

This newspaper column is written by Jens Galschiøt the artist behind the sculpture "The Pillar of Shame" in Hong Kong and Kira Marie Peter-Hansen, Member of the European Parliament. It outlines their motivations for organizing the EU exhibition and debates on China critical art, art censorship, and human rights in Hong Kong. Quoting freely from the text is permitted.

By Artist Jens Galschiøt and MEP Kira Marie Peter-Hansen

Auction Houses have a tremendous opportunity to defend the inviolability of art in Hong Kong. Will they continue to disappoint?

In 2022, the prestigious Danish auction house Bruun Rasmussen was acquired by the international art giant Bonhams. With this acquisition, Bruun Rasmussen became part of the global art market and, consequently, responsible for what happens on the art scene in Hong Kong. Bonhams, along with other global Western auction houses such as Christie's, Sotheby's, Phillips, and the world's largest art fair company, Art Basel, holds significant influence over the market.

It is commendable that Western companies control one of the most central art markets in Asia, as they are expected to support Western values such as freedom of expression and, particularly, the inviolability of art.

Unfortunately, it seems they are falling short of these expectations. Hong Kong was once a vibrant metropolis on par with London, Paris, and New York—a city teeming with energy, tourists, financial speculators, artists, intellectuals, researchers, and debaters, contributing to the dynamic chaos typical of a thriving metropolis, creating colossal vitality.

Hong Kong was one of the largest and most important metropolises in Asia. However, since being forced to become part of China, that quality is disappearing, and China has deceived us all, breaking all agreements.

Hong Kong's forced marriage to China started relatively happily. In the honeymoon period, the dynamism continued, and the city thrived as one of Asia's pivotal points. China realized that a free art scene in Hong Kong resulted in artworks criticizing China's treatment of its citizens. For instance, the Danish monumental sculpture "The Pillar of Shame" was erected in Hong Kong, symbolizing China's '89 killing and massacre of its own citizens when they demanded democratic influence. The sculpture also became a symbol of the freedom of expression that Hong Kong was entitled to under the agreement, the only place under Chinese territory with such rights.

China did not appreciate the art but tolerated it as part of the agreement, initially. However, the marriage ended unhappily. An agreement of beautiful and equal cohabitation has slowly been replaced by rules and restrictions. Openness and freedom have turned into bitterness and imprisonments. Artistic freedom now subject to "responsible" censorship, and symbols of freedom brutally torn down and locked away in steel containers.

Hong Kong's population has fought to preserve its freedom, with artists playing a crucial role in defending their own artistic and intellectual freedom, as well as the freedom of others.

The costs have been immense. Many are imprisoned on obscure charges, and almost 500,000 citizens have already left Hong Kong, including numerous artists, politicians, journalists, intellectuals, financiers, and researchers—now scattered around the globe. Hong Kong and human rights activists are under enormous pressure.

Hong Kong's art scene is now completely destroyed. It is impossible to produce, exhibit, collect, and sell China-critical art in Hong Kong, and they need help.

The city remains the most important commercial art market in Asia, with a significant portion of Asia's art passing through the stable and Western-owned art market with billion-dollar turnover. The art market is a huge business and is thriving, but something is amiss. Virtually all art that criticizes and problematizes China has disappeared from the sacred halls of art—self-censorship and fear of stepping out of line have spread everywhere.

The art market has adapted and become an involuntary tool for extensive censorship in Hong Kong.

We appeal for support from Western art giants leading the art market in Hong Kong. We acknowledge that auction houses are not to blame. China is introducing more and more oppressive rules and laws that stifle the art market, and we understand if they feel pressured by the legislation. However, just like the millions of citizens and artists who have defended their rights in Hong Kong, financial art markets must now step in and help defend both art and freedom of expression—not for their own economic benefit, but for the sake of decency.

Hong Kong's art market stands at a crossroads, and the choice they make is crucial. Will they help China introduce its totalitarian system in Hong Kong, including art censorship, or will they stand up and defend the inviolability of art and the right to exhibit and sell all art, even if it criticizes China?

We have organized an exhibition and debates in the European Parliament and hereby invite everyone to participate in this important discussion. The art industry relies on selling the works of artists, and it is time to stand up to defend the artists they depend on. We believe they have an obligation to do so, especially in Hong Kong, where they are the ones setting the art agenda within the constraints of the city. Everyone else has been forced to leave Hong Kong or is in prison. The art houses are the only ones left who can defend the inviolability of art.

And remember, history judges those who stand on the wrong side, and it has led to the fall of empires before.

The debate and exhibition in Brussels will take place between March 19 and 22, 2024, and we hope it will spread worldwide, making it impossible to avoid discussing it. We encourage auction houses to contribute.

We have gathered a wide range of experts, artists, debaters, and Chinese dissidents from around the world to participate in the debates. They will also be part of the exhibition in front of the EU Parliament with forbidden Chinese art and the Danish "Pillar of Shame" sculpture. We have, of course, invited representatives from auction and exhibition houses with branches in Hong Kong to come and share their views on how they will handle art market censorship in the city.

The debate on art markets' censorship policy in Hong Kong has already gained momentum in art circles worldwide, and the financial art market risks entering a PR disaster that could develop into a major storm for the companies involved. Examples prove this is not an idle threat.

For instance, in 2023, the former president of art critics in Hong Kong, Erik Wear, issued a statement to the world's finest art galleries, warning that participating in Art Basel 2024 in Hong Kong 'may cause potential harm' if galleries agree to censor the works exhibited at the fair. He suggested Art Basel move its exhibition activities to another Asian country where it is possible to exhibit art without censorship. This statement has had significant personal consequences for him; he chose to step down from his chairmanship of art critics in Hong Kong to avoid harming the association, and he now resides in Europe. He is now a participant in the censorship committee under the international critics' association. Erik Wear is one of our panelists at the Brussels meeting.

Hong Kong artist and NGODEI leader in Prague, Loretta Lau, has also appealed to Art Basel to show their opposition to art censorship in Hong Kong. She suggested Art Basel exhibit a model of the forbidden sculpture, "The Pillar of Shame." An exhibition that would underscore a stance of not accepting or participating in censorship. Loretta Lau is the curator of the exhibition of forbidden Chinese art set up in front of the European Parliament, and she is a participant in the debates in the parliament.

We have also invited the Chinese embassies in both Denmark and Brussels to provide their version of the story about art censorship.

In connection with the EU meeting, many actors from the activist and China-critical art scene who have come to Brussels from around the world to participate in our meetings and exhibitions will hold a series of informal meetings to discuss the follow-up to the art censorship debate in the EU Parliament. Many of the participants are influential in the global dialogue on China's human rights abuses, with a particular focus on the art industry's role in contributing to this oppression.

It might be perceived almost as a conspiracy theory that a relatively small group of activists and debaters meeting in Brussels could pressure the world's strongest financial art giants. However, pessimists are underestimating the situation. Art censorship and other forms of compromising the sacred halls of art have previously had significant consequences for the involved exhibition spaces and art dealers.

An example is the artist Nan Goldin (USA), a prominent activist in the fight against the opioid crisis. In 2018, she and her group "P.A.I.N." launched a campaign against the Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma, the producer of OxyContin.

Goldin and her activist group organized events at art institutions that received donations from the Sackler family to pressure them

to reject sponsorships from the opioid industry. Her activism illustrates the role of art in challenging ethical questions and raising awareness of social issues. The actions led to numerous museums terminating their sponsorships from the Sackler family, which is now considered a pariah in art circles that no one wants to associate with.

Another example is the Mayer Brown case, related to both Hong Kong and Denmark. It had significant consequences for the multinational American law firm that worked for Hong Kong University when they took on the role of attacking the Danish artwork "The Pillar of Shame" and contributed to the artwork's removal after 25 years of exhibition at the university. They faced extensive global criticism for taking on this role and allowing themselves to be used to suppress the democracy movement and restrict freedom of expression in Hong Kong.

This led to a hearing in the U.S. Senate, where it was criticized that a Western law firm participated in such activities. Mayer Brown was told it was incompatible for a U.S.-based firm to help a totalitarian China attack art, legal rights, and human rights in Hong Kong.

Thousands of artists simultaneously attacked the firm, and after a few weeks of turmoil, the major firm withdrew and gave up representing the university.

This resulted in a domino effect where the esteemed law firm then fell out of favor with the China-friendly security minister in Hong Kong, who urged Chinese companies to boycott Mayer Brown.

One of the participants in the Senate hearing was Samuel Chu, a Hong Konger in exile in the USA. We have invited him to moderate the debate on art censorship at the meeting in the European Parliament."

These examples illustrate how things can go wrong if timely care is not taken. There's not much that can unite Democrats and Republicans in the USA, but they are in complete agreement here, and the American market is the most influential and largest within the art markets.

Back to Denmark. Bruun Rasmussen is the jewel of art in Denmark. The company has featured in prime-time Danish TV with an entire series, where they (completely uncritically), and perhaps rightfully so, promoted themselves as part of the good cultural upper class with the right values and good connections to the royal family and other members of the cultural elite and salons.

Bruun Rasmussen is, therefore, in a very exposed position concerning the sale of the company to Bonhams, as they risk becoming involved in a major art censorship scandal in Asia. We urge Bruun Rasmussen to step up as a participant in the debate and defend artistic freedom of expression for all artists, including those in Hong Kong.

We have also invited Bruun Rasmussen to the debate in the EU Parliament.""