

## **Human Solutions for Art Venue Constraints**

**by John Batten**

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"What Is To Be Done?" was the question that Russian revolutionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would ask when discussing how to solve Russia's many social and political problems - it is a question that I always associate with Hong Kong's stifled public arts bureaucracy. "What is to be done" with our museums, public performance venues and arts spaces? It is an exasperating question because solutions appear to be quite simple but Hong Kong's public art venues suffer from a terminally conservative public service approach to the management of these venues.

Last year, the Hong Kong Government announced reform of Hong Kong's public service. Part of this reform entailed the disbanding of the Urban and Regional Councils, the former bodies that were entrusted with managing Hong Kong's arts venues. This function has been transferred to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. And although there has been a very small decrease in the number of staff employed to manage these arts venues, the management style of this new Department has not changed to improve the arts service offered to the public.

Hong Kong does not suffer from either a lack of money or venues devoted to the arts. However, most of Hong Kong's arts budget is distributed in the form of salaries to middle management employees of the Hong Kong Public Service and we have many arts venues that are just not physically appropriate - for example: most Community Centres which provide wet market and library facilities also have an 'Exhibition Hall' - most of these halls are too large, and have inappropriate fittings (mounting an exhibition on old grey-coloured cloth partitions is not what potential hirers wish to use in 2001!). Also, most of these venues are inflexibly managed - for example, if an artist wishes to use the printing press hire studios at the Visual Arts Centre in Kennedy Road they are unable to leave any personal materials or equipment overnight while working on a print run; imagine the hassle therefore in using this venue. Consequently, the Visual Arts Centre is presently a huge and embarrassing artistic white elephant; because of the inappropriate service offered by management this superb arts venue is just not being used by artists. To put it bluntly: this is a misuse of public money and the public has a right to demand better from its public arts administrators.

So, "What Is To Be Done?" I offer some solutions:

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that our public arts administrators are constrained by deep-seated Public Service structural problems - meaning, that the running of our arts venues is directly affected by the recruitment, human resource and management practices of Hong Kong's Public Service. Getting our arts venues running correctly initially requires that the people running them must be encouraged to be confident - our arts administrators are definitely talented, but they require freedom to excel. Therefore:

- Some of our smaller arts venues should be turned over to arts and community groups to run and manage. Larger venues such as the Heritage Museum and the Museum of Art need more autonomy and should become separate entities (outside the Public Service) with their own human resource and management structures answerable to an independent Board of Governors.
- Directors of Public Art Galleries be put on 5 year contracts with goals set and performance assessed. This is the practice in all of the major public art galleries around the world.
- Curatorial staff are given areas of responsibility and autonomy: the public service attitude of faceless decision-making should be abolished and curatorial staff should be pro-active in initiating and preparing exhibitions. There are presently too many exhibitions that originate and are curated by overseas galleries (for example: is it appropriate to have what appears as a permanent May booking date for French art during French May at the Hong Kong Museum of Art?). Hong Kong's young curators are undoubtedly talented. Please give them responsibility, autonomy and freedom to pursue some of their own interests.
- The Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Museum of Art each need (separately and jointly) to discuss their roles and collection policies through public consultation so that these two major recipients of public arts funding give better service. We want institutions that are both leaders in offering exhibition innovation as well as being keepers of Hong Kong's artistic heritage.
- The Government's advisory committee on art and culture, the Culture & Heritage Board, has been in existence for one year, however it has made no proposals on the structuring of Hong Kong's arts environment; it has only recently requested feedback from the public on arts policy areas. This committee is typical of many of Hong Kong's advisory boards: the incumbent Board members are all busy and high profile business, academic and public figures who, frankly, have little time to devote to the arts and are unaware of basic grass-root issues. Better to appoint younger, "less distinguished" art practitioners and business and community leaders that are familiar with some of the problems facing the arts. It has not been demonstrated (by their lack of action and public comment) that the present Culture & Heritage Board members do not know "What Is To Be Done?" - how much longer shall we wait?
- Hong Kong is a small place. Our arts administrators need to be linked in with overseas art institutions (especially and preferably with China and the Asia Pacific region), so that there are personal challenges, career options become wider and our administrators are abreast of industry innovations.
- Both the Heritage Museum and Hong Kong Museum of Art need to question whose needs are being met: its viewing public or the personal interests of the administrators? Exhibition themes and media must become more innovative, creative and wide. For example, why has the Museum of Art never organised an exhibition of photography in a place like Hong Kong where everyone has a camera and loves photography?

- The collecting policy of contemporary art for the Heritage Museum and Hong Kong Museum of Art needs to be challenged. Hong Kong needs a wider collection than the present policy of just collecting contemporary art by Hong Kong artists. The Singapore Art Museum has the best collection of South East Asian Art in the world - this collection now has the dual credentials of being a remarkable learning resource for Singapore art students as well as putting the Singapore Art Museum on the world map as a museum of international standing. Hong Kong could have the best contemporary Chinese art collection in the world or it, too, could have a Museum of Contemporary Asian Art. Now, wouldn't that be wonderful?

Last week was International Museums Day and a large elaborate tent display was set up outside the Museum of Art in Tsim Sha Tsui to promote the many museums that are now run by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. One interesting development was the setting-up of the "Art Promotion Office", who now occupy and administer the Visual Arts Centre. This team of young art administrators could (as they are intelligent and enthusiastic young people) do some interesting community arts development projects in the coming future. However, could I suggest that they receive a set of goals, a budget and are answerable to a Board of Governors (leaders in the arts community) and not, as it is at the moment, to the Director of Home Affairs. Now that would be innovative; the arts administrators would no longer be faceless and the Visual Arts Centre would be run where it suits community needs not administrative rules!

The solutions for improving Hong Kong's public art venues are in the hands of our political leaders. Culture is actually on their political agenda - but lip-service will not make Hong Kong a better artistic place. Let's be innovative and encourage our arts administrators to make our venues something to be proud of - at the moment all we are doing is shaking our heads asking "What Is To Be Done?"

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