

# HistoriCITY—A Roundtable on Art Historical Writing in and on Hong Kong

Introduction and transcript by Jaspar K.W. Lau



Guest speakers at HistoriCITY Roundtable Session 1, Art Historical Writing on Hong Kong. Left to right: Christina Chu, Chang Tsong-zung, Lu Peng, Wan Qingli, wen yau, Koon Yee Wan, Pamela Kember, Frank Vigneron. Photo: Phoebe Wong. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

The roundtable, HistoriCITY—Art Historical Writing In and On Hong Kong, held on September 29, 2007 at the Lecture Hall of Hong Kong Museum of Art was co-presented by Asia Art Archive and mMK.<sup>1</sup> The HistoriCITY roundtable was divided into two sessions with two different panels of invited guests, based principally on speakers' languages. The text presented here is an edited combination of speakers' synopses, transcriptions of their actual speeches, materials from earlier reading groups, and selected responses from the speakers and audience that were part of the first session. This session was conducted in both English and Mandarin with the latter translated here into English by myself.

## Historicity

Christina Chu, Art Historian

Historicity relates to history, and history can be understood on at least three levels: Firstly, "history" refers to "historical reality," understood as historical truth, historical facts, historical events, historical occurrences, or historical happenings. It can signify human activities that actually took place in the past. Secondly, "history" can mean the scholarly study of history. As an academic discipline, "history" on this level is referred to as "historiology," understood as historical research focused on the shaping of historical knowledge or historical understanding. Thirdly, "history" can also be understood as writing a narrative of historical knowledge.

In the context of this roundtable, my understanding of historicity is an approach that examines the construction of narrative found in the third level. The discipline of art history pertains to historiology as it also involves both historical actuality and the importance of history as a standard of value. Yet art historical writing concerns visual imagery. Visuality is a language distinguished from text, it commands a distinctive visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric used in art historical discourse has two aspects: formalism and contextualism. Formalism is the intrinsic property of an



Left to right: Christina Chu, Chang Tsong-zung, Lu Peng. Photo: Phoebe Wong. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

artwork. It involves an examination and analysis of form; that is, line, shape, colour, texture, and composition. Formal representation also gives rise to style. Traditionally, style has been the main element that makes up the sequence of art historical narrative. Contextualism examines artworks in the context of the motivations and intentions of artists, patrons, and sponsors. Contextualism also involves a comparative analysis of themes and approaches, and iconography and symbolism, in the works of past and contemporary artists. Contextualism has three important attributes: space, time, and society. These attributes form the substance of historicity.

Art historical writing in and on Hong Kong in the post-colonial era manifests a strong sense of nostalgia. This cogent sensibility of nostalgia embodies “historicity” rather than “history.” It is closely related to spatiality and temporality. Historicity can be instrumental in the construction of a new identity. Yet, historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future. It can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow de-familiarizes it and allows a distance from the immediate that is characterized as historical perspective.

The capitalization of CITY in the title of the roundtable sets up a framework of time and space in consideration to art-historical writing in and on Hong Kong art. The beginning of British rule that started in the 1840s, put Hong Kong on the path of emerging as the international city it is today. The colonial period was an interim phase with a Chinese past and future. Historicity necessitates reflective investigation that requires us to continuously reconfigure the structure of experience and, thus, knowledge. In building the narrative for Hong Kong art history, historicity integrates different issues and aspirations. The study of Hong Kong as a territorial subject becomes an international subject when the local collides with the global. The study of historicity imbues Hong Kong with a much greater presence in its connectivity to both Chinese culture and Western culture and, therefore, to a heightened sense of locality and internationalization.

### **Histories!**

**Wan Qingli, Director And Chair Professor, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University**

Amongst historical discourses, we have both official and unofficial ones. As history enters a multicultural era, the tradition of having just one official history textbook should be over. And art history is no exception. Any art history textbook, no matter its length, could still be just a simplified map or guide. The content and interpretation of official or personal histories, are

determined respectively by either official ideology or a subjective historical. It is impossible for one version to be “absolutely true,” and there is no longer such a thing as “authority.”

The more versions of history, the better. No single art history book can summarize art history itself. Even the better-qualified ones remain simply rough outlines. The more versions of art history we have, the more access we have to different perspectives.

Hong Kong art history should have a wealth of studies that focus on its various historical phases, areas of practice, its organizations, and its practitioners. The more authors the better, the more versions the better. They can each express their own histories and their own narratives.

### **What Context? Whose Context?**

Lu Peng, Art historian and critic based in Chengdu

If we put it in a crude way, everyone is an historian, because anyone can pick up a pen and write his or her own understanding of history. Yet it is also a far more complicated issue that directs us back to the fundamental question of “What is History?” Since our subject today focuses on Hong Kong art history, we have a more specific context. But what actually does the concept “context” mean? And then “whose” context, and “when” or “what” context are we talking about? Therefore, isn’t it necessary for us to first ask the question of “Whose Hong Kong” and “What is Hong Kong?”

From the themes raised by the roundtable organizer, namely that of “Hong Kong/China,” “East/West,” “Tradition/Modernity,” “the Local/Regional/Global,” “Glocality/Hybridity in artistic creation,” “works of Criticism/Curating,” there is a sense of conflict that seems to thread through them all. These themes, as with the book *Europe in China* (1895) that German scholar and linguist Ernest Johann Eitel wrote on Hong Kong between 1841 to 1882, drove me to similar questions about “what context” and “whose narration” that were, and still are, presiding over Hong Kong in each case.

People living through any period could certainly tell us a lot of stories. Eitel’s book, for example, helps us restore some historical accounts that were lost during the Japanese invasion. Yet that does not mean the story told by Eitel is providing a complete historical account, or even something that is essentially true. Still, we can respect Eitel’s history book because it is an eyewitness account of the period between 1841-1882, and that alone lends it relevance.

By the end of the “A Short Summary” section of the book, the passage, “Hong Kong has clearly fulfilled . . . the purpose of its establishment as the guardian of the interests of Europe in China,”<sup>22</sup> makes clear whose history of Hong Kong is being expressed and what the context was when Eitel wrote this book. This example might illustrate an aspect of the question of East/West, but it is not unrelated, however, to the questions of tradition/modernity or local/regional/global. The pairing of “Europe” and “China,” is definitely suggested as a focal point for that particular period.

Each time-period has its contextual concepts that define its own uniqueness. To study the art of post-1997 Hong Kong, we have to study a context that is obviously different from the 1940s or 1960s. There does not exist a Hong Kong that never changes, it can exist only in specific contexts at different periods. And the specificity of each context determines the focal point for each specific historical period.

After the 1960s, the influx and influence of Western modernism in Hong Kong did not arrive at the same pace as it did in mainland China, much like the opposing tendencies between Taiwanese modernism and the social realism of mainland China during the 1950s. How has the relationship between art in Hong Kong and that of the traditional, or of Europe, America, or even Taiwan differed in comparison to the relationship China has had with them during the past one hundred years? This is undoubtedly an issue (involving both understanding and judgment) pertaining to the Hong Kong/Chinese context, but also to the context between tradition/modernity.

So how is one to understand a particular context, a particular artistic language, and its association with society? What is the position of a writer? Is it possible to have a pure or commonly shared position? Can art in Hong Kong and its tie with Chinese art be discussed without being influenced by one's understanding towards the Western invasion, free trade, war, or the ideologies behind them?

Should Hong Kong Chinese artists who have developed their practice under the influence of the West be seen as just producing Western art in Hong Kong, or should they be included into the lineage of Chinese art? The latter has not been occurring, for as Chinese art history has primarily taken *Wen-Jen-Hua* as its standard. Even until now, the educational materials on the history of fine art in China show little consideration towards early Hong Kong art or that of the twentieth century, and it doesn't even exhibit much interest in the art of the Guangdong area.

Therefore, how should we frame the basic context for the abstract ink painting of Lui Shou Kwan, or determine the context of how we look at the works by Luis Chan? What is the relationship of his dreamlike work to that of European modernism? Or, perhaps, what does it have to do with Hong Kong? And does Hong Kong art history need to include Lin Fengmian? Why yes? Or why no?

### **Historical Judgement?**

Different authors will likely come up with different answers to these sorts of questions. Even if we use a micro-account of history, how do we actually associate Lin Fengmian's trajectory in Hong Kong with Hong Kong art history? Micro-accounts can easily slip into personal taste or preference, and become disassociated from the context. Can historical judgement still function? How then should historical value be assessed?

When different writers produce different versions of Hong Kong art history, does it make sense that they all stand as viable histories? If they each have their own historical judgment, does historical judgement still actually exist? We can agree that context needs to be studied, but this does not necessarily bring results in one "historical context" that is commonly agreed upon. There is never one single context.

It is unlikely that the different concerns of a writer from mainland China, a Chinese writer from Hong Kong, a writer from the West, and a Western writer in Hong Kong would all arrive at some singular agreement. Other than the various personalities and experiences of the authors, background of knowledge, political stance, nationalism, and their view on the history of civilization could simply result in differences in data collection and their consequent judgment upon it. These factors affect judgments about Hong Kong art as well, especially in deciding when, who, and what will be the subjects of study in Hong Kong art history. We might be able to continue archiving materials, but what counts as those materials for Hong Kong art history is still an issue.

For a publication such as my *A History of Art in Twentieth Century China*, I must attend to a broader framework. If one focuses too much on micro perspectives, then one could lose sight of the macro perspectives. So I accepted the cost of sacrificing a bit of the micro, but my book should not be the only book on the subject matter, and those who have been left out could always be written in as supplements, or be included in great historical books that stand on their own.

### **Inside/Outside**

Chang Tsong-zung, Curator

The question as to whether Hong Kong has its own art and art history is of course a ludicrous question, but it is also a real question. Yet people who do not know about this history might think it does not exist.

The present roundtable discussions about Hong Kong art history have partly been provoked by the appearance of publications written by non-Hong Kong writers, especially by mainland scholars. So I base my talk on the question of Hong Kong art history written by outsiders. Taking a more expansive view, one must recognize that to varying degrees history is always written from an outsider's standpoint: it is written either from memory or researched after the fact. Also, history represents a detached (outside) look at a bracketed sphere of experiences. The real problem at stake is less about an outsider's perspective, and more about the fact that we do not have enough diversity of perspectives within local writing.

The two main complaints about "outsiders" writing about local art are: Firstly, the usual issues about the gaze of the Other, which may constitute a "colonial" perspective that is one of power/control. Secondly, the misunderstanding of contextual meaning, disputes about which "typical" examples are selected for illustrating, the narratives disputes about interpretation, and the focus on what is of importance. These complaints point to problems about how the reading of a regional culture may be subsumed by or absorbed into a wider context, about how "accurate" or "significant" interpretation can be, and from whose point of view it comes from.

A great deal of work needs to be invested in the research of local situations, and sympathetic interpretations must necessarily represent the interests of those whose history is being discussed. However, there is a great deal to be said about being interpreted from the "outside."

To broaden the significance of Hong Kong art history, it must be made available for interpretation from the "outside"; it needs to make itself "useful." Strategically, to be incorporated and appropriated by others expands one's own possibilities. Furthermore, apart from cultural strategic interest, it is not possible to write a history without an outsider's perspective: history is like a face, it is both a projection of the self and a visage that is looked at, and the outcome is a dialogue agreed upon between oneself and others.

### **Lineage/*tong xu***

Often, Hong Kong art history has been placed within a larger picture of Chinese art history. The relationship between Hong Kong and Chinese art histories also reflects the problems faced by writers of "world art history," of which there have been a number of attempts in recent years. For a balanced view, concepts of art should ideally be translated both ways, and be read from multiple points of view. But realistically we are all aware of the leadership and creative energy of cultural scholarship and cultural industries in the West to know this proposed equal bilateral reading is at best an ideal vision.



Left to right: Chang Tsong-zung, Lu Peng, Wan Qingli, wen yau. Photo: Phoebe Wong. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

Then there is the problem of translation, especially in the descriptive and conceptual language of art. For example, the title of an exhibition opening later this afternoon: *qi yun* (Energy Rhythm), is a term that cannot be rendered into English without losing certain aspects of its connotations. Then there is also the problem of translated terminology taking on a life of its own, leading to misunderstanding as it departs from its origin. The one word that used to trouble me for a long time was the Chinese term *yu jing*, then one day it was pointed out to me that it is simply the standard translation of the English word “context.”

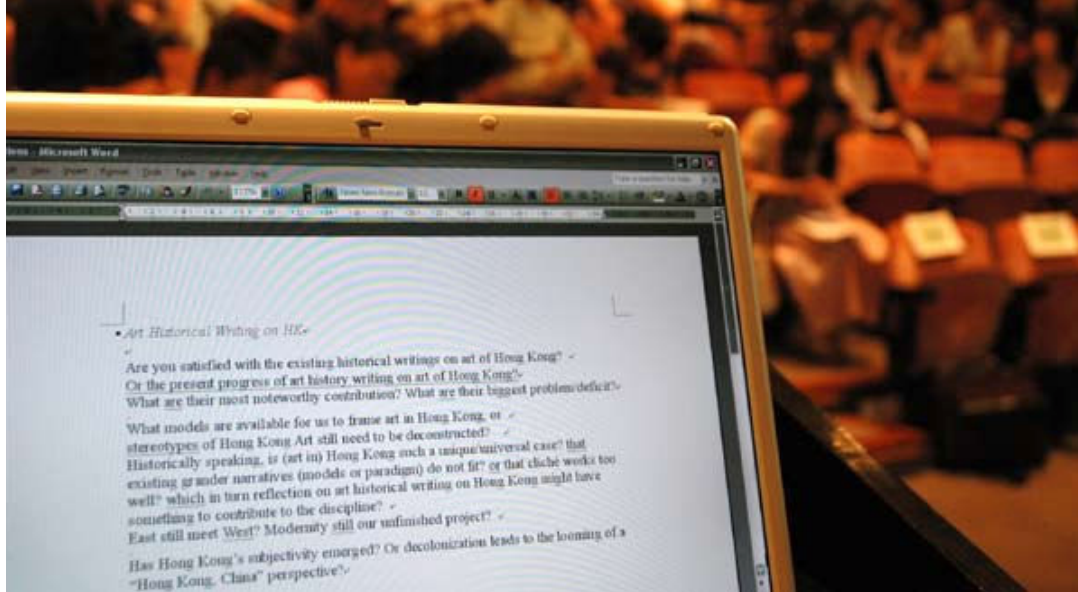
Having said this, the positive point to make about a “total” history is the implied faith in a certain master narrative. It reflects a faith in the possibility of order, of common ground, and perhaps even shared aspirations. On the surface it also goes against the grain of multiculturalism. What is at stake here is not “completeness,” which is often the focus of critics of world histories; neither is it the problem of language and translation. What is at stake is the choice of canons and narratives that constitute the master narrative of the moment (accepting the need to re-write and re-interpret as history changes).

In China, what has always haunted the Confucian scholars (and perhaps most Chinese people) is the issue of *tong xu* (lineage). In the twentieth century, Chinese reformers and Communists laughed at the idea of *tong xu* when in fact they had unwittingly been indoctrinated into the lineage and ideologies of the West. For modern China, Communist doctrine has worked exactly like the traditional *tong xu*, but assuming a particular European perspective. Today, we are fortunate to be able to start rethinking this issue, and for Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region of China, the most important contribution it can make is probably to contribute to a rethinking of the *tong xu* of Chinese art.

### **East Still Meets West?**

Frank Vigneron, Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Does East still meet West in contemporary art? Well, the answer is both yes and no. No, because the notions of East and West have been forged since colonialism, and a long series of negative stereotypes were then created (many of which unfortunately still exist today) and should not be used any more. Yes, because the concept of “East meets West” has been used by many artists of the recent past, although it should be understood in its historical context and not applied haphazardly.



HistoriCITY Roundtable Session 1, Art Historical Writing on Hong Kong. Photo: Phoebe Wong.  
Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

Using the concepts of “East” and “West,” besides creating binaries such as us/them or we/them, foster circumstances that are already favouring the survival of racist and xenophobic sentiments. It also creates situations that lead to the erasure of local differences existing inside the boundaries of national cultures. The terminology that I propose here could be supra-national cultures (cultures that are made and expressed beyond national borders), national cultures (cultures expressing the sentiments of a nation), and also infra-national cultures (cultures expressing “local” sentiments). The concepts of “East” and “West” are destructive for both national and infra-national cultures because local differences are ignored. Serious art criticism should not let itself be trapped in the misuse of cultural concepts like “East” and “West.” In my opinion, the process involved in looking at any artwork trapped in this discourse should follow several stages: The first one being to identify the discourse of an artist without making value judgment; the second being to acknowledge the problems of interpretation presented by this discourse (as there is always a gap between textual and visual creations); and the third stage being a kind of reconciliation, as even mistaken concepts can produce interesting and original artworks.

Take the existing discourse on Zhao Shao’ang of the Lingnan School movement, or Lui Shou-kwan of the Modern Ink movement as our examples. Laurence C.S. Tam, the curator of the Museum of Art of Hong Kong, suggested in a 1978 exhibition of work by Chao Shao-an, that he was under the influence of “Modernization of Chinese Painting” as proposed by Gao Jianfu. In Tam’s words, the movement “advocates the introduction of unconventional subject matter and Western art techniques into Chinese painting—such as the use of perspective and chiaroscuro.”<sup>3</sup> For a 1990 exhibition of the same artist, also organized in Hong Kong, no mention of the Western interests professed by the early Lingnan School is even made. It has perhaps something to do with the fact that the choice of paintings for this show did not include any of his early paintings with “unconventional” (read “borrowed from the West”) subject matter. Instead, the author of the catalogue introduction, Chiu Sai-kwong, himself a respected artist and the permanent president of the Hong Kong Art Research Association, prefers to refer to ancient and venerable concepts of Chinese painting like the “Six Principles” (*liu fa*) in looking at Chao Shao-an’s work.

If we look at Petra Hinterthür’s *Modern Art in Hong Kong* (1985), the first monograph in English on art in Hong Kong, the author is very careful not to link works by Lui Shou-kwan to any Western influence. She chose not to use the idea of “Western” and presented him as an artist who “tried to infuse Chinese art with a more modern spirit,” and then goes on to cite references to Zen



Left to right: wen yau, Koon Yee Wan, Pamela Kember, Frank Vigneron. Photo: Phoebe Wong.  
Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

philosophy and Chinese literati painting.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Zhu Qi, in his first monograph in *Chinese on art in Hong Kong* (Xianggang Meishu Shi, 2005), revels in references to the West, and Western artists, such as Turner and European Expressionism.

The emphasis of Western influences is clearly different in each case. However, “Westernization” is often seen as non-problematic because anything made by an ethnic Chinese with oil or acrylic can be placed in the category of “Westernized” art. I disagree with this, as nothing can be intrinsically “Western” or “Eastern,” and “Chineseness” or “Eastern-ness” are also concepts that have created other serious problems. Art historian David Clarke once presented the work of Wucius Wong as exerting a tension between two profoundly different traditions, a conflict that is unresolved, but is at least given expression, or dramatized. But, if we do not use the concept of “East meets West” anymore, how should we think about the issues of exchange so present in contemporary art? The idea of “hybridization” seems more fitting (one should not, however, mistake hybridization for a juxtaposition of cultural elements). Although, in the context of Hong Kong, hybridization has already become a buzzword that has somehow replaced “East meets West,” and this term probably should not be rejected so easily since every culture is a hybrid of some sort. In fact, hybridization is inherent to how cultures are shaped and constantly transformed. There are also forms of hybridization in art that we do not see so much any more as they are no longer very visible. The reason why the discussion around hybridity has become so tiresome for many Hong Kong intellectuals is that it is seemingly of inherent irrelevance, but perhaps just painfully obvious in its visibility.

### **Reside/Dual Spaces**

**Pamela Kember, Lecturer of Art History & Theory, Hong Kong Art School**

I would like to focus today on the need to look again at the history of representation, and specifically as it might relate to art from Hong Kong. I begin firstly with a play on the notion of residual space as a spilling over, or trace of some sort. Also, there is a play on the words “reside” and “dual” to denote a city that has existed and lies between two or more histories—colonial and Chinese, and yet it also exists on the residual elements of past cultures and customs. I am also interested in the term, erasure, in a Derridean sense, implying that we look for words that are inaccurate and yet necessary to say. It is also like the idea that the word exists, but you put a line through it, as Paul Chan does with the titles of his artworks.

To reference theorist Ackbar Abbas' *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, "space becomes an important category for analyzing power and subjectivity." For someone like Simon Leung, now living and teaching at the University of Irvine, California, the "residual spaces" are those left over from the Vietnam War. For him, as an artist born and raised in Hong Kong, where the memory of Hong Kong, for more than a decade, was the site of Vietnamese refugee camps, how does the renegotiation of his subjectivity from being Asian to being American transpire?

These are the trajectories that interest me the most, that there are many hidden stories of art worth discovering in the artists of Hong Kong's diasporic art communities. Think of the artists who studied abroad yet have returned to Hong Kong in the last decade. What of those who live between Hong Kong and elsewhere, returning pendulum-like from time to time? Or those that attempt to either de-link themselves from both their colonial past and Chinese cultural heritage to inhabit a new residing/dual space—cut off from, or separated from the presiding status quo? Just think of Simon Leung, or John Young (Australia), Suki Chan (U.K.) Vernie Yeung (U.K.), and all the artists from Hong Kong who are working in an international context?

Paul Chan, born in Hong Kong and now based in New York, sees Hong Kong citizens as being, "the first postmodern subjects, split between two or more languages and passports, people that form a strange amalgamation of Eastern and Western."<sup>5</sup> Postmodernist somehow remains a category that expresses the eclecticism of visual narratives borrowing both from the past and yet still referencing modernism. At its best, as James Elkins suggests, postmodernism is a concept that can create a space to discuss the meaning of art, to critique canons of modernist thought, and to provide for multiplication and fragmentation of meaning, thereby, becoming more relevant and distinct within the culture within which it evolves.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, I wish to examine the unique situation of Hong Kong as a place that has absorbed cultural complexity, and that has been presented with new difficulties, new types of visual images or new ways of describing the conditions of creativity. This is not to suggest that stories coming out of Hong Kong about its art are all fragmented and without substance, but I do not think we should necessarily follow the idea that there is a history to be written about Hong Kong art, something constantly referred to at this roundtable. We simply have to move beyond the rhetoric of a concise and defined history of art for Hong Kong, and pose alternative options to the way the majority of visual art histories propose a beginning, middle, and end. To borrow Abbas' words, "The[se] narratives are too straight. The images all tend to take on an independent life and tend not to show the hidden histories."<sup>7</sup> There is, however, a need to pull the various or alternative narratives together—like a puzzle, or a mapping of voices and images—and try to visualize these hidden stories. This concept of hidden narratives might be more concerned with the idea, in Abbas' words again, of "different historical moments and periods all coming together at the same time."<sup>8</sup>

Concerning who is writing the history of contemporary Hong Kong art, the question arises about whether one has to be local? The local, the insider, the outsider all come with overloaded connotations of either expulsion or exclusivity. In *The Accidental Asian*, Eric Liu described the struggle of being ethnically Asian and culturally American: "You don't feel yourself to be Asian but others perceive you to be, because of your ethnicity and features—multiple socially bound features that individuals use to think about themselves as either Asian or Western."<sup>9</sup> To address this issue, I have already put forth my thoughts in discussing the work of Hong Kong based, U.S. schooled artist, Choi Yan Chi. I asked at that time, can we not speak of an "outside of the body-self" that

neither limits nor consists of the burden or soul-searching towards an embodied self? This is something that Deleuze & Guattari suggest as de-territorialization, of an opening up towards the hidden, or intuitive stories, towards new possibilities and of new “open becomings.”

### **More History, Less City**

**Koon Yee Wan, Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts, The University of Hong Kong**

Finding the appropriate label for a discussion about Hong Kong art has been a constant headache amongst scholars, critics, curators, and artists. This roundtable discussion on HistoriCITY was organized in order to discuss some of the terms and frameworks that commonly appear in exhibitions, books, and journals, such as East/West, local/global, and hybrid/glocal. Each have their own merits, some more than others, but many have been misused, misread, and misinterpreted. Lying beneath these discussions is a hint of urgency that we need to define an identity for Hong Kong art.

Since we are not encouraged in the art world to think about Hong Kong in terms of history, at least we have geography. We talk about the arts in terms of spatial values: space, place, margins, frontiers, the Pearl River Delta, local, and global. Even when time is invoked, such as the recent Time after Time exhibition, it is about the cyclical nature of time and then only within the last ten years. But do we run into the danger of talking about art only as a form of discourse and leaving the human experience of the day to day out of the picture?

The reluctance to talk about history in contemporary art is not a surprise as the emphasis on the new is its rupture from the old and faded. But the past is always implied, which is not necessarily a past of substance, but an invented history that appeals to modern sensibilities. For example, in promoting heritage concerns, old photographs of Hong Kong are pasted on walls and presented in exhibitions. The popular sepia photographs of old Hong Kong are presented as insights into history, but that history is one of nostalgia; we look at what has changed, rather than seeing these photographs as remnants of a booming tourist industry or photographic journalism in the 1900s. We do not look at how they were used, but what they mean to us today. The difference is subtle—one is looking back from the present, the other from the past forward. There is nothing wrong with nostalgic histories, but we also need its factual side so that the past has a voice of its own.

Why is it important to consider Hong Kong art in terms of history? This is easier to answer: greater diversity. This means more depth and layers, so that we can talk about Hong Kong art with meaning instead of using vague terms. The next time you are in an exhibition, take a look at the title and the introduction—see if it is framed by geography (space/sites/margins/frontiers) or by projecting back in time. It’s usually one or the other. Here are a few examples of exhibition titles from the last few years: At the East-West Crossroads, Urban Karma, San Frontiers, and Trading Places. There are of course exceptions, such as “Chinglish” (Not East Not West) and Men, I Wish I Knew How to Quit You. What is exciting about having shows that are not framed by current trends is that you will see art that is not part of the festival circuit. It is also important for the artists to know that they can gain support from exhibition organizers and galleries to explore themes that are not space-based. History can be used as a framework to map out the diversity of themes, mediums, and artists, and thus tease out the complex identity of what constitutes Hong Kong art.

Participants in the Hong Kong art world have long decried that there are so few critics, while critics have cried for more exhibitions. Let’s be specific. We need a greater variety of perspectives rather than more voices saying the same things; otherwise, writing about Hong Kong art becomes

a one-trick pony. If we attempt to position art in history, let me again emphasize that history consists of the records of lived experiences of artists as members of society, and not a simple chronology of one artist in their rarified world of creative “genius.” I know it is unfashionable to promote history, and while it can be oppressive, it can also have emancipatory results. If art is to be important socially and politically, and not just economically, then history matters.

### **1950s Watershed**

Christina Chu

I have been working on a project about Hong Kong art history since my retirement from the Hong Kong Museum of Art. For the past year or so, I have been mostly reading available materials. But soon I found that one hundred years is really too long and of too big a scope, so I narrowed it down to pre-1949, before the communists took over China. This is already paradoxical, for the year 1949 is a marker that is firstly identified with mainland China. Other than acknowledging a series of first-time memorable incidents happening in Hong Kong, or even within the context of greater China, very few active artists at the time seemed to be of local origin, and their ties with mainland China were rather close, particularly during the war years. Yet despite this, things were very active here, with much happening, but Hong Kong still remained at the edge of China, certainly a reflection of the question/reality of a discursive position/power. So it seems to me, if we want look at Hong Kong art during the first half of the twentieth century, we need to take a view from the outside. That, however, also implies that we have to narrate from the perspective of hindsight, from the view seen from the outside of the emerging account of the subjectivity of Hong Kong art history.

### **Modernism up to the 1980s**

Lu Peng

In the past, most Chinese art history books had a very small portion, or even no discussion at all, on the art of Hong Kong and Taiwan. For me, the rationale to include Hong Kong into my recent publication, *A History of Art in the 20th Century China*, has got to do with my own view of Hong Kong as positioned within the context of the greater China. Since the book covers the past one hundred years, I thought of mentioning the foreign influences from Portugal and the United Kingdom via Macau and Hong Kong in the very first chapter. But as I surveyed materials on the twentieth century, I discovered that a greater influence had actually been coming via Japan, and so after some consideration, I decided against mentioning Hong Kong in the nineteenth century. Hong Kong appeared again in the materials of the 1940s due to the united front in the war against Japan. But if these works are considered in the context of mainland China, to what extent are they still Hong Kong art?

Only when it comes to the 1950s, during the time when the Mainland was cut off from the rest of the world, did I decide to bring Hong Kong art into focus. And I covered only modernist art, and not the so-called “traditionalist” art in Hong Kong. The focus, however, shifted back to contemporary art of mainland China from the late 1970s onwards owing to its Open Door Policy. Despite the fact that much has been said in relation to the postcolonial nature of contemporary Chinese art, in my view, it still owes much to foreign influences.

### **Syndrome of the 1980s**

From the Floor: Henry Au-Yeung, Director, Grotto Fine Art

About the art history books that have been written on Hong Kong, I think a great problem is the lack of study or research on the period after 1980. But as a phenomenon, I think it has a lot to do



Open floor discussion. Photo: Phoebe Wong. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

with what actually happened in Hong Kong. There are indeed a lot of large issues—instability in Hong Kong during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, lots of movement in the art scene, lots to do with politics and society. However, once we get into the 1980s, with the rise of the local economy and a sort of stabilization in society, it became what I called a “middle-class syndrome,” which is an uneventful, very stable, peaceful period, which has lasted all the way through to the present.

And what happened within this phenomenon is that people backed away from writing about it. You could write so much on the economy, an economic paradise but cultural desert as they like to frame it, but there is not that much art that is sensational enough to write about. If you do not focus on the art, or just the history, then there is just not enough to write about. It becomes, in a way, pure visual enticement. In order for writers to write about Hong Kong art, one has to face the issue of “What is Hong Kong art right now?” or “What is Hong Kong culture right now?” And I think it is the popular culture. I have just read a book by Perry Lam, and in it, he nicely used the film of *Internal Affairs* as an analogy. And he says that Hong Kong is like the characters in the film, the undercover cops, undercover criminals, with a loss of identity, and you have to betray in order to survive. All these issues, ones I called peripheral narratives, are of course important to Hong Kong, but are they attractive enough for those big survey, four-inch-thick art history books. Perhaps not.

### Contemporary Chinese Art

Pamela Kember

I just want to bring some contextualization to what Lu Peng and Chang Tsong-zung were saying about contemporary Chinese art, from outside of China, for I was working in the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1994 when we did a show called *Silent Energy—New Art from China*. That was a time of great interest in Britain about contemporary Chinese art, but the shows were of Chinese artists of the diaspora. Six artists were included in the exhibition, and their works reflected very specific socio-political viewpoints. But it surprised me how much interest there was towards contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s in Europe, and the idea that art made outside of China is making statements that the artists could not make inside. I personally think it is a total distortion of what was actually happening. But it raised the point that it was only outside of China, with artists working in Australia, in France, that brought Western curators, directors and collectors to start analyzing what was coming out of China.

Perhaps that was also the time that art in Hong Kong was being circumvented, being bypassed. And it has become a problem that Hong Kong art is continuously not being written about in the context of contemporary Chinese art. Why is there nothing really written about this period that we could analyze, about the inside/outside, about art in Hong Kong, and it's not just on the periphery but it is not even included? If we are thinking of the writing of history, it seems the West began to take notice of the idea of contemporary art from China because there was the naming of movements like Political Pop, Gaudy Art etc., in which Mainland critic and curator Li Xianting himself was involved. What has been written on contemporary art from China can no longer be applied to Hong Kong art.

#### Koon Yee Wan

But we are not China, we are not from the Mainland, and that's the whole problem about writing on Hong Kong art, about what Hong Kong art is. How do we define ourselves, against something that has been so well received, and has been written about so many times?

Yet, instead of replying to the question of what is Hong Kong art, let me respond to why it is so difficult to answer. Often, underlying that question is another one: asking why is Hong Kong art not as valuable or as in as much demand as art from the Mainland. The quick answer is the Cultural Revolution. Hong Kong does not have this historical burden, which continues to horrify and mesmerize in equal doses. But more relevant, albeit less sexy, is the long history of art training. The Chinese Communist Party is a big supporter of the arts, encouraging artists to produce large-scale works for their new buildings, for their new vision and public propaganda. Even before the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China, art was used to serve social and political purposes, and artists were seen as valuable assets. Art academies founded in the early twentieth century encouraged a large group of artists trained in a variety of mediums to compete with one another to gain commissions and recognition, which in turn encouraged diversity. What we see happening today in terms of Mainland artists is partially the result of a century of academy training. The Cultural Revolution is often the throwaway answer as to why Mainland art is so successful, but that's largely due to the pop-Mao art being amongst the first to gain the attention of the international art market.

This leads to a second question: if Hong Kong does not have the perverse attraction of the Cultural Revolution that in turn attracts the art market, what does it have? How can we ever compete commercially with China? Indeed, we have taken the opposite trajectory: to brand Hong Kong as a place of the future—a land of opportunities. This is filtered into many aspects of our everyday lives. If we are to look at how history is treated, from public interests to personal growth, we are told about the value of the here and now, and the non-value of the past.

#### Frank Vigneron

I also think we are talking too much about "Hong Kong Art," instead of Hong Kong artists. I was thinking about Cheung Yee, who has taught in the fine arts department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for many years, and who is now living in America. He has been doing amazing work for such a long time, but no one seems really interested in him. Whereas with Wang Keping, for instance, the mainland Chinese Stars Group artist from the late 1970s, because of the political background he comes from, he became an artist of interest, and I think the most serious problem we have to face about the history written on Hong Kong artists is this bias. We don't seem to see Hong Kong artists interesting because of the context they are working in.

This bias against Hong Kong is a serious problem. Just look at the English international journals, no one is really interested in Hong Kong artists. Mainland Chinese artists are so much more sensational, they are in a country with political repression, where the world is changing very fast, so there is an appeal in this that makes them interesting in themselves. It seems Hong Kong artists are having it too good, there is little political repression, and there is no reason to talk about them. And I also agree with Pamela that we need more piecemeal histories, not grand schemes and big books covering the whole history of Hong Kong art, which is bound to be limiting. In the academic circles now, there is handful of people, four or five, who actually write about Hong Kong artists. And if we have larger institutions, there will be a lot more interesting writing. A lot of writing has been done also at the grassroots level, and in Chinese, that are not always accessible to outsiders. Asked if I am satisfied with the existing historical writing in Hong Kong, I could say yes, for it is never going to be perfect. And thank God it never is going to be perfect.

### Theories and Practices

#### From the Floor:

Linda Lai, Assistant Professor, School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong  
I am sympathetic with terms such as Ackbar Abbas' "disappearance," or the "middle-class syndrome" as Henry just mentioned. Yet they have obvious limitations to them, so maybe there is a way to construct history, and I would like to propose first of all to undo the framework, the context, the narratives, the established conclusions of the political situation. What do we mean, for example, by "Postwar Hong Kong?" A lot of terms really need to be deconstructed. What do we mean by cultural context? Whose cultural context? Down this road of thinking, maybe there is no other way to write history, unless we go back to the level of groundwork, and borrow from the wisdom of anthropologists, to go back to the field and start counting and recounting.

#### Pamela Kember

I really do not believe that visual artists exist in a vacuum. I don't think the artists' imagination just suddenly comes out of their heads. This imagination comes from narratives, stories that have impacted upon them and their work. Their practice is informed by narratives, theory is informed by practices, and there is no differentiation for me. As for "disappearance," I grew up in Hong Kong in the 1960s, and my home has gone, my school has gone, the pier has gone, my world of Hong Kong as it was in the 1960s and 70s has gone. Disappearance is a very simple fact in Hong Kong.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> mMK is a curatorial unit conceived by Jaspar K.W. Lau since 1996. The roundtable of "HistoriCITY" is actually just one of the three related projects Jaspar Lau organized in coincident with his curator residency at Asia Art Archive, all upon the issue of art historical writing in and on Hong Kong. It began with a mini-art project, followed with a series of reading group sessions, and ending with the final roundtable (see more on <http://mmkprojecthkah.blogspot.com>)

<sup>2</sup> E.J Eitel, *Europe in China*, (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence C.S.Tam, Introduction to *The Art of Chao Shao-An*, exhibition catalogue, (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1979), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Petra Hinterthür, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, (Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd., 1985), 61-63.

<sup>5</sup> Neil McCleister, Paul Chan, *BOMB*, Issue 92, (Summer 2005).

<sup>6</sup> James Elkins, *Master Narratives & Their Discontents*, (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> G. Lovink, Interview with Ackbar Abbas, (Kassel: documenta, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> E. Liu, *The Accidental Asian*, (New York: Random House, 1998).