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Sunday June 16, 2013

Ahead of the game

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**Big splash:** Dutch conceptual artist Florentijn Hofman's *Rubber Duck* floats across Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour during Art Basel Hong Kong.

### **Art Basel highlighted Hong Kong's new status as an international arts hub.**

ANDY Warhol's art series of '\$' signs in the booth of Dominique Levy (formerly L&M) at the vernissage of Art Basel Hong Kong was telling on the voracious art market in Hong Kong. It was the same colour of money in another booth featuring Tsang Kin-wah's vinyl installation ala Tracy Emin with the emblazoned words, 'Making Art, Making Money.'

While China is the second largest art market in the world, briefly once even the largest, the spillover effects of the art boom from the mainland after 1997 to the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau are palpable and profound.

Basel's Magnus Renfrew helmed the last Art HK last year before it got the ermine 'Basel' livery which was an anointment of Hong Kong as a World City of arts and culture in the Asia-Pacific.

Hong Kong's main allure was as Art Basel director Marc Spiegler put it, "no censorship issues" (Warhol's *Mao* prints and dissident Ai Wei Wei's installations came up against a brick wall for an exhibition in Shanghai) apart from red tape, and the absence of tax (in China, it's 23% to 34% even with the trial concession of a halved import tax of 6%).

The selection in Art Basel Hong Kong, sandwiched in between the Frieze of London and the 55th Venice Biennale not to mention the Basel Basel on June 13-16, was much more stringent, restricting the overall

participants to 245 (including those in the ‘Insights’ of solos, ‘Discoveries’ for emerging artists, and the ‘Encounters’ 18 large-scale projects, with 48 galleries making their debut).

Malaysia’s Ivan Lam, under the aegis of Wei-Ling Fine Arts, made a parody of this rigorous selection in his brilliant automa-art art-on-tap – a vending machine dispensing miniaturised artworks in acrylic blocks offering a pseudo interaction whilst marrying art, sculpture/installation and technology. This way, Ivan Lam also bypassed and cocked-a-snook at the vetting process by “smuggling” in his reputable Malaysian artist-friends (38 of them) and having a backdoor exhibition of Malaysian art.

Rome-based H.H. Lim, who is also taking part in the Venice Biennale, was the only other Malaysian represented, by Tang (Bangkok-Beijing).



Visitors walk past the *Beetle Sphere* by Ichwan Noorat at Art Basel Hong Kong. The four-day annual show, which ended on May 26, has until now only been held in Switzerland and the United States and has made a dazzling debut in a city better known as a fast-paced financial hub.

### **Building the base**

So, what’s so terribly different between Art HK 2012 and the first Art Basel HK?

Renfrew, who directed both, said Art Basel HK had the backing of the full resources of the Basel organisational juggernaut and expertise that powered its art fairs in Basel and Miami, apart from the A-list galleries, the high-profiled projects including talks, and the network of big-time collectors and art-industry leaders. Topping the Conversation sector was ‘The Artist and the Gallerist’ between Zhang Xiao-Gang and Pace Beijing’s Leng Lin. Also, the layout was more spacious over the two levels of exhibitions.

At the vernissage, a tidal wave of the rich and famous thronged the booths and heady private receptions despite Hong Kong being hit the day before by the worst black rainstorms in decades.

Visitorship had spiked from 19,000 from the first Art HK in 2008 to more than 60,000 this year.

But HK, with an estimated population of only 7.15 million (as of July 2012), is already at the cusp of it all with an art ecology second to none in the region. It's strategically located at the gateway of the China economic powerhouse and a financial hub to boot.

Its US\$2.8bil (RM8.7bil) West Kowloon Cultural District project on a 40-ha waterfront site in Tsimtshatsui is expected to come onstream in 2015 and already M+ is having a playground of inflatable sculptures of vinyl-coated fabric and fans, that are creating incredible buzz, especially for the works of simulated excrement (Paul McCartney, Complex Piles) and suckling pig (Cao Fei, House of Treasures).

It doesn't stop there. Plans are afoot to convert the former central police station into a cultural hub in a partnership between the government and the HK Jockey Club.

The blue-chip galleries have already set up their outposts in Hong Kong despite the high rentals and with most spaces exceeding 8,000 sq feet. In Pedders in Central, Lehmann Maupin Gallery joins Gagosian Gallery (since 2008), Ben Brown Fine Art, Simon Lee Gallery, Pearl Lam Galleries and Hanart TZ Gallery, while Jay Joplin's White Cube (March 2012) and Galerie Perrotin are in Gloucester Road.

All have their own blockbuster shows at their premises: Zhu Jinshi (Pearl Lam), Qiu Zhijie (Hanart TZ, several pieces at US\$20,000 (RM62,000) sold), Frank Auerbach (Ben Brown), Jean-Michel Basquiat (Gagosian), Jake and Dinos Chapman's macabre installations *The Sum of All Evil* (White Cube), Takashi Murakami (Perrotin, until July 6), Jean-Michel Basquiat (Gagosian, Basquiat set a new record of US\$48.8mil (RM152mil) for his 1982 *Dustheads* at Christie's New York just a week before).

While the new gilt-edged players hogged the cash registers, Leo Castelli's booth was comparatively quiet. The Delhi Art Gallery chose to bank on India's masters such as M.F. Husain and F.N. Souza instead of its hot contemporary artists.

HK also boasts a strong network of art-collectives with their own spaces – Asia Art Archives, Para-Site, Woofer Ten, The Salt Yard, Spring Workshop, Videotage and 1A Space. Para-Site staged *A Journey Of The Plague Year* on the SARS epidemic including an installation by Ai Wei Wei.

Their artists have also eked an increasing international profile. Like Lee Kit, Leung Chi-Wo, Chow Chun Fai, Kwan Sheung-Chi, Trevor Yeung Hung Keung, Tsang Kin-Wah, Tang Kwok-Lin, Samson Young, and TamWai Ping Ping, the one behind the M+ inflatable, *Falling Into The Mundane World*.

Since last year, China's Top Two auction houses of Guardian and Poly International have set up bases in Hong Kong, while Christie's has become the first foreigner allowed to trade in China, in Shanghai. Christie's HK Spring Asian Art auction on May 26 registered robust sales of Malaysian art including lots of Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, Latiff Mohidin and Chang Fee Ming.

### **Exciting sidelines**

In the periphery of this heady 'HK Art Week', festival-scale extravaganzas exploded all over with trend du jour 'hotel art': the Asia Contemporary Art festival (ACA, J.W. Marriott Hotel, the Hong Kong Contemporary (The Excelsior Hotel), LINK Artfair (China Merchant Wharf), BankArt Fair (Island Shangri-La). The HK Asia Society Art Gala honoured Murakami, Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fangzhi, Nyoman Masriadi and Lee Ufan (absent) (Hong Kong Jockey Club).

Hong Kong East reprised the Saatchi London show last year of 24 HK artists including Chow Chun Fai and Amy Cheung.

An artists' parade performance, *Paper Rain*, was held at Victoria Waterfront (May 23). The 21st Le French May arts festival and the Opera Gallery, which had a separate Chagall exhibition, put up sculptures all over the Landmark hotel-chain buildings. The sculptures included Yayoi Kusama's *Kei Chan*, Cecile Bart's mobile, Robert Indiana's *LOVE* sculpture, David Mach's spiky bear, Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali and Rodin.

The ACA exhibition at the Marriott had chuppies (HK yuppies) nudged one another in the cramped hotel room galleries featuring 2,000 works from 70 galleries spread over four floors on VIP Night, while the Bank Art Fair attracted 64 galleries (fourth floor). Among the notables in the ACA were the Art Xchange Gallery's Indonesian artists, Bui Thanh Tam (Vietnam) and China's Lu Zheng Yuan's copper-cast psychiatric ward re-enactments (Phoenix Art Palace).

Institutions and alternative spaces also flexed their muscles. The Hong Kong Museum of Art, which hosted a Warhol Retrospective attracting 250,000 visitors ending March, staged *A Hundred Chinese Paintings* (from late Ming, until Oct 30).

An entire collection of eight of Juan Ford in Melbourne's Dianne Tanzer Gallery was sold out for US\$150,000 (RM467,000) a piece.

A Malaysian also got into the act, snapping up Fernando Botero's *Quarteto* (Galerie Gmurzynska) for US\$1.3 mil (RM3.93mil), which was among seven Boteros sold, from a lowest register of US\$400,000 (RM1.2mil). Hong Kong's love affair with the eccentric Yayoi Kusama, at 84 the undisputed Grandmother of Polka-Dot Pop, continued, with several of her works sold including *Flames Of Life* (Victoria Miro/OTA Fine Arts) for US\$2mil (RM6.2mil) and *Love Is Forever* (David Zwirner) for US\$550,000 (RM1.7mil).

Damien Hirst's butterfly painting flew off for US\$500,000 (RM1.6mil); Murakami sold 15 sculptures at US\$135,185 (RM409,203) each; two doghead sculptures by Yoshitomo Nara were sold at US\$350,000 (RM1.1mil) a piece, while eight of his paintings were also snapped up; White Cube sold Gary Hume's sculpture for US\$100,136 (RM303,113); while Indian Jatish Kallat's bamboo scaffolding went to Guy Ullens (Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Beijing) for US\$180,000 (RM560mil). Tai Xiangzhou's *Paradise Hills* (Paul Kasmin Gallery) sold for US\$165,000 (RM499,455).

Indonesian Eko Nugroha's flowered puppy, *Flower Generation II*, went to a South Australian museum for US\$54,000 (RM168,000), while Basel-based Eddie HaRA made a consecutive return to Hong Kong under a different gallery, Semarang, with his Environ-Art, and another Indonesian, Heri Dono, drew crowds with his Dinosaur Man alter ego combining technology, wayang kulit, Garuda wings, gamelan sounds painting/sculpture and video.

On automobile art, Indonesian Ichwan Noor's Volkswagen Beetle compressed into a sphere overshadowed Cesar Manrique's painted BMW, selling one of a set of five for US\$88,000 (RM274,000).

It is not known if the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich and the Swiss collector Uli Sigg bought anything.

The Art Basel HK really boiled down to an orgy of visceral delights: a Miro solo (Mayoral Galeria D' Art, Barcelona); a dirty organic linen drape masquerading as a landscape (Adam Avikainen, Monitor Rome), a

life-sized Roger Rabbit (Marnie Weber), a venticular hologram painted on a 'Vermeer' (Joonsung Bae), Penny Bryne's tableau of figurines of protest (Sullivan & Strumpf), an awkward overhang of Venetian blinds (Haegue Yang), and a metallic pressed cheongsam (Men Fung-Yi, Alisan Fine Arts).

For all the hype over Art Basel, the sentiments of the Hongkongites were rivetted on the giant rubber duck by Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman which listed in Victoria Harbour before being refloated to great relief and fanfare.

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