

# A space odyssey



Susanna Chung represents a new generation of arts administrators.  
Photo: Xiaomi Li

**Inspired by the verve of American art centres, a young manager hopes to propel Hong Kong to similar heights. Clare Morin reports**

Susanna Chung Yuk-man is on the last leg of a three-month 10-city research tour of the US and, today, the 29-year-old is at Space Gallery in Portland, Maine, to find out what brings crowds pouring into the club/gallery/community venue. Despite her hectic schedule and the cold and the rain outside, Chung is bright-eyed and ready for action.

Chung is the head of learning and participation at the Asia Art Archive (AAA), the Sheung Wan-based organisation that has been redefining the meaning of archiving by taking a pro-active role in promoting contemporary art in the region.

She was awarded an Asian Cultural Council (ACC) grant last year to conduct research on arts management with a focus on audience building and educational programmes. The trip involves meetings with more than 70 arts professionals from New York to Boston, Washington DC, New Orleans, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Her US visit could not have come at a better time as Hong Kong enters a pivotal period for audience building, with the West Kowloon Cultural District and the Central Police Station projects both on the horizon. And ever since the University of Hong Kong fine art graduate joined the AAA as a co-

ordinator in 2005, art education has been at the forefront of her mind.

In 2007, she worked on projects such as *Shifting Sites: Cultural Desire and the Museum*, and *What is Your Dream Museum?* that asked Hongkongers to conceptualise their ideal arts venue. The project was a hit, and has been adopted in India where a host of art museums are being built. Chung also launched the *Open Edit: Mobile Library* project in Vietnam – and has played a pivotal role in the field of arts education in Hong Kong with her so-called Learning Lab sessions for high school students.

One of the most memorable experiences of her US trip was a visit to the Brooklyn Museum in New York for its November edition of *Target First Saturday* – an evening of free art and entertainment programmes held every month.

“I have never seen so many people in a museum in my life,” she says. “Between 5pm and 11pm they had 7,000 to 14,000 people through. In July, they had 24,000. The idea of audience-building penetrates the whole institution.”

The event, held on the first Saturday of each month, takes the theme of the major exhibition (in November it was New York artist Sanford Biggers) and fills the museum with all forms of art and entertainment – from film

screenings, talks, a book club, live performances, a costume contest and a massive dance party. And it’s all free thanks to the support of the title sponsor and several art foundations. This interdisciplinary approach, of mixing up disciplines, is something that Chung wants to see more of in Hong Kong.

At the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, where Sarah Schultz heads its education and community programmes, Chung has learned that the organisation is founded on two interlocking circles: the collection and public engagement. The latter is not something thought up at the last moment, says Chung, but shapes the very basis of the institution.

“Sarah told me that if everything is collection-driven, you will be



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limited,” she says. “Contemporary art is not only about the things on the wall, the objects; rather it is about ideas behind the objects. So it’s about how you bring those ideas out.

“And audience development is not only about numbers,” she says. “But to develop, expand, complicate and even challenge the interest, knowledge, taste and expectations of the audience, through providing opportunities for access, engagement and experiences with inspirational and innovative works of art.”

She cites the Walker Art Centre’s annual *Open Field* event that turns the museum’s adjacent garden into a creative common, with everything from poetry readings, to art-making, music, yoga and curated exhibitions.

“They create public space,” says Chung. “I sat in on one of their meetings. On the one hand the programme team will run the *Open Field*, while the curatorial team thinks about the history of public space. And the education team doesn’t just support the curatorial team, they have equal status.”

As Chung talks about all manner of spaces – from tiny community arts projects in New Orleans to the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art – it is evident that she is learning some innovative audience-building strategies.

When she returns to Hong Kong, Chung hopes to incorporate this knowledge in fresh programmes for the AAA to roll out in Hong Kong and other Asian centres. She also wants to share these ideas with her contemporaries. “I got a grant and I am the lucky one,” she says. “I’ve had a chance to build my career these past few years and I want to share what I have learned.”

Chung represents a new era for arts administrators in Hong Kong who have grown up in a time of great promise and opportunity. She has witnessed a government prepared to invest heavily in culture, and has rubbed shoulders with some of the giants of the art world who are flocking in increasing numbers to the city for the annual art fair and auctions every spring.

She is passionate about her chosen path and argues that the field of art administration needs to broaden its scope and become more inspired. “We call it art administration, but there are differentiations. We are also mediators, criss-crossing art forms, connecting people. We are communicators. And we need to empower the art administrators to make them realise their role, and to seek their own position in the field. You walk your own creative path, so you are the artist of your life.”  
thereview@scmp.com