

Assessing Influence: Art, Auctions and Audiences in Hong Kong

Emma Watts

We live in a city with a global cosmopolitan image. Its rich cultural fabric is embedded in its history and in the people who live here, who are both multi-cultural and multi-national. In this unique environment visual art is serviced by an equally multi-cultural and multi-national plethora of providers, giving a virtual nonstop flow into the visual diet. Yet, cultural consumption is primarily dominated by the global position of the auction markets, which have had a significant and as yet unexplored effect on what we consume and the perception of consumption.

This paper will begin to unpack the implications of the economic success of the auction markets and how it relates to the ways of seeing and understanding visual art in Hong Kong. Inevitably we must, therefore, begin with questions; what is the cultural implication of the highly successful auction art markets in Hong Kong? And, how is this effecting cultural consumption?

The cultural providers are in abundance, providing an overlapping and symbiotic relationship, servicing the consumption of culture. From this provision emerge two distinct strands of cultural narrative; art and the art market. The “art” is primarily offered via non-commercial activity; public cultural institutions, artists-led events, NGO’s, archives and community projects. The “Art Market” consists of auction houses, private galleries and art fairs. However, the strength and commercial success of the auction houses have, to a greater degree, dictated the tenor of the cultural offer, influencing consumption and eclipsing the collections at the public institutions.

This influence has created a convergence of cultural consumption and commerce, with visual art primarily defined through the commercial language of sales and global media headlines. Regular media attention repeatedly informs of ever increasing record-breaking prices and the rise of Hong Kong in the global rankings auction markets. Data from the market specialist Art Price reported that in 2013 Hong Kong had achieved 9% of global revenue and become the fourth largest contemporary art market in the world¹. Moreover, the sales in Hong Kong are, according to the media giant Reuters, increasingly being used as the “global barometer for expensive artworks and luxury goods”.² This has had a foundation effect that has directly influenced definitions of culture and the consumption of visual art.

Definitions are often ambiguous and subjective in the arts and cultural world. Yet it is necessary to define in order to contextualize the meaning and systems of what and how we understand the consumption of culture in Hong Kong. The first and necessary clarification is the use of the words Hong Kong. The name

itself is loaded, as city, country and with the implications of both nation and national identity. However, it is within the geographical context, not related to specific cultural or national identity, that the framework of this study is placed. Primarily and purposefully, this context addresses the populations of the city, both visitor, temporary and permanent, as consumers and, crucially, providers of the cultural offer.

The auction markets have further been key in promoting specific categories of art, which have had a subsequent effect on the cultural narrative. From the meteoric rise of the auction markets, the emerging narrative of global contemporary art has replaced the more traditional idea of style or school. The global narrative takes direct influence from the homogenization of contemporary art and the international phenomenon that has grown up around its sale. Contemporary art has become a global economic commodity, transported for sale and exhibition, which, at the highest levels, is a distinct “culture brand” in a globalized world.

Contemporary art, viewed as a global brand, has an alignment to the luxury goods markets and as a high returning economic investment. Made visible through the media, contemporary art has become a lifestyle for the wealthy and, seemingly, a sound investment for economic return. The economic return, as quoted in an international bank advertising campaign, is that the art markets had outperformed the S&P 500 for the past nine years.³ The Hong Kong market revenues support the statement of the lucrative nature of art. As an example, in 2013 the autumn sales broke 16 records in five days raising \$542 million USD, against a forecast \$370 million for 3,500 lots. These staggering figures also reflect a doubling of revenue from \$280 million USD in the spring sales of the same year.⁴

In this climbing and affluent market place, the economic advantages of the city have positioned Hong Kong on the global stage as the Asian auction market hub.⁵ Riding on the wave of the success of this global positioning, Hong Kong has seen a growing number of international contemporary art galleries opening in the city and this has been further reinforced by the arrival of Art Basel. This expansion of cultural framework has created a dominant secondary market place, which has had the result of splitting the narrative of cultural consumption between art and art market.

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Split, yet paradoxically intertwined, the two narratives are a distinct aspect of the cultural discourse, both enhancing and challenging cultural foundations and sustainability. In May of 2013 *Time Out* ran the headline, “Is Hong Kong ready for contemporary art?”⁶ This paper will argue that the strength of the art markets have created a foundation of cultural consumption based in the commercial world of contemporary art. This alternate view of cultural foundations challenges the notion of Bourdieu’s *Habitus*, in the district context of Hong Kong.⁷

The auction markets in Hong Kong are seen predominantly through the lens of the two largest international auction houses; Sotheby’s and Christies. In addition other houses of note, which hold regular sales include; Bonham’s and the Chinese based Poly and China Guardian. This is an expanding

field of competition with newer houses such as Tiancheng International and smaller specialist houses now entering the market place. The market is further being expanded internally through additions to the regular spring and autumn sales seasons with mid-season selling exhibition “Boundless” at Sotheby’s. The development of the auction markets has had a distinctly positive effect on the visibility of art in Hong Kong, encouraging engagement through the spectacle and allure of high prices.

Yet how has this affected the cultural foundations of Hong Kong, in the wider sense of the consumption of culture and the development and sustainment of connoisseurship? The distinct ecology, the cultural foundations and infrastructure, present a distinct difference with other more mature art environments in other parts of the world. Hong Kong’s cultural foundations have, in recent years, grown outward as a direct response to the art markets. Thus presenting a very different model to more established ecologies.

The more typical model sees cultural foundations grow from a strong institutional infrastructure and, in parallel, organically from artists. Both foster the development of taste and connoisseurship of the wider public. In turn creating a culture of museums/gallery visiting, primarily to the public institution. The secondary markets are an evolution of the strong cultural foundation.

However, here, the unique condition of Hong Kong’s art ecology presents a reverse model. The art markets are leading and outshining the institutional framework and this has resulted in a fractured foundation. The auction houses are increasingly functioning, beyond the economic domain, as art museums. 香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

Again we face a contradictory or reverse model. Typically, established cultural institutions have a multi-functional capacity to reach across the social strata, providing stimulus, education and instructive tools for public visitor and the artist. Both formal and informal education for individuals and groups provide instruction and guidance. Be that through viewing, copying, comparison, labelling information, guidebook or more structured art historical study. Gallery going further fosters a system of peer-to-peer instruction which is an integral element in the development of taste and connoisseurship. The individual desire for ownership, collection and accumulation of art is an organic product, which naturally expands and thus generates the secondary art markets: commercial galleries and auction markets.

In Hong Kong, the current absence of a mature collection infrastructure and their associated collections, has forced a reliance on the commercial sector to provide a variety of art to view. In this respect the public value and position of the auction markets, for non-buying visitor, as an exhibiting arena cannot be underestimated. Utilized as an art museum of sorts, the viewing of sales gives the visitor the ability to experience a wealth of art for pleasure and individual acquisition of knowledge.

From the educational perspective Sotheby’s, for example, offers a multi-layered provision that includes: an executive education business management course, opportunities to work in the saleroom venue as saleroom assistants and mid-season selling exhibitions which provide an exceptional standard of international art to view.

In addition, the leading houses are including “taster” viewings of modern and contemporary works as additions to the spring and autumn sales viewings. Small collections of single canvasses effectively advertise lots in overseas sales, but essentially also provide a range of works to view that are not publically available in Hong Kong. These have included works of French Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism, which have provided singular opportunities to view works of art not available in the public domain.

The exhibition venue role of the auction houses presents a contrary model to that of other art rich cities, such as London or New York, where using auction viewing as an exhibition opportunity is not the standard or normalized practice. The sale markets are thus providing a wealth of art, in the absence of regular international standard exhibitions or collections in the public institutions, as has become the expectation of major art museums. M+, of course, it is hoped will begin to fill this gap. Yet in the time before its opening, the reliance on the commercial sectors is likely to become an increasingly more normalized and socialized experience, with the art market phenomenon as the key foundation for consumption. Within this environment the continual bombardment by the media, in the form of reports, editorial and comment, increases the visibility of the art market and, crucially, becomes the tangible link between market and audience.

The public institutional collections have been rather obscured by commercial enterprise. For example, during the two month period over March and April of this year, Hong Kong will see the Caravaggio⁸, organized by the Asia Society, the Spring sales at Christie's and Sotheby's, numerous private gallery exhibitions including Giacometti at Gagosian⁹, Anthony Gormley at White Cube¹⁰ and, of course, Art Basel¹¹.

By contrast the public institutions have offered over a two-year period; “Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal”¹², “Mobile M+: Inflation”¹³ and “PICASSO – Masterpieces from Musée National Picasso, Paris”¹⁴. These examples are not intended to generate funding or success debates, but are intended to exemplify the considerable differences between the private and public sectors in the cultural offer of the city and, crucially, how visual art is being embedded in society.

The imbalance between the expectations of public institutions and the commercial sector of the secondary markets, directly affects the consumption of culture itself and disturbs the notion of *Habitus*. In its simplest form Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *Habitus* explains a dependency on history and human memory as a necessary component in cultural capital and cultural consumption.¹⁵

Habitus is when certain behavior or belief becomes part of a society's structure when the original purpose of that behavior or belief can no longer be recalled and becomes socialized into individuals of that culture.¹⁶

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In response to the objective conditions of encounters, central to *Habitus* is embodied concept, not a conscious or explicit action but rather embedded through cultural encounters, over time and with the legacy of its own history. If we accept that the embodied action or practice of *Habitus* is an unconscious action then what we are experiencing in the current condition in Hong Kong is a conscious action of experience. Therefore, Hong Kong is not yet in a position where the consumption of culture is a part of the socialized fabric and we have not yet matured to an established state of unconscious *Habitus*. The media fuelled hype that surrounds the art markets, in conjunction with the primary focus on contemporary art is keeping experience firmly in the conscious state. It is a work in progress, where the perspectives of the split cultural narrative and fracture in the cultural foundation, have both altered and reinforced consumption as either conscious acquisition or passive inheritance.

In support of this assertion is Dr Vivian Ting’s recent research on the visitor experience at Hong Kong Museum of Art.¹⁷ The findings present two relevant aspects for the discourse, visitor numbers and visitor experience. Visitor numbers are often used as indicators of the success of events and as a consequence are widely publicized. Ting quotes visitor numbers from two public institutions and one commercial event.

“Mobile M+ Inflation!” - 150,000 visitors in six weeks (West Kowloon Cultural District 2013)

“Art Basel Hong Kong” - 67,000 visitors in five days (Art Basel 2013)

“Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal” - 257,055 visitors in 14 weeks (Hong Kong Museum of Art 2013)

On the surface these figures would appear to suggest a growing culture of visiting. However, while statistics can be notoriously flexible to particular conditions, by viewing the data as a daily figure it is the commercial event, Art Basel that drew approx. 12,000 visitors per day. With the public institutions attracting an average daily figure of 4,000 to “Mobile M+ Inflation!” and 3,000 to “Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal”. This, of course, does not take into account any repeat visitors.

This brief, alternate, view of the visitor numbers reinforces the predominance of the commercial cultural events for attracting both buying and non-buying visitors. Art Basel, available for the shortest time, created a more concentrated visitor demand, directly equating that demand with the commercial influence on cultural consumption. This is further reflected in the increase in visitor numbers over five years, which are up by 200% from 2008, when there were 19,000 visitors and 100 galleries, to a staggering 60,000 visitors and 290 galleries in 2013.

The assertion is further strengthened in the second aspect of Ting’s study, Experience. The strength of

the art markets projects an international image of a sophisticated art arena, which carries a weight of assumption of buyers as collectors and connoisseurs, who reflect knowledge onto the general audiences. Yet Ting's research would seem to suggest a rather different status of audience. Ting identifies five categories of experience; "connoisseur", "enthusiastic learner", "curious explorer", "leisure wanderer", and "passive visitor". From her research these different groups of visitor have defined boundaries that encompass viewing experiences. The focused research based at the Hong Kong Museum of Art show that a staggering 80% of the visitors to "Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal" were in the "curious explorer" category or below.

Ting's research is making footprints in virgin snow and we need far more concentrated studies in order to offer a more definitive judgement. Nonetheless, the framework does offer a view of the distinct condition of current audiences. With the indication, from both the visitor numbers and experiences data, suggesting a passionate audience, that is not displaying a thirst for knowledge or desire to simply experience, rather, motivation is via the entertainment of the outing.

The entertainment quality of visiting is a key component in embedding cultural activity as a normalized social pursuit. This was perhaps best exemplified in Hong Kong by the arrival of *Rubber Duck* in 2013, designed by Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman. While exact visitor numbers for the viewing are not possible, media reports of; "thousands of daily visitors" and the Facebook page, receiving 57,765 likes, would indicate it was a well-received event.¹⁸

Events such as this provide a "back door" into cultural consumption, utilizing what Hooper-Greenhill has defined as "communities of interpretations", an essential component for understanding and building sustainable audiences.¹⁹

Each member of the different communities using their own knowledge, category of understanding...and familiar concepts to render what they see.²⁰

The cultural outing, as entertainment, allows for the development of audiences within the individual's own framework of experience and the acquisition of knowledge a personal journey. Experience is not static, but dynamic and enriched with practice. In the private domain the various providers are, unwittingly, operating as dominant agencies in the accumulation of cultural capital giving, to borrow Lillian Farrell's phrase, the "gift" of art and cultural capital.²¹

Acknowledging that there is a current imbalance in the cultural journey, significantly weighed in favour of commercial domains and a predominance of contemporary art, opens the much-needed discourse on strategies for sustainable development. Crucially, deepening understanding of the ways in which audiences are responding to cultural stimulus.

Hong Kong is in a position of evolution, growing with the flux and flow of the changing cultural offer. Through this change an emerging environment in public infrastructure is becoming more visible. The

inclusion of visual art as a DSE (Diploma of Secondary Education) subject, West Kowloon Cultural District and the aims of M+, and an ever-increasing quantity of non-commercial art activity are fostering *Habitus* through education,²² and potentially attracting increasing numbers of future audiences into the pool of “curious explorer” visitors.²³

However, it will be some time before we see the expectations of the public institutions balance the infrastructure, with the visible dominance of the auction markets. Moreover, it remains to be seen what effect the phenomenon of socialized experience from the foundations of the art market will have on subsequent generations of audiences. Yet, by acknowledging the split narrative between art and art market, we have the ability to enable and enhance a *Habitus* of socialized belief in culture and sustainable audiences. Going beyond the scope of other established environments across the world into multi cultural, and multi dimension realm, which are an embodiment of Hong Kong.

Dr. Emma Watts is the Assistant Professor, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University

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- ⁸ "Light and Shadows – Caravaggio • The Italian Baroque Master", March 12 to April 13, 2014, the Asia Society Hong Kong Center.
- ⁹ "GIACOMETTI: Without End", March 13 to April 21, 2014, the Gagosian Gallery.
- ¹⁰ "States and Conditions, Hong Kong", March 28 to May 3, 2014, White Cube.
- ¹¹ "Art Basel HK 2014", May 15 to 18, 2014, Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center.
- ¹² "Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal", December 16, 2012 to March 31, 2013, the Hong Kong Museum of Art.
- ¹³ "Mobile M+: Inflation", April 25 to June 9, 2013, the Park at West Kowloon Cultural District.
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²³ See note 17.

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