

Institutional Exhibitions and Usurping the Discourse

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Rossi & Rossi Gallery opened *A Collection in Two Acts* in July, an exhibition which signals detachment and immersion simultaneously. It is challenging for the audience to enter the exhibition with standard expectations. There are still sparse descriptions in the first half of the show for the majority of viewers who relies heavily on textual guidance, but most viewers will find themselves lost amongst the domestic setting in the second half. Without an ostensible topic or a straightforward curatorial direction, the exhibition is naturally one that stirs confusion. That is not to say that the exhibition is bad, but simply, it is incorrect to view the exhibition with common assumption. *A Collection in Two Acts* is neither constructed for the appreciation of artworks, nor guided by senses and sentiments. The artworks in this exhibition are treated as materials for the curatorial practice in framing the two acts. Instead of an exhibition, it might be more appropriate to comprehend it as a theatre set uninhabited by actors or two immersive installations.

The first act is set in a white cube. Sided by a small caption card, artworks are installed according to their date of creation on the white wall under white lights and a white ceiling. Standardised, like most gallery exhibitions in the city. Each work has their own space to be viewed independently. Most works on view are renowned artists in Hong Kong, and they each have outstanding features of their own. Yet, there is not much association between the works and artists besides the fact that some works are inspired by the scenery of Hong Kong. Even though the curatorial direction is not apparent, following a chronological order, we can faintly recognise the trend of art

creation being influenced by social happenings: themes related to quarantine and staying at home are more recurrent after 2019. Here, the role of collectors is latent.

At the other end of the narrow hallway, visitors will find another exhibition hall. The second act imitates that of a homely environment. Dimly lit, a projector sits atop a coffee table in front of a sofa. Artworks of different sizes and genres cluttered on surrounding walls, looking disarrayed with works above and below each other. The works, from the left to right, are actually arranged according to the time of acquisition. The display reveals the collecting journey and preference of the collector; from the dense and crowded cityscape in *Elephants in Hong Kong*, to the anti-National Security Law protests documented in *Gaze*, these are all works reflecting his imagination of Hong Kong. As he makes Hong Kong home, his understanding of the city grows deeper and softer. This corner of the exhibition deliberately emulates the mood of a collector's living room, that is warm, and feels like a lived space. Amongst works by mature artists are small paintings of the collector's cats and a landscape painting done by Yuri's mother. The coffee table does come from Yuri's home. Taking quick glances around, we see everyday objects like a dishwashing sponge with YEP YEP printed on it, or Band-Aids with graphics by Yoshitomo Nara. It does not take much effort to imagine this collector as a homebody who likes to be close to his family and remains a child at heart. Details as such spread throughout the exhibition, providing clues for viewers' imagination of the collector.

The two halls also take careful approaches in the documentation of information. To supplement the main narrative of the collection and the curation, the curator invited artists and the collector to write about the works on view. In the white cube, artists' writings on their practices are compiled in files and kept in a cold metal file rack, like important documents that are about to be brought into an operation room. Over at the other side, the collector's home offers descriptions written by the collector. Yuri writes in a more casual flow, encompassing any topic that comes to mind, such as his thoughts on the work, and his encounter with the artist. Instead of displaying these entries in a file, the writings are collected in a collage book, reminding viewers of a photo album or memorial book.

The interesting thing about this exhibition is that the audience has to immerse in order to detach. Meaning that the viewer must first accept that there are two "exhibitions within an exhibition", immersing in each act as their own, reading all the details. Only then, can the viewer realise that this exhibition is trying to emulate the coming-to-be of an art exhibition (from a private collection to an institutional presentation), and to reflect on the narrative power of curation. This is a conscious reproduction that draws distance between the viewer and the art system, leaving space for contemplation. Quoting esteemed performance artist Tehching Hsieh, "The subject can experience, understand, and finally usurp the forces that bind it through deliberate and proven

means.” The subject can reenact the forces that bind it through deliberate and proven means, and by doing so, experience, understand and finally usurp these forces.

Via minute details, the binary exhibition halls continue to show two ways of representation in and outside of the white cube. Although the collector persona in the show is known to be fabrication and intended to propel imagination, it is still fleshed out with details. The more character that the domestic setting puts on, the more visible that the white cube is wiping off the presence of a collector. Of course, this is not an issue of the white cube. The intention of the white cube is to erase any impact from the environment, allowing the audience to focus on the work itself. We have to be conscious of such deficiency. Collecting is not only a consumptive behavior, it reflects the preference and experience of a person, just as Yuri’s collection embodies his understanding to a place. However, moving from a private space to a venue open to public, the voice of individuals are completely overshadowed through institutionalised exhibition. Even though museums often name exhibition halls after contributing collectors, it does not make it easier for viewers to understand what the collector thinks. As the viewer come to this realisation, they will notice that there are myriad of individual voices that have been neglected in the ecosystem of art – those of collectors, artists, and even audience.

This explains why the curator invited the artists and collector to elaborate textually, adding to the narrative in varying perspectives. Yet, this is an endless cycle. Once you decide to include a certain voice, you make the choice to rid another voice; you notice the lack of a voice, and you patch it, then you notice the absence of another voice – and the process occurs all over again. Exhibitions are unable to restore all voices of the world, because curation and archiving are practices of selection and focus. Even though individual voices end up as fragments of the world’s grand narrative, curator Chris Wan Feng believes that individual accounts still matter. Confronting the constant paradox of addition and absence, the crucial point is not to complete the narrative; instead, it is to be constantly aware of the reality where individual voices are overpowered in the art system. Upholding this mentality enables the act of understanding and usurping, as Tehching Hsieh proposed. As we usurp the narrative power of institutions, we keep the diversity in narration.