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Analysis

## How China's museums are cosyng up to commercial galleries for big-ticket exhibitions

Dealers are eagerly filling curatorial gaps in new museums with shows for their artists, but does the market hold too much sway?

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An installation view of *George Condo: The Picture Gallery* at the Long Museum (West Bund) in Shanghai  
Photo: JYYPHOTO; © George Condo; courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

As new museums have proliferated in China over the past decade, they have spent lavishly on impressive architecture and, sometimes, blue-chip art acquisitions. But many have scrimped on staffing, leaving a gap in curatorial expertise that commercial galleries are eager to fill. Top international galleries, which have launched operations in Hong Kong and increasingly the mainland over the same period, have imported Western models of sponsorship for museum exhibitions of their artists but the traditional boundaries between museums' curatorial control and the market's commercial interests are far more blurred in China.

Big-ticket, gallery-backed solo shows of Western artists have become a particular fixture of Shanghai's museums during the November art fair season, and there have been a few years when institutional shows of Asian artists in the city could be counted on one hand. Current autumn offerings include a Rockbund Art Museum show of John Armleder, who is represented by Almine Rech and Massimo de Carlo; exhibitions for George Condo (Hauser & Wirth), Beatriz Milhazes (White Cube) and Pat Steir (Lévy Gorvy) at Long Museum West Bund; and a Prada Rong Zhai presentation of Lisson Gallery artists Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg. Artists from major Chinese galleries like ShangArt and Long March feature almost as frequently in museum schedules as their Western counterparts.

"After Art Basel in Hong Kong started [in 2013], big Western galleries increasingly came to China, or Hong Kong at least, and hired greater China directors," says Chao Jiaying, an independent curator previously on staff at several museums and non-profits. She dates the trend to White Cube opening in Hong Kong in 2012. "Now they all have their own mainland China sales directors, who are tasked with talking with private museums to arrange shows. Originally museums paid for shows; now galleries mostly do. That means museums do not need their own curators." Chao also cites a pair of Sean Scully exhibitions that toured public and private museums in Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Wuhan in 2014-17, initiated by the artist himself but exploding his market standing in China. "Now all the galleries want that model," she says.

While the museums approached for this article declined to comment, commercial gallery representatives describe their support of Chinese museums in terms of mutual benefit. "These collaborations are important in building cultural cross collaborations between West and East," says Wendy Xu, the director of White Cube Hong Kong. The gallery has brought exhibitions of works by Antony Gormley, Beatriz Milhazes and Sarah Morris to Chinese museums, and Xu stresses that they have also facilitated shows by Chinese artists like He Xiangyu, Liu Wei and Zhou Li at White Cube's flagship location in London.

"The scope of the museum exhibitions we have been involved with span first shows in China for major international artists, focused presentations on specific bodies of work, and retrospectives, as well as milestone projects for some of the most important artists working in China from our gallery roster," says a spokesperson for Pace, which had a Beijing gallery from 2008 until 2019 and now has spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul. Along with shows at Shanghai's Long Museum for James Turrell, Loie Hollowell and Mary Corse, Pace has assisted with China shows for its Chinese artists including Song Dong, Sui Jianguo, Li Songsong and Zhang Xiaogang.

David Tung Daozi, Lisson Gallery's China director since 2016, denies that the process is transactional: "I don't see a quid pro quo. It is more about jointly developing content." While gallery support for museums includes some funding, he says: "There is not an average spend. Galleries like to host dinners, fund publications—it is similar everywhere." Tung demurs from commenting on widespread rumours that certain Chinese museums operate on a rental or pay-to-play basis, demand donations of works or only show artists from galleries that join their fundraisers. "We steer clear of museums who don't have a clear focus and agenda... We only work with museums with similar approaches to their international counterparts. It benefits us to avoid fuzzy situations."

Some museums are rumoured to charge commercial galleries rental fees of around \$400,000 per show. An anonymous art advisor who has assisted on many collaborative exhibitions says they are unsure how frequently or how much galleries actually pay, adding: "I assume serious museums will evaluate the artists first. It has to meet the basic museum level." Of dealers using institutional exhibitions to make sales, they say: "Serious museums will not allow it. Bad museums might do it, no matter whether it is a Western artist backed by a top Western gallery or a local artist backed by a local gallery."

Often, museums will appoint high-profile guest curators who provide little more than "a name on an article or a theme [for an exhibition]", Tung says. He concedes that "curation receives disproportionate support by galleries" in China, but says there is no one-size-fits-all approach to such content collaborations. "Each museum operates in a different way. It is part of galleries' jobs to assess [resources] before advising artists. A lot of galleries don't do due diligence in advance. The gap around what needs to be done is a conversation [for both parties]."

Museums' reliance on gallery support has resulted in exhibitions that overwhelmingly draw from the marketable canon of contemporary art, although there has been a slight improvement in diversity in the past few years—with more solo shows for women artists, for instance. "At the moment, there is more interest in established international artists from China's museums," says Fiona Römer, a senior director of Hauser & Wirth who leads their Asia business. "But we definitely see that trend evolving in time, especially in the cities with well-established and thriving art scenes such as Shanghai, with strong local institutions and galleries which are showing more emerging artists."

The current preponderance of the white and male Western establishment is in part because "there is a lot of art history to be introduced to China", Tung says. "What's fun is that it's still quite new here." Recent moves towards more inclusive exhibitions are a reflection of the "broader spectrum" of the country's art institutions today, he suggests. "There used to be three venues—now there's 30."

Indeed, if gallery-backed shows were a novelty in Chinese museums a mere five years ago, things are likely to change again just as quickly.

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Photo by Jim Rakete

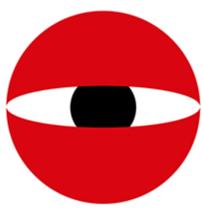
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