

An Envious Opportunity....

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Published in *Hong Kong Arts Yearbook 2000*, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002.

One of the most common questions asked by visitors to my gallery, with a slightly incredulous look on their face as they gaze at the surrounding art, is "...but-t-t, how do you make money?"

They just 'don't get it', do they? The satisfaction of having a gallery is, I believe, gained more from being part of a process to show art that matters; art with a voice; art that stretches our ideas of the world just a little further. Merely making money from art - as a gallery's only goal - is not good enough; there must be a higher aim. I would gain no satisfaction in showing decorative art; indeed, I would prefer to be an insurance agent flogging life insurance than succumb to showing art that the photography historian Helmut Gernsheim referred to as "...antiquated, fuzzy, sentimental, sugary work...triumphs of sweetness and cosiness..." (1). To be part of the process of showing, what I refer to as 'visually intelligent art', is a privilege: I meet a variety of creative, interesting and vital people and I have the envious opportunity to live with and contemplate a series of work - in as many as 12 exhibitions a year - in the confines of my gallery. Time spent with art is a luxury that few people have - so being an art dealer and combining art and work is a pleasure and privilege.

I consider myself to be a fairly typical commercial art gallery that could be found in most large cities around the world - there is nothing especially special about what I do or how I do it. However, in Hong Kong your usual art gallery does not generally show art more demanding than a demure semi-naked girl, a beautiful flower or a PRC artists' impression of angst. My gallery - which would be nothing particularly special in London, Melbourne or Tokyo - is different in Hong Kong's art world; we exhibit art that is visually intelligent; art that attempts to engage the viewer and challenges them to think, consider and question.

Art plays an ambiguous role in people's lives in Hong Kong. When I visit Mong Kok or Causeway Bay and see teenagers walking and shopping, I have this uneasy feeling that art (and I mean by that 'high' or 'fine' art) is of almost no interest to them. On the other hand, upwardly mobile parents do encourage their young children to participate in artistic activities and will readily pay for extra-curricula art and music lessons. There is (possibly also encouraged as a Confucian sensibility) recognition that a person should be well-rounded and that art, music and literature are desirable character forming activities. As a child gets older, however, the emphasis on academic achievement (encouraged by a moribund secondary school system obsessed with examinations) overtakes artistic activities and a pragmatic career path is planned. What is intriguing about this process is the subjective evidence that very little of the artistic appreciation instilled in a person's youth remains after they leave secondary school - it appears that force-feeding art into a child is as distasteful as the childhood medicine forced down as a curative. How else could you explain the apparent lack of interest in art by the majority of Hong Kong's young adults? Or, is art perceived to be just irrelevant? Or, that it gives little obvious enjoyment. It is expensive. It is only for intelligent people. Or, just for the rich.

I have previously argued that one of the greatest drawbacks in nurturing an art-loving and art-collecting culture in Hong Kong is its appalling housing stock. (2) Poorly designed and absurdly small flats have exacerbated overcrowding and meant that much of a flat's wall space is occupied by shelving and storage areas: practically, there is little room to display art. The Western term 'house-proud' has limited meaning in Hong Kong because Hong Kong's flats are so small that people rarely entertain in them; as a consequence, the need to beautify and decorate your flat is much less obvious or necessary. The improbability of improving Hong Kong's housing means that an overtly art conscious public will probably remain an unobtainable goal.

Societies and, by extension, our *persona* is defined by the art, music and writing produced by our culture. It is culture that is the basis for social organisation and, as demonstrated during the Cultural Revolution, social control (3). I often challenge people who believe that artists are unimportant by asking: "tell me the names of any 17th century businessmen?" - they cannot, but we all know artists, poets and writers dating from this period!

Running an art gallery in Hong Kong can, for some of the systemic reasons explained above, be a problematic experience. Rent and expenses need to be paid and resorting to only exhibiting art that sells becomes for many art galleries a safe business decision. It can be exasperating constantly meeting visitors that just "don't understand" and then challenge you and your own rationale in showing art that is difficult to understand. There are many mild humiliations that you encounter as an art dealer and these just have to be shrugged off - a thick skin and a determined attitude is required to maintain a longterm commitment to showing intelligent art.

Most people have no idea how commercial art galleries operate. Let me briefly explain. An art gallery such as mine predominantly organises and exhibits solo exhibitions by living artists. I exhibit contemporary art. An exhibition will usually run for between 3-4 weeks duration. If a piece of artwork is sold then the artist will receive 60% of the ticket price and the gallery will receive 40% commission for selling a work. Generally there are no other costs for the artist: although an artist may sometimes be asked to contribute to the cost of advertising, printing of an invitation card and/or reception expenses. Ownership of the artwork remains with the artist until a sale has been completed.

Galleries act as a conduit between artist and buyer. This is essentially no different from many other retail outlets: the factory makes a consumer product and a shop receives customers who will purchase the item from the shop. However, that analogy is too simple: the dealings between an art gallery and an artist are not just purely business. Art cannot just be purely about business. The work of an art gallery is governed and tempered by the personal synergy between the gallery director and the artist - this is often based around friendship, philosophical understanding, respect and a rapport that is much more personally complex than that which is usually found in more usual business relationships.

The artists' 'product' is also unusually complex to sell. It is not a consumer item that the consumer chooses to buy for practical reasons e.g. a car to take you from A to B or a washing machine to wash clothes. Artwork is a discretionary

purchase that is non-practical by nature. It is also a product done by an artist that may have many layers of personal emotion and thought put into it. It is usually a one-off, non-mass market piece of workmanship. The relationship between the artist and the art gallery is highly personal because essentially the artwork that is being sold is a personal extension of the artist's personality or philosophy. It is also ideally a relationship that has the potential to be long-term.

Artists and their dealers have had an historically uneasy relationship: money, ambition and creativity can be a potent mix and, like all relationships, they have the potential to go astray. However, an alternative system in which to market and sell the work that artists produce has not been found....the commercial gallery system will remain in its present form for the foreseeable future.

Successful galleries are predominantly owned and run by one person; due to the individual nature of the business an art gallery needs to be run personally. This explains why good commercial galleries are not run like supermarkets nor have a number of branches in different locations. The overseas practice of naming the gallery after the owner of the gallery is an example of the individual branding that gallery directors wish to convey to the public. It is one attempt to ensure that the public knows with whom to deal with when purchasing art from that gallery. You cannot have faceless ownership of a gallery, and ideally the customers will be dealing directly with the owner of a gallery, not with shop (unfortunately termed 'gallery') assistants with, possibly, little knowledge of the art that is being shown. In Hong Kong, the lack of development in the art market is reflected in the limited range of galleries that are available and the persisting supermarket (4) approach in the presentation of the art that is shown.

Hong Kong has an immature art market. There are very few committed collectors of contemporary art in Hong Kong; people with a clear-minded vision, focus and strategy to build a substantial collection in a focused art area. Yes, people buy art but usually only to decorate their flats.

Hong Kong artists have a very loose relationship with galleries; for both parties, a long-term relationship and a building of commitment appear to take second place to the possible lure of quick money and/or momentary fame. Galleries consequently exhibit few Hong Kong based artists - galleries like to know that an artist is 'in tow' and has a commitment to one business relationship with one gallery. The concept of formal representation of an artist by a gallery is consequently weak and contributes to the continuing lack of contemporary Hong Kong art to be seen in Hong Kong's commercial galleries.

Hong Kong's public galleries rarely acknowledge their commercial counterparts and it is rare for each to cooperate to exhibit an artist. In the world's more mature art centres, public and commercial galleries have a symbiotic relationship and cooperate to mount exhibitions of artists that a gallery may represent. This relationship can verge on the 'cosy' (with all the pitfalls that any relationship that becomes too close can fall into (5)). But it is also an acknowledgement that the art world is no different from any other economic activity and that cooperation between government and semi-government and business sectors is inevitable and, if kept honourable, exemplary.

Hong Kong's commercial galleries could contribute to the further development of Hong Kong's art scene by establishing a commercial galleries association, laying out a code of conduct and discuss trade ethics. A professional association would bring commercial galleries in line with other business and professional groups where such organisation and guidelines are commonplace and expected.

It may be imagined that an art dealer's day could be spent chatting internationally over the telephone, having long lunches and attending cocktail functions. Actually an art dealer's life is much more mundane: the daily grind of physically 'tending' the gallery and waiting for customers and the monthly organisation of exhibitions is time-consuming, tiring and often debilitating. One of the art dealer's most satisfying activities is, for galleries that represent living artists, the daily contact with their artists. It is ironic that, in the rarified world of art academics and museum curators, who generally ignore commercial galleries, one of the strongest intellectual and artistic relationships that an artist may have is with their business/art dealer. It is this dealer/artist relationship that is the legacy that most art galleries and artists leave when they each 'move on'.

Oh, so how do I make money?

I think I have answered that. Please! Enjoy the art.

Notes:

1. Helmut Gernsheim in P. Hill & T. Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography*, 1979, p. 135.
2. John Batten, *Hong Kong Artspace*, in "P/S: 5th Anniversary Edition", Para/Site Art Space's magazine, Hong Kong, 2002.
3. The pen wielded by an animated proletariat, is one of the most potent and common motifs seen in Cultural Revolutionary propaganda posters and ceramics.
4. The 'supermarket' approach to exhibiting art is, I believe, when a gallery predominantly presents a group exhibition of different artists (often in the form of an alluring title: e.g. *Summer Breeze*); a box in a corner with unframed work; and, Tibetan rugs and Chinese antiques (for sale) will be on the floor to catch a buyer who really may not know anything about art.
5. An example was the *Sensation!* exhibition controversy in New York.

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