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Leading Roles

Text / Louise Wong

Recent years have seen an unprecedented amount of activity in Hong Kong's arts scene. With art events peppering the calendar and the opening of ever more art spaces both commercial and independent, there is a sense of excitement around the city's vibrant art offerings. In keeping with global trends, more women are taking on roles as curators and administrators. Yet, as Hong Kong develops into a cultural capital, the question of gender prevails.

Pauline J Yao, lead curator for visual art for the upcoming M+ museum of visual culture, says awareness of gender imbalance is the responsibility of both men and women, and is more than a numbers game. She points to an inherent bias towards looking to men as authority figures, a sentiment that filters down into how media treats them, perpetuating a system that subtly keeps women out of the spotlight.

'Arts organisations, namely arts-related museums, are notoriously heavily populated with female staff, and this is often cited as a measure of equality,' she says. 'However, not only do we find that the higher positions are occupied by men but when, and if, similar positions are occupied by women, they go relatively unnoticed.'

There's no doubt that from an artistic production point of view, the field is profoundly male-dominated. While there are many female

Hong Kong artists, male artists still enjoy more prominent profiles. Yao, who sits as a member of various art juries, says female artists are clearly in the minority, and hopes that more people in her position take seriously the issues around the gender divide. 'It's not about making "women topics" but more about inviting practitioners and artists,' she says. 'We're always aware that programmes we do must be well-balanced gender-wise and if we don't try, then it would be all male artists, all of the time.'

Chantal Wong oversees strategy and special projects at Asia Art Archive. Established in 2000, it has become an important resource for learning and teaching contemporary art aimed at rethinking the role of art in society, including the contribution of female artists.

'With a lot of our work, we're realising how dominated by men art history is,' she says. 'We really feel there's a mission to do what we can to right this history. We put a lot of research into indexing women artists in order to create bibliographies and find their materials.'

Independently, Wong has co-curated exhibitions such as *Ten Million Rooms of Yearning: Sex in Hong Kong with Para Site*, and co-founded the artist-run space *Things that can happen*. Created in collaboration with conceptual artist Lee Kit, the space is intended to respond to the

Clockwise from top left: Dr Yeewan Koon, Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong. Image by Tai Lam / Chantal Wong oversees strategy and special projects at Asia Art Archive. Image courtesy of *Things that can happen* / Pauline J Yao, lead curator for visual art at the upcoming M+ museum. Image courtesy of West Kowloon Cultural District



political, economic and social environments of Hong Kong: 'I'm acutely aware of it when there's an imbalance,' says Wong. 'I'm also more sensitive to LGBT perspectives because they bring a certain empathy for people who don't have full agency in the world.'

Christina Li is the director of independent art space Spring Workshop, founded by Mimi Brown. Li compares her tenure with her time working in Amsterdam, where there is a more diverse range of platforms that are small to mid-sized, emerging or artist-run. Likewise, the gender divide is less prominent there than in Hong Kong. 'If you look at how many female artists we talk about compared to male artists, it's quite shocking,' she notes.

While gender imbalance is not always blatant and obvious, making it a challenge to tackle, it is clearly an issue that women in Hong Kong's leading art roles are prepared to keep at the forefront of their work.

Li cites collaboration as a key area where change can be made. 'Women tend to collaborate with each other because they find other ways of working, they create platforms,' she says. 'I have a lot of professional and personal relationships with peers that become the impetus for collaborative projects or ongoing discussions. Maybe that's a sensibility or it's inherent to women in the arts, or maybe it's a response.'

Old Bailey Galleries on the site of Hong Kong's former Central Police Station will open soon,

and the non-profit art centre is preparing two concurrent solo exhibitions of female artists, one well-established and the other up-and-coming. Assistant curator Xue Tan hopes the work will be evaluated by the quality and capacity of individuals, beyond their gender. 'Female representation is important in all industries, not only in the art world,' she says. 'Art institutions in general should support and exhibit works that reflect our time and inspire the viewers.'

At the University of Hong Kong's Department of Fine Art, where Dr Yeewan Koon is an associate professor, young women make up the majority of her classes. As the first Cantonese-speaking full-time art historian the department hired, in 2005, Koon is well aware of the need for greater diversity. 'There are plenty of women in the arts and in some places, entire teams,' she says. 'But the question is: has that had an impact on the arts? Are more women artists being shown in exhibitions? Are there new ways in thinking about women in the arts beyond the question of visibility?'

'In the larger bureaucratic world of academia, there is still very much a system that favours men, or rather, it's men who seem to rise to the top of the senior team,' she says. 'Given that the arts is one of the areas with so many women, are we not in a better position to do something about these systems and the bureaucracy that exists outside the art world too? Are we not in a position to be pioneers about rethinking structural models? We are, after all, creative thinkers.'



Xue Tan, assistant curator at Old Bailey Galleries.
Image by Luke Casey



Christina Li, director of independent art space Spring Workshop. Image by Ching Ho Yin