

Art Fair Innovations in Shanghai & London (AFI)

Despite the advanced technological context of the Chinese art market, collectors appear to remain conservative, preferring 2D and traditional sculptural works to digitally mediated art. How this will impact the future of the Shanghai art fairs and their infrastructure is a key question for this strand of the AFI project. Additionally, the rapid expansion of the Chinese art market - both online and offline - has not been matched by the equivalent growth of a developed critical and curatorial culture. This has led to a rapid increase in students from China applying for places on related arts and humanities programmes at UK academic institutions. Whilst the UK can provide this service, so assisting in securing the stability and sustainability of the Chinese art market (rather than letting it become prey to rampant speculation and a financial bubble), staff engaging with these students need to understand the driving forces, conditions and value systems of key locales within the Asian commercial arts sector through direct engagement.

Background

The Art Fair Innovation project seeks to initiate extensive examination of aspects of the Shanghai art market and its related creative sectors. The research activities act as a series of proofs-of-concept for more extensive and intensive UK-Chinese research engagement with and through the West Bund Art and Design Fair and Shanghai cultural institutions. These activities have also facilitated the direct engagement and networking necessary to build a shared understanding between the UK project team and academic colleagues in Shanghai, as well as enabling the team of UK researchers to develop and consolidate reciprocal meaningful connections with key individuals working in or overseeing Shanghai's cultural sector. The project builds upon established partnerships developed between the RCA and Shanghai University, the West Bund Art and Design Fair, the International Awards for Art Criticism, the John Moores Painting Prize China and the Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum.

Research trip to Shanghai

Between June 15th and 19th RCA based researcher Dr Eleanor Dare, visited Shanghai to conduct a series of research activities, including a participatory digital curation workshop, roundtable talks on the digital in contemporary art practices, as well as visiting Shanghai University and a number of relevant galleries. All these activities involved artists, gallery owners, curatorial and arts management practitioners, as well as individuals directly involved in the West Bund and Shanghai Art Fairs. The visit to Shanghai University coincided with the University's graduation show, enabling further insight into aspects of the educational backdrop to the Art Fair Innovation project, in particular, questions relating to fine art and digital media education.

Addressing innovation: gallery visits

On June 15th 2019 three not-for-profit galleries were visited, the Shanghai Ming Contemporary Art Museum (McaM), the Chronus Art Centre (CAC) and the Shanghai Mingsheng Art Museum.

McaM

McaM, like many Shanghai art galleries, is set within a renovated factory, in the northern area of Shanghai, the Zhabei District. The museum describes itself as a non-profit institute focusing 'mainly on experimental dance performances, visual art, and new media art.' At the time of the visit a show called *Sensory Canvas* was open, the nature of the work, deploying light projection, meant that most of the large, concrete interior was in darkness, apart from one exhibit, Karina Smigla-Bobinski's installation, *ADA*. Other works in the show, addressed *Kung Fu Motion Visualization* (Tobias Gremmler), Chinese Calligraphy (also Tobias Gremmler) and elemental properties, such as *Wind Forms* (WOW) and water, via the wet piece *Arc Zero* by James Tapscott. These Chinese and international works arguably point to a curatorial commitment to Chinese traditions and ideas, in this case, mediated by emergent technologies. McaM Associate Curator, Zhang Yuan, explained that the museum is owned by a real estate developer. The apartment blocks opposite the museum are also owned by her, suggesting another aspect of the complex symbiosis between commerce and art. However, Zhang Yuan did not feel the museum had a direct relationship to art fairs, something that was also echoed by CAC Executive Director, Bi Xin.

The Chronus Art Centre (CAC)

At CAC, Bi Xin spoke of the current exhibition of bio-art, entitled *Growing*. Bi Xin also confirmed that education, especially relating to coding and emergent technologies, is a significant part of the centre's remit, with upcoming workshops on coding and robotics and an international research and creation fellowship. CAC is set within a maze-like cluster of private galleries and fashion outlets, as well as cafés and a music venue, again, pointing to an interdependency between commerce, not-for-profit art spaces and entertainment.



Above, left, McaM Associate Curator, Zhang Yuan bathed in the light of Hiroaki Umada's *Holistic Strata* at McaM. On the right, WOW's *Wind Form*.

Box 1. The Chronus Art Centre's educational programme:

With the founding of their research and creation lab, CAC has initiated five research and practice areas as follows:

- 1) Emotive Networks & Haptic Gaming
- 2) Generative Art and Big Data
- 3) Intelligent Audio-visual Systems
- 4) Existential Technologies
- 5) It from bit

The final area, *it from bit*, might be described as a research by practice fellowship, with the aim of hosting international artists and researchers working in the area of new media art. As the CAC web-site states:

'CAC brings to the public awareness of the impending post-human reality and the resulting social and political implications by accentuating the dynamic synergy of art and science as a response to the challenges and opportunities that contemporary media society has given rise to.' (Chronusartcenter.org).

CAC was founded in 2015 by technology entrepreneur, Dillion Zhang, as well as independent curator LI Zhenhua, and artist Hu Jieming. The author's discussion with Bi Xin confirmed that

the relationship of the Chronus Art Centre to the art fair is not direct, rather one of coexistence, within an ecology of organisations, individuals and practices. It is interesting to note that many of the artists currently exhibiting at CAC, Eduardo Kac (professor of art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago), Ionat Zuur (SymbioticaA, The University of Western Australia) are also academics, indeed, the author of this report has met them (as well as the CAC founder, Dillion Zhang), in 2017, at an academic conference at CAFA (the Chinese Academy of Fine Art) addressing STEM and STEAM in education. The presence of academics within the Shanghai Art world points to a highly connected network of interdependencies involving educational stakeholders, academies, galleries, artists and exhibitions, but also commerce – real estate, technology and banking. The importance of this network was later remarked upon by participants in the ideation workshop. Though in many ways, it appears to be a tacit network, not one that is always acknowledged or explicitly surfaced.

The Shanghai Mingsheng Art Museum

The Shanghai Mingsheng Art Museum is set in a large renovated factory space, with several big exhibition halls and an archive, as well as a café. The Museum charges a very small entry fee and states that it is dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art and culture. It was established by the China Minsheng Bank in 2010. The museum is:

‘committed to a model which includes international exchange, and a broad range of public education activities to open up a viable space for art. In the interest of fostering an understanding of art within the general public and creating a pluralistic landscape of art and culture, the museum is creating a dialogue between pure art and applied art; traditional art and the avant-garde art, to break down the barriers and close the gap between art and the general public.’ (minshengart.com).

At the time of the visit a large exhibition was devoted to the Japanese artist Tatsuo Miyajima’s work on time, *Being Coming*. All of the works in *Being Coming* deploy digital systems, digital clocks and electronic circuits to produce an at times, oppressive relationship to technology and the technology of duration. The work suggests a critical and experimental concern with the impact of technology, while also reflecting non-Western imperatives, for example, eschewing the number zero as a Western (albeit Arabic) construct.

Box 2. The Shanghai Mingsheng Art Museum's remit for education:

'As part of the CSR ethic of the China Minsheng Banking Corporation, using a core of creative exchange and the strategic advantages of the future development of the Expo site, we will carry out a wide range of public education activities to host exchanges between design, art, science and technology and music, creating an immersive creative environment for the public.' (minshengart.com)

'the museum reflects on the idea of a modern city, the built environment and living conditions to explore the possibilities of bringing art into urban life and hopes to explore other future directions of urban development' (minshengart.com)

Addressing innovation: round table talk on the *Digital in Contemporary Art Practices*

Eight participants took part in an afternoon of discussion which ranged over our respective practices and concerns and hopes about digital technology. The group discussed digital art, art fairs, galleries, sustainability and speculation about the future of the art fair.

Zhang Li, Deputy director and curator of the How Museum

Some participants, such as Zhang Li, Deputy director and curator of the How Museum, felt that, while the internet, computers and mobile phones have become pervasive and have changed many aspects of our lives, other issues remain the same, such as the need for artists to find something worth while to work on, the need to find an audience.

Hu Jie Ming, Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts and New Media Artist

Hu Jie Ming commented that learning how to use technology is easier than originating important concepts, while issues of installation and maintenance for digital artworks are often far more challenging than for traditional paintings. For those reasons, it is also more expensive to exhibit, so, while the public might accept digital art, there is an issue of cost and maintenance, but also difficulties around the provenance of digital art works, which can easily be copied and therefore, devalued. The instability of digital artworks calls for a new way of selling them, for example, warranty mechanisms, service agreements and guarantees.

Vytautas Jankauskas, Head of Research and Creation CAC

But others, such as Vytautas Jankauskas, Head of Research and Creation CAC, suggested such a move would turn artists into something else, something they might not want to be, or have the time to do; being a digital service provider and maintaining systems and service agreements would leave no time for making art. Perhaps, in that sense, digital art is more like performance art and could be conceptualised in that way? This throws an interesting light on a gallery like McaM, which is concerned with events rather than stable objects, but still begs the question of the role digital art might play in the future of the art fair, if it is to become more than a minority form and something that many collectors wish to buy. Perhaps, suggested Hu Jie Ming, buyers might purchase an artwork for a short time.

Gao Jie, digital artist working with AI

Gao Jie's digital art deploys AI to challenge mechanisms such as online reviews, and the canon of art history, mixing up artworks into the wrong period of history, with his Art4AI applications. Such works are very expensive to maintain and distribute, however. Gao Jie spoke of infinite virtual worlds in which avatars and agents might explore their own art culture. But do software packages and readymade technologies restrict us, do they stop diversity of practice, each layer of technology (Gao Jie alluded to Heidegger) asserting its own logic, which he compared to Wittgenstein's *beetle in a box* (1953), layers of meaning, which, like a private language, may not be accessible outside of each box. In the *Question Concerning Technology* (1977), Heidegger states:

'the correct instrumental definition of technology still does not show us technology's essence. In order that we may arrive at this, or at least come close to it, we must seek the true by way of the correct. We must ask: What is the instrumental itself? Within what do such things as means and end belong?'

However, having pursued one line of argument, Gao Jie then playfully disowned it and suggested that digital artists should make work for phone users, not art fairs. The art fair creates a mythology of art and is entangled with issues of taste and culture; making art for phones, he said, disrupts the art fair. But replication of the dominant order, in any situation is inescapable. It will emerge through any medium.

Thomas Looser, associate professor at NYU

Thomas Looser, associate professor at NYU in Shanghai, spoke of his work with a virtual museum of Asian art, he spoke of a Japanese tradition which gives life to images, he wondered if AR has more potential, because it is not enclosed. Thomas showed an image of the avatar pop star made as a labour of love by her fans, as a form of *posthuman image work*.

Ling Min, Professor of art history at Fine Arts Academy of Shanghai

Ling Min closed the talks by stating that she felt young people wanted to be entertained and, maybe, educated along the way, while artists will continue to put forward their ideas

and questions for the public. This takes us back to the issue of agency, what part does innovation play and what can digital art do in the art world? Of course, to ask such a question might limit us, as Heidegger asserts, to the binary of instrumentalism, on the one hand, and an anthropological definition on the other. Perhaps, like Gao Jie, we should first address the essence of technology, bearing in mind Heidegger's assertion that everywhere 'we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral.' (1977)

Box 3. Addressing innovation via a round table talk on the *Digital in Contemporary Art Practices*:

The participants were:

Thomas Looser, Department of East Asian Studies NYU; Vytautas Jankauskas, Head of Research and Creation CAC; Gao Jie, Digital Artist; Zhang Li, Deputy director and curator How Museum; Shi Hantao, Chief Coordinator of 2018 Shanghai Biennale at Power Station of Art, who kindly introduced us; Hu Jie Ming, Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts and New Media Artist; Professor Ling Min, Professor of art history at Fine Arts Academy of Shanghai, Eleanor Dare, RCA.

Key questions:

- Does digital mediation support or hinder art fairs?
- Can scanning technologies, VR and AR enhance exhibitions and fairs? If so, how?
- What are examples of outstanding digital artworks? How were they curated?
- What kind of problems are there in curating digital artworks?
- Do collectors buy or in any way consume digital art?
- What about VR – is VR here to stay?
- How can VR be scaled to become feasible?
- How do digital artworks make money? How do digital artists get paid? Does having works online stop people going to see them in galleries?
- If so, are there strategies to counter this? What might they be?
- Do galleries understand what to do with digital artworks?
- What would a perfect art fair be like that incorporated digital artworks significantly?

Main points:

- Not-for-profit galleries/museums are not sure of their relationship to the art fair
- The art fair must increasingly address education
- Digital artworks are very hard to maintain and hard to install and fit to a site, unlike paintings.
- Is an AAAS model needed, to make buyers feel secure about the future and value of digital art? (*Artwork As A Service*).
- Galleries away from the centre of Shanghai have to work hard to get attention, they work hard on educational events, coding classes and things that appeal to a younger audience, the

forthcoming celebration of HTML at HOW Museum, technology has not changed need to get audiences into the museum, that persists.

- The mobile phone is the locus of all life in China, is that the real future site of the art fair in Shanghai?
- Current art fair models may collapse, as demand cannot meet supply.
- The West Bund Art Fair has FutureLab involved for educational purposes, it recognises the importance of technological education.
- CAC supports and exhibits critical works; might this provide a model for critical approaches within the art fair?

Addressing innovation: ideation workshop on the technological future of the art fair

Twelve workshop participants from backgrounds covering arts management, digital arts practice, technological innovation, gallerists and traditional artists, took part. Over four hours a prototype composition for a future art fair was modelled. The model is intended to convey conceptual shifts in the art fair, not a linear model of physical space or architecture. The result was a model of very large as well as very intimate virtual curatorial spaces, to reflect on the relationships and synergies between digital art, digital infrastructure, sustainability, posthumanism and the economics of the art world. Education, communality and communication emerged as topics of great concern to the participants. The process was intended to facilitate dialogue through the physical process of making a model together. The twelve workshop participants loosely modelled the four major spaces used by the West Bund Art Fair, which are called *B1*, *B2*, *B3* and *A1*.

Below, Art Fair concept ideation workshop at the Glass House, West Bund, Shanghai.



Box 4. Modelling sustainable art fairs with organic systems



This area represents sustainability, with all art fair rubbish centrally displayed and recycled back into the art fair ecology, making it a sustainable system. The green area is a core part of the art fair's metabolism and vitality, with a vertical farm growing all food consumed in the fair and a compost heap of all organic waste supporting further growth. Animals represent a posthuman art fair, one which recognises a different framing of the art fair and the art fair subject. With AI we can envisage a much more complex form of visitor, manager and artist as well as curator. One participant, Tongzhou Yu, noted that Chinese people have already become cyborgs, welded to their phones, the current art fair morphology arguably does not design for the cyborg art fair audience, the posthuman subject.

Box 5. The Art Fair shifts to entertainment and performance

This is a model of an entertainment area which would also have huge holograms, the makers of this model believe events, contemporary music festivals, performance art, new media, film and other forms of entertainment will become more important than the current format of art fairs, they have confidence that younger people, will want such a shift.

Box 6. Accessibility, a Highline and a riverine art fair.

In the final model a High-line, like the one in New York, connects all the art fair buildings, near-by galleries and cafes, adding another dimension of sustainability (encouraging people to walk) and a space for dialogue and contemplation. The High-line would provide people with an overview of each area, a change of perspective. The West Bund area is not well served by public transport, making it unsustainable in the long term, the river could also be used, for both transportation, exhibition and accommodation, with more use of boats and floating structures. One group proposed a huge sail in the West Bund Art Fair which would change according to the weather and the passage of boats on the Huangpu River.



Box 7. Education and communality

The group which produced this model wanted to focus on education, communication and communality, they felt those aspects were as important as the artwork, as well as networks between other countries, people and events. The model makers spoke of a rhizomatic space, breaking down art fair hierarchies and opening the experience to wider audiences.



The coloured rings are portals to other parts of the art fair, other worlds and other ideas, these portals could be created with AR as well as VR. The yellow and blue structures evoke a rhizome, a network in which there is no top or bottom, they wanted to model grass roots assemblages, flattening the hierarchy of the art fair and engendering openness, accessibility and communality.

Box 8. A VR Art Fair is the most sustainable form?

The participant who created this model felt that VR should replace the Art Fair completely to make it sustainable and inclusive. However, VR in its current, most predominant form, does not easily allow dialogue with others, but Social VR might change that situation in the next few years. Prototyping a Social VR Art Fair could be a useful exercise.

Box 9. A 360-degree image of the Art Fair conceptual model from the inside.

The model was photographed with a 360 camera, so individuals can 'enter' the space via a VR headset. The analogue model will be rendered in 3D software so users can travel through the space. This has potential to become a much bigger participatory design project.

Overview

- Education is a priority for the future of art fairs, especially in the area of digital culture and the deeper understanding of its relationship to the arts.
- Art fair organisers recognise that a significant educational remit is entangled with the art fair's future.
- Accessibility can be improved with technologies such as AR and VR, but also with the use of the river and boats, as well as the Highline idea.
- Communalities should be promoted through the structure and form as well as the content of the art fair. Sharing of artworks and networking across hierarchies is important to the future prosperity of the art fair.
- AR and VR can bring greater participation to the art fair, especially for those who cannot travel to Shanghai and other international locations.
- The *art fair subject* is now a posthuman subject, art fairs must catch-up with the implications of this shift, in for example, our extreme dependency and attachment to digital devices.
- Selfie culture is changing curation, but is it invariably a good thing that gallery exhibits, and spaces are designed to be phone-photogenic?
- AR can augment the navigation of art fairs but, combined with AI it has potential to create a form of *cyborg art fair*, one which a non or posthuman entity might curate and take part in.
- Ideation workshop participant, Yipei Lee has worked both within the arts and culture sector and technological innovation, she expressed great interest in the potential of Blockchain technology to facilitate transparent payment of all artists and contributors to the Art Fair.
- The future of the Art Fair must include an environmentally sustainable model
- The relationship of not-for-profit galleries with the Art Fairs could become explicitly symbiotic through appreciation and deployment of not-for-profit gallery's expertise in education, but also in exhibiting and valuing experimental art – digital, performance, sound and interactive works.
- Younger audiences are interested in music festivals taking place in art fairs, as well as entertainment experiences, emerging technologies, VR, holograms, AR and communal interfaces to artwork. As well as educational opportunities.
- Web access to all aspects of the art fair may decrease its aura for wealthy collectors but perhaps the future of the art fair lies with a mass audience?
- The art fair as it currently stands may collapse, may not be sustainable.
- Digital art requires new paradigms of ownership if it is to be a significant part of an art market.

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