



# In the Age of Art: From Consumption to Production — Assumptions and Realities

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Consumption, in the context of visual art development in Hong Kong, has been subject to a wide variety of speculation, expectation and assumption. Given life and breath through the media and press releases, the assumptions have opened fractures between what is cited as, and what is, the position of the creative industries.

The assumptions of visual arts are reached throughout the visual ecology and the art markets, and emerge into the public consciousness as a truth. From assumptions that arrive with the arts to the international nature of the players and commentators, the standard of education, and thus connoisseurship of the audience in Hong Kong, the creative industries have an air of the definite and a distinct lack of questioning.

The hidden questions are left hanging: who views visual arts, who consumes it, who is the target audience, at what level of education and is the audience sustainable? Questioning that interrogates the consumers' relationship with their experience are public sector norms in the creative industry; yet here, they do not seem to have relevance and little acknowledgment. This peculiarity is entirely due to the dynamics of the visual art ecology and more over the dominance of the private sector which has become a cornerstone of visual art experience in Hong Kong.

As the infographic shows, over the past five years the number of private establishments has increased by 20%, consistent with the continuing fiscal rise of the auction markets. The number of prestigious galleries (defined simply in terms of their international profile) now makes up approximately 10% of the total number of galleries. Aside from the increase in the

number of venues, it is prestige galleries exhibits and the high-end prestige sales in the auction rooms that are both the most financially lucrative, yet crucially are the most visible of the art markets. The objects and their sale prices are all but out of reach for the majority, inaccessible to most collectors and often national collections, who are priced out of the market place for new acquisitions. Yet, however small it is, this exclusive portion is the primary fodder of the media and the most visible to the public, resulting in an increasingly merged line between the traditional roles played by the private and public sectors. Rather what manifests is the opening of more commercial spaces, it seems everyone who is anyone in the international art world are hoping to take a piece of the lucrative Hong Kong art pie! (Fig. 1)

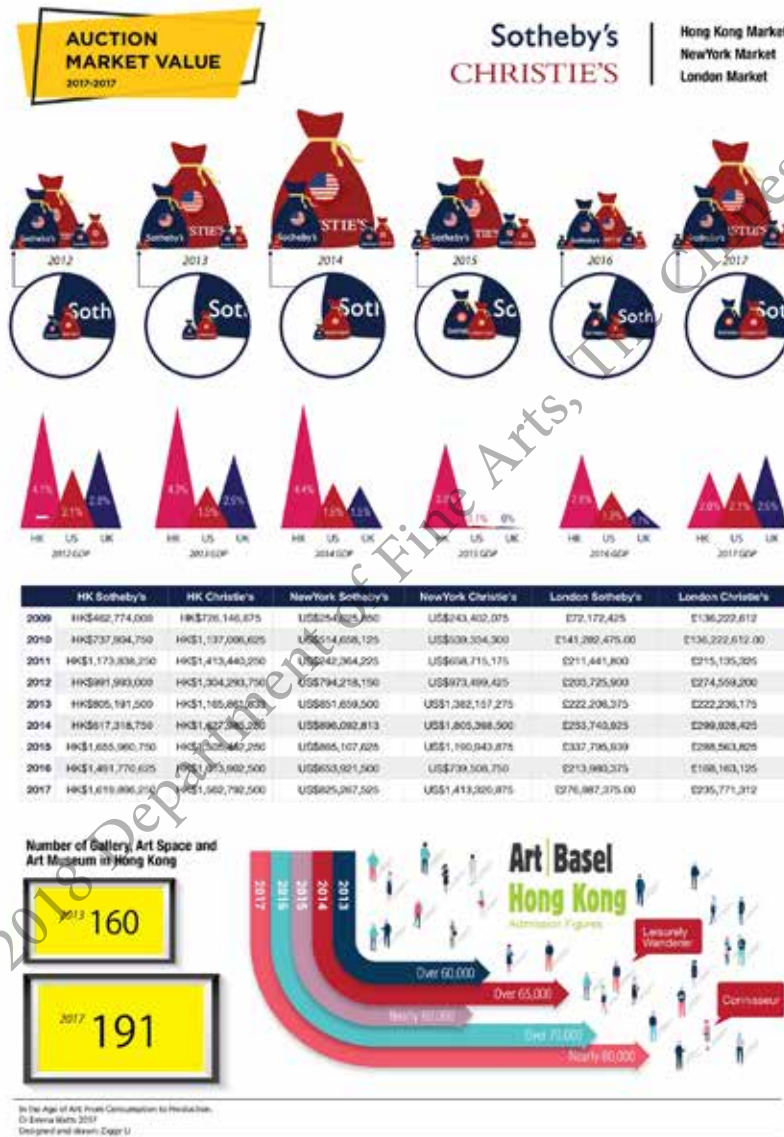


Fig. 1

Infographic of research showing the art markets over the past five years.

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This paper will begin to address some of the assumptions that have surfaced through unpacking how the ecology feeds, thrives and sustains the distinct layers of the environment available to the audience.

To a degree some of the assumptions made about art in Hong Kong can be explained by the trans-global nature of the foundation and the ecology itself. As stated previously, Hong Kong visual art foundation presents a unique market environment. It is, to all intents and purposes, an upside-down model to that of the other established markets, that has evolved from the commercial and secondary art markets and not the public sector. Historically, market emergence stems from either a state sponsorship of art or a collector's patronage of art, and relies on established infrastructure: education, art schools, galleries, museums and cultural fascination. In Hong Kong, this model is distinct in its differences. The market and cultural ecology has rather seen the emergence of sales before solid infrastructure, presenting an upside-down scenario where money, and art as consumer product, appears before taste and connoisseurship.

The visual art environment in Hong Kong is heavily supported by the trans-global commercial transfer of contemporary art, serviced by a global stock of art, which imports culture for sale and, in some incidences, the buyers themselves. This global diaspora of contemporary and modern art, that both supplies the flow but further responds to economic market conditions, following wealth as a global feed in the flow of consumption, becomes a part of the luxury goods market and another chattel of wealth.

However, the research of identifying the current position of the role of art markets and its ecosystem in both the public and the private sectors has revealed its unique pivotal role in the promotion of visual arts and cultural consumption in Hong Kong. The current position places the market as a key social educator and thus is unlike any other market place. "Habitus," in the Bourdieu sense, is thus embedded through the commercial world of visual art. The salerooms and art fair exhibition halls have become social-cultural space. They are the currency of knowledge with which we navigate visual arts. Unpacking its current position offers the opportunities to examine the influences and challenges in what has developed as a unique cultural environment of visual arts.

So, what are the art markets? Distinct from the public-sector galleries and museums, the private sector of secondary art markets is considered as two main components: the commercial galleries, those who buy, sell and exhibit art, and the auction houses, which sell and exhibit. There are other players such as brokers, art agents, insurance specialists and so on, but for the purpose of simplicity we shall consider the two main sectors of auction houses and private galleries.

Private galleries can be further subdivided from the prestigious international companies (defined by international profile, not qualitative methods!) into smaller international, geographic specialists, local and regional galleries. To avoid confusion of meaning and to present basic definition, all these establishments are in business to make money. They are not primarily non-profit or artist-specific spaces. They are a market space which sells art. “Art Basel” and the increasing number of fairs, to be discussed later, are facilitators. While this basic definition to some would seem obvious, it is often one that causes some degrees of debate!

Unlike any of the other international marketplaces, the predominate consumption of visual arts in Hong Kong is based though the private sector. One key reason is that the public-sector venues for visual arts are limited by constraints of renovation and construction. The “Hong Kong Museum of Art” (HKMA) was closed in 2015 for a four-year renovation and the opening of “M+” is still some way off. Granted there are any numbers of regular “pop up” exhibitions, the fundamental need to have a concrete tangible space is paramount in the sustainable development of visual arts. Without the tangible space, the ritual of the site, space and experience is lost, limiting repeat visiting and creating a distinct fracture in the future of audience practices and hence aesthetic experiences. This combination of circumstances has pushed the importance of the private sector even further into the psyche of the audience. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that as the shared venue for auctions and art fairs, the “Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre” at Wan Chai has established itself as the tangible space that is activated with each event. The changing nature of each event further provides excitement and anticipation and thus conjures the notion of site for the visual arts ritual.<sup>1</sup>

This is distinctly reinforced with the wonder of the “mini moment” as auction houses continue to expand and develop in terms of money made and prices realized. This has made visible the market opportunities in Greater China and has presented the Hong Kong audience with unwitting added-benefits. Regularly the privilege of “mini moments” arrives in Hong Kong, from the exhibition of important pieces of the “David Bowie private collection” prior to its London sale, to the odd Rothko or Monet. The auction house practice of bringing significant works to Hong Kong prior to their New York or London sale has significantly increased the availability of trans-cultural visual-aesthetic markers and the one-to-one experience with canonic art. Auction houses do not bring great works of art around the world to please the public, it is of course the prospect of a sale that is the enabler, but bringing the art to the collectors is having immeasurable benefit to the Hong Kong audience. An example of the “mini moment” was the autumn 2017 exhibition of *Salvator Mundi*, Leonardo da Vinci. One of only four venues on its world preview tour, for

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1 The notion from civilizing ritual as discussed by Carol Duncan has some resonate here and merits further separate discussion.

seventy-two hours queues of people flocked to see the work. According to Christie's that number was approaching 30,000 across the preview tour.<sup>2</sup> Clearly the display of this work says a great deal about the perception of the Greater China collectors' potential, but the buyer was not one in the queues of people who waited to see the work. These people were audience waiting to see art. And, to all intents and purposes, the commercial sector was fulfilling the role of public art museums, providing world class art and a canonic aesthetic marker for public viewing.

The market condition which has given rise to the growth in the number of galleries in private sector is also being matched by an increasing number of art spaces and art fairs. This sector (both private and public) growth would suggest that there is a growing demand for visual arts and in the cultural and creative industries. In light of this it would seem logical to assume that there are equally a large number of visitors who have participated in art and cultural activities.

According to reports, HKMA attracted a record-breaking 763,200 visitors in 2012-13, twice the number that visited the museum in 2010-11, 358,000 (Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2014). In 2013, art seemed to be passionately enjoyed over more and more people. The "Mobile M+ Inflation!" exhibition drew 150,000 visitors in six weeks after its opening in late-April (West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, 2013) and more than 60,000 people attended the "Art Basel Hong Kong" event in just 5 days (Art Basel, 2013). By 2016 the attendance number for Art Basel Hong Kong quoted had risen to a figure of "over 70,000."<sup>3</sup>

While the visitor numbers were undoubtedly and significantly boosted by "Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal" exhibition,<sup>4</sup> the statistics quoted suggest that there are many visitors who have participated in art and cultural activities. Yet their visiting experiences have not been researched, leaving what can only be described as a gaping hole in our knowledge and understanding of audience. Constrained by limited resources, local museums seldom conduct large-scale visitor surveys and the last time that the Leisure and Cultural Services Department appointed marketing professionals to carry out a survey was in 2004.<sup>5</sup> The results of the survey briefly outlined some of the reasons why people visited museums and what services they had used, but little attention was paid to their behavioral patterns, responses to exhibitions, and how they might have associated

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2 <https://hk.asiatatler.com/life/salvator-mundi-da-vinci-hong-kong>. Accessed January 2018.

3 Ting, W.Y.V., Ho, S. "Meeting Warhol in the Exhibition: Visitors' experience with art in the Hong Kong Museum of Art."

4 "Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal Exhibition," Hong Kong Museum of Art, from December 15, 2012 to March 31, 2013.

5 See footnote 3.

with the institutions. While some more recent, and small focused surveys have been done,<sup>6</sup> the implication for the cultural development of the visual arts in Hong Kong is one that has sidelined, or worse ignored, the vital element of audience.

The audience's central role affects and effects the very ecology as the pivot point which activates spaces, defines cultural aesthetic and sustains growth. Across the world, audience is the "success" factor in any creative industry. Here in Hong Kong, however, the audience is the least understood of all elements in the creative ecology. Instead of questioning the responses to art, report after report extolls success in the form of sales figures in the private sector and/or visitor number in the public sector. While it would be misplaced and ludicrous to suggest that the auction houses ran visitor surveys, Hong Kong is urgently in need of a serious academic audience study to further examine the market conditions of audience and to define the parameters in which any further discussion or study of audience and cultural development may be placed. Currently, audience response is equated to numbers. We are offered visitor numbers as a consolation prize, as to suggest the number is equitable to the experience or interaction of the audience. As an example of the often unhelpful nature of visitor numbers alone, perhaps consider the below statistics:

According to the HKMA, visitors rose by 100,000 in five years. Again, a statistic that would seem to uphold the belief of equating audience response to numbers. However, this is not a complete picture. The visitor number, while showing apparent growth, is not comparable with other institutions in major cities. This number does not compare with the "National Gallery" in London - 5.9 million, the "Art Gallery of New South Wales" in Sydney - 1.5 million or the "Metropolitan Museum of Art" in New York - 7 million. Rather the visitor number compares more in international terms to the size of a reasonably successful exhibition. Of course, this simplistic comparison does not allow for evaluations of collections or make mention of any visiting experiences in considering the cultural visions and understanding of the public. Rather it would be a welcoming addition to see quality metrics evaluation used to enhance the understanding of the visitor experience.<sup>7</sup>

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6 At the time of going to press, Hong Kong Arts Development Council announced the findings of visitor research. Titled "Arts Consumption and Participation Survey," the research was limited in numbers and methodology but more concerning was the multiple disciplines all collected under the term "Arts." The scope was enormous at any level, encompassing: "arts and cultural activities including dance; drama; xiqu; music; multi-arts; variety; pop-performance; film festival/independent screenings; visual arts exhibitions and literary activities. Variety and pop performances include talent shows, art competition programs and award ceremonies, independent bands and pop singers' concerts. Literary activities included literary talks, reading literary books in bookshops and libraries." See [http://www.hkadc.org.hk/wpcontent/uploads/ResourceCentre\\_ResearchReport/20180118\\_Arts\\_Participation\\_and\\_Consumption\\_Survey/Arts\\_Participation\\_Consumption\\_Survey\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.hkadc.org.hk/wpcontent/uploads/ResourceCentre_ResearchReport/20180118_Arts_Participation_and_Consumption_Survey/Arts_Participation_Consumption_Survey_ENG.pdf). Accessed June 2018.

7 <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/quality-metrics/quality-metrics>. Accessed April 2018.

Further by positioning museological studies, such as quality metrics evaluation, within the local context of arts development make motivations, agendas and cultural interests of the art audience more visible and help the agenda to develop the overall sustainability in the creative sectors of Hong Kong.

Visitor experience is key in understanding the reasons why people visit and for Hong Kong, this of course includes the meteoric rise of the private sector machine that is the art fair and especially Art Basel. Before 2012, “Hong Kong Art Fair” was an annual market event, supported by an ever-increasing commercial gallery presence, and bolstered by a number of similar events such as “Hotel Art Fair,” “Affordable Art Fair” and more local fringe events such as the annual “Hong Kong Art Walk” and “Fotanian Open Studios.” It was an active, if not high profile, visual art calendar. However, in 2013 Hong Kong Art Fair was bought by Art Basel, bringing to Hong Kong the visual art “brand” and with the brand came more expectations, more assumptions and, of course, the great and the good from the global art world. Strategically taking over logistics, handlers, galleries and VIP lists from the outgoing owners, Art Basel Hong Kong emerged and surpassed expectations with its first show. With a primary function of selling, it made a statement in the cultural and social calendar with visitors numbering 65,000 over the three-day event. As with the auction houses, Art Basel also presents a significant education opportunity for the visitors, but it has the ability to go further and has, in effect, created its own ecosystems with layers of experience for the myriad of different visitors. The layers include educational tours and talks, encouragement of student visitors through reduced admission fee and opportunities for emerging professionals to benefit from the vital art space job experience in the form of part time guides, booth assistants and technical assistants. Despite the educational advantages, Art Basel is also a spectacle with gallery booths vying for buyers. The name itself is a considerable global “brand,” reinforcing the perceived status of visual arts aligned with wealth, brand and luxury goods.

However, the concept of art fair has also been dubbed “the gallery for the Instagram generation,” and Art Basel HK does indeed become plethora of “selfie” potential. The fair, not unlike a shopping mall, affords considerable opportunity to observe how people interact with the arts, from children tied together to the endless selfie and over-heard conversations.<sup>8</sup> Of some amusement the mother accompanying her art student son and advising him not to create anything similar as she had enquired, and it had not sold!

The commercial sectors of the art markets offering the comprehensible dollar and price point as an understandable first link to visual art. The vital interpretive layers, are therefore built on the firm knowledge of money! The more considered side of that mother’s statement is of course

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<sup>8</sup> *Apple Daily* media image. <https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/daily/article/20150318/19080634>. Accessed April 2018.



embedded in the consumerist orientation for the exhibition (and purchase) of visual arts presented in mall-esque fashion and as a part of shopping culture. Nowhere was this more explicit than in the first Monet exhibition in China, on loan from the “Musée Marmottan” in Paris. The forty works were exhibited at the K11 Art Mall in Shanghai<sup>9</sup> which, as the *New York Times* reported, was “an elevator ride from Burberry, Chloé, Balenciaga.”<sup>10</sup> The “K11 Art Foundation” has laid claim to “pioneering museum-retail experience” in its art malls. Although this is not the forum for this discussion it does raise the question how does the term “Mall” change the perception and understanding of art? Ironically, the last major international exhibition in Hong Kong mounted in the public sector was “Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal,” an artist and an exhibition that play on consumerism and the commercial.

While consumerism is a fundamental aspect of the art markets, it is a common belief that the art markets are selling art, but art is a broad and generic term that, in this context, needs some explanation. To begin, none of the international salesrooms sell exclusively high-end fine arts. The auction market is not exclusively for the sale of visual arts. Rather the categories of the sales show an interesting yet complex dynamic range of objects, artifacts and prices. Sales are generally conducted in categories so that, for example, “Old Masters” is a sale ordinarily compiled of old masters. Yet categories of sales are subtly different across the global markets: New York, London, Hong Kong. The search for like-for-like sales has, therefore, become a pathway to audience differences and provided insight into the differences in market consumption. While it stands to reason that Chinese works of art would find a buyer more readily in the Far East than say European paintings; year on year the variety of sale categories is extending. This is a reflection of a maturing market, where buyers and collectors are expanding items and taste. So that the generic “Fine Wines” and “Important Watches” sales now have the addition of individual artists, artifacts and specific collection sales. In audience terms, this represents the progression of the repeat visitor and is a vital step in audience development.

Here is an interesting audience study funded by “Arts Council England” and the Welsh Government on the impact of entrance fees. The Study found that factors such as time and interest were the essential factors in the decision to visit an art museum or not. And, these factors outweighed admission fees. Further findings were that attendance increases frequently attributed to removing admission fees were often due to the same audience visiting more frequently – NOT necessarily from engaging new audience. The findings went on to suggest that it was not the total visitor number that should be considered but rather the unique visitors. “For example: Let’s say that a museum receives 400,000 annual visits from 300,000 unique visitors (1.33 visits per unique

9 Editor’s note: “Master of Impressionism – Claude Monet,” Shanghai K11 Art Mall, March 8 to June 15, 2014. <http://www.k11.com/corp/press/monet-masterpieces-to-be-exhibited-in-china/>.

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/06/arts/international/galleries-in-shanghai-combine-shopping-and-exhibitions.html>. Accessed April 2018.

visitor). The same museum annual attendance increases by 15% to 460,000 visitors – but from the same 300,000 unique visitors (1.53 visitors per unique visitors). In this hypothetical example, annual attendance went up...but unique visitation remained the same.”<sup>11</sup> While this paper is not about admission fees per se, this Study does bring to light the importance of fostering repeat visitors as an essential grounding for audience development. This would appear to be taking place in the private sectors, where the sale categories are evolving and becoming more specialists.

In the public sector, however, repeat visits can only be achieved by activating the spaces. Simply opening the doors and filling the spaces with artworks will not do. The international auction houses and the prestige galleries have nurtured their audience in Hong Kong. Originally through the collectors/buyers, this audience has activated spaces and as it has matured it has demanded even more experience. However nurturing to maturity is not a foregone conclusion. It must be tended and cared for, reviewed and revised. Not all the endeavors in the private sector have worked, not all have been sustainable and not all will yield results. Unlike an object, subjected to the museum effect, a person does not respond in the same way! Simply put, the museum effect suggests that when an object enters the collection of a museum it transforms from object into a work of art. The same cannot be said for the audience, entering a museum or rather viewing arts does not make you a connoisseur.

The rise of the blockbusting contemporary art fairs is having an effect on consumption and audience behaviour. Within a few years of opening its Miami doors, Art Basel had the unwitting effect of significantly gentrifying the environment near the fair venue. Acting as a key instigation tool, the fair enabled a culture rich environment of galleries, studios and experimental spaces. The arts was practiced, consumed and experienced from within traditional galleries to a more practice-based, experimental level. While it is doubtful that this will be replicated in Hong Kong to the same extent, not least because the Hong Kong Island site does not have the opportunities for urban gentrification. Nonetheless artistic enclaves are opening, rapidly emerging spaces are using the private sector as the spring board for fresh new activity. This is seen most especially in “Hong Kong Arts Month” which, inspired by the extensive number of fringe events, has recently received its label and its validation, from, and as a direct response to, Art Basel. Quite literally arts and its audience are developing from consumption to production.

The symbiotic relationship between art and money is not new. As a commodity and as a chattel, it is deeply embedded in social practices from portraits to public art, across the historical and geographical world of visual arts. Yet to this point little has been discussed about the role of the

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11 D.C Research. *Taking Charge –Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*. <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Final-Report-Taking-Charge---Evaluating-the-Evidence-The-Impact-of-Charging-or-Not-for-Admissions-on-Museums.pdf>. Accessed April 2018.

private sector and the secondary markets in the promotion of arts, culture and in fostering cultural consumption. Rather it is generally assumed that money is a dirty word in “Art.” Sale prices, rising values, market inflation and blockbusting sales are (apparently) at a discord with the process of aesthetics, creative sustainability and simple enjoyment.

But this is not the case in Hong Kong. Here, market dominance has been the catalyst for the growing ecology of visual arts, generating public engagement and sparking interest, facilitating the early exchanges of capital culture and habitus through general interest, public awareness of fine arts and, crucially, increased audience. This is a unique and prestigious environment in which the visual art ecology has had the opportunity to grow, from the public viewing of *Salvator Mundi* to a shopping mall full of Monet's. Access to international aesthetic markers across the region is being driven from the distinct parent of commercial marketplace. Art Basel has upped the ante further, with queues of people waiting for tickets. The dominance of private and secondary markets facilitate a unique developing audience and market environment embedded in a vibrant and active trans-global relationship with visual arts. This un-paralleled foundation provides Hong Kong with an acute awareness of contemporary art, the economics of that art and the beginnings of intellectual interactions with artworks and art spaces, in anticipation of meaning-making about visual arts. Hong Kong's next challenge will be how to use and enrich this foundation, to make bridges to the public sector museums.

We are though, in an age of art, the money from the art market has breathed life into the creative industries, giving audience unrivalled opportunity and this consumption has led directly to the production of art.

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