



Arts and Politics New Waves in Asia

 January 18th, 2023

 Vivienne Chow, Liang-Pin Tsao

During the pandemic, the high-end art market has flourished and its East Asian market was no exception. Its art scene continues its growth with major auction houses competing their expansions, and new museums and galleries opening. Yet China's censorship on art has also escalated, not only within the country and its neighboring countries, but even in Europe. What are the latest developments in the East Asian art market, and what are some of the political implications? We were joined by experts Vivienne Chow from London and Liang-Pin Tsao from Taipei in the fifth session of Asia Talks.

The shift in the geopolitical circumstances and the covid restrictions have changed the region's dynamics - people are now looking for investment opportunities outside of Hong Kong and China. China's zero COVID policy has been impacting the international art world's confidence in the country's art market. Vivienne Chow, the London correspondent for Artnet News, shared her insights of the present day art market from the economic perspective, how it affects the local markets and how the artists respond to it. Hong Kong has traditionally been the main art market due to the major auctions taking place there.

Art fairs ART021 and West Bund's abrupt closure were particularly impactful. What played a critical role in China's shift from its zero COVID policy was the "white paper" protests. It was similar to the series of protests that erupted in Hong Kong back in 2019. Chow also notes that China's censorship is getting worse - what is okay and what is not in China's standards is getting increasingly unpredictable. An abstract painting *Six Men* (2008) by the Chinese artist Li Songsong reportedly based on a World War II context has been taken down in an exhibition in Beijing, despite the artwork having been previously showcased in China without objection.

The big question is whether Hong Kong is still a viable market. Chow says that it is naive to think that art can survive without the market. Because of having been a strong market for decades, artists in Hong Kong and their sales are still strong. Auctions and fairs are still taking place and the market is still powerful. On the other hand, its political landscape has changed after the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. Censorship is strict and this is something very new for Hong Kong, having enjoyed the freedom of expression for a long time. Artists are experiencing having to self-censor or to be more

mindful about what they can and cannot say. The art is becoming more coded - the audience has to know the background in order to understand what the artwork is trying to say.

South Korea has suddenly become a huge force and has come into the spotlight in recent years. The country is ambitious in cultivating their presence in the world through their soft power. There is a discussion of whether Seoul will replace Hong Kong - but Chow suggests that no one is going to replace anyone - there are simply going to be more markets, each serving different purposes. Seoul is a big local market with Korean buyers, whereas Hong Kong caters to international buyers. Japan is another market people are increasingly looking at. They seem to be more reserved from the outside and do not really venture out to a global presence. As the third biggest economy in the world, their art market is comparatively very small - and therefore it has a potential to grow. Singapore is also often compared to Hong Kong as a potential replacement to Hong Kong given their recent rise. There's an influx of wealth from China, but it is still unclear whether that is going to translate into sales. As for Taiwan, it requires more time to see how it develops. People are exploring the region as a new frontier, if it is going to be a viable market or not.

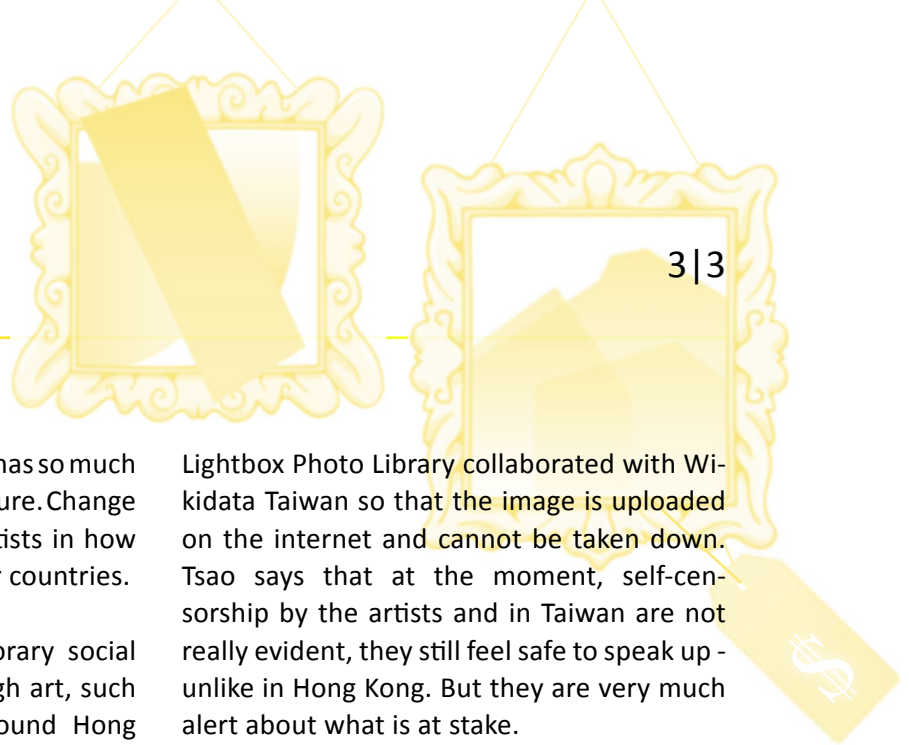
Vivienne Chow touched briefly the flourishing and overwhelmingly creative art scene in Thailand as well as Indonesia, which cater both more or less to neighboring countries. The potential there is highly appreciated by specialists from Malaysia and the Philippines. Currently being under no political influence

these nations enjoy great freedom within all the respective sections of arts.

Liang-Pin Tsao, artist and the director of Lightbox Photo Library, introduced his insight into Taiwan's landscape of art and politics from a more contextual perspective. Tsao claims that depoliticised art is problematic, while some say that politics is politics, and art is art. Tsao defines politics as an act to acquire power and to bring empowerment. Photography, in that sense, is the power to acquire an image. Bringing the logo of Taiwan's national day as an example, Tsao displayed how art plays a role in cultivating public image and the clear difference between the two parties Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), with KMT having a more "Chinese" aesthetic.

Tsao also dug into the recent policies on culture and art. There is now a new southbound policy where Taiwan aims to create diplomatic ties, business, and cultural interaction with southeast Asia, meaning more money will be allocated to the arts and culture exchange with the region, which generates not only a strong economic impact, but symbolizes the appetite, taste and independent understanding of the younger generation.

One of the reasons why the Taiwan administration advocates this is to recognise over one million new Taiwanese citizens who recently immigrated from Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and other southeast Asian countries. Another cultural policy to note is moving away from "Free China". Since the 1940, Taiwan has often been referred to as the "Free China" by the West. Taiwan wants to



separate itself from that idea, as it has so much more to offer than just Chinese culture. Change is expected among Taiwanese artists in how they interact culturally with other countries.

In Taiwan's art scene, contemporary social issues are often expressed through art, such as the recent circumstances around Hong Kong, Tibet, Xingjiang, 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre, and Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is also the case for domestic issues such as transitional justice - notably the February 28th incident and the White Terror period. How to move forward from these transitional justice cases are unresolved, but more archives need to be declassified, Tsao says.

In relation to China, Taiwan is facing a new kind of censorship and thus an information warfare with the country. China's tactic to infiltrate a democratic country with censorship is to pour in more irrelevant information, misinformation, entertainment content to divert attention and decrease exposure time on topics China does not want the civic society to pay attention to. It is a new strategy that does not require building a wall. The price of liberty may be the constant vigilance - but Tsao suggests that artists can play a role in conveying to the audience what is worth their attention and reconsideration. The Lennon Wall Project was brought out by Lightbox Photo Library in August 2019 amid turmoil in Hong Kong, people freely writing their views to the public, and the whole wall was documented in a panoramic image. After the National Security Law, China is trying to virtually erase the democratic memories in Hong Kong, certain books can no longer be found in public and university libraries. So

Lightbox Photo Library collaborated with Wikidata Taiwan so that the image is uploaded on the internet and cannot be taken down. Tsao says that at the moment, self-censorship by the artists and in Taiwan are not really evident, they still feel safe to speak up - unlike in Hong Kong. But they are very much alert about what is at stake.

Chow and Tsao both noted that photography now has an increased presence in the art world, despite the initial difficulties in being accepted in the industry. Although this session focused on the art scenes in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Seoul, Singapore and China, the Asian art landscape expands further into Southeast Asia, with Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia at the core. The Asian art scene will continue to be a topic to look out for.

Relevant Links:

Vivienne Chow

<https://www.viviennechow.com/>

Vivienne Chow's articles on Artnet News

<https://news.artnet.com/about/vivienne-chow-1111>

Cultural Journalism Campus

<https://culturaljournalismcampus.org/>

Liang-Pin Tsao

<https://liangpintsao.tw/>

Lightbox Photo Library

<https://www.lightboxlib.org/lightbox-photo-library>