

# COMMENTARY

## Made in Basel? A commentary on the contemporary art world in Asia

Matthew J. Waters  
*Royal Holloway University of London, London, UK*

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to assess the recent emergence of contemporary art in Asia from a macro, sociocultural perspective.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This commentary is based on secondary research and recent visits to contemporary art centres in major cities across Asia.

**Findings** – The author argues that contemporary art in Asia emerges by extension of the Western contemporary art world and suggests that more must be done if Asia is to create a contemporary art world that is both internationally recognised and distinct from its Western precedent.

**Originality/value** – This commentary debunks the hyperbole surrounding contemporary art in Asia as a regional phenomenon and provides a critical examination of the global (power) dynamics at play.

**Keywords** Art fairs, Art world, Biennials, Biennialization, Contemporary art, Mega-galleries

In speaking of a contemporary art world in Asia, we should first be geographically more specific and say that such a world, if we are to think of it in terms of place, clusters heavily in the global centres of China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. If thinking of the contemporary art world in Asia instead as a network of stakeholders analogous to Becker (1982), we can identify its inclusion of artists, curators, dealers and other expert individuals as well as museums, galleries and other visual arts organisations and institutions, including art schools, all professionally committed to art and its value in contemporary culture and society. The activities of these stakeholders include the production, curation, dissemination, education, management, administration, marketing, circulation and exchange of art today.

But a key point should be that the contemporary art world in Asia made visible internationally exists as an interconnected and fairly recent expansion of a globalised art world still dominated and controlled by the “gatekeepers” of contemporary art in Europe and North America (Harris, 2013). Asia’s prominence on the premier stage of contemporary art is determined by its proximity to these external stakeholders. They include the global art market where wealthy collectors flock to name galleries and auction houses such as Christie’s, Phillips and Sotheby’s to shop for the biggest name artist brands (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015; Schroeder, 2005); the international collections of major museum brands such as the Guggenheim, MoMA and Tate (Caldwell, 2000; Phillips and O’Reilly, 2007); the art fair and biennial circuits which, even in their corrective attempts, present Western art as the dominant paradigm (Filipovic *et al.*, 2010; Morgner, 2014); art/curatorial education which, like university education in general, is dominated by American and European schools (Markopoulos, 2016; O’Neill and Wilson, 2010); and book and magazine publishing which also centres in the West. Legitimacy and worldwide recognition are gained by Asia locking into these existing subfields of power and capital and agreeing to play the game according to its existing rules (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). To offer an initial example, it was not the Shanghai Art Fair founded in the late 1990s that produced headlines of “The art world’s pivot to Asia”, but the much more recent arrival of the Swiss art fair, Art Basel launched in Hong Kong in 2013 (Forbes, 2017).



The gallery system plays a key role in the art world because galleries and art fairs today are not merely sales rooms for the rich but go-to destinations for local art audiences in an era of rampant art privatisation (Wu, 2003). Their exhibition and events programmes play a key role in shaping tastes and value judgements, consecrating certain art practices over others when deciding which artists they represent. In Hong Kong, it has been the arrival of blue-chip US/UK galleries such as Gagosian in 2011 and White Cube in 2012 that have made the former British colony Asia's epicentre for contemporary art. This year sees the opening of three more "mega-galleries" in the city-state, all housed in H Queen's, the new skyscraper "trophy building" for art, dining and lifestyle (Gerlis, 2018). They include the German global powerhouse, David Zwirner; Swiss internationalists, Hauser & Wirth (with additional offices in Beijing and Shanghai); and the American, Pace Gallery (a second Hong Kong space, complementing two other outposts in Beijing and Seoul).

This leads us to the key question: to what extent are these mega-galleries contributing to and enriching the local art scene or merely providing outposts of their Western headquarters in the Far East? Here, the right noises are made in press releases. Leng Lin, President of Pace Beijing and Pace Hong Kong, states: "We hope to create more connection between the contemporary art scene in Asia and the West" (Boucher, 2017). But the reality is that these galleries only represent a small handful of Asian artists each. Among the aforementioned galleries, Asian artists currently represent less than 10 per cent of their rosters (counted at the time of writing). Why? This is because capital in *all* its forms is required at the apex of the global art world. Market value is one thing (e.g. there is a high price on contemporary Chinese calligraphy and abstract ink painting), but critical acclaim and international prestige is another, and it is here that you would be hard pressed to come up with an extensive list of living Asian artists (Zeng Fanzhi, Yayoi Kusama, Takashi Murakami, Ai Weiwei and Zhang Xiaogang spring to mind ...). And so, these mega-galleries arrive in Asia with their biggest brands (Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons *et al.*), and by doing so they present Western contemporary art as the gold standard, softening the blow by championing Asia as a new thriving hub for art (oh, because we turned up!).

But to argue that all of this is cultural imperialism forced upon Asia by an omnipotent Western art world would be misleading. This is also a relationship courted and duly received by those in Asia who recognise the cultural capital in contemporary art. Much like in the closely aligned luxury sector where we see Asia's aspiring, affluent middle classes engaging in symbolic consumption, contemporary art offers much for this growing segment of consumers, both as collectors and as leisure activity. Added to this are cultural policies and initiatives throughout Asia actively pursuing the arts for national economic gain. This is particularly true of China whose growing mixed economy adopts parts of capitalism compatible with its strengthening communist rule. As the superpower matures to include soft power also, contemporary art (provided it does not address politics) offers an attractive visage, wallpapering the cracks of regional income inequality, state surveillance and gross human rights abuses. In the words of filmmaker artist, Hito Steyerl (2010): "Contemporary art is a brand name without a brand, ready to be slapped onto almost anything, a quick face-lift touting the new creative imperative for places in need of an extreme makeover".

Biennial exhibitions are a key way in which Asia puts itself on the art map (Mersmann, 2013; Wei, 2013; Wu, 2009). Taking place every other year, these large-scale surveys of "glocal" contemporary art attract worldwide interest, particularly at Asia's three most established biennials: the Taipei Biennial (1992); the Gwangju Biennale (1995); and the Shanghai Biennale (1996), which describes itself as a "gateway to the West" ([www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/shanghai-biennale](http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/shanghai-biennale)). Thematically, these exhibitions often sidestep the local altogether in favour of cosmopolitan platitudes ("Inhabiting the World", Busan, 2014; "Beyond Borders", Gwangju, 1995; "If the World Changed", Singapore, 2013; "The Sky is the Limit", Taipei, 2000). Despite their inclusion of

local artists and varying degrees of community engagement, these exhibitions usually involve Western curators to as Wu (2007, p. 379) argues, “provide the aura, the imprimatur and the legitimately sanctioned access to the international biennial circuits that only their Western credentials can guarantee”. Thus, Asian biennials have been curated by prominent names such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Okwui Enwezor, Massimiliano Gioni, Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind. This risks both the underrepresentation of Asian artists if the Western curator has not thoroughly researched current practices in the host country, as well as the lazy importation of exhibition themes from the kunsthallen of Europe, including neo-critical buzzwords such as: “reactivation” (Shanghai, 2012) and “multitude” (Busan Biennale, 2016). Wu (2009, p. 107) describes her candid interview with Barbara Vanderlinden, Curator of the Taipei Biennial, 2004:

I kicked off by asking her to explain the curatorial policy regarding the number – five – of native Taiwanese artists chosen to appear. To this she replied by curtly throwing a question of her own back at me: “Do you know how many Taiwanese artists were represented in the Shanghai Biennial?” Meaning, of course, that five local representatives seemed to her quite adequate, thank you very much, and people would certainly be wrong to expect more.

So in short, the growth of contemporary art in Asia involves both a “push” strategy from the West and a “pull” strategy from the East, making it good business for everyone in a global economy. But while finance may be the winner, art becomes the loser. Asia is undoubtedly rich in its own art histories and sensibilities, grounded in its own philosophies and politics, and these need to be better heard. Chinese Gallerist, Pearl Lam claims: “All these galleries that are opening throughout Asia are not focusing on the cities in which they exist; they’re still looking at the Western hemisphere” (Dafoe, 2017). Lam’s galleries provide a strategic model by representing a roster of predominately Asian artists like other local galleries, but interspersed with notable American and British artists, Jenny Holzer and Yinka Shonibare. This neatly reverses the strategy of Western galleries and helps attract Western interest to the gallery, in the process showcasing Asian artists to the uninitiated. It also helps the gallery secure more favourable locations at international art fairs where there is a selection process and money is not enough to choose your booth.

Important organisations such as Asia Art Archive (AAA) and China Art Foundation are also leading the charge, improving the local and global dissemination of contemporary art from the region. AAA has developed a vast, scholarly collection of books, catalogues and rare documentation about Asian contemporary art since opening in 2000. The archive, alongside research projects, residencies, talks, workshops, conferences and outreach programming, provide a hub for knowledge and education both locally and beyond (strategically, AAA now have a New York outpost). More still could be done outside of Asia, for example, White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney houses a significant private collection of Chinese contemporary art and provides an excellent way for Western audiences to familiarise themselves with recent art from Asia. This complements the emergence of new museums for contemporary art in Asia, both state and privately owned, such as M+ set to open in Hong Kong in 2019 which will have a strong focus on visual culture from Asia and generate tourism with the building having been designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the Architects behind the recent expansion of Tate Modern. Lam (Dafoe, 2017) stresses that more of these will be needed in order for Asia to attract audiences and through collections develop its own versions of art history, theory and criticism.

In addition is the need for more to be done at a grassroots level. This includes the further provision of cutting-edge art/curatorial education in Asia which would reduce the tendency among young artists and curators to study (and stay) abroad. Historically, art schools that

offer rigorous learning environments such as CalArts and Goldsmiths can mobilise creative and intellectually engaged practices and help spawn artist-run/not-for-profit spaces where artists can collectivise and take risks in less market-led environments. Coordinated strategies of this kind, in combination with those above, will help Asia to create an art world of difference, global in reach but foregrounded in its own locale. That would surely seem a much better alternative than Basel in Beijing.

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**Corresponding author**

Matthew J. Waters can be contacted at: [matthew.waters.2016@live.rhul.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.waters.2016@live.rhul.ac.uk)