would speak much more to the health of the local community if the city and people of Chicago supported an "Art Week" instead of a single commercial fair. Says Grabner, "Not everyone needs to be involved in the commercial gallery system. EXPO offers something to push against. It's not about that one thing being everything to everybody. It's about that

one thing establishing a hierarchy for other types of artists to resist and overthrow."

The "Art Week" concept already exists in several other cities. One of the most successful models is "Miami Art Week," which involves multiple consecutive large fairs (Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Miami, Pulse, the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) fair, etc.), as well as dozens of peripheral events, from scrappy beachfront motel pop-up galleries to immersive exhibitions funded by private businesses. In addition, every Miami art museum and big

private collection opens a major exhibition during Art Week, and all over town there are

artist talks, mural tours, experimental installations, spontaneous happenings, cool parties, and innumerable sanctioned and unsanctioned collateral events.

Obviously, we're not Miami—they have palm trees. And Dubai has glitz. Hong Kong has deep pockets. Basel has prestige. New York has attitude. The secret to "Art Week Chicago" is not to copy what other cities do. It's to make it representative of who and what we are.

Embrace our history. This is the Second City—home of the New Bauhaus, the Monster Roster, AfriCOBRA, Joan Mitchell, Henry Darger, Elizabeth Murray, Kerry James Marshall, Richard Hunt, Jessica Stockholder, and hundreds of other pioneers. This is where the *Wall of Respect* was painted. Half a dozen of the most expensive, most famous paintings ever made live in this city, as do a half million or so of the poorest citizens of this country, many of whom have virtually no access at all to the arts.

The volatile history of Chicago art fairs is part of the idiosyncratic heritage of this city, but it can only be relevant to our common future if the young (in body or in heart) among us can transform that history into the embryonic stage of a broader, more experimental, more inclusive Art Week ecosystem—something worthy of our status as unique cultural leaders, with the potential to survive and prosper.

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