The Challenges of Professional Visual Artist in Hong Kong

The art industry is tough for the artists as they have to go through expensive training, unsure market conditions, low income and high risk (Menger, 1999). Typically this is a winner takes it all market (Adler, 2006). The article outlines the challenges of the professional artist in Hong Kong that is not discussed in other literature. The author's field research in Hong Kong since 2011 is linked to analyses of Hong Kong's art market and in particular the unique challenges faced by the artists. Comprehensive visits and interviews both formal and informal were carried out to artists, art educators, auctioneers, dealers, curators, writers and historians, collectors, museums, art consultants, art insurance agents and logistics operations. Hong Kong has many talented artists and one of the strongest visual culture traditions in South East Asia. The rapid growth and decline of private-sector art dealing in Hong Kong pose extra difficulties to the artists. Government agencies and educational institutions need to improve assistance to develop new curricula for artists' "artrepreneurship". Existing programs do not provide artists with professional practice information and skills to establish viable careers in Hong Kong in the 21st century or to compete in an increasingly globalized art market. Access to new technologies is available but the conceptual and pedagogic basis for its use in new media and art forms is not. The Art World can be defined to include not only artists, but gallery directors and dealers, curators and museum professionals, art writers and publishers, art collectors and audiences. At present, the art world in Hong Kong which could contribute to the development of distribution and consumption of the visual arts, lacks both professional skills and motivation.

A distinction can be made between the definition of an artist and the characteristics of professionalism in individual art forms. The definition of an artist that is most widely accepted was put forward by UNESCO in 1980. It accepts the artists' self-definition, which is their commitment to artistic creativity (Jeffri 1998). However, the art world and market are a dual system and there are competing definitions of the professional artist. As artists develop new career structures, the concept of professional is best defined by peer group recognition, in which 'The context, manner and location of the exhibiting of the work defines the professionalism of the artist, because the title 'professional' is one which is bestowed by peers in the group to which the artist aspires' (Jeffri et al1991). In contrast, a definition of the artist who sells his or her work in the dealer's market is based on the fact that they work full time at their art and make their living from selling it, but this definition admits no judgment about peer group recognition or the aesthetic value of the work.

As there is no common national or international framework for art business development, there is a need for a strategic framework to guide key stakeholders to develop "artrepreneurship". This empirical study explored the status of "artrepreneurship" practices in Hong Kong. Artists working in a developed economy such as Hong Kong's, are not able to work full time at their primary creative activity. Their situation is not dissimilar to that of artists in other developed countries such as Australia and the United States in which only 11% of artists earn their income solely from their artwork (Jeffri and Throsby 1994). However, with insufficient transaction even the prices paid to Hong Kong artists for their work are reasonable compared to the prices brought by artworks in developed economies, so that artists in Hong Kong experience a far greater pressure in developing their work. David Throsby argues that artists' career structure, reputation and income are based on the development of their 'human capital'. That is, the proportion of time devoted to art work, the length of time in arts training, and the amount of experience the artist has as a practicing professional (Throsby 1986; Throsby and Thompson 1995). Throsby has also argued that his

data on Australian artists shows that arts income rises approximately in step with the proportion of time devoted to the arts. The problem with Throsby's argument is that it does not take account of the function of the market. There are high prices for only a select number of contemporary artists in order to insure their investment potential, while the prices of most artists are low, and as a result so is their income. In economic terms, the price set at the fall of the hammer, or by the dealer, is the objective determinant of value (Ashenfelter, Graddy and Stevens 2002).

Despite the wide spread culture of arts education, there is a disconnection between the production and consumption of arts. Many argue that arts and culture have always taken a backseat in policy conversations in Hong Kong, during both British and Chinese rule, and it was never in the forefront of education and other policies, as if the arts and culture were a favorite side dish that no one wishes to order as an entrée. This reflects that arts and culture are on the agenda, just not in one unified, strategic agenda. The current cross-agency model contributes to the discussion of the creation of a cultural bureau, as well as the slow realization of the West Kowloon Cultural District project, which has been ongoing for over two decades. Several organizations play key roles in the arts and culture industries in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council is a key player in arts policies, advocacy, programming and funding allocation since its establishment in 1995 (HKADC 2010). Another key player, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, established in 1977, is the largest local independent arts programming institution (Clarke 2002). It strives to be the creative hubs for arts and community in Hong Kong, and is a “self-funding organization whose mission is to promote contemporary arts and culture within Hong Kong and beyond” (HKAC 2012). Among other arts organizations, Asia Art Archive (AAA 2012), established in 2000, and the Hong Kong Art Fair (ArtHK 2012, now Art Basel 2015), founded in 2007, are two of the key players as well.

Cities often compete with one another for resources, talents, in tourism, trade, and in other fields. Hong Kong’s main competitors are also cities that are compared with Hong Kong frequently; these include Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Beijing. These cities have all grew their arts and culture industries and in a way, Hong Kong has been lagging in this race.

Art worlds consist of all those people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world and perhaps others as well define as art.’ (Becker:1982:34). The art world is a series of interconnecting relationships between an artistic tradition and its educators and practitioners, artists, dealers and curators, writers and historians, collectors and museums.

The growth in the number of private art dealer galleries provides one of the conditions for a national market. Dealers integrate the artist into the economy by transforming aesthetic value into economic value, thus making it possible for artists to live by their art work (Moulin 1987:37–65). In art market centres in developed countries, dealer galleries represent a complex typology based on the career stage of artists whom they represent, the characteristics of their collectors and their level of capital investment. Another way to identify galleries was proposed by Marcia Bystryn (1978), who identified a two-rung system in which artists’ progress from a first-rung gallery after their work and reputation develops, to a second-rung gallery. The second type of dealer has a high level of capital investment, and a well-established reputation with collectors and museums that enables them to establish artists’ prices and artistic reputations as more stable commodities.

Among dealers there are also differences between those who exhibit and sell established or historical art and those who sell contemporary art. As the supply of contemporary art has no limit, dealers in contemporary art must be entrepreneurs willing to take risks and be clear about their judgment and the style of work they will exhibit (Moulin 1987:51). Both types of dealers must have skills in exhibition programming and display. The dealers exhibit a select group of artists for whom they cultivate collectors or niche markets. In order to establish the aesthetic values of an artist's works, certain professional criteria must be established through solo exhibitions that demonstrate the scope of the artist's current work, their consistency of style and their ability to produce enough work to ensure their viability for collection and investment over time. The basis for the artist–dealer relationship is contract, consignment and intellectual property law that ensures both parties accept their contractual obligations to their mutual benefit. The introduction of arts laws or related civil law is one of the most important public policy developments necessary to support a national art market. Another issue that has become more important as the reproduction of artworks in catalogues and art publications increases, is copyright. For example, in Australia, the passing of Commonwealth Government legislation to establish artists' copyright, and the establishment of the collection agency, copy, was important because of the recognition it gave to artists' rights, as much as for the income artists derived.

At present, the art world in Hong Kong lacks both professional skills and finance. Commercial galleries range from a predominance of picture shops for tourists, to a handful of dealers with professional skills in exhibiting, and arranging contracts or international subsidiary dealerships or exhibitions. The strongest art market centres in Asia are in Beijing and Shanghai, and dealers from those markets are signing up Mainland artists on contracts that require them to deliver their full output for one year. Artists making contracts with multi-national dealerships are unaware of market prices in other countries and of the legal codes in developed countries. Hong Kong artists are vulnerable to unstable market situation and high cost of living.

In most countries there is a national market for art consisting of local dealers and auction houses. Prices in the national market are often high because collectors feel confident about values in their local tradition. Since the 1950s, art worlds and markets in many countries have been transformed. An important part of the process of change was the integration of national markets into a global system through sales conducted by the multi-national auction houses. In Hong Kong there is no local auction house establishing prices, and so far there has not been sufficient demand to hold international sales of local Hong Kong art. The art market in Hong Kong is at the stage in which it is essentially a dealers' market, but it is a dealers' market that is surrounded by, or historically and socially linked to, more developed and aggressively competitive multi-national dealers. As the level of capital investment in Hong Kong art grows more ethical and integrated, market processes must evolve for Hong Kong artists to develop sustainable professional careers in art and in art-related occupations, such as writing, curating, professional museum work, teaching and lecturing.

'Aesthetic principles, arguments and judgements are some of the conventions through which members of an art world act together to confer value.' (Becker:1982: 131). The network of relationships between museum directors, a select group of dealers, critics and curators, who influence collectors and confer aesthetic values on historical periods and emerging styles, that

supports artists in New York, does not yet exist in Hong Kong. The influence of powerful taste-makers is always important in determining the acquisitions and exhibitions role of national art museums, and in
Hong Kong this is the Hong Kong Art Museum. However, the positioning of national institutions in relation to the developing market can be seen clearly in the expansion and changes at the M+ National Art Museum. Even though museum directors have been buying contemporary art, lack of funds and exhibition space, international financial and professional resources will effect changes.

As change is not happening in national art museums, a network of new spaces for exhibiting is developing. The artists who pursue new aesthetic modes such as conceptual and performance art, video installation and experimental film have a more multi-faceted role than the career structure determined by the national art museums and the dealers' market. These organizations allow more experimental art and also explore the intermediary functions of dealers' galleries, state controlled art museums and magazines. Because of the slowness of national art museums to create regular exhibitions of new local work, other institutions, such as university galleries, may step in to fill what they perceive as a gap. However, as artists in other countries have found, the alternative gallery sector provides a historically important diversification in art practice but is unable to effect long-term change in the directions that the market is taking. For example, Canadian artists came to this conclusion by the end of the 1970s: Parallel galleries exposed the importance of experimental art but because of their marginal status they haven't been able to validate such work to the level that the more durable institutions can…all we are able to do now is to keep the traditional large institutions going and they can hardly be said to be even absorbing new roles (Robertson 1980). Professional and inclusive national art museums play the key role in validating both historical and contemporary art work in a developing market.

Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach as there was no previous research on the artists' "artrepreneurship" practices in Hong Kong and a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to penetrate into the perspectives of the marginalized voices. While limited by small, non-representative samples, the analysis of the 20 interviews enabled the research objectives to be accomplished and provided insights for further research and empirical application.

Results and Implications

The Hirst's success story can provide good lessons for today's management world. Managers should constantly watch out the blind spots in their industries and should not be blind by "inattentional blindness". The successful contemporary artist can operate like an entrepreneur running a global business. To do that, they must constantly challenge the current practices and assumptions in their field. Current practices and assumptions can be the filters which can be beneficial or bad for the managers to become innovative in their field.

Conclusion

The future of the professional artist in Hong Kong is at stake. Hong Kong has many talented artists and one of the strongest visual culture traditions in Southeast Asia. The faculties of art and design need not only the financial resources to exhibition venues, but are looking for assistance to develop new curricula for both artists and designers. The existing programs do not provide artists with professional practice information and the skills on "artrepreneurship" to establish viable careers in their own country in the 21st century, or to compete in an

increasingly globalized art market. Regulation of artist– dealer relationships, the development of public auction houses and the development of national art museums as professional organizations could provide the infrastructure for a successful national art world and market.

Keywords: artists, careers, dealers, art market, Hong Kong

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