

Contemporary art needs long-term support if it is to reach out to the public and make a difference, writes **Claire Hsu**

# The big picture

**C**an art change the world? Can art change anything? These questions were posed by the Seoul-based art collaborative, Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, last week as both a discussion topic and the title of a work produced during the group's artistic residency at Asia Art Archive.

Regardless of any conclusions reached during the presentation, it was clear that most of the audience already believed in the possibility of art to make a difference. They were but a handful of the small percentage of Hong Kong's population that has the interest to engage with contemporary art on a deeper level.

The majority of Hong Kong's citizens see contemporary art as a hobby for the rich. And who can blame them? Its press coverage is mostly limited to its value in the marketplace and the prices it fetches at auction. If a Hong Kong family wants to see an exhibition of contemporary art at the weekend, they are more or less limited to commercial art galleries. Because of the

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extortionate rents that limit the galleries' size, the only time a family might see art on a larger scale is during an auction preview or an art fair. Our government museums present occasional exhibitions of contemporary art, but those tend to limit their focus to work made in Hong Kong.

What is wrong with this picture? There is nothing wrong with seeing art in a commercial gallery or at an art fair, but there is something seriously wrong when the only places to see art are commercial venues. Fundamentally, the goal of these spaces is to sell work. Let's be realistic: the art world could not function without these commercial components. But, it should become a cultural concern when commercial venues stand in for and perform the role that public platforms like museums are meant to fulfil, and when the inclusion of work in an auction is automatically read as confirmation of its historic importance.

It is difficult to believe that in a city as

wealthy, ambitious and internationally minded as Hong Kong, a museum or sizeable public gallery with a consistent contemporary art exhibition programme does not exist. Non-profit organisations work hard to address this imbalance. However, until there is sufficient support and interest, both public and private, in promoting the development of cultural spaces within our society, the audience will continue to be the small group of those already converted.

An annual grant from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council set up in 1995 has allowed smaller non-profit visual art spaces to exist for over a decade, while similar organisations established simultaneously in the region are now defunct. The largest grant a visual arts organisation can apply for is approximately HK\$700,000, regardless of history, influence or contributions to the field. Meanwhile, in the performing arts sector, nine major groups are awarded a portion of HK\$264 million.

Most of these non-profit visual art spaces have been able to survive, but because of the difficulty in securing private or corporate funding for the visual arts in Hong Kong, they have not grown. Asia Art Archive is a rare exception in the amount of money it has been able to raise beyond the grant (it initially covered 90 per cent of the budget; 10 years later, it covers 6 per cent). However, increased government funding, alongside private support, will be crucial to the long-term future of the organisation.

It is important that a mechanism is put in place to help those organisations with solid track records grow to the next level and sustain themselves, becoming flagship institutions of which Hong Kong can be proud. The success of these organisations will only strengthen projects like West Kowloon's M+ centre for visual culture and the Central Police Station Compound.

The government's announcement of new Arts Capacity Development Funding this year effectively recognises the funding gap in the visual arts sector. A HK\$1.5 billion endowment will see an annual return of around HK\$60 million going towards arts development, half of which will go to the Arts Development Council and the other HK\$30 million to the new fund. While it is a step in the right direction, there are a number of issues. If not the Arts Development Council, with its close relationship to these organisations, then who will administer these funds? What are the criteria for judging an organisation's eligibility and assessing its contribution and relevance? If the fund's goal is to help visual arts organisations grow, will the grant be offered on a long-term basis?



Because, in reality, it is not only increased – but also long-term – funding that will be important in building the institutions we need.

It is true that Hong Kong is planning to make a significant investment in West Kowloon's M+, which will play an important role. However, it is vital that we safeguard and develop a range of venues and voices for the collection, interpretation, research and discussion around contemporary art; it should be the right of every individual in Hong Kong to have a choice. And it is vital that the government take a holistic approach to developing the visual art scene so we do not end up with an enormous museum in West Kowloon on one side and tiny organisations on the other, with little in between.

So, why bother developing these institutions in the first place? Can art really change the world?

Of course it can. Through art, we open our minds to the ways we look at the world. Art is not purely symptomatic, but a mirror of our times. Art is not only about its

investment potential. Whether in the form of socially-politically motivated works, like those of the post-80s generation in Hong Kong around the demolition of Star Ferry or Choi Yuen village, or observations of the everyday, as in the work of Hong Kong's Pak Sheung-chuen, or works that highlight the plight of the domestic worker in our society in the photography of Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong, art enables us to consider the world we live in from new perspectives. Artists can speak the unspeakable, address inequalities within society and imagine a new order of things.

With a widening poverty gap in Hong Kong, bombs dropping in Libya and nuclear threats following the earthquake in Japan, something has to change the world. If, in Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries' words, the "smart" guys running the world would spend more time with art, then perhaps art would finally be given the opportunity to make a difference.

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Agnes Kang

## A woman's place

**W**omen in Hong Kong today live in contradictory times. On one hand, they have made remarkable advances as reflected by their increasing presence in the workplace and other public arenas. However, this belies a lack of progress in the symbolic realm, particularly in changing social and cultural attitudes about gender.

The media plays a powerful role in shaping and reflecting public perceptions of gender. Studies on images of women in the mainstream media in Hong Kong from the 1980s and 1990s strongly convey that a woman's place is in the home and stress the need to keep up one's physical appearance. Men are generally represented as authority figures while women take on more subordinate roles. These representations of women have not changed much in the past 30 years. Research conducted last year on advertising for luxury homes in Hong Kong found that the adverts typically portrayed women as traditional objects of desire and/or wives and mothers. For example, in a TV commercial for Residence Bel-Air, images of a grand home are accompanied by a female vocalist singing: "What are you doing for the rest of your life?" The romantic ballad sets the tone for the main narrative showing a woman running through gardens to the home, to her waiting lover. Her chief preoccupation, according to the song lyrics, is to ask her man to "spend [his life] with me". The advert focuses on the woman's attainment of love and devotion. It culminates in a kiss, suggesting that the "successful" woman in this advertisement has achieved the perfect life – fulfilling her dream of perfect love in her ideal home.

Even in seemingly more non-traditional roles, the same values are emphasised. For example, in an advert for The Long Beach property development, we see a young, independent and competitive woman realising her goals through hard work and action. The female protagonist is then transformed through her relationship with a man and, by the end, is revealed in a more feminine image of the woman as a wife and mother. The love story in the commercial depicts a kind of "taming" of the non-traditional woman into a more traditional and "recognisable" one.

The representations of women in adverts such as these suggest there is only one path to success for women – to use stereotypically feminine roles to pursue wealth and a privileged life.

If we look to measure the progress of women in terms of their non-traditional representations in the media, the results are disheartening.

Even government public service messages are not immune to gender stereotypes

In a series of public service adverts in the wake of the severe acute respiratory syndrome crisis, Hongkongers were urged to fulfil their civic duties, which, according to the ads, translated into clearly gendered roles: men were urged to be careful when shaking hands in business meetings and women were encouraged to dutifully apply the formula for mixing bleach solution.

That so little has changed in media representations of women over three decades speaks to a critical need for society to review how traditional gender stereotypes contribute to the limited roles available to women in our society. The news underscores how these images contribute to practices that fossilise outdated views of gender. After all, it was only a few years ago that a female teacher resigned over a dress code that forced female staff to wear dresses.

The perpetuation of stereotypes is particularly destructive because the media wields the power to normalise those stereotypes. The images are pervasive to the point that they appear so convincing that it is difficult to conceive of women in any other way. Maintaining stereotypical images of women in the media implies a degree of complicity with the lack of symbolic progress for women in Hong Kong society. Acknowledging that stereotypes in the media create barriers to gender parity is the first step to challenging and, ultimately, changing them.

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Voices: Hong Kong

## Keep basic-wage rules to an absolute minimum

**Lau Nai-keung**

I am all for minimum wage legislation that provides a bottom line for the income of the working poor – without it, I am afraid more people would just give up working and opt for public assistance. Then the burden of social security would ultimately fall on the shoulders of you and me in terms of higher levies and taxation.

This simple objective requires clear and simple procedures that both employers and employees can easily understand, and it should all involve minimal administration. But if anyone should care to read the government draft reference guidelines on the subject, which are supposed to be a must-read for all employers and employees, he or she would fall into a mental maze.

The guidelines took me a few hours to grasp and, even for a small firm, it will require at least one full-time staff member to administer the system.

According to some calculations, to satisfy the stipulations in the guidelines, taking into account lunch breaks and holidays, the minimum wage of HK\$28 per hour would translate into around HK\$9,000 a month.

I must say that some of these calculations are exaggerations, and are meant to be sensational. But, to the public, this is a far cry from the monthly minimum wage of around HK\$6,000 that was originally envisaged when HK\$28 per hour was put on the bargaining table.

Nobody should begrudge others earning more money for their work but, at the same time, any right-

minded person would ask the logical question: can employers afford this minimum wage level plus the additional administrative costs? In addition, can our economy afford such new measures?

In turn, come May 1, when the minimum wage law comes into effect, quite a number of workers, especially the old, weak, uneducated and unskilled, will inevitably lose their jobs. And a large proportion of the additional costs will be passed

Can employers afford this minimum wage level plus the additional administrative costs?

on to consumers in the form of higher prices.

This will result in stagflation and businesses closing down, meaning there will be more job losses; the higher the minimum wage, the more severe the results.

Pushing the minimum wage law beyond what is reasonable is obviously harmful in every aspect, and first and foremost detrimental to the working poor it was originally designed to protect.

Trade union leaders are fully aware of the situation and know that this is ultimately not beneficial to workers, but they are now on their moral high horses and cannot simply dismount.

They have fought and won a battle against Cafe de Coral

regarding paying for lunch breaks, and there is no way they will agree to leave this out of the wage calculation. As for holidays, these are workers' entitlements and, of course, they should be counted.

This is a very good excuse for mobilising people to take to the streets to protest, and I can see it coming. There are votes to be gained.

The government will soon be caught in the crossfire between employers and trade unions, and the populist media and politicians will be chelering on the latter from the sidelines.

The answer is for the government to simplify the issue instead of complicating it in order to be politically correct.

One thing is for sure, minimum wage legislation is only the beginning of a long, drawn-out period of political and social bargaining.

With five city-wide elections in the coming two years, such bargaining may well be highly irrational, and sometimes even nasty. Do not expect fair play because there is not going to be any.

**Lau Nai-keung is a member of the Basic Law Committee of the NPC Standing Committee, and also a member of the Commission on Strategic Development**

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Voices: Energy

## Plug into the power of China's deserts

**Jerry Li**

With events still unfolding in Japan following last month's devastating earthquake and subsequent tsunami and radiation leaks, many people are asking what could have been done to avoid or lessen the impact of the tragedy.

Countries around the world have suspended their nuclear plant programmes. China has put nuclear power plant construction plans on hold, and ordered a safety review of all facilities and its overall nuclear energy plan.

As we look ahead, we should determine the broader implications of this tragedy, which has revived the debate over nuclear safety and safe energy supplies.

We must wake up to the fact that we need to look for safer and more sustainable sources of energy than nuclear power. And we should not forget that there is still a pressing need to prevent climate change by making deep cuts in carbon dioxide emissions.

To meet these challenges, we should look to the sky: the sun is our infinite energy source.

The Desertec concept offers a solution that provides plentiful supplies of safe and clean energy using technologies available today. The idea is to harness the sun's power in deserts and transmit it through an integrated grid. It is a powerful concept, given that within six hours, deserts receive more energy from the sun than humanity consumes in a year.

Concentrated solar power (CSP) technology captures this heat with specialised mirrors to boil water and generate electricity with a steam turbine. And with the help of ultra-high voltage direct current (UHVDC)

transmission lines, this energy can be transmitted over thousands of kilometres to centres of demand.

Both China and Mongolia have large areas of desert that would be suitable for building such power plants. If realised, the potential in these areas would be enough to support the energy needs not only of these two nations, but also some neighbouring countries.

China's green revolution is being spurred by the enormous amounts of power it needs to support its fast expanding economy. The country is experimenting with CSP and, although it lags behind in the development and implementation of the technology, its unique knowledge of large-scale UHVDC deployment lays a solid basis for this technology to become a leading energy solution for China as well as the region.

There is great potential for the whole Greater East Asia region – China, Mongolia, Japan, South Korea plus the five Asean nations in the Mekong region – to push ahead with this technology. While the concept originated in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, the region's communities could see even bigger benefits.

It is in everyone's interest that China is an active player in this area. Beijing, together with industry, should promote the concept, and accelerate construction of the necessary infrastructure while supporting financing and acceptance by key players.

**Jerry Li is chairman of Asia Energy Platform, a non-profit organisation that promotes energy-efficient and renewable-energy technologies, and a co-ordinator of Desertec Foundation in the Asian region**

Voices: Philosophy

## When all that's solid melts into uncertainty

**William Tam**

The earthquake and tsunami in Japan remind us again how vulnerable and psychologically unprepared we are, compared with the Japanese themselves, in regard to natural disasters. In this technologically innovative age, it is easy to surrender to the idea that we have successfully mastered nature and can exploit its resources without paying a price.

In such shocking times, we should consider the essays of the Roman stoic philosopher Seneca, who invited us to think pessimistically and to always expect the unexpected. Yet, he also calms us by reminding us that almost nothing is certain. No matter how sophisticated our plans, there are always things that will get in our way and frustrate us.

Seneca said life is intrinsically founded on chaos. Rather than striving towards certainty, we should embrace uncertainty and learn to live with it. We should regard nature as infinitely more powerful than ourselves. Pessimism keeps us humble and helps us expand our mental universe.

Small wonder, then, that the Japanese are highly stoic, given that they live their lives surrounded by volcanoes and the constant threat of earthquakes. But there is a wiser lesson to learn here. Instead of just preparing for what life may throw at us, we should also learn to appreciate the notion of death or decay.

Indeed, traditional Japanese philosophy advocates a view that all things are prone to decay; what we hold dear today will eventually perish. That is why the Japanese have the capacity to fathom the

beauty of withering cherry flowers rather than the blossom, and the beauty of a moon partially covered by clouds.

If the notion of decay is deemed to be of value, it is because cherishing what will soon disappear can enable us to pay more attention to the smallest details in life and, from that, discover what can best enrich our lives.

Perhaps this is why photography was invented, and why we feel the need to write diaries and their modern-day equivalent, blogs.

Our need to record things lies in its ability to freeze the most unforgettable moments in life, solidify and amplify them, and thereby grant us the chance to savour what is beautiful and good in our hearts. It is precisely because things are prone to decay that we find psychological value in immortality.

Hence, a great deal of happiness in life is grounded in the notion of decay. If good friends never part, they will never appreciate the joy of a reunion that comes later. If we are not daunted by death, we will never find the value in our existence.

The Japanese realised this long ago. That is why they are able to refine every detail in life, and execute it to perfection.

From them, not only can we learn how to remain calm in the face of nature's fury, but we can also learn how to nurture our lives and live them to their fullest.

And, most importantly, the Japanese way can help us find the right attitude to deal with life's uncertainties.

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