

## WHY LOCAL ARTISTS SHOULD NOT FEAR NEW FOREIGN INFLUX



Local fair Art HK became internationalised as Art Basel Hong Kong last year



### CARL GOUW

Entrepreneur, designer and cultural writer Carl Gouw is managing director of family investment firm Goldig and vice-president of the Hong Kong chapter of the Entrepreneurs' Organisation. His property and design portfolio comprises the ACTS Group and FC Residence Group. A fervent supporter of local arts and culture, he is currently assisting the University of Hong Kong on an art project.

Since our handover to China in 1997 and the subsequent major economic setbacks – the Asian financial crisis, Sars, the 2008 financial tsunami – calls from different segments of society for less reliance on the financial sector have grown louder and louder. What we need, they cry, is for diversification into creative and design-related industries. Substantial government initiatives, notably the West Kowloon Cultural District and the preservation of heritage buildings, have aroused public interest and in turn generated even more noise.

The general complaint from the young generation and the creative industries is that the government, established businesses and even the public at large are generally only concerned about constructing physical facilities and buildings but neglect the substance, purpose and culture behind our concrete jungle as well as the metaphysical side of humanity. There is also a call to have a blueprint and vision for art and culture.

In the past few years, there has been a growing internationalisation of Hong Kong. Now we are seeing works by renowned architects and designers like Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Thomas Heatherwick and Robert Stern being built, Gagosian and White Cube galleries opening, the Art HK fair being 'replaced' by Art Basel, and worldwide academics coming to debate at Intelligence Squared. Many, including myself, are pleased with the developments as we have long waited for a wider advocacy and promotion of arts and creativity in business.

Others like local art dealers and artists, who perhaps wish to stay in their 'comfort zone' and the nostalgia of local Hong Kong culture, argue that such international influences, driven also by 'hot money', are diluting their original artistic value. Some even argue that this leads to segmentation and a division between exclusive 'high-brow' art and local art.

### STAGNANT PAST

It is interesting to note that in architecture, for example, since the completion of HSBC headquarters and the Bank of China building in the late 1980s and until very recently there have been no important projects by overseas designers. During that period, we endured the construction of some very stagnant architecture. Likewise since the opening of Johnson Chang's Hanart TZ gallery 30 years ago, and our

exposure to Chinese contemporary art through Hanart and the China Club, we have seen little significant growth in the local art market.

The recent availability of works by international artists and designers has actually created healthy competition, resulting an improving art scene. As Henrietta Tsui, owner of local gallery Ora-Ora, comments: "The opening of international galleries helps to create a critical mass and collecting climate for the local art market, generating more opportunities for local artists for their works to be exposed.

As the pie becomes bigger, local artists should also respect the art market's eco system."

Just like major banks, some architectural firms have chosen Hong Kong as the base for their regional or global operations. This is also due Hong Kong's positive business and political environment, and hence we should remain competitive if we are to attract both creative and non-creative industries to flourish.

### EMBRACE CHANGE

As those who have long waited for Hong Kong to be a striving hub of the arts and creativity make efforts to bridge our city with the rest of the world, local artists or cultural workers should not be worried that their influence is being diluted or diminished. Hong Kong has always been a city of change and growth, whether economically or politically, culturally or socially.

Hong Kong artists, designers and creative workers should be excited that our city and works – such as Lee Kit's recent showing at the Venice Biennale – are being recognised globally. Local works, which embed the values or expressions that we wish to communicate, should therefore be impacted by such changes in our artistic market and creative landscape, even when this means influences and forces from overseas. As Alan Lo, chairman of the Hong Kong Ambassadors of Design, puts it: "Hong Kong artists should no longer look inwards and should have a paradigm shift in terms of wanting to promote themselves and introduce their works to the whole world."

Hong Kong has always been competitive and efficient because our people have an adaptive and flexible mindset. If we are to help Hong Kong become an art and creative hub, all participants need a completely burden-free and liberated mind to make bold decisions and embrace diversity. 15

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