

# CURATING AS STRATEGY

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## A MODEL FOR THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES "FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE"

The eye wanders from Star Ferry Pier in Tsim Sha Tsui into the distance toward East Kowloon and then back to Hong Kong Island, up to the HSBC Building, which at night looks like a space ship that has just landed in the middle of Central. No one can escape the fascination of this panorama, and yet we came out to this terrace for another reason.

As so often on our research journeys to Hong Kong, the goal is to step out of the mad rush for a moment and from that distance check to see what was there, what patterns are visible. That was the case in 2011, after a workshop on "Governance in the Creative Industries" that met in the boardroom of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority. The idea at the time was to design a model for the creative industries that better reflects the global dimension. That same evening, we produced the first sketches: drawings with different spheres. In many conversations and discussions in Hong Kong and elsewhere, they evolved into a simple tool for discussions among the multiple actors in the creative industries.

That was the case in 2012 and 2013 when we tried to get a better understanding of Hong Kong's ecosystem in a time of transition by organizing a series of more than thirty conversations and interviews with artists, designers, CEOs, art collectors, art space organizers, festival directors, architects, urban planners, scholars, consultants, journalists, curators ... as the city was changing from a "financial hub" to a "cultural hub" that was intended to evolve in the specific context of Chinese politics, but also from a global perspective.

Many of these conversations and encounters had been arranged for us by Erwin Lüthi, the Swiss deputy consul-general in Hong Kong at the time, who had an impressive understanding of diplomacy beyond formal occasions and official representation, as a translator between worlds. Accordingly, he organized very different formats, hosted exciting events, opened doors to his friends in the creative economy, commissioned cultural engagements, networked with his fine sense for exciting constellations of people—always support-

ed by Winnie Kan, one of his staff, with many friends in the creative scene, and Jimmie, his chauffeur, who always found the way through the constantly changing urban landscape.

The resulting model took a broader look at the value added of the cooperation of the creative industries and other industries—not as a fixed order, but as a series of fields of tension and possibilities in which individual players are constantly repositioning themselves, criticizing themselves, and strategizing.

#### CURATING AS CREATIVE DESIGN PRACTICE

That was 2014, back when we were commissioning a scholar and consultant on cultural policy from Hong Kong to organize a workshop at the recently opened Connecting Space of Zurich University of the Arts on the subject of how the principles of curating, which are primarily applied in the sphere of the arts, can be applied to other fields. We wanted to put to the test our suspicion that curating, as a creative design practice, could be productive when dealing with uncertainty in many different areas of activity that are concerned with developing “novelty.”

The internationally-known cultural policy researcher in question is Desmond Hui, who is now a good friend. As with many exciting personalities in Hong Kong, ultimately it is about the personal relationship and only then about the high level of professionalism, which is difficult to pin down: Desmond is active in a number of professions and activities and is constantly reinventing himself: over the years we have been collaborating, he has been a university professor in charge of a renowned institution, an expert on the creative industries interpreting the situation in East Asia for UNESCO, an architect converting a cultural heritage building into a prize-winning youth hostel, and a watercolor painter traveling the globe. Highly dynamic, he is constantly changing perspectives, from mapping of statistics on Hong Kong's creative industries by way of the stories behind urban development to moderating current debates with important players in the scene. Always with

an eye to similar themes: How can Hong Kong constantly renegotiate the possibilities of a forward-looking creative hub with its Asian and British heritage? How can cultural added value, urban impact, and economic relevance come into play in new ways? How can abstract categories and statistical data be positioned within a specific space?

From the perspective of the participants, the workshop in 2014 was a successful event in the context of the opening week of Connecting Space: The assembled gallerists, designers, architects, curators, theatermakers, and theoreticians discussed scenarios for Hong Kong's future, only to conclude in the end that, surprisingly, it took the Zurich University of the Arts' Connecting Space and two Swiss scholars to think up this meeting and to make it a reality with important local figures. It was a meeting of people who knew one another well and admired one another, but who had never before sat down together to discuss the agenda for their city. In conclusion, the need for further such meetings was expressed.

And now we were back on the terrace, after a strenuous day in March 2015 on the subject of curating. Art Basel Hong Kong was being held for the second time. As part of the supporting program of that most important of art fairs, with three locations (Basel, Miami, and Hong Kong), the Alternative Futures: Curating Hong Kong event was announced. Three workshops and a closing panel addressed the question of how the meanwhile indisputable shifts in Hong Kong from “financial hub” or “logistical hub” to “cultural hub” were affecting different spheres.

Two simple models were hanging on the wall as points of reference for the diverse discussions on very different subjects: A model of the spheres of action for reflecting on the value added of creative economies, which had already served as a tool for discussion in the years leading up to it, and a model of the practice of curating that was intended to turn this practice into a common theme in an exchange among exhibition organizers and members of the Umbrella Movement, artists and architects, scholars and entrepreneurs, to introduce a number of inspiring connections.

## ALTERNATIVE FUTURES: CURATING HONG KONG

Under the heading “The Urban,” architects, urban planners, and real estate owners discussed how Hong Kong’s perception as a “global city” could change, to what extent these dynamics are already evident today, and what consequences for urban planning should be derived from this. Curating from this perspective would mean taking up current dynamics of development and rereading them, for example, no longer seeing rear courtyards as a backstage but as the true public space, which officially does not exist in this form. Or understanding historical strata of previous developments as resources in order to tell stories with an eye to the future: a large traffic axis in Central has been converted by the Umbrella Movement into a place for reflection, community, and alternatives.

The workshop called “The Digital” brought together media artists, directors of university programs, and representatives of the Umbrella Movement to address the question of how Hong Kong should manifest itself between the poles of the digital and the analog, and how it should position itself globally. The diverse intertwining of analog and digital worlds is particularly evident in a metropolis in which physical space represents a challenge for many. Curating in this context almost automatically moves “in between,” in order to make activities visible, in order to organize and manifest a student movement that is visible and discussed worldwide, in order to communicate local artistic projects globally while at the same time translating global positions locally: the approach of the Connecting Space Hong Kong is the best example of this.

On the subject of “Shopping,” operators of arts spaces and co-working spaces and the directors of the Connecting Space of Zurich University of the Arts discussed whether and how shopping is constitutive of Hong Kong’s reformatting and reforming system of art, with consequences as well for how we think about curating as a practice: whether the museum shop is becoming more important than the exhibition,

whether the shopping mall and the art space should be combined in order to move people from one world to the other; whether shopping itself can be read as a cultural practice, as the expression of the way many are exploring the world today but also as an opportunity to reach many with new, unfamiliar, and unconventional things.

These exciting encounters and the format of the workshop as conversations among many, diverse players on school desks from Hong Kong classrooms and fed with cuisines from all corners of the city would not have been possible in this form without Patrick Müller and Nuria Krämer. Our two colleagues managed in a very tight time frame to establish the Connecting Space in Hong Kong as a very unique place for debate and exchange. In a city where much is in motion, much is happening, and attention is always drifting, they have made a difference with the space in a way that has moved very busy people to take the time to join the conversation. By not renting the space to the highest bidder but instead sharing it with the most interested people. By not importing their content from Switzerland but instead developing it in collaboration with locals. By motivating not only the representatives of Zurich University of the Arts but also as people on the local scene with their space — one of the most important assets in this city.

By making it a place where unrealized projects, improbable constellations of people, and new forms of collaboration are becoming possible, and where asking the right questions is often more important than finding answers. This suits Hong Kong, is a sustainable approach for Zurich University of the Arts, and is a promise for the future.

## A RELAXED APPROACH TO CURATING AS A REFERENCE POINT

In the final large panel on the evening of the all-day event, the dimension of shopping in relation to art was taken up again and vigorously debated. This time the participants included the design curator of M+, Aric Chen; the founder of the renowned Asian design label G.O.D., Douglas Young;

the director of the museum and shopping complex currently under construction at the Central Police Station, Euan Upston; the research director for the nonprofit AAA, which is very important in the cultural field, Hammad Nasar; and the professor of cultural economy at City University London, Andy Pratt.

“Shopping is about taking something home. It’s more than just spending money.” When Douglas Young, a cofounder of and creative force behind the design label Goods of Desire — abbreviated G.O.D., which is also a homophone for “to live better” in Cantonese — formulated that reply, it was evident how seriously he meant it. We met Douglas on one of our first research journeys in 2011 when we visited his laboratory, a design company that is also a creative agency, and above all a museum. His mission is to ensure that the Hong Kong of the 1970s and 1980s has a future: against the backdrop of the current changes in the city and the overwriting of heritage with new agendas. He does so because he is profoundly convinced that the attitudes and artifacts of that era, which was so important for the city, are central to designing its future. His company, his shops, and his museum are equally important in that venture. In his eyes, the shop is not just an appendage to the museum; the museum becomes the think tank for the shop. And a laboratory will have no effect if the people’s desire to shop is not satisfied where they are.

Both the roundtables and the evening panel seemed to confirm that curating in Hong Kong is seen as less art-focused than it sometimes is in Europe, and hardly as ideological. Curating is found in the art world, of course, but also when coming up with a new design for the city’s “harbor line,” or when media entrepreneurs think about their programming. In contrast to Europe and the United States, there doesn’t appear to be any hype growing around the subject. In all discussions, curating is always employed in a very specific, focused, and precise way, and described with a concrete connection to one’s own practice and work, never as a hip catchall term for practices and themes that is intended to lend an emotional charge by suggesting proximity to some artistic process or another.

Seeing herself as a curator from early on, Agnes Lin is an entrepreneur and a veritable institution in Hong Kong, who has over the years built up a holding company that unites a portfolio of initiatives that she sees as connected and intertwined: an influential gallery for contemporary art in Asia, which has been very important in the context of Art Basel; an interior design company that helps hotel managers rethink art and service in combination; an agency for arts education at Hong Kong schools; a consulting firm for developers; a research institute that supports innovative collaborations among artists, designers, journalists, and scholars from East Asia with presentations and projects in Singapore, Tokyo, and Jakarta.

For once, Agnes Lin did not herself appear on the panel, since other appointments took priority the week of Art Basel Hong Kong. But her entrepreneurial model and her projects contributed to the reflection on curating Hong Kong. And at a personal reception the previous day she presented to us her ideas for other panels she felt would be important when designing a Hong Kong of the future ...

“Would you like to order anything else? Yes, two more glasses of Chardonnay, please.” Whereas traffic is heard only as a distant rumble out on the terrace, one is struck all the more by the imposing building of the Bank of China or by the fact that one light panel or another is out. Or that cars are passing again where the previous fall the tent city of the Umbrella Movement stood for several weeks, bringing to a standstill one of the city’s main arterial roads. Zooming out of one level always means zooming in on another, and often a movement between what is and what could be.

#### ZOOMING OUT AND ZOOMING IN

The polarity between the interviews and the analysis of specific cases, between individual conversations and local contexts on the micro level, on the one hand, and the interpretation of statistical data and the international comparative perspective on the macro level, on the other hand, guided our various visits to Hong Kong. In the process, we developed the aforementioned model for curating, as a

condensation of examples from the field, a simplification of complex entrepreneurial and artistic practices, and as reference points for fundamental debates on the global creative industries scene.

“Cheers!”

At the same time, this model made it possible, especially in the context of our visits to Hong Kong and the discussion on the terrace, to reflect at a distance on our own activities in Zurich and St. Gallen in order to begin again with new perspectives. The highly connoted institutional contexts of Zurich University of the Arts and the University of St. Gallen called for an “in-between,” a space of new possibilities. And all too often, the debate over research struggles with the scholarly relevance of artistic processes and curatorial practices. Zurich University of the Arts has become an important, internationally recognized, effective crystallization point for research, teaching, experiment, and publication on curating at large, which has opened up many exciting options and possibilities.

Our own reflections and initiatives and the documentation of them may be found on our website: [www.creativeeconomies.com](http://www.creativeeconomies.com). It shows and describes how the joint research venture CreativeEconomies.com of the RISE Management Innovation Lab at the University of St. Gallen and the Department of Cultural Analysis at the Zurich University of the Arts is reflecting on and constantly reframing these “in-between” dimensions in its structures and processes as well. In addition to the workshops and panels organized in Hong Kong, there is also documentation on the strategy workshops and download areas with reports. The principles of curating developed in and through Hong Kong, which we have been trying to condense since 2014, continue to guide our activities.

#### MULTIPLE EMBODIMENTS OF CURATORIAL PRACTICE

On our various research journeys to Hong Kong, we have gained many important insights regarding the multiple

practices of curating through working and talking with people from a wide range of fields, some of whom do not see themselves as curators, while others do, but each in their own way.

On the micro level, we have been influenced, challenged, and inspired by the actions and thinking of people from Hong Kong. In the current essay, we have mentioned the deputy consul-general, the merchandising magnate, the entrepreneur and cofounder, the cultural policy researcher, and the space managers. We could have mentioned others as well, such as Lars Nittve, the former director of M+; the architects of Parallel Lab with their reframings of Hong Kong; Cosmin Costinas, the director of Para Site, a small organization and a big institution; Monique Burger and her Burger Collection and her husband, Max Burger, of Golien; Uli Sigg and the curator, Pi Li, who see art as a path to exploring and understanding Chinese culture and society; Michael Schindhelm and Rem Koolhaas, who have opened up important means of access to the hardware and software of the cultural hub of Hong Kong; the many people on the creative scene, working as artists, designers, journalists, curators, teachers, and social agents in Hong Kong and internationally; Thomas D. Meier, the president of the Zurich University of the Arts, who early on asserted, and then made a reality, that Hong Kong can be the ideal place to get critical distance from one’s own perspectives and thereby gain near spaces of possibilities; Connie Lam, the arts entrepreneur with her important art center which has had influence on the public space for so long; the publisher Mary Chan, who has modestly yet persistently published the important developments; or the Hong Kong Jockey Club, which takes in money from gambling on horses and provides funding without which almost none of the cultural and social initiatives and enterprises mentioned here could exist in this form ...

This diversity and heterogeneity of people, models, and perspectives in a condensed space and in constant motion makes Hong Kong a unique laboratory of a society and society “in transit(ion)” between worlds.

## THE CURATING MODEL

Condensing that diversity and heterogeneity into the four dimensions of a model is impossible and yet appealing for that very reason: zooming out from the distance of the terrace above the harbor can only work because it is based on countless zooming ins on the streets, back courtyards, and construction sites of Hong Kong. This design has become an important reference for many exciting debates, including those of the various panels at Connecting Space in March 2015:

STAGING STORIES scanning, searching, narrating, materializing, and staging stories: curating alternative futures, presents, and pasts first of all imply the creation of narratives envisioning possible futures, while at the same time connecting them to the actual present, thus retelling history; in the process, it is essential to translate such narratives into tangible prototypes, artifacts, media, and spaces, as a way of staging such narratives in order to make them accessible to all the senses. MOBILIZING RESOURCES accessing, mobilizing, and bundling relevant resources, audiences, and partners: realizing initiatives requires the mobilization of financial and nonfinancial resources, an orientation toward heterogeneous audiences, an involvement of multiple actors, artifacts, experiences, and competences, a connection to many organizations, institutions, and collectives, making it possible to translate stories and possibilities into attractive exhibitions, installations, initiatives, and projects that make a difference.

JUDGMENT DEVICES evaluating, selecting, and justifying attractive, desirable, relevant possibilities: curating furthermore implies evaluating alternative possibilities systematically in order to select particularly attractive, desirable, relevant, valid initiatives; in the process, curatorial practice creates, actualizes, and references various judgment devices as valuation tools, including lists, rankings, paradigmatic examples, performance dimensions, algorithms, community judgments, standards.

ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONS organizing, connecting, brokering, translating for alternative institutionalizations: curatorial practice not only focuses on the realization of specific exhibitions, installations, initiatives, and projects, but at the same time always also on the creation, establishment, and advancement of institutional contexts, which provide the basis for the recurrent realization of novel initiatives and projects, for example in the form of museums, laboratories, agencies, communities, forums, associations.

“May I bring you anything else?” The question comes across as friendly but firm, since our table right by the balustrade of the terrace high above the city is attractive and in demand. But we aren’t finished: the first sketches for the next projects, panels, works, and publications have to be made more precise and coherent.

## CURATING AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL STRATEGIES

In 2015, the focus is the question of how curating can be suited to the digitizing that is making many things possible in Hong Kong: it will be followed by a Strategy Workshop on “smart curating” in Zurich in 2016, headed by our colleague and friend Frédéric Martel, and by a panel on “smart spaces” and forms of organization in creative economies, in collaboration with Andy Pratt, who wants to test and develop our curating model in London.

At the same time, we learn in Hong Kong how important physical space is, because it makes many things possible in the first place, and hence activates our senses, with which we perceive, experience, and recognize things without being able to see them: a Strategy Workshop on “sensory hacking” will follow in 2017, with our friend and colleague Serge von Arx and his masters students from the Norwegian Theatre Academy. Two things are repeatedly discussed: the importance of research, and artistic and curatorial strategies.

Along with this comes the connection to practices and processes of entrepreneurship, never purely commercial,

but always with reference to economic developments and possibilities. Creative economies, too, are always alternative ventures and economies that rethink added value and find novel approaches to the mobilization of resources.

On the terrace in Hong Kong in the spring of 2015, the first sketches for these experiments and initiatives were made, and the first efforts to condense the questions and patterns that in 2017 are becoming the new research sketch: “Entrepreneurial Strategies: Creating, Judging, and Reflecting Value.” At the same time, we are taking up another reference point, one that was a theme of our first panel at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2010: we are re-thinking “Value.”

Another theme formed in the spring of 2015 that has pre-occupied us ever since: How can we refine our language in order to be able to talk about, discuss, debate, and reflect on things that are “in transit(ion)” and thus still in motion. This resulted in the hypothesis that what we need is a nautical language, the surfers and lighthouses, navigation and nautical charts, freight harbors and ferries, islands and archipelagos, sea routes and currents ... that can articulate and address for our reflection on the dynamics and uncertainties of creative economies and for our understanding of possible entrepreneurial strategies in these contexts.

#### CONCLUSION: ZOOMING IN

Now we have reached a point where we can descend again from the terrace of the Sevva restaurant in Central. We are taking with us in our bag the first sketches of the next models (after circles and squares, they will be triangles), ambitious questions, and ... one last look across the harbor of Hong Kong... 🌐

