

'International Art Fame - Taking the Biennial Route?'

by John Batten

Originally published in Chinese in *Ming Pao Weekly*, Sunday 11 June 2000.

Where does Hong Kong rate in international art circles? Probably not highly, but neither does Sweden, New Zealand or Argentina; and each of these countries has a thriving and vital art community. Does Hong Kong have to worry about its international image on the world's art stage?

It seems some of our art administrators are worried. There has been a suggestion that Hong Kong should organise its own international biennial or triennial art exhibition - something similar to the Kwangju Biennial in Korea or the Sydney Biennial in Australia. An exhibition selected by a curator featuring local and international artists. It seems our arts administrators believe that such an event will heighten the profile of Hong Kong art in the international arena. But, will it?

Countries that dominate the international art scene: USA, Britain, France, Germany have a developed art market and an obvious synergy between public and commercial spaces. This is evidenced, for example, by Charles Saatchi's ability to get his own personal art collection (the *Sensation* exhibition) exhibited in a public space (the Brooklyn Museum in New York) and this same collection will, later this year, be auctioned off by one of the large international auction houses. Hong Kong has an immature art market: commercial galleries are generally unadventurous and public spaces are run by tenured public servants with little public accountability. Other places in the world with a similar large and educated urban population have both an established art market and a dynamic alternative art scene where artists having difficulty breaking into the established gallery circuit have mobilised to form co-operatives, artist-run spaces, and organise private exhibitions in people's homes. Hong Kong's art scene, in comparison to other similar urban centres, is actually very, very small and without much diversity.

It is well established that art and culture is used to promote co-operation between countries, however, its importance is probably underestimated. Hong Kong has 100 diplomatic missions and most concentrate on consular and trade functions, however once commercial deals are struck and trade is established, the marketing of that trade 'presence' must be maintained. Art and culture are obvious sources for reinforcing a commercial presence. Hong Kong artists are fortunate in having access to foreign government agencies (often through their Hong Kong consulates) who wish to build and advertise their relationship with Hong Kong: scholarships, exhibition opportunities, artist exchange programmes, research grants and travel subsidies are easily available to Hong Kong artists. Indeed, Hong Kong artists' access to foreign cultural funding must be one of the highest in the world.

It could be argued that Hong Kong's presence in the international art scene is already being well cared for by a variety of interests, including support from foreign organisations, The Hong Kong Arts Development Council, private galleries, individuals, and, of course, artists themselves (Para/Site Art Space and

1space have organised international exhibitions). A major art event that has been organised with minimal involvement by Hong Kong's art bureaucracy is the forthcoming Berlin-Hong Kong Festival & Hong Kong-Berlin Festival. To use economic terminology: 'the market place has already decided' to show and promote Hong Kong art. Further initiatives may actually not be necessary!

One initiative, however, could be considered: to sponsor a Hong Kong commercial gallery to take a selection of Hong Kong artists to a large international commercial art fair - the Chicago, Basel, Melbourne and ARCO in Madrid all have prestigious art fairs attended by international art collectors and public gallery curators. Surprisingly, this could easily raise the profile of Hong Kong art without having to cope with the logistics of organising our own art biennial. Maybe, this suggestion is not 'sexy' enough for our art administrators - but it would be more effective!

What is more problematic however, is that Hong Kong has only a very small pool of artists and only a handful would be of international interest - what occurs, then, is that the same artists over and over again receive grants and represent Hong Kong at international art events. The fact is that there are not many artists in Hong Kong. If the main aim in organising a Hong Kong Biennial is to really promote Hong Kong art, then, the question that should be asked is: do we have enough Hong Kong artists to showcase and do we have an infrastructure that will benefit from the considerable investment that such a Biennial would undoubtedly require?

I feel that Hong Kong needs to look at more fundamental issues before we spend lots of money on an art biennial to promote Hong Kong art and (without any guarantee of) heightening our place on the international art circuit.

A biennial sounds suspiciously elitist if presently run artistic events are any indicator: it would be interesting to receive a breakdown of the attendance figures from the Hong Kong Arts Festival: from observation the majority of attendees are from the higher socio-economic bracket of the population. Indeed, Hong Kong's administrative models for a Biennial suggest a bureaucracy would probably be given the task to run it: many Hong Kong arts organising bodies tend to have permanent staff and a public service approach to organisation. What is needed in all of Hong Kong's art organisations is flexibility, innovation and an invited artistic director on short contract only. An entrenched public service model cannot do this!

Once, while walking around a large commercial art fair I asked an Australian art dealer why he was showing both contemporary Australian art next to work by Picasso and other European modern masters - his reply was simply that the Australian work (which the audience was not familiar with) 'looked better' when seen alongside familiar work by famous artists. I suspect that many art administrators would agree with such a view and would consider it a reasonable approach when trying to promote Hong Kong art. Hong Kong is not alone in having a public that is unfamiliar with contemporary art - but any educative approach that wishes to widen interest in art must start at a much lower level.

And the best promotion of a product is when consumers talk about and buy it - our greatest source of art promotion is actually the Hong Kong public itself.

Art and culture do enrich our lives: the challenge in Hong Kong is somehow to change the Hong Kong psyche and allow art to be accepted and acknowledged. This is a great challenge and various macro initiatives are needed to bring change, including:

- Art is maintained as part of a child's school curriculum until they leave school.
- Art is seen to be part of everyone's lives and not perceived to be just for the rich.
- That we introduce and support local community based art events.
- That there is a reason and purpose for having 'big' art events.
- That we establish a University level art school.

These are general points, but as an example: Hong Kong's old Urban and Regional Council District Civic Centres are large, boring, unfriendly buildings run by government workers who sadly have no sense of ownership in what they are doing. These buildings could be renovated and some of the exhibition halls and meeting rooms be handed over to independent community arts groups to manage and organise community art out-reach activities. Again we need flexibility and innovation.

I wonder if talk of a Biennial is said with an eye to our Mainland neighbours? Shanghai already has its own Art Biennial (next scheduled in November 2000) and the world's interest in Mainland Chinese art has meant that Hong Kong's own artists have been marginalised in deference to Mainland artists. But it is an interesting 'marginalisation' - as already seen: there are lots of opportunities for Hong Kong art to be seen internationally, however there is only a small interest in buying Hong Kong art. But, that is how the art market works - there is no logic to why something is more or less popular than something of comparable artistic merit.

International art curators and artists constantly visit Hong Kong - they must be disappointed with what they see. Hong Kong's showcase art space: the Hong Kong Museum of Art has a display of contemporary Hong Kong art that is shocking; three corridor-like rooms. That's it! Hong Kong's art is summarised in three corridor-like rooms. Hong Kong art will never gain international recognition unless it is highlighted within Hong Kong itself. Only then will Hong Kong and overseas collectors see merit in collecting Hong Kong art. An international audience cannot be expected to take Hong Kong art seriously if, within Hong Kong, art is not given the respect it deserves.

My suggestion in raising the profile of Hong Kong is simply to start from the neglected bottom and work up. The prestige of having an international art biennial will benefit not artists but the ribbon-cutters - and, as we all know, we have enough of those!

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