

Arts

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Deviant galleries are becoming as intriguing as the art itself. **Roberta Smith** traces the evolutionGOODBYE ...
AND HELLO**John Batten Gallery, one of the few local private galleries to showcase challenging, non-commercial art, is closing in April. Owner John Batten talks about why he's moving on to new projects "outside the box".**

"For a city of seven million, Hong Kong has few art galleries. The number isn't necessarily a problem, but the lack of variety is. Art, like literature and cinema, thrives on diversity. Good can be judged against bad, and mediocrity exposed for what it is.

"An artist recently described his paintings to me like this: 'It's all an interplay of strict control and chance, as anything is that has life in it.' Ideas like this are a reminder that anyone seeking solutions to problems or building something from nothing – be it in business, science or art – requires diversity and challenge to thrive. For artists, these challenges are often only expressed visually in an art gallery.

"During the past nine years, my art gallery has organised and exhibited a range of challenging art, covering documentary photography, installation, multi-media, video, sound, music, poetry and non-commercial painting, drawing and prints. It's a gallery that emphatically does not exhibit art described by the photography historian Helmut Gernsheim as "... antiquated, fuzzy, sentimental, sugary work ... triumphs of sweetness and cosiness".

There have been many highlights over the years: Tsang Kin-wah's recent White Cube installation; Laurence Aberhart's 8x10-inch photographs of Macau and China; the local conceptual art group 20 Beans + A Box; Santiago Bose & Alfredo Esquillo's mixed media paintings; Rick Martin's *cha cheng teng* series of photographs; photographs by So Hing-keung and Leung Chi-wo; and thematic group exhibitions: The Gambling Show; Behold! God ... and the recent Coming Near You: the Destruction of Central Hong Kong.

"My attitude to Hong Kong's art scene has always been to have a 'get on with it and do it yourself' attitude, but increasingly I've found the actual physical space – my gallery – problematic. Having a gallery implies a certain approach: strict opening hours, the presentation of art surrounded by white walls in one fixed location, and unlimited free access to the public.

"But the biggest drawback is the requirement to be physically present and open 365 days a year. It's tiring, restrictive and debilitating.

"The challenge is how to be creative and regain an enthusiastic and open-minded approach. I plan to set up an office and use a variety of guerilla sites in Hong Kong and regionally to exhibit art: temporary spaces, warehouses, abandoned sites and open-minded public museum and private gallery venues, depending on the works.

"There should be an exciting flexibility in choosing from a variety of venues. And it meets a challenge, similar to any business that needs re-jigging – in this case, it's simply to work outside the box."

John Batten is director of John Batten Gallery and, among other things, volunteer organiser of Hong Kong ArtWalk 2006

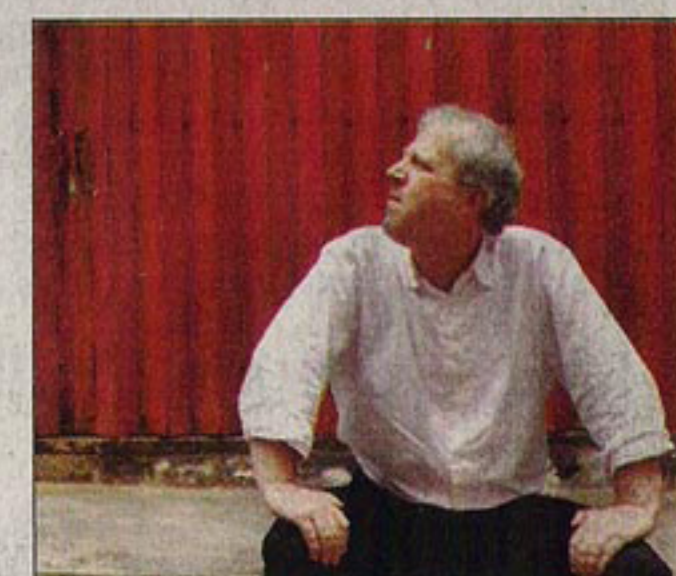


Photo: Jonathan Wong

OUTSIDE
THE CUBE

"WHAT IS ART?" It's an often-asked question. But a more pertinent one right now might be: "What is an art gallery?"

Must galleries be run or look the way they do? How inevitable is the cycle of solo and group exhibitions and the steady movement of art works from galleries to museums, auction houses and collectors' homes? How can you slow, expose or disrupt the delivery mechanism – maybe even avoid it altogether occasionally – to reassert art as a process and a mind-set rather than a product?

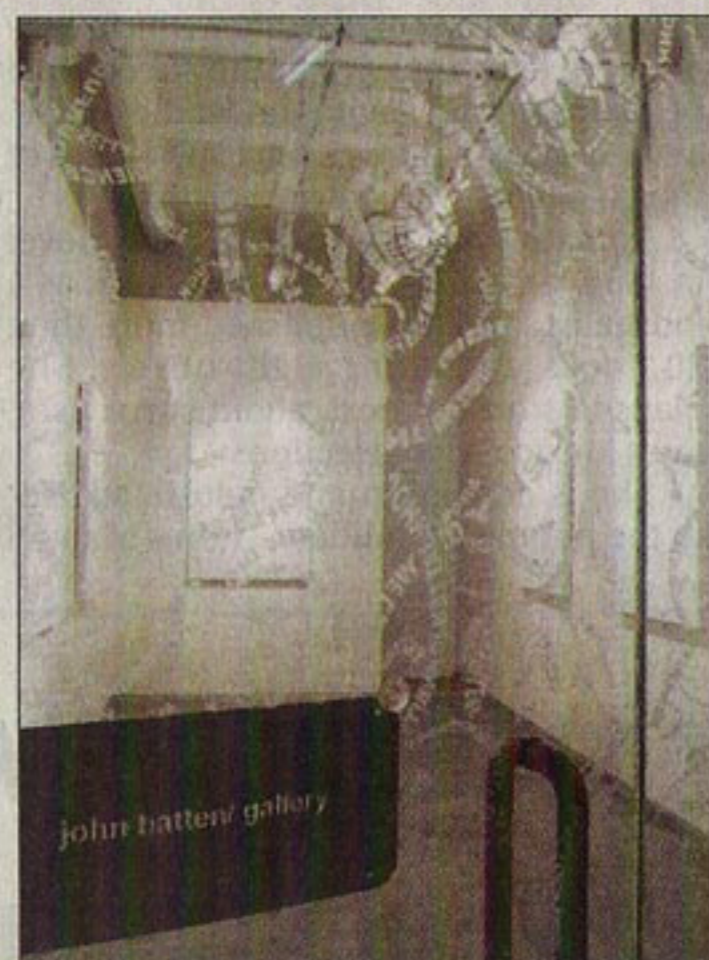
In Hong Kong, for instance, a cluster of private gallery owners have diverted their focus to less lucrative ventures, while selling art to pay the bills. Among them is Sin Sin-man, who recently moved to a 700-sq-ft space in Western, Sin Sin Annexe, which will show not only fine art but also sculpture, objets d'art, installations and performing art. Her objective isn't to make profit.

"My idea is to offer more space to artists and, through their exhibitions, attract more people to the venue," Sin says. "Hong Kong isn't a cultural desert. We have culture here and I want to use this space to showcase it."

With changing exhibitions and precarious finances, galleries worldwide are by their nature under constant revision. Lately, the gallery model in New York City has seemed to be in even more flux than usual. More young dealers, artists and art-lovers are thinking outside the so-called

white cube. Other galleries or so-called art spaces are trying to establish their alternative reputations by interrupting the regular monthly shows with a series of short exhibitions or performances. Some established dealers are turning their spaces over to other dealers.

Among the so-called deviant or alternative galleries is the Wrong Gallery, cre-

Installations by Tsang Kin-wah: *White Cube 2005* (top) and *Untitled - Hong Kong 2003-2005* (above)

ated by the artist Maurizio Cattelan and independent curators Ali Subotnick and Massimiliano Gioni. The four-year-old space shows it's possible to parody a gallery while functioning as one, by giving numerous artists mini debuts. The gallery will participate in this year's Whitney Biennial, and began an extended stay at Tate Modern in London in December.

Subotnick and Gioni are involved in organising next month's Berlin Biennial, for which they've created Gagosian Gallery, Berlin, a real gallery that's staged four exhibitions. Any resemblance to the real Gagosian Gallery, or the Guggenheim Berlin, is far from coincidental.

Another leading figure in the deviant scene is Gavin Brown, who stirred up the gallery form in the mid-1990s by opening a bar called Passerby nearly inside his gallery on West 15th Street.

Two years ago, Brown moved his main gallery, maintaining Passerby (run with a partner) and keeping his old gallery as an intermittent off-site project space. The new space has begun the new year with a series of one-week shows, starting with *Sonic the Warhol*, a film by Oliver Payne and Nick Relph that combines videogame faces with a visit to the zoo. Everyone gets a mask, and the music, by Brian DeGraw, is terrific.

Arguably, Michele MacCarone has strayed furthest from the white cube. The three-storey building she opened at the east end of Canal Street in 2001 is barely

renovated, and she has allowed it to be regularly torn up, top to bottom, by artists showing there. But MacCarone is in other ways an old-style gallerist, who seems to have almost single-handedly willed her challenging project into existence while always striving to meet the demands of her artists.

Her current exhibition, the overstocked debut of Nate Lowman, demonstrates the way all galleries fluctuate between subversion and business as usual, if only to survive. In the show, *The End and Other American Pastimes*, Lowman con-

Overseen by Norwegian artist Emily Sundblad and American critic John Kelsey, it provides an adamant reminder that a gallery is a social organism – even a kind of family – that combines aspects of living room and studio.

The space, part of the housing complex where Sundblad lives, was initially rented to create a business address that would beef up her visa application, and grew from there. The Reenas, as they're sometimes called, kept a delicate pipe scaffolding from the store's days as a dress shop. It now serves as a brilliant

"Hong Kong isn't a cultural desert. We have culture here and I want to use this space to showcase it" Sin Sin-man Sin Sin Annexe

tinues to develop his down-and-out excursions into collage, graffiti and appropriation. The work feels original in some places – particularly a painting technique that suggests velvety silkscreens – and Warholian in others, such as the series of paintings of blown-up fake bullet holes, which take up a great deal of wall space throughout the building.

In contrast to almost everything about MacCarone (except its funky space) is Reena Spaulings, a two-year-old gallery headed by a nonexistent person that was set up largely by accident.

device to disrupt the gaze and usually helps pull even the most shambling exhibition together.

The store was first used as a meeting place, performance space and screening room. The fictional name came later, as did more organised exhibitions – but the unfinished air persists.

Eventually, Sundblad and Kelsey started making art as Reena Spaulings, and she, as it were, has been invited to this year's Whitney Biennial. *The New York Times* Additional reporting by Kevin Kwong