

HYPERALLERGIC

Binging on Selfies and Regurgitating Money: The Best of Hong Kong's Art Fair Week

29 March, 2016 | Ellen Pearlman

page 1 of 5



Kyungah Ham, "What You See Is The Unseen/Chandeliers For Five Cities" (2014–15)

HONG KONG — Last week's Art Basel Hong Kong (ABHK), the fair's fourth edition, included 239 galleries, about half of them from the Asia Pacific region. Admission to the final days was sold out, and the fair logged an impressive 70,000 attendees. Beleaguered placard holders stood around all day holding signs in English and Chinese explaining that no more tickets were available. Many mainland Chinese schools and businesses had scooped them up in advance and in bulk, and brought their groups of employees or students to view — not buy — the art. The other factor for high attendance was Easter break, with a lot of local students and families attending the heavily promoted fair.

Art Basel is an art fair designed to sell art objects to collectors of various stripes as part of a global commodities market delivering luxury goods. Part of ABHK's appeal is that Hong Kong offers zero tax on the import and export of art. The fair is the centerpiece of an ecosystem that involves more than gallery transactions. It encompasses artists, institutions, critics, curators, publicists, convention centers, journalists, graphic design firms, security, technical infrastructure, logistics, bus drivers, airline personnel, transportation hubs, hotels, restaurants, and on and on.

This edition of ABHK was certainly full of a lot of pretty, shiny things. At the VIP opening, I focused on the snippets of conversations that were passing me by: “This could go so well in our backyard garden, don’t you think?”; “I just love the shoes, love, them, love them”; and even, “The collector bought the piece and wired the money into my account on the same day!” Pace Gallery reportedly sold 19 works ranging between \$20,000 and \$2,750,000 within the fair’s first three hours, but what exactly does that mean? Beyond the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, there were more than 80 art and cultural events during the week, including the scrappy satellite fair Art Central. With that entire picture in mind, I compiled a top 10 list from everything I saw over the course of ABHK week.

Best Performance Art: Abdullah M. I. Syed, “The Flying Buck” (2016), and Sydney’s 4A Center For Contemporary Asian Art, which sponsored it

Taking place over three days of the Art Central Art Fair, the Pakistani-Australian artist’s performances focused on the distribution, engagement, and consumption of the global art market. For “The Flying Buck” — which in Urdu translates as talking excessively, or gibberish — Syed spent more than an hour folding fresh, uncirculated \$1 banknotes into paper airplanes, unfolding them, then eating and regurgitating them, producing a “Money Art Object.”

Best Art Show: VHILS (Alexandre Farto), Debris, on top of Lamma Island Central Ferry Pier 4, and the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Foundation, which sponsored it

In development for over a year, this Portuguese graffiti artist’s solo show contained works of video, sculpture, prints, installations, and neon art. VHILS made his reputation by creating portraits using explosives, hammering, or drilling in urban spaces, revealing haunting figures emerging from destruction. This enormous exhibition, which encompasses the entire top of the ferry pier, includes a video tunnel of Hong Kong street scenes playing in slow motion, neon sculptures, acid etched metal plates, as well as portraits built from layers of street advertising posters. It also features a room with perforated acrylic stencils on top of a bank of TVs, another room with bleach and ink paper prints, and a two-story-high reflected styrofoam cityscape sculpture. The media and techniques used, while remaining true to his basic themes of layering and revealing, is prodigious in its depth and variety.

Best Public Art Installation: Tatsuo Miyajima, “Time Waterfall” (2016), sponsored by Art Basel Hong Kong

Taking the 1,588-foot-tall International Commerce Center (ICC) on the Kowloon waterfront as its canvas, Miyajima’s light art project depicted numbers from one to nine cascading down the exterior of the building, with the number zero noticeably absent. Miyajima said that counting is an act of life, while zero represents the absence of life, or death. The piece is a reflection on mortality.

Best Alternative Art Fair: Art Central

Art Central brought more than 100 galleries from 21 countries into its tent along the Central Harbour Walkway. I asked a Singaporean collector for her take on the collecting atmosphere of the fair, and she said it was more affordable and more intimate than ABHK, and that it was good for those who don’t know what they want to buy. They could easily shuttle back and forth between ABHK and Art Central in order to make a more informed decision.

Art Central was divided into sections, including “Rise,” which highlighted 15 galleries and art spaces opened in the past five years, and “Projects,” with large-scale installations by six artists. The Aspan Gallery from Almaty, Kazakhstan, presented a couple of standouts, including video and photography by Almagul Menlibayeva and work by Sergey Maslov (1952–2002), an underground but important artist who broke with Soviet Realism to embrace myth and mysticism. The local Cat Street Gallery presented Jacky Tsai’s “Pow Pow Pow” (2016), a lacquer carving on wood featuring Eastern and Western superhero figures. And does anyone remember that gorgeous blue-and-white porcelain dress sculpture that was featured in the Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute show *China Through the Looking Glass* last year? The piece, “The Injury of A Thousand Years” (2015) by Lee Xiaofeng, was sold at Art Central through by Lee’s dealer, Red Gate Gallery of Beijing.

Best Museum Shows (and Dance Performance): Asia Society Hong Kong

The triple-header put forth by the Asia Society Hong Kong included *Dance Strokes*, an exhibition of Chinese-born, New York-based dancer and choreographer Shen Wei’s site-specific and large-scale oil paintings, and Shen Wei Dance Arts’s “Untitled No.32 (Bodies and Rooftop)” (2016), a rooftop performance. (For those unfamiliar with Wei, he choreographed the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony.) Also on view is *Apparatus of Power*, a solo show by Lahore-born, New York-based artist Shahzia Sikander featuring 70 works including prints, paintings, and animations dealing with postcolonial issues of hybrid identity in different national contexts of the East and West.

Best Consideration of the New Art World Direction: Videotage Conversations

Smartly curated by Issac Leung, chairman of Videotage — Hong Kong’s longest-running new media space, launched in 1986 — in conjunction with the Art Basel Crowdfunding Lab, Conversations featured video works from the Videotage Media Art Collection. It also brought people together in an informal setting to mull over such topics as “The Rise and Rise of the YouTube Generation” and “The Dying Institutions Culture.”

Best Stealth Sponsor: Kickstarter

Since corporate giving and government support are mutable, Kickstarter is working with Art Basel to provide support to artists through its crowdfunding platform. First launched in 2014, it has supported 34 projects to date, raising \$800,000 — a drop in the bucket, but better than no bucket at all. At ABHK, Kickstarter highlighted “Strangers in a Strange Place: Artist Exchange on Migration,” a program created in conjunction by Videotage and Rachel Rits-Volloch’s MOMENTUM space in Berlin. The project aims to raise awareness of the experience of immigrants through an artist exchange whereby Amir Fattal in Berlin and Morgan Wong from Hong Kong will work with immigrant communities in each other’s respective countries. (You can still contribute to the project, until April 21, [here](#).)

“We are art migrants drifting from one fair to another fair or art refugees,” Wong said at a roundtable discussion. “Art is no longer about physical boundaries, it is about immateriality.”

Best Idea Worth Considering: The decentralization of Art Basel through Art Basel Cities

Art Basel’s parent company, MCH Group, is planning to buy up existing art fairs or starting new ones. This may not be as ominous as it seems. Art fairs generate tremendous exposure for artists and are economic powerhouses. Art Basel Cities (ABC) will partner with various cities to develop cultural content with selected projects showcased at different Art Basel-owned fairs around the world. ABC’s board members include Brooklyn Museum director Anne Pasternak; Lars Nittve, founding director of London’s Tate Modern; Uli Sigg, who donated most of his collection of Chinese contemporary art to the M+ Museum; and Michael Tay, a former Singapore diplomat who runs the Foundation for the Arts and Social Enterprise.

Though at the moment this seems like a PR initiative on the part of Art Basel, it includes board members with some real art world chops. For example, Sigg was prescient in his acquisition of contemporary Chinese art, saving critically acclaimed works from being lost to obscurity or locked up in dusty storage bins, beholden to prevailing political winds; and Pasternak recently took over as leader of the Brooklyn Museum after more than 20 years at the helm of Creative Time.

Best Art Basel Hong Kong artworks: Pretty, shiny things that facilitate selfies anytime and anyplace — but especially during artist talks

ABHK had three designated sections: the Insights sector, with 28 galleries from Asia; the Discoveries sector, with 24 galleries showing emerging artists; and the Encounters section, curated by Alexie Glass-Kantor, the executive director of Artspace in Sydney, which was decidedly more tame and less controversial than in previous years. However, the Art Basel audience's relentless selfie addiction — including complete disrespect for artists during Salon discussions — combined with an obsession for reflective surfaces or gold objects, seemed to have reached an all time high.

In the Encounters section, Korean artist Kyungah Ham showed “What You See Is The Unseen/Chandeliers For Five Cities” (2014–15), an embroidered tapestry of ornate chandeliers suggesting the demise of an empire. Ham covertly hired North Korean female textile workers to stitch her designs, using agents to smuggle the pieces through China to highlight the tension between North and South Korea, and the issue of forced labor.

A much needed antidote to glittery selfie bait was Indonesia-born, Australia-based Tintin Wulia's “Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories” (2016), also in the Encounters section. Hong Kong is rife with elderly cardboard collectors who push trolleys to recycling centers to earn enough money to eat. Wulia spent two years following the cardboard's journey, including its use on Sundays by Filipina domestic workers who lay it flat on the ground to sit on and socialize in public areas during their one day a week off from work.

Best Art Films: A tie between Takashi Murakami and William Kentridge

Li Zhenhua, the Beijing- and Zurich-based curator, screened over 70 films during ABHK. They included William Kentridge's “10 Drawings for Projection” (1989–2011), a series of 10 animated films that explored South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy through the gradual transformation of main character Soho Eckstein from capitalist to penitent.

Takashi Murakami's first feature length film, *Jellyfish Eyes* (2013), shows the world being saved from nuclear holocaust by a clutch of schoolchildren who battle evil with the help of their imaginary friends. These friends can be summoned at will through special mobile phones. The film highlights the unique way the Japanese have of dealing with the Fukushima nuclear meltdown that followed 2011's earthquake and devastating tsunami. During ABHK, Murakami staged a discrete “InstaMeet” gathering with his fans in a hotel suite in the Admiralty district and let his fans take as many selfies with him as they could muster.

URL: <http://hyperallergic.com/286423/binging-on-selfies-and-regurgitating-money-the-best-of-hong-kongs-art-fair-week/>