

An Example of the Official Presentation of Contemporary Art in Hong Kong: *City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists*

The 1992 showcase exhibition *City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists* at the Hong Kong Museum of Art was a benchmark exhibition that still defines the Museum's approach to contemporary art. Championed as the Museum's "first thematic exhibition on contemporary Hong Kong art" (1) after moving to its permanent home in Tsim Sha Tsui in 1991 this exhibition revealed many of the conservative features that the Museum has consistently displayed since.

At the time, critics of *City Vibrance* questioned the need for the Museum to actually distinguish the art on display as being of 'Western media': surely contemporary art was contemporary art so why the need to emphasise, for example, that photography and video are 'western'? The Museum of Art has since revealed that it is predominantly a museum that showcases traditional Chinese art (2) and 'buys in' outside exhibitions of well-known European artists (e.g. the yearly 'French May' exhibitions) or packaged exhibitions (a recent example is the ancient Egyptian art exhibition). Rarely has local, regional, South-East Asian or, indeed, contemporary Chinese art been seen in the Museum.

City Vibrance was an early example of the 'fudging' that the Museum does in its preparation of exhibitions. In 1992 the then Head of Hong Kong University's Fine Arts Department and a Museum 'Honorary Adviser', Carolyn Muir, gives credence both to the artists selected and the rationale of *City Vibrance* by stating that all the artists "work in Western media, in one or more of the following categories: painting, photography, printmaking, ceramics, sculpture, installation, video art, and mixed media...". (3). This is an early example of the Museum drawing outside support (in this case, from an academic) to explain and legitimise the parameters of an exhibition – it is something that the Museum of Art has consistently done when mounting exhibitions. Passing the role of the curator (of which the Museum of Art has many) to these 'advisors' (4) undermines the professionalism and independence of the Museum. It should be, as in Museums throughout the world, that the curator is held solely responsible to present a critique and rationale for an exhibition.

The use of these advisors over the last decade has sanitized many of the Museum's exhibitions by its apparent kowtowing to neutrality. Likewise, the Museum's curators have had their individual curatorial roles debilitated by the Museum being forced (5) to adhere to the greater Hong Kong Public Service ethos. *City Vibrance* is an early example of curatorial subservience within the Museum of Art – causing the Museum of Art to sadly be almost an artistic non-entity over the last decade in a city that really needs a strong public museum presenting stimulating and educative contemporary exhibitions for its audience.

1. Gerard C.C. Tsang, *City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists* catalogue, 1992, p. 5.

2. The Museum of Art's permanent galleries are the: Xubaizhai Gallery of Chinese Painting & Calligraphy; Chinese Antiquities Gallery; Historical Pictures Gallery; Chinese Fine Art Gallery; and the Contemporary Hong Kong Art Gallery (it is in this final gallery that the Museum's permanent contemporary collection is housed – basically a series of four short corridors).

3. Carolyn D. Muir, *City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists* catalogue, 1992, p. 8.
4. Yes, there is an extant Committee of Advisors overseeing both the Museum of Art and the Heritage Museum.
5. The current Senior Curator of the Museum of Art is a breath of fresh air compared to the previous incumbent – thus, it is fair to assume that the bureaucracies within the Museums Section of the Leisure and Culture Services Department and the Home Affairs Bureau are probably one the root causes of the Museum of Art's continued timidity.

Hong Kong Identity and So Hing Keung's New Hong Kong Landscape

This Mortal Coil: The Alienated Urban Landscapes of So Hing Keung: a book of recent photographs by So Hing Keung published in May 1999 (1).

The British left Hong Kong two years ago and since then the majority of Hong Kong artists have continued to explore the pre-handover 'hot topic' issue of Hong Kong people's confused identity (something along the lines of "I am not British/I am not Chinese/I am Hong Kong people" [*sic*]). Most recent exhibitions at Para/Site Art Space, Z+ and at the Fringe Club have explored Hong Kong artists' desire to present their personal frustration with and observations of a society without a strong local identity. Indeed, there **is** a strong local identity - but, by acknowledging a society that holds its heroes to be rich businessmen, Canto-pop stars, high-rise apartment TV melodrama characters and fashion labels within a landscape of computer games, Hong Kong artists would be seen to be trivial. To date, Hong Kong artists have ignored such obvious topics as gambling, horse racing, Hello Kitty, gangland intrigue, suicide, shopping arcades, etc.

Hong Kong's 'popular culture' appears ignored and so are the 'big' topics: outside political hegemony (recently British, now the Chinese Central Government), a self-interested local bureaucracy, disinterested overseas multi-nationals and business monopolies (e.g. big banks and property companies). These subjects seem too difficult or too sensitive for local artists to tackle.

Consequently, we are still awaiting the big post-colonial artistic statement.

The publication of *This Mortal Coil: The Alienated Urban Landscapes of So Hing Keung* could be a landmark series of work challenging Hong Kong artists to explore wider issues than their own personal identity crises. So Hing Keung offers a radical reinterpretation of Hong Kong's physical landscape - it is a unique interpretation by a Hong Kong artist. In his photographs (2) So Hing Keung ignores the 'official' (e.g. as promoted by the Hong Kong Tourist Board) physical view of Hong Kong of 'quaint' Wan Chai shop-houses, awe-inspiring tower housing blocks and commercial buildings and a busily efficient business city. And he has fast-forwarded us from the romantically misleading 1950s/60s urban landscape of seemingly organized streets, colonial buildings and content people depicted by veteran photographers Mak Fung and Yau Leung (when the reality was quite different).

So Hing Keung offers a relevant 1990's version of Hong Kong. It is a view that is honest, perceptive and, at times, brutal - the 'awe-inspiring' tower housing blocks are shown for what they really are: sub-standardly built super-small flats lacking light. The streetscapes show real people: harassed and frantically hurrying. Buildings are leaking, black and patched. Hong Kong's back alleys hold the foundations for the city's glitzy mirrored signature buildings but behind this façade these lanes are stinking, low, rubbished places. So Hing Keung has been photographing **his** Hong Kong for many years: dark streets, derelict building sites, floating rubbish. He has diligently and unconsciously documented a tormented city. Eugene Atget portrayed the Paris of the 1900s and in the process he presented (and what was later acknowledged as) a unique genre of photography. So Hing Keung is an artist trying to get to a psychologically deeper understanding of Hong Kong - its landscape, people and places. As an artist, he

is also presenting an important and unique artistic reinterpretation of a great city that too often has only been depicted with all its lights flashing.

1. 'This Mortal Coil' (meaning 'this fatal turmoil') is a phrase from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* Act 3, Scene 1: Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" speech.
2. So Hing Keung's photographs are black and white Polaroids that are usually a double-exposure composition and then scratched, under and over developed in the darkroom and then randomly (but controlled) sepia toned.

This essay was originally published in *Paroles* magazine, Alliance Française de Hong Kong, Hong Kong, July/August 1999, by John Batten using his occasional pseudonym Jean Botcu.

1 July 1998 and Leung Po-shan's *Love the Fucking Country*

"Everything, everything, no matter how common-place and how ugly, has secret meanings. Everything."

- Clarence John Laughlin (USA photographer 1905-1985).

Steve Vines, former editor of the demised English-language newspaper *The Eastern Express*, aptly states in his new book *Hong Kong: China's New Colony* that China prefers to keep Hong Kong's entrepot status. And, like the British, have a "government" led by an unelected Executive supported by a strong central administration of public servants who are occasionally pricked by an impotent, business dominated, and universally unrepresentative Legislature.

This is Hong Kong's new socio-political environment. But, Hong Kong artists have never really been a political lot and even gutsy Handover issues last year were generally ignored. At best, Hong Kong artists obliquely tackled the Handover by again (yes, it is an on-going theme for Hong Kong artists) searching for a Hong Kong identity. In contrast, one of the more mature political art statements recently seen in Hong Kong came from the young feminist artist Anthony Leung Po-shan. Her *Love the Fucking Country* installation at Para/Site Central 'celebrated' the first anniversary of Chinese resumption of sovereignty by using Cantonese offensive slang within her installation and on specially printed tee-shirts. In one stroke she reinterpreted the "I am Hong Kong people" notion of identity by using offensive (and in context, 'unpatriotic') Chinese characters known only to Cantonese speakers. Northern Chinese bureaucrats would be oblivious to the offensive meaning of her message as the regional Cantonese slang would be unrecognisable to non-Cantonese speakers.(1)

The power of Leung's installation pales however to the importance (or notoriety) of two other recent events in Hong Kong's small, tight art and political world. Prior to the Handover the question asked by visitors was "what will happen after 1997?" - the question now asked is "have there been any changes?". Most residents are aware of subtle differences "after 1997". In the art world there have been two interesting and seemingly insignificant events over the last six months that may indicate future trends:

1. Hong Kong's first example of post-colonial large red Chinese character propaganda has been erected on the Headquarters of the Chinese Army in Hong Kong – it reads "Love Hong Kong Love the Motherland". Simple and ostensibly inoffensive, it was placed on the Prince of Wales building in Central just prior to Hong Kong's first anniversary celebrations of Hong Kong's return to China. At the time of writing, and four months after this first anniversary, the message remains in place. It looks like it will remain.
2. The second event is ominous and also occurred during the first anniversary reunification "celebrations" (by the way, largely ignored by the population). An art exhibition of Chinese artists celebrating Hong Kong's reunification with China was shown at City Hall and jointly presented by the Chinese Cultural Ministry and the Urban Council's Museum of Art. The exhibition was an appalling example of propagandist art at its most propagandist. The Chinese Cultural Ministry has excelled in similar art exhibitions in China for decades.

For the Urban Council (2) – which itself has a plethora of guidelines for its venue hirers to ensure that the Urban Council is not implicated in potentially embarrassing exhibitions or performances - to have been associated with such propaganda is insidious. What is particularly galling is that since its opening the Urban Council's Museum of Art has never hosted a major contemporary art exhibition from China.

1. There are about 200 commonly used colloquial Cantonese written characters – these unique characters are meaningless to a reader of Chinese from other areas of China.

2. Since this essay was written the Urban Council itself became a victim of Tung Chee Hwa's desire to centralize decision-making....the Urban Council had autonomy over an arts and culture budget in excess of HK\$1.5 billion and its functions have now been absorbed into the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

This is an extract of a longer essay originally published as "Hong Kong's Stifled Art Spaces - a summary of Hong Kong's recent art scene", in *Photo Pictorial*, #398, 1998 & *Dislocation Magazine*, #13, 1998/99.

Email, Hello Kitty, 'Cockroach' Magazine and Zunzi

The 1990s saw the rise of a plethora of populist images - many inspired by Japan, Disney and television: Hello Kitty, Dear Ronald, Snoopy, Mickey Mouse, the Simpsons... and if you are male and older: Japanese *manga* characters and their equally macho Chinese counterparts (e.g. Dragonball).

The 1990s also saw the rise of a fashion item – the designer backpack - that allowed the dangly display of many of these populist items: Hello Kitty attached to the zipper of the backpack was commonplace. The ungainly mobile phone 'bricks' of the 1980s were replaced by the compact mass-market mobile phones of the 1990s – and with it the need for equally kitsch mobile phone attachments: flashing lights, Hello Kitty (again) and a variety of colourful replaceable phone covers.

Email, pirated VCDs, the Internet and ICU became commonplace and with it easy access to friends, cyber-sex, obscure facts, pornography and information.

Jump to the *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily*: Hong Kong's most popular newspapers: local artist Zunzi Wong has a daily political cartoon; his book about Tung Chee Hwa (*Silly Old Tung*) is a best seller.

'Cockroach' Magazine balances between popular and 'high' art. Illustrators, artists and cartoonists meet: Craig Au-yeung, Chan Kai-yin, Lily Lau etc.

This is the background for a walk around Mong Kok or Causeway Bay.....and when you see teenagers walking and shopping you might, as I do, have an uneasy feeling that art (and I mean 'high' or 'fine' art) is of almost no interest to them.

Para/Site Art Space's *Art SUPERmarket*:

The walls and shelves of the upstairs area of Para/Site Art Space were completely covered with paintings, ceramics, constructions, photographs and a variety of ephemeral objects: all donated by "more than 90 artist friends" (1) and sold at a set price of HK\$800 (proceeds equally split between Para/Site and the artist) for each item to raise funds for Para/Space.

Art SUPERmarket (or *Art \$UPERmarket* as it was variously promoted) – was a stated response to demands by the Visual Art Committee of the Hong Kong Art Development Council (HKADC) for Para/Site to do more to justify its HKADC funding. Although Tsang Tak-ping does not exactly explain what were the bureaucratic demands on Para/Site, he does state that Para/Site had future plans and projects and the time-lag between applying for and the receiving approval for these projects from the HKADC meant that Para/Site needed funds to allow flexibility and a cushion for planning. Funds independently raised by Para/Site itself could then be used without the threat of the HKADC demanding justification.

Art SUPERmarket was a clear expression by Para/Site - as an independent artist run space that was ostensibly outside the 'art market' – of the realities of receiving money (in this case government money from the HKADC) and feeling constrained or even captive for receiving such money.

Art SUPERmarket was the first ever sale of art on Para/Site premises and, intriguingly, it was by resorting to the well-tested route of artists placing their own work for sale that Para/Site was exerting its own 'independence'. Constraints on independence are obviously felt by all artists, not only those working within the commercial art world.

The scramble to buy art during the first night of *Art SUPERmarket* was a surprise to everyone and the organizers resorted to drawing a name from a hat to choose the purchaser for those pieces that attracted great interest. May be the 'supermarket' atmosphere of the event created a frenzied buying rush because it would be hard to imagine Hong Kong art being so sought after in a commercial gallery. The mad buying seen at *Art SUPERmarket* where many buyers unable to get their item of first choice were visibly disappointed, angry and upset would make further interesting research – a similar buying frenzy was seen again during *Art SUPERmarket 2* held later in 1998.

The overtly mercantile lust seen in *Art SUPERmarket 1* and *2* was possibly too unsavoury for Tsang Tak Ping (Para/Site Art Space's artistic conscience) to contemplate a third. A pity – such spontaneously frenzied events (and outlets!) are few for Hong Kong artists to experience seeing their work getting such recognition.

1. Tsang Tak-ping, *Art SUPERmarket* introduction pamphlet, Para/Site Art Space, 1998.