



In the spring of 2013, we slipped into the Art/Activist-in-Residence programme of art space WoofertTen, in a manner perhaps a bit unlike the other participants—through a back door which didn't have the word “Activist” labeled on it. But seeing that we were coming from a heavy-handed capital known as Beijing, it is exactly that we were interested to question the delicate ambiguities lying in other regions between art and activism in Hong Kong. This may be more a conceptual question than an artistic or activist one, but somehow it ended up being the perfect question to take with us to Yaumatei, an aging old neighbourhood on the Kowloon side of the city.

*WoofertTen is located on the ground floor of the corner building where our residency hosted us. The door of this community arts space is mostly open during the day, attracting a mix of curious passersby and a bunch of regulars, who visit frequently to say hi, sit down and read the newspaper, bring food to share with the people working in the space, or participate in whatever activity is going on at the moment.*

Learning about recent Hong Kong history from our friends at WoofertTen and the neighbouring comrades at Tak Cheong Lane, we sense that the questions people face here are much more concrete, at least in the sense that certain “big brother bullies” are very clear, and social movements are grounded in specific events where artists and activists have been able to express themselves and further the possibilities for social change. We quickly learn that most of these incidents stem from land-based disputes and urban development issues.

*One of the first nights we set out to reach the seafront. According to a map of 1970's Yaumatei that Fung found in the public library, the sea used to be only a few hundred meters away from Shanghai Street where we are staying. But decades of land reclamation and development have stretched a boardwalk imaginary across several streets, newly built concrete traffic islands, under a highway, up a ramp and onto a complicated network of pedestrian passageways that lead not to the sea but—where else—a shopping mall. Still, nautical references abound there; there's a "Water Zone", and the surrounding residential complexes bear names such as "Harbourview", "Harbourside" and "Waterfront". So we get lost at sea in another sort of way—trying to exit the mall.*

*The Elements Mall's website states: "Hong Kong needs more shopping alternatives. People are craving for another place to hang out other than their homes and offices. This is what we call the "third" place – a place where there is a sense of community, a place where everyone can reconnect to each other and to nature. We believe the parkour philosophy of using body and mind complements the holistic lifestyle approach of Elements."*

*With words appropriated in this way, one wonders whether there is still any room for resistance...*

We never made it to the West Kowloon harbour front that night, but some dilapidated markers in Yaumatei still bear the vestiges of its port-side past: steelworks, south Asian imports and red light entertainments. Inadvertently, the neighbourhood is also the gathering point for young revellers of the "plastic left", and these layered psychogeographies became the focus of what turned out to be a several months' long visual research project bringing the city, creative practice and the question of activism together.<sup>1</sup>

*It is interesting to think about where activism (as resistance) is enabled and/or deterred by art (in the community). "Community art", a term partly determined by the initial open call from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), was often used to describe Woofertan's practice and aspiration. At the same time there was also an attempt to redefine what community art might be, or what community and what kind of art we are talking about. The discussion quickly turns to politics and the possibilities for change.*

*"For me, going into art is just because this is a platform for resources, cultural capital, that you can invest into the kind of things that you find more meaningful."<sup>2</sup>*

We have been observers during this journey rather than activists. But what we have seen is filled with a certain momentum catalysed by the ideas, motivation and work of these artists and activists based in Kowloon. In the period of our

stay in Hong Kong, resistance intersected with and was amplified by community in a number of instances—as collective resistance to blatant urban overhaul, to workers’ rights violations and to excessive consumerism.

*The heterogeneous group of people that the space attracts initially triggered a feeling of asylum (community as collective escape?), but this was soon succeeded by more positive thoughts about the heterotopian quality of such a space and a community of those who may have nothing in common.*

*This was not an unfamiliar scenario to us, however, as several aspects of WoofertTen resembled HomeShop, the artist-run space we have been involved with in Beijing since 2008. Also a storefront space in an old neighbourhood, HomeShop’s loose organisation by a group of artists, thinkers and drifters is maybe a similar asylum of sorts, another kind of community of misfits and wandering souls.*

Understanding the “community” of “community art” becomes a manner of observing and trying to understand the dynamics of these forms of organisation, where the idea of service becomes intermediary between various social groups and a form of artistic practice embedded within daily life. What community does this form of art serve, and does art’s appropriation in the service of political activism devalue art as an end in and of itself?

*One night at a meeting with members of Autonomous 8A, someone mentions the transition from housing as a right to housing as welfare, a service provided by the government.*

In a Rancierean mode of thought, such transitions are sense-based differences in the awareness of what is common, meaning that art and its capabilities to alter and expand the realm of the sensorium, and therefore, sensibilities, are integral to politics, not simply in service of but as the meta of politics. We have attempted to look at Hong Kong social movements from this perspective of sense, the sense of what is common, of which particular “we” has rights to the commons, what is in common.

*Another evening Fung walks with us over to Tak Cheong Lane, the base for a group of young activists just a couple of blocks away from WoofertTen. “Come in, we are open, everything is free”, they say.*

The different experiments of the groups we interviewed for our project can in one sense be described as variations of understanding the commons, and with that, community.

*March 28. We walk over to Tak Cheong Lane again in order to take a few shots of the space. As we arrive, people are getting ready to leave; there’s*

a certain urgency in the air. "We're going to the container port, the strike has started. Do you want to come?" On the way there it starts to pour torrentially. We take the metro to a certain point and then load everything into two taxis that drop us off near the port. We check in through the port security, who looks at our IDs and registers us as press. We cross the threshold and enter into a weird festival-like atmosphere. Different groups of young people sit down under a large canopy, blocking the passage of trucks to the port. Some talk with the workers on strike, others play music or conduct reports and interviews for the media and social networks.

"It's always an encounter, I guess, or many encounters that shift your life course without you even knowing it. This is life inventing itself..."<sup>3</sup>

It is no surprise that our walks, talks and journeys through Hong Kong in the spring of 2013 were a continual process of life inventing and reinventing itself. From the very beginning, the uncanny, simultaneous familiarity and distance we experienced at WoofertTen and in the city set a tone for how we could produce a new work engaging with a community which welcomed us, but to which we were outsiders.

*Like the Chinese saying, "No coincidence, no story", our narrative was punctuated by the kind of serendipity that gives one an acute feeling of "life inventing itself". A few days after arriving, we realised that Elaine's aunt and uncle lived in the exact same building for several years in the 80s, just one floor below.*

*Later they came to visit, and her uncle moved through what is today by local standards a spacious apartment, gesturing in the air to show us how the space was divided back then: five rooms on one side, occupied by single people, couples or families, and four bunk beds on the other side of the narrow corridor for those who could not afford their own room. A shared kitchen with kerosene stovetops, a toilet without running water, a dark stairwell, her aunt recounts. In 1988 they received the lottery for public housing and moved out.*

This kind of hyper-density is still one of the first things one notices in a place that has been extending both vertically (high-rises) and horizontally (via land reclamation) over the last several decades, driven by a need for more housing combined with a desire to exploit every available square meter for economic gain. Issues related to this density and the politics of space filter into every aspect of culture here. The old wood panel-divided apartments upstairs from WoofertTen have the harsh intimacy of a Wong Kar-wai film, something like what Ackbar Abbas famously wrote about in the context of Hong Kong's "politics of disappearance", "a culture whose appearance is accompanied by a sense of the imminence of its disappearance,

and the cause of its emergence--1997--may also be the cause of its demise.”

But as Fung jokes, the urgency of artistic practice and political participation in Hong Kong's post '97 years may be more akin to a politics of appearance.

*It all started with a seasick steadicam. It was the bane of those first few weeks of working, becoming one of those challenges that one cannot give up on simply because you've already wasted too much time trying and cannot bear to let go in vain. And those many hours spent walking back and forth the third floor flat tinkering with an orange handsaw arm, PET bottle caps and various metal washers came out of a whim, really, based upon a beginner's rereading of the Politics of Disappearance and moving around in Hong Kong. Movement, restlessness, sitting at a desk overlooking noisy Shanghai Street looking for the right troubleshooting video to make the damned steadicam work as it should. Sitting as restless as distraction, the wrong videos lead to other flows, like centripetally-spinning eggs scrambled inside the shell and shanzhai effecting tilt-shift optics with video and image-editing software.*

This was how our visual research slowly began to take shape, and we continued over the next months to make a *dérive* with these ideas. Spreading around Yaumatei, we interviewed a number of people from four groups/communities involved to varying degrees with the social movements or artistic practice. Guided by their ideas and paths traced from their daily lives, we used the DIY steadicam to film their routes in the city: from a meeting place to the university, an activist free space to mother's house, from home to the social movement resource centre and from the bus stop to the community art space.

The resulting shots from the not-so-steady steadicam acquired a kind of floating quality, which might make one dizzy but also felt quite apt to the experience of moving through a place like Hong Kong, itself a city of transients. Transience, movement and the rainy Hong Kong spring were punctuated in our camera by an eye toward minor details, moments of coincidence and the layering of ideologies with the fabric of the city.

In the end, it was the particularity of certain moments involved at WoofertTen that anchored and shaped our experience. Fred Ma came to visit many days, bringing dimsum, her health advice and a warm smile; we joined the “pokkai” bag making session to raise funds for the HIT dockworkers; we'd find Fung and Vangi many late nights, tucking under the half pulled down metal gate of WoofertTen to discuss anything from spatial organisation to the boiling frogs of the SAR.<sup>4</sup> We were introduced to organic farmers, sound artists, anarchists, and even the neighbourhood joker. A community of transients, maybe.

But these are the daily movements that offer small bridges of understanding between aesthetics and social change, that are not about coming to concrete conclusions or finalising a report. A conversation has begun, movement is continuous.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The “plastic left” is a play on words from the Cantonese sounding like “leftist phallus”, appropriated in recent years by young liberals to describe themselves.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted from an interview with Jaspar Lau, one of the founding members of WoofertTen, included as audio material in the video work “Precipitations”.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted from an interview with Chin Tang, member of Tak Cheong Lane, included as audio material in the video work “Precipitations”.

<sup>4</sup> SAR is an abbreviation for “Special Administrative Region”, the legislative designation given to Hong Kong by Mainland China since the end of its colonisation by the British in 1997. HIT is Hongkong International Terminals, Ltd, a port container operations company owned by infamous Hong Kong billionaire Lee Ka-shing, and source of a controversial labour strike that lasted 40 days in the spring of 2013. “Pokkai” is Cantonese slang literally translated as “trip or fall on the street” and used as the expletive equivalent of “fuck you”. WoofertTen artists reappropriated the logo of Lee Ka-shing owned supermarket chain Park’N’Shop (the Cantonese name is transliterated as “pakkai”) with the more crude version, hand illustrating and screen-printing cotton shopping bags with the logo for sale in support of the dockworkers’ strike. Dimsum is the traditional style of Cantonese brunch. Fred Ma is a 78-year-old neighbour and avid participant of WoofertTen. She is known as Fred Ma because she is the mother of Fred.

<sup>5</sup> An edited version of this text was first written as a final report at the conclusion of our residency period at WoofertTen in the summer of 2013. Some of the above conversations and movements have been captured in the video work “Precipitations” that we completed during this period.