

# ***Hong Kong's Art Venues***

By John Batten

(Published in *PS: 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* - Para/Site Art Space's magazine)

Hong Kong from a distance must seem a very attractive place in which to have an art exhibition. However, let me offer a few 'rough-facts' - obvious, but oft forgotten.

Rough-fact 1: Hong Kong is one of the world's important financial centres and a meeting point for business decision-makers. Almost all decisions made in Hong Kong are made to maintain Hong Kong's business environment.

Rough-fact 2: The world knows the Hong Kong skyline: impressive tall buildings, neon brand advertising and stunning view. Generally unknown to visitors (and some of Hong Kong's richer residents!), however, is that 45% of Hong Kong's population lives in similarly tall public housing: vast housing estates in the New Territories. The space allocation in a public housing flat for a family of four is 250 square feet: architects have acknowledged that Hong Kong has some of the smallest and worst housing stock for a city of its size and wealth in the World.

Rough-fact 3: About 15% of the population is university educated.

Rough-fact 4: Many residents were born in China and on their arrival into Hong Kong were (a type of) refugee/s.

Rough-fact 5: Hong Kong is a Chinese city. Although its service industry has a very functionally competent English-speaking workforce, the majority of residents are Chinese-only language speakers - and, indeed, the English-speaking world has little or no bearing on their daily lives.

Rough-fact 6: Hong Kong does not lack for arts funding; it has the second highest per capita expenditure on the arts in the world. However, most funding is allocated to the bloated government arts and museum administration sector. It could be argued that the independent Para/Site Art Space on a yearly budget of HK\$800,000 does much 'more' for Hong Kong art than the publicly funded Hong Kong Museum of Art with a budget of over HK\$52 million (not including salaries) (1).

Rough-fact 7: Hong Kong's population comprises over 7 million people. In a recent comprehensive gallery guide (2) of Hong Kong's contemporary art spaces, Hong Kong has:

- 10 commercial art galleries (regular solo exhibitions/stable of artists)
- 12 decorative art galleries (group exhibitions/stock of decorative art)
- 5 publicly funded art museums (including university & public museums)
- 4 publicly funded & independent artist run art spaces (including Para/Site Art Space, 1aspace, Artists' Commune)
- 1 independently funded artist run space (Meli-melo Artists' Alliance)
- 1 boutique-gallery (agnes b)
- 1 overseas cultural organisation gallery (Goethe Institut)
- 7 partially publicly-funded independent organisations with galleries (including Hong Kong Art Centre, Fringe Club, The Pottery Workshop)

A survey of a similar sized city in another part of the world would make an interesting comparison; I suspect their art venues would be of greater number and diversity.

These diverse facts have much bearing on Hong Kong's small art world. For example, Hong Kong's flats are so small that people rarely entertain in them; therefore 'keeping up with the Jones's' means, for example, buying things to wear e.g. jewellery, watches, clothes - art is not considered desirable as it is unable to be seen by others.

Government decisions are pragmatic and rarely ever consider aesthetic angles; the bottom line rules. Thus, Hong Kong has some of the dreariest public sculpture, fountains, streetscapes and buildings of any city of its stature. The new Heritage Museum (remember: built at a budget exceeding the Guggenheim in Bilbao!) and the new Central Library both display elements of ugly gargantuan Soviet-style box architecture that many architects in China have even abandoned! The general public is rarely offered anything difficult or conceptual when they look at their city.

Understandably, like most refugees/immigrants once settled in their new home, the focus of work is on personal wealth creation and security building - art rarely enters that equation when 'bettering' yourself and owning a home is the aim. When art is considered for purchase, decorative art and posters will invariably be the choice.

This little potted summary gives a small insight into Hong Kong: this reality does bear heavily on Hong Kong's artists and art spaces.

Two recent exhibitions shown in Hong Kong's two most established art venues in September 2000 show contrasting approaches to the presentation of art to Hong Kong's public. The Hong Kong Arts Centre organised and exhibited *Very Fun Park* - contemporary art from Taiwan and the Hong Kong Museum of Art exhibited the, now well-known, *Inside Out* show of contemporary Chinese art.

The Museum of Art, with its prominent Hong Kong waterfront position, is a major disappointment for residents and for any Hong Kong visitor. Although the Museum has a remit to present all art forms, traditional Chinese art takes precedence. Since it opened 10 years ago, the Museum has never organised any exhibition of contemporary Chinese art (while the rest of world craves it!), any exhibition of photography (in a photography mad city!), or, any exhibition of applied arts (jewellery etc). The Museum does buy overseas organised art shows; however, it rarely organises any themed exhibitions itself nor appears to use the large resources and staff that it employs. The recent showing of *Inside Out* at the Museum is ignominious because it is a 'fly-in' exhibition organised by the New York-based Asia Society - the Museum should have been embarrassed that it did not organise its own similar exhibition years ago. However, it is hoped that the Museum will undergo major organisational changes in the near future as the former intransigent Director has been replaced by someone more open to diversity.

The Hong Kong Arts Centre (HKAC) was founded by a group of art-visionaries in the early 1970's: the then colonial Hong Kong Government granted a small plot of land; a group of philanthropists donated funds to build an innovative theatre, cinema, art and

studio complex designed to be financially supported by rent received from commercial offices in the upper floors of the building. During the recent Asian Economic Crisis, the HKAC suffered due to a dropping off in rental income. Its exhibition programme has been forced to be more focussed; however, it continues to

show the sort of art and exhibitions that one would expect from the much better resourced Museum of Art.

Some of the best art in Asia comes out of Taiwan and *Very Fun Park* was precisely organised as a type of alternative exhibition to be compared to the much-hyped *Inside Out*. The Hong Kong Arts Centre's independence in organising and then presenting Taiwanese art in Hong Kong and its determination to fend off any possible political repercussion is admirable. However, the HKAC, does not seem to be 'in tune' with what's happening in Hong Kong and some of this possibly reflects its own institutionalisation and internal bureaucracy. The HKAC is presently trying to reinvent itself as a community art school with (totally misguided) aspirations of being a tertiary-recognised visual art academy: however, it is confusing its role of being an established arts venue with its need to raise money. The HKAC will continue to be in arts-limbo until it recognises that it is first and foremost an arts and performance venue and needs to take a 'cutting-edge' approach to whatever it does.

Hong Kong's publicly funded Museums do not suffer from a lack of money. Most of Hong Kong's arts budget is distributed in the form of salaries to middle management employees of the Cultural Services Department and in maintaining 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 (or, in its new reincarnation as the offices for the Art Promotion Office) is presently a huge 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.

These publicly funded arts venues 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 be 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 adequate time to this Board 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.
- 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 the exhibited 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 and traditional Chinese painting, ceramics and sculpture. 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?

Hong Kong's most independent (and I mean by this, not 'beholden' to any other person or institution) art spaces are actually its commercial galleries. Although the majority of Hong Kong's commercial galleries show timid art, it is also possible to see in these galleries the latest work, for example, of US-based Chinese artists Gu

Wenda and Xu Bing; Hong Kong photographer So Hing Keung; Philippine artist Santiago Bose; and traditional artist Wucius Wong. However, most Hong Kong commercial galleries suffer from a hyper-supermarket approach to showing and marketing of art: the decorative and over-hyped prevail and the customary ordinariness of the art makes commercial art gallery going a problematic experience.

Hong Kong's 'alternative' art scene plummeted with a bang early in 2000 when the 18-month old Oil Street art spaces closed. Oil Street sprouted in late 1998 due to the availability of large and cheap warehouse space (albeit on short lease terms) close to Hong Kong's Central district - it was the sort of deal that is rare in Hong Kong. A variety of artists flocked to these spaces and many performances, exhibitions and art events evolved over the next 18 months - many of surprisingly good quality. Many of the Oil Street art groups have relocated to the government renovated old abattoir in To Kwa Wan (now known as Cattle Depot Artists' Space). Videotage (a video and film artists' collective) and 1aspace emerged as the most organised, and the Artists' Commune as the best connected of the Oil Street artists. Together with Zuni Icosahedran, it will be interesting to see how these groups will use this arts venue, which is not near an MTR station and relatively isolated in To Kwa Wan.

Hong Kong's only installation art venue, Para/Site Art Space, has presented a variety of installation, construction and video exhibitions with various degrees of success over the last five years. It has proved to be the most persistent and resilient of Hong Kong's artist-run spaces: and only those who have ever managed such a ("we do it for the love of it" type) venue and dealt with the variety of dilemmas, dramas, financial crises, aesthetic considerations, politics, form-filling, people and monthly rental and salary payments will appreciate that this 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary should be specially celebrated.

#### **References:**

- 1) (2) Para/Site Art Space's budget between 1996 to 2001 derives from various sources. Its operating budget for 1999 was small and daily venue and administration costs were constrained by that year's HK\$190,000 budget. However, its 2001 budget was HK\$890,000 and just over 90% of its funding was provided by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. An outstanding deficit of HK\$150,000 will be carried forward and the raising of extra funds will be needed to finance future programmes.
- 2) *Paroles* Magazine, September/October 2000, pp 13-28. Compiled by Gérard Henry, published by Alliance Française de Hong Kong.

This essay is an adapted version of a similar essay, *Hong Kong Art Spaces Now*, originally published in *Art Monthly Australia*, October 2000 and an article, *What Is To Be Done?* published in *Ming Pao Weekly* on 3 June 2001.

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

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