

JULY/AUGUST 2016
VOLUME 15, NUMBER 4

Yishu

典 藏 國 際 版

Journal of
Contemporary
Chinese Art



INSIDE

Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modernist
Calligraphy

Hong Kong After the Umbrella Protests

New Media Arts from Taiwan

Artist Features: susan pui san lok, Wang Bing,
Xie Nanxing, Zhang Kechun

Buried Alive: Preface

US\$12.00 NTS\$350.00
PRINTED IN TAIWAN

John Batten

Hong Kong after the Umbrella Protests



A street barricade closing Connaught Road during the Umbrella protests, Admiralty, Hong Kong, November 2014. Photo: John Batten.

Hong Kong's political and arts landscape has dramatically evolved over the last five years. Divisions and anger that had brewed for years and that was first seen when nearly one million people marched against the incumbent Tung Chi-hwa government on July 1, 2003 (the annual celebration and public holiday for the Establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), escalated with public demonstrations in 2013 and 2014 that ostensibly demanded greater democracy and “proper” universal suffrage, but also reflecting previous grievances about government/property developer collusion, air pollution, intensity of redevelopment of older urban areas, and increasing numbers of cross-border mainland visitors overwhelming local services. The culmination of this anger were the Umbrella protests that closed parts of Hong Kong with the erection of barricades, occupation of public roads, and protests in Mong Kok, Admiralty, and Causeway Bay for seventy-nine days in late 2014.

After the barricades and protesters were forcibly cleared on December 15, 2014, differences between pro-government and pro-democracy factions further increased in early 2015. Street protests in the form of groups



1967 Hong Kong riots, police on Nathan Street, Mong Kok District.

organized as being on “shopping trips” in Mong Kok targeted mainland visitors who were seen to be “invading” Hong Kong, responding to a comment by Hong Kong’s current Chief Executive, Leung Chun-ying, that Hong Kong people should now “go shopping” to help the economy recover (a spurious assertion, as later economic figures showed that actual retail sales activity and visitor numbers had not been adversely affected by the Umbrella protests).

By early 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping had extended his tightening of political power on the mainland through a crackdown on corruption by public officials, senior military and public security figures and, later, business leaders. This was part of a concerted power struggle between factions aligned to Xi Jinping and those of the previous president, Jiang Zemin. For the first time since the Cultural Revolution and Hong Kong’s 1967 riots, mainland politics had spilled into Hong Kong, with mainland officials, through the China Liaison Office, taking a stronger public attitude and directing—despite the city’s autonomy in these areas—Hong Kong’s internal affairs.

The best expression of this new presence of the mainland can be seen on Hong Kong’s public buildings, including fire stations, hospitals, schools, and police stations—institutions previously deemed politically neutral. All these buildings now fly Chinese flags, and the sovereign power is emphasized by the imposition of regulation flag sizes: the Hong Kong SAR flag is smaller and hung slightly lower than the Chinese flag. Furthermore, in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council, disenchantment with the Leung Chun-ying government has seen filibustering by pro-democracy legislators of proposed government legislation, including urgent updating of copyright protection legislation—whose introduction is currently shelved—amid fear that it could be used to stifle freedom of expression and artistic license.

Meanwhile, mainland academics, officials, and Hong Kong’s pro-government supporters condemned the Umbrella movement and called on all arms of the law to prosecute protesters. The rule of law and due process has always been defended by the legal profession and has recently



View of tent city during the Umbrella protests, Admiralty, Hong Kong, November 2014. Photo: John Batten.

been strongly affirmed by Hong Kong's Chief Justice of the Court of Final Appeal, Geoffrey Ma Tao-li. In early 2016, five Hong Kong book publishers who had sold books exposing the private lives and financial affairs of mainland officials were taken from Hong Kong, possibly by mainland police, and detained in Guangdong. This news made headlines around the world and was condemned by the Hong Kong public and international human rights commentators. Hong Kong has autonomy in internal governance and policing, and this serious breach of "one country, two systems" and Hong Kong autonomy has spooked the Hong Kong public. For many people, the abduction of these book publishers confirms the loudly stated views of many young people that "Hong Kong is dying." This is expressed in the dystopian post-Umbrella film *Ten Years* produced by Ng Ka-leung which controversially won the Best Film award at the 2016 Hong Kong Film Awards and tells five stories of Hong Kong in 2015 under the thumb of the mainland, with the previous pragmatic approach of "one country, two systems" in tatters.¹

I don't, at the moment, share this pessimism; Hong Kong has always played a much more nuanced role than it has historically been credited for, as, for example, a colonial British trading and military enclave; an annoying southern city for the northern Beijing leadership; China's capitalist outpost; and an East/West melting pot. The mainland will tolerate Hong Kong—despite each side's outraged posturing and complaining—unless a truly popular, widespread sweep of independence or revolution emerges in the city. The emergence of "localist" and "Hong Kong independence" political parties at the moment has little mainstream support. A majority of Hong Kong's public will continue to wish and clamour for greater democracy and maintenance of Hong Kong's "core values"—namely, the rule of law, press freedom, and the intolerance of corruption. If those core values are fundamentally undermined, then Hong Kong will—and only then—as many have and too often disparagingly predicted, become "another Chinese city."



This political story is a background for everything currently happening in Hong Kong—including business, sport, property development, and art. Exhibitions focusing on the recent protests and related issues have freely and without censorship been mounted since the protesters were dispersed in December 2014. Exhibited at the Goethe Institut, Birdy Chu’s video and photographs documented, including interviews with protesters, the main Umbrella site in Admiralty. Kacey Wong Kwok-choi’s *Art of Protest—Resisting Against Absurdity* exhibition at the now-closed AJC Gallery was a thoughtful and critical exploration of aspects of the protests and police tactics featuring documentation of the artist’s highly theatrical performances at the time, including a replica of an army-style armoured vehicle.

Birdy Chu, view of multi-media installation *It's Just the Beginning*, 2015, Goethe-Gallery, Hong Kong. Courtesy of the artist, Goethe-Institut, Black Box Studio, Hong Kong.



Kacey Wong-Kwok-choi setting up his pink cardboard tank *The Real Culture Bureau* prior to participation in the annual July 1st protest rally, Hong Kong, 2012.

South Ho Siu Nam and friends spent many days and nights at the Admiralty and Mong Kok Umbrella protest sites: the resulting *good day good night* black-and-white photography exhibition at Blindspot Gallery was a contrasting and poignant display of vast, empty roadway protest spaces

South Ho Siu Nam, *The Umbrella Salad III*, archival inkjet print, 45.7 x 45.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



South Ho Siu Nam, *The Umbrella Salad XXIV*, archival inkjet print, 45.7 x 45.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



devoid of people alongside images of the protesters' daily and mundane activities. His photographs highlighted, as I noted in the exhibition's accompanying photobook, "an unprecedented time of futile exhilaration and optimistic crisis."² The Umbrella protest sites of Admiralty were revisited in Samson Young's guided walk *So You are Old by the Time You Reach the Island* from the Hong Kong Convention Centre during Art Basel 2016. Participants were given headphones and a radio to hear a narrated



fictional story and listen to the occasional evocative sounds of bells as they walked near “the dark place” (scene of an alleged police bashing of a protester) and toward the main, now deserted tent city of Admiralty.

Samson Young, *So You are Old by the Time You Reach the Island*, 2016, guided walk. Photo: John Batten. Courtesy of the artist.

On another note, Ivy Ma’s *Last Year* exhibited forty predominantly black-and-white frontal portraits of young Umbrella participants at Gallery Exit. Her display had intentional similarities with Gerhard Richter’s *48 Portraits* installation of a line of portraits of famous men shown at the 1972 Venice Biennale. The importance of the Umbrella movement can be judged only by the passing of time—and by youthful future generations, as Ivy Ma indicates by quoting two lines from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, a poem of hope penned during the darkest days of the Second World War: “For last year’s words belong to last year’s language/And next year’s words await another voice.”

Hong Kong’s mainstream contemporary art scene has largely been unmoved by the city’s political future. But the art scene itself has undergone a reassessment over the last five years, with a number of influential factors converging. The 2008 monetary crisis forced central banks worldwide, including in China, to pump money into the banking system to keep interest rates low; with the consequent availability of capital and low interest paid on deposits, investors sought assets that offered capital gains. Physical assets, predominantly property, but also art—including art in some niche areas and markets, including contemporary Chinese art— attracted unprecedented interest. Hong Kong’s international auction houses, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, joined by the mainland’s Poly Auctions and others from Korea and Japan, saw record sales. However, with the mainland’s recent corruption crackdown and the knowledge that buying art is an

Ivy Ma, *Last Year—10 Nov 2014*, 2014, ink, pencil on archival print, 70 x 46.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Exit, Hong Kong.



avenue for money laundering, this enthusiasm has reached a plateau. Hong Kong's primary contemporary art market has been more fickle. A handful of international galleries have opened in Hong Kong, but it appears their main motivation is Hong Kong's liberal taxation regime, excellent logistics support, ease of entry and exit of art, and the need to geographically cover representation of their artists in Asia. For these same reasons, Hong Kong has evolved as the best location for a major

international art fair, and the efficient operations of the Swiss-owned Art Basel have made Hong Kong its third worldwide location, complementing Basel in Switzerland and Miami Beach in the USA.

Factors directly benefiting Hong Kong artists include a general growing interest in the art market, which has tracked publicity about worldwide record prices paid for contemporary art. Hong Kong's growing middle class has more leisure time as fewer people work or attend school on weekends. This has translated into people wanting more recreation options, including visiting museums and public exhibitions to appreciate and learn more about art. M+, the new museum at the West Kowloon Cultural District slated to open by 2019, has been astute in organizing a series of exhibitions, on different themes and featuring a variety of media, at changing venues around Hong Kong. Publicity, even negative criticism by legislators in the Legislative Council about the project's delays, has increased the reporting on art and art policy issues in the mainstream news media, and consequently raising awareness about contemporary art with the general public.

Government art and culture policies dating back ten years are coming to fruition: the number of yearly fine arts graduates has increased ten-fold, and there is also a wider range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in fine arts, new media, and cultural management from which students can choose. Likewise, debates about Hong Kong's political reforms and influence of the mainland in Hong Kong affairs have reflected rising concern about freedom of expression and Hong Kong's own particular cultural and "core" values, resulting in an interest in Hong Kong culture, including art. And, likewise, with the increasing numbers of fine arts graduates, there is a growing appreciation of the importance of good art writing, criticism and curatorial professionalism.

Crowds at Art Basel HK, 2016. Photo: Keith Wallace.

I often equate the art done in Hong Kong with the music of the British band Mumford & Sons. This popular "indie" band features up-tempo acoustic guitars of gradual chord sequences. Or, with respect to the art scene's more introspective moments, I think



of the clear, tortured voice of the Irish singer Damien Rice, a favourite of Hong Kong artists, university students, and the city's increasingly educated, well-travelled "cosmopolitans."³ Similar to these musicians, Hong Kong artists and their work, increasingly engage across international boundaries and can more easily be seen and appreciated. Their work is often overtly personal while hinting at wider social issues. However, the art often seems complacent with its execution and social positioning. I particularly have this feeling when I see curators' (and increasingly, collectors') favourite Firenze Lai, an artist whose work hints of Edvard Munch-like psychological tension of sole figures or groups of people in a swirling landscape, perfectly illustrating interpersonal angst; as her illustrations often do when they appear in *Ming Pao Weekly*, a popular magazine predominantly read by the educated middle class.

Firenze Lai's work invariably is culturally neutral, with figures in a landscape that could be anywhere. Her naïve-like, gentle expressionism has similarities in style and subject matter with the work of senior Hong Kong artist Chu Hing-wah, whose ink-on-paper paintings are firmly rooted in the inner-city life of Yau Ma Tei, where he grew up. Chu Hing-wah's twenty years as a psychiatric nurse lends a genuinely personal impression of life in Hong Kong, which he projects with a schizoid aura as a cinema-like city of junkies, prostitutes, gambling dens and of "outsiders," the estranged and lonely, alongside parks of playing children cared for by chatting grandmothers.

Lee Kit, a well-travelled Hong Kong artist (now predominantly Taiwan-based) and arguably its most internationally exhibited, has a focused, worldly approach. His recent work increasingly uses painted impressions of the logos of international consumer items as cardboard installations, wall-mounted or simply placed on the ground, often accompanied by daily items and home furnishings. There is a world of familiarity in Lee Kit's work.

Following Lee Kit's lead, Hong Kong's art scene and Hong Kong artists are becoming more worldly. And in an exciting development, the art being presented by Hong Kong's public galleries, some private galleries, and independent art organizations has reached new levels of international diversity and depth. In a season of performance art, John Cage's rarely seen or heard *Writings through the Essay: On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* was mounted by M+ in the Cattle Depot, a decommissioned abattoir of colonial heritage buildings in Tokwawan. Projected through mounted speakers, the ambience of



Chu Hing-wah, *The Unchanging Yau Ma Tei*, 1999, ink and colour on paper, 179 x 97 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

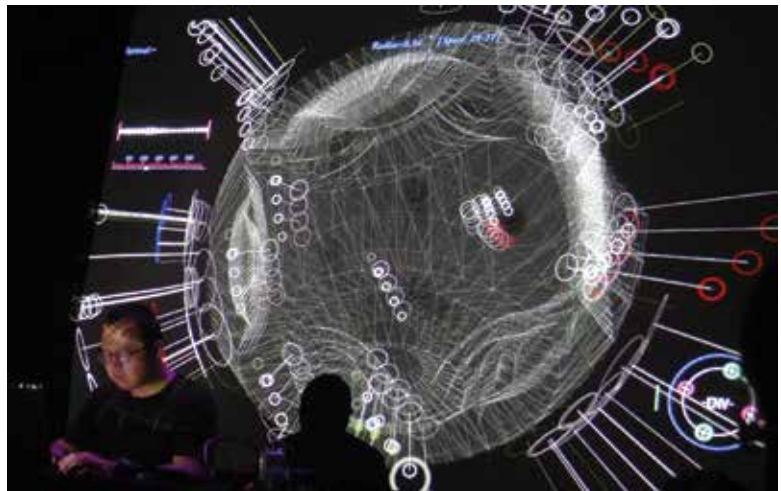
musical sound and Cage's own voice in a beautiful open space calmed the atmosphere and brought alive the architecture.

Lee Kit, *I want to be things*, 2010, installation view at Osage, Hong Kong. Photo: John Batten.

The city has seen a range of sound art recently; this is great inspiration for a wave of young Hong Kong cross-media and sound artists—of which one, Edwin Lo, himself organized a tour by French sound and graphics innovator Jean-Claude Eloy. The monthly Sonic Anchor performances, spearheaded by Samson Young, are a forum for new media, sound, and discussion. Recently, Taiwan sound and performance artist Betty Apple (Cheng Yin-ping) and sound and graphics artist Wang Hsin-jen performed at Sonic Anchor, and during Art Basel, Taiwan curator Guo Jau-lan mounted a small exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. The semi-commercial Empty Space Gallery recently presented an ambitious set of international sound artists. Festivals organized by soundpocket and the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble has kept new music performances and ambient soundscapes as a focus of consideration and enjoyment.



Wang Hsin-jen, sound art performance at Sonic Anchor, Hong Kong Art Centre, 2015. Photo: John Batten.



Rendition of the renovated Hong Kong Museum of Art. Courtesy of Hong Kong Museum of Art.



The challenge for Hong Kong's public art institutions is, as in other places of the world, to spread the appreciation of art to more people. Each of these public galleries will be challenged to provide a level of service previously unknown in Hong Kong. The public will expect a more relaxed viewing experience and better self-education facilities to appreciate the displayed art. The Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong's original and previously only public museum showing contemporary art, is currently closed for renovation. The enlarged museum will have dedicated galleries to permanently display the story of Hong Kong modern and contemporary art and increased space to accommodate travelling exhibitions. When the museum reopens, competition between new public art spaces will be much keener. The Old Bailey Galleries at Tai Kwun, the new dedicated spaces for contemporary art designed by Herzog & de Meuron within the large former Central Police Station and Victoria Prison heritage complex in Central Hong Kong, will open sometime in 2017. One of Tai Kwun's first exhibitions will be mainland artist Cao Fei's large survey exhibition, currently on exhibition at MOMA's PS1, New York. The small M+ arts pavilion in the West Kowloon Cultural District, inspired by the (albeit annual, temporary) Serpentine Gallery pavilion in London, is nearing completion and will soon begin its exhibition program despite being located near the currently noisy and dusty M+ museum construction site. Tsang Kin-wah, Hong Kong's representative at the 2015 Venice Biennale, will be among the first exhibitions.

A recent weekend seminar, Community Art and Heritage Preservation, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong highlighted how grassroots, community, and activist groups have tapped community talent and interest in art to develop personal, political, and social awareness. Public objections to intense property development and the construction of transport infrastructure in Hong Kong's older urban areas and countryside has increased concern that Hong Kong's built heritage and unique urban ambience is being destroyed as street markets, outdoor restaurants (*dai pai dong*), street and neon signage, traditional and long-standing shops and businesses disappear. Community art projects do raise issues, but, it is the determined action by urban planning activists that have successfully challenged, and continue to challenge, government plans for mass redevelopment projects and destruction of Hong Kong's limited built heritage.

Likewise, plans to further develop Hong Kong's countryside and the previously closed border areas with Shenzhen have been met with spirited protests and objections. The recent 2nd Emptyscape Art Festival in Ping Che, near Fanling, celebrated Hong Kong's rural lifestyle and highlighted the beauty of the countryside. Amid village housing, an abandoned school, and fields of growing vegetables were art installations. On a simple stage, musicians played and the audience quietly listened. In a seemingly cleansing action, artist Ng Ka Chun led a group of children to construct figures using found material and then mounted them on poles; these were then paraded around the village. This part of the North-East New Territories might soon be developed and Ping Che village and the surrounding fields destroyed. In Hong Kong, with its fragile environment, the challenge is always how

to balance the needs of housing and infrastructure while conserving quiet places, preserving rural ways of life, and ensuring a sustainable future.

Hong Kong's independent or semi-independent (including those with some government funding) art spaces and organizations include Videotage, Parasite, 100ft Park, Lumervisum, C&G Artpartment, Iaspace, soundpocket, Asia Art Archive, Spring Workshop, and the newer Floating Projects, Neptune, Things that can happen, and Rooftop Institute. Overall, these spaces offer an eclectic art programme and indicate growing diversity in Hong Kong's arts scene.



Architect's rendition of new Old Bailey Galleries at Tai Kwun. Courtesy of Central Police Station/Tai Kwun, Hong Kong.

Another future new space is the Mills Gallery, initiated by a former textile manufacturer turned property company, which will convert its original factory into a contemporary art space in homage to Hong Kong's once vibrant textile industries. In the Mills' temporary space, artist Kwan Sheung Chi, a possible Hong Kong representative artist at a future Venice Biennale, installed a simple but sinister installation. *Hong Kongese* (literally "Hong Konger," a term popular during the Umbrella protests and now used by localist groups) comprises a large layout of badges, while two rooms—named *Room* and *Hong Kong*, respectively—are situated prominently in the gallery. The first room merely had a phased light-emitting pillar, security cameras, and door-opening sensors, which led to the second room. Inside this second room was a paper map of Hong Kong folded into the shape of a world globe (reviving a previous art project of Kwan's) and sitting on a spot-lit plinth under the gaze of another security camera. Walking around this room, a viewer soon realizes that the door sensor allowing exit is not working, whether intentionally or accidentally. It is difficult not to suppress apprehension or fear of entrapment, despite knowing that it is inside the relatively safe environment of an art installation. The door will open if another person triggers the sensor in the first room. Then, on exiting the installation, a bed of Hongkongese badges, red in colour and reminiscent of



Kwan Sheung Chi, *Hong Kongese*, 2016, metal badges, dimensions variable. Photo: John Batten.



Kwan Sheung Chi, *Room*, 2016, installation. Photo: John Batten.

Cultural Revolution Mao badges, must be walked over. Visitors are invited to take one.

Kwan Sheung Chi's installation appears to succinctly sum up Hong Kong, in metaphor, at this very moment. It is the unintended, organic, mutual support needed in coordinating the entry and exit of doors by visitors to exit Kwan's installation that emerges as the most significant aspect of the piece. It recalls the Umbrella banners in those final days of protest and camaraderie in Admiralty: "You Can't Kill Us All!" and "We Will Be Back."

A version of this essay was originally published in Chinese in ARTCO Monthly no. 284 (May 2016), pp 124–27.

Notes

1. The five directors of each story in *Ten Years* are Ng Ka-leung, Jevons Au, Chow Kwun-wai, Wong Fei-pang, and Kwok Zune.
2. John Batten, "Then.Now," introductory essay in South Ho's *good day good night* photobook (Hong Kong: Brownie Publishing, 2015).
3. Among many possible descriptions, "cosmopolitans" is a perfect term to describe Hong Kong's increasingly worldly young people.