

The Big Shift

China has become the largest market for art and antiquities. Now the government is tightening the screws.

The German business manager of an international art transport company has been in detention in China since the end of March and is apparently so intimidated that his company is not prepared to speak about the reason. The only things that are known are that he has been accused of smuggling and that the company has transported works by Ai Wei Wei, among other artists. The transport company is receiving support from the consulate, the Beijing office of the company is closed, and its computers and data remain impounded. At least three other international transport firms that have long been doing business in China are also affected according to the information of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Their business managers have also been detained for investigation.

“I am unsettled,” says Michael Schultz, a gallery owner in Berlin who has been organising exhibitions in China for the last six years and also brings Chinese art to Germany. Some of the Chinese works that he wanted to show at the Art Cologne currently taking place were not allowed to leave China, including various ceramic reproductions of Karl Marx’s “Capital” by the sculptor Ma Jun. An exhibition of the US artist Simon Raab that Schultz also brought to Beijing was delayed at customs despite having received written authorisation. Although Raab’s works are abstract, they have names such as “Tibetan Flags” or “From behind these Bars”. “It is possible to read something political into every artwork, but the Raab exhibition had been approved,” says Schultz. “I have never experienced such arbitrariness in China before. The screws are being tightened.”

Screws are arguably the most common metaphor that is used when there is talk of government arbitrariness in China. The only real question is which screws are being tightened and why. When one speaks to Chinese and western art dealers, one hears many in part conflicting conjectures about why their everyday working life in China has suddenly become so uncomfortable. It is, however, not possible to quote the majority of the people that one talks to by name.

“The Chinese government is currently not so much tightening the ideological screws. It’s rather a question of money,” says one of the best authorities on the Chinese art scene. He has been living in Beijing for a number of years and is normally not publicity-shy. But this time he is.

There is much to suggest that the regime is once again attempting to keep local artists out of the international market. Chinese painters and sculptors have recently been bringing high returns to foreign auction houses. In October 2011 alone, Sotheby’s earned 412 million dollars with its China business in Hong Kong. The works of artists such as Zhang Daqian and Qi

Baishi are now bringing in more than a work by Pablo Picasso or Andy Warhol. What is apparently now desired is the creation of a stronger domestic market in China so that the money stays in the country.

In the past months, a report by the European Fine Art Foundation (Tefaf) has confirmed what many in the scene have long suspected: China has risen to become the largest market in the world for art and antiquities. Its share of the world market is round 30 per cent, one per cent in front of the USA. This figure means that Chinese auction houses such as Beijing Poly (which reputedly has connections to the military) are making increasingly more revenue. The figure also means that a growing number of Chinese millionaires and billionaires are buying increasingly more ambitious art, above all at international auctions. Now these affluent citizens are buying (or being forced to buy) more local art.

One week after the publication of the Tefaf report, an anti-smuggling campaign was initiated in China. It is called “Shield to the Country’s Doors” and is supposed to continue until November, thus until the changeover of power in Beijing has taken place. The designated new head of state is Xi Jinping. “With Xi, what is coming to power is a clique of functionaries for whom political power and the instinct for personal material gain have been present in equal measure from the very beginning,” says a German gallery owner with many years of experience in China. “They will try to control the art market aggressively.”

Wang Ning, the head of the national anti-smuggling agency, has already announced that his employees will “crack down on dangerous and long-existing gangs of smugglers” and thus “create a fair trading environment”. The transport agents from the West who have recently been detained have arguably come into the sights of these anti-smuggling agents. The offices of the auction giants Sotheby’s and Christie’s in Mainland China have apparently also been searched in recent days. If one asks Sotheby’s about this, one receives the following answer: “Sotheby’s, as well as other companies, have been contacted by the Chinese authorities, and we are responding to their requests. We look forward to continuing to cooperate in their investigations.” In January, Christie’s Asia head still appeared to be optimistic that his auction house would hold its ground in the competition with its increasingly stronger Chinese competitors. Christie’s and Sotheby’s had increased the number of their Chinese-speaking employees a short time before.

The Berlin gallery owner Alexander Ochs is worried about the Chinese artists, some of whom he has known for two decades. “They are the real targets, not the dealers. I am now faced with the fundamental decision of how I should configure my involvement with the artists. There is no rule of law here at all.” According to Ochs, there is now supposed to be only one guiding principle, according to which it is no longer important which motif an image depicts

but who painted it. In addition to a blacklist of subjects, there is also supposed to be a taboo list of artists' names. Naturally, this list, if it actually does exist, is not official.

Xin Dong Cheng, one of the most active dealers in Beijing, who acts as a broker for Chinese artists in the US and Europe, however, currently sees no intensifying of ideology. "Particular political subjects such as Tibet, Tiananmen or the leaders of the Communist Party and their families remain taboo. But that has always been the case. Artists who attempt to flout this have never been able to exhibit in China. What is new is the fact that they are now no longer supposed to have the possibility to exhibit abroad either. Above all when their art brings in a lot of money."

One of the artists that Xin Dong Cheng represents is Yue Minjun. In 2007, his painting "Execution" was sold at Sotheby's for a little less than 6 million dollars. It was the most expensive contemporary Chinese painting up to that point. He painted it in the summer of 1995 and sold it to the Hong Kong art dealer Manfred Schoeni - for 5 thousand dollars. The picture had something of Goya's "The Third of May 1808", showing two rows of laughing men in front of a red wall that calls to mind the Tiananmen Gate outside of the Forbidden City. The row on the right is the firing squad but the men are not holding any weapons. The men in the row on the left are the condemned but they are wearing casual pants and laughing for all they're worth. All the men look like the painter himself. "They are not afraid of death," Yue says about his painting. "The laughing illustrates my deepest emotions. It is possible to be very happy today but yet never sure what will happen next."

The art movement in which Yue Minjun has been classified is called "Cynical Realism", which emerged after the massacre at the Square of Heavenly Peace in 1989. At that time, many artists lost their hope in an open China, and idealists became disappointed individuals. Their suffering was made into an art that sold very well at a particular time. Now it is the dealers who earned a lot from this art for a long time who are suffering for the first time. Yue himself rejects the label "Cynical Realism". His art is merely a self-ironic response to the spiritual vacuum in China today.

The label "Cynical Realism" actually applies much better to the dealer scene. Urs Meile, the Swiss gallerist for Ai Wei Wei, says: "For the government, I am only a little dealer. That's why they have left me in peace up to now. As long as I don't exhibit any political works by Ai."

TIM NESCHITOV

Süddeutsche Zeitung, Feuilleton, 21/22 April 2012

English translation: Amy Klement