

# Buying and Selling Art Control Mechanisms during Interaction

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Creativity at Work:

# Buying and selling art: Control mechanisms during interaction

*By Can-Seng Ooi*

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# Abstract

In using the Bakhtinian dialogic approach, this paper examines the microscopic interaction of three artists, two art buyers and one gallery sales executive in Singapore. The importance of galleries, as go-betweens for artists and art buyers is acknowledged in art world research. This paper however looks at the interactional levels and identifies social mechanisms that shape art buying and selling behavior. Despite the possibility of skipping galleries in acquiring art, the commercial art gallery absorbs the “emotional costs” of buying and selling art. Commercial art galleries create and maintain glamourized image of the artist; this image can be destroyed when art buyers go back stage and visit the artist. The clashes of expectations and social contexts when artists and art buyers transact can be avoided when the transaction is done through the commercial gallery.

# Keyword

art world, creative economy, dialogic of art, Singapore

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## Buying and selling art: Control mechanisms during interaction

Can-Seng Ooi

Discussions on what constitutes good art have always been hotly debated. The position that an art work's aesthetic values lie within itself is popularly propagated by Kant; art appreciation should make no reference to anything outside of itself but on purely aesthetic terms, such as expression, idea, feeling, tension and contrast (Blau 1988; Kant & Pluhar 1987; Stolnitz 1960; Zangwill 1995). This means that the aesthetic experience should not be adulterated through social and economic concerns nor through personal values and preferences; good art transcends and is autonomous of social conditions (Blau 1988: 271). This view is challenged by the relativist view of art appreciation: beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. The relativist position suggests that quality is subjective (Dickie 1964). The value of an art work does not stem from the work itself but from the appreciator, based on personal tastes and individual preferences. This paper moves away from the field of philosophical discussions on aesthetics. It looks at the social processes of how artists, buyers and gallery managers engage in discussing, selling and buying art. These discussions can become emotional. Social ambiguities, that is when a social situation is unclear to individuals and they wonder how to behave and relate to each other, are common, as art buyers and art sellers shift from an aesthetic sphere to a commercial one. Emotional ambivalence or mixed feelings often accompany social ambiguities. This paper documents the experiences of a Dutch couple - Laura and Nico (pseudo names) - in Singapore. I interviewed and followed them on their journey to acquire works of art in the city-state. I also interviewed the artists - Victor TAN, CHNG Seok Tin and Wong (permission granted for using Tan and Chng's real names) - and Karen, the sales executive of Tree, a commercial art gallery, where Laura and Nico visited during their quest to expand their art collection.

In contrast to aesthetics, art world 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 M. 1972; Becker 1984; Currid 2007: 388-389; Schulze 1999; Throsby 1994; Zolberg 1990). Museums, galleries, collectors and artists collaborate, even manipulate, to maintain prices of art works, perpetuate the status of art in society and define what constitute good art (Albrecht 1968; Becker 1984; Bonus & Ronte 1997; Bourdieu 1996; Wolff 1981). Works are also popularized and commodified through the system

(Adorno & Horkheimer M. 1972). Art has become a means to socially differentiate and stratify society (Bonus & Ronte 1997; Bourdieu 1996; Grenfell & Hardy 2007). Art quality and value may seem to lie in the eye of the beholder but the eye is socialized, 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 internalization.

This study is steeped in the art world research tradition. It stems from some simple empirical observations. The starting question is: Could art buyers bypass mediators and acquire art from artists themselves? By doing so, art works can be bought cheaper as the commissions demanded by galleries can be saved, for instance. And artists can have fuller control over their own creations. Commercial art galleries and art dealers become irrelevant then. While people do buy directly from artists and many artists do not use galleries and dealers, the existence of many art galleries and dealers still allude to their continuing relevance in the art market. This also means that they still serve functions between artists and art buyers. Studies have already been done on the importance of art galleries and dealers in the art world. For instance, Becker (1982: 108-119) offered a historical perspective of how dealers form symbiotic relations with collectors. Dealers train appreciators to be collectors and inculcate senses of pride and confidence in displaying one's taste and eagerness to display one's social status through art. At the same time, collectors can trust dealers to champion the artists they have bought works from. Also working with critics, dealers and collectors develop a consensus on the aesthetic and commercial values of art works. In another study, Abbing (2002), showed why artists remain poor. Many people, including artists, are trained to think that art and commerce do not mix. Artists should be creative and be experimental; they should not be dictated by commercial interests. As a consequence, public support is expected, demanded and often given. Many artists have come to accept their relatively poor economic state of affair and have devised their career in this frame of mind. Since artists are not supposedly overtly interested in the commercial value of art, galleries and dealers step in to facilitate the commercial tasks of the market.

This study acknowledges the intertwined relationships amongst different art world players. This study wants to examine some of these intertwined relationships at the microscopic-level of social interaction. In this case, it will be amongst artists, art buyers and a sales executive of an art gallery in Singapore. The study will highlight the social and emotional challenges and obstacles faced by artists and art buyers when they interact. The ranges of rules and appropriate behaviors are *de facto* microscopic-level control mechanisms within the art world, through which prices are determined and values associated with art are kept. The control mechanisms are subtle and steer social interactions; the outcomes may be unpredictable but emotional discomfort arises when parties deviate from socially established expectations and what is considered appropriate behavior, for example, some artists are uncomfortable when having

to engage deeply in commercial activities when they see themselves as creative individuals.

In using the dialogic perspective, this paper maps out the intricacies of selling and buying art works. The various parties have to navigate from the emotional appreciation of art to the rational exchange of money for works of art. These processes are not linear; there is 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 microscopic control mechanisms in the art world.

### **Dialogism**

The dialogic perspective originates in the work of literary theorist Bakhtin (1981; 1984; 1986). His works on literary texts have been appropriated into the social sciences (Bakhtin 1998; Ooi 2002; van Loon 1997). 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.

Specifically 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 art business. A social context entails a common understanding of what constitute 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 a work is not usually the main dimension in a discussion on 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 could fetch in the art market. In fact, in what Abbing termed as the "denial of the economy" (Abbing 2002: 34), an obsession with price may destroy the aesthetic experience. As a popular set of discourse, overarching commercial intents by an artist would dilute the creative process and as a result, the works created would be rendered less-than-art. 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. 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 one's 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 quietly excited. In each situation, there is a social order that 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, people invoke different voices in their arguments and opinions. For instance, when an art dealer says that "the price is determined by the market", it is an attempt to marginalize 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 which voices are used and which voices are ignored during social exchanges. Voices that are marginalized are also important. Together, the voices articulated by one party show the politics of the conversation. The dialogue among 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. The concept points to multiple cultures and spheres of activities in the art world which cannot be totally managed, suppressed or controlled (Bakhtin 1984; Stallybrass & White 1986). Carnavalesque brings together heteroglossia and polyphony. Social reality is characterized by multiple contexts and voices. A person holds different views and carries a repertoire of social behavior. Because a person can behave differently within the range of appropriate behavior, the outcome of the interaction remains uncertain. For example, there are multiple understandings of what art is and how art works should be priced. The myriad of views has become a resource for artists and art buyers to selectively use during interaction. They may move their conversation from appreciating art to price negotiation but the emerging exchange may be fraught with ambiguities and ambivalence. The social situation, like in a carnival, can take off in different directions as persons interact. Individuals involved may feel happy, frustrated or ambivalent as the dynamic social situations emerge through the carnivalesque interaction.

As a framework, dialogism opens up questions and points to social complexity. But unlike a functionalist integrative ontology - although the dialogic approach does attempt to simplify - the aim is to organize 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 art, emotions and money come together through the case of Laura and Nico buying art from three artists in Singapore.

### **Laura and Nico Art Buying Experiences 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 worlds 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 reasonable priced. Their appreciation of art is multifaceted; they refer to their emotional responses, the techniques and ideas behind works and also their rational 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 on specific pieces they acquired at flea markets, visiting artist studios, galleries and small shops. Going behind the scene into artist studios is special to them because they could get closer to the artist and understand the artist's works better. 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 Art 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 art business.

Tan's studio is on the fourth floor of the Telok Kurau Art 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. So, from a distance and at first glance, one might mistaken 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 centimeters 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. 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 he made a series of baby

sculptures, inspired by the birth of his niece a couple of years earlier. 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, and the then-school principal encouraged him to try other media to “sketch”. He tried using wires and that eventually turns 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 accolades for an artist in Singapore, the national cultural medallion. When we visited, she is 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 the two paintings are infested by termites and she is “drying” the pictures. After I introduced Laura and Nico to her, we went into her studio. Most of her works are stacked and kept in two rooms.

Chng gave Laura and Nico catalogues of her works. She also explained that she seeks help in making her prints because she is visually impaired. Chng also writes, compose music and paints. Chng is more proficient in Mandarin but could speak and understand 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 is still available. Chng laughed uncomfortably before saying that the painting was destroyed by termites, together with many other pieces. After looking around, Laura and Nico were shown 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 make the print looks 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 A/P (Artist’s print) and five test prints. The series was meant for the exhibition in Taiwan but Nico asked if the prints are for sale. Chng smiled and said, “artists need to make a living too”.

Nico looked at the “Development of the wind” series for some minutes, comparing the various copies 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 named a price and added that it is the “market price”. Nico looked at the print again and decided to acquire it. And after a moment of reflection, Nico excitedly said 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 will communicate via email. All parties, including myself, were excited. After taking pictures and having some discussions, we left. We returned to Tan's studio.

#### *Back to Tan's studio*

Nico talked enthusiastically about acquiring Chng's series. We were supportive of his taste and desire to buy the works. Laura and Nico were again looking around Tan's studio. They showed interest in acquiring Tan's works. So, Nico asked whether they were for sale. With an uncomfortable smile, 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.

Nico was interested in a figure climbing out of a wooden frame. Tan said that was not for sale because that is 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 artist should be given the freedom to express and the buyer should not take away the artistic license of the artist. 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!"

#### *Coffee after our visit*

After the visit to Telok Kurau Art Studios, Laura, Nico and I went for coffee. We talked about the experiences earlier in the afternoon. 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 they are prints. Laura and Nico however felt somewhat sorry for Chng because her works are not maintained properly. Laura was upset that the piece she was interested has been destroyed by termites. Laura and Nico felt that every work by an artist should be precious, like that of 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 would he pay for the series of prints. Nico thought that Chng should not charge him for the test prints, while paying 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 is confident and he knows the future is his. Tan is in his 30s. They also felt that Tan's studio is overwhelming. Nico was drawn to those figures that depict motion. He said that Tan's specialty is the "movement". Nonetheless, Laura and Nico were a bit confused and wondered if Tan is interested in selling his works to them. They asked to buy three pieces and were told they are not for sale.

*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 down the prices of each individual prints, 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 is not only formal, there is a price list for each individual print. Nico had asked for a packaged price, instead he got a listing of all the works. He felt that there was no actual discount, Nico said:

It is interesting that the prices listed are higher than 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.

After Nico received the email, he went to visit Chng in her studio. He wanted to acquire the A/P print. He thought that is the 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 has not offended Chng. Chng eventually explained to me that she wanted to use the print for the exhibition in Taiwan. She has 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. There was confusion and misunderstanding.

Regardless, Laura and Nico told me that they acquired a painting from an artist, Wong, through an art gallery. Laura and Nico stumbled into the gallery, Tree. Laura saw a tulip painting that she likes but it is already sold. The gallery’s sales executive – Karen – said that she could ask the artist to produce a similar one, with a bit of changes. Laura, with her view on artistic integrity, was aghast. Karen then suggested that she brings 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 word, “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 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 is complete. Wong said that the customer would probably think so too but he felt that there is still something more but do not know what that is. 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. Wong did not do any selling. Laura and Nico sensed that he is not comfortable telling them the price. Laura found that Wong encapsulates a sense of aesthetic demands expected of an artist. Karen was the one doing the selling. Wong’s studio is separated between the work space and the display space. That seems professional 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 she noticed in 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 whether to buy the painting or not. That was not a problem. A few days later, Karen told her that the first piece that she likes is in 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 one 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 costs \$6000, while the other \$10 000; the couple admitted that the price is also a factor. Price does affect their decision even though 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 has 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 particular views about art, according to Nico. For example, Nico noticed the artistic signature of Wong in his paintings - a few dark brush strokes that are found in almost all his paintings - and pointed that out to Wong. Karen interjected and pointed out 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 a narrower view about art but she is good at selling.

#### *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 has lived in Singapore all his life and has no overseas training. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) 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 when he was in art school. My conversation with him was conducted in Mandarin. Laura and Nico similarly felt that his art is special because, in their eyes, it blends the eastern and western traditions. The mixed media (oil and sand) painting that they bought is that of a hill protruding out in the open space but on closer examination, it is that of 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 dictation of art consultants and designers. He wants to express his own feelings in his creations; he has also moved away from his training of doing photo-realistic paintings. His 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 likes himself. Also unlike many local art buyers, Wong did not have to explain much about his paintings to Laura and Nico.

In our conversation, the encounter with Laura and Nico was framed as doing 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 was keen to push for a sale during the visit and that created some awkwardness for him. On the other hand, Wong knew that Laura and Nico are 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.

#### *Views on Laura and Nico*

Besides Wong, I had the opportunity to talk to Tan, Chng and Karen about Laura and Nico. Tan and Nico have become closer as they met a few more times before Nico went back to the Netherlands. Nico was also trying to advice Tan on buying computers that provide facilities for the visually impaired. Tan is fond of the Dutch couple. When I asked Tan why he did not sell them any piece during their first visit to his studio, 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 rather 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.

I also interviewed Karen in her gallery. Besides her encounters with Laura and Nico, I asked her about her gallery and how she sells art works. With regards to her sale tactics, she said:

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 eyes 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.

To Karen, selling to Laura and Nico was easy because the couple "knows what they want and they are ready to buy". Laura and Nico also told her about their collection and learned that they acquire works from around the world. Furthermore, Laura and Nico, according to Karen, look at art works rather than artists and thinking about the investment value. "If there is a piece that catches their eyes then they buy, like some who walk around and find certain paintings that suit their wall or environment and they just buy." She processes such information in her sales job. Her job is to sense what her potential customers like, and find suitable paintings for them. The first painting that caught Laura's eyes is the tulip by Wong; that was already reserved for a corporate client. So she showed Laura Wong's catalogue and Laura noticed "Talking to the sky". According to Karen, they were thrilled and asked if they could go to the artist's house. So, Karen called Wong and they visited Wong's studio.

Chng, however, did not tell me much about her exchange of emails because Kate was helping her. Chng also wondered aloud on what happened. Nonetheless, she still is fond of the Dutch couple. She also said that selling her works is not the most important thing, having them as friends is more interesting. No negative feelings have precipitated in the outcome. In March 2010, Laura visited Chng, wanting to find out if she could acquire possibly the same piece for Nico for his birthday. That piece could not be found and Laura did not leave empty handed because Chng gave a print to Nico as a birthday present.

### **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 across different social arenas as the persons engage in art appreciation and then transact commercially. I would highlight two dialogical arenas in this paper.

#### *The Authentic-Professional Line*

In contrast to art galleries, visiting artist studios offer behind-the-scene insights into artists. It offers an authentic experience for Laura and Nico. Talking to the artists, seeing how they work and knowing artists' views will add different dimensions to understanding particular art works. The experience is different from visiting a commercial art gallery or an art museum. Laura and Nico admitted that they, at times, do feel more compelled to buy when they visit artists in their studios. Artists know that persons visiting their studios are

potential customers. The studio provides a more authentic experience. Authenticity as an academic concept is fraught with debates (e.g. Timm Knudsen & Waade 2010). The idea, however, is commonly used to refer to senses of sincerity, unpretentiousness and truthfulness. Visiting artist studios contrasts against the slick presentations in galleries. Laura and Nico seek these “authentic” experiences, a term they use. Despite this advantage of going behind the scene in artist studios, as the case shows, the social interaction between artists and art buyers can be uneasy. Their series of interactions embeds multiple social contexts and genres of social behavior, or in dialogism, characterized as heteroglossia. The resulting experiences for artists and art buyers can be emotionally ambivalent.

Laura and Nico have always appreciated visiting artist studios. While they were eager to visit Tan and Chng’s studios, the backstages they encountered allow them to appreciate and criticize the artists at another level. They became more intimate with the artists as they saw how these artists work and exchanged views with them. In one of my meetings with them, 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, Tan wants to keep them. So there is something special in those pieces.

Then we went to Tree and then 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. 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 were sad, even horrified, that Chng’s works are being destroyed by termites. Each piece should be precious to the artist, like the ‘artist’s baby’, according to Nico. They nonetheless sympathize with Tan and Chng. They saw the actual settings in Tan and Chng’s studios, felt that these artists could use some help in getting organized, and at the same time, they like their works and want to purchase some.

In contrast, Wong’s works were either on display or bubble-wrapped in his studio. Every piece has a brief description. Tree, the art gallery that represents Wong, helps the artist in the documentation and cataloging of his works. Wong is personally uninterested in the oft-thought mundane administration of his art works. But the consequence is that his studio and work space is better organized. Wong’s meticulously arranged studio did not appear staged or inauthentic to Laura and Nico. On the contrary, Laura and Nico felt that Wong is a professional artist that brings good practices into his personal work area. As

professional artists, there is a genre of practices that they must follow, even when artists are in their private and personal spaces.

In this context, the experiences of Laura and Nico show that the authentic experience may be evaluated by the front-stage standards of the gallery. Laura and Nico's experiences are layered, as they reveal their thoughts and feelings about their visits to the different artist studios and their interaction with them. The compartmentalization of social arena and social standards are not distinct and clear. The internalized standard of what constitute professional art practices, as championed by art galleries, are carried into the evaluation of behind the scene authentic experiences.

### *The Art-Business Crossing*

Widely believed by many artists and art collectors, artists should be concerned primarily with their creative production. Their art works should not be dictated by commercial potential. Commercial success should only be incidental. Commercial art is often looked upon dimly by many. There are also many people who would challenge this view. Regardless, Tan, Chng and Wong do separate the processes of creating art from selling art. Bringing these activities together may be uncomfortable. Laura and Nico make similar separation too. Therefore, Laura and Nico tread politely by first appreciating the works in the artist studio before asking about the prices. They cautiously crossed from the art appreciation context to the business context.

From my observations of Laura and Nico, they were always the ones who crossed into the business arena with the artists. They first asked if the works are for sale before asking for the prices of specific pieces. The crossing into the business arena is not necessarily smooth. For instance, Tan was visibly uneasy when talking about selling his works to Laura and Nico; it was easier for him to cultivate a friendship with them. Selling his works seems to be hindering the friendship making process. In other words, he was not ready to bring the relationship into the commercial arena. But after many meetings, including hanging out together, Nico managed to buy a work from Tan, a piece that Nico did not notice at first and Tan might not be willing to part with it either. And out of goodwill and sign of friendship, Tan gave Nico an "incomplete" piece, together with the purchase.

While Tan oscillated in and out of the business context, Chng took the unambiguous step of giving a formal offer to Laura and Nico through an email, stating the "market prices" and the "discounted prices" of her works. The works were considered too expensive by Nico and the deal did not take place. The original deal with the A/P was rescinded by Chng. The episode was uncomfortable for the artist and the art buyers. They did not communicate with each other. Laura and Nico wondered how Chng view them, and vice versa. But in March 2010, Laura visited Chng again, partly on my initiative. As mentioned earlier, Laura wanted to acquire a print for Nico's birthday. The visit ended up with Chng giving Nico a print of Laura's choice. Their friendship is now sealed, even though no purchase is made.

From Laura and Nico's perspective, they bought a work from Wong with little complication. The deal was settled through Karen. The meeting with Wong was polite and friendly, without the artist having to mention any prices. Wong discussed about art, his works and his background, essentially establishing a friendly relationship with Laura and Nico. The commercial transaction was clean and clear cut with Karen. Karen's relationship with Laura and Nico was basically a commercial one and Wong's relationship 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 transactions highlight the carnivalesque outcomes of heteroglossia or multiple social arenas. In straddling between the aesthetic and commercial spheres, Chng and Wong invoked the voices of the market and the gallery to justify their prices. They were also uncomfortable when talking prices to 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 paper, I asked why is it that art galleries remain relevant, when artists and art buyers can by-pass these mediators. Many art buyers do by pass the mediators but these mediators still seem to serve some functions by their mere existence. Art world researchers have acknowledged that galleries play an important role, as in the promotion of the artists and marketing works, for instance.

This study however highlights that there are entrenched control mechanisms at the microscopic level of social interaction. As this paper has shown, through the interaction amongst the players in the study, social and emotional challenges and obstacles may arise as they interact. Based on a range of established appropriate behaviors in a social context, interactions are steered but the outcomes remain unpredictable and emotionally mixed, as the players crossed social contexts, each with different social expectations and warranted behaviors. Due to the multiple social contexts, artists and art buyers have internalized various incongruent, even contradictory, sets of values, expectations and behavior. As artists and art buyers interact, the varied values, expectations and behaviour are articulated and invoked, which may result in ambivalence and ambiguities. Galleries offer a social arena for the sale of art. There are lessons to be learned.

One, many people appreciate art works by learning more about the background of and even having personal experiences with the artist. Visiting artists in their studios is a common practice. In contrast to the slick professional commercial art gallery setting, the artist studio offers insights behind the scene. Inadvertently, as the experiences of Laura and Nico demonstrate, the visits to artist studios may shatter the professional image of artists. Artists seem less

professional if they work in a less organized manner. Art buyers like Laura and Nico, carry with them expectations of a professional artist and inevitably impose those expectations when they go behind the scene. As a result, their experiences are bitter-sweet. In contrast, art galleries, on the other hand, are supposed to present art works in a professional and attractive manner. They are the front stage for artists and their works.

Two, the crossing from art appreciation activities into doing art business may generate discomfort for artists and art buyers. To many, artists who are overtly and primarily concerned with the commercial value of their creations often draw criticisms because they have compromised the ideal of creative expression. So, while artists sell their works directly, they should not appear too eager. A compromise, as shown in Laura and Nico's experiences, is that the artist and the art buyer become friends; the artist offer gifts and discounts, to indicate goodwill. To Laura and Nico, Chng may have crossed too much into the art business sphere at first but the meeting after nearly two years later, the gesture by Chng to give Nico a gift, sealed the friendship. Karen, as a sales executive in a gallery, explicitly behaves in ways to sell art; there is no ambiguity on how she should behave. Wong has benefitted from having Karen and Tree to sell, organize and document his works.

Three, as pointed out in the first two points, galleries help artists sell works and absorb many of the emotional discomforts that would otherwise arise when artists sell their own works themselves. Galleries also help set the "market price". By referring to and invoking the market voice, artists are able to justify and present prices for their works. As Tan feared, by him having to name the price may give the impression that he is greedy and exploitative. A friend does not exploit.

In sum, social interaction between artists and art buyers can be uncomfortable. Although art buyers and artists can bypass galleries in the sale of works, gallery managers offer a mechanism to segregate business from art in the transaction. Despite the quest for the authentic experience, the image of the professional artist can be shattered when people go back stage; galleries can help maintain a refined image of an artist through the gallery setting. Galleries are part of the art market and artists use gallery prices to justify their own pricing when selling directly to buyers. The artists may want to have high commercial values for their works too but they are unlikely to say that is a primary purpose of why they are doing art.

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