INTRODUCTION

The Chinese University Press : Copyrighted Materials

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the government of the People's Republic of China started a program of cultural policies aiming at creating a renewed interest in Chinese culture both in China and around the world. In the view of the Chinese government, this was a pressing issue and was a way to mend the negative impact of the "century of humiliations" that saw China lose its preeminent place in the hierarchy of world cultures during the period ranging from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. The desire to give back to Chinese culture the importance it once had, even though this importance did not necessarily translate into the kind of influence the so-called West exercised over the rest of the world, has been defined as China's soft power (*wenhua ruanshili* 文化軟實力). The notion of soft power, codified by Joseph Nye,[1] and opposed to its counterpart of hard power, encompasses cultural influences ranging from sports to high culture, which supposedly will lead to economic and military domination. Obviously, the desire to put Chinese culture on the same footing as the other cultures of the world, or even higher, stemmed directly from the extraordinary economic success the country has enjoyed since it has begun to reap the benefits of the open door policy established by at the end of the 1970s. Martin Jacques, in his bestseller *When China Rules the World*, describes the notion of soft power as enacted by the public and private authorities of the People's Republic:

> When a country is on the rise, a virtuous circle of expanding influence tends to develop. As China grows more powerful, more and more people want to know about it, read about it, watch television programs about it and go there as tourists. As China grows richer and its people enjoy expanding horizons, so the cultural output of the country will increase exponentially. Poor countries have few resources to devote to art galleries

> or arts centers; can sustain, at best, only a small film industry and a somewhat prosaic television service; can afford only threadbare facilities for sport; while their newspapers, unable to support a cohort of foreign correspondents, rely instead on Western agencies or syndicated articles for foreign coverage. . . . As China grows increasingly wealthy and powerful, it can afford to raise its sights and entertain objectives that were previously unattainable, such as staging the Olympic Games, or producing multinational blockbuster movies, or promoting the Shaolin Monks to tour the world with their kung fu extravaganza, or building a state-of-the-art metro system in Beijing, or commissioning the world's top architects to design magnificent new buildings. Wealth and economic strength are preconditions for the exercise of soft power and cultural influence.[2]

But the reception in the rest of the world of this very legitimate desire has been anything but straightforward. This wish of a country generally represented in Euro-America as nondemocratic and constantly violating human rights smacks too much of a desire to become a hegemonic nation in the eyes of nation-states that have dominated the world economically and culturally for about two centuries. That the "Western influence" over the world began with its most violent and destructive form, namely colonization and its lingering effects, has made it all the more necessary for Euro-American nations to define their new role in a postcolonial world as "soft," strongly emphasizing ideas that are the most likely to be represented as universal and therefore universally desirable, the most commonly and widely accepted being precisely the notions of democracy and human rights. For various reasons, not the least being that they have been shaped by a colonial past in no way comparable to that of places like India or Africa and are therefore more likely to accept these universals as unquestionable, many intellectuals in Hong Kong have been just as wary of the desire of the undemocratic People's Republic to project an idea of universalism translated into the notion of soft power. For instance, many artists in Hong Kong have looked at a number of cultural policies of the mainland as mere attempts to control the populations of the country and have therefore reacted violently against them. But this attitude shared by many members of the local cultural scene in Hong Kong is, as we shall see, only partially representative; other groups feel much closer to the new depiction of Chinese culture in general defined as soft power. Because they are also being shaped by very strong institutional structures, an essential requirement for the establishment of something called soft power, it is therefore possible to define cultural strategies and tactics in Hong Kong as interacting and reacting with the culture of the mainland in ways that are by no means simple or straightforward. They consequently must be understood and defined as sufficiently different not to be mistaken in any way with the project of soft power in mainland China. It is these differences that will be analyzed in this volume.

In my preceding book about the territory, *I Like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization*, no attempt was made to portray the whole of what is often called "Hong Kong art" by historians and artists alike. Considering the sheer number of practicing artists in the territory, I felt that such a portrait would require the work of many other scholars to be complete. In any case, attempts at providing a complete view of the local

The Chinese University Press · Copyrighted Materials

art scene have already been made in the very ambitious exhibition *Island Is Land: Hong Kong Eye. Contemporary Hong Kong Art*, an event at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2012. The exhibition catalogue is probably the most complete portrait of the art practices of the SAR to date and even includes an attempt at an art historical portrait of the place. But it is by no means exhaustive, and did not really try to be.[3] To conduct an exhaustive study of local art practices, researchers would have to start with a definition of what constitutes an artist in a place like Hong Kong. In fact, only a handful of those producing projects or objects that can be defined as art may be considered professionals, in the sense that they rely exclusively on these activities to make a living. Even the most successful of these artists, in terms of income generated by their art making, will often engage in other activities to supplement their revenue, the most common being teaching. In reality, the large majority of artists active in Hong Kong cannot be considered full-time practitioners at all because they rely on other sources of income to make a living. From office workers to housewives, the variety of activities they rely upon covers all that could be seen as belonging to an "elite," i.e., a well-educated middle class ranging from a lower middle class to an upper middle class, if we wanted to use a slightly dated vocabulary. It would be very instructive to study the social field of art practitioners using the demanding methods of sociology; that would require an analytical study involving interviewing a representative range of art practitioners (from the institutional to the most private of art makers), a representative range of art lovers (from the regular gallery goer to the occasional visitor), as well as, if it is at all possible, a representative range of people who have no interest in the visual arts. Such a study would actually be very useful since the creation of the West Kowloon Cultural District, a topic that will reappear repeatedly in the following pages, is now occupying a wide range of art professionals, including those on the political side of the cultural field. But such an ambitious project will have to be left to other researchers who are more likely than I, having no specific training in the social sciences, to obtain the necessary funding.

This book is therefore more concerned with art practices themselves and, to put it simply, will try to give as coherent and complete a picture as possible, for a single writer, of the kinds of art forms being made in Hong Kong at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Obviously, it is not possible to separate the study of the art practices of a place from an understanding of the social and institutional structures in which they are enacted. A consideration of the latter also has a place in this book. In the web-based publication *Modern Art Asia*, Anthony Elliott, a chair professor of sociology at Flinders University interested in transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, wrote a review of *I Like Hong Kong*, the kind of review any author would be extremely happy to receive. The reviewer noted "its importance for those wishing to explore how contemporary European philosophy relates to the varieties of Chinese art and culture," and added that "it is essential for collections on contemporary Chinese art criticism, and a good addition for those interested in artwork of migrant populations, post-colonial culture, and applied postmodern aesthetics." Just before that though, he observed that,

The Chinese University Press · Copyrighted Materials

While *I Like Hong Kong* strongly emphasizes the theoretical issues of engaging with Hong Kong's art, it is a little too subtle in its exploration of social issues. The hyper-commercial nature of Hong Kong has yet to nurture a strong market for local artworks, leaving the available arts infrastructure small and inaccessible to all but a few. Many artists therefore have enjoyed the freedom of experimenting conceptually without the pressures of conforming to funding bodies. This experimentation and the small network of arts practitioners, fuelled by the lack of specific hereditary practices and institutions, supports Vigneron's conceptual argument but is only briefly touched upon, as is the questioning of the local audience for art which predominantly engages with a local elite and a European expatriate community (Vigneron included). As the title might suggest, at times Vigneron overly romanticizes the reality. In his determination to publicize Hong Kong's art and culture, he overlooks some of the more negative social attitudes and antagonisms still in existence that affect the subjects and processes of the Hong Kong art world: huge economic inequality, marginalization of immigrant workers, the continuing struggle for full democracy, and the unique lack of post-colonial independence to name just a few. This is, however, a problem of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome more generally. The model struggles to analyze hierarchical relationships of power, as each rhizome has so many connected nodes that it is difficult to discern positive and negative relationships, as well as the significance of different relationships, until they have produced visible results. Thus, whilst making dense theory accessible through comical anecdotes and personal reflections, Vigneron sometimes seems hesitant to commit fully to this post-modern approach and the difficulties it entails.[4]

As Elliott notes in the next paragraph of his review, it was, however, not the purpose of the book to reflect on the social inequalities of Hong Kong, and the questions it raised were related to cultural globalism and how the idea of a local culture articulates itself in the works of its participating artists. I am not a fanatical defender of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, even though I generally find their works stimulating and a much better approach to the issues of cultural globalism than anyone else's in Euro-American thinking. Like Jacques Rancière for instance (of whom I am not a fanatical defender either, although his ideas will find an important place in this book), I find a number of Deleuze's arguments, in his works on cinema for instance, unnecessarily convoluted and more often bordering on wishful thinking than stemming from a reflection on the reality of the medium. The same could be said of Deleuze's attempt to recognize in the concept of the fold an overarching theme that would be true of the entire baroque period, when even the idea of a baroque period is fraught with the difficulties inherent in the discipline of traditional art history. All the same, I will still defend the validity of the concept of rhizome to understand how cultural elements are related with one another in a global setting. I must, however, agree with Elliott that the rhizome does not leave room for an understanding of how its manifold connections produce positivity or negativity. The reliance on a rhizomatic model will therefore not be as central in this volume as it was in *I Like Hong Kong*, even though it will reappear from time to time. Elliott's most serious reservation expressed about *I Like Hong Kong* is, however, something I cannot but agree entirely with: the fondness I

The Chinese University Press : Copyrighted Materials

have for the place colored all my accounts of the art practices of local artists and this attitude may well be seen as a damaging lack of objectivity. In spite of this, I do not reject at all *I Like Hong Kong* and its overall positive representation of Hong Kong society, but I am painfully aware of how too rosy a picture of this postcolonial space it presents, especially in its neoliberal economic setting wide open to all the negative influences of the world, inside and out. I will therefore address some of these issues in this volume, especially in the section dealing with the art practices engaged with the urban civic movement that became very visible in the years following the writing of *I Like Hong Kong*. In the same review, Elliott mentioned "how contemporary European philosophy relates to the varieties of Chinese art and culture." The question of the presence of European philosophy in considerations about art in China is the white whale of contemporary studies on this domain and many are the scholars, especially in mainland China, who find it objectionable to rely on theories first expressed in Europe or North America to make sense of present-day art in the Chinese world, especially when they believe they are dealing with traditional art practices. It might be possible to approach that question from a different angle than the one usually adopted by both the opponents and the defenders of the use of non-Chinese theory in the context of art criticism in the Chinese world (including the issue of Chinese diaspora art), even though I am aware that the position I will describe now might anger those who take an essentialist position in the evaluation of these theories. Such an essentialist position considers that there is something fundamentally Western in the theories that were so popular in the Chinese art world of 1990s, and hence their use in trying to understand Chinese art is unacceptable. We will see that even the expression "Chinese contemporary art" is charged with political meaning in today's debates about art in the mainland, where reliance on terms like "West" and "East" is unfortunately still very much alive, an issue I approached in *I Like Hong Kong*. If we accept that the polarization inherent in the East-West concept relies on a historically conditioned dichotomy that has produced an endless array of misconceptions and misinterpretations—see the work of Edward Said and the authors of postcolonial studies—it becomes very problematic to identify these theories, from deconstruction to feminism and everything else around and in between these domains, as specifically Western. That is the first point I want to raise and we may note that Anthony Elliott defined very precisely the kind of theory that underpins *I Like Hong Kong* as "European philosophy," something that might actually pass unnoticed since the term "Western" still pops up in the mind of many people when they see the words "European," "North American," or the one I often use: "Euro-American."

This is, of course, not to say that these theories or philosophy were not conceived in Euro-America. They obviously were, but it does not mean that their application is limited to the same geographical area, and for a very simple reason: there is no ownership of these theories and their origin in these very specific geographical areas does not make them inherently, exclusively, or reductively part of Euro-America. Why should anyone European or North American refrain from a sense of ownership? These theories were produced not out of the "genius of the

The Chinese University Press : Copyrighted Materials

West" (a notion we can, unfortunately, still encounter in the history of philosophy for instance where the "genius of the Greeks" is portrayed as unexplainable, almost miraculous and therefore inescapable) but out of specific social and cultural situations that have nothing to do with a Western ontology. Once the obstacles to the adoption, cultivation, and development of such ideas are lifted in other parts of the world, obstacles generated by, among other things, the violent suppression of other cultures enacted by colonialism and the poverty it generated, it becomes quickly obvious that some of the ideas of poststructuralism, for example, are not inherently Western because they make just as much sense in other geographical areas. All the same, we should never forget that other types of theories and philosophies were also produced in other parts of the world. That they remained almost invisible for a long time can be easily explained: the voice of Euro-America was more strongly heard only because of circumstances, mostly economic and military, that have nothing to do with the unacceptable idea of a superior Western identity. In this context, this way of understanding how intellectual life is produced, it becomes not only impossible to claim any kind of ownership of any kind of ways of thinking (the only important thing being to acknowledge a place of origin without turning it into a claim of exclusivity), but it also becomes nonsensical to reject an idea only because it was produced somewhere else. Within the discourse on cosmopolitanism, this idea that the ownership of concepts is to be rejected if we want to understand how ideas travel, adapt, and are transformed, has been essential. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, cultural cosmopolitanism proposes not a homogenized society "without culture" but one that "draws on the traces and residues of many cultural systems, of many ethical systems. . . . It means the ability to stand outside of having one's life written and scripted by any one community . . . and to draw selectively on a variety of discursive meanings."[5]

In the same spirit of recycling and rearranging as in *I Like Hong Kong*, derived from some of Deleuze's ideas, I will continue to use the term "plastician" to talk about artists engaged in contemporary art practices. This is briefly how this term was introduced in the preface of *I Like Hong Kong*:

> To avoid the problems attached to the use of a word [i.e., artist] that was already in existence at a time art was something so entirely different, I propose to use the name coined in France in the 1980s: instead of artist, I will use the term 'plasticien,' and even Anglicize it by writing it *plastician*. The use of this Gallicism will also have the advantage of allowing us to avoid the term 'contemporary.' Strictly speaking, 'contemporary art' would be all the present cultural activities called 'art' by their practitioners, but in reality 'contemporary art' is an expression only used for certain types of art like installation, performance, video art and a very narrow range of paintings. In fact, nobody seems to agree on a definition of what 'contemporary art' covers, but it remains a fact that it is the only type dealt with in magazines like the American publication *Artforum* for instance, where specialists often use complex ideas to analyze certain types of artworks ignoring others as being unworthy of their attention. . . . This word also takes into consideration the fact that 'artist' was far too much associated with the idea that art had to be painting or sculpture; today's *plasticians* often have no such specialization and are using an increasingly varied number of me-

The Chinese University Press · Copyrighted Materials

> dia, from painting to video and from sculpture to installation (whatever sense you give to the term 'installation').[6]

Since all the issues concerning the ideas of the contemporary, and its supposed counterpart the traditional, are central to this new book, the term *plastician* is still a relevant way to demarcate the role of the art practitioner of today from the one practitioners seemed to have had in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, it has not been possible to entirely avoid the use of words like *contemporary* in this book, and having recourse to concepts like *plastician* has also not made it possible to abandon entirely the word *artist*, unfortunately. In order to avoid being overly repetitive, especially in employing a neologism, in the following pages I use both *plastician* and *artist* to mean "art practitioner."

After the first chapter, dedicated to the description of the present-day fast changing institutional context of art in Hong Kong, the second chapter opens with the question of how the discipline of art history has defined the roles of the artist by relying on an understanding of the subject that was already strikingly similar in Euro-America and China by the end of the eighteenth century and then throughout the modern period up until today. Without following the same epistemological path, for the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both cultures developed conceptions of what artists are and how their identities rely on the creation of personal styles. Considering how the old diachronic categories of period style developed by traditional art history may be irrelevant to the understanding of the bewildering variety of art practices nowadays, it is important to adopt a mode of classification based on a relational structure, a synchronic model that can help make sense of the simultaneous presence of art forms that might seem entirely antithetical in today's Hong Kong. The relationship of such different art forms as calligraphy and dialogic aesthetics in Hong Kong, as we shall soon see, cannot be understood without situating it within the wider context of Chinese culture as it is manifested in mainland China.[7]

This relational model generates the four subsequent essays—Chapters 2 through 5—where I also endeavor to understand how the local social structure often underpins the choices made by plasticians. Many plasticians in Hong Kong conceive their art practice as opposed to other art practices, but we will see that the two recurring themes of contemporary/traditional and public/private, which are not entirely opposed in reality, can be relied upon to define these personal choices in art making. However, this view of the Hong Kong contemporary art field as ensnared in these two sets of concepts comes through the eyes of the author of this book, which renders an understanding of my own position in the art field extremely important. To ensure that contemporary/traditional and public/private are not essentialized, not understood as ontologically monolithic entities but as purely diacritic ones (i.e., the meaning of "contemporary" can only be established in a sort of loop that connects it with the meaning of "traditional" and vice versa), I will rely on Pierre Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus and insist that my understanding of it is necessarily shaped by my own position in that same field. It could therefore be said that positioning oneself within the social field of art is also a matter

The Chinese University Press · Copyrighted Materials

of trying to impose one's position as more relevant than others, but we always look at something from a certain point of view through eyes that have been trained by a certain cultural and social background. It would be naïve to believe that one's interpretation of art and culture is the only possible one, but it is still possible to affirm that a reading relying on a nonessentialist, relational, and relativist view of culture is the only honest one in a globalized world. Deciding on the relevance of this or that art practice is therefore not the purpose of this book; its content cannot be construed as art criticism and I will attempt never to pronounce on the validity of any side of the relational model it is built upon. In the end, however, this might very well be an already failed attempt as no one can ensure that there is no blind spot in one's understanding of such a complex and rich domain as the social field of art. I have tried, however, to include all the visible aspects of art making in Hong Kong and have also attempted to make a representative selection of plasticians working in each domain.

None of the above would make any sense unless one thinks in terms of an ecosystem that includes all the institutional aspects of art making in Hong Kong. From the apparently flourishing art market that has recently made itself visible in the territory to a multiplication of private and public galleries and art education institutions, present-day art practices in Hong Kong are inscribed in a complex field of influences and counterinfluences. Considering that many of these influences are both beneficial and detrimental to art practices at different times and for different practitioners, it is essential to understand how this ecosystem is shaped by questions of politics related to the social structure of Hong Kong. The first and last chapters will therefore explore these structures, looking particularly into the changes brought by the growing involvement of political institutions from mainland China in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong and the new configurations of local art education, and what they might have in store for the future.

The Chinese University Press : Copyrighted Materials

Notes

1 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

2 Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (London: Penguin, 2012), 548–49.

3 Chang Tsong-chung and Serenella Ciclitira, eds., *Island Is Land: Hong Kong Eye. Contemporary Hong Kong Art*, exhibition catalogue (Turin: Skira, 2012).

4 Anthony Elliott, Review of Frank Vigneron, *I Like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization*, *Modern Asian Art*, 2011, http://modernartasia.com/MAA7_Elliott_Vigneron.pdf (accessed September 12, 2011).

5 Stuart Hall, "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities," in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26. This quote was kindly suggested to me by Arthur Laing Ming Wong, who used it in his own proposal for his PhD thesis.

6 Frank Vigneron, *I Like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010), xii–xiii.

7 Although more and more exhibitions have been dedicated to the relationship between mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, revealing a desire to understand how art practices in these very different contexts can still relate to each other (a question often seen in the discussion about the nature of "Chineseness"), this book focuses only on the Hong Kong–mainland China relationship and does not consider any of the developments of art in Taiwan or even Macau; not because of any reasons of methodology but because it would require an even longer volume to tackle this four-sided relationship.

The Chinese University Press : Copyrighted Materials