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Start From Zero, © Rafael Wong

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The upcoming arts in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is both known as a global centre of finance and the place where the world's largest auction houses sell most of their fine arts. Only, what is the situation for emerging artists and spaces for low-brow art?

"There is no history of art centres in Hong Kong," states Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya, Para/Site Art Space's Spanish Executive Director and Curator. "Internationally it is the most developed art infrastructure. For example, Sotheby's just opened a new headquarters in Hong Kong. On the other side there are just five or six galleries with an interesting contemporary art program," he says. Although there are so many local artists realising projects outside of Hong Kong and foreign artists are staying in the city through their connections with the different universities, Fominaya says, there is no network of art centres to enable artists to produce new and showcase their works. He explains that old art spaces like Artist Commune, Videotage or Para/Site were created by different artist collectives in the 90's. Only the government's grant has been diminished over time so they haven't been able to grow. Fominaya concludes, "Hong Kong's problem is the lack of medium or large-sized contemporary art spaces to give artists the opportunity to produce their work, also to bring interesting art from around the world to the city."

However furthermore it is the lack of an audience that would appreciate it. "There is no place to go and, as a visitor, have an interesting experience," Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya claims. And despite the existence of initiatives such as small cultural hubs, the only organisation that has the resources to develop an audience would be the Museum of Art, he tells. However their new building won't be completed before five years. Nevertheless he finds the local art scene most promising — but nothing seems to be happening before the next three to four years.

Turning industrial buildings into creative lofts

A purely commercial city without a heart for the upcoming arts? At least when it comes to artist spaces, things have been changing a bit in the last couple of years. With a part of the production being shifted to Shenzhen or Guangzhou, the vast Chinese industrial agglomerations, several industrial buildings have been turned into lofts for creative workers. Since the government has relaxed the laws for old industrial spaces, artists have been starting to occupy all these industrial warehouses with cheap rents. For example, for the last decade in Fo Tan, a former industrial area in Kowloon, more than 180 artists have been working in about twenty loft spaces turned into studios in several adjacent complexes known as Fotanian. During their annual Fotanian Open Studio Programme for two consecutive weekends they open their doors for visitors.

Another former industrial site that has been turned into a centre for the arts is Cattle Depot Artist Village. Since 2001 the former slaughterhouse in To Kwa Wan, Kowloon's eastern bay area, has been hosting events, exhibitions and serves as workspace for about twenty groups. Yet another space has been transformed for the arts: in 2008, a former factory located in Shek Kip Mei on the Kowloon side was turned into a vivid centre, the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC), with an artists' own shop and gallery spaces next to ateliers; on the ground floor the elderly from the neighbourhood take a rest on benches. In distinction from the other two spaces, JCCAC by the Jockey Club — Hong Kong's big charity foundation — has to be economically worthwhile. That is why the part of the space has been rented out to shops such as a tea house or a designer store.

"In Hong Kong, people buy art first and foremost as investment for their storage."

When it comes to alternative art, there is one place not to miss: ufoArtgallery in Central Hong Kong. The owner, German Jane Zimmermann, opened the first underground art gallery just over a year ago in April 2009. She finds the situation difficult for upcoming talents as the government seems to be quite strict on them. "Artists can't afford the locations. Many have their studios beyond the Chinese border far away, and then you can't reach them," she says. She admits she had a hard time when moving to Hong Kong and opening a space for alternative art — something that hasn't had any standing in the city, yet. It is a place you can't compare to the American or European street art or low-brow art scene. "In Hong Kong, people buy art first and foremost as investment for their storage," Jane Zimmermann explains. Her clients are mainly Westerners, she tells, whereas the creative scene in Hong Kong mostly consists of locals and rarely foreigners.

Despite the initial hardship her gallery's concept proves to be fruitful: a couple of months ago, a second alternative art gallery, No Borders, opened their doors with a similar goal. Now ufoArtgallery collaborates with the alivenotdead.com film community, a platform for artists of all kinds of creative fields such as music or film. Speaking of online communities, the Secret Hong Kong group on the social network Facebook is just one that has been actively promoting art and design events. Another would be Hong Kong Ambassadors of Design who organize regular events where artists showcase their works.

Artistic survival

In other cities, underground artists could also make a living through artistic collaborations with street savvy brands such as Nike or Adidas. However this is rare in Hong Kong. Last year, a big department store, Lane Crawford, held a show with artist Jimmy Lam. But then again French street artist ZEVS was arrested by the police after he had sprayed a "liquidated" Chanel logo on the Armani flagship store. The brand claimed more than 300,000 Euro as compensation. Nevertheless — or because of that — ZEVS was commissioned to do the same for Louis Vuitton right afterwards.

No jobs for the artists

Now when it comes to actually producing street art, Tat and Vi of illustrator duo graphicairlines are, together with befriended stencil artist group Start From Zero, the most prominent representatives in the city. As a collaboration of eight years, they just moved into their new studio in an industrial loft in the Kowloon Bay Area. On the other side of the street happens to be another former industrial building where Start From Zero have their work space. It is no coincidence. "Because the rent is too high it's hard to have a shop for individuals. Most of the artists go into the industrial buildings," Vi explains. And Tat adds, "There aren't many jobs for artists in the city." Their atelier is overflowing with old projectors, old furniture they found on the street and in between there are the paintings, illustrations of character development or accessories spread they created.

Tat had a boring design job at a newspaper, he tells; Vi comes from animation but didn't find a job so she turned to graphic design instead. They started drawing stickers and put them on the streets; and that is how they met some fellow artists. There are a couple of street artists but they work more low-profile, they say. Tat assumes that there aren't more than twenty active street artists in Hong Kong, the scene is quite local. To pass on some of their creativity, graphicairlines just held a workshop with schoolchildren organized by the Jockey Club; the results are exhibited inside one of the ferry piers on the Central Hong Kong side. Street art for kids!

Verena Dauerer is Spana's editor in Tokyo.



Artist duo Tat and Vi from graphicairlines, © Rafael Wong





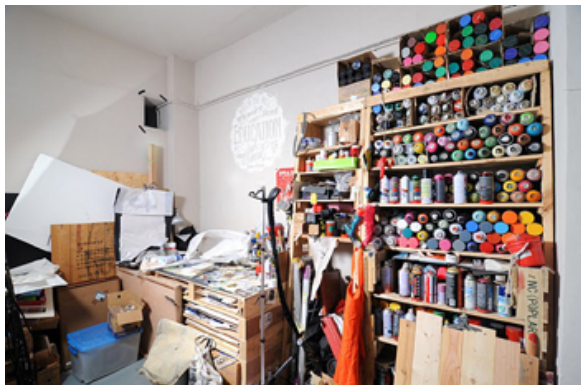
Jane Zimmerman of ufoArt Gallery, © Rafael Wong



Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC), © Rafael Wong



Cattle Depot Artist Village, © Rafael Wong



Start From Zero studio, © Rafael Wong

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