

The Olympics of art in distant realms

The view of the gallerists on the Art Basel in Hong Kong

In the framework of our field research on the Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2014 it was possible, as in Basel and Miami Beach, to carry out a questionnaire with the galleries participating in the fair. The same comprehensive survey was used, which enabled us to make some comparisons in regard to intercultural convergences and divergences in the statements of this central group of actors. For the sake of simplicity these findings are mostly presented with the relevant per cent values in each case. Their validity and import should not be overrated, but in the framework of this pluri-methodological study they provide an interesting supplement to the predominantly qualitative research methods we adopted. The 80 galleries that participated in the survey, were almost exclusively newcomers to the “Art Basel Universe”. Only five had participated in the fair in Basel in 2011 and only two in Miami Beach. One gallery took part in the fair in Basel in 2012. They cannot, however, be characterized as newcomers to the art field. Approximately half of them had already gathered experience in previous years at the art fair in Hong Kong. Nine galleries had attended all five fixtures of the Hong Kong International Art Fair, and 13 had been there four times. Only 35 of the 80 gallerists had never taken part. Fifty-two of the galleries questioned came from Asia, the greater part (20) coming from China.

As with the gallerists attending the fairs in Basel and Miami Beach, economic reasons played the decisive role in the decision to participate. For 86 per cent of the 80 galleries in Hong Kong “getting into contact with new customers” was “very important”, as was “selling artworks for your gallery” for the same number. For the gallerists in Hong Kong the “presence of your main clients in the same place at the same time” was

less relevant than it was for the galleries in Basel (36 per cent in Hong Kong, 69 per cent in Basel). This indicates that their primary interest lay in increasing the circle of their clients. In comparison to the economic factor the discovery of new artists and trends is not particularly important for the gallerists; and this is even more seldom the case in Basel. At 24 per cent the agreement of the galleries with the item “discovery of new artists/trends” was 10 per cent higher than in Basel. This suggests that in comparison with the establishment dominating the original fair in Basel with a well-known repertoire of artists, a larger number of less well-known galleries representing more or less unknown artists participated in Hong Kong, which left more scope for surprises.

Whereas for the gallerists in Basel the special significance of the fair lay in its “intrinsic” aspects, and specifically in the “quality” of the gallerists represented (96 per cent), the works presented (82 per cent) and the “cultural level and connoisseurship of its clients” (75 per cent), these factors play a clearly reduced role in Hong Kong. Only 65 per cent saw the quality of the galleries represented as a special feature of the fair. In regard to the quality of the works presented agreement with the item was only 53 per cent. At 46 per cent the rating of the “cultural level and connoisseurship” of the clients was also clearly lower in Hong Kong than in Basel. These statements also point to a certain hierarchical differentiation between the two fairs. Whereas Basel self-confidently defines its “corporate identity” in terms of the “outstanding quality” of the fair, the newcomer in Hong Kong shows greater reserve both with this kind of self-labeling and with the qualification of its customers as “connoisseurs”.

Even the business side of the fair does not seem to play such a prominent role as in Basel according to the statements of the gallerists in Hong Kong. In regard to the relevance of “clients’ buying power” the fair has a rating of only 57 per cent compared with 75 per cent in Basel. Significantly the location Hong Kong itself seems to be more important. For 66 per cent the “location Hong Kong/Asian market” is important. In addition, at 32 per cent, the “fiscal terms (e.g. taxes)” are clearly more important than for the galleries in Basel (7 per cent), even though Basel enjoys highly privileged conditions in this regard in comparison to other locations in the Western hemisphere. It seems as if the Art Basel in Hong Kong is judged in a quite pragmatic and utilitarian way according to the criterion of optimal business conditions, i.e. purely in terms of the market economy – a standpoint which is in accordance with the expectations and

assessments expressed by the gallerists we interviewed at the Art Basel in Basel in 2012.

According to the interviewees in Hong Kong the works for the exhibition were specially chosen in order to take the specific local conditions into account. Sixty three per cent of the gallerists stated that their choice of the works of art was determined by the location. On the one hand they refer to the Asian clientele: "presence of Asian collectors", "tailored to Asian audience" and "Asian taste and culture". The preference was for "big objects", "more colorful", "not so conceptional" pieces, "high quality works, with an emphasis on calligraphy" and "artworks that won't offend Chinese people". On the other hand the works of Asian artists were consciously offered for sale: "We represent Korean artists around the world", "to feature the work of an important Hong Kong artists" or "most significant/potential artists from China" are some of the answers given. Reference is also made to the "bridging function" of Hong Kong. Statements such as "presenting the East/West aspects of program" and "global/universal language in the artwork" are very popular.

The presence of the interviewed galleries at fairs is concentrated on the Asian area. This is not surprising in view of the sample, in which the Asian galleries form the majority. For the gallerists we interviewed the Art Stage Singapore (31 per cent) is the most important Asian Fair apart from Hong Kong. It is followed by the Art Taipeh (22 per cent), the Tokyo Art Fair and the Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair (both 17 per cent). In the West the galleries are most frequently represented at the Armory Show in New York (20 per cent).

The thesis that the art fairs are of pre-eminent importance for the galleries is less strongly confirmed in Hong Kong than in Basel. They are "very important" for 41 per cent of the gallerists questioned in Hong Kong as against 61 per cent in Basel; they were "important" for 55 per cent (in Basel 38 per cent) and "not really important" for four per cent (in Basel one per cent). A possible explanation for these differences could lie in the fact that we are dealing here with less cosmopolitan galleries with less experience of the global art market than is the case with the "big players" who set the tone in Basel.

The factors influencing the development of the art world are located above all in the area of demand: new types of collectors influence the development "very much" (69 per cent), followed by the private collections (66 per cent), new groups of buyers (62 per cent) and the relatively

declining purchasing power of public museums (39 per cent). Twenty nine per cent of the galleries interviewed agree “very much” with the view that the market price increasingly influences the evaluation of art.

According to the interviewees the Asian region will gain importance among the leading market places in the future – a conviction they express even more strongly than the Western gallerists interviewed in Basel. First place is accorded to Hong Kong (91 per cent as against 85 per cent in Basel); Shanghai follows with only 41 per cent in comparison to 58 per cent in Basel and then Seoul at 25 per cent and Tokyo at 23 per cent. And according to the galleries South America will also grow in importance, above all Sao Paulo (48 per cent) and Mexico City (32 per cent).

The gallerists who filled out the questionnaire believed that the aesthetics of global contemporary art will be increasingly diversified (49 per cent). Forty six per cent are convinced that the aesthetics of the threshold countries will achieve a greater influence – clearly more than in Basel, where only 30 per cent were of this opinion. In contrast only six per cent (Basel 14 per cent) believe in the continued dominance of Western aesthetics. Here we can clearly see how the local involvement in a globalizing market can contribute to specific location dependent perceptions.

In regard to the influence of various factors on the prices of works of art the gallerists attributed great importance to exhibitions in public museums (56 per cent) and purchases by powerful collectors (51 per cent). The prestige of the gallery was regarded as less relevant by the interviewees in Hong Kong (44 per cent) than by their counterparts in Basel (58 per cent). Here too it must be pointed out that the choice of the galleries participating in the original fair in Basel is clearly much more restrictive and their composition undoubtedly more elitist, so that we can speak of different levels of prestige of the galleries represented at the two fairs.

In their assessment of the causes for price increases in the past the gallerists give first place to the money-driven dynamics of the art market. Here “capital investment and market speculation” are seen as being “very much” responsible (47 per cent, nine per cent points more than in Basel), followed by the “demand for art from emerging countries” (47 per cent) and “new groups of purchasers with high incomes” (46 per cent). However, 44 per cent attribute the rise in prices to the “increased quality of the art production”. Only 28 per cent of those interviewed in

Hong Kong mention the “growing market power of auction houses” as an important reason (in comparison to 39 per cent in Basel). Whereas the comparatively low significance attributed to auctions might seem at first sight surprising (perhaps their role is so taken for granted that it does not need to be specifically emphasized), the other statements on this question clearly reveal the special nature of the emerging Asian market.

All in all the opinions expressed by this group of actors give a very coherent overall picture, which is characterized not least by a marked optimism in regard to its future prospects in a globalized art world. But it remains nonetheless clear that in spite of the spectacular developments in the Asian art market the fair in Hong Kong will continue to be a kind of side-stage or junior partner of the original fair in Basel. When singular goods are concerned, whose origin is a decisive factor determining their primarily symbolic value, then the brand contemporary art, like the brands of global luxury goods and their mints, is and probably will, in the medium term, remain associated with the Western metropolises.

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