

BECOMING AN INDUSTRY

An interview with Warren Leung Chi Wo for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion
coming soon • เร็ว ๆ นี้

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Q: How would you position yourself in the Hong Kong art world?

So, to position myself in the Hong Kong art world, personally, I think as far as I have observed what has happened in the past, perhaps I would say that I am a bit old, in a way that I have been lucky to continue making art. Whereas in the past it was kind of like a different time. You would always have mainly different people to work. So nowadays we are starting to see people who could maintain a bit longer. So, in that sense I probably would be the one who has been working since the past until now in the last twenty years. And then also I have another identity as an art teacher. So, I can imagine that the young ones would probably work with me in some particular context that I am interested in. I'm not sure if this is about my position, but in a way, I will say that I now have got a rather stable life. Maybe that reflects a bit my position.

Q: When you graduated in the 1990s there were not a lot of international art world professionals in Hong Kong. From your experience, how did their entrance in Hong Kong take place and how was this perceived by the homegrown art scene?

I remember that in the 90s that idea of 'international' was not clear. First, it was the time facing to the Handover of Hong Kong in terms of sovereignty. Obviously, you felt that it was really international, because it was covered by the international news and the society had been paying a lot of attention from different worlds. And then in daily life you could feel like Hong Kong actually was progressing into more like a liberal society, although it was a colony. But in the art world, I think on the one hand that mindset could not be totally different. But on the other hand, the art population was rather small. So, we couldn't really sense that kind of internationalism in the daily practice of the so-called art world that we define today. But for example, in school, the teachers would give you examples by artists from different parts of the world and then you would be rethinking your language; your art language could be international. Although you really didn't know if you had an international audience or any other colleagues that could work with you. But that's fine because I think in the 90s artists and many people were just so busy with this very local agenda; because the Handover was an identity issue, and obviously culturally speaking there was very strong discourse on the post-colonial situation of Hong Kong. And then in academia you also had people from other places being interested in Hong Kong's cultural development; I mean a very famous book by [Ackbar] Abbas for example. So, it is interesting. We didn't really see international practice. But that idea of being international was not really a question. I remember it was very interesting. It was the time, it was almost

like an advertisement slogan, I do not know who invented it: 'Think global, act local'. I don't know who started that. I really remember that we had a discussion at Para Site, when we were working at Para Site, we somehow thought, "yeah, that kind of globally practicing art is something we are doing". But of course, we didn't really know if we could have any international interest. I mean, it's interesting that it was difficult to split them as you found that it is almost like a daily practice in terms of media, in terms of communication, in terms of all this information. You didn't really feel disconnected, right? But in practice I think it was also the moment, happening mainly because of this political coverage. We started to meet let's say journalists, curators; people who had a chance to pass through Hong Kong. And they thought that would be a good occasion to look at that a bit more. So, I think it was really the time that you would have these thoughts about the 'international' coming into our physical world. That you could meet people. I think it was also an interesting situation for the local art development; because of the Handover, and maybe because of the reform of the government structure. I remember, in 1995 we first had the *Hong Kong Arts Development Council* (HKADC), which always had a lot of complaints, but at least you could really tell the difference between having zero support and having some support. So, it was the first time that artists could really receive support from a public structure in visual arts. And that really made a difference.

Q: What is your personal experience with interactions with international art world players, such as international galleries, curators, artists, and was this different from interactions within the Hong Kong art world?

My personal experience with the interactions with all these international players... I try not to simplify the word 'international' because I think all the time it is probably a bit of personal character, but not because they are visiting. I mean I had also diverse responses from all these international curators. Some of them, for me, were annoying. And I remember that you would have these visits by these curators who did not prepare anything, and he or she would not have any idea of what I was doing before they came. I found actually that you would waste a lot of time, because if you did not find my work interesting, why did you have to make the visit? Right? But you would also have people, who were very sincere, taking notes, and really with a lot of questions; that was very pleasant. But somehow, I guess it is a bit personal; someone would be more attentive; someone would be more like doing this art tourism. I think also it is a different thing if you have a visitor who has a very particular agenda. So, if they are working on a certain project, they have a very precise idea of what they want to see. But also, you would have people who probably would be a bit more open for possibilities. I guess for the situation of Hong Kong in the early years, you probably would have people who came for special reasons, so they just needed their task fulfilled. But I think recently we also started to see people who heard of Hong Kong and they were interested to come. Even if they would not have a very concrete idea. But they may be still very open for that. In this case you would also have people who would like to listen, and that was important.

Q: It seems that Para Site has been very successful in linking up to the international art world. From your experience, how did this process take place, and what have been the upsides and downsides of this development?

For Para Site's development, it has a very strong international profile today. But I would say that when we started, as I also talked about that kind of global force from the very beginning. I think that Para Site's practice, even today, has been always so down to earth. There was a time that we started with local artists that we worked with. But not simply confined to that meaning of 'local' because in that sense we also worked with artists who came from other countries but decided to live in Hong Kong. We always dealt with a certain flexibility. I think maybe it is also because we are artists. We hate certain kinds of stereotypes. So we always tried to subvert very rigid ideas of defining. So that 'oeuvre' of being in Hong Kong was extended when members started to travel and to live overseas. Because your surroundings are no longer that very Hong Kong physical space. So you would have friends from other countries, because you were in Amsterdam, you were in Los Angeles and so on. So I think that becomes part of your world. So when you came back, you would just bring those things back. Our international program was simply there because our lives have sustained a bit of that so-called foreign flavour. But also because I think this has become our agenda. For example, when you think about your work, you will also think about how your work could be contextualised in certain spaces and certain locations. Because also members started to do artists in residencies; I think that is also important. I remember around the time when we all came back, it was like the year 2000, I mean for programming it was just very natural. We started to include very good artists, friends, that we met on the road. That somehow maybe for some later members, or colleagues and they find that Para Site was open to different possibilities. Somehow the first conversation with Tobias Berger in 2003, or maybe 2004, when he was just visiting Hong Kong from New Zealand; he would just contact us for that kind of communication simply because I guess we were just open.

Q: What are the benefits or positives of the arrival of the international art world in Hong Kong?

Well, I guess with all these international visitors in the art world that are coming to Hong Kong, the benefits are apparent, as the media have covered these. You have all these big galleries, important curators, and because of that also local artists would earn this opportunity to further develop their career beyond Hong Kong. That's obvious. I guess there is also the other part, that's more a personal experience. One time I had this moving company, or they call it 'art logistic company', to pick up some works here, so I checked with this guy moving all the stuff, and they just find that they were so busy now. They got a lot of commissions and works and with the approaching art fair, they simply had to turn down offers. What I have seen, is that the framers charge much more than before. So, I think now it has become an industry. In the 90s we never thought it is an industry. And that means that you also have this periphery. The people working around you. They might not be interested in art, but they are kind of essential to make this an industry. So that is a benefit to the government because as an industry they would be much more aware of artists or many people who work in this

industry's presence. And they would consider economic policy to deal with this. After all it is the GDP they are interested in. But at least, because they are interested, for their budget they will also have... this year they actually had a pretty good chunk of money put into art. The interesting thing is that they would spend money not simply on this buying and selling of art. They would also have this money going to community projects. They will also have money into the education. After all, a lot of people still complain that a lot of money could still be mis-spent, but there is also money well-spent. So, I think that is a benefit.

Q: What are the disadvantages or negatives of the arrival of the international art world?

The disadvantage actually is really the other side of the benefits. I mentioned that you now have to pay more for the framing. It is a benefit for the framer. But you see that as an industry more people are in this competition. But also, more people would demand the service. And it has become very difficult, for example, for a lot of small galleries it's just hard to compete in terms of the production skills and qualities. And then because of the art fair, the galleries need to spend a lot of money to take part in the art fair. Some of them would really make a decent profit, but not all. But it is almost like usual practice for the galleries. Even if you are losing money, you are working in this... You still go to the art fair. And now I guess, when it has become an industry, you start to see that there are some very influential people. You have all these magazine-rankings of all these important people. In the old days, if you live in this small local village, you don't need to care about all these things. But today, everything has been connected and affected. So, the space has been so expensive. Maybe this is not the fault of the art world. But somehow you can imagine because you have these big spending galleries looking for art space, and now artists also need studio space, which is a good thing that you have more artists but at the same time it has become more competitive to have opportunities. So maybe this is a good/bad thing: you always welcome competition, but when it comes to your really personal life, you definitely sense it. Everything has become more demanding. But I think it is interesting to think how you can turn all these disadvantages to be an advantage. And that is the most challenging thing to do.