

## **Cacophony of Voices and Emotions: Dialogic of Buying and Selling art**

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### **Abstract**

The importance of galleries as go-betweens for artists and art buyers is acknowledged in art world research. Using a Bakhtinian dialogic approach, this article examines social encounters of three artists, two art buyers and one gallery sales executive in Singapore. Specifically, it looks into the social interactional dynamics of artists and art buyers when they trade directly. Situational ambiguities and emotional ambivalence arise during such meetings from the different expectations and demands that are imposed, which have the effect of placing the parties involved in conflicting social contexts. For instance, when art connoisseurs and artists discuss aesthetics, monetary value is not of primary concern, nonetheless when they want to trade, commercial concerns become central; this can lead to discomfort between the parties. Similarly, art buyers may want to go behind the scenes to know more about the artist and the art practice; getting away from the glitter of the commercial gallery and into the modest art studio for an authentic experience may reveal too much for visitors; such experiences may break their illusion of the glamorous artist. This article looks at the microscopic interaction between artists and art buyers and shows how the ambiguities and ambivalence that can be generated by their encounters become constraining factors in encouraging artists and art buyers to trade directly, by-passing commercial art galleries and dealers.

**Keywords:** Art world, art markets, art mediators, dialogic of art, Singapore

## **Cacophony of Voices and Emotions: Dialogic of Buying and Selling art**

Buying and selling art can be emotional. This article examines the social processes involved when artists, buyers and gallery managers engage in discussing, selling and buying art. Their negotiations and discussions are emotionally-laden. Social ambiguity – where a social situation is unclear to individuals and they wonder how to behave and relate to each other – is common, as art buyers and art sellers shift between the aesthetic sphere and the commercial sphere during their transactions. Emotional ambivalence or mixed feelings are part of socially ambiguous situations.

This article documents the experiences of a Dutch couple in Singapore – Laura and Nico (unless stated the actual names of respondents are not used). I interviewed and followed them on their journey to acquire works of art in the city-state. I also interviewed the artists, Victor Tan and Chng Seok Tin (who granted permission to use their actual names). Interviews were also conducted with Karen, the sales executive of a commercial art gallery, Tree, which Laura and Nico visited during their quest to expand their art collection. Wong, an artist represented by Tree, was also interviewed.

This study is steeped in the art world research tradition. This stream of research addresses art quality and value within social settings. The relational dynamics amongst various art world stakeholders, functioning within social structures and institutions, generate the commercial value, popularity and recognition of artists and art works. There is a system of gatekeepers, mediators, intermediaries and institutions that structure the art world and construct consensus on art quality and taste. The starting point is that a work of art has no value in itself; various values – aesthetics, prestige, social, historical, political and economic – are generated and maintained through the art world (Adorno & Horkheimer 1972; Becker 1984; Zolberg 1990; Throsby 1994; Schulze 1999; Currid 2007: 388–389; Thompson 2008; Madoff 2009). Museums, galleries, collectors and artists collaborate, even manipulate, to maintain prices of works of art, perpetuate the status of art in society and define what constitutes good art (Albrecht 1968; Wolff 1981; Becker 1984; Bourdieu 1996; Bonus & Ronte 1997). Works are also popularised and commodified through the system (Adorno & Horkheimer 1972; Thompson 2008). Art has become a means to socially differentiate and stratify society (Bourdieu 1996; Bonus & Ronte 1997; Grenfell & Hardy 2007). Art quality and value may seem to lie in the eye of the beholder but the eye is socialised, as persons acquire aesthetic tastes. So, groups of individuals learn to appreciate art in their own social milieu. The status of art and artists are acquired through the social system and processes of internalisation.

Studies have shown that commercial art galleries and art dealers serve important functions between artists and art buyers. For instance, Becker (1984: 108-119) and Thompson (2008) showed how dealers form symbiotic relations with collectors. Dealers train appreciators to be collectors and inculcate pride and confidence in displaying one's taste and social status through art. At the same time, having bought works, collectors can trust their dealers to continue to champion the represented artists. Also, working with "independent" critics and auction houses, dealers and collectors develop a consensus on the aesthetic and commercial value of art works. In another study, Abbing (2002) explained why most professional artists remain poor. Many people, including artists, are trained to think that art and commerce do not mix. Artists should be purely creative; commercial interests should not dictate them. As a consequence, public funded support is expected, demanded and often given. Many artists have come to accept their relatively poor economic state of affairs and have devised their career in this frame of mind. Since artists are not supposed to be overtly interested in commerce, galleries and dealers step in to facilitate the commercial tasks of the art market.

While acknowledging the mediating functions of art dealers and art galleries, it may be asked why artists do not attempt to educate their own potential customers, change their own mind sets and learn to market their own works. Similarly, why do art buyers approach commission-seeking art dealers when they could save money by buying works directly from artists themselves? In fact, many artists and art buyers do so. But fulfilling the roles of the commercial art galleries and dealers is easier said than done. As will be shown in this article, the so-called obstacles also come from the microscopic interaction mechanisms. This article aims to present some of the mechanisms in the art world that give relevance and importance to galleries and dealers. This case study will highlight the social and emotional challenges facing artists and art buyers when they interact face-to-face and trade. As will be elaborated later, their interaction is highly influenced by views that art should not be appreciated through monetary value and that good artists are only marginally concerned with selling art. Such views are not easily reconciled with the wheeling and dealing that an art transaction often involves, and the result is an awkwardness and tension that hinders the parties when negotiating a direct sale. At the social interaction level, commercial art galleries and dealers offer a way to art trading that is less socially ambiguous and emotionally ambivalent, making the experience of buying and selling art more pleasant for artists and art buyers.

In using the dialogic perspective, this article maps out the intricacies of selling and buying art works. The various parties have to navigate from the emotional appreciation of art to exchanging money for art. These processes display a cacophony of voices and emotions. In the next section, I will discuss the dialogic perspective. Subsequently, the case of Laura and Nico is presented. By accentuating emotional ambivalence and social ambiguities, this paper points out various constraining microscopic mechanisms in the art world.

## Dialogism

The dialogic perspective originates from literary theorist Bakhtin (1981, 1965/1984, 1986). His works on literary texts have been appropriated into the social sciences (van Loon 1997; Gardiner and Bell 1998; Ooi 2002). The dialogic perspective accentuates social multiplicity and dynamic processes. It offers a set of concepts and vocabulary to present social phenomena in a dynamic and yet systematic manner, with the emphasis on social multiplicity and interplay. Just as importantly, the dialogic perspective accentuates the tensions of order and disorder in the social environment.

For this paper, to accentuate emotional ambivalence and multiplicity, a number of dialogic concepts, namely heteroglossia, polyphony and carnivalesque, are used. Heteroglossia points to the multiple contexts existing in social situations (Bakhtin 1981: 325–326; Holquist 1981: 428; Vice 1997: 18–44). Heteroglossia or multiple contexts are embedded in the art business. A social context entails a common understanding of what constitutes appropriate behaviour and how social actions should be interpreted. So, for instance, at the broad level, art business assumes at least two different social contexts. In the circumstance of art appreciation, pricing is usually not the main dimension when discussing aesthetics. The aesthetic experience may be subjective and emotional, or rational and technical, but the value of the work is usually not judged by the price it commands in the art market. In fact, in what Abbing (2002: 34) terms the “denial of the economy”, an obsession with price may destroy the aesthetic experience. As a popular set of discourse, overarching commercial intent by an artist would suggest a corruption of the creative art-making process and as a result, the works created would be rendered less-than-art. Commercial intent is seen as detrimental to the art making process. On the other hand, the art market is a commercial institution; artists sell their works and collectors buy. The art sale arena is essentially a commercial one. A commercial gallery, for instance, is intentionally staged to entice buyers. Many artists and collectors know the rules and behave accordingly in the aesthetic mode but awkwardness and tensions arise when the meeting switches to business exchange. For instance, when an artist sells his own art, in wanting to show a disinterest in the worldly commercial sphere, the artist may refrain from being enthused with the potential sale although the artist may be inwardly excited. In each situation, there is a social order in which people know how to behave appropriately. There is disorder when contrasting social contexts meet. Heteroglossia highlights the clash of contexts when people interact in social arenas.

Closely related to heteroglossia is the concept of polyphony. Polyphony highlights multiple voices (Bakhtin 1981: 331–336, 1986: 112–113; Vice 1997: 112–148). When a point of view is being articulated, there is also an overarching voice or the voice of the narrator. Just like in this article, my voice is omnipresent even though I do not use the personal pronoun in most instances. In text, dialogism draws our attention to the voice of the author. In social interactions, individuals

may marginalise their own voices and instead invoke other voices in their arguments and opinions. For example, when an art dealer says that “the price is determined by the market”, it is an attempt to marginalise the dealer’s own interest and giving a voice to the so-called “market”. The actual voice is still the dealer’s because the dealer constructs the argument and narrative. The concept of polyphony reminds us of who constructs arguments and whose voices are used and whose are hidden during social exchanges. Voices that are marginalized are also important. Together, the voices articulated by one party shows the politics of the conversation. The dialogue amongst different parties, the cacophony of voices, illuminates the social complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence in the situation.

Carnavalesque alludes to the seeming disorder and yet orderly proceedings of the carnival (Bakhtin 1965/1984; Stallybrass & White 1986). The concept accentuates multiple cultures and spheres of activities in the art world, which cannot be totally managed, suppressed or controlled. The concept of carnivalesque brings together heteroglossia and polyphony. Multiple contexts and voices characterise social reality. A person holds different, even contrasting views and carries a repertoire of social behaviour. Because a person can behave differently within the range of appropriate behaviour, the outcome of the interaction remains uncertain. For example, an art buyer may want to know an artist and visit the studio to have a more “authentic” appreciation of art practice. Art making practice can be messy and disorderly, in contrast to the sleek and staged presentation of finished works in commercial art galleries. The reaction of a visitor to the revealed grubbiness of the art studio, the lack of glamour in the creative process, is coloured by any pre-conceived idea he may hold about what the working space of an artist should be. Subsequently, as expectations meet or fail to meet, and impressions conflict, the visitor may be in awe or be disappointed with the visit. Artists, on their part, seek a “balance” between being open and honest in presenting their workspaces while, at the same time, maintaining the image and mystique of themselves as artists; this “balance” is not defined. Individual artists and art buyers are not sure of the outcomes of their encounters as they all have their personal preferences and interpretations of the situation. The experience of visiting an artist studio to go behind the scenes and to buy art is fraught with social ambiguities and emotional ambivalence. The social situation, like in the on-goings of a carnival, can take off in different directions as persons interact. Individuals involved may feel happy and frustrated as the dynamic carnivalesque social situation emerges.

As a framework, dialogism opens up discussion on social complexity. But unlike a functionalist integrative ontology – although the dialogic approach does attempt to simplify – the aim is to organise the complexity rather than to reduce the complexity. As a result, the case in this paper will accentuate the multiplicity of social contexts and voices in the interaction between artists and art buyers. The tensions between order and disorder will also be highlighted. Emotional ambiguities and ambivalence are predominant. Using Bakhtin’s dialogical framework, this

paper addresses some complex ways in which art, emotions and money come together through the case of Laura and Nico buying art in Singapore.

## **Laura and Nico Buy Art in Singapore**

Laura and Nico, a married couple, are Dutch university professors working in the Netherlands. Nico was in Singapore for the first six months of 2008, visiting a local university. Laura also visited the same university but only for two months. Both of them are my friends. Because of my research on the art world in Singapore, we started talking about local art and artists when we met in Singapore.

According to Laura and Nico, they collect paintings and sculptures that they like, not so much for investment but for enjoyment and decoration. The works must also be affordable and reasonably priced. Their appreciation of art is multi-faceted; they refer to their emotional responses, the techniques and ideas behind works and also their evaluation of the price. Their perspective on particular art works is also shaped by their knowledge of the artist, and whether they have met the artist before and their chemistry with the artist. Before making a purchase, Nico often searches for information on the Internet about the artist and earlier prices of works sold.

In my conversations with them, they recalled how they acquired various pieces of art over the years. Nico has meticulously documented their various pieces into a booklet. They recalled affectionately the specific pieces they acquired at flea markets, artist studios, galleries and small shops. Going behind the scenes into artist studios is special to them because they can get closer to the artist and understand the artist's works better; these experiences are, in their own words, "more authentic". They were glad when I wanted to introduce them to a couple of artists and visit their studios in Singapore.

### **Visit 1: Laura and Nico Visit Victor Tan at the Telok Kurau Studios**

The first artist studio Laura and Nico visited with me was Victor Tan's. Laura and Nico met Tan a couple of evenings earlier at an exhibition, during which I introduced them. Over drinks, the first meeting was friendly and animated, as we discussed the art scene in Singapore, the Netherlands and Denmark. We also exchanged views on art and the art business.

Tan's studio is on the fourth floor of the Telok Kurau Studios, a government-supported art housing complex. The studio is about 50 square meters. The black walls contrast well against Tan's stainless steel wire sculptures; from a distance and at first glance, one might mistake the sculptures as being made from wire mesh. There are hundreds of sculptures of different sizes in the studio. Most of the sculptures are human figures in different poses – standing, sitting, walking, jumping. There are also figures of birds, trees and abstract shapes. The figures come in different sizes, ranging from a few centimetres tall to over four meters high. For



the first-time visitor, one fears knocking down sculptures while navigating through the labyrinth. In the middle of the room, there is a raised platform on which Tan makes his sculptures.

The guests looked around the studio curiously, peering into the workspace of the artist. They were amazed by how Tan could create sculptures with bales of stainless steel wires. Laura and Nico asked Tan about his works and stories behind various pieces. Tan was forthcoming with his tales. For example, Tan explained that a series of baby sculptures was inspired by the birth of his niece. Tan is also visually impaired and he explained how he accidentally started making sculptures with wires: he could not draw because of his handicap in art school, so the then school principal encouraged him to try other media to “sketch”. He tried using wires and that eventually turned out to be his medium of artistic expression, even though he majored in ceramics.

After about 30 minutes, we decided to visit another artist, Chng Seok Tin. Her studio is on the ground floor of the art studio complex.

## **Visit 2: Laura and Nico Visit Chng Seok Tin**

Chng is also visually impaired. In her 60s, she has received the highest national accolade for an artist in Singapore, the national cultural medallion. When we visited, she was working on a series of prints and preparing for an exhibition in Taiwan. A friend and helper, Kate (not her real name), was with her. Chng welcomed us warmly. Chng’s studio was once the servant’s quarter in the complex. Chng was putting two paintings in the sun when we came calling. She explained that termites infested the two paintings and she was “drying” the pictures. After I introduced Laura and Nico to her, we went into her studio. Most of her works were stacked and kept in two rooms.

Chng gave Laura and Nico catalogues of her works. She also explained that she required help in making her prints because she is visually impaired. Chng also writes, composes music and paints. Chng is more proficient in Mandarin but speaks and understands English. Kate and I helped in the interpretation at times.

Laura saw a painting in the catalogue that interested her. She asked Chng if it was still available. Chng laughed uncomfortably before saying that the painting, together with other art pieces, was destroyed by termites. After looking around the cluttered art studio, Laura and Nico were shown her new series of prints. Nico took particular interest in a series called “Development of wind”. This series shows a picture of long grass blowing in the wind, with a bird flying in the sky. The composition and the style makes the print look like a Chinese brush painting and yet western in character; the blend of the East and West appeals to Nico. The series consists of nine pieces: three prints, one Artist’s Proof (A/P) and five test prints. The series was meant for the exhibition in Taiwan. While appreciating the series, Nico wanted to acquire a copy. Nico cautiously navigated the art-business heteroglossic situation; he first praised the works, indicated that he is touched by

their aesthetics and then with enthusiasm, asked if the prints are for sale. Chng smiled, paused to indicate that she is not overly excited on selling but said, “artists need to make a living too”.

Nico looked at the “Development of the wind” series for some minutes, compared the various prints and was most interested in the A/P. An A/P is usually not for sale, Chng explained, because it is the artist’s favourite. But would Chng part with this A/P? She smiled hesitantly and said “yes”. Chng then detached herself from the price by stating that the sum she has quoted is the “market price”. Never comfortable to bargain with the artist, Nico looked at the print again and decided to acquire it. And after a moment of reflection, in a carnivalesque turn of events, Nico spontaneously proclaimed that he wants to buy the whole series of nine pieces. Nico thought that he could display all pieces, showing how the creative process emerges in the series! He asked Chng to think about his proposal. Nico said that he will not bargain with her, and asked her to give him an offer for the whole package, instead of for individual pieces. If he could not afford the lot, then he would just buy the A/P. Chng was agreeable and seemed pleased. They agreed to communicate via email. All parties, including myself, were excited. After taking pictures and having some discussions, we left.

Nico and Laura were glad for the honesty and authenticity experienced in Chng’s studio. Behind Chng’s powerful works, they saw a very competent artist who overcame her physical disability. They were however also uncomfortable with the fact that some of Chng’s works were destroyed by termites and that her space seemed disorganised. Nico nonetheless loved “Development of wind” and wanted to acquire it.

### **Back to Tan’s Studio**

We returned to Tan’s studio. On our way, Nico talked enthusiastically about acquiring Chng’s series. We were supportive of his taste and choice. Laura and Nico were again looking around Tan’s studio. They showed interest in acquiring Tan’s works. Nico cautiously broached the subject of a commercial transaction and asked Tan whether the works are for sale. With an uncomfortable smile, having to step into business dealings, Tan replied positively. Tan also added that he normally would ask visitors to go to the galleries to buy his works. He would then not have to deal with the commercial transaction. The buyer would also know the prices of his works in the market.

While Tan stated his “normal” practice and reluctance in doing a direct sale, he also alluded to the exceptions he would make. He would only sell to friends who are aesthetically excited about his works; unspoken in the clarification is a hint that Laura and Nico prospectively qualify. In putting primacy on the aesthetics and friendship spheres in the heteroglossic situation, Tan has used his criteria for direct sales as a social marker of how he views the buyers; he would prefer to relate to them as friends and art connoisseurs, not as customers.



Nico was interested in a figure climbing out of a wooden frame. Tan said that was not for sale because that was his last piece in the series. Tan mentioned that he could however make another piece for them. That was not acceptable to Nico; he felt that the buyer should not usurp the artist's right in creating and editioning his work. Laura asked about another figure and that was also not for sale. Nico pointed to another and met with the same response. "Are there any for sale?" asked Laura in a jovial but exasperated voice. "Yes", replied a laughing Tan, "but you want those that I want to keep!"

In a later interview, I asked Tan why he did not sell any pieces to the couple. Tan said:

It was a coincidence that they picked some of the sculptures that I have strong feelings for, or there is significance for me in keeping them. This has happened before. If I said "yes" to selling them a long time ago, they would not have seen them.

I also feel that buying and selling art is about synergy, [...] there is a need to have some chemistry between the two parties. It is not just me pushing a sale but also depending on the buyer. To have someone appreciate my work is more important than one buying my work because friendship is more important to me. It is not like if they don't buy my work, then they are not my friends. I like to spend time with them. Actually when people email me to buy my work, I ask them to go to the gallery first. Look at those there. If they want to come to have a look and want to have a chat, they don't have to buy my work from me. Galleries [offer the] mood for selling and buying. Willing parties come together.

I rather be friends than talk about money. [...] I say the price and wonder if they will be offended. It's a dual effect. I feel uncomfortable to sell and they feel uncomfortable buying [...] That's why I like to let galleries sell my works.

Essentially, Tan was uncomfortable and ambivalent about selling his works directly to buyers. He wanted to see and portray himself as an artist first and art seller second. By voicing himself as a friend (versus that of an art seller) in cases where he does sell, Tan personalises the process because the commercial transaction is then actually a favour for a friend. Tan was also afraid that the price he named might make him sound money-minded. It would be easier if the buyer obtains his works through the galleries that represent him.

### **Coffee After Our Visit**

After the visit to Telok Kurau Studios, Laura, Nico and I went for coffee. In the absence of the artists, we talked candidly about the experiences earlier in the afternoon. Both were happy with their experiences of going behind the scenes in the studios; the artist work spaces were very different from the glitz of a commercial art gallery. Nico was clearly excited about acquiring Chng's series of prints. He liked the character of the prints, in the sense that they look like Chinese paintings, but are prints. Laura and Nico however felt somewhat sorry for Chng because her works were not stored properly. Laura was upset that termites had destroyed the piece she was interested in. Laura and Nico felt that every work by an artist

should be precious, like one's baby. Knowing of her handicap, they knew that she needs help in getting organized. They respect her works and admire her for having received the national cultural medallion in Singapore. I also asked Nico how much he would pay for the series of prints. Nico thought that Chng should not charge him for the test prints, while he would pay full price for the rest. That is a fair discount, he thought.

Laura and Nico have a good impression of Tan too. They felt that Tan, in his late 30s, is confident and he knows the future is his. They also felt that Tan's studio was overwhelmingly crowded. Nico was drawn to those figures that depict motion. He said that Tan's aesthetics rests in the portrayal of "movement". Switching to the commercial aspect of their encounter, Laura and Nico were a bit confused and wondered if Tan was truly interested in selling his works to them. They asked to buy three pieces and were told they are all not for sale.

Our after-visit discussion contrasts against how Laura and Nico behaved during the visits. As they immersed themselves into the private workspaces of the artists, Laura and Nico were always mindful to demonstrate their appreciation of the works and of being allowed into the studios. They did not discuss the quality of the art works based on monetary terms with the artists. In other words, Laura and Nico behaved cautiously, showing respect and appreciation and not insulting or offending the artists when they navigated through the heteroglossic situation of art versus business.

### **Email Correspondence and Acquiring a Work From Wong**

A few days later, I met Laura and Nico. Nico received an email from Kate on behalf of Chng, listing the price of each individual print in the series, with full and "discounted" prices. The whole series was too expensive for them. During their face-to-face meeting, the discussion was informal. Chng was happy to sell. They felt it strange that the email was formal, and each print was priced individually. Nico had asked for a packaged deal. Nico said:

It is interesting that the prices listed are higher than were mentioned in the studio but with a discount. [Giving discounted prices] is very unprofessional, I would say, because we don't buy by seeing whether there is a discount or not.

Nico felt uncomfortable that he was perceived to be a bargain hunter. After Nico received the email, he went to visit Chng in her studio. He wanted to acquire the A/P. He thought they had an agreement: if he does not buy the whole series, he would just buy the A/P. But Chng refused to part with the A/P. Nico found the whole incident puzzling and hoped that he had not offended Chng. Chng eventually explained to me that she wanted to use the print for the exhibition in Taiwan. She had not taken a picture to document the work. It was also Kate who liaised on her behalf with Nico; Chng did not know the exact details. Kate later explained to me that she thought she followed Chng's instructions. There was confusion and misunderstanding, resulting in the rather messy and unpleasant situation.

Regardless, Laura and Nico told me that they acquired a painting from an artist, Wong, through an art gallery. Laura and Nico stumbled across the gallery, Tree. Laura saw a tulip painting that she liked but it was reserved. The gallery's sales executive – Karen – said that she could ask the artist to produce a similar one, with some changes. Laura, with her view on artistic integrity, was aghast. Laura was shown a catalogue of Wong's works and was drawn to one particular piece. Karen then suggested that she could bring the couple to Wong's home and studio. Karen called up the artist and they took a taxi there.

During the visit to Wong's home, Laura and Nico became fond of Wong. Laura felt that she, in her own words, "clicked" with the artist. Karen was asking Wong to take out works to be shown to Laura and Nico. Wong was, on the other hand, asking Karen to allow Laura and Nico to look around and take their time. He unwrapped paintings and turned them at different angles, so that Laura and Nico could enjoy. In contrast to Tan's and Chng's, Wong's works are meticulously packed and documented.

Laura noticed that there was a massive commissioned work being done. She mentioned that the work looked complete. Wong said that the client would probably think so too but he felt that there was still something more but did not know what that was. Laura and Nico also saw a painting hanging over the door. Wong noticed their interest and said immediately that the painting is not for sale. Laura and Nico felt that Wong is not comfortable telling them the prices. Laura found that Wong encapsulates a sense of aesthetic expected of an artist. Karen was the one doing the selling. Inadvertently or otherwise, in the heteroglossic situation embedded in the visit to appreciate art and to sell art, Karen was handling the commercial aspect of the visit, while Wong focused on the aesthetic discussion.

Wong's studio is separated between the workspace and the display space. That is a professional set-up, according to Laura and Nico. To the Dutch couple, unlike Chng and Tan, who seem only to create works, Wong takes his works to the packing and selling stages.

Eventually, Laura saw the piece from the catalogue. After seeing the actual painting and meeting Wong, she likes the picture even more. To Laura, there is a Zen-like character in both the painting and the painter. She asked to go home and contemplate before deciding on a purchase. That was not a problem. A few days later, Karen told her that the first piece that she liked was on the market again. Laura asked Karen to bring the one from Wong's house to the gallery, so that the two pieces can be compared. Laura and Nico eventually decided on the piece from the house. Without rational reasons, the Zen-like painting grew on the Dutch couple more and more, and the tulip painting less and less. The one they bought cost S\$6000 (€3000), while the other S\$10 000 (€5000); the couple admitted that the price was also a factor. Price did affect their decision; they could afford the dearer one.

Laura and Nico also told me about their encounters with Karen, when they visited Tree. Nico felt that Karen had a kind of naivety and simplicity that helped in selling art. She is chatty. To them, Karen seems to think that Laura and Nico would buy more pieces. She kept asking, “You don’t want to buy the other?” As a result, Laura thought that Karen has many rich customers. Karen seems to have limited knowledge about art, according to Nico. For example, Nico noticed the artistic signature of Wong in his paintings – a few dark brush strokes found in almost all his paintings – and pointed that out to Wong. Karen interjected and pointed out instead the artist’s name-signature at the bottom of the painting. Wong then said that Nico was referring to his artistic signature. To Laura and Nico, Karen may have an unpracticed eye, but she is good at selling. Karen revealed her sale tactics to me in an interview:

We always say the things that the customers like to hear [she laughs]. So always say nice things about the paintings. For example, one lady came the other day and walked past the shop three, four times and finally came in to take a look at a painting. This square painting really caught her eye and she liked it very much. Since the lady doesn’t have enough space for the painting, she was wondering if she should buy or not. Then I told her that lots of customers like the details in the painting and I also told her that every time she looks at the painting, it makes her feel happy. The customer agrees and said, “Yes, I feel happy when I look at it”. That’s how we try to convince customers.

With little ambiguity in what she has to do as an art seller, Karen embodies the commercial agent in the art world.

### **Wong’s View on Laura and Nico**

I interviewed Wong a couple of weeks after Laura and Nico bought his painting. Wong described himself as a “very local” artist because he lived in Singapore all his life and has no overseas training. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts while in his early twenties. He does both traditional Chinese ink paintings and also western paintings using oil and acrylic. Of late, he has been working with mixed media, including sand and gold paper. Based in Singapore, he finds himself mixing Chinese and western traditions in his works. The blending of the East and West comes naturally to him because of his Chinese background and his major in western art. My conversation with him was conducted in Mandarin. Laura and Nico felt that his art is special because, in their eyes, it blends eastern and western traditions. The mixed media (oil and sand) painting they bought was of a hill protruding out in the open space, but on closer examination, reveals a side profile of a face speaking to the heavens. Wong explained to me that the picture refers to a Chinese legend in which a warrior asked the heavens 100 questions. That is why the painting is titled “Talking to the sky”.

It is very rare that customers visit his home. Laura and Nico’s visit was agreed upon because of their interest. Wong said that Laura and Nico are the best type of customers because they know what they like. While he does commissioned works

for hotels, banks and private homes, he likes to work without the dictates of art consultants and interior designers. He wants to express his own feelings in his creations; he has also moved away from his training in photo-realistic paintings. His current works are mainly abstract and semi-abstract. With an idea in his head, the painting emerges as he works on it without knowing the exact outcome. Laura and Nico seem to resonate with him, Wong said, because they pick out the paintings that he himself likes. Also, unlike many local art buyers, Wong did not have to explain much about his paintings to Laura and Nico. Wong is aware of the heteroglossia or conflict of contexts if he has to sell his works himself; he maintains his aesthetic aura by letting Tree represent him in the commercial field.

By marginalising the customer in Laura and Nico, the voice of friendship is articulated by Wong. In our conversation, the encounter with Laura and Nico was framed as establishing friendship. Wong said that he enjoyed talking to them, discussing art and ideas in his works. It was not important that they bought a painting. Wong said that Karen is keen to push for a sale during the visit and that created some awkwardness for him. On the other hand, Wong admittedly knew that Laura and Nico were ready to buy.

Tree and Wong have a good relationship. Wong appreciates Tree's support although the gallery is making money through him. The gallery is professional and is able to do the marketing and documentation of his works. Marketing and administrative skills, as Wong admitted, are lacking in him.

## **Discussion**

The case presented above highlights a number of emotionally-laden social processes in art buying and selling. The artist and the art buyer straddle different social arenas as they engage in art appreciation and transact commercially. I will highlight two dialogical arenas in the discussion.

### **The Authentic-Staged Line**

In contrast to commercial art galleries, visiting artist studios offers behind the scene insights into artists. Talking to the artists, seeing how they work and knowing artists' views will add different dimensions to understanding particular art works. Laura and Nico admitted that they do feel more compelled to buy when they visit artists in their studios. Artists know that persons visiting their studios are potential customers. But as the case shows, the social interaction between artists and art buyers can be uneasy and the outcomes uncertain. Nico recalled his visits:

We have a very nice time at Tan's studio. You also feel that you actually have to buy something. [...] But] it was unclear in Tan's studio what was for sale and what was not for sale. Interesting that the pieces we are interested in, Tan wants to keep them. So there is something special in those pieces.

Then we went to Tree and subsequently Wong's home. It was a completely different experience, in the sense that Wong's [home] gallery is completely separated from his studio. It was nicely maintained with the décor. He was more professional [even in his own private working space]. He made a clear distinction between what is for sale and what is not. We got a present from him, something made of clay, even though we didn't buy anything [then]. And we have an open and nice discussion.

Karen is an amazing person. She has a [sincere] naivety in selling because you would not get the idea that you are pushed by her or she is telling things which are not true. [...] She lets the buyers take their time to look at the art and she tries to figure out what the buyer wants.

Laura and Nico, I observed, felt uncomfortable and ambivalent when they see the artists' workspaces as disorganised or works stored improperly. They were dismayed by the destruction of some of Chng's works by termites, one of which they had wanted to acquire. In Wong's case, Tree have helped him document and pack his works; that gave a good impression to Laura and Nico. These reactions revealed an expectation by Laura and Nico that art be revered from its inception, and not only upon its launch. The professional standards of a commercial gallery in its careful handling and showcasing of art, for which Laura and Nico have high regard, arguably conditions such a line of thinking. The staged gallery standards seeped into the disorderly reality of an artist studio, giving rise to mixed feelings. They nevertheless avoid being rude during the visits; they did not criticise the artists during their visits. They behave appropriately in the studios, by showing respect and appreciation of the art works, exchanging views on art, asking questions about the artists and not evaluating the art works through monetary terms.

Catering to the desires of visitors to know them better and yet to present themselves in a good light is a challenge for artists. Negative judgements may be made if artists reveal all aspects of their practice. But if they were to tidy up their spaces and selectively reveal positive aspects of themselves, visitors to their studios would have a false impression. Essentially, Laura and Nico's experiences are layered. They crave and enjoy having the veil over the creative process lifted, but they cannot help but evaluate what they are allowed to see in accordance with their own value systems.

The quest for the authentic experience by visiting artist studios, but with a desire to see artists practicing art in an organized and staged manner allude to the heteroglossic clash of the unkept artist studio and the primed up art gallery; the art studio is a private work space and should not be staged and the commercial art gallery is a publicly staged space to entice art collectors. These conflicting demands inadvertently come together when art buyers want to visit art studios while inherently expecting art gallery practices.

### **The Art-Business Crossing**

Many artists and art collectors believe artists should be concerned primarily with their creative production. Their art works should not be dictated by commercial



potential as profit-driven art is often looked upon dimly by many, though there are also those who would challenge this view. Regardless, Tan, Chng and Wong all try to separate the process of creating art from selling art. Mingling these activities closely would be seen as a commercialisation of art and unacceptable to many artists. Laura and Nico think so too. From my observations of Laura and Nico, they were always first to cross into the business arena with the artists. They initiated the process by asking if works are for sale before inquiring for the prices.

As this occurs, the parties inhabit the dual contexts of art and business simultaneously. This heteroglossic situation results in a quandary. Tan, as described above, was visibly uneasy about selling his works directly to Laura and Nico, feeling that it risked compromising his integrity as an artist. Laura and Nico, in turn, did not want to press him into making a sale. When faced with this awkward situation, Tan attempted to recalibrate the social dynamic: he emphasised those qualities he saw in Laura and Nico – taste and cordiality – that appeal to his value system. In so doing, he indicated that they were people he could bond with. Befriending them would assuage his unease and make him more amenable to selling to them; any such transaction would then honour his policy of only selling directly to buyers who he considered friends. Subsequently, Nico had several friendly meetings with Tan over the weeks and trust and understanding was built. Nico eventually managed to buy a work from Tan, a piece that Nico did not notice on the first visit. And out of goodwill and friendship, Tan gave Nico an additional, “incomplete” piece. Acquiring these works from Tan was protracted.

Chng, in contrast, took the unambiguous step of making a formal offer to Laura and Nico through an email, stating the “market prices” and the “discounted prices” of her works. It was considered too expensive by Nico and a deal did not take place. They did not bargain or negotiate the prices face-to-face. Further, Chng rescinded the original agreement for the A/P. The episode was uncomfortable for the artist and the art buyers. They did not know how to continue their communication with each other; Laura and Nico wondered how Chng viewed them, and vice versa. The awkward dynamic of the art-business crossing remained unchanged. But in March 2010, Laura visited Chng again, partly on my initiative. Laura wanted to acquire a print for Nico’s birthday. The visit ended with Chng giving Nico a print of Laura’s choice. Goodwill was fostered, but no commercial transaction took place.

From Laura and Nico’s perspective, their acquisition from Wong was the least complicated. The commercial exchange was unambiguous and they did not worry about how to proceed in acquiring the work. The deal was settled through Karen and Tree. The meeting with Wong was polite and friendly, without the artist having to mention any prices. Wong discussed art, his works and his background, essentially establishing a friendly relationship with Laura and Nico. The commercial transaction, made through Karen, was clean and clear cut. Karen’s relationship with Laura and Nico was basically a commercial one and Wong’s relation-

ship with Laura and Nico stayed within the art and aesthetic arena. Wong did not have to cross into the commercial sphere directly and personally.

These three contrasting art-buying experiences highlight the carnivalesque outcomes of heteroglossia or multiple social arenas. In straddling between the aesthetic and commercial spheres, Tan and Chng invoked the voices of the market and the gallery to justify their prices. They were also uncomfortable when talking prices with Laura and Nico. As for Wong, Karen was Wong's commercial arm. The result for Laura and Nico was that the transaction with Wong and Karen was smooth and uncomplicated. That was not the case with Tan and Chng.

## Conclusions

Art world research has shown that the value of a work of art is not inherent in the work itself. There are stakeholders that maintain prices and define tastes. At the start of this article, I briefly discussed a few mediating roles of commercial art galleries and dealers in the art world. They also add costs to artists and art buyers. Some artists and art buyers do appropriate the functions of the art mediators but as the case presented in this article shows, social ambiguities and emotional ambivalence mar the microscopic interaction between them. When cast alongside the established norms of how artists and art buyers should behave, and what to expect, these ambiguities and ambivalence become constraining factors in encouraging artists and art buyers to trade with each other, bypassing art galleries and dealers. Heteroglossia highlights the clashes of multiple contrasting social contexts when artists and art buyers trade. This article concludes with two points.

One, many art buyers appreciate art works by learning more about the background of and even having personal experiences with the artist. They desire the authentic encounters with artists by going behind the scenes but as the experiences of Laura and Nico demonstrate the visits to artist studios may shatter the professional image of artists. Artists may be perceived as unprofessional if they work in a less organized manner, so it is risky for them to allow visitors into messy work studios. Despite their desires, visitors may not hold consistent views and may not appreciate the work circumstances of individual artists. Art buyers like Laura and Nico also carry with them preconceptions of a professional artist and inevitably impose these expectations when they go behind the scenes. As a result, their experiences are bittersweet. They are ambivalent; they adore certain artists and their works, but at the same time they are dismayed by their chaotic art practice. In contrast, commercial art galleries shield the grubbiness of art practice from the public.

Two, artists and art buyers may have similar understanding of what art is and share common interest in art trading but crossing from the aesthetics to the commercial in the heteroglossic situation can be clumsy and often generates discomfort for all parties. To many, artists who are overtly and primarily concerned with

the commercial value of their creations often draw criticism because they have compromised the ideal of pure artistic expression. So, while artists do sell their works directly, they should not appear too eager. A compromise, as shown in Laura and Nico's experience, is for the artist and the art buyer to fraternise and build trust; when there is goodwill and friendship parties need not bargain, and gifts and discounts may even be offered. To Laura and Nico, Chng may have crossed too aggressively into the art business sphere with the email but meeting after nearly two years later, the gesture by Chng to give Nico a birthday gift generated a level of goodwill. Karen, as a sales executive in a gallery, explicitly sells art; there is no ambiguity. At the end of the day, it was easier for the Dutch couple to relate to Wong. The protracted and uncomfortable encounters of buying art directly from artists make such forms of acquisition cumbersome. It is easier to buy art from the commercial art galleries.

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