

Capitalizing on Communism

BY ANDREW COHEN

Art-world insiders in China are divided over the moral and cultural implications of the most important collection of contemporary Chinese art ever to hit the auction block. Many are claiming Guy Ullens reneged on a promise to donate his collection to China, while others argue it doesn't matter whether he did or didn't make that promise—a person is free to change his mind.

Further fueling the debate is Ullens' announcement that he's looking to divest himself of his recently built Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA). In 2007, he opened one of China's most expensive private art centers in Beijing's 798 Art District. Exploiting the venue to exhibit works from what was considered his "permanent" collection, as well as sponsoring individual shows for artists (many of them featured in his collection) with works for sale, Ullens created a value-added mechanism that, among other things, enhanced his holdings. The UCCA, rife with such conflicts of interest, was plagued by controversy from its inception. Within six months of its opening the lauded staff was replaced: Paris-based Chinese art critic and curator Fei Dawei was sidelined for imported foreign directors. For its perceived cultural imperialism, the center received harsh criticism from the Beijing art community.

Sotheby's sale of the Ullens collection on April 3 was as controversial today as the artwork was aesthetically daring back in the 1980s and 1990s. Now the art world is weighing in on both sides of the argument.

On the pro-selling side, many dealers and collectors say they are happy for the opportunity to get their hands on highly important works fresh to the market. Art historians in this camp hail it as the decline of an era of cultural imperialism—a disproportionate amount of seminal works by China's avant-garde are in the hands of a few foreigners, such as Ullens and Uli Sigg, who had the wherewithal and means, during the post-Mao art market vacuum, to buy up the work at a fraction of today's stratospheric valuations. With this sale, a new chapter in contemporary Chinese art history will be written, as the works will be redistributed, most probably to Asian buyers, and with rising inflation, at record prices.

Meanwhile, detractors argue that Ullens is "selling out." Many in the art world recall him stating in the press and elsewhere his heartfelt desire to keep the collection intact for Chinese posterity. Ullens believed, rightly or wrongly, that foreigners couldn't have the same deep appreciation of the works as



the Chinese (though the UCCA has a French director). Artists prided themselves on being part of the Ullens collection, which was promoted on Chinese television, through exhibitions such as "Paris-Pékin" at Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris, in 2002, and later through shows held at the UCCA.

With Ullens supposedly believing in cultural repatriation, many asked why he was demanding top dollar for his collection. For instance, with such a handsome, built-in profit running into the tens of millions of dollars, why didn't he conclude a deal with the privately owned Minsheng Art Museum with whom he was rumored to be negotiating? These concerns follow on the heels of the Estella Collection and Pierre Hubert fiascos, in which artists were allegedly lured into selling their work at discounted prices with the promise of entry into museum and other permanent collections, only to watch their work auctioned off for much higher prices a short time later. Unsurprisingly, no artists represented in the collection attended the Sotheby's-sponsored dinner to honor Mr. Ullens at the UCCA. "It would be like the

artists showing up to their own funeral," a new Chinese arts magazine editor said.

For some, the sale of the collection was to be expected. "In the Ullens case it depends on how you view him," says Li Xianting, the revered critic who launched the early careers of many of these artists. "If you see him as a business man, then buying works cheaply and selling them high is a very normal business practice. This angers many Chinese because they had expectations that were too high. They put him on a pedestal, thinking he was the patron of Chinese art, a respectful collector. I am not angry because I never saw him as a great and important collector."

The larger issue at stake is that the Chinese cultural ministry, though spending USD 4.45 billion in cultural outlay (excluding construction, such as the National Museum of China's \$380-million face lift), still does not have the ideological and institutional wherewithal to recognize, let alone buy back and safeguard, its national treasures. Can a nation unable and unwilling to look at itself in the mirror acknowledge the importance of its critical artworks, let alone find solutions to the issues these works raise? Given this institutionalized censorship, it may not be possible at this time for China to develop its dynamic national art history. Fearing censorship by the authorities, Sotheby's didn't dare attempt to import any works from the Ullens collection into China that depicted Mao Zedong.

As a result of the failed vision of one venture capitalist-cum-philanthropist and the government's lack of vision, the Ullens collection will most likely be dispersed among other avaricious collectors, dealers and private museums mushrooming and decaying around the country. According to one prominent critic, this will only serve to provincialize the works once again.

Thus the controversy surrounding the Ullens sale is not just that of an aging foreigner who, having failed to share his bounty, is now cashing in his winning chips in order to simplify his life and the lives of his heirs. Perhaps if and when Uli Sigg sells his collection (unless he donates it to China), the nation will have matured so that its history books will accurately reflect the events of recent decades.

Li Xianting once said, "Art is ahead of everything." And it just may be that art will pave the way to this restoration and the writing of an accurate history of the era—but only if it can be seen by the local population.

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