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Taking part: participatory art and the emerging civil society in Hong Kong

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As civil society grows in post-colonial Hong Kong, participatory art has registered a heightened local consciousness, the desire to be autonomous and attempts to resist various kinds of hegemony in the 2000s and the 2010s. This essay aims to provide an empirical base for further studies by examining exemplary works, namely *Complaints Choir of Hong Kong*, Stephanie Sin's *Super Warm*, Kacey Wong's *Instant Skyline*, artwalker's *West 9 Dragon* and the practice of Woofer Ten. I analyse how committed artists have treated form with an openness that is critical for art to take a more active part in society.

Keywords: contemporary art; participatory art; socially engaged art; social practice; civil society; Hong Kong

An anonymous comment was made on a message board at an exhibition of municipal public art at the Hong Kong City Hall in 2002. Directed against a note declaring that 'art is priceless', scribbles in red complained that at a time when 'so many people were jobless' (Hong Kong was at an economic low point after the stock market crash in 1997), the point was 'nonsense' and 'idiotic'.¹ Though this may have been an isolated comment, it was symptomatic of how art and value were perceived. That art meant something to this society, especially in challenging times, was not commonly recognized. The situation has changed notably over the past decade. Socially minded artists have ventured into the public arena, and their practice has run in parallel with intense developments in civil society.

This social turn was linked with the urge to reclaim agency, and prior to that, resistance to a status quo that has become increasingly problematic to an awakened post-colonial consciousness. Many have argued that, in the colonial era, a vacuum of national and civil awareness was deliberately maintained; neoliberal opportunism was encouraged in a kind of state ideology for this port city, whose population consisted mostly of immigrants who, having fled from the wars in mainland China, did not necessarily see this place as their permanent home (Cartier 2008: 59–83; Chan and Lee

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2008: 17–18). Stability and habitual political passivity, maintained by the booming economy, were however shaken after Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 bringing economic troubles and fears of losing privileges long taken for granted. A change in mentality occurred in citizens who took an unprecedentedly active part in a series of contestations; these were for the preservation of what was considered crucial for Hong Kong, especially in the face of economically driven development and mainland China's attempt to alter the city's system. An emergent post colonial subjectivity, wary of the aftermath of colonialism and the city's complicated relationship with the mainland as another patronizing regime, has been considered a nascent 'local discourse' in cultural studies.²

Such self-consciousness has also been addressed in art-historical literature. How art and other cultural forms convey nuances of local identity is the subject of Frank Vigneron's *I Like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization* (2010). David Clarke's *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (2001) examines the subject in context during the transitional period, and highlights the tensions arising when ideologies contend with one another.³ While Vigneron focuses on symbolic expressions, and Clarke's publication predates developments in the last decade, art's direct interaction with society can be observed as a notable trend in contemporary Hong Kong art (Leung 2014; Wu 2014). Leung's and Wu's arguments were made in the context of a seminal discourse-shaping exhibition, *Art as Social Interaction*, held recently in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Reviewing socially engaged art in the two localities, the exhibition exemplified growing interests in social practice, yet the introductory approach underlined a lack of in-depth documentation and review of such works in context.⁴ This essay aims to fill this gap by discussing a number of works that have constructed an emergent subjectivity as they intervened, at both conceptual and practical levels, in some of Hong Kong's most pressing issues over the past few years. These are all telling works that have broken away from conventional art institutions. They present themselves not only as objects for contemplation, but also as participatory processes that inspire deliberations on art's share in this historic moment, when an incipient critical mass feels the need to take a more active part.

A choir of complaints

The year 2003 marked a breaking point: on 1 July, the sixth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China, 500,000 demonstrators took to the street to protest the legislation of Basic Law Article 23, whose anti-subversion clauses were considered a threat to the Special Administrative Region's exclusive freedom.⁵ This large demonstration, and the subsequent withdrawal of the legislation proposal, was a milestone in the city's civic movement. In the following years, it has become an annual occasion for

citizens to vent their frustrations about government inefficacy and other social vices. As Hong Kong people learned to say no, they also became more responsive to the erosion of non-monetary values especially after becoming disillusioned with the myth of prosperity. From 2003 onwards, there was an explosion of opposition to certain kinds of development: the demolition of historical buildings as a systematic erasure of colonial memories and the uprooting of neighborhoods in favour of commercial interests. 'Business as usual', which might have been previously taken as 'normal' and not something to concern citizens was no longer considered acceptable (Ma 2007; Wong and King 2012).

Protests fueled by dissatisfaction with the status quo and the belief in the possibility of dissidence provided the context for *Complaints Choir of Hong Kong* (香港投訴合唱團; 2009–11). Fifty on-and-off members participated in this event, in an open group organized by Pep!, a collective of young art practitioners (including artists, independent curators and art administrators). The form of *Complaints Choir*, an open-source community art project initiated by Finnish artists Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, was adopted locally after Vangi Fong, a core member of Pep!, learnt about the *Choir* in a documentation exhibition at MoMA PS1 in New York. 'It is the best contemporary art work I have ever seen', recalled Fong. 'It is so real. The complaints convey a lot of truth about society.'⁶ *Complaints Choir of Hong Kong* therefore began as a participatory process for people in Hong Kong to voice their discontent, in a framework that involved visual forms, performance, community engagement and discourse-building.

The project was introduced to its future participants through a series of prelude exhibitions, which featured video documentations of *Complaints Choirs* in other countries and statements, in text and visual forms, of the aspirations of the local version. The emblem of the project is expository. Parodying a typical coat of arms, the design features a rooster and a duck, crowing and quacking to each other under the crest of a crown, an authoritative castle wall and the line 'Believe in Social Order'. In Chinese, the expression 'the rooster talks to the duck' suggests the impossibility of communication between people speaking different languages, literally or figuratively. The complementary text noted that the lack of consensus was indeed a condition for dialogue. Other elements refer to protest-related anecdotes. A banana in the middle alludes to a then recent incident in a Legislative Council meeting, when a furious councillor threw a banana at the city's Chief Executive. The three ribbons at the bottom are each marked with the word 'COMPLAIN', ridiculing the Chief Executive's wife, who reprimanded people for their constant 'Complain[ts]! Complain[ts]! Complain[ts]!'.⁷

The prelude exhibitions also served to collect complaints (Figure 1). Through a total of four exhibitions, three of which were held as road shows in the busiest parts of town, over one thousand complaints were



Figure 1. Complaints Choir of Hong Kong. An audience member posting a complaint in the prelude exhibition, held during Fotanian: Fotan Artists Open Studio, January 2009. Photo courtesy of Pep!

gathered. These became a pool of materials for a lyrics writing workshop, led voluntarily by Chow Yiu-fai, a well-known lyricist who supported the cause. Choir members, mostly young people receptive to creative practices beyond conventional forms of art and recruited through the prelude exhibitions, road shows and social media, wrote the lyrics collaboratively. The verse is in Cantonese – a dialect that, spoken in the Guangdong area including Hong Kong, is commonly perceived as an assertion of autonomy for its notable difference from Putonghua, the official Chinese language sanctioned by the Central Government. In a colloquial language full of local references, the lyrics start with ‘點解點解永無放工’ [Why, why is work never over?'] and identify some of the city’s commonest woes: among them, high-pressure lifestyles, widespread poverty, ruthless profiteering, alarming food safety issues, mistrust of the media, and political misconduct. The gravity of the grievances is, however, given a twist with the crispness of the Cantonese, especially when sung to a light-hearted tune that makes the song sound more like Canto-pop karaoke than a traditional choir piece.⁸

The Choir performed in the aforementioned 1 July demonstration in 2009 and in a number of symbolic locations. The selection brought the Choir to loci of tension and conflicts. For instance, there were sites of power, including the Golden Bauhinia Square (where the handover ceremony was held in 1997), the Statue Square (previously home to statues of the colonial

royalty) and the city's glossy shopping malls, where the reign of China, Britain and capitalism are respectively made manifest. Other places were hotspots of debates, such as Lee Tung Street, Wanchai Market and the clock tower in Tsim Shat Sui, all historical locales effaced by urban redevelopment despite public objection. Glass-fronted buildings in West Kowloon and Tin Shui Wai were also used as a background. The former are exorbitantly priced luxury apartments in a prime location; the latter are public estates in a poorly planned satellite town. Both are illustrative of the city's housing challenges. These performances, as recorded in the project's documentary video, show how Choir members tactically intervened in the hectic city. The performance at Wanchai Market was exemplary: in front of the soon-to-be-rebuilt market building, about ten Choir members stood in a line on the island of a zebra crossing. Irony reverberated as the traffic, like unstoppable development, streamed past incessantly as they sang (Figure 2).

Complaints Choir of Hong Kong became a media phenomenon: within six months, it was covered in over thirty stories by the mainstream media.⁹ While the local media has never been very interested in art, the coverage testifies to the newsworthiness of the Choir, and its resonance with social sentiments. A full-page story in *Ming Pao Daily*, citing the organizer, highlights the importance of dissidence at a time when 'concordance' was promoted by the supporters of the establishment as a means of achieving orderly progress (Pang 2009). *Wen Wei Po*, notwithstanding its pro-



Figure 2. Complaints Choir of Hong Kong. Performance outside Wanchai Market, July 2009. Photo courtesy of Pep!

Chinese tendencies, also featured the Choir positively and used the words ‘an alternative way to care about society’ in the headline (Lam 2009). Despite unprecedented media attention, there was no review on the Choir in any art publications. This absence of critical reception can be attributed partially to a general lack of platforms for art criticism in Hong Kong. It is also possible that this mode of practice was then still marginal to the local art field. The only practitioner who wrote about the Choir when it was still in progress was Ching Chin-wai Luke, an artist discussed below, who (not unsympathetically) compares the Choir to the mythical Sisyphus and commends its insistence on pursuing something that may be futile. He also makes a point about its demonstration of an emergent collaborative spirit (2010).

What then was left along the path when Sisyphus pulled the stone through this city, where problems persist despite the Choir’s complaints? Responding to an open call (by the author) for reflections, three participants volunteered to share their thoughts within days.¹⁰ Although they all see themselves as active participants, two suggest that their motivations for joining the Choir were simply curiosity and boredom. Louis Hung finds in the Choir

a soft way for Choir members and the audience to vent their frustrations. Most citizens do not care about the lives of others and social problems. The Choir provides a window for those who are indifferent to think about social issues. Even though they are powerless in the face of all kinds of injustice, at least there is a modest way to do something.

Tempo Yeung remembers how the Choir resonated with the time:

With only a few weeks between the collection of complaints and the performance, it was like an immediate response to the government’s policies and the social reality... The audience’s reactions were memorable. At the beginning, they did not have a clue about what we were doing. Then they saw that we were there to sing, nodded to our lyrics and finally gave us a big round of applause... The gap between us and the passers-by was dissolved over the course of a song.

The members themselves were also changed through participation. Leung, who previously had no interest in current affairs and politics, began to pay attention and take part in social movements. Hung started the Summer Slow Life Festival (夏慢慢生活) to contemplate the possibility of a slower life. Other Choir members also continued to give a creative spin to this congested city. One of them is Thickest Choi, another respondent to the call for reflections. Choi is a co-founder of Lawnmap (草原地圖), whose events transform regulated urban lawns into freer cultural spaces. The initiative is one of the most ingenious projects in recent years and has gained a steady following. Reflecting on the Choir, Choi acknowledges its influence on his current work.

Complaints Choir of Hong Kong can be seen as a process of becoming. Starting from an artist's inspiration, it grew organically through self-organization, and responded to the political and social context in a form which is clearly defined by artistic considerations but nonetheless blurs the divisions between art and real life. Its relevance to society is proven by its reception and impact on participants. Many of the Choir members have become stakeholders in a budding creative civil society, and have continued to contribute non-mainstream perspectives through new projects and activism. The Choir is also a significant example of how art reinvents itself as a civil-minded drive that permeates the city, and heralds a new direction for artists' participation in a place they care about. Full of colloquial references, written by the people, and essentially Canto-Pop, the Choir has resounding overtones: a local consciousness has clearly taken roots.

'Let's own it!'

The impulse to assert autonomy is shared by a growing critical mass of socially conscious practitioners. Among the mushrooming initiatives, a series of curatorial projects by MaD (Make a Difference; <http://www.mad.asia/>) addressed the notion of cultural democracy at the West Kowloon Waterfront Promenade. The Promenade's backdrop makes it a highly symbolic location. A stretch of reclaimed land on the city's prime-location harbour front, it was announced in 1998 that the site was to become Hong Kong's first and only large-scale cultural hub. The plan inspired both hopes and worries. Sceptics thought it might become just another commercial development, and doubted whether local culture could really benefit from a blueprint fixated on 'world-class' hardware. Public disagreements eventually changed the government's original plans, and in subsequent contestations, 'West Kowloon' has become almost a fetish of cultural development.

The site, with all its implications, was the stage for MaD's curatorial undertakings. The series started with an independently curated project called MaD@West Kowloon (2011–12), an imaginative rendering of the destined yet overdue cultural hub. Rejecting the exclusive primacy of the cultural elites, the group has adopted 'Let's Own It!' as a forthright slogan and emphasized ownership and bottom-up agency in the making of this place. Multidisciplinary practitioners were invited or roped in through open calls to create content for public visitors. Artists played a part by presenting works that were vehicles of civic participation.¹¹

Stephanie Sin, a studio painter, was among the participating artists in MaD@West Kowloon. Her challenge was to discover how her solitary practice could transform into an appropriate piece of public art for this loaded context. Sin's response was *Super Warm* (溫暖牌), an approximately 100-metre-long 'painting', sewn together with clothes crowd-sourced through an open call asking for contributions to a 'gift for West



Figure 3. Stephanie Sin. *Super Warm* (2011–12). Temporary display during MaD@West Kowloon at the West Kowloon Waterfront Promenade. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Kowloon' (Figure 3). 'Many are debating on what is good for this place', said the artist. 'I hope to bring people together to keep this place warm'.¹² The patchwork was conceptualized as a gigantic scarf. It was wrapped around the fence of the waterfront promenade, exposed to both scorching heat and biting wind comparable to constant disputes and scrutiny. Embodying people who warm the place by donating a piece of themselves, the work also transformed the site aesthetically. The monotonous hardness of the rusty barriers was immediately replaced by the patchwork's colourful irregularity. Wind that might have been rough seemed to soften in the fluttering fabrics. Sunlight, instead of blinding and burning, lit up the vivid hues and gave the work a lustrous glow at sunset.

Has the work really brought people together? Sin admitted that many took part simply because they wanted to discard old clothes – like those who joined *Complaints Choir* out of boredom; yet the process of *Super Warm* also opened a window. Because of the scale of the work, the artist engaged a large number of helpers for the collection of the clothes and the mounting of the work. When they saw the interactions generated by the process, and how the work created a different horizon by the spectacular harbour, they had new ideas about art in the public realm. The work, conceived as a scarf, in fact became one when the promenade was used for a

pop-up market: 'Vendors said that fortunately the work was there to provide shade and shelter from the wind'.¹³ The thoughts of the helpers and the gratitude of the vendors were not exactly in line with the artistic intention, but the work of art nevertheless brought together diverse views in a virtual dialogue.

Making room for individual reactions, while projecting the artist's utopian vision, is an approach shared by *Instant Skyline* (瞬間天際線), a more elaborate, process-based work by Kacey Wong, also presented in MaD@West Kowloon. Wong, whose background is in architecture, is concerned about the city's built environment:

People in Hong Kong think about real estate, homes and buildings in utilitarian and economic terms. They rarely think about these concepts in relation to history, integrity and freedom... Citizens have no say in the city's hardware... Only property developers and the government have the power to decide and build.¹⁴

The skyline of Hong Kong's central business district, dictated by those in power, fully visible from the West Kowloon site, was the point of departure for a participatory art project that enabled participants to construct a democratic 'instant skyline'. Stationed at a carefully designed workbench, Wong and his assistant invited members of the public to build their own mini-skyscrapers with scrap wood and carpentry tools. Over four weekends, hundreds of walk-in participants crafted their own wood block skyscrapers. In all sizes and shapes, they celebrate a wealth of personal characters hardly accommodated in the dominant cityscape. After finishing their architectural masterpieces, participants lined them up along the harbour-front railing. In a perspectival superimposition, this instant DIY skyline, full of humanity, contrasted starkly with the glass-clad high-rises on the other side of the harbour (Figure 4). 'There is a reversal in what is real', explained the artist. 'The buildings in the foreground are actually more real than those in the background'.¹⁵

To sum up this symbolic reclaiming of citizens' right to the city, at the finale the artist staged *Symphony of Lights (Citizens' Version)* (幻彩詠香江 [人民版]), a *détournement* of the nightly gaudy light show in which laser beams shoot out from skyscrapers by the harbour. A touristy spectacle seen by many locals as an eyesore, the show illustrates how the city does not seem to belong to the people. The *Citizens' Version* is deliberately wonky, and teases out the inauthenticity of the actual show. Laser effects, cheaply simulated with torches and LEDs, were complemented by a flying dragon and a countdown for fireworks. All the tricks were manually performed by a crew in black, clearly visible to the audience while pretending to hide behind creased masking. The artist, directing his crew on a mobile phone, played the role of a controlling mastermind. This farce was watched by an audience



Figure 4. Kacey Wong. *Instant Skyline* (2011–12). Participatory process and temporary display during MaD@West Kowloon at the West Kowloon Waterfront Promenade. Photo courtesy of the artist.

of around three hundred. Although they were not involved in the making of the work, the crowd completed it as an orchestrated ritual.

Wong's statements about power relationships in a city, and issues of control and autonomy, are unambiguously articulated in highly readable forms. However, to the participants, mostly families on a day out at the waterfront, these critical comments may not have even crossed their mind. The process was probably taken as an occasion for parents and children to make things together, to try hammering a nail for the first time, and to have a creative work of their own on public display. The artist is open to participants' own versions of the event. Indeed, the room for open-ended creation of meaning is integral to the work. Instructions were minimal and participants could shape their buildings freely with the versatile blocks. Organic growth, both as a model and as a metaphor, is reinforced in the finishing touch: participants were invited to put soil on their buildings and sow seeds, so that grass would grow naturally within weeks. Thus, even though the work and concepts were thoroughly developed by the artist at the onset, it was also an open structure by default that involved pluralistic sense-making and transformation.

As participatory works of art, both *Super Warm* and *Instant Skyline* can be considered with reference to Jacques Rancière's theory of emancipation in the dissensual aesthetic regime. Those 'without parts' – in this instance, ordinary citizens with little say in the development of West Kowloon and the city's built environment – took part and acted while they looked. People had agency to assert multiple ways of understanding and conceiving, and what

was ‘sensible’ – what was sensed and how we made sense of it – was no longer monopolized by those dominating the discourse (Rancière 2009, 2010). At the same time that the artists put forth what made sense to them about the status quo, their works also triggered further sense-making by the participants. In a realm of ideas and artistic actions, the works constituted a non-hegemonic open field.

These ideas were embraced by the curatorial series, whose final edition, *Construction-in-Progress* (2013), was an assemblage of bottom-up initiatives seeking to encourage greater cultural diversity and autonomy. Among the many open-call entries, *West 9 Dragon* (西九民 · 化骨龍) was presented by artwalker, a partnership formed by theatre designer Yung Chi-kin and artist Meipo Yuen, a member of the curatorial team in previous years. Having facilitated the realization of both *Super Warm* and *Instant Skyline*, Yuen took part in the third edition as an independent practitioner. With her artist’s hat on, Yuen sees the work as a translation of the curatorial rationale in artistic form. The work was a participatory process that invited walk-in participants collectively to shape *West 9 Dragon*, a pun on the Chinese name for West Kowloon. They were to draw or write down their thoughts about the future of this place on sculptural parts prepared by the artists, and then attach these to a backbone to form a dragon. The idea behind the work was to create a space for non-professionals to have a share in the symbolic construction of West Kowloon. After four hours of intense participation, a thirty-foot dragon was created by about one hundred participants (again, mostly families with children) and paraded through the site (Figure 5). As they held up the dragon in mid-air with poles, participants wore badges identifying them as ‘stickholders’ (stakeholders), also a play on words.

Based on what the participants drew or wrote on the dragon parts, the artists’ intention to democratize West Kowloon was not exactly registered. But if culture is fundamentally a way of acting, doing and living, the work did realize its objective. ‘When participants picked up the markers, they drew automatically’, Yuen observed.¹⁶ To recognize creativity as a common impulse was at the heart of *West 9 Dragon*. This was achieved by a design with simple but versatile parts that welcomed intuitive and adaptive uses. In addition to asserting everyone’s right to create, the process, especially during the parade, also fostered a kind of interpersonal connection that went beyond momentary conviviality. Hindered by sudden drizzle and taking place in the busiest moment of the day, when the promenade was filled by tens of thousands of visitors, the parade took much longer than expected. Holding up the sticks for almost an hour was extremely tiring, but no one gave up. A kind of natural solidarity emerged. Family members took turns to hold the poles, and when the ‘stickholders’ had to stop and wait in the middle of impossible congestion, they were exceptionally patient, and started to swing the dragon rhythmically among themselves. At that point,



Figure 5. artwalker. *West 9 Dragon* (2013). Participatory process and parade during Free Space Fest 2013 at the West Kowloon Waterfront Promenade. Photo courtesy of MaD.

the artists had completely stepped back. ‘I had always wanted to create a mirage’, said Yuen; ‘here a mirage was created for, with and by the people’.¹⁷

Seen in a historical perspective, *Complaints Choir of Hong Kong* marks a moment when frustrations sparked off a tactical intervention to say no collectively. *Super Warm*, *Instant Skyline* and *West 9 Dragon*, all slightly later, indicate an empowering kind of optimism. The artists affirmed the autonomy of citizens and pursued democratic ideals by creating situations in which participants had agency to make sense and create meanings in multiple ways. This tendency to venture beyond egotistical monologues, and enter into dialogic relationships with others and the environment, resonates with a growing desire for civic participation and recognition of diversity in the social climate. The early 2010s have seen the formation of a great number of self-organized groups, many of them employing creative forms, that have championed new notions of what makes a good society, including freer use of public space, alternative economies and sustainable development.¹⁸ There were also a number of campaigns in defence of values citizens had gradually learnt to cherish, such as land justice and political autonomy.¹⁹ As art interweaves, practically or ideologically, with this general current, how have artists explored and reflected on forms and processes, so that art is truly relevant – to both society and the art world – when it takes part?

The revitalizing living room

An exemplary case for considering the above question is Woofer Ten (活化廳; see <http://wooferten.blogspot.hk>), a loose group of artists dedicated to exploring what art can do in the real world. The group, whose practice is grounded in a real community, social forces and real politics, was founded in 2010 with the objective of creating a platform for socially engaged art. Its home base is a ground-level space in an old part of town called Yaumatei. The venue is owned by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and local art groups can apply to be its operator on two-year terms. Before Woofer Ten took over, the space was a small gallery used mostly for art exhibitions. Over the past four years, when it was run by the group in two successive terms, it has evolved into a meeting-point for socially committed artists and also people in the neighbourhood.²⁰

Yaumatei is an old commercial-residential district. Besides clusters of hardware stores, shops selling specialized appliances, a wholesale fruit market and street vendors, there are buildings that house a large range of affordable eateries. Since 2005, with the opening of a mega-size shopping mall, a five-star hotel and further upmarket establishments, humble life in the area has been gradually eroded. Because of rising rent and new regulations to keep the streets ‘in good shape’, small businesses find it harder and harder to survive. This situation is not exclusive to Yaumatei, and is indeed a common symptom among many old districts in Hong Kong, increasingly monopolized by chain stores and commercial outlets that serve either tourists or Hong Kong’s upper echelons.

In the face of this gentrification, Woofer Ten intervened by starting out with *Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise* [sic] (多多獎小小賞; 2010; Figure 6). Recognizing local stores that catered to the needs of the neighbourhood, the project enlisted about thirty practitioners, working in a range of disciplines, to look for ‘awardees’ in Yaumatei.²¹ Artists responded to the nominations and created customized trophies. The naming of these awards paid tribute to simple but heartfelt merits, and also suggested new perspectives to appreciate these local gems. For instance, while a ‘好味蛋撻獎’ (delicious egg tarts award) and a ‘最上鏡制服獎’ (photogenic uniform award) were presented to a bakery and a tailor respectively, there was also a ‘人文老闆大獎’ (humanistic boss grand award) for an antique store, a ‘藝術教育大獎’ (art education grand award) for a bronze utensil maker and ‘麻甩仔救星’ (scruffy guys’ saviour) for a helpful grocer who eased the dietary disorders of single young men. The trophies, made on a low budget and never intended to be long-lasting, were warmly received by the awardees and became an ice-breaker for new friendships. Examples of how the recipients cherished these objects are illustrative of the mutual regard cultivated through the process. A framed drawing given to a reticent old painter as ‘最上海街畫廊’ (top Shanghai Street gallery; Shanghai Street is a long road that stretches across the

活化廳

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Figure 6. Woofert Ten. *Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise* (2010). Prize-giving to small businesses in Yaumatei. Photo courtesy of Woofert Ten.

whole area) still hangs on his wall. A shop owner who received a ‘溫馨king 框大獎’ (warmest frames grand award) took a broken trophy back to Woofert Ten three years later, hoping for repairs.

Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise is exemplary of the practice of Woofers Ten. Through down-to-earth engagement with the community, it builds real relationships with the *kaifong* 街坊 (a colloquial expression for people in the neighbourhood), and casts light on the real lives and social ties that make a place. In addition to reaching out through thematic projects, Woofers Ten has been working on a ‘revitalizing living room’ – exploring what its name means in Chinese for the community (Figure 7). The space is furnished like a casual living room, and visitors are welcome to drop by at any time, have a seat and do whatever they like. With a welcoming atmosphere, a variety of communal activities (including a local newsletter, a bilateral learning series, sharing of watermelons, home-brewed rice wine, etc.), and shifts of unpretentious artists genuinely interested in interacting with the walk-in *kaifong*, the place eventually grew into a community home base. The grassroots *kaifong*, rarely included in art and cultural activities in more elitist circles, became vital participants. This redistribution of cultural rights, echoing Rancière, has been a critical issue raised by advocates of local culture, among them activist Chan King-fai (who took part as a nominator in *Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise*):

Hong Kong culture is not the 5000 years of traditional Chinese culture... Those who created the history of Hong Kong were not the big bosses, but the middle and lower classes... Understanding the ‘little people’ in the multitude is important. It is only through their stories that we can understand our own culture and identity (2008: 31; original in Chinese, translation by the author).

Indeed, many Woofers Ten projects were inspired by the *kaifong*. Through daily encounters, often something dear to the *kaifong* emerges as creative ideas. As the project evolves, it is always the *kaifong* rather than the artists who take centre stage. For example, in May 2013, a frantically eventful month for the Hong Kong art scene with the first ever Art Basel in town, Woofers Ten presented *Where Art Thou, My Love—Cheng Kai-fong Albums Collection* (知音何處—街坊鄭生唱碟收藏展), a showcase of vinyl records collected by Mr Cheng, a frequent visitor known for his passion for popular music. As though posing a counterpoint to the globalized art fair, informality was emphasized both in the choice of exhibits and the way they were shown. Encased in the space’s ground-level shop window, Mr Cheng’s collection was displayed on unembellished racks, in front of a painted background with bright green strips and handwritten words – a sharp contrast with the refined aesthetics of high art. Contrary to the art market’s approach to collection, curation and exhibition, the show was explicit in its celebration of the cultural significance of the retiree’s passion. Mr Cheng was present as a DJ during the exhibition period, and shared his favourite tunes and what he knew in person, from know how on keeping the records to stories of the music industry. These narrated a *kaifong*’s enthusiasm



Figure 7. Kaifong meeting during Yaumatei Self-Rescue Project at Woofers Ten (2013). Photo courtesy of Woofers Ten.

and provided a lively account of social developments in Hong Kong through the years.

Another example is *You Help Me Help Her* (你幫我幫佢; 2013), a project initiated by Fred Ma ('Fred's mom' in Chinese). The elderly lady first visited Woofers Ten because she could freely use its DVD player for her daily health research. She eventually befriended the artists and

became an avid participant. During a 'rice balls for the homeless' project in Christmas 2012, she was reminded that her late mother gave out rice balls to the poor when she was a child. Shortly afterwards, she showed up and expressed the wish for another rice ball-giving event during Chinese New Year. As much as the artists wanted to support Fred Ma, at that moment they did not have the manpower to realize her dream. Fred Ma persisted, and the artists at Woofer Ten came up with crowdsourcing as a creative solution. Through a Facebook call, around ten volunteers were recruited, and with funds raised by Fred Ma herself, over one hundred rice balls were prepared and given to homeless people in the neighbourhood. The process can be seen as a work of relational aesthetics: Woofer Ten inspired an individual to take the lead in filling a social interstice; through its facilitation, resources in the community were mobilized in a model of sharing economy.

Woofer Ten has been proactive in responding to social and political issues. On each occasion, activism overlaps with art. For instance, in a recent fundraising campaign for dockworkers going on strike to demand fairer remuneration, the items on sale were a series of canvas bags, with critical statements silkscreened in a manner reminiscent of the pastiche of Pop Art. Earlier, when a school strike was growing into a city-wide protest over the implementation of national education (which some feared would be akin to brainwashing), it launched *Dare Strike, Dare Teach* (你敢罷我敢教). Mr Cheng, Fred Ma and a few other *kaifong* formed a team of voluntary teachers and offered to teach everyday subjects. The artists designed a poster which played on cram school advertisements, and added another layer to the project by questioning the ultimate purpose of education. A further example is the group's annual 4 June commemoration. Since 2010, *Cycling to the Square* (來往廣場的單車) has been organized on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre (Figure 8). Participants – artists, *kaifong* and others – cycled all the way from Woofer Ten to Victoria Park (where the memorial vigil is held), staging in the busiest roads a public performance that brings to mind pictures of students ferrying resources to Tiananmen Square. In 2014, the group gathered memories from the *kaifong* and presented *Pitt Street Riot* (碧街事變), a reenactment of a riot that took place on 7 June 1989, allegedly sponsored by the Central Government to quell demonstration in Hong Kong after the crackdown in Beijing. While mentions of 4 June are suppressed in China, commemoration of the event has always been an important indicator of Hong Kong's autonomy. The city's freedom of expression is, however, increasingly overshadowed by mainland influence.²² These memorial occasions strike a special chord.

By collaborating with the *kaifong* and others in its socially engaged projects, Woofer Ten sees itself as a community/art platform and its work as community activism. A long-term project is *Yaumatei Self-Rescue Project* (社區自救計劃; since 2013), which seeks to counter the pressures



Figure 8. Woofer Ten and *kaifong*. *Cycling to the Square* (2010). Participatory performance, from Yaumatei to Victoria Park. Photo courtesy of Woofer Ten.

of gentrification. Multipronged strategies range from salon-like *kaifong* discussions that address issues of common concern, to the practice of urban farming, local economy, community network building and autonomous use of public space. Macroscopic in its vision, the methodology of Woofer Ten is always on a human scale. ‘Unlike other NGOs that treat people as random beneficiaries’, suggests Irene Hui, a helper in Fred Ma’s rice balls event, ‘they take the time to see people as individuals’.²³ Hui is now a regular volunteer at Woofer Ten. With almost no previous exposure to art, she now thinks that ‘art is important’. Her engagement with art includes learning calligraphy from a craftsman stationed at Woofer Ten, ideas about the *kaifong* choosing better-looking bowls when they cook together, and getting to know artists from near and far. As well as impacting on individuals, the work of Woofer Ten has also created a particular atmosphere in the neighbourhood. In Yaumatei, there is now a cluster of practitioners and self-organized groups sharing a similar vision. A new ally is So Boring (蘇波榮), originally a moonlight barbecue stall, now a community kitchen striving for the sustainable goals laid out in *Yaumatei Self-Rescue Project*. So Boring is an entity of its own, but the pioneering work of the Woofer Ten has provided an environment conducive to its existence.

Woofer Ten’s penetrative approach, and its conscious departure from exclusive forms of high art, make a notable difference; especially when art that complies with capitalism can be an accomplice of gentrification.

Critiquing capital's numbing erosion of life in East Asia, cultural critic Hui Yuk argues that art today needs a kind of criticality that expands into society, and that the meaning of aesthetics must be rethought (2012: 16–17). In a discussion on the art of Woofers Ten, core member Lee Chun-fung defined artists as 'producers of aesthetic experiences and dialogue'.²⁴ The quote aptly sums up what the group has been doing so far. Artistic decisions – from democratizing curation to appropriating mass appeal, negotiating with signs/sites of power, experimenting with self-organization, actualizing social relations and giving people full respect and attention – have shaped processes that make sense to the participants and society, and have at the same time resisted inertia and oppression. In the face of the oppression and injustice in modern societies and the capitalist system, Lee sees such practices as a responsive microcosm (2014, 9). 'Can we think of a form of resistance that attempts to infuse principles of participation into everyday life, that builds a sustainable form of collective life upon the basis of needs and desires?' writes Lee in a curatorial text for a recent exhibition on emergent initiatives along these lines (2014, 3). The work of Woofers Ten responds to this question in praxis.

Conclusion

What would the anonymous audience at Hong Kong City Hall in 2002 say if they learnt about these recent endeavours? Would the person who wrote that 'art is priceless' also see the value of these participatory undertakings, acknowledging that *Complaints Choir* have transformed grumbling into intervention; that *Super Warm*, *Instant Skyline* and *West 9 Dragon* have made possible momentary democratization; that Woofers Ten has bridged art and life and brought together the multitude in resistance? Would the one who wrote 'nonsense' change his or her mind? Or would he or she reiterate the comment, arguing that nothing has really changed? The grievances of *Complaints Choir* are still present, if not worsened, in today's Hong Kong; participation at West Kowloon came and went, and the site is still in the authority's custody; Woofers Ten is in a precarious position, about to lose its physical base.²⁵ Undeniably, even though the works described above strove to exercise agency and venture into real-world situations, sceptics might question their impact. Yet perhaps before full-blown realization, they did contribute to the imagination of and experimentation with civic ideals.

As an art historian, I see in these artworks layers of historical significance. They are testament to the growth of Hong Kong's civil society at this intriguing moment, in which a critical mass is learning to establish its own subjectivity by identifying not with hegemonic regimes – colonial Britain in the past; China and capital in the present – but with the local and its people, and is exerting its will to autonomous power in a range of

contexts, from fetishized West Kowloon to the very heart of grassroots lives. The process is in many senses decolonization in action. No longer submissive in the face of imposed ideologies, the dissidence and tactical transgression of *Complaints Choir*, the respect for direct participation and pluralism under the banner of ‘Let’s Own It’, and Woofers Ten’s perseverance in grounded and sustained engagement, exemplify values that drive the citizens’ self-fashioning of a more democratic state. In mirroring ideological currents, the participatory nature of these works also promotes such thoughts in practice. They register history, while at the same time making it.

This strand of art also substantiates rethinking of the reciprocal relevance of art and society. It is perhaps not coincidental that participation is a common strategy. Further to outward social and political goals, at a deeper level, there seems to be a shared wish to create – borrowing a (previously quoted) phrase from Lee, ‘a sustainable form of collective life upon the basis of needs and desires’. Obviously, this can never be achieved by one solitary artist. While participatory models emancipate spectators, they also make room for reimagining what art can explore in intersubjective situations, and what artists can do as makers of forms. When artists explored these questions with a heightened sense of civic-mindedness in the dynamic context of Hong Kong over the past few years, they demonstrated a turn from singular authorship to a repositioning of themselves as welcoming initiators, whose larger-than-life projects must be completed by others. Artistic logic enters into dialogue with a plurality of voices. It is only through being responsive, and letting the form be reinvented through participation, that this mode of practice makes sense. This history, as much as it is about how art enables people to participate in the social realm, is also about how art itself learns to take part.

Postscript

Shortly after this essay was submitted, Occupy Hong Kong launched. From 28 September 2014, protestors occupied a number of the busiest spots in the city for a total of 79 days, risking arrest in acts of civil disobedience for truly democratic elections. Creative display, including imagery and objects, from supportive cheering to sarcastic caricature, was noted by the protestors as well as observers as an essential part of the movement. While these will probably be considered in another chapter on art’s role in the history of Hong Kong’s civil society, this essay documents earlier signs and tendencies, before they burst onto the scene.

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Notes

1. The comment is noted in the author's MPhil thesis ('Public Art in Hong Kong', University of Hong Kong, 2004).
2. The 'local discourse' has emerged through talks, seminars and publications in local journals, newspapers and web-based platforms. In 2008, the *Journal of Local Discourse* (本土論述) was first published as an annual compilation of related essays.
3. A range of views about local identity, and the urge to make statements in the public arena among official bodies and artists, are discussed in Clarke's survey, which covers art in conventional institutions, popular culture and public sites.
4. *Art as Social Interaction* featured Taiwanese curator Wu Mali, a veteran in social practice and a key writer on such practices in the Chinese language, and over 30 artists and art collectives. For this bi-city exhibition, a timeline on socially engaged art in Hong Kong was drawn for the first time by Kaitak, Centre for Research Development, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University. That this timeline was simply a list of related events and initiatives indicates both the value in research in this area and the gap in our knowledge suggested in this essay.
5. Post-handover Hong Kong is governed by the Basic Laws, a set of laws that, according to the Sino-British Joint Declaration, promises to operate the SAR according to a legal system separate from that of the Chinese Central Government. Article 23 states that 'The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies'. When this article was introduced in 2003, it was feared that the city's freedom would be infringed upon and political control from the Central Government would be tightened.
6. Interview with Vangi Fong by the author, 19 July 2014. The interview was conducted in Cantonese. The quotation is a translation by the author.
7. See webpage of *Complaints Choir of Hong Kong*: http://www.complaintschoir.org/hongkong/complaintschoir_about_hongkong.html.
8. A video of the Choir, showing the members performing in various locations, with the lyrics in Chinese and English subtitles, has been posted on Facebook by the organizer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQVZMMqg7_o&nedirect=1.
9. The Choir was covered by almost all major local newspapers and popular magazines, including the *South China Morning Post*, the *Standard*, *Hong Kong Economic Times*, *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ming Pao Daily*, *Sing Tao Daily*, *Oriental Daily*, *Apple Daily*, *AM 730*, *Ming Pao Weekly*, *Next* magazine, *U* magazine, *Weekend Weekly*, *CUP* and *HK Magazine*. It has also attracted the attention of pro-China papers in Hong Kong as well as mainland

media, such as *Wei Wei Po*, *Tai Kung Pao*, *China Daily*, *Shenzhen Economic Daily* and *Nandu Daily*.

10. The open call was made via Vangi Fong to former Choir participants, who were invited to respond to the author's questions on a voluntary basis. Responses were originally in Chinese. The quotations are translations by the author.
11. After MaD@West Kowloon, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority embarked upon a similar programme. Called Freespace Fest, it also adopted a model of co-curation, and MaD was invited as one of the co-curators. Responding to the extravaganza's pre-determined framework, largely masterminded by the Authority, MaD's approach was to reiterate the premise of open-ended collaboration. Thus its contribution to the first Fest was straightforwardly titled 'Collaborative Programmes' (2012). The last edition in this curatorial series was 'Construction-in-Progress' (2013). An example from that edition is discussed in a later part of this essay. For the series' documentation, see <http://www.mad.asia/posts/509/Others/MaD-@-West-Kowloon-2011>, <http://www.mad.asia/posts/391/Others/Freespace-Fest---Collaborative-Programmes>, and <http://www.mad.asia/posts/559/Others/>. The author is a member of the curatorial team.
12. Interview with Stephanie Sin by the author on 29 July 2014. The interview was conducted in Cantonese. The quotation is a translation by the author.
13. Interview with Stephanie Sin, 29 July 2014.
14. Interview with Kacey Wong by the author on 18 July 2014. The interview was conducted in Cantonese. The quotation is a translation by the author.
15. Interview with Kacey Wong, 18 July 2014.
16. Interview with Meipo Yuen by the author on 31 July 2014. The interview was conducted in Cantonese. The quotation is a translation by the author.
17. Interview with Meipo Yuen, 31 July 2014.
18. This trend can be illustrated by a considerable number of initiatives joining the open call for Construction-in-Progress. A list of these groups can be viewed at <http://www.mad.asia/posts/560>.
19. Major campaigns that took place in the early 2010s include the anti-national education protests (2012), whose high turnout forced the government to suspend plans seen as an attempt at indoctrination. There were also oppositional struggles against development plans that were thought to be negligent of indigenous livelihood and sustainability, such as the construction of an express rail link and urbanization that would wipe out villages and farmland (from 2009 to the present). The earlier struggles, though often in vain have inspired widespread concern for land justice.
20. Woofers Ten was not selected as the operator of the space when it applied for a third term of occupancy in 2013. Some of the group members believe that relocation will sever the communal ties established over the years, and thus have been negotiating with the Hong Kong Arts Development Council for another space in the same area. Negotiations were in progress when this essay was written, and members persisting in the cause were then still based in the Yaumatei space with the support of the new tenant.
21. This seminal project was initiated by Ching Chin-wai Luke, whose writing on *Complaints Choir* is cited above.
22. Two recent examples that suggest the threat to the city's freedom of speech include the brutal attack on veteran journalist Kevin Lau and the closure of *House News*, a popular website. The attack on Lau was allegedly due to his

- investigation of corruption on the mainland. The owner of *House News* also hinted that its closure was due to pressure from China.
23. Interview with Irene Hui by the author, 7 August 2014. The interview was conducted in Cantonese. The quotation is a translation by the author.
 24. Interview with Lee Chun-fung by the author, 2 August 2014. The interview was conducted in Cantonese. The quotation is a translation by the author.
 25. By the end of 2014, when this essay was under review, an exceptionally supportive gentleman rented a space in the neighbourhood and offered it for free to artists who continued to pursue Woofers Ten's cause.

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