

RTHK Radio 3 'Viewpoint' – 2 September 2003

by John Batten

This morning I received a large packet containing catalogues, newspaper articles and abstracts of a large exhibition and conference organised last month by the Australian National University in Canberra – 'Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights'. I had lent two works by the Philippine artist Santiago Bose and had seen a glimpse of the complexities that the organisers undertook to exhibit 15 artists from around the world in four different art spaces as well as organising the related academic conference attended by hundreds of people.

As I flicked through the catalogue and read the articles I thought – yet again – that Hong Kong's publicly funded galleries and museums could not achieve a similar well coordinated exhibition.....and on a touchy topic – human rights – to boot.

It is not because we do not have intelligent art and museum curators and staff, nor that we do not have the facilities. It is simply that an exercise such as this is impossible when Hong Kong's public galleries and museums are shackled by being a direct arm of Government and its staff are public servants. Red tape and kowtowing to Others' power are impediments to innovative exhibitions.

A consultancy report prepared and written by consultants Lord and Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu has recently been tabled to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department with the mind-numbing title: "Consultancy Study on the Mode of Governance of Hong Kong's Public Museums and the Hong Kong Film Archive".

In the body of the Report the consultants clearly show that Hong Kong's museums are seriously out of step compared to the rest of the world in the running of its museums. Most of the world's respectable public galleries and museums are run by an independent Board of Governors with clear lines of both public and private funding.

On pages 55-56 the Report writers propose three clear areas in which the Government initially needs to decide on the running of Hong Kong's museums – briefly:

1. The drafting of a Museums Ordinance to clearly define the role of Hong Kong's museums.
2. Which of Government's objectives can museums best serve.

And to quote directly from the Report: "The third decision will be on the amount of independence the Government is willing to give to the museums. How far will the Government be willing to let the museums go?"

It is a clanger isn't it? To allow a current Government entity independence?

The Tung administration has in the last seven years ensured the centralisation of policy-making and entrenched its own decision-making. Or, as the Commercial Radio presenter and *SCMP* columnist Albert Cheng said a few days ago: '(it is) a casino of power'.

My money is on this Consultancy Report being shelved.

John Batten is Director of John Batten Gallery in Central Hong Kong.

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