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A full-length photograph of Mark Tucker, a man with glasses, wearing a dark pinstriped suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. He is standing in a modern, brightly lit hallway with marble floors and large columns. The background is slightly blurred, showing architectural details and a potted plant.

I'M MARK TUCKER

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BONUS SEASON
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DIGS ITSELF
A HOLE WITH
MINING REFORM



A PIECE OF ME - KABUKICHO, TOKYO 2010 by Anton Kusters

INTANGIBLE VALUES

The worlds of art and finance both specialise in hard-to-value assets

By Jill Wong

While financial firms often make claims to artistic qualities such as creativity and innovation, it is less common to hear artists claiming reciprocal inspiration from the world of finance.

However, artists are nothing if not unpredictable. As financial markets have come to dominate the global economy, some artists are starting to explore the effect of this financialisation on human interactions and relationships. The Social Contract, a project hosted at the Spring Workshop, a non-profit art space in Hong Kong, required audience members to sign a contract requiring them not to divulge what they saw at the exhibition.

Paris-based artists Geoffrey Lowe and Jacqueline Riva, who collaborate under the name A Constructed World, say the contract itself is the artwork.

"The contract takes you out of the normal line of function and allows you to think in other ways," said Lowe. "It's normal for artists to move around in ways that are very changeable but the audience is expected to know what they think. What this contract seeks to do is to increase the repertoire of the audience so that the audience can participate in the same way as the artist by having divergent feelings, by being not sure, by not exactly knowing what the exhibition is about."

Of course, financial professionals are not unfamiliar with the

intangible. A synthetic collateralised debt obligation requires several layers of abstraction to comprehend, and a good dose of creativity to price. So it is fitting that a work such as The Social Contract could be available for sale if a willing buyer emerged, according to Riva. "We're using this contract in a way to make a situation where people can participate, by signing the contract and taking a role," she said. "Without signing the contract, the work doesn't really exist."

Such confusions and conflicts are a common source of inspiration for artists. Another recent exhibition in Hong Kong drew on this theme through the illicit allure of the criminal underworld, featuring

Belgian photographer Anton Kusters' study of Japanese gang members — the Yakuza — and especially their ornate and symbolic tattoos.

"It's not me that decides or sees that my work is art or not art," said Kusters, whose exhibition was on display at the AO Vertical Art Space in Hong Kong during December and January. "The only thing I do is take my vocation seriously, and I try hard to not only see and document things that touch my soul, but I also try to show these stories in the best possible context that I afford for them. I find tremendous inspiration in trying very hard to look with open eyes in what can be considered as difficult situations."

Artists depend on light to illuminate their subjects, but the most interesting stories are often hidden in the shadows. "At their best, artists open our eyes to ideas that have never been seen before," said Sundaram Tagore, president and curator of Sundaram Tagore Gallery, which has spaces in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Tagore says that it is this exploration of new ideas that makes art desirable — and commercial. "I do not tell my clients how valuable an artwork is without first telling them the idea and background behind the work, because that's where its true value lies," said Tagore, explaining a sales technique that is certainly not alien to financial professionals.

Indeed, financiers are extremely well positioned to understand the value of art (and a good sales pitch) — because art is just like money or any other financial commodity, in that it has value when people agree that it has value. The only question is: How much? **FA**

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