

# The Art Fair as Cultural Policy Platform

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Art Basel Qatar ignited an industry-wide debate when it positioned itself as a potential alternative to the long-criticized and increasingly strained traditional art fair model. Courtesy Art Basel

Something [Art Basel](#) Qatar certainly succeeded in doing was sparking a much-needed industry-wide reflection—one that continues to ripple weeks after its inaugural edition. At the center of the debate was the fair’s model, which [departed significantly from the established commercial template of global art fairs](#). The curatorial structure—a [deliberately restrained, boutique format](#) that brought together just 87 galleries, each presenting only a single artist—was certainly different, aimed as it was at encouraging a slower pace and more focused engagement, privileging sustained dialogue and deeper contemplation over the accelerated transactional rhythm typical of larger fairs. Yet what was far more interesting in this context was its governance framework, with Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) and Visit Qatar as partners, indicating a fusion of culture, tourism and state investment [typical of 21st-century soft power strategies](#).

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As one of the few international art fairs fully backed and largely funded by the state, [Art Basel Qatar](#) redistributed much of the financial burden and risk typically borne by galleries. By absorbing a large portion of these structural costs, the fair created conditions that made possible more ambitious, museum-quality and experimental presentations—projects whose value may unfold over time through institutional acquisitions, scholarly attention and cultural influence rather than immediate sales. In a [Financial Times interview](#) ahead of the fair, the country’s central cultural figure Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani—the chief architect of Qatar’s cultural transformation—described Art Basel Qatar as marking “the next phase of our cultural strategy,” merging with and amplifying the artistic ecosystem the country has been methodically building over the past five decades.

Looking at the global scene, other fairs, including those within the Art Basel portfolio, often operate in hybrid frameworks involving varying degrees of public-private collaboration, frequently collaborating with local tourism agencies. Yet what emerged in Qatar is something far more structurally integrated: an art fair embedded directly within a national development strategy, aligned with a long-term policy vision aimed at transitioning the country beyond its historical dependence on hydrocarbons toward a diversified, knowledge-based and culturally driven economy.

Something similar is going to happen in Abu Dhabi, with the first [Frieze](#) edition of the fair coming next November. For 17 editions, Abu Dhabi Art was organized by the Department of Culture and Tourism—Abu Dhabi, a government entity responsible for advancing the emirate’s cultural and creative industries. When this transition within the [global art fair ecosystem](#) was announced, H.E. [Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak](#), chairman of the Department of Culture and Tourism, described the partnership as the culmination of a nearly two-decade process in which Abu Dhabi Art played a foundational role in cultivating the emirate’s cultural ecosystem, laying the groundwork for what is now envisioned as a fully integrated global art hub anchored by museums, institutions and market infrastructure.

## The long legacy of culture-led development

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The intellectual foundations for this approach are not new. Since the 1990s, a growing body of research in cultural economics and urban policy has documented the transformative potential of cultural and creative industries when deployed as long-term development strategies. Scholars and policymakers alike have demonstrated that [sustained investment in cultural infrastructure can catalyze broader economic diversification](#), foster educational and institutional capacity and enhance social cohesion and international visibility. Early experiments in culture-led regeneration in post-industrial cities such as Liverpool offer a foundational example. There, the launch of the

Liverpool Biennial in 1998 marked a pivotal moment, later cemented by its designation as European Capital of Culture in 2008—establishing a recurring international platform that helped reposition the city within global cultural circuits.



Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* sculpture at the Guggenheim Bilbao. Rafa Rivas/AFP/Getty Images

Yet the most cited example remains [Bilbao](#), where the 1997 opening of the Guggenheim became shorthand for culture as an engine of urban regeneration. The so-called “Bilbao effect” demonstrated how a flagship cultural institution could drive the repositioning and regeneration of an entire post-industrial city within the global creative economy.

Clearly, the global proliferation of biennials and cultural festivals over the past three decades—from Gwangju to Sharjah, Kochi to Istanbul—was deeply informed by this understanding, reflecting a broader shift toward viewing culture not merely as a reflection of economic prosperity but as one of its driving forces.

Visiting the [Kochi-Muziris Biennale](#) shortly afterward offered yet another instructive example of how government-backed cultural initiatives can catalyze lasting structural change. Founded by artists in 2012, the biennale has played a central role in reshaping Kochi’s cultural identity, stimulating local creative production and attracting international attention to India’s contemporary art scene. What began as an experimental, locally driven initiative has evolved into a major recurring event capable of transforming a former colonial port city not only into a destination for

the international art world but, perhaps most importantly, into a site of encounter, discussion and empowerment for local communities. Alongside the main exhibition, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale dedicates substantial space to its Students Biennale, offering young artists hands-on exposure to institutional exhibition-making. This edition foregrounded India's contemporary scene, positioning the Biennale as a platform and living laboratory for a new generation.

Within the Gulf, the example of Sharjah and its long-running Biennial is particularly instructive. Founded in 1993, the [Sharjah Biennial](#) has evolved from a relatively modest regional exhibition into one of the most influential contemporary art platforms in the Global South, playing a central role in shaping the region's artistic landscape and the permanent institutional infrastructure around it. Here too, long-term vision proved decisive: the establishment of the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009 ensured the continuity of this ecosystem beyond the biennial's cyclical rhythm, supporting residencies, commissions, research programs and year-round exhibitions while fostering sustained relationships between artists and institutions. The Foundation has also played a decisive role in cultivating local expertise, encouraging the growth of university programs and cultural initiatives and gradually building both a professional art community and a knowledgeable public audience.

Similar dynamics can be observed across the Global South, where biennials have played foundational roles in shaping entire artistic ecosystems. Founded in 1951, the [São Paulo Biennial](#) emerged as Brazil's first international art event, creating visibility for local artists alongside opportunities for international exchange and institutional dialogue. This helped integrate Brazilian art into global circuits while simultaneously strengthening domestic cultural production and catalyzing the emergence of galleries and a broader professionalization of the local art system. In West Africa, the Dakar Biennale—officially founded in 1989 and rooted in earlier Pan-African cultural festivals—has played an equally transformative role. Beyond its main exhibition, the emergence of parallel programs such as Dak'Art Off, an extensive network of artist-led initiatives, independent exhibitions and public interventions, has fostered the development of local exhibition spaces, collectives and critical discourse, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem tied to the biennale's recurring rhythm.



Ibrahim Mahama's *Parliament of Ghosts* at Anand Warehouse for the 2026 Kochi Biennale. DHANUJ PHOTOGRAPHY | Courtesy of the Kochi Biennale Foundation.

## The economic and cultural impact of art fairs

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At the same time, the expansion of art fairs over the past two decades has demonstrated their ability to generate powerful spillover effects extending far beyond the confines of an exhibition hall. When [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) launched in 2002, it not only transformed Miami into one of the world's most important art destinations but also triggered profound and lasting changes in its cultural and economic landscape, turning the city from a beach vacation destination into something appealing to a much broader international audience. According to official figures published on its website, the 2024 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach generated an estimated \$547 million in economic activity—an increase of nearly 10 percent from the previous year—reflecting the fair's extensive ripple effects across hospitality, retail, dining and transportation, as well as its role as a platform for fostering international diplomatic relationships. Perhaps even more importantly, over the years Art Basel Miami Beach has not only catalyzed the emergence of an entire constellation of satellite fairs and cross-industry events, parties and partnerships, but also the gradual development of nonprofit institutions and commercial galleries that have today coalesced into a permanent ecosystem capable of sustaining year-round programming and supporting an expanding local collector base.

Similar dynamics unfolded in Hong Kong following the arrival of Art Basel in 2013, an expansion actively supported by local government agencies as part of a broader strategy to reinforce the [city's position as Asia's leading cultural and financial hub](#). [Art Basel Hong Kong](#) has received direct public funding, including approximately HK\$15 million from the government's Mega Arts and Cultural Events Fund, while the Hong Kong Tourism Board entered into a multi-year strategic partnership with the fair to promote the city's cultural identity globally and attract international visitors and capital. Within this supportive institutional framework, the fair rapidly accelerated Hong Kong's consolidation as Asia's primary art market hub. In the years that followed, major international galleries established permanent outposts in the city, alongside a broader expansion of advisory firms, private collections and institutional programming. "We like to think [we've helped nurture Hong Kong's and the region's contemporary art scene](#) as a whole," the fair's director, Angelle Siyang-Le, told Observer in a 2024 interview.

While some galleries have since scaled back or closed their spaces amid the compounded effects of the pandemic and China's real estate crisis, auction houses have doubled down on their physical presence, investing heavily in permanent infrastructure more specifically designed to serve the region's collector base and buying trends. Christie's inaugurated a new 50,000-square-foot Asia-Pacific headquarters at The Henderson, while [Sotheby's opened its two-story luxury Maison in Central Hong Kong](#)—signaling a long-term strategic bet on the city's continued centrality within the global art market and, in particular, as the main hub and gateway for the fast-developing Southeast Asia market. As the Hong Kong government significantly increased its 2025-26 budget for tourism and culture, allocating HK\$1.235 billion (about \$158 million) to the Hong Kong Tourism Board specifically to revive tourism and attract international visitors, further support will likely extend to the city's art scene as well, which continues to grow both organically and regionally even as some international brands recalibrate their presence. Just recently, leading Shanghai gallery Antenna announced a new outpost in the city.



Several fairs within the Art Basel portfolio have demonstrably contributed to the consolidation and growth of local art ecosystems. Courtesy of Art Basel

Still, it is boutique, highly context-specific regional fairs that have succeeded in nurturing entire cultural ecosystems. By engaging directly with existing communities while actively shaping them, these fairs often operate less as transient marketplaces and more as long-term cultural agents. One such example is ESTE Arte in Uruguay, which under the leadership of curator [Laura Bardier](#) has played a pivotal role in [cultivating a local scene of artists, galleries and—perhaps most crucially—collectors](#). Interwoven with the particular dynamics of Punta del Este, it has contributed to the expansion and professionalization of an art ecosystem that continues to mature alongside the fair itself.

Or take ZONAMACO—since its establishment in the early 2000s, its role has not only been to support but also to actively help shape, consolidate and internationalize Mexico City’s contemporary art scene and, more broadly, the country’s cultural infrastructure. “I care about my clients and [our community continuing to grow and thrive](#),” the fair’s founder and director, Zelica Garcia, told Observer last year. This has contributed to the exponential expansion of Mexico City’s art week, which now attracts international galleries, collectors and institutions from across the globe, reinforcing its position as one of the most important cultural centers in the Americas.

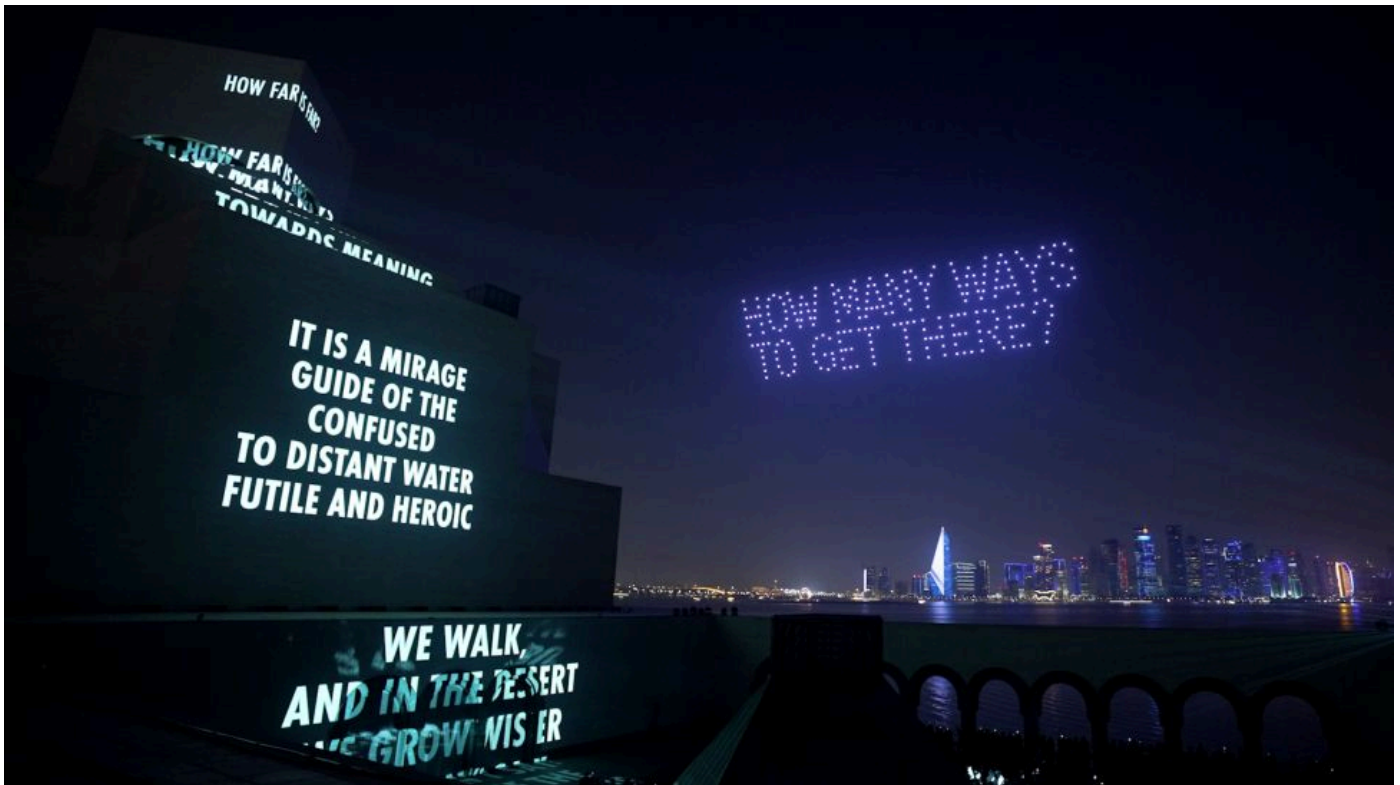
Going beyond their immediate economic impact or ability to attract tourism, all these examples show how art fairs, like biennials, can play a decisive role in actively building art scenes by catalyzing the development of durable cultural infrastructure. Fairs, as much as biennials, also function as bridges between local and global art systems, providing artists not only with international visibility but also with opportunities for direct exchange and confrontation with international peers, institutions and professional standards. While this dynamic has often been criticized for contributing to the homogenization of artistic languages, in many regional scenes it has also played an essential role in accelerating professionalization—encouraging artists, galleries and cultural producers to develop the business practices and organizational structures necessary to sustain a functioning art ecosystem capable of supporting long-term artistic careers and institutional growth.

### **Is it time to rethink the art fair?**

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From all this comes a timely reflection: given that the traditional art fair model is facing rising costs, sprawling global circuits and shrinking margins for galleries, it may be time to rethink art fairs as something closer to a new institutional form with a different kind of public involvement. Something more like a for-profit, invitation-only biennial operating at the intersection of the art trade and cultural policy. As art becomes more deeply embedded within the broader lifestyle and experience economy, as Qatar has shown, fairs are already the perfect instruments through which cities and nations can build cultural capacity, shape local ecosystems, attract global expertise and accelerate the development of institutional cultural infrastructure.

This transformative potential emerges most clearly when these events operate not merely as temporary exhibitions but as context-specific undertakings—commissioning work locally, engaging surrounding communities through sustained educational programs and public outreach, and eventually leaving behind venues, archives, residencies, networks and professional expertise. Over time, these accumulated layers of infrastructure enable the emergence of self-sustaining cultural ecosystems that evolve long after the event itself concludes.



Still, the collision between the art world and politics poses real risks. Qatar’s impeccably orchestrated debut—where, despite being an inaugural edition, virtually no room was left for error—was the emergence of a system in which aesthetic capital and geopolitical laundering appear to operate in tandem, delivering a flawlessly engineered spectacle. Many argued that potential controversies around censorship were preemptively neutralized through tightly calibrated, artist-led curatorial framing, while more troubling questions lingered about cultural whitewashing or “Islamist art washing,” as Reza Negarestani [described it](#)—the use of cultural soft power to purchase reputational capital even amid ongoing human rights concerns and military entanglements. These tensions felt particularly acute as the fair unfolded against the backdrop of rising instability in Iran and visible U.S. militarization in regional waters and borders. Yet the paradox between escalating geopolitical alarm and the global cultural circuit is hardly unique to Qatar; similar contradictions increasingly haunt major art events worldwide as institutions come under growing scrutiny.

We are still left with the fact that what has been described as an unprecedented experiment in Qatar is only unprecedented in certain respects, while remaining firmly grounded in decades of cultural policy strategies, research and tested precedents. And if the question is whether an entire art ecosystem can simply be bought, what Qatar may have demonstrated is that the right strategic public investments—carefully calibrated and designed to follow dynamics already proven elsewhere—can significantly accelerate processes of cultural development that would otherwise take generations to unfold.

Much of the infrastructure that characterizes mature art markets is still emerging in Doha and across the Gulf: the number of galleries remains limited, with many concentrated in Dubai, historically the region's primary commercial gateway; the collector base is still developing; and many of the invisible systems that facilitate market activity—specialized logistics, art handling, insurance and storage—are only now being established.

Yet these foundations are also being built rapidly. [Qatar's announcement of a major freeport storage facility](#) designed to anchor its ambitions as a global art logistics hub, alongside Abu Dhabi's introduction of customs duty waivers for high-value artworks and the expansion of long-term creative and artist visa programs, reflects not isolated incentives but coordinated structural interventions aimed at building a fully functioning cultural economy.

What remains striking is not what is missing, but the scale of commitment to building it. In contrast to regions where cultural infrastructure remains heavily dependent on private philanthropy and fragmented funding models, Gulf states are approaching cultural development with the same strategic clarity that has historically been applied to other sectors of economic transformation.

In the art world, the prevailing narrative has always been that markets emerge organically: first, the dealers who support artists and shape collectors' tastes, then the institutional infrastructure to archive and consolidate. This narrative implies that new art centers can only emerge when a sufficient number of wealthy individuals spontaneously develop collecting habits—a process that typically unfolds over decades. In today's shifting geopolitical and economic landscape, this approach looks increasingly anachronistic, still rooted in the era of Medici patronage and Gilded Age benefactors. Today, as wealth becomes ever more concentrated in the technology sector, those billionaires have often proven far less inclined to invest in or donate to art as a means of status-building or cultural legitimization than previous generations were.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Translation Stream* (2023 and 2025) at Manaar in Abu Dhabi. AHMED ALNAJI |  
Courtesy of Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi & Public Art Abu Dhabi

At the same time, we are living in a moment in which creativity, technology and content have become the lifeblood of a new kind of economy, reshaping not only how value is produced but how societies understand work, innovation and development itself. Culture is no longer seen merely through its measurable outputs but as something structurally embedded within broader economic and technological systems—capable of actively shaping the conditions for future growth. [The Korean Wave](#) offers another particularly instructive example of a country that, through systematic, long-term investment in its cultural and creative industries—first in music, then in film and eventually in its contemporary art scene—was able to completely reshape its global image, positioning itself and its culture as among the most compelling to international audiences.

In an era in which economic competitiveness increasingly depends on the generation of ideas and intellectual capital, cultural and creative industries have emerged as central mechanisms for building the human capabilities upon which innovation depends—despite some governments having badly lost sight of this in recent years.

As [David Throsby](#) has observed, cultural and creative industries occupy a unique position at the intersection of knowledge creation and capability development, functioning not simply as economic sectors but as foundational drivers of broader systemic transformation. The Gulf is

clearly aware of this.

This already provides the theoretical and practical framework for understanding why cultural platforms such as biennials and art fairs have become increasingly central to national development strategies. Beyond their immediate commercial or symbolic function, they operate as nodes of knowledge exchange, institutional formation and professionalization, capable of accelerating the emergence of creative ecosystems. Cultural production plays a crucial role in enabling societies to shape their own developmental trajectories, catalyzing the creation of capabilities within local communities and expanding human capacity, innovation and long-term resilience.

What is unfolding in places such as Qatar and Abu Dhabi reflects a growing awareness that culture, and art in particular, can be a powerful driver of sustainable local development. In the Gulf, art fairs, biennials and cultural institutions have been conceived as integral components of the mechanisms through which countries build knowledge economies, attract talent and position themselves within global cultural and economic networks.

At a moment when historically dominant cultural centers such as the U.S. face mounting institutional scrutiny and declining public investment in cultural and research infrastructure, newer cultural hubs appear to be embracing this shift with greater strategic clarity—envisioning a future in which art fairs operate less as temporary marketplaces and more as permanent institutional platforms embedded within local cultural policy frameworks.

## **More in Art Fairs, Biennials and Triennials**

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