



Spring Workshop
in
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to cater to a booming Asian economy, with a blossoming art fair and a nascent art scene of its own, Hong Kong is art's newest hotspot. *AR:HK* focuses on the territory's artists, institutions and galleries – as well as on the impact of the political context in China.

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How have recent social and political developments in mainland China affected the country's art scene?

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As Hong Kong becomes an increasingly important centre for the business of art, what are the territory's cultural structures doing to keep pace? A look at the Hong Kong art scene to come

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**Under Construction:
Hong Kong's Institutional Culture
in 2012** *by Iona Whittaker, critic*

Under Construction: Hong Kong's Institutional Culture in 2012 by Iona Whittaker, critic

Taped to the damaged base of a sculpture outside the Hong Kong Museum of Art is a note of unwitting irony: 'This part will be repaired.' *Overlap* (2009), by Lee Shu-fan, Faye Mok and Yiu Fung, was commissioned by the Art Promotion Office, a government body set up in 2001 to 'further the efforts in the promotion of visual arts in Hong Kong'. The artwork itself – a cluster of minimalist mirrored pillars that greets visitors with a shifting mirage of its own reflections and those of buildings and traffic behind them – is irrelevant; it's the institution outside which it stands and the public information message stuck to it that resonate with the current state of Hong Kong's art scene.

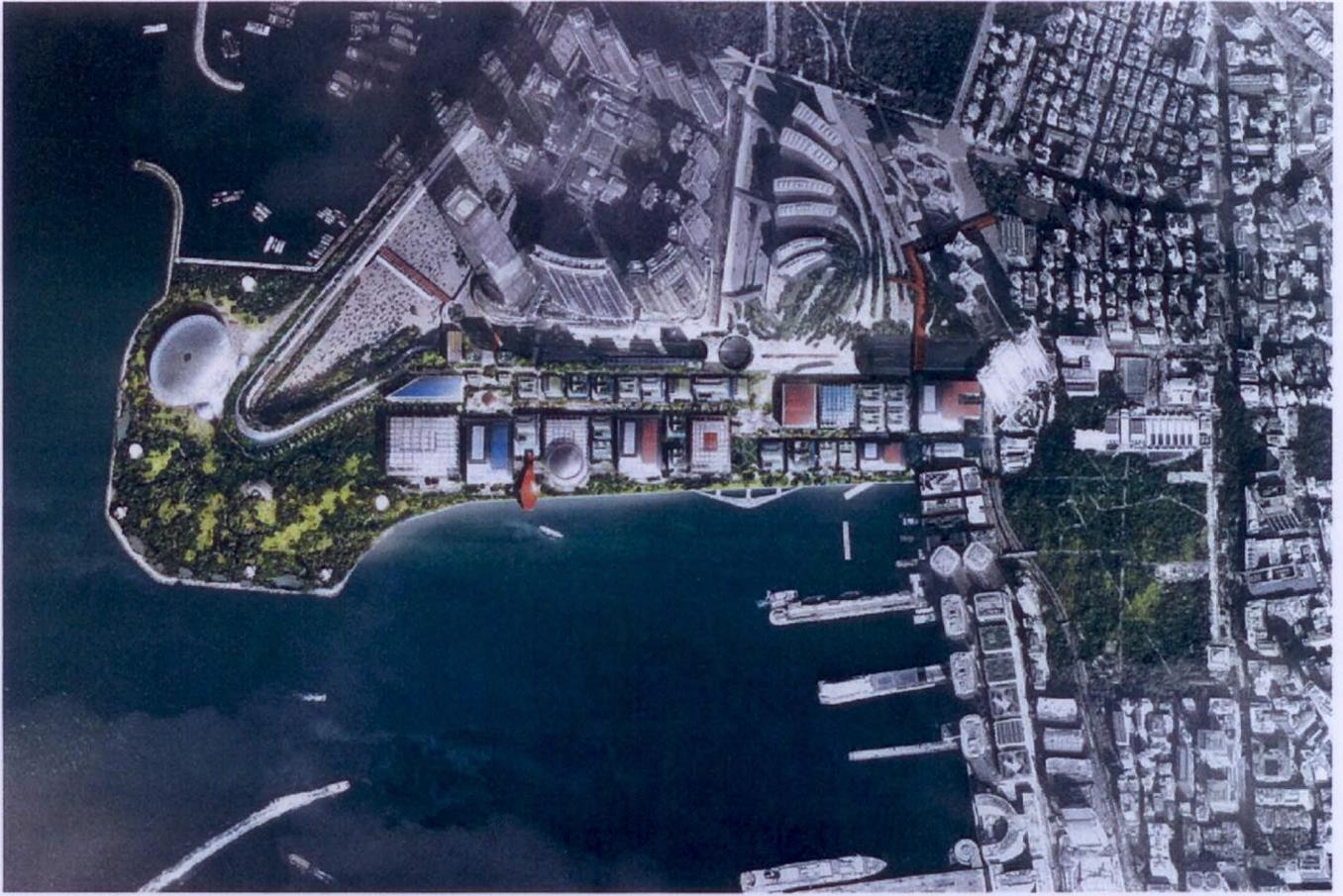
The Hong Kong Museum of Art is symptomatic of what's wrong with this global city, which has long lacked a hub for contemporary art. Founded in 1962, the museum was initially housed in the City Hall, before relocating in 1991 to its present purpose-built quarters alongside the Hong Kong Cultural Centre – a conglomeration of heavy 1980s boxes linked by shallow steps, dark horizontal walkways and pedestrian forecourts. The buildings' skin of salmon-pink tiles is punctuated intermittently by unromantic signage, and an out-of-date shop stocks local knickknacks and souvenirs. The exhibition programme is focused on Chinese cultural heritage, and tellingly, the word 'contemporary' does not feature in the museum's introduction. It is an institutional image in need of repair: "Go and have a look at it, and you'll see what we're up against," remarked a curator at the West Kowloon Cultural District office, five minutes' walk down the road, where much-publicised plans are afoot to build a giant cultural centre and contemporary art museum.

The idea of a buzzing 'Hong Kong art scene' akin to those of New York, London or Berlin has for many years been something of an oxymoron. The region's international identity hinges on its status as an offshore financial and trading hub – a commercialism that has long outrun other forms of culture in terms of Hong Kong's visibility. Hong Kong enjoyed greater sociopolitical freedom than the mainland – including almost zero censorship – under colonial governance, and its unique positioning as a doorway between the West and Asia has made it cosmopolitan. At the same time, however, what is now known as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) has limited infrastructure for cultural life to flourish on different levels, and a lack of the kind of institutional bedrock common to Western artistic centres. Coupled with

this, space is at a premium in the densely packed metropolis, leaving its small community of artists (until four years ago, there was only one university providing fine art education) in a tight spot. Following the 1997 handover, the region was left somewhat in the shadows, as international attention swept northwards to an awakening art scene in Beijing. As a result of these factors, Hong Kong's relationship with artistic culture to date has been almost exclusively commercial; despite rich pickings for auction houses, this gleaming global city has done little to foster artists and their work on the ground, and attempts to remedy a dearth of public institutions have been kept at bay by bureaucratic hurdles and the supremacy of shopping malls.

But changes are afoot which suggest that Hong Kong's art scene really will be repaired. There are institutional developments and plans currently being implemented across the spectrum, from independent nonprofit outfits to ambitious government-supported schemes; the Hong Kong Jockey Club – the city's most robust colonial inheritance and an omnivorous sponsor – is also backing art-related projects. "It's like being in London in the early 1970s or New York in the early 60s," says Tobias Berger, a former director of Para/Site, Hong Kong's longest-established nonprofit art organisation, and now managing curator at M+, the forthcoming contemporary art museum within the future West Kowloon Cultural District. "Every place has a certain time, and I think now is the time of Hong Kong. There is no place I would rather be... Sure, you don't have something as advanced as London or Paris, but it's so formative." The rhetoric is certainly present now, whereas in the past, art practitioners and the public alike would bemoan Hong Kong's art scene. For David Elliott, the prominent British curator and Asian art specialist now charged with programming the redevelopment of the historic Central Police Station (CPS) and transforming it into a cutting-edge contemporary art centre in central Hong Kong, "it's a place waiting to happen – everything else is here except a public forum for contemporary culture. It's been botched, especially in terms of visual art."

From the outside, this new mood in Hong Kong might seem to have come almost from nowhere, but there are factors that make it a logical, if belated, evolution. Occupying this small southern Chinese area is a population of around seven million; the society, although diverse, is comparatively young and in a process of transformation, so that the sedimentation



of culture and artistic production is a matter of natural progression. The past two or three years have witnessed a burgeoning of the commercial scene on the heels of the rampantly successful Hong Kong art fair, which came under the aegis of Art Basel last year. Western commercial galleries have flocked to open branches here: White Cube and Galerie Perrotin are among the most recent to set up shop. On the other side of the coin are nonprofit ventures, of which there are particular names of note. Para/Site was founded by a group of artists in 1996 who wanted an art institution where there wasn't one; the new-media art platform Videotage can trace its roots back to 1986; and the Asia Art Archive – a comprehensive resource tracking Asian art as it unfolds – was launched in 2000. It is this convergence of the market and noncommercial initiatives, coupled with local government interest in developing Hong Kong as a cultural centre, that has seeded the evolution of a real art 'ecology' in Hong Kong, says Melissa Chiu, museum director and curator at the Asia Society in New York. As this development deepens, so the appearance of new institutions renders it tangible.

The CPS revitalisation project taps powerfully into the public imagination, as a consequence both of the building's punitive past and of its projected artistic future. The site of a former law-enforcement headquarters, prison and dormitories built by the British in 1864, the CPS is one of the few visible reminders of Hong Kong's colonial legacy – a large gated compound at the east end of busy Hollywood Road in the Central district, and the site of layered memories. The plans for its refurbishment as a multivenue contemporary kunsthalle with art galleries, public space and a theatre have been jointly proposed by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and local government; the incorporation of white-cube-style additions by Herzog & de Meuron alongside the historic architecture makes the space approximately equal to London's Hayward Gallery. The Jockey Club, for which 'heritage' is a buzzword, will foot the initial bill of HK\$1.8 billion (\$232 million); once up and running, however (the CPS is scheduled to open in 2014), the nonprofit institution is expected to sustain itself through a combination of rent-paying ventures and outside support, though Elliott is frank about the issue of

fundraising where an operator for the site has not yet been found. The relationship between the Jockey Club and contemporary art is an interesting one, too, where the club occupies an inherently political position within Hong Kong's close-knit system, and art carries political implications within a transforming society. A fine balance must be struck and bureaucratic hurdles jumped before Elliott's vision for an institution that can 'break the ice' in Hong Kong can materialise.



Spring Workshop is the most recent addition to the nonprofit sphere in Hong Kong and, without local authorities or clubs as stakeholders, has fewer people to answer to. The personal project of Mimi Brown, an American composer who relocated in 2005, Spring Workshop is "a love letter to Hong Kong, her people, artists and organisations, her buildings, cultural textures... history and future". The organisation is scheduled to open officially in autumn 2012 (a soft opening with screenings of videoworks by Yang Fudong has

already taken place), and will be owned and run by a board of advisers. Spring Workshop will have 1,500 sq m of interior exhibition space and facilities on the third floor of the Remex Centre, which lies in the Wong Chuk Hang industrial neighbourhood to the east of the city centre (the architect William Lim has a studio nearby, and a new MTR station is being built opposite). The expansive premises are currently under construction, the functions of this former factory making way for artistic activity; its physical conception comes in direct response to the existing environment in Hong Kong,

where a lack of space for artists has been a major problem. Spring Workshop will stage a cross-disciplinary programme of artist residencies, exhibitions, film, music and talks designed at once to support local creativity and integrate it with artistic activity abroad. Like Para/Site, Spring Workshop is encouraged by the promise of grand arts projects at the CPS and in West Kowloon, but moves forward also with a common awareness of the need

to cooperate strategically with other nonprofits in this deepening 'ecology', where it is in the interests of the artistic community to stick together.

Early February this year saw the opening of a new Asia Society building in Hong Kong, thus marking the arrival of

the first American satellite museum in the region (Hong Kong is the society's first centre outside New York, where it was established in 1990; the new building elevates it to museum status). The centre is now housed in a former explosives magazine, which has been restored and transformed with the help of \$49.5m from the Jockey Club, whose name almost dwarfs that of the Asia Society itself on the entrance placard ("They could have shrunk the font a few points," remarks one member of staff). Centrally located, the building's at once historic and contemporary three-storey structure, with an elevated walkway through the tree canopy, is reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater design, and a far cry from the vertical towers around it. The society recently altered its mission statement to reflect a more mutual relationship with Asia – a significant step beyond its original didactic purpose in the US. Melissa Chiu is quoted as saying that the Asia Society is 'preparing Americans for a shared future', and in conversation with *ArtReview*, she explains how the establishment of the Hong Kong branch represents one of the few private-public nonprofit ventures in Hong Kong and is therefore an unusual model for the region, with a government-granted site and private funding run out of New York, as well as support garnered for individual activities from relevant partners. The society hopes to add a pan-Asian view to Hong Kong's institutional landscape, and a contemporary art collection started six years ago with a strategic focus on video and photography reflects what are perceived to be the region's strong points in contemporary artistic practice.

But there can be no doubt that the most ambitious cultural project ever to hit Hong Kong – indeed the world – is the West Kowloon Cultural District. In the pipeline already for 13 years, this gargantuan development on a waterfront site in Yau Ma Tei was triggered by a tourist survey in 1996 that concluded the region lacked cultural infrastructure. Now, and after some hitches relating to red tape, funding and Norman Foster's masterplan for the site, the project is moving forward with the goal of making Hong Kong an international cultural player; local government will fund the enterprise to the tune of billions of Hong Kong dollars. A 37,500 sq m portion of the district will be devoted to M+, which would top MoMA and Tate Modern in terms of floorspace. Lars Nittve, erstwhile head of Tate Modern, is leading the museum project, which he says has a very strong public-service ethos, with the need to attract tourists coming second to the museum's ties to Hong Kong and its residents. For him, at issue is public trust in Hong Kong relative to its institutions, which thus far

have proved wanting. Like David Elliott, Nittve emphasises the Hong Kong public's receptiveness to a world-class cultural institution. In the words of M+'s Tobias Berger, "Hong Kong has this unique time and possibility at the moment to transform this situation... We are building an independent hub of communication."

Yet for all the ribbons cut and plans and construction work under way in Hong Kong's art scene now, there is a common thread linking institutions at all levels: how to realise and activate a Hong Kong perspective, and decide how to move forward with this in the context of contemporary art and culture amid changing local and international contexts. The question itself is difficult to elucidate, and for the most part it is foreigners – not Hong Kongers – who are leading the current search for answers. "Asia is becoming more and more important – what do we make of it?" asks Berger. "And this is just the beginning... How do we keep this thing true and how do we develop criteria to judge if it's working?" Nittve is conscious of the comparative youth of the concept of a museum in Hong Kong – a very particular, localised context in itself – compared with Western artistic centres: "We need to look at how we should interpret it in a way that will fit artists here, audience habits, expectations... There are layers in Hong Kong." In his own words, David Elliott was called in to check that both the hardware and the software for CPS were up to scratch, also remarking wryly that "institutions always have baggage, and when you create something, it's how to have the right baggage... On one hand we're doing something totally new, and on the other helping what is already here to develop." On this basis, Mimi Brown hopes Spring Workshop "will foster creative freedom and creative friction, while on the more practical level providing tea and chairs... to discuss and savour the process". Ultimately, Melissa Chiu asks, "What's the next step for Hong Kong after these buildings are built? How do we think about a true cultural city?" It is the city's new institutions that bear a responsibility when it comes to creating Hong Kong's identity, and while the eyes of the artworld are on these timely and intriguing changes in the region, the hope is that this repair job will be a success. ❦

