

Contemporary art and its Eastern public

After our presentation of a series of statements by the actors in the Chinese art world we will now let the non-professional actors, the public at the Art Basel in Hong Kong, briefly have their say. Although the art fair is obviously organized as a primarily commercial undertaking for the suppliers and buyers of art works, the “rank and file”, the visitors interested in art who do not intend or lack the financial means to buy art, are also a part of the event. They participate out of curiosity or love of art, but as extras they are nonetheless indispensable for the successful production of the show. In March 2015 almost 60,000 people visited the Art Basel in Hong Kong and at the time we did our field work the figure was even over 65,000.

For easily comprehensible socio-historical reasons the public there is less familiar with contemporary art and its reception and consumption than those interviewed in the years before at the Art Basel in Basel and in Miami Beach. However, the around three dozen guests interviewed at the Art Basel in Hong Kong in regard to their impressions and assessments were also enthusiastic about the abundance of insights into the world of contemporary art. They all praised the perfect organization of the fair and particularly the strong presence of art from the Asian region, although some of them felt that the Asian galleries should have been even more strongly represented than the art dealers from the West. In particular, the mainland Chinese we interviewed regarded the presentation of less usual art genres – from sculptures to installations and video art – alongside the customarily dominant paintings as a great advantage of this event. All of the interviewed persons felt that the visit to the fair was worthwhile.

In contrast to the findings of the previous interviews in Basel and Miami Beach, however, there were statements which indicated a certain disorientation and frustration in the face of a cultural pattern – the way

of dealing with contemporary art and its presentation –, as this was not part of the customary repertoire of cultural practice in this region and was not readily available in the form of habitualized aesthetic-intellectual competence.

For example an around thirty-years-old visitor from Xian reports: “Art Basel is very professional, in terms of details and services, more organized and international.” At the same time he thought that the fair was “a bit bombarding, too overwhelming for ordinary audiences, there is too much information.” In addition he also suggested that the organizers “could improve the route of visit. Now it is rather messy.” By this he meant that it would be better if there were a planned visiting route for the art fair that one could follow in order to view the works more effectively. A woman from Singapore who accompanied her son to the fair expressed her new impressions in similar words: “I wished there were more elaborations for each art piece. For me sometimes the elaborations are not enough. I can’t catch what it is all about.” Another visitor noted: “And also art should be free but the way people are going around, it should be more organized, like the alley, sometimes they are parallel, sometimes you can go through, you could miss out pieces. You could miss out a lot of important things, the way the route is set. They are displaying large pieces that are hard to see when there are 50 people around.” And a woman from mainland China added: “I think it seems messy at the beginning. I walked around and I felt disorientated. Maybe it is just me though.”

The statement by a young visitor from Quangdong, an accountant by profession, reveals the expectations she had in regard to the presentation of art and the way the fair differed in this respect: “The works are represented based on galleries so it is quite messy for me since I do not have much understanding of art works. It is not really suited for visitors; maybe the buyers would like this arrangement. I would rather prefer to categorize the works on the basis of styles or genres. It is like a carnival. It would be great if the art fair makers could have a theme, but I guess it is more of a sales fair than an exhibition.”

These different references to a widespread discomfiture on account of the over-stimulation resulting from the presentation of a mass of art works in a way felt to be unstructured, confusing and unsurveyable points to a sociologically interesting relationship between the availability of specific cultural capital and the claim to and the competence for an autonomous mode of appropriating art. As early as the 1960s the study of a research

group led by Pierre Bourdieu on the public attending various European museums revealed that visitors with only a small amount of cultural capital emphasized, in exactly the same way as the Asian interviewees quoted above, that they desired a clearer, pedagogical-didactical introduction to their encounters with cultural goods and more specific aids for the understanding and interpretation of the art works on view, whereas visitors with more cultural capital rejected this kind of didactic support as out of place and superfluous. Like many of the Asian visitors to the art fair in Hong Kong they called for explicit instructions in the form of clearly designated routes and explanations of the art works presented at the fair.

A further indication of the so called “civilization gap” resulting from the conditions of delayed “contemporaneity” and of the need to catch up in the development of the specific cultural competencies and dispositions required for dealing with the singular goods of art is clearly manifested on many of the walls of the exhibition booths in Hong Kong. There are many little “Don’t touch” signs designed to keep visitors less acquainted with the etiquette of the “White Cube” at a distance from the works of art. A comparative observation of the events in Basel, Miami Beach and Hong Kong reveals clear, culture-specific behavioral patterns in the ways of dealing with the institution of the art fair and its objects in a different regard. These include, not least, the omnipresent use of smart phones, in particular for taking selfies with the works of art in the background. This practice, criticized by some of our interviewees as being “in bad taste”, is much less common in Miami Beach and Basel, but it seems to fit in almost seamlessly with the social habits of the visitors to the Art Basel in Hong Kong. The atmosphere often calls to mind the funfairs at which small groups of friends amuse themselves, turning the event into a kind of leisure activity with entertainment for all the family. The practice was severely criticized by some of the actors from the art world we interviewed and was anything but a welcome sight for the gallerists at the fair.

How matter-of-course the combination of a visit to the fair with family leisure pursuits was can be seen by casting a glance at the location of Art Basel, the Convention Center in the harbor of Hong Kong, where onlookers could gaze in amazement at a gigantic yellow rubber duck by the Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman. Although the rubber duck quickly ran out of air and shrank into a small heap of plastic it enjoyed much greater publicity and a wider success among the public than the works of art which could be seen in the background. In discussions in the foyer of

the exhibition organized by the Asia Art Archive, in which we took part, the invited experts frequently criticized this symbol of popular (bad) taste as an eyesore in front of the gates of the elitist fair.

In our discussions with the experts they repeatedly referred to the need to catch up by means of “aesthetic education”, which – as they expressly emphasized – should start in early childhood in order to develop sensitivity and competence in dealing with contemporary art and to achieve a sustainable socialization in this respect. The strong presence of elites accompanied by their offspring in the halls of the fair in Hong Kong seems to point precisely to this ambition to overcome the deficits in regard to the cultural pattern of love of art imported from the West.

Intercultural differences between the events in Hong Kong, Basel and Miami Beach are also revealed to the observer in regard to both the presentation of the show and the ways of encountering the culture on offer. The Art Basel in Basel is clearly much more discreet and distinguished than the Art Basel in Miami Beach with its stylized chicness and media hype. In contrast to both, the public at the Hong Kong Convention Center was clearly less excited, more everyday and less prone to life-style oriented self-presentation even in the periods reserved for the VIPs. At the opening of the fair, in contrast to the often inconsiderate pushing and shoving of the Western VIP collectors in Basel and Miami Beach, there was no tendency to hustle and bustle, no sign of routes through the fair prepared in advance, designed to lead collectors eager to make purchases down the shortest and quickest paths to the objects of their desire and to get them there before potential competitors. There was also no indication that the big business of the galleries took place in the very first hours or even minutes after the opening of the fair. Instead the Western gallerists depict a behavioral pattern of the buyers which was for them both unusual and disturbing. Throughout the entire day customers potentially interested in buying a work of art would turn up several times at the exhibition booth and ask about the price.

Finally a further striking difference in the social uses of art is revealed by the comparison of the three locations. Whereas in Miami Beach and even more so in Basel the “art lovers” we interviewed revealed a clear tendency towards a cultural condemnation and stigmatization of art auctions, Hong Kong presented a picture of truly harmonious coexistence. In 2013 a big auction of contemporary art by Christie’s auction house took place in the Convention Center parallel to the Art Basel. The public moved

regularly and casually from one site of the art trade to the other without any noticeable inhibition or feeling they were breaking a taboo. What is more, the manager of the Art Basel in Hong Kong was no less unproblematic in his approach to a competitor so often decried in the West. The talk here was of meaningful “synergies” in such a concentration of two art events and of an important time-saving factor for the entire clientele of Asian collectors.

Paradoxically, or possibly not, the Asian visitors to the Art Basel in Hong Kong are a socially selected population with an above average educational capital, which is, however culture specific and contextually dependent. In this respect it reflects the outcomes of the interviews already carried out in Basel and Miami Beach. It is not a lack of formal educational capital as such which creates the need for clearer guidance through the abundance of cultural goods. What we see here is, rather, a kind of “missing link” in the canon of legitimate educational goods, which inevitably makes contemporary art seem unusual and even consternating in the absence of a specific view and particular competence in deciphering art works deriving from an aesthetic disposition which the Western cultural elites had developed during a 150 years-long tradition of dealing with modern and contemporary art.

We are dealing, therefore, with newcomers who call for support and guidance in view of their lack of familiarity with this kind of art. This is expressed, for example, in the inability of some of the interviewees to recall the names of the galleries they had visited or the artists who had impressed them. A young woman from Shenzhen reports: “I took some pictures of the works that interested me, but I can’t remember the names of the works or the galleries representing them, I don’t have that habit.” She added that she seldom attends exhibitions and apologizes with the remark: “I’m too lazy.”

The emerging love of art and the process of gaining familiarity with the canon can also be discovered by tracing the spread of knowledge about established works and artists. Within the framework of a small additional empirical study some of the visitors were shown a small selection of “blue chip” works of art of Western (Van Gogh and Picasso, Rothko, Warhol and Koons) and Asian (Qi Baishi, Zhang Daqian) provenience and asked whether they knew the works or could name the painters. It turned out that the interviewees were best acquainted with the classical representatives of Western modern art (Van Gogh and Picasso with 70 per cent and 50

per cent respectively), whereas only a small minority knew the works of Rothko and Koons. In contrast, our interviewees from mainland China were seldom in a position to identify the reproductions of Chinese works of art which are relatively well-known in the West on account of the media reports on the spectacular prices achieved on the market by the originals. Only one in six knew the works of Qi Bashi or Zhang Daqian. It seems, therefore, that the spectacular market value of a work of art achieved at an auction is not enough to put it on the road to becoming an icon, whereas the emblematic representatives of Western aesthetics are easily able to exercise their hegemonial influence in the Far East.

It is worth noting here that the most easily accessible artworks of Impressionism with their pleasing motives typically achieved the greatest resonance among the inexpert consumers of art. During a visit to a Monet exhibition in a shopping mall in Shanghai we were able to see how strong the attractive power exercised by this kind of middle brow “blockbuster” art on the Chinese public was and how readily the visit to the exhibition harmonized with the acquisition of Monet-inspired consumer articles in a nearby sales room. At the same time, and probably not by chance, huge reproductions on billboards in the town drew attention to a here hitherto completely unknown Chinese artist whose style and motifs obviously worked like variations on the aesthetics and themes of Monet.







