

Hong Kong art historiographies and pitfalls of political desire

As paroxysms of protest brought Hong Kong to a standstill through 2019 to 2020, the city and its people were cast in the role of underdog in a high stakes David and Goliath narrative. Western news media closely followed these developments, focusing subsequently on the draconian punishment being handed out for minor miscalculations,¹ and the rapidity of Hong Kong's transformation into a Kafkaesque maze of politico-legal restrictions under the National Security Law implemented in 2020. This coverage has been framed, as academic Hentyle Yapp has observed, by the values of liberalism—its logics of freedom and of speech—which inform “not only Western media's descriptions of the protests in Hong Kong, but also the activism itself.”² It is difficult to turn away from the grand and deeply profound calls for freedom, dignity and self-determination expressed by Hong Kong's people *en masse* over the last several years. Stepping back, if not away, from these urgencies however, highlights the potential blind spots that this narrative, with its cadence of oppression and resistance so familiar in the context of China, seems destined to reproduce.

In cultural terms, art criticism and scholarly literature has been attentive to these dramatic socio-political ruptures (including the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, but in particular the 2019–20 anti-extradition protests) as “artistically productive event[s]”³ that have precipitated responsive and dynamic forms of participatory, community-based and activist art. A brief review of recent scholarly literature on “art” and “Hong Kong” uncovers a quantity of new discourse that theorises artistic praxis in relation to a nexus of socio-political strategies, inscribed through a predominance of terms including resistance, resilience, community, collectivism, activism, identity and the articulation of a social commons.⁴ Indeed, one likely positive outcome of the otherwise devastating historical circumstances produced by China's intensified presence in Hong Kong is the quantity of such literature likely to emerge in response. This is a level of attention comparable to that prompted by Hong Kong's last ‘fifteen minutes of fame’,⁵ the 1997 handover, of the transfer of its sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. The handover was the other critical inflection point from which significant theoretical frameworks on Hong Kong emerged. These, in some cases (notably US academic Ackbar Abbas' 1997 theory of “disappearance”), retain their intellectual monopoly almost a quarter of a century on, remaining the most widely cited texts on Hong Kong's visual culture.⁶

This attention, insofar as it will generate new forms of knowledge, is undoubtedly welcome. However, the entirely predictable nature of its amplification sheds light on a wider pattern in Hong Kong's art historiography, the quantity and nature of which can in general be tracked against the ebb and flow of political events to the exclusion of alternative histories and practices.⁷ This begs

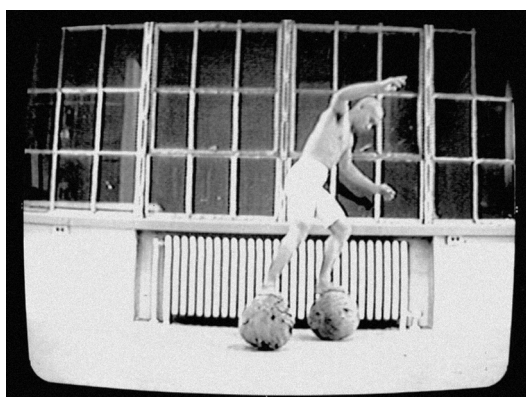
the question of sustainability: how long will the spotlight last, given the ceaseless pressure of other global urgencies? And further, what accounts of this period will we be left with, and how will those accounts shape the forms of knowledge that we have about Hong Kong and its visual culture? The manner in which answers to these questions ultimately unfold will tell us much about the nature of our interest in Hong Kong, and the ways in which this interest tracks with the art world's broader economies of attention.

ARTIST AS ETHNOGRAPHER: TSANG TSOU CHOI AND HONG KONG'S PURCHASE ON THE GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY

The dominant parameters of visibility afforded Hong Kong art are illustrated in the public and institutional profile of Tsang Tsou Choi (1921–2007), commonly known as the King of Kowloon. The “improbable”⁸ rise of this outsider figure to local hero for his profligate and unschooled calligraphic urban interventions protesting British colonial occupation, and then, after 1997, China's neo-colonial presence, has been of general interest since the 1990s and is well documented.⁹ Beginning in 1956, Tsang (who received only two years of formal schooling) used Hong Kong's public space to declare an ancestral claim over Kowloon, writing out his lineage in misshapen calligraphy over walls and electricity boxes. Popular and institutional historicisation of Tsang's endeavours over the last decade, however, has seen his position as an originator of contemporary art as well as a local cultural identity, become thoroughly canonised. In a commercial and institutional context this has been through a framing of Tsang as the “first properly contemporary artist in [the] region,”¹⁰ or a foundational cultural avant-garde.¹¹ While there have been commercial motivations at play in this context,¹² the cardinal position afforded Tsang in Hong Kong's contemporary art history narrative is also evident in scholarly accounts. In the Hong Kong chapter of their authoritative 2012 book, *The Art of Modern China* Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen select Tsang as the first artist for discussion (subsequent to the New Ink Movement of the 1960s–1970s), introducing their section on the post-handover contemporary period. At the popular level, the manner in which Tsang's story refracts issues related to sovereignty, cultural and political dispossession, memory, the negotiation of public space, as well as his recalcitrant marginal status, has seen him claimed in public affection as the “story of Hong Kong writ large.”¹³ Demonstrative of his solidifying pride of place in both an art historical and populist narrative, the first artwork encountered in the inaugural exhibition of Hong Kong's new institutional repository of a local visual history and identity, the M+ Museum, is a pair of wooden doors inscribed by Tsang in 2003.

The various readings applied to Tsang (often in the absence of his own voice articulating his imperatives¹⁴) are of interest, not in terms of what he means to Hong Kong and its people, but rather insofar as they illuminate the major discursive frames which facilitate the circulation of Hong Kong art. That is, in its articulation of cultural identity, which, particularly in the contemporary period, has been intimately bound by its political condition. In the 1960s–1970s, the New Ink Painting Movement became Hong Kong's ‘official style’ to a not insignificant degree on the basis of its harmonious integration of sinicised Western elements with Chinese painting in a manner that broadly aligned with British colonial government branding of Hong Kong as the place where ‘East-meets-West’.¹⁵ In the post-handover contemporary this has been increasingly cast in political terms, of the relationship of Hong Kong's subjects to the authoritarian pressures of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is these parameters which determine the projection of cultural authenticity, and by extension the circulation and historicisation of art in a global field. The growing

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public and commercial profile of Tsang Tsou Choi might therefore be explained by the artist's fulfillment of the dual expectations that the global art critical and commercial establishment holds for non-Western art broadly: being, on the one hand, readily identifiable in terms of its cultural or national point of origin (in this case through the use of calligraphy as an autochthonous characteristic) and, on the other, offering a critical intervention into sites and symbols of cultural and political power in a manner that is consistent with ethical and aesthetic values of postmodernist and postcolonial deconstruction.¹⁶ As noted by art academic Simon Soon, exhibitions and texts which have facilitated Tsang's evolution, from a local marginal figure to internationally recognised artist have frequently sublimated the specific logics and methods of his irredentist claims (which were fundamentally motivated by political concerns and a lack of education, rather than skill) into an act of conceptual radicalism.¹⁷ This move to locate Tsang within a contemporary art paradigm turns on a Western, or more specifically "North Atlantic"¹⁸ equation between negative values of resistance or refusal and ethical, philosophical or political positivism. Within this framing, Tsang is allocated an ethnographic role, tasked with summarising a collective history and subjectivity in ways that contradict the intensely individual nature of his work. In this sense, recent local and international traction of Tsang's work is illustrative not only of the criteria by which contemporary art from Hong Kong and, more broadly, China is appreciated in the wider art world, but also the processes of exchange, loss and discrepancy of meaning that participation in the "incompletely shared present"¹⁹ of the global contemporary art project necessitates.

ART HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF HONG KONG

Consistent with these logics of attention, the most substantive international and scholarly engagement with art from Hong Kong has occurred in concert with its politico-historical ruptures.²⁰ Mainstream coverage of Hong Kong's art scene spiked in relation to the 2019–2020 anti-extradition protests. However, and predictably, this has largely not been in terms of meaningful engagement with actual artworks—their histories, interpretation, or aesthetics. Instead, it has focused on evolving conditions of censorship and restrictions the arts community has faced subsequent to the imposition of the National Security Law, as well as anxious speculation on the stability and sustainability of Hong Kong's status as a key node in the global art market.²¹ A similar tendency to collapse the boundaries between political and artistic expression was observed by art historian Paul Gladston several years ago, when he described the way in which relics and ephemera from the 2014 and 2019 Hong Kong protests were being "upheld and therefore institutionally decided within the purview of the international art world's currently fashionable social turn as indexes of radical socially-engaged artistic expression."²² For Gladston, such a transfiguration "maintains the expanded field accorded to the aesthetic as part of postmodernist-lite discourses, whereby all modes of expression have the potential to be considered as art."²³ Attention to this groundswell of visual material culture (inclusive memes, graffiti, posters etc.) is accorded on the basis of an indexicality to political developments which are understood as globally significant, or history-making.

Looking further back, the period up to and surrounding the 1997 handover saw a spate of exhibition-making and research through which the major interpretative paradigms for contemporary art were established. The advent of the contemporary—both as a socio-historical condition and aesthetic sensibility—has long been wedded to the introspective turn in the lead up to the 1997 transfer of sovereignty. Within existing art historiography, it was in the shadow of the handover, that moment when "history with a capital H"²⁴ visited Hong Kong, that the SAR and its

art “came into its own,”²⁵ increasingly characterised by forms of expression oriented towards a local audience newly aware of its own cultural autonomy. For art historian David Clarke, author of what remains one of the most authoritative texts on contemporary Hong Kong art and visual culture, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (2002), this moment of localisation was epistemologically postmodern, taking the form of a “rejection of all master narratives, whether of Chineseness or of Western-centred conceptions of modernity or contemporaneity.”²⁶ The desire for cultural autonomy in the absence of any possibility for the same kind of self-determination in the political domain precipitated the beginnings of a “psychic decolonisation,”²⁷ through the deliberate disaffirmation of Chinese national identity “in order to open up an alternative space of Hong Kongness.”²⁸ Formulated in this way, the contemporary is bound up with the articulation of a visual culture which, for the first time, took Hong Kong as its primary horizon and was catalysed by threats to Hong Kong’s way of life, which encouraged residents to realise their own histories, culture and identity in ways that would come to take on an increasingly activist tone in the post-2003 era.²⁹

Clarke’s text, the first major scholarly account of contemporary Hong Kong art, which explicitly took as its frame of reference, “the response of artists to a major socio-political event,”³⁰ functioned to elevate a range of artists and artistic strategies of the retrocession period. It also, significantly, dated the origins of contemporary Hong Kong art and culture to the handover as a “primary impetus.”³¹ This reiterated a causational claim already made several years earlier in Ackbar Abbas’ influential text of cultural theory, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. For Abbas, the “cultural self-invention” of the postcolonial Hong Kong subject emerged in response to what he describes as a “space of disappearance” that is a symptom of new historical demands of the handover, but can also describe Hong Kong’s historic status as a transit space or thoroughfare and the abstraction of space in the digital era.³² As well as being the only text to offer a survey of contemporary Hong Kong visual culture, Clarke’s historiography gained traction through his role as an advisor and catalogue essay writer alongside Johnson Chang Tsong-zung for the Hong Kong section of the acclaimed touring exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998–99) curated by Gao Minglu. *Inside Out* was the only international exhibition of China’s new art in the 1990s to substantively co-present contemporary art from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora and mainland China under a single curatorial framework. Although the exhibition technically covers the period from 1984 to 1998, the five works selected from Hong Kong are from 1994–96, and the majority deal directly with the handover.³³ This is consistent with Clarke’s historiography which moves directly from a discussion of modernist artists working in either harmonious or critically disjunctive forms of hybridity, such as Wucius Wong (b. 1936) or Luis Chan (1905–1995), to the response of artists “living in the shadow of the future.”³⁴ Works selected were overwhelmingly weighted to the 1990s and the demonstration of a “growing concern for Hong Kong cultural identity” as a “parallel” to the desire for self-determination in the political arena.³⁵ Other authoritative accounts of Chinese art history, notably by Andrews and Shen, follow the same inflection points, and as a result the few contemporary Hong Kong artists that they select for discussion are also related to the retrocession period, delimited by the same political horizon.³⁶

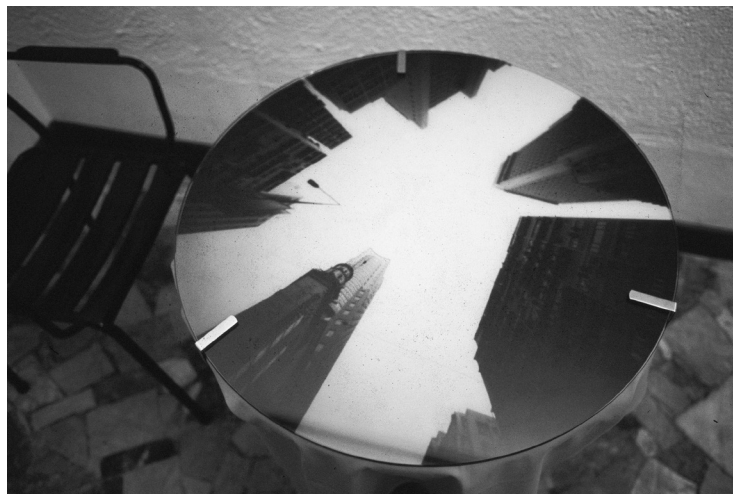
Within this dominant story of the Hong Kong contemporary, art has been allocated the role of handmaiden to identity and history: “participating in this desire to affirm Hong Kong identity or subjecthood and even to some extent help[ing to] give birth to it.”³⁷ This ascription of a socio-utilitarian function to art can in many ways be attributed to the exceptional nature of Hong Kong’s political history.³⁸ In a break from the typical experience of decolonisation via insurrection animated

by nationalism (which perhaps better describes the society-wide protests that rocked Hong Kong in 2019), Hong Kong's one hundred and fifty-six year British colonial period came to a 'natural', although not necessarily preordained end in 1997, due to the expiry of the legal contract which had leased the New Territories from China for ninety-nine years from 1898.³⁹ The term "decolonisation" does not accurately encapsulate an experience in which the exit of the coloniser ended with the transfer of sovereignty from one global power to another in place of the progressive acquisition of autonomy. Much of the scholarly literature on Hong Kong is marked by a desire to understand the city, possessing a cultural expression figured against the fluctuating forces of (post)colonialism, free market capitalism and Chinese nationalisms throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, offering postcolonial historians a hybrid post-national identity par excellence.⁴⁰ Accordingly, such scholarship is often marked by a prevailing interest in Hong Kong's cultural identity and political narrative rather than in its art, per se.

The assessment that "there may well be no historical equivalent for the questions raised"⁴¹ by Hong Kong's struggle for self-determination is persuasive.⁴² The experience of Hong Kong's people, situated in an increasingly concrete historical space between colonisation and a pre-scheduled return or re-colonisation, is unparalleled. Artists have, as they do everywhere and across time, responded to these events in novel and compelling ways. But the handover itself did not loom as large in the psyche of Hong Kong's artists as one might imagine from the extant art historical narrative (as given by Clarke), at least not at the time of its occurrence. Writing in 1996, one year prior to the handover, artist/curator/art critic Oscar Ho Hing-kay reports, with some bewilderment that, "despite the fact that the city has entered probably the most political era in its history,"⁴³ the response of the local visual arts sector to these issues was piecemeal at best: "there are no artists who deeply and persistently investigate the issues of '97."⁴⁴ More broadly, Ho suggests that "With the exception of the democracy movement in 1989, political art has never been an important art genre in Hong Kong."⁴⁵ This apparent apathy (which could also be described as simply incorporating a wider range of interests beyond the political domain) is verified by artist and curator Ellen Pau, when writing on the development of video art in the SAR for the journal *V-Text* in 1997, suggested that despite works related to issues of local identity and the "turmoil"⁴⁶ of 4 June being the most widely circulated at the time (notably through the program... *Will be Televised: Documents from Asia* programmed by Shu Lea Cheang and broadcast in the US via Deep Dish Television in 1990) "the number of production [sic] of this nature is less than ten annually."⁴⁷ According to Pau, up until the formation of Video Power⁴⁸ in 1988–89, "most video works were not about social documentary or commentary"⁴⁹ and "was not seen as an empowering tool for personal/political ends."⁵⁰ Unlike Taiwan, where the "emphasis [was] on documentary and activist work,"⁵¹ in Hong Kong this first decade of video art was generally conceptual and concerned with articulating "the ontology of the medium,"⁵² an aesthetic priority that was to some extent inherited from German influence through the early involvement of the Goethe Institute in Hong Kong.

Despite this, the authoritative accounts of this period focus on Hong Kong art in terms of the interdependent domains of cultural identity and politics to the exclusion of almost all else, taking as their domain of inquiry as the "cultural self-invention of the Hong Kong subject"⁵³ or "the problems of cultural identity that Hong Kong may represent."⁵⁴ This framing radically delimits the terms by which Hong Kong art is able to be understood, and, more significantly, divorces contemporary Hong Kong art from its own art historical genealogy. While rupture, as academic Charles Green recently reiterated, figures consistently in the emergence of modern and contemporary art, it can

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only ever be a partial account of these art historical turns.⁵⁵ These historical severance points (war, conflict and de- or re-colonisation), described by curator and critic Patrick Flores vis-à-vis the work of John Clark as an “irritation that festers, as it were, into a distinct condition”⁵⁶ must be counterbalanced by “the deep structure of inheritance”⁵⁷ that is emergent in artists and artworks via dual processes of chance and agency. Thus, even while apportioning appropriate weight to the plight of Hong Kong and artists’ engagement in these terms (both historically and now), it remains the case that the attention given to socio-political paradigms, at the expense of other readings, has encouraged an overreliance on Hong Kong’s position in relations of geography and of power to interpret cultural production. This has had the corollary effect of rendering periods of relatively apolitical and/or culturally oblique artistic innovation and exploration largely invisible.

Tying the advent of the contemporary (art and Hong Kong subject) to the handover as a local political catalyst—for cultural self-introspection and a broadly deconstructive impulse—obscures a far longer and richer history of contemporary art in Hong Kong. Attention rather, to Hong Kong as a site of latticed connection to both local histories and global discourses, indicates an alternative and equally significant point of origin. This can be found in the dynamic and highly interdisciplinary art scene of the late 1970s and 1980s, as well as the earlier if idiosyncratic experiments in conceptual art, environments and performance by Frog King Kwok Mangho (b. 1949), from the early-to-mid 1970s. It was during these two decades that large numbers of artists, dancers, choreographers, poets and filmmakers returned to Hong Kong from studying overseas at arts institutions across Europe and North America. They brought with them first-hand knowledge and experience of emergent global contemporaneous developments in areas including conceptual art, minimalism, feminism, performance art, video, postmodern dance and theatre, as well as the wider social ruptures of student activism and the counter-cultural currents which characterised the American campus experience from the mid-1960s. Back in Hong Kong, this rich intellectual interplay was amplified by the nascency of the city’s art ecology as well as a productive distance from the evaluative mechanisms of the North American art world.

While the return of a generation of overseas trained artists is widely acknowledged as a “precondition for the subsequent evolution of a contemporary arts scene,”⁵⁸ the specificity of artists’ diverse pedagogical heritage has remained vague, obscuring an alternative and art historical source of contemporary art developments. From this energetic and richly transnational context (descriptors which can be applied to Hong Kong generally) emerged a range of new, often interdisciplinary, artistic experiments. These included the new mediums of video and installation by Choi Yan Chi, May Fung Mei-wah and Ellen Pau, which developed in dialogue with experimental dance and theatre contexts; installation and performance by Joshua Hon and Kwok Mangho in response to the local material culture and phenomenological experience of Hong Kong; disruptive forms of ‘action art’ by Fung Manyee and Ricky Yeung Sau-Churk influenced by local anarchist groups, international student movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the social orientation and institutional critique of artists including Hans Haacke and Joseph Beuys; and a community-based curatorial practice informed by anthropology, sociology and West Coast Funk art as practiced by Oscar Ho Hing-kay. I could go on.

Although this history is widely known in Hong Kong, its significance as a radial point for contemporary art has generally been obscured by the dominant narrative of political rupture. To displace the precipitative role of the political allows us to see, for example, that the “local turn”⁵⁹ of the 1990s was not only a direct response to the pressures of the handover, but emerged from a

much broader and globally inflected range of factors. One pertinent example here is Danny Yung's history of community organising for Chinese and Chinese-American communities in New York in the 1970s with the Basement Workshop,⁶⁰ informed by socio-political activism around civil rights, the Vietnam War, affirmative action, and wider Third World solidarities. Another example, Oscar Ho Hing-kay's interest in both the populist tendencies of the Californian Funk Art Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the Marxist approach of art historian John Berger while studying at University of California, Davis in the early 1980s.⁶¹ This predisposition for narratives of rupture also makes invisible various forms of continuity that exist between Hong Kong's modern and contemporary periods. Numerous artists of the 1980s generation trained with Modern ink painters Lui Shou-kwan or Ding Yanyong, and frequently followed their advice to travel to the same international universities as their predecessors.⁶² A reconsideration of this history points to alternative genealogies for many of the major strands of contemporary Hong Kong art as they emerged in the 1990s. This includes the use of urban material detritus in installation art in order to index local concerns; activist tendencies in performance art; an increasing localisation of publics and concerns; and what has previously been identified as a broadly postmodern tendency evident from the 1980s.⁶³

Decoupling contemporary Hong Kong art from the political horizon allows for its emergence, development and significance to be framed by a far richer and more expansive set of transnational aesthetic, technological and art historical factors. Freed from the burden of representation, Hong Kong art is able to re-stake its claim to the vast and asymmetrical terrain that is the global contemporary, a terrain that is "energised by specific local, national, regional, and global contingencies, often all at once."⁶⁴ It is this longer history, its aesthetics and genealogies, that risks being lost through the recent reinstatement of the political as the major interpretative framework, as pervasive pressures to engage with art in terms of newness, urgency, and relevance produce a myopia of rupture.

HONG KONG IN/AND HISTORIES OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

The catalytic role ascribed to the handover in narratives of contemporary Hong Kong art and visual culture is symptomatic of a broader set of issues which have troubled contemporary Chinese art since its entrance into the international arena in the 1990s. In broad terms, this can be related to the desire for the non-Western artist to perform the role of ethnographer, as part of an "anthropological turn" in contemporary art which Hal Foster identified as early as 1995.⁶⁵ This is a paradigm that relies on a number of assumptions, namely, that the artist who is culturally or socially 'other' has automatic access to a site of transformative alterity, in which their artistic intervention is also politically real.⁶⁶ In the context of Greater China, the international appetite for artists and artworks that confirm an existing set of (Western) beliefs about the CCP as a globally preeminent authoritarian government has seen over the last three decades artists and artworks that propose a relationship of dissidence with the state achieve tremendous institutional and economic success.⁶⁷ As Hentyle Yapp has argued, this reliance on Western values (particularly freedom of expression) as the "model for how the state functions with regard to the individual"⁶⁸ facilitates the circulation of contemporary Chinese art in global markets. This 'major' narrative obfuscates what Yapp has proposed as the 'minor',⁶⁹ namely aesthetics and the actually nuanced relationships that exist between artists and state power, entanglements that exceed the bounds of the Western liberal imaginary. Curator and art historian Carol Yinghua Lu has similarly argued that the manner in which scholarship on contemporary Chinese art is overwhelmingly scribed in terms of rupture and linear historical progress—"descriptions [that] tend to be based on the binary narrative models of

politics versus art, orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, suppression versus rebellion, dependence versus independence, official positions versus non-official positions and so on⁷⁰—functionally “exclud[es] artistic approaches and the attitudes of those who didn’t display such criticality in their political and social positioning.”⁷¹ Owing to the presumption of exogenous Western understandings of contemporary art which prefer art and its aesthetic to be the locus of deconstructive criticality⁷² or a “liberal antidote”⁷³ to illiberal expressions of power, key accounts of Chinese art history locate the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 as a ground zero in the development of contemporary Chinese art. As a result, the total (and socially totalising) political and aesthetic apparatus of Socialist Realism and a revolutionary narrative are excluded as the basis for its development and interpretation—a history which Lu recuperates.⁷⁴ Narratives of contemporary Chinese art that understand it as emerging in reaction to the CCP, rather than in many ways existing in continuity with the system that the CCP established, are attractive because they allow for the Chinese state to be reiterated as “inherently illiberal, behind and needing to catch up to the West.”⁷⁵ However, as Lu astutely observes, “in China, at least, setting up oppositions to narrate the appearance of contemporary art is actually the passive acceptance and extension of a revolutionary narrative that was transformed into an avant-garde rhetoric, emphasising resistance to state ideologies and existing authority.”⁷⁶ Art historiographies of Hong Kong that emphasise political rupture are framed by this wider context. It is no coincidence that Hong Kong art first achieved its limited attention at the precise moment that the CCP came to occupy significantly more real estate (both in Hong Kong and internationally) and as Britain exited. The handover, while being its own unique historical event, is also marked by this wider nexus of global expectation and desire.

Re-positioning the political is not an effort to minimise the precarity of Hong Kong’s circumstances nor to deny the manner in which art invents itself everywhere in response to local and culturally specific needs. It rather forms part of the necessary work of resisting the demand that art from outside Euro-North American centres should always justify its significance by recourse to something outside itself, as a lucid articulation of a place, culture or political event, in precisely the same way that the identity of Hong Kong has always been made legible by way of simplistic reference to places and cultures beyond its territorial boundaries.⁷⁷ When art historian David Teh compared Hal Foster’s 2009 *Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’* with Asia Art Archive’s four-part rejoinder from 2012, *An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary*, he noted that, “[I]n the *October* exercise, words referring to nation (nation/al/ism, country, government, state) appear just 33 times; in the Asian survey, they recur 120 times... we can hardly avoid the conclusion that in Asia the state exerts a far greater gravity on contemporary art, and figures more in the thoughts of those studying it, than in Europe and North America.”⁷⁸

As Teh observes, the role of art in relation to society is culturally determined, and in Hong Kong, like much of Asia, the troubled quest for nationhood (here uniquely cultural due to the foreclosure of the political) has occupied much artistic interest. There is no escaping politics, particularly not in a place like Hong Kong, a city in which the fundamental questions of living—access to space, discourse, expression—are politically overdetermined. It remains possible, and arguably desirable, however, to encounter art on its own terms, something which would allow for a far wider range of artworks and meanings to be articulated. Such an encounter would necessitate not a denial of the political (an impossibility) but it’s re-positioning to a space outside the studio door, even while acknowledging that to open the door would be to encounter a typhoon.

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With such a buffer in place, it becomes possible to perceive a richer set of histories and more complex ambits of meaning for art from Hong Kong. The decentring of political and rupture-based art historical narratives also complicates methods of additive pluralism that are inherent to a project of global art that proliferates art history's subjects without attention to its methods. As Patrick Flores warns, "the plural cannot be affirmative, an incessantly expansionist complexification and relentless extraction of irresistible local articulations of the immovable norm reared elsewhere and reigning supreme."⁷⁹ The addition of Hong Kong to a project of global art history vis-à-vis its political context functions as such an affirmation, maintaining a simplistic and exclusive narrative of the Chinese state as illiberal, and Chinese artists, including those from Hong Kong, as anti-heroes. In the context of Greater China, resisting these normative pressures requires a critical engagement with our desire to inscribe art into history through the 'major' narratives of rupture and political resistance or intervention in ways that might increase the visibility of art from this region, but nevertheless maintain the global art historical status quo.

Notes

¹ See, for example, John Yoon, 'Hong Kong Sentences 5 Over "Seditious" Children's Books', *The New York Times*, 10 September 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/10/world/asia/hong-kong-childrens-books-free-speech.html>

² Hentyle Yapp, *Minor China: Method, Materialisms, and the Aesthetic*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, p. 212

³ Laikwan Pang, 'Arendt in Hong Kong: Occupy, Participatory Art, and Place-Making', *Cultural Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2016, p. 156

⁴ See, for example Isaac Leung, 'The Resilient City: When Social Activism Meets Media Arts in Hong Kong', *Art and Activism in the Age of Systemic Crisis*, London: Routledge, 2020; Pang, 'Arendt in Hong Kong'; Stephanie Cheung, 'Taking Part: Participatory Art and the Emerging Civil Society in Hong Kong', *World Art* 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 143–66; Minna Valjakka, 'Co-Authoring the Space: The Initial Lennon Wall Hong Kong in 2014 as Socially Engaged Creativity', *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6, 2020, pp. 979–1006; and Wen Yau, 'Art as a Gift of Empowerment: Civil Engagement in Hong Kong', *Antithesis* 31, Defy, 2021, pp. 24–35

⁵ Kin Wah Lau, 'Polemical Position—Art's great leap in Hong Kong and its denial of the local', *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2, 2014, p. 128

⁶ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. In his book Abbas examines Hong Kong cinema, architecture and literature to argue that the Hong Kong subjectivity has been formed in response to a culture of "disappearance". Abbas' book has been cited at least 1,500 times. His work has also been directly referenced by artists. See, for example, May Fung and Danny Yung's video work, *Image of a City* (1990)

⁷ This is not to discount the sustained and important work currently taking place, including the Art History Department of the University of Hong Kong, which has recently published the *Hong Kong Art History Timeline*; <https://arthistory.hku.hk/hkarttimeline/>, and Asia Art Archive in their ongoing collection and creation of new resources in this area

⁸ Louisa Lim, 'Chasing the King of Kowloon', *The Atlantic*, 19 April 2022; <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/hong-kong-chinese-calligraphy-democracy-indelible-city/629582/>

⁹ Art critic Lau Kin-Wai is credited with first bringing Tsang substantively into the local art world with a controversial solo exhibition held at the Goethe Institute in 1997. Tsang's calligraphy was a familiar sight to Hong Kong residents from the early 1970s, and he was the subject of sporadic local arts coverage from as early as 1978. Tsang's first major international recognition came with his inclusion in Hou Hanru's and Hans Ulrich Obrist's touring exhibition *Cities on the Move* (1997–99) and reiterated through his inclusion in the Hong Kong pavilion for the 2003 Venice Biennale co-curated by Hou Hanru. Although Hong Kong did not receive its own pavilion until 2003, Hong Kong artists Ellen Pau, Ho Siu-kee and Leung Chi-Wo with Sara Wong Chi-hang were included in the China/Hong Kong Pavilion curated by Johnson Chang Tsong-Zung in 2001

¹⁰ *King of Kowloon* (exhibition catalogue), Saamlung Gallery, 2012, in Simon Soon, 'Reading Tsang Tsou Choi: Margin, Madness, and a Hong Kong Avant-Garde', in *Preservation, Radicalism, and the Avant-Garde Canon*, Rebecca Ferreboeuf, Fiona Noble and Tara Plunkett eds, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 200

¹¹ A position first articulated by Hong Kong art critic Lau Kin-Wai in 1992. See Soon, *ibid.*, p. 195

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¹² The highest price Tsang's work achieved to date is US\$237,238 for a scooter covered with calligraphy which sold at Sotheby's in 2013

¹³ Soon, 'Reading Tsang Tsou Choi', p. 191. See, for example, academic and journalist Louisa Lim's use of Tsang as a lodestar for Hong Kong's history and identity in her recent book *Indelible City: Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong*, New York NY: Riverhead Books, 2022

¹⁴ Simon Soon presents a cogent critique of the ways in which the complexities of Tsang's political motivations have been sidelined in accounts that seek to position him as a cultural avant-garde

¹⁵ The trope of 'East meets West' was elevated to a civic ideology following the 1967 anti-government riots which prompted the British administration to invest in a range of localisation policies and encourage a sense of local cultural identity formulated around the principle of harmonious East-West relations outside the influences of communist China

¹⁶ The framing of Tsang's unschooled calligraphy as contemporary Chinese art serves to locate it in relation to other international contemporary Chinese artists working with calligraphy, including Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan and Xu Bing

¹⁷ See Soon, 'Reading Tsang Tsou Choi'. This includes, for example, the 1999–2001 group exhibition of contemporary ink, *Power of the Word* curated by Chang Tsong-zung; a 2012 commercial exhibition at Saamlung Gallery; the touring exhibition *Cities on the Move* (1997–99), and the 2013 monograph edited by David Spalding, *The King of Kowloon: The Art of Tsang Tsou Choi*, Bologna: Damiani

¹⁸ James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 107. Elkins employs the term "North Atlantic" to refer to "the general geographic region that art historians in different parts of the world take as optimal practice." Elkins, p. 47. As Elkins describes, this centre is flexible and varies according to one's geographic and cultural position, but at its most specific can be identified with the journals *October* and *The Art Bulletin*, and institutions Princeton, Yale, Columbia, Berkeley, Courtauld, Humboldt University and select others. See pp. 44–48

¹⁹ David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2017, p. 2

²⁰ The other major curatorial framing which facilitated the international circulation of Hong Kong art was globalisation and urban development as explored in exhibitions *Hong Kong etc.* as part of Okwui Enwezor's 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1998) and *Cities on the Move* curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist

²¹ See, for example, H. G. Masters, 'ArtAsiaPacific: M+ Removes Controversial Paintings about Chinese History', *ArtAsiaPacific*, 26 April 2022; <https://artasiapacific.com/news/m-removes-controversial-paintings-about-chinese-history>; 'Two Hong Kong Universities Remove Tiananmen Artworks after Pillar of Shame Dismantled', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/two-hong-kong-universities-remove-tiananmen-artworks-after-pillar-of-shame-dismantled>; Vivienne Chow, 'Hong Kong's Local Art Market Is Flourishing. But Under Its National Security Law, Many Fear an Artist Exodus', *Artnet News*, 28 September 2021; <https://news.artnet.com/market/hong-kongs-local-art-market-flourishing-national-security-law-many-fear-artist-exodus-2014185>

²² Paul Gladston, 'Beyond the Pale: Critical Reflections on Society, Politics and Aesthetics Within and at the Borders of China', *di'van | A Journal of Accounts* 7, 2019, p. 97

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ David Clarke, *24 X 365 X Hong Kong: A Year in the Life of a City*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007

²⁵ David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonisation*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 10

²⁶ David Clarke, 'The Culture of a Border Within: Hong Kong Art and China', *Art Journal* 59, no. 2, 2000, p. 90; <https://doi.org/10/dtr9n5>

²⁷ Clarke, *Hong Kong Art*, p. 8

²⁸ Clarke, 'The Culture of a Border Within', p. 91

²⁹ For reference to politicisation of Hong Kong's art post-2003, see Lau, 'Polemical Position – Art's great leap in Hong Kong...'

³⁰ Clarke, *Hong Kong Art*, p. 38

³¹ Clarke, *ibid.*, 8. As well as Tsang Tsou Choi, whom Clarke highlights, these are, broadly, artists engaged in strategies of cultural distinction including visual/verbal puns on the Cantonese dialect and the excavation or fabrication of local histories, as well as installation art particularly that which related to the circle of artists surrounding Para Site Art Space from the mid-1990s

³² Abbas, p. 65

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³³ Works by Hong Kong artists included are Kum Chi-keung, *Transition Space* (1995); Ho Siu-kee, *Walking on Two Balls* (1995), Phoebe Man, *Beautiful Flowers* (1996), Pan Xing Lei, To Weun, Tim Yu and Ma Jian, *Cultural Mourning* (1996) and Danny Yung, *Gifts from China* (1994). The lack of attention given to practices prior to the 1990s in this exhibition perhaps explains Gao's utter disdain for conceptual art from Hong Kong when he again was tasked with presenting Hong Kong to an international audience for the landmark exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999

³⁴ Clarke, *Hong Kong Art*, p. 38

³⁵ David Clarke, 'Found in Transit: Hong Kong Art in a Time of Change', *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, Berkeley Los Angeles London New York: University of California Press, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, 1998, p. 175. Other inaugural presentations of Hong Kong contemporary art to international audiences were curated by Johnson Chang Tsong-zung. Chang was responsible for the selection of the Ho Siu-kee work, *Walking on Two Balls* included in *Inside Out*, for Hong Kong's first inclusion in the 1996 São Paulo Biennial, and for the Hong Kong presentation at Venice in 2001 where Ho Siu-kee was exhibited alongside Ellen Pau's *Recycling Cinema* (2001) and Leung Chi-wo's *Crossing Skies* (2001) and *City Cookie* (2001), with Sara Wong Chi-hang

³⁶ In the case of Andrews and Shen this is Phoebe Man, Ho Siu-kee, Tsang Tak Ping, Tsang Tsou Choi and Wilson Sheih. Hong Kong is broadly excluded from major surveys of contemporary Chinese art on the quite reasonable basis of its "very different contexts and histories." Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History: 1970s–2000s*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2014, p. 10

³⁷ Clarke, 'The Culture of a Border Within', p. 91

³⁸ What Abbas has described as a "mutant political entity," *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, p. 142

³⁹ The island of Hong Kong became a British Crown Colony in 1842 through the Treaty of Nanjing which ended the first Opium War of 1839–42; the Kowloon Peninsula was acquired in 1860 after the Second Opium War of 1856–60, and the New Territories, a large area of land abutting mainland China along with over 200 outlying islands was leased from China for 99 years in 1898

⁴⁰ Xiaoying Wang, 'Hong Kong, China, and the Question of Postcoloniality', *Postmodernism and China*, Xudong Zhang and Arif Dirlik eds, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 89–115.

⁴¹ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Hong Kong from the Outside: Four Keywords', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol 16, no. 3, 2015, p. 488

⁴² See, for example, Yiu-Wai Chu (ed.), *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium: Hong Kong as Method*, Singapore: Springer, 2017

⁴³ Oscar Ho Hing-kay, 'The Long Road Back Home: Hong Kong in 1997 and Beyond', *ArtAsiaPacific* 15, 1997, p. 52

⁴⁴ Oscar Ho Hing-kay, 'The Limits and Possibilities of the 1997 Handover', *Art Criticism For the People: News Clippings of Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, 1980-90s*, Anthony Po Shan Leung (ed.), Hong Kong: Typesetter Publishing, 2020, pp. 133–34

⁴⁵ Ho, 'The Long Road Back Home', p. 52

⁴⁶ Ellen Pau, 'Development of Hong Kong Video Art', *V-Text: A Magazine About Video, Digital Image, and the World of New Media*, 1997, p. 31

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56

⁴⁸ Video Power was a socially oriented video art collective, which actively invited young people to use video in order to record local demonstrations and support of the Beijing student movement in 1989. Pau, p. 156

⁴⁹ Pau, p. 56

⁵⁰ Pau, p. 55. Alice Ming Wai Jim also attributes this to the "historical indoctrination of a British colonial practice that dissuaded overt political expressions." Alice Ming Wai Jim, 'Urban metaphors in Hong Kong media art: reimagining place identity', PhD Thesis, Montreal, McGill University, 2003, p. 34; <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/7w62f868g>

⁵¹ Pau, p. 54

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 55

⁵³ Abbas, p. 1

⁵⁴ Frank Vigneron, *I like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialisation*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010, p. xi

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⁵⁵ Charles Green, 'The Asian Modern', *di'van | A Journal of Accounts* 11, 2022, p. 90

⁵⁶ Patrick Flores, 'Finally, or in Hindsight, the Contemporary', introduction to John Clark, *The Asian Modern*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2021, p. 212

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Clarke, 'The Culture of a Border Within', p. 70

⁵⁹ Clarke, *Hong Kong Art*, p. 8

⁶⁰ The not-for-profit Basement Workshop (1970–86) was aimed to provide arts and social services programming related to Chinese and Chinese-American communities in New York. It later expanded to become an umbrella organisation for pan Asian-American artistic expression and community activism and was central to the articulation of an Asian-American identity during the 1970s

⁶¹ Email correspondence with Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, 7 August 2022

⁶² As well as artists of the New Ink Painting Movement whose connections with Lui Shou-kwan are well known, artists Kwok Mangho and Choi Yan Chi both studied with Lui Shou-Kwan during the early 1970s. A number of artists including Danny Yung, Evelyn Liang Yiwoo and Eva Yuen studied with Ding Yanyong during this period. Others, including Choi Yan Chi, Eva Yuen, Ming Fay and Wucius Wong were educated at the Columbus School of Art and Design in Ohio, USA

⁶³ See Clarke, 'Found in Transit: Hong Kong Art in a Time of Change'

⁶⁴ Teh, *Thai Art*, p. 4

⁶⁵ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?', *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* 302, 1995, p. 309

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Obvious examples include *Political Pop*, *Cynical Realism*, the 'unofficial art' of performance art in the 1990s in particular, and the exemplar political subversive, Ai Weiwei

⁶⁸ Yapp, pp. 209–210

⁶⁹ Yapp, p. 210. This is distinguishable from the ways in which the Chinese state is experienced as major by those minor in and to it, namely Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and the Uyghur populations. See the afterword in Yapp, pp. 209–221

⁷⁰ Carol Yinghua Lu, 'The Historical Formation of Chinese Contemporary Art and the Socialist Legacy', PhD Diss., Melbourne, University of Melbourne, 2020, p. 2

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 45

⁷² See Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*, London: Reaktion Books, 2014

⁷³ Yapp, p. 2

⁷⁴ This transformation of China's modern art into an international avant-garde with connotations of criticality and originality is exemplified in Gao Minglu's selection of the English title, *China/Avant-Garde* for the renowned 1989 exhibition, instead of the direct Chinese translation, "Chinese Modern Art Exhibition". See Lu, 'The Historical Formation of Chinese Contemporary Art and the Socialist Legacy', pp. 31–32

⁷⁵ Yapp, p. 2

⁷⁶ Lu, p. 2

⁷⁷ See Joan Kee, 'Art, Hong Kong, and Hybridity: A Task of Reconsideration', *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2 no. 2, 2003, pp. 90–98

⁷⁸ Teh, p. 1

⁷⁹ Flores, p. 215