

## **You missed the good stuff – About curating exhibitions in Hong Kong**

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A forum on curating in Hong Kong organized by Para/Site was held on July 20 in 2005, and drew a full house at the Goethe-Institut. Most speeches given during the forum were about the hopeless future for curatorial practice in Hong Kong, or the lack of high quality local exhibitions. Discussion then went on in the online guest book of Para/Site (<http://two.guestbook.de/gb.cgi?gid=94616>). Let's find out if exhibition curating is such a failure in Hong Kong.

### **Exhibition can be an art form**

First of all, what is a curator?

It generally refers to the person in charge of a museum, but has adopted additional meanings over the recent decades. A curator now does much more than just collecting and presenting artworks, and does not rely on one single organization for survival. An independent curator is not restrained by the traditional work direction of any organizations. He/she can organize contemporary exhibitions with his/her own foresight. A successful curator must have a good understanding of the current art trend, and is able to think outside the box. The exhibition is sometimes a work of art itself.

To make a difference in the contemporary culture, it requires profound knowledge in art history, sociology, philosophy, or a multitude of subjects. While many curators are art historians, cultural studies scholars, or cultural critics, we also need curators with more diverse backgrounds. Curators have to process words as well as take care of artists, artworks, exhibition spaces/organizations and audiences. The word "curator" stems from the word "care". A curator is the mediator between artworks and the audience. Apart from the exhibition, he/she has to take care of related researches, talks and publication materials. He/she acts as a scholar, collector and artist, and at the same time, a manager, producer, fund raiser, accountant, PR person, editor, publisher, instructor, host and entertainer. Heavily multitasked, curators are always prone to criticism. One could readily jump to the conclusion that there is a lack of good curators and well-curated exhibitions in Hong Kong.

So what is a well-curated exhibition? The most cited example is "When Attitudes Become Form" curated by Harold Szeemann, the godfather of curating. This exhibition marked a new era in art, with artworks showcased in a brand-new manner. It developed a cultural depth and created new viewpoints about the practice of exhibition making.

Art is not judged by one single standard. But if you would ask whether there are any curators in Hong Kong like the above – one that is able to hold on to the latest cultural trends, promote cultural awareness and discussion, and influence the public opinions through exhibitions and activities, the answer is actually positive.

Oscar Ho's article "Development of Curatorial Practices" in the *Hong Kong Visual Arts Year Book 1999* has included many exhibition examples that reviewed the nature of exhibition and art or are about local culture and art history. He has also pointed out the different curatorial directions in Hong Kong, and listed the efforts made by art museums, alternative art spaces, commercial galleries, individual artists, non-artists and researchers – some of them have made significant influence in Hong Kong contemporary art. I would not repeat his views here. I will just talk about the new development.

### **More quality than quantity concerned**

Due to the decline in Hong Kong's real estate market since 1997, an increasing number of exhibition venues have been set up. There are museums, art museums, art centers, exhibition centers, exhibition halls of cultural and educational organizations, galleries and artists' spaces, as well as artists' studios, cafes, bookstores and public spaces found in malls, MTR stations and ferry piers. There are more than a thousand exhibitions a year, and people started asking for more quality exhibitions. That gave rise to research-based exhibitions, such as Tsang Tak-ping's "White Ink" (2000), a research/exhibition about feminist art; Para/Site Art Space's research-based "Hong Kong Artist Series"; and Leung Po-shan's "Fotanian 2004: Open Studio", a research about artists in Fotan and the changes in Hong Kong's art ecology. Linda Lai's "Take a ST/Roll: Donut Fantasies" (2005) provided a solid research of spheric lens that capable of a 360° capture. At the same time, it was experimental and open to participation by all audiences. However, there is only a handful of this kind of exhibitions due to a lack of budget. While government museums are well financed, more fund should be made available to do research on local art.

### **The emergence of curatorial groups**

The power of curators started to diversify, when some of the cultural workers in Hong Kong are aware of the power relationship between curators and artists. Many curators deny themselves as curators, and rather call themselves a coordinator or chief coordinator. They downplay their role in order to shift the spotlight onto the artists. In other countries, there are curators that are eager to build up their status by getting star artists to work with them. Such acts are rarely seen in Hong Kong. Curators in Hong Kong are even replaced by curatorial groups. Power is divided and curatorial concepts have to be discussed and reviewed. Initiated by Tsang Tak-ping, Para/Site Collective is one of those groups. Members with different specialties worked together for Hong Kong's participation in the Venice Biennale for the second time. Although it was not a particularly remarkable achievement, it did set a new mode for curating in Hong Kong. The project of "pH5" was even better planned out and came with a more explicit aim. The curatorial group hosted a photography festival composed of exhibitions, publications, talks, seminars and community programs, to encourage the audience to look at photographic works from a historical and conceptual perspective.

### **Fame is not a priority**

When asked about famous curators in Hong Kong, what comes to my mind are those that work for results rather than fame, such as the two curatorial groups mentioned above. They try to be as open as possible, offer support to budding artists, and invite public participation. Similarly, Chan Yuk-keung's "Ghost Encounter" has involved a series of discussion between the curator and artists before the exhibition – it was not a

one-sided, I-ask-you-answer mode. When curating “Home and Homeless: Portraits of Families”, Oscar Ho had also provided participating artists abundant time and resources to create new works. May Fung’s “Corner of Dialogues” took on a historic theme and emphasized the interaction between artists of different generations. These are exhibitions that motivate cultural workers instead of promoting the curator. They have a well-defined direction and favor open interpretation. These high quality exhibitions do not necessarily attract a lot of media attention, but that does not undermine their significance. After all, results are not weighed by media coverage or figures.

### **The professional is not necessarily better**

One point raised during the Para/Site forum was that most exhibitions in Hong Kong are curated by artists in a non-professional manner. It implied that artists do not suffice, only curators can do the job. This reminds me of the saying of the old Catholic Church, that we can not reach out to God directly, but only through the church or priests. Artists and audiences are all humans who can communicate directly. A middle-person should not be a must. Professionalization is not synonymous to improvement. Professional and non-professional should co-exist to allow for more varieties. I agree that there should be more professional curators. But sometimes artists curate their own shows to make sure they have the complete right to interpretation, and to avoid their works being “polluted” by curators. If the artist knows his/her role and responsibilities as an artist and curator, he/she is apt to accomplish his/her purposes. Exhibitions have become a form of creativity, and there is no reason to stop artists from taking part in the curatorial practices. If curators think that curating is a liberal activity, they definitely should not shut off others.

The professional is not always the best, and non-professional does not necessarily mean bad. Should we nurture more curators? As Oscar Ho said, not many independent curators can survive in Hong Kong. One might ask: Why learning curatorship then if there is not much of a career future? In fact, the number of professional artists in Hong Kong is also scarce. As an art educator, I don’t think that should worry us. Let students develop independent thinking, resilience to challenge existing systems and routine practices, and the ability to look at themselves critically. With general knowledge of a scholar, collector, artist, manager, producer, fund raiser, accountant, PR person, author, publisher, teacher and event host, they will be readily qualified as a curator, as well as for many other professions. If the chance to practice curating is not available, they can create opportunities for themselves, as long as they can make a difference to the contemporary society’s art and culture. Students with these qualities have no reason to worry about their future. If there are more cultural workers bearing these qualities, there is definitely hope for Hong Kong art.