

A world turned upside down

The birth of an art field under the aegis
of the (global) art market

A common form of the ethnocentric misjudgment and distortion of alien and distant social realities and cultural phenomenon results from seeing and judging them through the glasses of our own ingrained patterns of perception and interpretation. In essence such “touristic errors” reveal more about the observer, his cultural codes and social norms than about the object of his observations, which is simply assimilated without reflection into the accustomed patterns. In this way genuine curiosity about and encounters with foreign culture is rendered improbable and a confirmation of existing stereotypes and prejudices likely.

The pictures of this region of the world mediated by our dialogue partners in the West (see the chapter “Prospective territorial occupations”) seems to be nourished primarily by the hyped up Western media reporting on the turnover of the art market in China, which has made a giant leap forward within a few years from being a marginal, grey zone to becoming a first-class growth area of the global art trade. Although these spectacular indicators of a rapid inclusion of China in the global art market have proved unreliable and the Chinese market has in the last few years turned out to be unstable and highly dependent on economic trends, this seems as yet to have scarcely any effect on the generalized gold-rush fever and euphoric mood. The conviction of gallerists, collectors, curators and art critics that the Far East is the growth market of the future seems completely unshaken. This is clearly shown in the in-depth interviews and the surveys we undertook in Basel, Miami Beach and Hong Kong. The large numbers of rich and newly rich collectors, the numerous opportunities such an emerging market offers and the need to stake one’s

own claims on it: these are the common stereotypes which always occur in conversations about Asia and especially about China.

But what do these circumstances and phenomena look like when seen at close quarters? How are they seen, interpreted and judged by the relevant local actors and experts? In what complex social practices and cultural contexts are these apparently so objective market data and the accompanying dynamics embedded? The question is not simply whether the spectacular rise of the Asian and the Chinese art market might turn out to be a flash in the pan, whose impressive radiant powers diminish the closer one gets to it. Much more fundamental questions must be asked about the Asian art scene as such, about its status and significance within the so hotly discussed and eagerly invoked global art market.

In the 60 interviews and conversations we conducted a large number of approaches and positions were thematized, discussed and occasionally analyzed in more depth. Many questions were raised and some, albeit careful and only provisional, answers given. The interviews collected in this book and many of the unpublished dialogues speak in the first place for themselves. They can only provide a few starting points for discourse which must be continued and intensified. In their standpoints and their assessments of the structures, changes and transformation processes and their consequences and challenges the interview partners sometimes differ widely, as each of them argues from a particular standpoint – on the one hand as art dealers, gallerists, curators or artists and on the other hand on the basis of their origins and cultural background. Nonetheless an attempt will be undertaken here to present a comprehensive view of the most important aspects.

In this concluding observation it is necessary, first of all, to emphasize once again what all the actors in the East and South East Asian art world expressly and unisono pointed out: as a monolithic social-cultural entity Asia is no more existent than is the West. Just as Michel Leiris uses the telling title “*Afrique fântome*” when speaking about Africa in his classical ethnological and demystifying travel report, we too can fittingly speak in our context of an “*Asie fântome*” in order to underline the massively ethnocentric simplifications and distortions typically applied to this huge region from the distance of the West. Our local interview partners seem to have felt a great need to warn against and to eliminate this fundamental misunderstanding and lack of comprehension. In contrast to the Western actors of the art world, who usually simply thematize this region as

a market to be conquered, the Asian actors are directly involved in the markedly divergent art worlds of the various Asian countries, regions and cultures, whose development is the prime object of their interest. They also seem to be inspired by an, albeit rather different, pioneering spirit. For them, in contrast to the actors from the West, this region of the world is not an unknown territory waiting for the discovery of its treasures and marketing opportunities, but rather an extremely lively art world in its own right, and is undergoing a process of developing and blossoming in which many of them are participating or wish to do so.

This fundamental divergence in the positions and perspectives of the two groups which meet in the expanding art market hub of Hong Kong leads to no less fundamental communication problems. Apparently the actors are speaking about the same object, but mean, on the one hand, a terrain whose occupation by the established global players promises profit, and, on the other hand, a blossoming autochthonous site of original regional and local art production.

Those who are directly involved as gallerists or collectors in the local or regional art field tend to adopt a standpoint which respectfully takes the cultural particularities of each region into account and identifies and differentiates between lines of tradition and specific aesthetic codes. The global view of distant sales markets has neither the cultural competence nor the sensitivity needed for this approach. As representative of the statements of many of our dialogue partners we can quote one of the most distinguished experts on the Chinese art market, who recently realized yet again how slight his knowledge of this huge cultural area was when he heard of prices amounting to millions paid for the works of a Chinese artist completely unknown to him, whose fame was presumably restricted to one particular Chinese province. Other dialogue partners emphasized the radical differences in the aesthetics of artists from Hong Kong, mainland China or Indonesia, who were sweepingly subsumed under the heading of contemporary art and who, in each particular case, attracted the interest of different groups of collectors. And in regard to the motives for the relatively recent practice of art collecting in this huge region many of the collectors we interviewed emphasized how important for them the search for the cultural identity of a region as expressed in its art was.

In general it seems to be the case that the dynamics of the rising regional and local markets for contemporary art are closely tied to the economic growth of each particular country and to a growing national

self-awareness, so that art in a certain fashion becomes a reservoir for the symbolic means of expressing national identity or at least the sense of regional or local belonging. In this context contemporary art acquires a completely different status and different functions than the traditional or classical art goods. The latter represent the transgenerational patrimony and in a certain fashion look backwards, whereas contemporary art symbolizes and demonstrates the fact that one is keeping pace with the times and is willing and able to compete on equal terms with the dominant hegemonial powers in the world of cultural exchange as in the analogous case of newly acquired economic importance. The dynamics of the art world described here is thus embedded in complex socio-historical transformation processes. And although it enjoys a relative autonomy over the important economic factors in the current shifting geo-political setting, under the given circumstances this autonomy is clearly much more restricted than in Western countries with their more than a hundred-years-old pre-history of given conditions.

GLOBALIZATION AND MODERNIZATION AS CATCHING-UP DEVELOPMENT

In the course of globalization Asia has experienced rapid economic, social and cultural changes in the past two decades. As a result of its growing economic power the region has become an engine of growth for the world economy, which many observers already regard as the gravitational center of the 21st century. In particular the East Asian states China (with Taiwan) and South Korea have experienced a boom which continues unabated to this day. The South East Asian countries Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, which were severely shaken by the Asian crisis at the end of the 1990s, have caught up enormously and now count among the winners of the globalization process in the region. In spite of all the evident problems these countries still face the entry of the region into a new age seems pre-determined. Today one third of the global added value is already generated in Asia, without taking Japan into account. China, which is now the most powerful economic force in Asia, will probably overtake the USA as the biggest national economy in the world within the next few years. The powerful growth has also increased the prosperity of the region and the number of people with improved living standards is growing in spite

of serious inequalities. According to the predictions the middle-class in Asia will rise to around a billion people by 2020.

Due to its economic success and its massive economic and social upheavals China stands without doubt in the focus of interest. The rapid modernization process is characterized by the integration of China into the world economy, material growth, increasing consumption and a gigantic boom in urbanization. And the economic rise of a national economy obviously also accelerates the interest in the globalized art world of the regions concerned.

The cultural transformation undergone by the art trade parallel to the processes of modernization in the country must be seen against this background. The hitherto scarcely heeded Chinese contemporary art, which could be seen for the first time at international biennials and exhibitions in the 1990s, became a factor to be taken seriously in the global art world after the turn of the century. In spite of its complexity and highly heterogeneous contexts the Western understanding of contemporary Chinese art suffers from a systematic distortion which continues to exist up to the present day. Contemporary Chinese art is mostly reduced to and interpreted as a symbol of freedom in an authoritarian system.

The rise of the Chinese art market and of Chinese art to which we have frequently referred both reflects and symbolizes profound commercial changes in the global field of art. In the course of the last few decades the art trade has opened up new sales markets in regions which, at least in regard to art, were characterized by their peripheral situation. China's rapid rise to the status of a global player in the art market and the high growth rates for the trade in art in Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia and the Arab world are witnesses to a territorial and structural transformation of the art world.

In contrast to the globalization of the world economy the globalization of the art world was until recently clearly limited in scope. The dominance of the US-American and the European art scene was unbroken, as was manifested above all in the supply and demand in the art market, but also in the conditions for the reception of art, the language of the art world, art criticism and the exclusively Western art historical canon. And although numerous studies¹ show that this ascendancy continues to exist, the global

1 | See for example Buchholz, Larissa/Wuggenig, Ulf (2004): *Cultural Globalization between Myth and Reality: The Case of the Contemporary Visual Arts*. In:

turn has nonetheless led to a readjustment of the relationships of power and to a differentiated view of the continuing processes of change. The art world has become fragile in spite of the North American and European hegemony and the gate-keeping of its professional actors.

In harmony with the ideological promises of neo-liberal politics and with the economy globalization now seems to be asserting itself in the art field as well – specifically through the art market. If we leave aside the biennialization of art, we can encounter this globalization nowhere more clearly than in the trade with art. The growing economic power of the emerging or developing economies is the driving force behind the international art market and it involves a power struggle over resources, claims and markets. The primarily economic expansion has not only shifted the geographical borders of the art trade and changed its practices. In the course of the world-wide economic globalization the number of so-called high wealth individuals has massively increased, creating a clientele of millionaires and billionaires from the so-called take off countries, who are increasingly present on the expanding art market as the buyers of traditional, modern and contemporary art.

Western modernism with its universalist codex has never attempted to conceal its claim to economic, political and cultural hegemony. In this context art always plays a role which should not be underestimated. What was regarded as modern or even avant-gardist was always subject to modification by developments and the course of time. This seems to apply in equal measure to the age of globalization, which, like capitalism, is a product of the Western modern age. Whoever fails to move with the times falls by the wayside. Inclusion and exclusion touch upon the self-understanding of the art world not only in the emerging economies but also in the developed Western states themselves.

Our dialogue partners provide a detailed insight into the development of an emerging, highly dynamic and rapidly changing art scene, characterized particularly by an expanding art market, a low but growing density of art institutions and an unbelievable number of young aspiring artists. A part of these stories is closely associated with the economic rise of China, which has also provided for an exponential growth of the

Art-e-Fact, 4. Lind, Maria/Velthuis, Olav (eds.) (2012): *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*. Berlin: Sternberg.

art market in recent decades. The nature and the speed of the political, economic, social and cultural transformations experienced by China since the end of the Mao era determines the conditions for the current and the further development of the art world and gives it its own particular stamp. It also profoundly influences the relationship between artists, their cultural inheritance, their understanding of the present and their vision of the future.

According to the statements of the actors the rapid social development of China in particular has thoroughly ambivalent consequences for Chinese art and the Chinese art world. As the majority of our dialogue partners report, the speed of art production matches the speed of change. Not only the artists but also all the other actors such as curators, critics, collectors or the public interested in art have scarcely any time for thought or reflection. They can only react to the accelerated developments in order to keep up with them.

COMMERCIALIZATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE ART SCENE

Many changes today occur under the aegis of capitalism. Many actors in the West, above all, seem to be truly dazzled by the boom in the Chinese art market. According to their estimates China is the future market of the art world pure and simple – regardless of whether it is critically received or simply positively welcomed. Among the important market actors in particular there is a pioneering spirit which no-one can or will evade. Gallerists even justify financial losses by arguing that they must be in at the beginning in order to stake their claims.

To all appearances attention is predominantly directed towards economic factors and economic success. This enables galleries to cooperate indirectly with up and coming artists, who in turn need the galleries in order to make progress in their artistic careers. But this does not mean that artistic development is totally neglected. Well known commercial galleries in particular search for established artists whose works can be easily sold and who act more skillfully in the promotion of their careers. On the other hand it is reported that numerous young artists prefer to be represented by renowned Western galleries rather than to be cared for by smaller, ambitious program galleries under Chinese management,

even though this would be more advantageous for their future artistic development.

Since the beginnings of the modern art market private art traders in the West have always seen themselves as the patrons and promoters of art rather than as dealers and marketers of art.² In China, however, the auction houses, which sell art for record prices, continue to play a dominating role, which has, not least, led many galleries to keep an eye on investment opportunities with prospects of economic profit when choosing their artists. In contrast to the auction houses, however, the galleries remain indispensable for an art trade which holds the balance between artistic and economic interests.

In this connection the role of the museums must also be mentioned, as they as institutions occupy a central position in the art trade and the art world. As new museums are sprouting up in record time in China one of the most important questions to be asked will concern the criteria these houses follow outside their functions in regard to the art-interested public. Will they, like the auction houses and galleries, be mainly guided by economic values and market trends or will they be developed and curated in accordance with the discourses of the science, history and criticism of art? In view of the large number of museums it is highly doubtful, according to the statements of some of our dialogue partners, whether the museums will in the near future take on an important role similar to that of their counterparts in the West. It is not for nothing that they place their hopes on already existing institutions with an international reputation such as the Rockbund Museum in Shanghai, the Central Academy of Fine Arts Art Museum (CAFA) and the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing or planned flagships such as M+ in Hong Kong.

If one is to believe the statements of the local actors China has successfully become a part of the international art world. But the country still owes its visibility in the global art world above all to the powerful growth of the art market and the high prices achieved on it. Of course there is a remarkable number of young artists, above all in the metropolises such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing or Xian. But the positive development is partly hindered by the substantial difficulties of the art

2 | See for example Thurn, Hans Peter (1994): *Der Kunsthändler. Wandlungen eines Berufes*. Munich: Hirmer.

institutions of the state. The actors repeatedly complain about the lack of public museums, exhibition halls, non-commercial foundations and non-profit facilities, which are of enormous importance for the visibility of Chinese art. All of our dialogue partners emphasize unisono that such an infrastructure is one of the most important preconditions if the Chinese art scene is to acquire international status. The long term institutionalization process of the kind we know in the West is only in its infancy in China. Even the existing facilities such as the academies have not as yet gone through a historical development similar to that of their counterparts in the West. Consequently comparisons with Europe at the beginning of the 20th century are not seldom made.

Our dialogue partners complain again and again that with few exceptions there are virtually no public museums which could provide an overview of modern and contemporary art in China. The exhibitions of the museums financed by the state continue to pursue strongly political or educational goals. Although numerous semi-public or private museums have arisen in the very recent past, with few exceptions they do not follow a curatorial principle or have any art historical or scientific ambitions. Here an academic basis is evidently lacking and the collecting activity is often guided by considerations of investment or social prestige. In addition the borders between public and private institutions are unclearly drawn and often call for political and economic compromises. In order to cover their costs the private museums are often dependent on state support or sponsoring. This phenomenon is well-known in the West and has become particularly apparent following China's entry into the market economy. The suspicion is frequently expressed that some of the newly established private museums are simply architectonic prestige objects designed to increase the value of the property and to promote luxury neighborhoods. Many of the private museums which were established during the two building waves after 1990 have in the meantime closed again and have been put to different uses.

As some of our dialogue partners report, most of the private museums cannot in any case be compared with Western collections and by no means correspond to the Western concept of collection and museal presentation. Even the few books on the contemporary development of art forms in China do not attempt to find or develop a professionally well-founded art historical consensus. It seems necessary, therefore, to promote more strongly the young and emerging, scientifically oriented, art critical

and curatorial generation in the country and to build up the necessary infrastructure to achieve this end. The lack of qualified personnel ranging from museum directors or curators and art historians to administrative staff further restricts the ability of the existing institutions to act effectively. Severe competition for personnel and a high fluctuation among the staff are consequences which are felt even by respected institutions such as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, whose top management changed every two years.

The boom in Chinese art is scarcely visible in the old centers of the art trade. From an artistic point of view contemporary art in China has scarcely been received to this day in the Western art world, if one ignores the familiar names such as Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fanzhi, Li Shan, Fang Lijun or Yue Minjun from the first generation of Chinese artists, who in the course of the political and social upheavals of the mid 1980s made their way as artists slowly, accompanied by numerous reversals, and were variously labeled according to taste as the Chinese avant-garde or as representatives of so called cynical realism or political pop.

But it is no less interesting to see what was ultimately filtered out of the entire range of Chinese art production by the structures and mechanisms of the art world and so achieved a degree of international publicity. According to our interview partners art production in China is fundamentally more differentiated than is suggested by the impressions successfully conveyed to the Western art world, which are mostly oriented on the current taste in art of a Western and nowadays increasingly cosmopolitan elite. Chinese contemporary art is mainly conceived in the terms of the Western narrative, and, conversely, the West needs this narrative in order to find access to Chinese art. This is the conclusion of an interview partner, which may at first sight seem banal but nonetheless hits the nail on the head.

The predominant image of a necessary catch up development both at the institutional level and in the equipment of the recipients with the necessary cultural capital, as it is expressed in the interviews, is highly ambivalent. It is oriented largely on the norms, standards and rules which have characterized the field of art since it achieved relative autonomy in the Western hemisphere. They ought, it is said, to be implemented as swiftly as possible so that China can be included in this art field. This process strongly recalls the implementation of the rules of liberalization and free trade of the West by transnational institutions

such as the IWF, the World Bank and the WTO in the course of economic globalization.

Discussions on how far commercialization has affected the conditions for the production and distribution of art or on the influence of price increases on the creative work of the artists are not today in the center of focus. Instead our interview partners brought up questions about the function of art in China, Chinese self-awareness and, not least, the educational level of the public.

WHEN THE MARKET RULES ART: THE TWO FACES OF THE ART WORLD REVISITED

There is a danger that fundamental misunderstandings will arise in dealing with the semantics of such a well-established concept as globalization if there is a lack of differentiation in regard to the levels at which processes are described. It seems necessary, for example, to distinguish between narrations about the art world in terms of the structural levels to which they refer. Are we dealing with the art market as such or with the field of art when we talk of contemporaneity and a globalized art world? If we consider the undoubtedly existent and even massively expanding state of the trade with the symbolic goods of art and takes the exploding turnover of the auction houses in China as an indicator for such a diagnosis, the concept of globalization seems to be a completely fitting label. But if, instead, we enquire about the social structures in the field of the production and consecration of art, the establishment of its legitimacy and aura and the promotion of the career of the artists through these instances of consecration and certain recognized educational procedures etc., a clearly different, more complex and even contradictory picture of the events results.

The developments of the recent decades clearly show that the trade in art has in the meantime reached almost all the important metropolises in the world, even though these locations may hitherto have been scarcely visible on a world map of the history of contemporary art. Wherever economic capital endeavors to be converted into symbolic capital and profane material wealth seeks for legitimacy in the form of cultural noblesse the operational system of the art market with its diverse institutions soon comes into play. However, the locations where this symbolical capital is

produced and goods which usually have only a minimal material value are equipped with a priceless aura by means of a kind of symbolic consecration are few in number and highly selective in nature.

The relevant locations on the globe of the art world reflect the crystallizations of a laborious socio-historical dynamics. They are places in which generations of actors have worked – cooperatively or competitively – to create networks of institutions and ensembles of collective practices, aesthetic codes and social uses of symbolic forms of expression which interact and so supply this universe with a specific symbolic capital and endow it with visibility and legitimacy as a relatively autonomous social field. They are places such as Paris, the “capital of modernity” (Walter Benjamin) which themselves present “modern myths” (Roger Caillos), serve as projection surfaces and models in the international context and become radiating international poles of attraction for lovers of art. In such places what can be described in the terms of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as “fields of art” are formed and function as prototypes and models. Only after the “long durée” (Fernand Braudel) of the socio-historical emergence of a relatively autonomous field gravitating around a specific good, the symbolic capital of art, can such a highly symbolic place develop that aura which is then transferred to the actors active in that field.

Such a field of art cannot be conjured up out of thin air in the short term by the mere accumulation of wealth and the accompanying demand or even by means of state regulation, as is attempted in some of the oil-rich desert states or booming emerging industrial regions. It is, instead, built upon the congealed history of the long-term collective endeavors and investments of all the interested actors participating in it. Depending on the national context in each case, this history is not only characterized by massive asynchronies, but also directly reflects international symbolic relationships of power. This means that national fields of art production which develop early can also establish themselves in a transnational context as an avant-garde and as a model, as in the already mentioned case of Paris as a prototype or as was manifested after the Second World War by the establishment of the cultural hegemony of the United States with New York as its center. From the fact that in recent years the global art trade has achieved its greatest turnover in China it can by no means, therefore, be concluded that parallel to this development globally recognized sites for the consecration of the production and distribution of art have also been established. Successful assertion on the global art market is by no

means automatically accompanied by the recognition of a location as a transnational art field. “What money cannot buy” is precisely this specific symbolic capital: without itself being consecrated a location cannot become a site of consecration; without aura no aura can be radiated, without magic no enchantment.

This is precisely the context for a point made several times by our interview partners from the Far East. Although the art market is booming and the region occupies top positions on the global world market for art, it nonetheless plays at best only a secondary role in the international field of art. As the interviewees emphasized again and again, the region lacks the institutions necessary for the existence of an autonomous field of art and for the exercise of the powers of consecration. What is more, in contrast to some of the emerging countries in Latin America, for example, China possesses no tightly knit national network of artists, galleries, auction houses and collectors, state institutions such as academies, public and private museums, biennials and art fairs, or curators, art critics and other relevant actors and professional groups. Some of our dialogue partners explained this by reference to the particular political development of China. Not only the art market but also the entire art scene was in a state of suspension and subject to state supervision and control before the opening up of the country. The dynamic growth of the art market and the art scene only began after the turn of the century.

As we have already stated, the museum landscape is in the initial stage of development, but it does not yet possess the critical mass, public presence and visibility to contribute to the emergence of a public equipped with the cultural capital needed by contemporary art in order to achieve resonance and a broad impact. The public education facilities cannot fulfill this function either. In our Western civilization the educational system – and in particular the upper levels of the schools – have functioned for more than a century as instances for the mediation of art and have familiarized entire generations with the specific aesthetics of modernism and late modernism. For readily comprehensible historical reasons such educational functions can scarcely be taken over in the short term by other cultures.

In the interviews it was also frequently emphasized that the countries of the region, and above all China, did in fact have specific art academies for the training of artists. However these academies, which can look back on a centuries-old tradition, have always produced an elite of artists

with certified competencies, who were committed to specifically codified aesthetic ideals. The form of perfection they teach, for example in regard to certain artistic genres such as calligraphy or techniques such as copying, must be envied for its virtuosity, but it nonetheless runs counter to the artistic ethos of singularity, distinctiveness and autonomous creativity demanded by contemporary art. The situation is only slowly changing with the appointment of contemporary artists as teachers in the academies, who can familiarize the young generation of artists with the specific codices of contemporary art.

Against the background of this historically explicable lack of many of the elements of an art field it is easy to understand why our informants all emphasized that young artists from the region had to gain experience as travelling journeymen in places and institutions on the map of the art world which possessed the necessary resources for the legitimate mediation, certification and consecration of artistic capital. This compulsion to migrate is accompanied by the danger that these talented young artists might not return to their home country after their initial sojourn in the promised lands of the art world, even though several of the interview partners emphasized the strong attachment of the young generation of artists to their countries of origin and underlined that they would look for artistic recognition precisely in their home country. Furthermore, the institutions of art criticism and curatorship have scarcely been developed or established in an emerging national or regional art scene which has developed late and often under unfavorable political conditions. This is a further handicap in the process of catching up in the development of an art field comparable to that of Western regions.

Last but not least the late and hesitant development of a gallery system probably shares a degree of responsibility for the specific structures of the art field in this region. Regardless of whether they are commercial, semi-commercial or non commercial, galleries of a Western kind have no tradition in China. The Chinese art trade was always characterized by direct purchasing from the artist. Even today a great part of the artistic production is still sold by the artists themselves in their ateliers and workshops or brought to one of the numerous auction houses for sale. Before 1991 auctions were forbidden; the first gallery, the Red Gate Gallery, was also opened in 1991, revealingly enough by an Australian.

Our dialogue partners again and again emphasize the enormous influence of the auction houses. They explain it by reference to the specific

social psychology of market behavior under the given socio-historical conditions, namely the delayed development of a field of contemporary art together with its characteristic cultural patterns, social rules and practices. The numerous auction houses, including the big players from the West, had already occupied, not to say virtually monopolized, the terrain of the art trade even before the autochthonous galleries began to show their presence. The latter had a difficult time in the face of these powerful competitors, who seemed to enjoy a range of obvious advantages in the eyes of an as yet unpracticed and inexperienced art public in general and of an emerging community of collectors of contemporary art in particular. As was frequently reported, these include above all the transparency of the price formation at the auctions, whereas the fixing of the prices for art works bought at galleries seems less transparent and is largely based on trust. Trust, however, is capital which can only be accumulated gradually on the basis of experience with previous successful transactions, whereas the open market with its exemplary demonstration of competition at auctions plainly shows everyone the relationship between supply and demand. On this point the author of an article in a Swiss economics periodical writes: "However, the infrastructure which supports every art system is deficient: an established museum structure, pioneering exhibitions, curators and also the criteria for the judgment of art – all of these are lacking. The vacuum has been filled up to now by the auction houses such as Poly International Auction (since 2005) and, of course Christie's and Sotheby's."³

At the same time, in view of the slight degree of legitimization of the gallery as an institution in the Eastern art market, the argument put forward by many buyers and collectors seems plausible and even convincing, namely that the 50 per cent of the proceeds of sales which usually ends up in the pocket of the gallerist represents an unnecessary and easily avoidable waste of money when compared to the much lower charges of the auction houses. The market power of the auction houses, which is incidentally demonstrated by the maintenance of luxurious exhibition rooms in the style of the big galleries of Western provenience, is at the same time a handicap for the development of a gallery system which would feel particularly obliged to serve the primary market and to provide a programmatic orientation.

3 | Brigitte Ulmer (2007): Kunstmarkt: Goldrush in China. In: Bilanz. Das Schweizer Wirtschaftsmagazin, 9.11.2007.

Galleries are more than purely commercial undertakings; they traditionally also serve to discover and encourage young artists, and to bring them to the notice of the public during the first stages of their careers – a function which no other institution of the art field, let alone of the art market in the narrow sense, is even remotely capable of fulfilling so efficiently. It is indeed reported that some of the auction houses in the meantime also serve the primary market for young artists and accept the works of unknown artists alongside their established candidates and blue chips. But this involves the danger that young artists will be quickly promoted with a lot of hype and just as quickly dropped again and forgotten.

The precarious situation of the gallery system in China seems to be improving gradually. In the meantime a number of galleries exist which have succeeded, after years of intensive endeavor, in building up a stock of collectors as clients, even though they are also faced with direct competition from the big galleries from the Western metropolises such as Gagosian, Pace or White Cube, which are streaming into the country. Gagosian, for example, has a branch at one of the noblest addresses in Hong Kong, the Pedder Building, for which it pays an extremely high rent – a rent which in the opinion of our dialogue partners can scarcely be justified by the turnover achieved.

Since the Art Basel entered the Asian art market in 2012 with its take-over of the Hong Kong Art Fair the lack of balance between the market dominance of the auction houses and the relatively marginal existence of the gallery scene seems to have been rectified to some degree. It should not be forgotten, however, that the Art Basel itself practices a kind of global gatekeeping by only admitting galleries to the fair which meet certain (Western) norms and standards. But whereas in the West it continues to maintain a clear distance from the auction system frowned upon by traditional collectors, it has, significantly, come into close touch and cooperates with the auction houses in Hong Kong under the circumstances sketched out above. In 2013, for example, a big auction was carried out by Christie's in the Convention Center at the same time as the Art Basel. It was possible to observe how a freely fluctuating public moved effortlessly and seemingly uninhibitedly from one minute to the other between the exhibition space of a noble art gallery at the fair and the fully packed auction room.

What does the pattern of collecting in such an emerging economy look like? As we know, taste, motives and behavior often differ very widely from

the familiar notions of the Western art world. Although the collection of art has a long tradition in the East and South East Asian regions, it was concentrated for a long time on classical art and antiquities, which is scarcely surprising in view of the absence of an autochthonous and autonomous period of modern art and the late development of a field of contemporary art. Even today the market for classical art commodities is still a powerful economic factor and remains competitive in the face of alternatives from the West.

In most of the countries apart from Japan and, to a certain extent, South Korea the collection of contemporary art is still a relatively unusual cultural practice which it takes time to get used to. This is particularly true of China where, together with antiquities and porcelain, traditional ink and brush paintings were mainly collected, which were founded on an autonomous artistic tradition. The opening up of the country to contemporary art trends only began in the 1990s. The subsequent astoundingly swift growth of interest in contemporary art is attributed by our local interview partners to various factors. They refer, on the one hand, to the model role of Western elites, with whom the representatives of the new money among the Eastern economic elites are trying to catch up for reasons of prestige and the legitimation of their social status. They also emphasize that contemporary art is seen as a particularly stylish form of symbolic capital, in which considerable economic resources are invested in order to achieve social benefits in the shape of recognition and distinction.

In the talks it was also pointed out that newcomers to the field of collecting contemporary art could also fall back on the services of Western enterprises such as the art consulting unit of the UBS. A younger Hong Kong art collector informed us that he had recently participated in a seminar held by the UBS in Switzerland in which he was not only introduced to the finer points of collecting and its economic aspects but also had the opportunity to meet artists in their workshops and, not least, to make network contacts with other collectors all over the world. To our knowledge there is a great demand for such coaching and development aid among the latecomers to the world community of collectors.

During the Art Basel in Hong Kong our participant observation enabled us to discover at close quarters how intensive the exchange of information can be on such occasions between the aspirants from the emerging economies and the established collectors of Western

provenience. At all events the staff of the art consulting unit of this Swiss bank see in their offer of services an attractive instrument for the acquisition of discerning customers from the wealthiest layers of society in these regions. They emphasize that they are offering precisely what money alone cannot buy, namely special connoisseurship and expertise in dealing with art and in acquiring access to the exclusive circle of the Western collectors' community. In other words such an undertaking skillfully takes advantage of a backlog demand in order to function as a kind of exchange platform for the conversion of the abundance of economic capital into social and symbolic capital. A bulletin of another big Swiss bank states this relationship in all clarity: "The new Chinese millionaires all desire status symbols which represent their newly achieved wealth." And again: "Chinese businessmen travel to Europe and the USA, where they meet Pinault, Arnault or the Rockefellers, and must recognize that it is not enough just to be rich, but that one must also buy and collect works of art.", says François Curiel, the president of Christie's in Asia.

From a sociological point of view the enormous attractive power which the symbolic capital of art acquisition and art possession exercises over the new money and the social climbers can be put in a nutshell in the words of Pierre Bourdieu: "Of all the conversion techniques designed to create and accumulate symbolic capital, the purchase of works of art, objectified evidence of 'personal taste', is the one which is the closest to the most irreproachable and inimitable form of accumulation, that is, the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power in the form of natural 'distinction', personal 'authority' or 'culture'. The exclusive appropriation of priceless works is not without analogy to the ostentatious destruction of wealth; the irreproachable exhibition of wealth which it permits is, simultaneously, a challenge thrown down to all those who cannot dissociate their 'being' from their 'having' and attain disinterestedness, the supreme affirmation of personal excellence."⁴

It has been pointed out to us again and again that the strategy of using art commodities as objects of investment for the purpose of making a profit is far less stigmatized or looked down upon in this region. Some of the Asian collectors we interviewed by no means concealed the fact that they regularly resold works of art at a profit, a conduct clearly disapproved

4 | Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) [1979]: *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 282.

of among the collectors we interviewed in Europe and the USA, which would lead to a revocation of the status of a genuine collector. But here too changes are happening and the narration which emerges from our interviews suggests that the young generation of collectors from the East is in the meantime moving closer to the decades-old ideal type of the collector in the West with his credo “L’art pour l’art” and has internalized and habitualized the explicit and the implicit rules of art so profoundly that the hitherto existing coarse and fine differences in the etiquette and social uses of art will soon pale into insignificance. On the other hand, in spite of these indications of convergence and the leveling out of differences, the strength of the tendencies towards the self-assertion of cultural identity through distancing and distinction from hegemonial models should not be underestimated.

Why should the cultural specifica of the artistic traditions in this huge geographical region, such as ink painting, not be preserved in the evolution of an aesthetic code of contemporary art of a Chinese kind? Or find expression in a hybridization of differing techniques of different origin? The further development of the Eastern art world will probably depend, not least, on whether the producers of art, among whom we primarily include all the actors of the primary market with its sphere of limited production, succeed in emancipating themselves from the powerful big players of the global art market and assert themselves by acquiring the measure of autonomy needed if art is to be justifiably seen as more than a luxury good – a condition and a claim which might appear all too illusory and romantic under the conditions of a completely unfettered and deregulated capitalism.





