

## *Preface*

*Kowloon,  
Kowloon, Hong Kong,  
I like Hong Kong,  
It's the place for you . . .*

This famous song from the nineteen sixties, performed in English by Rebecca Pan 潘迪華, who often appeared in Wong Kar-wai movies like *In the Mood for Love*, points very clearly towards what the problems of cultural identity in Hong Kong may represent. Does a Hong Kong cultural identity really stem from the cliché of “East meets West,” which has been strongly attached to the idea most people have had of Hong Kong for decades, or is it exclusively the product of a Chinese background only masked by British colonization? Beyond the fact that I have always known this song very well (my parents bought this record while they were living on the island in the nineteen sixties), I cannot help associating it with a kind of nostalgia for a past they remembered with a passion that no other place they lived in could have awakened. I therefore use this little song as an introductory quotation for this book which will consider cultural and art practices in this Special Administrative Region (SAR).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, this refrain should clarify the fact that, however close I find myself to Hong Kong culture, it is only as an observer looking from the outside that I make this statement. The terms of “cultural identity” are still quite problematic in Hong Kong, as many people are still not willing to admit that there is such a thing in the SAR, but it is also accepted as entirely obvious by the vast majority of the territory’s inhabitants, Chinese and foreigners alike. This identity, like any other cultural identity, is always changing and is always in a state of flux as I will explain in further detail in a later chapter of this book. A witness to the constant transformations of the territory would, at different times, feel and see different attitudes and frames of mind in the active members of this cultural environment. It is never easy to define precisely the

characteristics of a cultural identity and it is only possible to make a portrait of it at a particular point in time. But, since changes still take some time to happen, it is possible to trace a sketch, though maybe a little blurred because its subject matter is in constant movement, of a Hong Kong cultural identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This book is a description of a local culture and what this term covers, as well as a manifesto for the creation of conditions more favorable to a sustained dissemination of the products of local cultures. In many ways, it is not so much a portrait of art practices in Hong Kong during the decades before and after the year 2000 (other people will attempt to write such a book which must be as exhaustive as possible in its observation of all the artists of this place—a daunting task!) as it is a reflection on the issues raised by these practices. When one gets involved, as both actor and observer, in the development and the actualization of such a unique local environment as the one of Hong Kong, it is very difficult not to see in it a possible solution to the cultural and political woes of other regions of the world. In the case of the culture of Hong Kong, one has to realize how successful it has been in creating ways of living and relating its members to one another and to the rest of the planet, a success that is very tempting to see as a model for the future of other places. Of course, the term “culture” itself is ambiguous; a culture is not simply an independent being which takes care of its human participants, it is not either merely an outgrowth produced by a human community but both at the same time: it is a context, produced by a human community, that in turn shapes the people who produced it in a kind of constant feedback. Hong Kong has been seen as an “anomaly” by many foreign commentators who forget a little too quickly that, if this place had been such an anomaly, it would not have produced such a vibrant and fertile society, a society and a culture which give all the signs that they will be here for a very long time. The fact that it seems to feed on contradictions, for instance its bizarre relationship with Chinese culture as a whole, a lack of democracy that is accompanied by a complete freedom of the press, etc. does not negate the fact that it is home to millions of people, famous in the region for their positive and dynamic attitude.

As an advocate for all things “local,” it might appear, especially to the English-speaking readers of this book, that I attack “American culture” from time to time, but this is only true on the surface. What I react against are the conditions created by dominant cultures, cultures whose techniques of dissemination are so commercially powerful that they do not leave much room for other modes of expression to coexist. For the moment, these dominant cultures are American, English, Latin American and

still, at least for a time, French and German. Among these cultures, there is no doubt that the *primus inter pares* is a certain type of popular American culture (especially in the domain of popular movies, the so-called Hollywood blockbusters, and in popular music). It is a fact that commercial or popular American culture occupies that dominant spot, and it is also a fact that the pressure created by that overwhelming power has a tendency to eradicate the voices of minority cultures around the world. It is another universally acknowledged fact that many languages are on the verge of disappearing not only because the speakers of these tongues grow fewer and fewer but also because the use of English is such an absolute necessity in a globalized market that there are fewer and fewer incentives to continue using these minority languages. Similarly, the products of the dominant cultures are so well-marketed that they have created a cultural vacuum in many countries: the example of French movie directors in the nineteen nineties asking for limitations on the import of American movies was a rather dramatic, if not slightly pathetic, request for more creative room as movie theaters in France tend to program more and more Hollywood blockbusters and less and less French movies. All these are, of course, symptoms of a situation dictated by market forces but, unfortunately, it is also the direct way to cultural leveling. Don't get me wrong, I love to be entertained and I am the first to buy DVDs of "Hollywood blockbusters," but I can only regret a situation that seems to encourage the disappearance of all the things that create different cultural environments. As far as I am concerned, when it comes to non-dominant cultures, the more the better.

Before moving on to the first chapter of this book, and since art is its main focus, I would like to give my own comment on conversations I had over the past years with a number of people about the appropriateness of the term "artist." This word has an already long history and has taken, in many societies in the more economically developed part of this world, a specific meaning in the *doxa*, an important concept in the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who used this term to define non-specialist knowledge and common beliefs. The easiest way to observe the meaning of the word "artist" in the *doxa* is simply to look up its dictionary definition. In Webster's Dictionary, one finds the following definitions for the term "artist": 1/ "one skilled or versed in learned art"; 2/ "one who professes and practices an imaginative art"; 3/ "a skilled performer." Even though one would be hard-pressed to find any deep-seated problems in these definitions, one could also very easily prove them all wrong by giving examples taken from the work of many contemporary practitioners (there is of course the issue of tackling the entire problem of what art is—a project I am not willing to consider in these lines). For the first definition, it would be easy to

show that the problem of skill is often rejected today, many practitioners preferring to emphasize their lack of skill as a denial of more traditional approaches to art-making. For the second one, it would also be very easy to show that reconsiderations of the whole notion of originality have been a fundamental aspect of the criticism of these traditional approaches, and that “imagination” is not even a viable concept since the capacity for imagination has often been redefined as something closer to “recontextualization” than to “creation.” For the third definition, even though performance is nowadays a widely accepted form of the visual arts, one could again criticize the notion of skill.

Similarly, even though I accept the idea that art can be found everywhere, I am increasingly disturbed by the exaggerated use of the word “artist.” This concept has connotations that are far too profoundly rooted in the definition of “artist-as-genius,” dating from the heyday of Romanticism. The notion of genius was first made into a central concern of aesthetics by eighteenth-century philosophers including David Hume and Immanuel Kant, and by the late nineteenth century, it had transformed the practitioner of art into the “artist”: the demiurge capable of creating *ex nihilo*. This notion was so powerful that it remained the way such art critics as Clement Greenberg thought about painters up until the nineteen sixties. The nineteen seventies saw however a violent reaction against the notion of “artist” and the notion of “fine arts” themselves, as the character of the artist was changed radically and the idea of “fine” had increasingly less relevance to the practice of art. The English-speaking world, however, never felt the need to come up with a more appropriate term, a new name to give to the practitioners of art. This struck me to an almost schizophrenic degree during a recent presentation given by MFA students in a Hong Kong teaching institution: as much as I try to be open to any type of art making (it is part of my job after all), the word “artist” was used so many times during that afternoon that it was completely emptied of its meaning. Try repeating thousands of times the same word and you will understand what happens to it.

To avoid the problems attached to the use of a word that was already in existence at a time art was something so entirely different, I propose using the name coined in France in the nineteen eighties: instead of artist, I will use the term *plasticien*, and even anglicize it by writing it as “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. I will not try to deal with this problem here and will also focus on what specialists—i.e. academics, art critics, art workers of all kinds—call the “contemporary.” Instead of “contemporary,” which would logically include every type of art production made today; I will therefore prefer the term “plastician art.” Such a neologism does not solve the question of what falls under the category of “plastician” or “contemporary,” but coining a new term has at least the advantage of revealing that there are differences between many of the art expressions of today and those of even the recent past. A similar problem will be tackled in a chapter of this book with an analysis of the idea of “postmodern” in Chinese art today.

The etymology of the word “plastician” obviously derives from the word “plastic” which has, among others, the following definitions according, once again, to Webster’s Dictionary: 1/ “capable of being molded or modeled” and “capable of adapting to varying conditions”; 2/ “capable of being deformed continuously and permanently in any direction without rupture.” This word also takes into consideration the fact that “artist” was too strongly associated with the idea that art had to be painting or sculpture; today’s plasticians often have no such specialization and are using increasingly varied types of media, from painting to video and from sculpture to installation (whatever sense you give to the term “installation”). Interestingly enough, the terms used for “art” and “artist” in modern Chinese do not create the same problems as in Euro-America. “Art” is rendered by the word *yishu* 藝術 in Chinese. *Yi* 藝 means art in general and would be used with similar connotations as in Euro-America; but, just like art meant different types of practices and knowledge in the European past, it originally meant the type of disciplines that entered the education of young noblemen in ancient China, namely rites (*li* 禮), music (*yue* 樂), archery (*she* 射), chariot driving (*yu* 御), calligraphy (*shu* 書), and mathematics (*shu* 數). Although it is today more often associated with the visual arts, it could also mean literary arts in the past. As for the second character of this word, *shu* 術, it means method and technique and has some of the connotations of the Greek *techne* (“art” in the sense of “skill”). In fact, the use of the term *yishu* 藝術 is fairly recent and only appeared in the nineteenth century, before that time painters were “practitioners of painting” (*huajia* 畫家) and calligraphers “practitioners of calligraphy” (*shufajia* 書法家). The term for “artist” in modern Chinese is also extremely straightforward and

is simply rendered by “practitioner of *yishu*” (*yishujia* 藝術家).

Of course, the word “plastician,” like any other word, tends to become absurd when it is overused, but at least, it has the benefit to avoid being confused with the more traditional definition of the term “artist.” In order to avoid the obnoxious repetition of neologisms, I feel I have to alternate the two words “artist” and “plastician” although both words have the same meaning in this book (unless otherwise specified). Similarly, the terms “West” and “Western” have been replaced in recent scholarship by the terms “Euro-America” and “Euro-American”; I will clarify the fact that “East” and “West” are empty concepts in several chapters of this book and that I also prefer to utilize the new expressions, but, for the sake of avoiding repetition, I will also alternate the use of all these expressions.