



Shen Shaomin, *I sleep on top of myself*, 2011-12, showing as part of ART HK Projects I image courtesy the artist and Osage Gallery, Hong Kong

Letter from ArtHK

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Next year The Hong Kong International Art Fair (ArtHK) will be re-branded Art Basel Hong Kong, and is widely judged to have hit the big time in 2012. With 266 exhibitors from 38 countries, this is now one of the world's largest fairs, and looks set to grow even larger. For major galleries worldwide it has already joined Art Basel (Basel and Miami), Frieze (London) and Armory week (NY) as an essential event. For the big players, not to exhibit at ArtHK will henceforth not be an option.

The prestige fairs are as much about networking as floor sales, and by any measure ArtHK12's celebrity quotient was considerable. Coming between the inaugural Frieze NY (4-7 May) and the venerable Art Basel (14-17 June), some major gallerists evidently sent their B-teams to ArtHK, but increasingly celebrity artists are encouraged to attend these events. John Baldessari's much-quoted comment that hanging around your gallerist's booth is 'like watching your parents having sex' may still hold true but, outside of the *vernissage*, the booths are not where the real action is. What matters are the numerous cocktail parties, lunches, dinners, after-after parties and harbour cruises laid on by galleries and wealthy individuals, and entrée to these is in high demand. At ArtHK12 the privileged could rub shoulders with Maurizio Cattelan, Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Kosuth, Mariko Mori, Takashi Murakami, Pipilotti Rist, Luc Tuymans and Jeff Wall, along with many lesser luminaries. The big fairs also attract influential museum directors and curators, and Australians Elizabeth Ann MacGregor (MCA Australia), Melissa Chiu (Asia Society NY) and Aaron Seeto (4A Centre Sydney) joined the likes of Hans Ulrich Obrist (Serpentine London), Klaus Biesenbach (MoMA PS1 New York), Philippe Vergne (Dia NY), and Sam Keller (Fondation Beyeler Switzerland). Added to these were a host of private museum owners, a fast-growing phenomenon worldwide, but especially in Asia. These included Judith and Paris Neilson (White Rabbit Sydney), Guy Ullens (Ullens Centre Beijing), and François Pinault (Paris).

In a recent *New Yorker* piece, Peter Schjeldahl characterised the phenomenal rise of art fairs as the commercial dealers' counter-offensive against the growing market share of the auction houses which, at around \$30 billion, now accounts for half of all fine art sales worldwide. Less noted are the ways in which the quality fairs also challenge the role of contemporary art museums and biennales, commissioning ambitious site-specific works from renowned artists, usually in conjunction with major commercial galleries. ArtHK12 presented ten such 'Projects' curated by Yuko Hasegawa (MCA Tokyo). These included major installations by Yayoi Kusama, Ai Weiwei, Shen Shaomin, Yin Xiuzhen, Tatsuo Miyajama, Choi Jeong Hwa, Daniel Buren and José Patrício. These offerings were hugely popular with the throngs of fair-goers,

and the dense crowds of ordinary HK families was a phenomenon in itself – testament to the growing 'entertainment' value of contemporary art. ArtHK12 drew an impressive 67,000 visitors over its four days; the large, mixed booths of the major galleries appeared less of a draw than the forty-nine-strong *Asia One* section, where smaller and middleweight galleries each presented the work of a single artist. Australia had a strong presence here, including Damien Minton (showing Peter Gardiner), Nellie Castan (Bindi Cole), Ryan Renshaw (Martin Smith), Tolarno (Brendan Huntley), Tim Olsen (Sophie Cape), Sullivan & Strumpf (Alex Seton), and Tristan Koenig (Karen Black). The *Futures* section, featuring artists under the age of thirty-five, was also very popular and included Anna Pappas Gallery (Sue Dodd and Michaela Gleave), and Neon Parc (Viv Miller and Katherine Huang). All reported brisk business.

From the exhibitors' point of view the crowds, though gratifying, are more of an irritant than an advantage, requiring constant vigilance and distracting attention from potential buyers. At most art fairs, key business is done at the VIP/collector previews before the public opening, however at ArtHK many exhibitors reported sustained buyer interest throughout the four days. All the booths featured a small storage room, which were firmly closed once the public surged in, but opened during VIP hours to reveal discreet arrays of massively valuable works – I saw many Picassos, numerous Warhols, a minor Léger and even a small Courbet landscape, some with asking prices in the high seven figures.

Many contemporary artists have multiple gallery representation, and some appeared ubiquitous. A good number of booths featured shiny Tony Cragg sculptures, and works by Zhang Xiaogang, Zhang Huan, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Louise Bourgeois and Damien Hirst were also prevalent. Many galleries simply ship over a selection from the stockroom, and in the main galleries section Roslyn Oxley9 and Barry Keldouls showed a discerning pick from their stables. Anna Schwartz bucked this trend, presenting a technically demanding whole-booth neon installation by American Joseph Kosuth. The well-heeled Galerie Gmurzynska (Zurich) had a booth designed by Zaha Hadid, and a museum-quality survey of paintings by the late, great Cuban cubist/surrealist Wilfredo Lam. Michael Werner (NY/Cologne) presented a survey (curated by Dimitri Ozerkov, Hermitage St Petersburg) of 20th century German modernism featuring key works from artists such as Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Markus Lupertz, and Georg Baselitz. Galleria d'Arte Maggiore (Bologna) showed a superb collection of Morandi still lifes. The fair saw several million-dollar-plus sales, and scores in the six figure zone. Alex Seton's life-sized marble hoody-figure (*Soloist*, 2012) sold promptly to an Australian collector for around \$110,000. Heedless of Baldessari's adage, Seton and other Australian artists made themselves cheerfully available to talk about their works.

It seems undeniable that HK has successfully re-asserted itself as the international gateway to the exponentially expanding Chinese contemporary market – for both international and Chinese buyers and sellers of many persuasions; a big change from a decade ago, when the city was perceived as something of a contemporary art backwater



(clockwise from top left) 1/ Yayoi Kusama, *Flowers that Bloom at Midnight*, 2009, showing as part of ART HK Projects; image courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York

2/ Choi Jeong Hwa, *Breath Flower - Red Lotus*, 2012, showing as part of ART HK Projects; image courtesy the artist and AANDO FINE ART, Berlin

3/ Handiwirman Saputra, *No Roots, Not Shoots No. 1*, 2010-2011, showing as part of ART HK Projects; image courtesy the artist and Nadi Gallery, Jakarta

4/ Daniel Buren, *Photo-Souvenir From Three Windows, 5 colours for 252 places*, 2006, work in situ, showing as part of ART HK Projects; image courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

compared with the dynamic art districts of mainland cities like Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai, where a new generation of artists was transforming the contemporary scene, often selling direct to local and international buyers, and giving rise to a new breed of dealer-gallerists.

HK now has its own emergent art districts, located in several grimy industrial locales on HK island and further afield. ARIs abound, and many new commercial operations have crowded in. Most telling of all is the recent arrival of some of the world's most prestigious commercial galleries. On a cramped street in the Central shopping and financial district lies the unremarkable entrance to the historic and famously expensive Pedder Building where, stacked floor-upon-floor, are the cool spaces of Gagosian, Simon Lee, Pearl Lam, Ben Brown and others. Even more impressive is the first White Cube gallery outside of the UK, not far away on Connaught Road. Having opened in April with Gilbert and George's *London Pictures*, it was in May/June showing Anselm Kiefer's *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, an exhibition of paintings and sculptural installations mounted on two levels with production values befitting a major institution. A few blocks away, Sotheby's in May launched their own dedicated gallery space, occupying a whole floor at 1 Pacific

Place, Admiralty, with two large selling shows: Yayoi Kusama's *Hong Kong Blooms in My Mind* and *Modern Masters: Corot to Monet - French Landscape Paintings in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.

It may take a while for the HK market to deliver a return on these outlays, but such multi-million dollar developments are not made lightly, and ArtHK has been a significant if not dominant driving factor in all of this. Its rapid growth in just five years is testament to the business savvy of founder Tim Etchells whose global company Single Market Events (which owns *Art Melbourne* and the upcoming, in 2013, *Sydney Contemporary Art Fair*) has a successful track record with events from fashion to hospitality. However it is ArtHK Director Marcus Renfrew who is credited with steering the event to its current winning status, and he will stay on under Art Basel's ownership. As an 'art destination' HK will only get better, for it is not just commercial operations investing in the city. New York's Asia Society has just opened a spectacular new HK base, and across Victoria Harbour the \$2.7 billion West Kowloon Cultural District will feature, along with theatres and concert venues, the new M+ museum.

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