

Who needs Criticism?

For Art Writing, Art Development and the Art World

Art Appraisal Club

The booming art world...

The development of the West Kowloon Cultural District has ignited boundless imagination of what art can do for Hong Kong. In government policy, “the arts” offer new concepts for boosting economic development, which is highlighting the city as an international metropolis. Art is indeed profitable. International commercial galleries like the “White Cube” and “Perrotin” bring a global vision to the local art market, and “Art Basel” is creating a premier platform for bringing together artists and their patrons, generating monetary and “cultural” values for the arts. Today, bringing art to daily life is no longer a slogan, but a spectacular phenomenon: art pieces are being installed in wet markets, parks, and shopping malls. Even on public transit, you may find yourself sitting next to a work of art.

The boom in art is also nurturing various kinds of art writing – news reports on art events, features in magazines, exhibition catalogues, and commentaries on the Internet, etc. Art writing (i.e., “art criticism”) includes a wide variety of forms, from personal reflections, intellectual packaging from commercial art galleries, and analyses of the art market, to theoretical accounts of artistic practices. The writings usually offer a vague and detached account of art, instead of attempting to broaden the space for art criticism or encouraging more discussions on the developments in art. Curiously, with the increasing amount of art writing, the critical reviews of art are less likely to relate to wider audiences. When a colony of paper pandas occupied iconic landmarks in Hong Kong, the media invited the artist and organizer, celebrities, conservationists, and members of the general public to talk about the “art”, yet no art critics were included (Yiu 2014; *East Touch* 2014; *The Sun* 2014). What is the role of an art critic? What is the state of art criticism in Hong Kong? What can art criticism do for the local development of the arts?

This article examines the local art world in Hong Kong as a sounding board to look at the state of art criticism. Drawing from Howard Becker’s sociological notion, the art world can be considered as a socio-economic network that defines, negotiates, and appropriates discourses of art. Art critics would be one of the agents mediating between producing and consuming art, and promoting a dynamic process of meaning-making that resonates with the wider public. By no means does the view reinstate the importance of art criticism, rather, it aims to examine some of the less than palatable forms of art writing in the local context. This article may draw criticism that Becker’s theory only addresses the “sociology of occupation applied to artistic work”, but gives little attention on the artwork *per se* or the internal logic of contemporary aesthetics (Becker 2008: xi). However, it is justified that Becker’s sociological notion

broadens the scope of studying art not just as an event or object, but a meaning-making system that operates within the profession and resonates in society. It is instrumental in considering the state of art criticism – a meaning-making process that works alongside with other art producers to reflect upon what the arts mean to society. In particular, this article argues that the paucity of local art criticism lies in the inability of local art infrastructures and this cultivates a populist perception of art – one that is posh, individualistic and sentimental.

Production mechanism in the art world

In his classic study, *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker proposed to use a sociological approach to examine the production and consumption of art as a system that involves collective activities and shared conventions in articulating what art is. Drawing inspiration from George Dickie's institutional theory of art, Becker defined art by collective activities and the shared discourses, not just by its end product, the art pieces. Unlike Dickie, Becker was less interested in offering a philosophical classification of art in an institutional context, but his research focused on how art comes into being by examining visible structures and hierarchies of the art world. He suggested that:

Art worlds typically have intimate and extensive relations with the worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves. They share sources of supply with those other worlds, recruit personnel from them, adopt ideas that originate in them, and compete with them for audiences and financial support (2008: 36).

In this world of art, individuals (such as artists, curators, journalists, and collectors) and institutions (including alternative art spaces, museums, the art market mechanism, schools, and funding bodies) interact with each other in the production of art. They form the social system of art that embraces art-making, exhibitions and events, researching and archiving, publishing, collecting, education, and funding and sponsorship. These activities help define, negotiate, and invent discourses of art, and the presentation of art not only serves to reconfirm the discourses within the professional field, but also disseminate ideas to the general public, and to a certain extent, shapes their reception of art. Becker argued that an art object only lives within such a social system and an understanding of the art discourses would transform them into conventions that regulate the interactions among different parties, and specify the rights and obligations of the participants (2008: 29-30).

Drawing from Becker's notion, Figure 1 is a diagram that outlines the different players in the art world. Situated at the center of the art world, artists (also referred to as the primary producers) are the professionals who transform a vague creative impulse into an artifact – a performance, a mixed-media installation, or a community art project (Becker 2008: 25). In contrast to the popular belief that creation comes from nothing, a realization of an artistic idea would follow, develop, or challenge the existing convention(s) of art making. Creating a new piece of artifact enables the primary producer to manifest his or her talent and potential, and more importantly, to be involved in professional dialogues that articulate

the contemporary discourses of art. An artifact could be considered as an objectified consciousness that is composed of artistic conventions from previous generations and continuously modified expectations related to the future. It forms a part of the collective whole, extending an artistic pursuit of uniqueness.

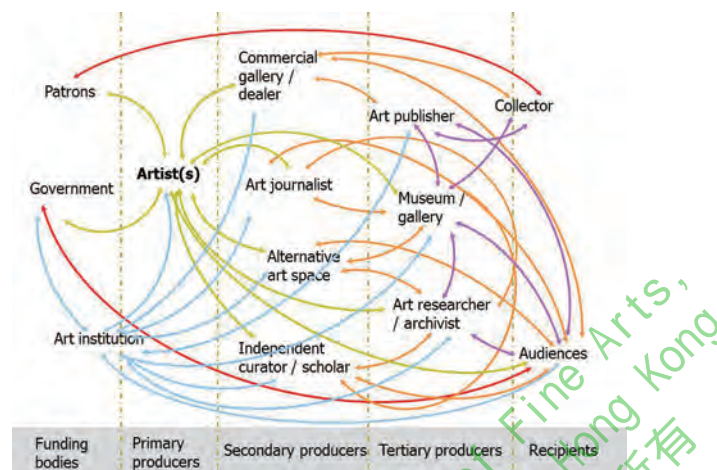


Figure 1: Diagram of the local art world (modified after Howard Becker)

In fostering professional dialogues within the art world, an artist would work with secondary producers to articulate the discourses of art through the means of exhibitions, curatorial projects, education workshops, and public seminars. Secondary producers, including alternative art spaces, independent curators, small to mid-sized organizations, and universities, when willing, would work on discourses that have not yet been canonized, and develop new possibilities that may eventually become conventions. Experimentation is the key for the works, and by circulation and identification of art discourses, the artifact can be seen by a larger circle of people. Further, new layers of meaning can be added to the original discourse of art. In addition, the commercial galleries, dealers, and consultants who specialize in working with young artists, also belong to this group of producers. Like their counterparts in the non-profit sector, they help with the circulation and identification by buying and selling to collectors and corporations, and transforming the cultural capital of the artifact into monetary profit.

The production of art is itself an internal network between the past, present, and future of certain artistic discourses. Throughout history, artifacts have actively “organized” human culture by eliciting sensuous interactions, as in the visual artifact impression and the manner of engaging in a particular activity, gradually consolidating the aspect into a form of canons. Tertiary producers are the institutions with practices that focus on the contextualization and canonization of art discourses. Museums, art publishers, archivists, and research institutions are the authoritative agents that research the continuity and discontinuity of contemporary art and establish what good art is, and how it speaks for our cultures. Looking at artifacts from a broader context, they contextualize the discourses of art that are relevant to the contemporary, and communicate these to wider audiences. They also confirm new conventions

and facilitate innovation that retains its integrity by embracing aesthetic sensibility and intellectual sophistication. A tertiary producer can be considered as a powerhouse of ideas that engages the wider public to negotiate, reconfirm, and even challenge the discourses of art. In the commercial sector, auction houses and international galleries are the tertiary producers, helping to promote the discourses of art across times and cultures. By referring artifacts as “classic”, “timeless”, or “masterpieces”, they duly transform cultural significances to have greater monetary value.

Roles of the art critic

Considering the art world as a dynamic process of production and consumption, art criticism would serve an intermediary role communicating between the production and consumption poles (Schreyach 2008: 17). The art critic, a professional viewer who ponders over a work of art, a specific creative practice, or a curatorial project, would evaluate its creative merits in its own cultural context on a public platform. Critical writing in art is therefore an intellectual exchange between critics and producers for articulating how different perspectives (historical, artistic, or personal) might merge into a meaningful discourse of art (Becker 2008: 163). On the other hand, audiences who are curious about the art world would like to be informed about new possibilities for interacting with the art, *per se*, even though it might seem strange, unappealing, or even obscure. To art lovers, critical writing communicates the “what” and “how” of the discourses, and invites readers to further contemplate how the discourses might resonant with their own cultural experiences (Carroll 2009: 45).

When writing a critique, the art critic constantly thinks about the arts, the professionals, and the public, while considering how to reduce the gap between the production and consumption of art. In its ideal state, art criticism operates by a convention of flexibility: an openness to embrace new ideas, a sensibility to scrutinize professional practices critically, and a resistance to accept subjective positioning that “speaks” for the arts. A critic does not belong to any specific tier of producers, and yet, he or she would take an initiative to interact with different tiers of producers by writing about an artifact, an experimental project, an art fair, or a museum exhibition and examine the discourses critically. The mobility allows the critic to move across different tiers in the art world and reach out to other professional worlds. Interestingly, this also projects a sense of ambiguity that makes the role of a critic less obvious. Arguably, the art critic is neither an arbiter of taste, nor an authoritative source of knowledge, but a public intellectual who is committed to mediating meaningful discourses of art with people from different worlds. The art critic means to create public forums that celebrate creativity, critical thinking, and artistic integrity for reflecting on the meaning of art and how it relates to our condition in contemporary society.

Local critics and their habitat

Looking at the role of art critics within the theoretical context of the art world may sound superficial considering the almost invisible presence of critical art writings in Hong Kong. Here, art critics work in a less than thriving habitat that prompts them to ask: Why am I writing and for whom?

Media platforms, such as newspaper columns, the arts and cultural section of a magazine, and professional journals, are the natural habitats for art critics to communicate with audiences. Flipping through a local newspaper for art exhibitions or events, they seem to be in need of more exposure, though they also tend to be packaged as posh leisure activities or a spectacle for capturing the public's attention. The arts and culture section of the local newspaper seems to have disappeared, and the remaining sections are focused

on the art of living, featuring fashion, food, home decoration, and travel. Today, an art critic would be very unlikely to enjoy the privilege of having his or her own column. The lack of publication opportunities is marginalizing art critics, and to some extent, is discouraging the discourses for art to be communicated with the public. Even if a critic is fortunate enough to have his or her work published, most critical art writings are limited to 500-1500 words (Ho 1998). Short articles could be useful for highlighting a particular argument or issue, but the brevity tends to stifle the depth and breadth of one's critical thinking and reduces intellectual discussions to mere opinions or statements that are only skin-deep, at best.

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In the face of intense competition in the media and publication industry, general cultural magazines, like *Artplus* and *City Magazine* (Plate 1) weave cultural discussions with glamorous features on lifestyle. The editorial team would prefer reporting about the art world than accepting critical reviews of arts and culture (Chan 2014). The heyday of local art criticism has long gone. Professional art journals like *Crossover Magazine*, *E+E*, (Plate 2) and *C for Culture*, (Plate 3) were once keen to work with young writers and welcomed long, analytical writings on the arts, but the life-spans of such publications tend to be short these days due to lack of funding support (Chen 2013; Leung 2007; Tu 2007). To further their professional success, local art critics once submitted their critical writings to overseas art journals. Readers from different cultural contexts would appreciate seeing the arts from different areas; however, one could

Plate 1 (left)
City Magazine, Issue 392,
May 2009



Plate 2 (right)
E+E, Volume 1, Autumn/
Winter 2001



ask how an overseas readership might change the scope of the writing, and how would this help the art discourses of the local community.

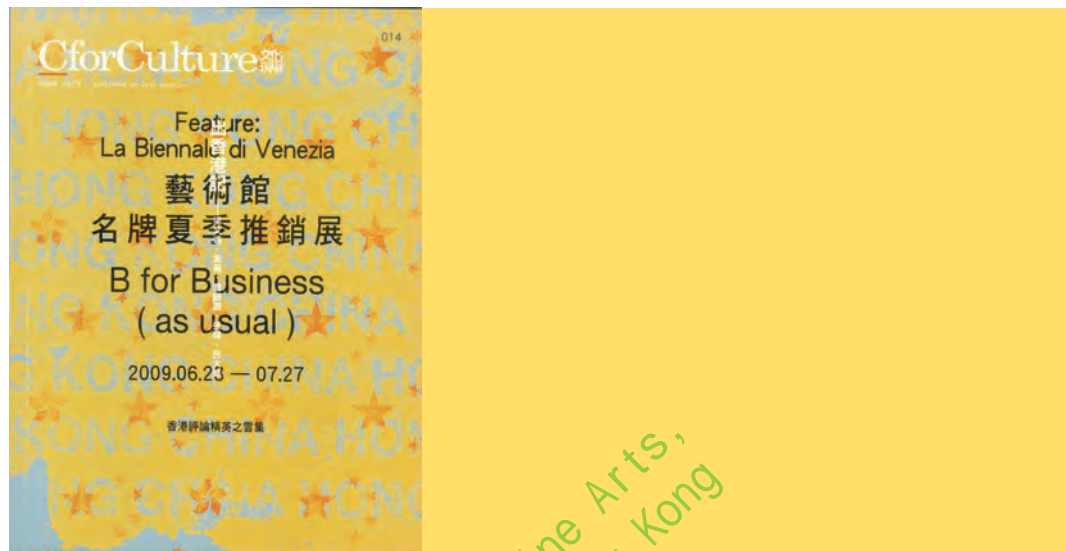
Articulating discourses of art

Ironically, Hong Kong is now the third largest art market in the world, and it strives to be a creative hub for the region, regardless of the paucity of art criticism. Becker's notion might suggest otherwise, emphasizing that art production is not just about making an end-product, but it is a meaning-making process that communicates the discourses of art in the art world and for wider audiences. The absence of art critics fails to legitimize the discourses of art and risks marginalizing the art world (Becker 2008: 164). Considering the recent art development in Hong Kong, Becker's notion about art discourses needs to be articulated in the local context.

To envision Hong Kong as an international arts and cultural metropolis, the government has considered the creative industry as a driving force for future development. In promoting Hong Kong's creative capacity, the West Kowloon Cultural District project was implemented, at a cost of HK\$21 billion for 17 art and cultural venues¹. Unused heritage buildings like the Central Police Station Compound and the former Police Married Quarters were transformed into glamorous landmarks for arts and leisure facilities ("InvestHK": 2014). As a policymaker and funding body, the government seems to care little about what art might do for the minds of the people; the only concern is about how much money will be brought into the city. Innovation and creativity are good things, because they can be converted into capital and economic growth. In any case, the grand scheme for art development may offer new opportunities for artists, the primary producers, for their pursuit of career goals.² How would an artist's voice be heard in this "golden age" of art? The "Fotanian Open Studio" program is an interesting example with insights about how artists interact with the public.

Running for more than a decade, the Open Studio event expanded from showcasing 18 artists to working with more than 250 professionals from about 80 studios (Lam 2007; Fotanian Limited: 2015). The event aims to show artists' artworks in their studios – the places where the works were conceived and constructed, while encouraging genuine exchanges between artists and visitors. The materialization of creative practices is viewed from the perspective of primary producers. For the enthusiastic learners, the organizer arranges talks, seminars, educational workshops, and guided tours to allow art discourses to be discussed, circulated, and explored. The rapid growth of this annual festival is an indicator of the vibrancy of the local art scene. The event has been successful in terms of the numbers of visitors and the scope of media coverage. Still, when the discourses are re-interpreted by the media, the image of the artists, or more precisely, their romanticized image, is identified. For instance, the latest media promotion highlighted that the event would enable visitors to have face-to-face interactions with artists to solve some of the mysteries of the arts (Cheng 2015). Playing with the popular fantasy of the arts, the media tends to associate the "artists" with "good taste", "unconventional lifestyle", or "big dream" (Kwok 2014; Leung 2014a; Leung 2014b; Kafka 2011). Media interviews show artworks that are visually appealing and easy to understand,

Plate 3
C for Culture, 014, June
 2009



The media tends to portray a rather fanciful image that good art is good taste, which is where art can arouse the desire to own things that are special.

suggesting that “art is for everyone” (*Weekend Weekly* 2014; Wu 2013). The news coverage may help artists gain some exposures, but it does not necessarily communicate who the artists are as individuals, what they do in their profession, or how their works speak to our collective experiences. The media tends to portray a rather fanciful image that good art is good taste, which is where art can arouse the desire to own things that are special. Following this line of thinking, it would not be surprising for a reporter to recommend that readers should bring cash with them when they go to Fotanian Open Studio for souvenirs or to buy their favourite wines and foods (*The Sun* 2013; *Umagazine* 2011). In a sense, the media reconfirms the government’s discourse: the creative industry is a driving force for our economy, and art is utilitarian, after all. Although the artists may have made attempts to articulate their voices, the glamorous vision of the arts is overly loud.

The Fotanian Open Studio program draws more than 10,000 visitors who have diverse interests and prior knowledge of art, to engage in different activities. Visitors’ interactions with the discourses of art would vary due to the media publicity. In any case, the processes of meaning-making would be circulated and discussed in small circles of friends and colleagues that would be less visible to the public eyes. Thus, local art criticism, to a certain extent, is replaced by a popularist reporting about art. Art criticism is an intellectual investigation

and thoughtful commentary on the discourses of art. In contrast, art reporting tries to pull the basic facts into an interesting story, and may not pay much attention to the discourses. Offering an “accessible” entry to art, art reporting can reduce the discourses of art to posh entertainment that is fun, comprehensible, and affordable, where specially designed products would always be available to take home as “art”. Art is appealing not because it is intellectually intriguing, nor emotionally compelling, but rather, it is an empty

signifier that engages people to project their own personal stories in a pseudo-aesthetic involvement that feels good and distinctive. Art reporting serves its readers as an informative guide to find spectacular and interesting experiences that promise a good life.

The discourse(s) articulated about a work of art would change according to its exhibition context. That is, when a work of art is shown in an exhibition, a public platform is set up by a secondary or tertiary producer, the discourse of art is then enriched by the curatorial idea, its juxtaposition with other artworks, and/or the context of the physical space. For instance, local artist, Leung Mei-ping's "Made in Hong Kong" is a series of paintings illustrating an array of iconic images in Hong Kong. The images range from Disneyland to the Big Buddha at the Po Lin Monastery, and from the "golden toilet"³ to the statue of Golden Bauhinia. Curious about the production mechanism of Dafen Village in Shenzhen, from where the origin can be traced back to a local trade painting business, Leung posed as an amateur painter who receives training at a souvenir workshop. Intervening in the business pattern, Leung commissions the studio to produce images she took in Hong Kong that highlight a spectrum of tourist experiences, such as shopping in Mong Kok, attending the June 4th anniversary gathering, and queuing for kindergarten applications. When the artist worked on this series at the Dafen Village, she was doing a performance that mimicked the operation of the site of reproduction, by playing with the notions of authorship, representation, and appropriation. Eventually, this series of paintings was turned into Leung's solo exhibition, "Pearl River Delta I: Made in Hong Kong", which was launched at the Osage Gallery – a site of art business. Numerous copies of each image in various dimensions are clustered together as if moving from the production studio to a souvenir shop, ready to greet their potential buyers. The exhibition enables this series of paintings to be viewed as an integral collection, embodying the desires of people through the pictorial representation of the city, from the tourist's point of view. The physical space further highlights the desires and yearnings in buying and selling. As a secondary producer, the curator articulates the artist's discourse and questions the cultural implications (e.g., what is original and what is a reproduction, and who copied from whom?) with regards to the economic exchanges occurring between Hong Kong and China.

Unlike most of the exhibitions in Hong Kong, Leung's solo exhibition has been mentioned in a couple of articles that examine the multiple identities of the work as a souvenir, an imitation, or a work of art (Tsang 2014; Wu 2014; Kafka 2014). These articles tend to state the intention of the artist, content of the series, and how writers see the images in relation to their own personal experiences. The rather subjective comments neither unravel the complexities of the series by Leung Mei-ping, nor critically examine the work within the context of contemporary art, such as looking at the latest development of an art form, or a theme that notices recent concerns and issues in society. For instance, Kafka's article describes a brief history of export paintings in Hong Kong to highlight the creative process of the work of Leung Mei-ping in Dafen Village – a center of export paintings and replicas. It then introduces iconic images of Hong Kong captured by the artist and relates these images to how tourists would have shaped the daily life experiences of the city. This writing summarizes what the artist has done and how a viewer would have seen the work, but it does little to evaluate the works within the context of contemporary art practices, or

local cultural discussions. It even considers the series as an innovative approach of paintings in engaging the public regardless of the fact that the artist has done the paintings to intervene in the production mechanism of export paintings and play with the multiple narratives of an object as a commodity, souvenir, and replica, but not about the contemporary notion of painting. This example demonstrates that art writing in Hong Kong is inclined to be personal responses to the arts, and writers are less likely to examine multiple perspectives of approaching the work within the context of contemporary art and culture. It underlies the popularist notion that art is for everyone and everyone would have something to say about the arts. Such a notion overlooks the professional practices of art producers, and eschews the role of an art critic in articulating intellectual discourses of art. In many cases, the audiences would be fortunate to read a piece of art writing without mistakes about the artists and the concepts of their creative practices; it would be overwhelming if the writing instead offered them with new insights to interact with the work.

To further determine the missing aspects in local art writing, it is worthwhile to consider one of the most reflective articles on Leung Mei-ping's work, published in a professional art journal, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Art*, which targets international readers. Written in 2008, the article examined an earlier version of the "Made in Hong Kong" series, putting it in the context of the global market for reproduction, along with other pieces of conceptual art like *the Painters* series by Christian Jankowski, and *Real Fake Art* by Michael Wolf (Wong 2008). By focusing on the collaboration between contemporary artists and the export manufacturers in Dafen Village, the article considers Leung's paintings as enactments of the interplay between high and low cultures, and mechanical reproduction and artistic appropriation, thus asking about the conditions of originality that can be made into reproducible and unfixed commodities (Wong 2008: 38). This critical writing demonstrates the meaningful interactions between the artwork and the critic, that is, through recontextualization and evaluation, the writer poses new questions for the discourse of art to be circulated and rearticulated. The writer asks how the work reveals the contemporary condition of culture, which is exactly what is lacking in Hong Kong: that the discourses of art have a rather limited time-span. When the exhibition is dismantled and the works are no longer visible, the discourse loses its dynamics for dissemination, negotiation, and appropriation in the wider public. Even while the exhibition is running, the discourses are conveniently reduced to a monotonic narrative that promotes art as thoughtless entertainment. In the local artworld, secondary producers may attempt to further articulate the discourses of art, but their efforts would not be supported by critical art writing. The discourses would lack the momentum for circulation among professionals and easily replaced instead, by art reporting.

The lack of art criticism not only reinstates Becker's argument that art fails to be legitimized and the art world is being marginalized. It also points to a void of meaning that turns the discourses into an entertaining experience for consumers, which causes an intellectual rupture so that critical discourses are no longer accumulated, documented, or rearticulated in the art world. In Hong Kong, archives and documentaries about local artists are fragmented, and the research of art history is sketchy, as it only focuses on specific themes or topics, which are insufficient for outlining a comprehensive picture and

multiple narratives of the arts in Hong Kong. The only overall study of local art history was conducted by Zhu Qi, a mainland Chinese scholar. Because of the missing first-hand materials and groundwork, the volume ignores some significant art groups and their interactions with various cultural repertoires throughout history (Lai 2006). At the level of the tertiary producers, research of local art development has also been insufficient for complementing the art discourses and confirming new conventions or challenges to the established discourses. The local art world appears to be haunted by the so-called decentralization of cultural institutions, which is missing the diverse narratives of art articulation and the micro-histories of art development. Instead, the local art world has encountered difficulties in operating its reflective meaning-making mechanism through research, publication, and exhibitions.

In face of the crisis for meaning-making, the commercial sector has become far more ambitious in defining good art for the locals. For instance, Graham Steele, Director of “White Cube” Hong Kong says:

There are no museums in Hong Kong yet to see exhibitions of new and fresh international contemporary art on the level that “White Cube” is known for... But we are here to engage in this community, we are dedicated to producing ambitious, challenging new shows that will excite and change the way that people see contemporary art in Hong Kong (“InvestHK”: 2014).

Considering that White Cube is equivalent to a museum, Steele confidently holds that the gallery brings international contemporary art to Hong Kong, which a museum cannot, and articulates that the discourses of art are shaping how people see art. This statement can be triangulated by many corporations that attempt to use “the arts” for enjoyment and enrichment of a community, like the elephant statue parade in Swire-owned properties⁴; “Encounters 11”, an art project promoting local young artists hosted at the K11 shopping mall; and most notably, “Art Basel”, an art fair aiming to create intellectual exchanges for artists, gallerists, collectors, and visitors. In sustaining the people’s interest in its programs and events, the commercial sector is keen to offer diverse experiences of arts by working with an array of partners and communities. Eventually, the art discourses being articulated by these business minds would be tied to a large number of participants, with spectacular viewing and consumption. Instead of broadening the discussions on art and culture, these art events offer new marketing strategies for more aesthetic daily life experiences and for associating arts with consumption. People may see many different things in art, but in Hong Kong, art seems to be rather straightforward and equivalent to something fun, nice looking, and unique. The question is: If art fails to be a seductive provocateur, who will try to open up new possibilities for its creation and for the conditions of culture? What is art to the local art world and the wider communities?

The online platform: A new habitat?

In this “golden age of the arts”, good art seems to be evaluated by the number of participants, the scope of media coverage, and the scale of captivating spectacles. In the local art world, these ideas are showing

no sign of convergence among its members and with the public. Furthermore, overwhelming evidence suggests that the mechanism of discourse production will continue to be shaped by government policies, commercial corporations, and the art market. In considering new possibilities for articulating the art discourses, online platforms like *Artalk*, *Pixelbread*, and the art section at the *House News* have been set up to promote critical exchanges within the community of artists, researchers, and art lovers. In today's Internet era, websites, social media, and message boards seem to constitute the public platform for engagement, with reflective dialogues and debates to counterbalance the lack of discussion spaces in the media and publication industry. Obviously, online platforms demonstrate a cost-effective operation model that allows more users to gain information for personal purposes and to engage in critical conversions with the communities. According to *Artalk*, the editors receive five pieces of critical writings on a weekly basis and more and more readers are becoming writers themselves to share their thoughts on the arts and culture (Yeung 2012). It is, indeed, encouraging to see art writing being supported by the online platforms. Nevertheless, writing online does not guarantee remuneration and many art critics prefer submitting articles to printed publications rather than having their writing posted online.

At its heart, online platforms invite art lovers to write about their experiences about art exhibitions and events. Implicitly or explicitly, the platform magnifies the idea that anyone can be a critic and that art criticism is about one's personal experiences of art. This rather pragmatic outlook liberalizes the art experience from a connoisseur's view or a historian's investigation to promote multiple approaches for seeing art. It suggests that to enjoy a work of art, viewers create their own experiences – in an individual relationship with the artwork, which may not necessarily be the experience intended by the artist (Ching 2013). In other words, viewers are empowered to envisage themselves with the artwork and perceive it as a part of their life experiences. Positioning the viewer as a subject of an art experience aims to transform such experiences into a dialogue between one's "object" and "subject" (self). Ideally, art viewing would draw any inquiring mind out of the comfort zone and into the vast world of possibilities (Yeung 2012).

Art seems to become a communicative tool rather than a meaningful discourse in itself.

In democratizing cultural authorities of the art world, the pragmatic outlook embodied by online platforms is admirable, but not without its pitfalls. It adopts a rather open definition of art as embracing sensuous, emotional, and intellectual responses. Nevertheless, the focus of art writing is not about art or the discourses of art, but the viewer's experiences or reflection about the world. Art seems to become a communicative tool rather than a meaningful discourse in itself. It overrides intellectual articulation with subjective perception, and simplifies art experiences as a cerebral response to environmental stimuli.

Looking at art out of its own context, the notion of art is deconstructed and dissolved. In many cases, online writing becomes a casual remark about the artwork without looking at its context or any wild association with subject matter that might be irrelevant to the art itself. Privileging individual experiences over artistic form and content, how can the vague notion of art encourage writers to embrace multiple perspectives? In addition, how can individual responses resonate with other online users in the articulation of art discourses?

It is too early to evaluate the impact of online writing on the local development of art criticism. To operate an online platform, time is of the essence. An online platform enables information exchanges to be immediate, transparent, and flexible, but users may feel lost in the enormous sea of information. To connect with the world, users may prefer to read instant updates about an event or follow the breaking news, instead of going through an exhibition review that has already come and gone. The writers must produce articles quickly to be able to catch the attention of the community, which would leave little time for contemplation. Massive information exchanges could cause a writer's article to be quickly buried, which puts pressure on the writer to capture a large web traffic. For example, a photo series of a large yellow rubber duck might generate more interest than a 3000-word analysis of the popularist aesthetics of inflatable sculptures. The online behavior of users seems to dictate how writers create their pieces to foster the most interactions in the community. One might ask if the quantity of the writing really speaks to the quality of the resulting discourse and whether or not a large audience can be motivated to enter the art world in the long-run.

Conclusion

The art world is an intricate system of art-making, curating, research, publication, education, and collecting to produce meaningful discourses shared by the public and cultural organizations and institutions. At every level, critical art writing offers intellectual input to facilitate the discourses that uphold professional integrity and promote new inventions.

In Hong Kong, art critics have struggled to make their voices heard in the mainstream printed media. In-depth discussions on art seem to be unwanted by the newspapers and their imagined communities. Art critics also find it difficult to work with online platforms that offer little remuneration and threaten to bury their writing under massive exchanges of information. Curiously, the rapid development of the arts requires it to be written, publicized, and viewed by wide audiences. Art reporting has become a dominant form of writing that packages art exhibitions and events as spectacles and forms of entertainment to be consumed. Art viewing, as an increasingly trendy hobby, invites everyone to bring their personal experiences to the activity. Art can be entertaining, provoking, and inconvenient. Art reporting may reduce the discourses into monotonic narratives about the aesthetics of daily life, in relation to taste and a posh lifestyle. Nevertheless, such simplified narratives do not help audiences to engage in intellectual discussions about art and culture, instead, they enshroud the arts with more misunderstandings. The patterns also highlight the imbalance in the infrastructure for the local art world, where the production of discourse is more likely shaped by government policy, commercial corporations, and the art market.

The blooming of art seems to bring a set of common challenges for individuals and institutions in the local art world. Commercialization, aestheticization of everyday life, and the decentralization of cultural institutions are all changing the nature of art making and the articulation of art discourses. When we all look at art, it seems to evaporate before our eyes. Perhaps we need to reconsider the meaning of art, our reasons for participating in art activities, and how we can get the most from the critical discourses of art.

Art Appraisal Club

Art Appraisal Club was initiated by Ying Kwok with a group of local professionals including Chan Sai-lok, Leung Chin-fung, Leung Po-shan Anthony, Vivian Ting and Yeung Yang to encouraging critical thinking and effective discussions.

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- ¹ Editor's note: the exact number of art and cultural venues within the West Kowloon Cultural District is to be further announced by the Authority.
- ² Interestingly, Fotanians' stories are never quite like the rosy picture painted by the government. According to ethnographic research conducted by Leung Po-shan, most of the Fotanians are university graduates or even postgraduates and their monthly income is around \$15,000 on average (2010a). The researcher has thoroughly analyzed how the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District would have projected a superficial image of the artists (Leung 2010b).
- ³ "Golden Toilet" was built in gold and diamond by Lam Sai-wing, Chairman of Hang Fung Gold Technology Ltd.
- ⁴ "Swire Properties to host Hong Kong's first ELEPHANT PARADE® this Summer", Swire Properties press release, Apr 3, 2014. http://www.swireproperties.com/en/media-resources/press-releases/2014/elephant_parade.aspx

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