

ART

CONTRIBUTIONS
FROM CHINA,
GERMANY, HONG
KONG, INDONESIA,
JAPAN, MALAYSIA,
MYANMAR, THE
PHILIPPINES, SPAIN,
SINGAPORE AND
THAILAND

**LEARNING
FROM
THE FIELD**

IN

CON

ON

Published by
Goethe-Institut e.V.

**Conversations
with and between
art and cultural
practitioners**

TE

XT

**Edited by
Herman Bashiron
Mendolicchio
and
Susanne Bosch**

CONTENTS

04

INTRODUCTION
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio
and Susanne Bosch

08

**CITIZEN PARTICIPATION
IN PUBLIC SPACE**
Rolf Stehle

10

**REIMAGINING
SPACE**
Lee Cheah Ni in conversation with
Alecia Neo

20

**MIGRATING
REALITIES**
Okui Lala in conversation
with Alecia Neo

32

**ARTS-ED AND THEIR
PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES
IN MALAYSIA**
Chen Yoke Pin in conversation with
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

42

**PRODDING CIVIC
IMAGINATION THROUGH
PLAY**
Alex Lee in conversation
with Alecia Neo

50

**BUKU JALANAN'S
POLITICS
OF THE STREET**
Zikri Rahman in conversation
with Elaine W. Ho

60

**QUESTIONS OUT
OF THE DEMONSTRATION
AREA**
Lee Chun Fung in conversation
with Elaine W. Ho

72

**ADDING LETTERS TO OUR
TRANSACTIONS**
Yeoh Lian Heng in conversation with
Elaine W. Ho

80

**FINDARS AND
IMAGINED COMMUNITIES**
Tey Beng Tze in conversation
with Zikri Rahman

88

**NGONGKONG
AND ART**
Djuwadi in conversation with
Lim Paik Yin

98

**WORKING IN THE REALM OF
THE DEAD AND UNDEAD:
LAND CONTESTATION IN
SINGAPORE**
Jennifer Teo & Tien Wei Woon
(Post-Museum) in conversation with
Susanne Bosch

106

**THE HIDDEN
SELF**
Alecia Neo
in conversation with
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

120

**ORGANIZATION-IN-
BETWEEN:
ART, ACTIVISM AND
COMMODIFICATION**
Elaine W. Ho
in conversation with Susanne Bosch

132

**AN ORGANIZATION CALLED
TO BE DONE**
Renan Laru-an
in conversation with Susanne Bosch

142

**"BREAD IS LOVE
BETWEEN STRANGERS"**
Caique Tizzi in conversation with
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio and
Susanne Bosch

156

**ART, EDUCATION AND
COMMUNITY-BASED
PROJECTS IN MYANMAR**
Haymann Oo and Ko Aung
in conversation with
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

164

MORE IN THE LESS
Jakob & Manila Bartnik
in conversation with
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

174

**THEATRE, DANCE AND MUSIC
FOR JUSTICE IN SOCIETY**
Bhumini Dhanaketsiparn
in conversation with Susanne Bosch

186

**"FUNDAMENTALLY, WHAT
DRIVES ME IS INTEGRITY"**
Lim Paik Yin in conversation with
Susanne Bosch

194

**ANON-CURATED SPACE OF
LIVED ART ACTIVISM**
Misako Ichimura
in conversation with Emma Ota

206

**A SHIFTING STAGE OF FREE,
SUBJECTIVE DEFINITION**
Art Lab Ova - Zulu Kageyama and
Kuri Suzuki in conversation with
Emma Ota

220

**TRACING THE STORIES
WHICH "ART" THREATENS
TO ERASE**
Rika Aki
in conversation with Emma Ota

230

**EXCHANGING
THOUGHTS**
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio
and Susanne Bosch

ART IN CONTEXT: LEARNING FROM THE FIELD. CONVERSATIONS WITH AND BETWEEN ART AND CULTURAL PRACTITIONERS. ISBN: 978-3-945048-24-5. EDITORS: HERMAN BASHIRON MENDOLICCHIO AND SUSANNE BOSCH. INTERVIEWERS AND TRANSLATORS: HERMAN BASHIRON MENDOLICCHIO, SUSANNE BOSCH, ALECIA NEO, EMMA OTA, ZIKRI RAHMAN, ELAINE W. HO, LIM PAIK YIN. PROOFREADING AND COPY-EDITING: CHERYL HOFFMANN. DESIGN: REINHARD STEGER, MARIA MARTÍ VIGIL / WWW.PROXI.ME. PUBLISHER: GOETHE-INSTITUT E.V. PRINT PRODUCTION: MEDIENSCHIFF BRUNO HAMBURG. PRINTED IN GERMANY, BERLIN, 2017. THIS WORK IS LICENSED UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL 4.0 INTERNATIONAL (CC BY-NC 4.0) LICENSE. TO VIEW A COPY OF THIS LICENSE, VISIT: [CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



BUKU JALANAN'S

Zikri Rahman

POLITICS

in conversation with

OF THE STREET

Elaine W. Ho



A bi-monthly book discussion in Taman Tasik Shah Alam, 2012

Zikri Rahman consistently embarks on diverse interdisciplinary socio-cultural-political activism projects with the focus on public space subversion as a form of knowledge transaction. *Buku Jalanan*, a project he co-founded as a cultural workers' collective and an

autonomous community-based cultural and literacy initiative, has now spread to almost 80 different locations worldwide.

He is also the festival director for the inaugural *Idearaya*; a festival of ideas to celebrate progressive and dynamic

discourses within vibrant and diverse grassroots communities, intelligentsia, civil society and community organizers in Southeast Asia. Apart from that, Zikri is also a writer, independent researcher, translator and podcaster for various online portals such as *Projek Dialog*,

Jalan Telawi and Rokat Kini. Currently, he is doing a cultural and literary mapping project in understanding the development of the city Kuala Lumpur through literature lenses with *LiteraCity*.¹

Without having known all that Zikri Rahman is involved with, spending two weeks with him during the master class *TransActions in the Field* made it obvious that this young man is extremely active and connected. Wherever we went—to a café, on the street or in the metro, he ran into people he knew. So...either Zikri is the friendliest mafioso in Kuala Lumpur, or he is a jack of all trades. Working in the realms of cultural studies and social justice, Zikri's activities as a writer, researcher, translator, festival director and even podcaster put him in touch with all manners of people and bring him all over the city. The following dialogue focuses on one of these activities, not coincidentally also involving many social groups and multiple locations.

Buku Jalanan is the open-air reading group that Zikri, with two fellow students, began in 2011, in the university district of Shah Alam. With the simple manifest to “bring books down from exclusive shelves and out to public spaces for all”, the pages of Buku Jalanan, (literally translated as ‘street books’) has come to include around 80 chapters all over Malaysia and the globe. Here, Zikri and I read together through the work of Buku Jalanan, reflecting upon the potentialities of reading as a form of organization, organization as an on-going dialogue, and dialogue as a means to emancipation.

Zikri Rahman: We started Buku Jalanan in the year 2011 with the awareness that there is a lack of public spaces being used for public activity. Public space here is always either sponsored by the state or corporations, both with agendas which actually side-line the idea of public space itself. The global phenomenon of privatizing public spaces also reflects our consciousness as a collective to reclaim it.

In addition, studying in the local university under the repressive University and University College Act and the Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act (Act 174) means that students are not allowed to engage in politics. We would like to raise awareness and create alternatives for discourse. Books and the act of reading can be seen as neutral, but to see a group of students converge and take part in different activities and sharing sessions within the realms of books, arts, culture and activism helps us to fill the void within university discourse and reimagine what we can do together.

Elaine W. Ho: The idea of utilizing public space in conjunction with the act of reading is wonderful and very challenging, because that is the point when reading goes beyond an individual activity towards a collective and shared one.

The accessibility of information in our modern age now is full of potential, and yet general society remains banal, merely consisting of passive readers. Thus it is no longer a question of how much we read, but how much we gauge the potential of reading as an act of liberation. Reading alone is not sufficient, and so the reason why Buku Jalanan emphasizes the idea of utilizing public space is to advocate cultural change collectively through the simple act of reading. But it is not only the act of reading. It is the idea and praxis that reading brings from theory and from the words we consume. We do believe in the notion “to read the word, is to read the world”.

And with so many chapters all over the world, it seems like Buku Jalanan is slowly doing that! But the culture and politics of public space in different countries is so diverse, how does the confluence of reading and space work in these different contexts, and is context-specificity important to you all?

Yes, there are 80 autonomous chapters of Buku Jalanan worldwide, run by hundreds of budding cultural activist-cum-librarians, meaning we interact with totally different contexts altogether. The most popular initiatives work via NGOs or advocacy groups centred in urban areas. But Buku Jalanan, as an idea, transgresses the boundaries of the urban-rural divide, opening it up to multiple adaptations of the idea.

For me, the practice must be context specific because the interaction happens within different groups of people and communities. For example, Buku Jalanan in Shah Alam interacts with the student-based community, but our counterparts in Buku Jalanan Chow Kit focus upon marginalized groups in the city. This does influence our priorities in terms of the types of literature and texts, the discourse and even the language that we speak in meetings. Nevertheless, transversality and the idea of solidarity within different multiplicities have always been the focus, and for us, advocacy must happen in public space as a form of 'dynamic' and ongoing protest.

This reminds me of the 'space of appearance' discussed by Hannah Arendt, beautifully referenced here in the following passage from Judith Butler:

Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us or, indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality. Indeed, there is no human on [sic] her view if there is no equality. No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality. I would add the following: The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. This space is a feature and effect of action, and it only works, according to Arendt, when relations of equality are maintained.²

I remember also a scene from Howard Zinn's memoir *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*,³ about an incident in which the black students pressure and attack the racial policy of the main library by asking the library staff to provide them several reading materials that they were not allowed to read. In the end, the library must concede and provide them with the reading materials. This anecdote really left a lasting impact on me of how books can indirectly create change and be used as liberating tools of critical consciousness.

Yes! For Arendt, the idea of the *polis* stems from the Greek city-states as the place in which some have the right to speak, act and vote, but thus also represents a space in which we are allowed to be heard, seen and acknowledged as bodies and as human beings.⁴ This space of appearance relates just as much to tools of power like books, which are made visible or invisible by those who control them. It seems very much in line with what you mentioned previously in regards to using books and discourse as a reaction to the stifling of it by the state. Is that how you saw it from the beginning?

Buku Jalanan's beginning in Shah Alam was natural, since most of us are from here. But Shah Alam is also a city with five different universities in the area, which is superb for us because most of our visitors are either university students or the local community. Although Shah Alam is actually a university town, there is a lack of a functioning public library (one exists, but is quite far from the centre) and also a lack of bookshops. This provides us with the opportunity to intervene strategically.



Participatory literary installation of Cerita Pendek Terpanjang during Buku Jalanan, 2013

So you were actually beginning in response to a specific need. What kinds of books have you then focused upon to do this?

We are responding to the reality of the space in Shah Alam, which mainly consists of university students. For me personally, the ideas

must come out of specific needs of the society but always with the idea to rethink society together. The selection of books as outlined in our Buku Jalanan manual follows the principle of "books for all, all kind of books". We are always focused on bringing quality reading materials in any form possible: zines, pamphlets or even flyers. From the reality, of course, it is our desire to allow the culture of discourse, and most importantly, the culture of dissent, to take place within our community.

Has there also been a circulation of certain books coming out of your activities that surprised you, or a readership that you didn't expect to emerge?

When we hold a Buku Jalanan session, it is quite common for us to share all kinds of books. Since we openly share some sensitive books, one time a visitor actually questioned our selection. The thing is, though, the book in question, *Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh*, was published by the university press and openly sold in bookshops. Shamsiah Fakeh is one of the senior leaders of the Malayan Communist Party and a pro-independence fighter. It is funny, even when a book is in the bookshop, people are not aware of it, but when it is put into public space, the perception becomes very much different.

In regards to the phenomena that emerge, I guess the openness of various individuals to organize their own Buku Jalanan within their localities is something that has surprised me. With more than 80 chapters worldwide, it means that we do have some kind of readership that is open to the ideas and possibilities for a new cultural movement to take place. But the question is how can we make it sustainable and radicalize it further?

For the chapters outside of Malaysia, are they also reading and sharing books in foreign languages, or is the emphasis still placed upon Malay and Malaysian issues?

Most of it is still very much Malaysian books, but the issues discussed are very much global. There are lots of ideas that we can venture into, and I am looking forward to see how the international communities of Buku Jalanan, like Buku Jalanan Beijing⁵, Buku Jalanan Germany⁶ or Buku Jalanan Mansurah⁷ translate the books from the respective countries into Malay languages. This will prove to be a good initiative as well.

Are there specific rules that every chapter has to follow in order to maintain its status?

We do not have any specific rules for each chapter, though we have produced a manual on how to set up your own Buku Jalanan. It is merely a checklist on certain aspects you should maintain and emphasizes our principle of "B.A.C.A.: Books. Arts. Culture. Activism." *Baca* literally means 'read' in Malay, and this is how we develop our activities.

It is very flexible, such that people with books can actually organize their own Buku Jalanan. The act of sharing and encouraging mutual belief and solidarity are what make all the difference in how we organize Buku Jalanan.

Encouraging the public to set up their own Buku Jalanan, or to take part in the process of organizing it, stems from the belief that nobody owns public space, clearly it belongs to everyone and yet to nobody in particular. In terms of the book collection, for now most of the books come from local contributions, and we also work closely with various groups. We hold bi-monthly discussions and sharing sessions. For us in Buku Jalanan Shah Alam, we utilize the park, which has a very strategic location in front of the playgrounds. So there are also a lot of children coming over to do *conteng-conteng*—scribbling and painting together with us. From there, we document the artwork done by them and turn it into some sort of guerrilla public art gallery to enhance the ambiance of the surroundings.

Usually, the turn out for each event is around 20-30 people, not including those who come and go along the way. The way we keep track of attendance is through our book-borrowing list, because most of them come for the books and discussion. Basically, we are very interdependent in terms of organizing, since we believe in the most organic and sporadic forms of organization, which allow it to be adapted and open-sourced in different dynamics and contexts.

One thing is that it is very clear that we do not advocate any selling of books, and we are very fond of the idea of 'copyleft', especially for books which are out of print and hard to find. We believe that knowledge should not be commodified, and sharing sessions should be democratic. Having said that, we are also aware that some chapters of Buku Jalanan do sell books and zines, but we completely



Installation preparation during second year anniversary of Buku Jalanan, 2012



Visitors during Buku Jalanan's Conteng-Conteng session, 2011

understand, especially if they are outside of Kuala Lumpur where it may be quite hard to obtain books, or if selling helps to sustain their activities in the long run.

It is our belief that Buku Jalanan should be an open platform to advocate cultural change and exchange. The 'conscientization' as put forward by Paulo Freire is something that we hold dear to allow critical reflection to take place in both our reality and desire.⁸

Is Buku Jalanan goal-oriented?

We do have an open-ended goal, but it is always based on the different interpretations of the active members in Buku Jalanan. The aspirations and the goals might be different, but always with the focus to agitate different forms of cultural output, from discussion groups and making songs to writing articles and getting involved with community art projects.

Besides that, we do charter our own long term planning every five years, and this year is our fifth year. The dynamics of the group are changing but it can be stated positively that we have achieved and learned new things along the way, which is the most important thing as a collective.

The five-year plan is a very good measure for an organization—seen everywhere from the anarchist-leaning activist group Autonomous 8 in Hong Kong to the Communist Party of China!⁹ I am impressed that you all had the foresight to consider this manner of flexible institutionalizing so early on. And how does it work? Does it mean this year you will have to draft a whole new charter, and do you expect that it will change very much from the previous plan?

In a way, yes. It is not really a charter but a retrospective and reflection of what we are doing, from our collective and individual experiences. It involves everyone who is active in coordinating Buku Jalanan; we are going to brainstorm on how to make it to the next level.

For now, we are very much in the process of reflection, especially concerning our own practices and approaches. Buku Jalanan, from my own understanding, is merely a tactic. For it to be successful, we must develop as a tactical-based collective toward some sort of diverse front, to allow for broader collaborations and initiatives to take place.

The dynamics are changing, and of course will continue to change. To otherwise be in a state of stagnation is suicidal. There must be continuous dialectical processes within the group to enhance the best ways possible for experimenting with space. We never know what the outcomes from the process will be.

I like this idea very much, that you do not fix the collective in terms of a solid form, but refer to it as a tactic. It really turns the act of reading into something more embodied, with the power to activate subjects rather than rest as mere objects of consumption. There has never been a time when we had so much information readily



Compilation of artworks during Conteng-Conteng session at fourth year anniversary of Buku Jalanan, 2014

available at our fingertips—to read, to watch, to hear—but when I ride the metro, it only depresses me to see the rows of passive robots scanning information via mobile phones. Of course engagement may also occur, but very often the taking in of media is left at the level of consumption. Lately, I have also been dwelling upon the possibilities for the act of reading to become embodied, towards a subjective empowerment. Your words and Buku Jalanan's ideas create a lot of resonance, but we have yet to answer the question of how organized reading could go beyond consumption towards that form of liberation of which you speak.

Yes, reading levels have increased, but we end up merely being consumers and worse, addicted to various confluences of information. For me, the answer of how organized reading could go beyond consumption lies in the word 'organized'. Organizing is something that we do not see much of, especially in Malaysia. It is always within the confined spaces of party politics or NGOs that society is organized for us, and thus we feel a genuine, grassroots popular initiative must take place. The act of reading has always been seen from the individual perspective; it is very personal. For us, the personal is politics; the way we perceive our reading materials, or even why we choose certain materials to share with the public, is political.

The unfortunate and very difficult predicament that independent practitioners find themselves in during our time of late-capitalism, however, is one in which everything can be appropriated and capitalized upon, even self-organization. Isn't that what the DIY ethos is all about? Grassroots has come to mean for many people making your own start-up. Talking about the relation between activity and space, how do artists and other cultural workers not simply end up being gentrifiers?

The question of artists, or in our case, the cultural workers, ending up as gentrifiers is a non-question since we start our initiative from the act of reading, which can be deemed as a very passive and neutral act. The question of gentrification would only exist when those who come are isolated from what we are doing. Maybe the word gentrifiers should be changed to 'agitators', since that is what we are actually doing—to continually agitate the public by our presence in these spaces. We are aware of its potential.

In this regard, I am very much influenced by Louis Althusser and his theory of the apparatus,¹⁰ especially within cinema, where the whole industry is very much interrelated, from the producers (filmmakers, film producers, cinematographers, etc.) to the masses. What we are doing here is exactly the same, breaking and dissecting the chains between cultural producers and the masses. By taking action directly in public spaces, maybe and hopefully we can have the negotiating power to influence and work towards liberating the whole apparatus of a systemic industry.

Can you give a specific example of how you felt that Buku Jalanan's activities were left at mere consumerism or addiction to information? What did you do to try to go beyond or resist that?

It can be as simple as people sharing and retweeting on social media without going deeper into what is happening. I guess it is a global thing—information or news is something that we consume from time to time, for people to forget, so that we can produce more and, of course, consume more.

The idea for Buku Jalanan to go beyond this is to ensure that we are organizing something that will not be detached from the interest of the masses—it sounds populist, but in an era of viral information, popular initiatives must be a double-edged sword. Maybe it would not work in the short-term, but if we stay long enough to be a part of the process and rooted in the community, then only will cultural formation take place.

What is community to you personally?

As we are organizing in public spaces, our sense and idea of community is always 'in-between' and nomadic. For example, those who actually participated in a previous Buku Jalanan might not be involved for the next one, and this allows us to be experimental in our approach.

This is because the time of interaction with different individual participants in Buku Jalanan will produce different spaces of contact, especially in terms of contributing to the development of Buku Jalanan. For example, during our meetings, we do have different settings for discussion and sharing sessions - some in which open topics are encouraged and some others which are topic-based, in which we usually collaborate with different collectives and individuals who are keen to share.

Buku Jalanan advocates the idea of community space, and it is our concern to agitate the public space from time to time to reclaim its functionality. The public space, which we idealize, corresponds to the idea of community that we believe in and aspire to: egalitarian and critical.

In the last years, there has been a huge shift and emphasis placed upon local context and rootedness, especially with regard to community-related and activist projects. This is something you see quite often in Hong Kong, where with an easy enemy such as



Interactive sculpture during third year anniversary of Buku Jalanan, 2013



Banner displayed during the Buku Jalanan session, 2014

'the Mainland', I sense that people feel the urgency to over-assert some kind of separate local identity, sometimes to the point of xenophobia and neo-fascism, unfortunately.

So when you talk about nomadism in the context of community building, I find it a very stimulating juxtaposition because it seems to differ from the idea of fixed, long-term identities that try to utilize historical fundamentalisms. How do you balance a certain kind of 'in-between'-ness and fluidity of identity with activist causes, which very often need to be simple, direct and concrete?

Of course, activist causes are always perceived to be simple, direct and concrete in dimension, and that is exactly what Buku Jalanan in practice is. We are only in our fifth year and the question of cultural formation is very much out of our reach since it must be done with continuous analysis to see how it unfolds.

Cultural formation is a space of interaction and intervention, and that is how we are advocating the idea of opening up space, by ensuring everyone has their own active role in 'in-between' space.

I think I remember you telling me before that the group has changed a lot over time, or stagnated in periods because of the lack of structure or motivation from the protagonists. How does the group persist then, despite that?

Yes, the changing dynamics in groups can sometimes be 'fatal', especially if we do not anticipate any changes to it. The *raison d'être* for Buku Jalanan is crystal clear: to go against the bureaucratic structure of knowledge production and allow the democratization of it to take place within the community.

Having said that, as a group, the only way forward is to continually engage the public through any cultural means necessary. It is very clear that from the start we have been made up of different individuals with autonomous decisions made collectively. From here, Buku Jalanan will serve as an open platform, and the most important thing to make it persevere is by working together, to make it open-source, for people to replicate the idea and to start working together in their own community; to rethink the idea of community as a whole.

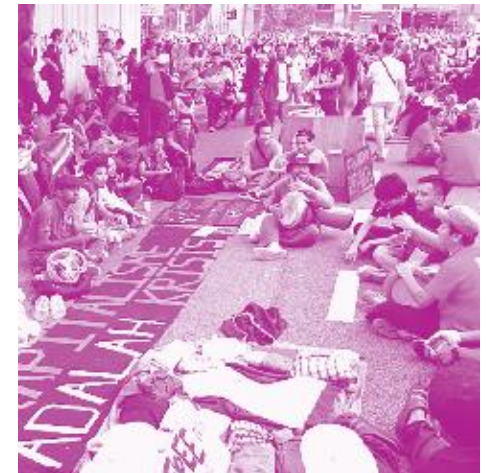


Preparation for
Padang Jawa Street
Arts Festival, Shah
Alam, 2013



Shows during
Padang Jawa Street
Arts Festival, Shah
Alam, 2013

Peace camp during
May Day rally, 2014



1 [facebook.com/buku-jalanan/](https://www.facebook.com/buku-jalanan/) and [timeout.com/kuala-lumpur/books-and-poetry/buku-jalanan-titi](https://www.timeout.com/kuala-lumpur/books-and-poetry/buku-jalanan-titi) (accessed Aug 31, 2016); [facebook.com/literacitykl/](https://www.facebook.com/literacitykl/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 Butler, Judith. "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*. eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en (September 2011) (accessed Aug 31, 2016).

3 Zinn, Howard. *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press) 1994.

4 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 1958.

5 [facebook.com/buku-jalananbeijing](https://www.facebook.com/buku-jalananbeijing) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 buku.jalanan.jerman.blogspot.my/?m=1 (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

7 [facebook.com/BukuJalananMansurah](https://www.facebook.com/BukuJalananMansurah) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

8 Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd) 1996

9 The Five-Year Plans of the Communist Party of China are a series of social and economic development initiatives that map "strategies for economic development, setting growth targets and launching reforms" within five-year periods. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five-year_plans_of_China (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

Autonomous 8, a coalition of activists greatly involved in the social movements of Hong Kong, also reorganises its charter every five years. To read the current charter and learn more about Autonomous

8, please see: smrc8a.org/about-us/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

10 Ferreter, Luke. *Louis Althusser* (Routledge Critical Thinkers). (New York: Routledge) 2006.

Image Copyrights:
Buku Jalanan (50, 53, 54, 55, 57, 59)
Padang Jawa Street Arts Festival (58, 59 top)

QUESTIONS

Lee Chun Fung

OUT OF THE

in conversation with

DEMONSTRATION

Elaine W. Ho

AREA

Lee Chun Fung (b. 1984) graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Fine Arts Department in 2007. His artistic interests include: Art activism, urban space, autonomous self-organized practice, and independent publishing. His practices cover different media and disciplines, ranging from art action, video, photography, zine-publishing, workshop, writing, curating and etc. He is the co-founder of the community/art space Woofertan.¹

Few Few Prize, Many
Many Praise, 2009, HK



Lee Chun Fung is an artist and curator from Hong Kong, best known for his work with Woofertan², the artist-run community art space active in the Yaumatei area of Kowloon from 2009-2015. As a young practitioner whose art school days coincided with what critic Jaspar LAU Kin Wah describes as the “late arrival of ‘the real 1997’”³ and growing politicisation of art and artists in the early 2000s, Lee has grown to become a veteran of the Hong Kong aesthetics of protest. He is the only original member of Woofertan to staunchly stay with the project, from the time of its initial stewardship as recipient of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council’s (ADC) Shanghai Street Art Space commission all the way until the lamentable closing of its doors after a two-year controversy and stalemate. The following interview is an insight into Lee’s reflections on the practice of Woofertan and socially engaged art practice in the context of Hong Kong.

CONTEXT, LOCALITY, CRITICALITY

Elaine W. Ho: During the *TransActions in the Field* master class, a great deal of discussion was placed upon context-specificity, which at times makes the possibility for learning and exchange difficult when we are all working in extremely different situations with diverse resources, socio-political backgrounds and intentions. While terms such as site-specific, context-specific or site-conditioned have been often used in the art world to describe varying degrees of relations between time-space and the artwork, within the discussion of socially engaged practice, the consideration of these terms perhaps needs to be refined further. I think a lot about the place-making nature of people, events and situations themselves, which then creates an ongoing dialogue between time and space.

Lee Chun Fung: Actually I don’t really understand the differences between context-specific, site-specific or site-conditioned, but context and site are very often considered together; they have an interactive relationship. Generally, my practice begins from the concept and topic. How can meaning be established between people, groups and society at large via the dialogical capacity of art, and can this meaning also trigger action? Very often, context and site are misplaced targets; the ideas and relations between people take the real leading role.

To speak of a practice exactly triggered towards action needs its own vocabularies and categorization to understand it more fully. Because you address work, and a way of working inherently tied to human relations, perhaps there is no way to compare the final ‘piece’ or resulting outcome of much context-specific and site-specific art. Considering relations is a constant feedback and feed forward dialogue of a never-ending, processual nature.

But looking at the more recent work you’ve done this year in Zürich, were there any elements directly taken from your practice in Hong Kong that could be transferred to the new context?

Zürich this time was not really a residency or period for my own creative work. I was working together with friends there to develop a trans-regional education programme. At Woofertan, many of our ideas and activities began out of impromptu talks between members of the community or friends. The accumulated rhythm of these kinds of ‘jam sessions’ is very important.



The kind of coming-and-going practice of entering a new environment is different from my work at WoofertTen. It takes time to go more deeply into a place, and it is not easy to develop closer interactions with others. So in cases like these, I rather take the position of the observer or share perspectives from my own background. There was one time when we visited an elderly woman in Tokyo and listened to her story of protesting the highway to be built in her community. For several consecutive years, she went every morning to the station to hold up her sign in protest, but even then many of the city residents were unaware of the situation. So I organized the details of the story together, and by means of several artistic interventions and workshops hosted by 3331 Arts Chiyoda was able to connect the protest, an exhibition space and several different people together.⁴ However, what I want to stress is that while these kinds of externally imported practices have a certain significance, my focus is still upon the rooted locality of Hong Kong.

Is it possible to have the same measure of criticality when working in an unfamiliar environment? What is the relationship for you between criticality and locality?

I think criticality is universal and not something limited to those from certain backgrounds. Self-criticality is an evaluation of the degree of sincerity between concept and praxis, and criticality towards the other points out the orientation and meaning of one's action, revealing the complicated power relations and structures of reality.

As for localness, I think of it as the identity and relations created by the 'soil', which has nourished your development, including the political soil, economic soil and the socio-cultural soil. It is also a commitment. For example, I grew up in Hong Kong in the 80s and 90s, and all of the major events, urban development, pop culture, education system, and resistance movements etc., of those before me, make up who I am today. This is reflected in my thinking and action, like the accumulation of history. I create a promise with these layers of history in order to protect that which I value. Similar to receiving a gift, the soil becomes my property, but also something I am indebted to, and for this I am thankful; there is a need to acknowledge it.

Another thing to take note of is that 'localness' takes on distinct meanings in different contexts. For example, the Chinese translation of 'local' has different versions: 本土 *bun tou* (local referencing an ideology?), 在地 *zoi dei* (referencing

a mode of action?), 本地 *bun dei* (referencing place/space?), 地道 *dei dou* (referencing common or folk culture?), etc. To use these concepts without a clear grasp of which particularity is being referenced can often lead to serious misunderstandings.

PO, LAAP: COMMUNITY X ART X ACTIVISM

From what I understand of WoofertTen's practice, media and communication were very crucial aspects of the project. But looking at it from another angle, I sometimes sensed a kind of conflict between the internal organisation of the group and its external publicity or representation. Where does community stand within this conflict?

In the context of neoliberalism, 'community' in Hong Kong could be understood on one hand by the word '破 *po*' (to destroy), and on the other as '立 *laap*' (to establish). At WoofertTen, a majority of the artists' practices tended towards 'po'. Rather than direct creation or building up, we smash down and critique issues relating to the current situation as a way of pointing out new possibilities. As a result, in our context of *po* it becomes rather difficult to grow the process of publicising and communication. In the long-term, it is a reason for internal conflicts and the inability to sustain our development. Community cannot wallow at the levels of posturing, activity or critique; it must also include the establishing of a 'common' and continuous communication. But many community art projects in Hong Kong suffer various constraints, and it is difficult to push towards that point.

If the attitude tends closer towards destruction, can it still be called 'community'?

I think that to destroy and to build up, unmaking and making, are parts of the process of establishing and constructing. The reality of critique or destruction is one phase, and the organisation of smashed fragments to re-establish something new is another. They supplement and complement one another. But within the situation of Hong Kong, usually too much emphasis is placed upon thorough destruction, with too little know-how to positively ask, "What kind of life can we create?" Actually, the reason is probably that here you have little possibility to take hold of the power necessary to create change. On the contrary, a so-called freedom of speech means that action at the level of posturing will always manage to be seen. Does the ability to continue only point out our greater powerlessness or

our continued hope? You could say hope and despair are both fabricated, but at least it is through hope that we go towards a future.

Why is this label of 'community art' so important for describing WooferTen? Are there better terms to describe you and how you perceive community? If we take two projects from WooferTen as examples in order to make a comparison, like *Few Few Prize*, *Many Many Praise* from the early period, and one of the last projects, *Pitt Street Riot: Rolling Theatre of Tiananmen Massacre*, how did these two projects conceive of community differently?

During the early period of WooferTen's practice, 'community' corresponded to those quickly disappearing and ruptured social relations. But as those social problems were addressed, the responsibility shifted toward ideas being practiced in real life. Those later projects all hoped for longer-term development.

Few Few Prize, *Many Many Praise* and the *Pitt Street Riot* projects have five years' distance between them. The concept behind *Few Few Prize* was quite flashy, but the actual publicly participatory elements were rather cheap. Artists went out to interview neighbours, look for interesting bits, later made trophies, and then the neighbours became the happy recipients. This project was of course much more down-to-earth than those public sculptures that appear to drop down from the sky into a community, and it is also a bit more inspiring than "let's paint murals together with the neighbours." But did we really create something deep within the community? Probably it was only just stirring things up, and maybe it was somewhat inspiring, but the project only lasted one to two months. What was interesting was that because of that project, we were able to engage in longer-term relationships with the neighbours, like for example with one neighbour who

came back three years later with her trophy asking for it to be repaired. That meant that trophy was really quite important to her. But the key point is, that also could only happen because we were continuously active.

Pitt Street Riot was actually not so different, but it could only happen with entering more deeply into the context. Actually, we had been investigating this historical incident for many years,⁶ so once the project kicked off we were able to refer to many people and research materials. Considering

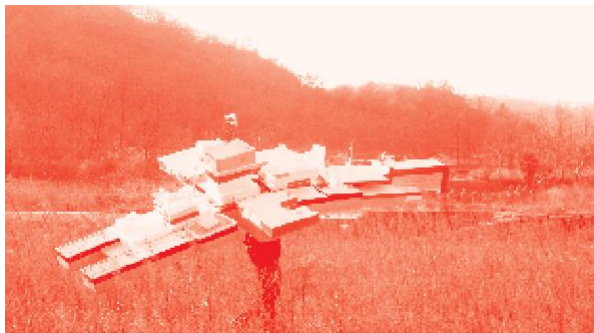
the factors of time and space, the significance and spirit of this project are very different from *Few Few Prize*, *Many Many Praise*. For example, on the day of the performance many good friends from the Yaumatei area came to participate, and the whole event was like an explosive climax; there were many lengthy discussions afterwards. Not long after the performance, there was an action to raise funds against the northeastern New Territories development plan, and a few months later the Umbrella Movement began. All of these are the echoes of spontaneous resistance from the people. The group organization of *Pitt Street Riot* actually brought the greatest number of possibilities to the project, because after entering the community to look for answers, together we were able to gain a picture of how, back in 1989, the Yaumatei community was able to support the student movement. For those of us of this generation, not present at the scene in '89, we were able to make a connection to this history. June 7th is precisely an event that goes beyond that time-space; it is our connection to the past via this place today. As for the community, at least it's possible to say this event could resuscitate a vanished history to become an 'event' after all. In one instance, during our street play we re-enacted the action of a neighbour who had been there that year and hung banners at a nearby middle school. Seeing this, he also began to ask himself, "This incident has been discarded for so many years... what can we still do today?"

If you ask me to compare the two projects, I would actually say both were one-time experiments, unable to communicate very deeply, and unable to reach a more in-depth ideological reflection. They stress a form of questioning and inquiry, not a long-term thinking about building-up and organizing.

What kind of relations have these projects created? What kinds of connections, futures or possible movements? That is what is really important. Allowing for the accumulation of time, for an intertwining, can lead us towards real relations of resistance, and only then can the foundations be laid for social change. Otherwise it's only populism and emotional catharsis. This is the general meaning of "Community x Art x Activism".

Because the term 'community art' is often referred to, even in the Hong Kong context, in English, it is easy to make the connection towards its genealogy in the west, like its use by state-supported initiatives in the United Kingdom from the 1960s. Seeing that WooferTen also stems from a government initiative, do you think community arts in Hong Kong have extracted certain elements from this history of western social practice? Where do they depart from western practices to become something specific to the Hong Kong context?

From the Chinese to the Japanese speaking worlds, the translation of the word 'community' itself varies based upon different local cultural and political contexts. For example, the word '街坊 *kaifong*' in Cantonese is relatively closer to 'community' in English than the word '社區 *se keoi*' (more like district or sub-division). If you look at it from the angle of intimacy between people, these words are created from particular historical, temporal and spatial, political, economic and cultural contexts (like how residents self-organized a "kaifong mutual welfare association" under colonial rule). '街坊 *kaifong*' does not necessarily have the same associations and connotations in Taiwan and mainland China. Therefore, 'community art' becomes a complex discussion, and different cultural contexts necessarily explain 'community art' in varying ways. Without starting from the



Battle of Tamagawa
Josui, 2011, Tokyo

cultural context, grounding why people go and do something, genuine dialogue and exchange is almost impossible.

To put it simply, no matter whether in Hong Kong or any other place, we must ask upon what relations do the practice of 'community art' reflect? What values does it propose? What problems does it reflect in that society? What temporality and spatiality does it correspond to? What are its methods, its content? Who are its targets? What ethics are embedded? These are the questions to be answered when using this word, otherwise it is only a casually applied diversion in reaction, without any greater possibility for deeper development—only a consumption of the radicality of this concept. As for strategies adopted from the west, I think it is mainly an issue of the discrepancies of 'modernity'. Some things that have been experienced in 'the west' and brought to a different context will naturally diverge and have their own specific development. But to stress again, it should not be a kind of mere 'cultural transplantation', and it is very necessary to tie in to a contextual background in order to answer those questions.⁶

As *TransActions in the Field* participating artist, Zulu Kageyama, also brought up during the master class, this word has indeed created many misunderstandings in the Asian context. I would like to hear you explain a bit further about the meaning of 'community' in the context of the art and activist spheres in Hong Kong particularly, including how you would answer those challengingly posed questions above. Can you answer them with respect to your own practice?

It is exactly when we discuss 'community' within the context of Hong Kong that we can be more precise about what is meant, but the questions above are already answers, and they are what give meaning to community. Does the *Pitt Street Riot* project correspond to the questions of who controls the voice of history? If history is in the hands of individuals, are the methods and hopes underpinning it a rhizomatic, decentralising platform for action? What are the reasons this can or cannot be realised? If we think that Hong Kong's manner of grieving June 7th is too simplified, would a more diverse and spontaneous form of civic discussion be feasible? Between the lines of these questions is the hint of a commonality or individuality amidst authority (the multitude?). How do we resist the oppression of the system and conceptually link together? Would that be a possibility for saving ourselves?

TIME, ETHICS, 'THE DEMONSTRATION AREA'

I heard before that criticism towards the ADC's decision to end support for Woofertan was premised on the question of time: "How can you place a time limit on community?" How do you see this issue?

It is exactly that the ADC sees the Shanghai Street Art Space as temporary, so the longer Woofertan stayed there, the greater the pressure for us to leave. This is actually how the government understands the resources of these spaces and programmes as their 'demonstration area'. They control 99% of the resources anyway, and the invitations are in their hands. The significance of Woofertan lies in whether or not it was able, despite these kinds of rules and limitations, to break through this 'demonstration area' to some degree. What relations and imaginaries of resistance could be created outside of their frameworks for production,



Woofertan, 2015, HK

and what are the knowledge and ethics of them? How to continue? At that moment and place of existing as WooferTen at the Shanghai Street Art Space, these were the main questions on which to reflect.

If that is the case, I think to some extent perhaps you were always clear that what WooferTen was doing did not necessarily fall under the label of community art, and actually the urgency of action and response follows what you mentioned previously concerning criticality. If the space was merely a 'demonstration area', what kind of power does your criticality have? Looking back, do you think the practice of

WooferTen was indeed able to break through the 'demonstration area'? And yes, what were the relations and imaginaries of resistance created outside of their frameworks for production? To ask you that question exactly, what were the knowledge and ethics of the work?

It all refers back to the problem of the vagueness of the concept of community art. Without referring to a particular context in reality, it is harder to focus. Are we saying we want to create community? To service the community? Or to solve some problems within the community? Can art solve problems? If what it resolves are not real problems, then what are they? I think what I actually wanted to address with the practice of WooferTen was in between 'community art' addressing issues of the community and the community as a target of 'community art'. The former is like many of the art projects that come from the system—relatively focused upon the ego of the artist and actually grounded by the elite. The latter is like many of those neighbourhood beautification art projects. Their protagonists emphasize participation itself, and aesthetics and criticality play relatively small roles. Even so, whether or not there is a kind of platform for equal dialogue, is there a place for each one's ego?

Simply put, what I want to do is rebuild 'heterogeneous relations', and the aesthetics within these relations can spur on and inspire dialogue and creation. Under neoliberalism, can the role of artists come down from that of the elite and privileged classes in order to organise and revolt, to become a role of positioning? I don't dare to say clearly going forward one step at a time will bring about revolution, but at least it will be the right direction, and we will be able to create a social space in which we can live sincerely. Maybe our generation will not bring us to the point where each person can live with dignity and freedom in equality, but there is still hope for the future.

Are we able to break through the 'demonstration area'? If the knowledge and relations accumulated by our actions can positively enter the situation, I think our resistance will already be stronger than simply remaining inside the demonstration area. There are reasons for artists to choose to remain inside feeling self-satisfied; the demonstration area is safe. But this zone cannot directly lead to action, because it is also programmed by the system. It is only in the moment when you actively cross its rails or border tapes that you really strike at the nerve of the system, and only then can it be called a real movement. Isn't that the reason for the demonstration in the first place? Ask yourself the ethics embedded within this: is there a responsibility to take that which has been accumulated from within the demonstration area to the next level? Or do we remain forever within the demonstration area attracting people's favour and support with Facebook 'likes'? Artists can grasp cultural resources and the right



Fools of the World United,
2015, HK.

to speak more easily than the weakest or lowest levels of society. Therefore, I think that responsibility exists, and we cannot say each person just does their own thing, doing what they're good at without discussing the ethics of it. If we did that, then it would be too easy for artists to gain from those oppressed and in the end, play a part in the machines of oppression.

CONTINUITY, GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING, REAL RESISTANCE

Looking back at WooferTen's work, which project do you think is most worthwhile to continue in the future? What is the most important lesson for you personally as an artist?

Basically I believe that there is a great deal worth criticising throughout the process to the present. The question of what the team and the community reflect upon is more important than which project will continue. Whichever plan should continue is a technical question. To speak about continuing without having addressed the discussion of values would be to fall into another repetitive cycle, and it will be impossible to ever break through toward transformation of the social structure. In the end everyone only feels good and warm, and that is not something artists need to deal with.

Well said. I also think that the practice of HomeShop fell into the trap of hiding criticality behind fun and warm feelings, and too many people never saw beyond that. This veiled way of working is of course also due to the realities of the mainland context,

but outside of technique, you must have learned or felt inspired by something from the experience over the years, no? Can you give an example? If we are to not linger at the level of 'feeling good', what have we changed after feeling critical or feeling bad? Depression is also a symptom of our individualisation under neoliberalism! So how do we turn individual subjectivities, both the elated and the despondent, into collective action?

Like what was mentioned before, what have these practices actually established? What have they resisted? You must, very clearly, ask yourself these questions, otherwise movements will ultimately have no solid meaning. To build and to resist, you must point out the structure, not simply the appearance of problems. If you make a rooftop farm and propose a type of green living, but in the meanwhile many urban spaces that could be self-organized for greening and planted upon are regulated, farms are repossessed and everywhere is gentrified and developed, how can you, with your bit of luck, continue to ignore the situation and keep watering the plants and flowers on your tiny rooftop? Can you call it the best of your ability? Is there a need to point out more radical possibilities? Are you willing to put forth more of a stand, or remain in a comfort zone? That is the question. To many of my friends who have rooftop gardens, please understand that these questions are not personally directed; what I want to emphasize is an ethical responsibility over 'each does his own'. People like to do as they please, but who isn't thirsty after eating salted fish? Things shouldn't be like this, and it is necessary to overcome this kind of neoliberal logic, to interrogate the integrity of our ethics of responsibility. We must realise that there are some things that cannot be easily done or resolved alone. The premise of "Each person does their bit!" is personally directed, and there is a communitarian and altruist slant to feel good that you can play your little part without the ideas really changing. It's not so simply "Each person does their bit!"

One other point: where do resources come from? What is the significance of autonomy? What is the relationship between resources and that which you fight against? Some people think that going inside the system to take resources is one kind of strategy, but how far does the strategy then drift from intention? Where is the limit? As a basic, you shouldn't take from those whom you fight against. If you oppose redevelopment together in the neighbourhood, then take funds from the Urban Renewal Authority in order to make community projects, are you not selling out, for very cheap, the very image of grassroots radicality in which you try to operate? Is the goal of taking resources from the system, in hopes for reaching more people, to mobilise a stronger resistance? Or have you only manufactured another kind of populism? If there is no in-depth dialogue, is it not merely a fast-paced consumption of the idea of resistance or a kind of replication by the system? In the long term, are you able to help everyone to persist in revolt?

I've seen many cases in which unrealistic results are homogenised by the majority. So it is still relatively important to have a solid concept before action. If the foundation is not even steady, who would assure positive change before even getting to the point of change? Most people are interested in action, experimentation and self-practice without asking about the starting points of the situation, and this can never lead to real resistance.



Pitt Street Riot, 2014, HK

1 leechunfung.blogspot.de/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and curatorsintl.org/collaborators/lee_chun_fung (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 wooferten.blogspot.de/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 LAU Kin Wah, Jaspar. "Politics of a Bio: Hong Kong Art from Dissemination to Usage". *HongKong Eye: Contemporary Hong Kong Art* (Milan: Skira Editore SP A) 2012.

4 For more information about 3331 Arts Chiyoda, please visit: 3331.jp (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 On the 7th of June in 1989, just a few days after the tumultuous events at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, a riot spontaneously erupted from Pitt Street in Yaumatei. Over 7,000 protesters became involved and several injured or arrested, resulting in the cancellation of a planned public strike

in support of the students in Beijing. Woofert's *Pitt Street Riot* project encompassed a street theatre performance based upon oral histories collected from the Yaumatei neighbourhood. The video documentation of this re-enactment, with additional documents and texts, were compiled in 2014 for a publication of the same name. pittstreetriot.blogspot.com (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 Lee collaborated with FOA-FLUX in 2015, a researcher group based in Zurich, for the idea of launching an interregional education programme. foa-flux.net/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

Image Copyrights: Lee Chun Fung (60, 62–64, 69, 71) Pak Chai (67)

ADDING

Yeoh Lian Heng

LETTERS TO OUR

in conversation with

TRANSACTIONS

Elaine W. Ho

Malaysian butoh dancer
performing during the
Jalan Sultan Project, 2010

Yeoh Lian Heng was born in 1978. In 2004 he founded the art space and collective Lostgen's Contemporary Art Space with artist peers, pursuing eclectic expression in the exploration of art's role in society. In his projects, Yeoh utilizes art towards increasing awareness and understanding of various social issues such as the loss of cultural heritage through Pudu and Petaling Street community art projects.



As I talk to Yeoh Lian Heng via an online video chat one evening, he is soft-spoken and modest, as he has been at each of our encounters. His words come out in a fast flurry, giving me the impression that there is much more activity running in his head than can be expressed in the space of his sentences. The self-described combination of “quietness and edginess”¹ of Lostgen's Contemporary Art Space (of which he is one of the co-founders) seems to describe him as well. Despite the incredible amount of pressure and sedimentation that one could imagine from an art space that has been operating for 12 years, Yeoh is self-critical and reflective in a manner that reveals a genuineness to the ‘quiet edge’ of a work that he loves doing. In this conversation, we weave together a combination of looking back at the *TransActions in the Field* master class as an example of the dynamism of Yeoh's practice, juxtaposed with his rich experience as a Kuala Lumpur-based artist, curator and activist.

Elaine W. Ho: After the *TransActions in the Field (TATF)* master class ended, there were two concerns that continued to reverberate with me in the following weeks. For one, how to find a form of continuity to reflect and build upon all that we had experienced? And secondly, why was the programme abbreviated TATF and not TITF or TAITF? Well, *ha-ha*, okay perhaps the second one is not so important to discuss...

Yeoh Lian Heng: This was not a one-time activity. Many connections that emerged out of *TATF* have quietly unfolded, like the fact that participant Zikri Rahman visited others he met during *TATF* while travelling through Shanghai, Beijing and Taiwan. One of the main sites of the master class, *kampung Banda Dalam*, recently hosted *Teater Atas Pokok* (“Theatre in the Tree”) about historic preservation and included our visit to the *kampung* in their play. Two participants from *TATF*, Bhumini Dhanaketpisarn from Thailand and Paik Yin Lim from Malaysia, were invited to perform.

I remember also reading, not so long ago, about another event that took place in the *kampung*; wasn't there a mapping workshop?

Yes, it was led by visiting architecture scholar Huang Jiu-Mao and curator Sandy Hsiu-Chih Lo from Tamkang University in Taiwan. The exercises from this workshop have catalysed the realisation and publication of a *kampung Banda Dalam* art and culture map, now to be produced as a completely self-organised project by *kampung* residents. Actually, this was an idea that was first hatched during *TATF*. On the tenth day of the programme, some participants from our group visited the Madrasah Tarbiyah mosque and community centre, where a brainstorm meeting was held between myself, Alice Ko, Zikri Rahman, Chen Guan-Jhang and Soleh. The idea to create a map of the *kampung* had started here.

It's a great way to collate the subjectivities and sense of place of residents as well as introduce newcomers to the sites and culture of the village.

Yes, and while of course this map was impossible to materialize during the brief programme of *TATF*, I am happy that it has now become an autonomous initiative.

Most importantly, it is the kind of intervention that, like Indonesian artist and writer Moelyono Moel describes, finds “a sustainable configuration that guarantees the persistence of the work done”.² I've heard that the socially-engaged work of Moelyono has been a strong inspiration to the founders of Lostgen's.³



Save Jalan Sultan
(February 2013).
Malaysian dancers
Lee Swee Keong
and Jack Kek per-
forming during the
Save Jalan Sultan
Project

Like Moelyono, I think that art workers that pay attention to social issues must keep up the contact and exchange. This is included in his ideas of “sustainable configuration”. I understand that actually these kinds of relations and communication need a great deal of time and resources to be sustained. I believe—just like the design of the *TATF* logo—that at the same time that it appears that distinct atoms may be coming together, they are also loose and nebulously aligned. Different elements will collide, repel away from and/or merge with one another. These are all necessary parts of the process. I am very thankful to the Goethe-Institut in Malaysia for their support and for allowing these kinds of connections to have their start. Whatever happens later is up to us.

Funny, the fact that you bring up the design of the logo is actually related to what I mean about the *TATF* acronym! Forgive me for indulging in negligible details, but the point is that the arrangement of letters refers to these building blocks for what become words, sentences, novels and information—basically all that we can communicatively conceptualize in the spaces that exist between human beings. I refer to Roman alphabetic notation in this example, and in the case of the logo, the visualization of this idea takes the form of cellular-like shapes. The relations between these forms, between the words that are exchanged between us, can exactly be described as transactions in a field. If we imagine ourselves as units within these fields, then we are natural points of energy, reflecting off of one another, some gaining speed, others slowing down, but all in a constant motion that speaks of the kind of continuity that relays our activity in this world.

This juxtaposition somehow also encapsulates for me some of the multiplicities of your role as initiator and co-organizer of *TATF*. On one hand, you had clear responsibilities to be fulfilled, but there were also more loose and amorphous visions for what the workshop could become.

Among the projects I have done, *The TransActions in the Field* master class employed the greatest amount of resources, financially, materially and socially speaking. Even though I have organized bigger projects in the past, like the Pudu Community Art Project,⁴ which lasted around half a year and engaged more than 300 participants, gathering a group of artists, activists and curators with different backgrounds as we have for *TATF*, to discuss, work and live together, has been a new kind of methodology with enormous possibilities and risks. Actually, it’s exactly in the spirit of *Lostgens*’!

Can you tell me a bit more about the Pudu Community Art Project and how it compares to your experience and methodology working on *TATF*?

In 2010, *Lostgens*’ organized a community outreach project in the Pudu area of Kuala Lumpur. Pudu is one of the most significant historical places in the city, having witnessed the development of Kuala Lumpur from being a little trade settlement, serving a few surrounding mines, to being the prosperous capital city it is today. According to historians, the Pudu village has existed for 120 years and was mostly occupied by early Chinese settlers who were involved in the tin mining industry and other small-scale local trade. It was predominately a Chinese community from the start, and the area is largely populated by the Chinese community even today, with an increasing number of foreign workers.

Due to the rapid development of Kuala Lumpur, a few significant landmarks have been demolished, including five cinemas and the 117-year-old jail. They are part of the collective memory of locals who have lived or are still living in the Pudu area. This project was initiated as an attempt to rediscover the cultural value of Pudu via a series of community-based arts and culture programs that engaged the locals. The aim was to build the groundwork for social bonds with

the hopes of revitalizing the community. The project included oral history sharing, performances, workshops in schools, installations, a community newsletter, a Pudu history exhibition and a lantern-lit moon walk in the neighbourhood during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

The biggest difference between these two examples from my practice is that the Pudu Community Art project was curated by Lostgens' with a very clear working goal. Making an art project or festival creates the production base which defines the working method. On the other hand, *TATF* offered a framework, but the content within this structure was flexible, opening up many possibilities. Things could suddenly erupt (or at least there was the latent potential for eruption). When you put a group of people of varying backgrounds together for an extended period of time, there will of course be sparks, and this is exactly in line with the nature of contemporary art.

It's true, *TATF* was a first time experiment, and one of a manner and scale that has never been tried in Kuala Lumpur. But I also think this opening up of possibilities, and the uncertainties that accompany it, were balanced because of the trust and support for the people involved. This includes not only the long-time art workers deeply embedded in communities in Yokohama, Hong Kong and Sarawak, but also young initiatives from Penang, Taiwan and the Philippines. We have all been additionally supported because of the strong team behind Lostgens', and that is probably one of the most crucial foundations behind both of these examples.

So, going back to this idea of open-ended experimentation and surprise, the sparks and eruptions, there is this interesting contradiction that emerges: how does one go about organizing and structuring a field of openness and surprise? This is probably the most fundamental learning lesson for both the organizers of *TATF* and its participants, yet it is not so clear a package as to say, "We've learned this; our knowledge is recorded; here is our certificate." How, therefore, do we begin to reflect upon an experience such as *TATF*, and how shall we 'acronymize' in words and pages the kind of experiment it was, so that it not only opens, but spurs us further?

As art workers, or perhaps even more to the point, as members of society, I think there is a need for us to pay attention to social issues such as demolition and relocation; there is a need to be more sensitive to the changes going on in our local surroundings. Art can be used in so many instances. Besides being able to move the soul, art can also move us to action.

I see that today we are up against the enormous totality that is the capitalist system. It is not easy to find a way to respond to a profit-driven system, but art is one possibility.

I agree. Not to reduce everything to binaries, but this balance — between a totalizing, hegemonic structure and the flows that are able to leak through, create fissures and open up possibilities — is exactly what we are addressing. That brings us back to examining the master class as a framework for achieving *what we don't yet know*. You planned *TATF* together with Susanne Bosch and Soleh for nearly one year prior to the event, and I think it becomes the perfect case study for rethinking the practices that it seeks to address. Indeed, this opportunity to look back at *TATF* via discussions among us for this publication draws another common field and allows another kind of continuity to deepen and strengthen the "transactions".

Yes, we must try to forge links with other communities and mutually help one another. Part of the *TATF* activities took place in a Malay village, *Kampung Banda Dalam*, and this was possible because we had worked together with community leaders from the *kampung* in 2013 during the anti-MRT demonstrations.

From 2011 to 2013, I lived in an old district surrounding Petaling and Sultan Streets, also the area where Lostgens' is currently located. When faced with impending demolition and expulsion due to the building of a new rapid transit line, we brought art and culture, things foreign to the authorities, as our response. We planned many art activities in defence of the old neighbourhood: oral history storytelling, guided tours of the historic streets and the publication of a cultural map of the area. We celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival and Chinese New Year's all together, and we even made a "moving great wall" march to appeal for support. These art and culture practices affected the way that people viewed the issue, creating pressure on authorities and eventually leading to the preservation of most of the buildings in the area.

Coming together with residents of *Kampung Banda Dalam* at this time, we gained a mutual understanding that racial problems can be overcome despite the political problems, which increase racial tension in Malaysia. Art can be a very good bridge towards this.

I remember, during one of our previous talks, you mentioned that "Malaysia is a country which can refer to many". This multiplicity of culture and language ironically chimes in with the country's slogan "Malaysia, truly Asia." Being able to directly connect to Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China on varying levels, it is possible to see the advantages of working with you all, our Kuala Lumpur hosts. Malaysia provides a contextual foundation for each of the participants to reflect upon practices in their own country, to give a framework from which to establish a concentrated and dynamic dialogue. I think you tried to catalyse this by introducing some young local practitioners to the group with the presentation series "Malaysia as context: The role of participatory art/activism and collective action". Lee Cheah Ni, Alex Lee, Lim Paik Yin, Okui Lala, Zikri Rahman and Tey Beng Tze each spoke about their recent work.



Cikgu Ishak, the village's chief is accepting the wood printing artwork from Indonesian artist Duwadi and accompanied by Malaysian artist Zikri Rahman, *TATF*, *Kampung Banda Dalam*, November 2015



Malaysian artist Tay Beng Tze and Indonesian artist Djuwadi working with children of migrant background on wood carving in Kampung Banda Dalam, November 2015

But did you feel there were ample private conversations going on during the master class?

Well yes, unfortunately, this session was squeezed between a full day programmed with other talks and activities. The necessary directness of straightforward presentations (i.e. speaker plus PowerPoint-type visualisation) did not bleed over into the also necessary informality of relaxed conversation in response to these presentations. It is obvious that you place a high degree of significance upon the unplanned as part of the planned. Again, it is a question of designing a platform in which the unexpected can occur. The undocumented casualness of affective conversations between two or three people are perhaps the place where our “transactions” are amplified. While their ephemeral nature makes it more difficult to position points of success or concrete output, it may be possible to say that it is actually in those interstices, between scheduled activity, where we can push further into understanding community and making active “feedback-feedforward” loops towards new action.

We must consider both, just as we must consider those who are outside of the system and yet still controlled by the system. There is a constant need to adjust and reorganise, as we experienced multiple times during *TATF*, for example during the intervention initiated by Ichimura Misako during the “Open Space” session.⁵

With *Lostgens*’, ideally we would have a storefront space similarly situated as *WooferTen* in Hong Kong or *Art Lab OVA* in Yokohama, but because we are independently funded, we aren’t able to afford rent for a more expensive street-level space. There’s no elevator in the building, so many old people in the community aren’t able to come up and visit the space. Because of this, we’ve had to adjust our strategy and position ourselves more as a contemporary art space. It is definitely a challenge, and 70% of our time and resources go towards the contemporary art programming, with the other 30% going towards continuing our efforts in the community. Based upon our past experience, we’ve come to understand that community-engaged practices need a great deal of knowledge and human resources, so recently we’ve also started to host a philosophy course as a way to build upon our thinking and activate greater potential.

What else have you been working on more recently?

I am currently working as an independent curator to co-curate a public art programme sponsored by a state enterprise (GLC), so it’s completely separate from my work with *Lostgens*’. Of course it’s a completely different way of working than the more grassroots projects, and taking the project was something that I debated upon for some time. Is it appropriate for me to do it, and what is the meaning of it?

But as a part of the art circle here, and seeing that this is the largest public art project to ever be hosted in our country, I began to think that I should work further to develop art in the capacity that I can. Whether or not this project succeeds, it will have a large impact upon the way mass society, the government, and businesses view art in public space. At the same time, I have been thinking about what the possibilities for art can be beyond resistance —what about strengthening dialogue?

Resistance and dialogue are not necessarily contradictory; they are always in process together. It’s something I also talked about with Lee Chun Fung from Hong Kong, and he mentions it in relation to the concepts of the characters 破 *po* and 立 *laap* in Chinese.⁶

Of course, I still stand by the directly and indirectly critical capacities of art.

Moelyono brings it together very well when he describes “a form of person-to-person relationship” that “enables us to adopt a critical perspective” such that “everyone is a creator of culture”.⁷ There are beautiful possibilities built into this kind of transaction between the deconstruction of critique and the building of culture. So let us continue adding letters and subtracting words to this dialogue! I joke about *TATF*, *TAITF* or *TITF*, but they are all equations that do not necessarily add up. But we can continue to play with the variables.

1 Yeoh Lian Heng is one of the co-founders of *Lostgens*’ Contemporary Art Space in Kuala Lumpur, described on their website as, “established in early 2004 by a group of artists. Though situated in the bustling capital city, *Lostgens*’ has managed to take on a certain quietness and edginess that comes from being off the beaten track. This self-managed experimental space aims to encourage originality, creativity, individuality, as well as to promote contemporary arts. It provides an alternative space for budding innovative exhibitions and performances. *Lostgens*’ has entered a next phase

of unique development and operation. What started as a small private group has now moved out into the public, *Lostgens*’ aims to weave itself into the multicultural artistic atmosphere. More than just a place that brings together artists, it also provides a platform for a dynamic growth of multi-layered artistic culture.” lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 Juliastuti, Nuraini. “Moelyono and the Endurance of Arts for all Society”. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 13 (Spring/Summer 2006) pp. 3-7.

3 As mentioned by Alex Lee, architect and participant of the *TransActions in the Field* master class. Active since the 1980s, Moelyono Moel’s roving projects with various local communities across Indonesia could be seen as a model for future sustainable configurations of *TATF*.

4 For more information and documentation about the Pudu Community Art Project, see: puducommunityartproject.blogspot.my (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 Read more about the “Action!” intervention in the interview between *TATF* participant Ichimura

Misako and Ota Emma p 194 of this publication.

6 Read more in the dialogue between Lee Chun Fung and Elaine W. Ho p.60 of this publication.

7 Juliastuti, Nuraini. “Moelyono and the Endurance of Arts for all Society”. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 13 (Spring/Summer 2006) pp. 3-7

Image Copyrights: Yeoh Lian Heng

ORGANIZATION-

Elaine W. Ho

IN-BETWEEN:

in conversation

ART, ACTIVISM

with

AND COMM-

Susanne Bosch

ODIFICATION

Version 1.2

Elaine W. Ho works between the realms of time-based art, urban practice and design, using multiple vocabularies to explore the micro-politics, subjectivities and alter-possibilities of an intimate, networked production. The act of describing takes on a number of forms—a kind of grammar, a documentation, a gesture, a biography—or an experiment in Beijing known as HomeShop. She is the initiator of the art-ist-run space, active from 2008–2013, and continues to ask questions about the

socio-politics of syntax, more recently as fellow at the Institut für Raumexperimente (Berlin, 2014) and editor & collaborating artist for the three-day embodied knowledge *HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event (2015). She likes to drink coffee and tea mixed together and is a frequent contributor at iwishicoulddescribe-ittoyoubetter.net.

Version 2.0

Elaine W. Ho works between the realms of time-based art, urban practice and design. She received a Bachelors in Art and Art

History at Rice University, thereafter continuing to broaden her fields of inquiry through fashion design (Parsons School of Design, 1999–2001; Academy of the Arts Arnhem, 2001–2004) and critical theory and communications (European Graduate School, 2007–2010). These extended forms of learning created the basis for HomeShop (Beijing, 2008–2013), the artist-run project space, self-organised as an experiment in collaborative learning amidst the aporetic spaces of contemporary Chinese socialist capital.

She continues to explore such questions through writing, performance and time-based installation, most recently by way of collaborations with the Institute for Spatial Experiments and Display Distribute.

Recent work has been presented at the Power Station of Art (Shanghai, 2016), Guangdong Times Museum (Guangzhou, 2015), Spring Workshop (Hong Kong, 2015), Neue Nationalgalerie (Berlin, 2014) and Tate Modern (London, 2014), among others.

Rooftop view of the first "WaoBao!" community swapping event that functioned as a miniature experiment in moneyless economies, Beijing, 2012

Elaine and Susanne had a conversation about Elaine's work in Beijing, with HomeShop, and The *HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event in Hong Kong in 2015. Much more than just "work", Elaine lives, through and through, what she holds as values, as questions and as the spaces in between.

Susanne Bosch: I was very intrigued by your statement of intent for the *TransActions in the Field* master class last year. This is an excerpt of what you wrote:

"Regarding my own work and practice, in all honesty I find myself in an extended period of transition, as HomeShop, the artist-run project space that I founded and co-organised for five years in Beijing, came to a close at the end of 2013. The retrospective distance from which I am able to look at this project now leads me alternately to a sense of accomplishment or feelings of foolishness, and the period since then has involved a great deal of reflection, transformation, and the regaining of new ways to continue. With a practice that involved art (both self-initiated projects with HomeShop and my individual practice), writing (as part of my practice and publisher of independent publications), and organisation (trying to find infrastructures of collaboration), HomeShop has allowed me to question every aspect of the creative act and the social sphere. This is not only about questioning what "public" can mean to us today, but about how networks and splintered means of production and reception have altered those connections between publics.

At the same time, I am often cynical about artists' ability and responsibility for enacting political change."



What intrigued, touched and resonated with me was your honesty to speak about difficult things. Back then, you wrote to strangers. I am interested in understanding more about your cynicism, your learning, where you are at now. For you, does this cynicism have to do with the system “art” that we all belong to, which is highly hierarchical and exclusive? Or is it a more general cynicism towards global, man-made systems that we try to change, break or inhabit?

Elaine W. Ho: Cynicism is a strong word, but yes, maybe sometimes it is that, or we may also call it forms of resistance, or “finding one’s way” when one doesn’t feel like he/she has a place. I listened recently to a podcast from the sociologist Pascal Gielen¹ and he talks about how there is a plethora of artist-run organisations that “started to do community art because they hated the art world and they wanted not to be involved in the art market”. See also this exhibition catalogue which includes a text I wrote, “Organisation-at-Large”, about starting from ‘disappointment’.² Also to answer your question directly, it is both the ‘disappointment’ with systems in art but also systems in the world in general. Because anything that becomes an industry—and yes, *the art world is indeed an industry*—will inevitably be a global, economic and institutionalised question.

The ironic counter to this is that a curator once asked me about what he felt was a contradiction in the ‘anti-aesthetics’ of HomeShop, which was very funny to me because I actually always found our work to be very aesthetic, simply not a mainstream kind of aesthetic. He pointed out the fact that to be ‘anti-art’ is always in reference to ‘art’ as well, which is indeed true. But thinking again now, I realise that his sad mistake was more so to substitute our stance in opposition to the hierarchical systematics of the art world with a misaligned assumption against art itself. This is not the case at all.



So even if we may be marginalised from the elite of the mainstream (commercial) art world, there are quite a few of us (of many different varieties) on those edges. Finding situations that you feel are unfair, self-indulgent or exclusive can be a very good directive for exploring alternative realms of living and working that may be more fair, more nurturing and/or more inclusive. So maybe not so dissimilarly from the 1000+ practitioners that Gielen has interviewed, HomeShop also began because I wanted to make a space to work in a way that was stimulating for me as an artist, when I could not find



Neighbours and friends gather around the hutong public broadcast of the closing ceremony of the 2008 Olympic games

Hanging out and passing by HomeShop on the opening day of the “Ten Thousand Items’ Treasury”, a public library for borrowing books, tools, DVDs and other ephemera, Beijing, 2011

it otherwise. This was the first step. But as you mention learning, resistance as reaction is not enough, so as you begin to build the space and people begin to gather together, you have to be attentive to the context that is created from out of the pre-existing context. These are not the same things, if we are talking about the kind of work that we do as artists working with communities or in consideration of collaboration and a kind of commons-building. And so perhaps it is also because there is such a strong disjuncture between the different social communities that HomeShop had lateral relations with—old retired Beijingers living in the *hutongs*, a kind of hipster young foreigner crowd, the Chinese contemporary art world and curious young Chinese people with interests in a kind of ‘cultural consumption’ but not necessarily coming from the art world—the kind of mish-mash created led to the wild journey that was HomeShop’s five-and-a-half year course.

When I look at your various bios, you come across as global nomad, coming from two backgrounds—Hong Kong and the USA, having studied in Asia, Europe, the States, and now living in Shanghai, China. Can you give me an idea of your role or the positions you hold, as you seem to embody the “insider and outsider” of various fields... you seem the amalgamation of various cultures within and outside of Asia, of your gender, of your profession, of your time and space.

Aiaiai... the identity question is a fundamental, yet very difficult one for me, and maybe that’s why the biography as a format becomes something highly suspicious. As you see with the various versions that have come up over time, there is a need to play with it as a way of deconstructing forms of representation. The ‘global nomad’ description is one that I’ve heard about myself quite often, especially in the last couple of years, but it actually strikes me with surprise, because I never saw myself like that. My life and practice were so heavily invested in Beijing for the previous nine years, movements didn’t feel nomadic. I suppose this was the case for the previous bases as well, in the Netherlands or the U.S., because it is about your attitude within a context that marks a differentiation between being the nomad or not. Somehow I see the character of the nomad as insistent upon his/her own outside-ness to the point of a small-scale colonisation, whereby one simply implants oneself onto new ground and continues the same practices as always, moving every so often to different places when the resources are dried up. This is something similar to my impression of the expatriate, another kind of character with which I would rather not identify, because as you say, there is a desire to find a better understanding of some kind of ‘inside’ of a culture, a field or set of relations, rather than simply remain an outside imposer. And I have been fortunate enough to perhaps gain different glimpses of several ‘insides’, but yes, at the same time I am inevitably always an outsider (in my insecurity the latter always feels the strongest). So there is an inherent contradiction at work here...

What is your personal inner driver to do what you do?

Maybe some of this question is answered already from question one, or from the “Organisation-at-Large” text. I have a very deep desire to learn, know more and understand the wealth of contradictions created from diversity, singularity and the attempt to come to terms with our being in the world. As you encounter such complexity, there is a desire to find ways to reflect and decipher that complexity. As you find problems, there is desire to seek solutions and find alternatives. And as you learn, there is a concurrent desire to share knowledge.

Your question of “how we can live together” in the “Organisation-at-Large” text is answered by Gielen with some suggestions to us, the creative crowd. I liked his analogy to circus life: if we move away from an idea/belief of freedom that takes the freedom of others away, it becomes what he calls “negative freedom”. Instead, Gielen emphasizes the need to shift thinking toward a shared or collective freedom. He calls upon artists to build more and more collectives to work together, to find our singular voices and respect the voices of others. The “multitude” is about parallel singular voices that can live with each other. So Gielen suggests that we organise ourselves as with life in the circus, with a mix of private and public life, a mix of creativity and economy, all in a tent. A tent is not only mobile; it marks a structure in public space which has an inside containing its own vertical institution. This institution can only be made within the collective; it can be fantastic and very cheap to make, due to social relationships, and it is mobile; it marks an autonomous self-governmental space for a moment in a context that can be shared. As it is not rigid like a museum or other institutions, it moves, then builds up another structure again somewhere else. He asked if we can re-think art today like this.

However, the flexibility Gielen attributes to the tent is an admirable form of auto-reflection and willingness to rethink one’s own structures; you see it in the kind of five-year planning or time-based charters of certain organisations including Zikri Rahman’s Buku Jalanan. So, in my view, the great possibility that circus life, as a metaphor, affords us is then a repeated process of learning and unlearning, or building and deconstructing the ‘tents’ which organise and systematise our ways of working and living together. The difficult part would be to avoid what I mentioned about the figure of the nomad or expat, where sedimented ways of doing and thinking are simply repeated and implanted into different contexts.

He also touched upon a theme that you have written about as well: the contradiction of being invited by commissioners and institutions that set up a structural framework which artists actually question and even try to break. Artists sometimes naïvely enter into this type of socially-engaged public art practice to build social cohesion, and sometimes they succeed. But artistic interventions can also be cheap solutions to fill up holes in neoliberal systems. As temporary and project-based formats, this type of work on the micro-social level most likely remains far from real structural change. When artists realize structural problems, when they start reasoning on political levels, that is when the role of the artist becomes very dangerous. Gielen warns us not to fall into the trap of “NGO art”, to work from both ends of the spectrum by helping people with good intentions and a good heart, but at the same time preserving political-structural situations that help a neoliberal system to stay alive.

Within Asia, this problem is very much relevant in Hong Kong (see the work of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council), or perhaps places like Japan where there is a lot of government funding for culture, but less relevant at least from our perspective in the Mainland, where there is virtually no government support for art (though there are huge pushes being made in recent years for soft power via film and certain other aspects of the ‘creative industries’).

But a related trap that I think artists very often get into, and which you touch upon by saying how artists naïvely “help a neoliberal system to stay alive”, is the issue of gentrification, and the wholly flexible ability of capitalist interests to appropriate, engulf and swallow artistic endeavours. The fact that we see the collusion of the Chinese government and private interests very skillfully being able to utilise the phenomenon of urban gentrification as a *top-down*



In response to the difficulty and frustration of working as an independent publisher, as well as in note of the dearth of dialogue between small-scale practitioners in East Asia, Elaine has most recently joined the Display Distribute platform with its “LIGHT LOGISTICS” project—aiming to support an alternative distribution network for the exchange of independent publications from Asia, 2016

strategy to rejuvenate land and value, is a kind of gentrification ‘with Chinese characteristics’ in which young creatives are very happy to take part. Located in an area of the city that is highly gentrified, HomeShop’s naïve role as contributor to such trends is something that plagues me. I would like to be able to emphasise other, non-quantifiable forms of value that HomeShop has been able to effect and affect with its practice, but unfortunately they still also come with numbers like rising rent costs and the inability for HomeShop to sustain a longer-term relationship to the community.

A former banker, nowadays a permaculture farmer, said to me last year that the one amazing, extraordinary quality of capitalism is its ability to adopt and subsume absolutely everything in its structure and turn it into its favour. The feeling of a contradictory “trap” where your work has effects in ways you do not wish it to, is a difficult one for me as well. Therefore, I wonder if you ever discussed within HomeShop, for example, the gentrifying aspects of your work? I’m thinking of artistic strategies where you “mirror” the downfall of a system.

Yes, we were very aware about our possible role as “gentrifiers” in the neighbourhood, and there is a series of discussions on the topic in relation to us and other developments in Asia on our blog, humorously titled “Gentrification

Disco".³ I think that playing with the realm of ambiguity of productive outputs in our practice, as well as trying to avoid the commodification of many contemporary art exhibitions, were some of our strategies to confuse or intercept the gentrification and capitalisation process. Making a clear decision to end HomeShop could also be described as cutting off the possibilities for capitalisation on the HomeShop name and accumulation of value created by this so-called 'portfolio of experience'. But there's no need to heroicise our failures, *haha*. We've thought about these aspects of our nebulous activities, decorated with this ironically very blunt endnote. But closing HomeShop was not a consensual decision, and the democratic vote that led to our dissolution was very disappointing for some of us.

The Institute of Human Activities⁴ is an artistic example of living with these tensions. Renzo Martens gave an impressive talk about their struggles at the Artist Organisations International conference in Berlin.⁵

He said, our critical gestures of boycott obscure the connection between art and global economies. By making beautiful art we give the impression of being on top of the social injustice we identify. To meaningfully deal with war, capitalist exploitation and social injustice we need to understand them better. Gatherings of critical art producers in the form of biennales, etc., represent these tiny, beautiful exceptions that provide the world with good feelings and satisfaction. But we are somehow all involved with "gentrificationism". For Martens, solidarity would be to present beyond the centres of capitalist accumulation (social, cultural, financial, etc.) in the old centres of empire. These centres add value to art and that value has a real outcome for bankers, politicians and real estate managers. To be present with the fruits of this critique, in the locations where the critique is actually aimed, is the centre of their solidarity attempt. We are not always aware of structural conditions, but we as artists can choose to try and make the fruits of our work happen exactly where the injustice takes place. So for example, the Institute for Human Activities (IHA) invited Richard Florida⁶ to help them "gentrify" their Unilever Plantage Workers' living conditions and be part of the creative economy amidst their transformation from the Fordist economy to something else. For me, this seems a very radical twist to mirror the structural conditions, to try and turn them for the locality. I wonder what your take is on that.

I did see Martens' *Enjoy Your Poverty* some years ago and was completely blown away, which is no easy feat in a biennial-type setting with an overload of video content. He has mastered the tendentious self-awareness of his power as a white male creator, and that is what makes it so funny and frightening at the same time. While I understand the logic of his attempt to redirect capital, unfortunately, I heard that the exhibition of artworks created with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise did not sell very well at all...

That leads us to practical examples, because these aesthetic potentialities where we question and deal with obvious inequalities need to be strategized in the current situation in a practical way. HK Farm and the three-day *HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event (2015) interests me. You brought together several farming/activist/art groups from Hong Kong and mainland China to create a three-day publication-making workshop in the form of a collaborative, performative event of embodied knowledge. What happened? What was your experience and what was the outcome?



To kick-off The HK FARMers' Almanac book sprint, participants engage in a compost ritual of untangling over 20 meters of pumpkin vine that spontaneously grew from the HK Farm-designed plexiglass compost box, Hong Kong, 2015

Urban farmers also work on computers. Day one of the The HK FARMers' Almanac book sprint, Hong Kong, 2015

Working installation for The HK FARMers' Almanac book sprint, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, 2015





The text "Organisation-at-Large" was written on the occasion of the exhibition "Can We Live (Together)", curated by Lee Chun Fung and including this semi-autonomous viewing hut built by Elaine W. Ho. Visitors were encouraged to bring their own video material to be shown freely within this context of a government-managed art space, Hong Kong, 2014



The final compilation of The HK FARMers' Almanac special edition includes zines, artist editions, digital content, postcards and seeds harvested from various urban farmers and collectives around Hong Kong, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, 2015

Basically, the form of this book event came out of the natural coincidences of the HK Farm collective's image-making as an important part of their process, our mutual interest in zine culture and the fact that farming is a very hands-on, embodied kind of practice and knowledge. So how to turn reading, writing and publishing into something equally embodied and collaborative? This book sprint was an attempt to do that, bringing the skills, perspectives and interests of several protagonists of the urban farming landscape in Hong Kong together to share knowledge and experiences together within the context of an intensive three-day workshop. The goal was simple, to work together to write, edit, illustrate, design and put together a specially published edition that includes both printed matter and digital content, a few artist editions and even a packet of seeds, all enclosed within a wooden box that doubles as a planter.

Because the Spring Workshop team for the organisation of this project was so incredibly on top of it and supportive, this project was for the most part smooth-

going in its experience and outcome, and I have to say it's the kind of luxury I don't usually experience working as an independent practitioner with fewer resources.

We described it as a 'spontaneous book event' following the same-named projects from the Institut für Raumexperimente (IfREX)⁷, where in 2014 I had first participated in a similar workshop for one of their publications. At IfREX, the spontaneous publications are produced as a one-day session with a guest critic to lead a collective editing process of A4 contributions made by each of the participants of the Institute. The final production was co-ordinated by the organisation team.

In our case, we stretched the one-day conceptualisation and editing process to three days, because we wanted to also include the possibility for on-site production (not simply on computers)—to make space for the embodied and hands-on work that could reflect the kind of knowledge process more akin to farming/gardening as crafts. I developed a kind of spatial arrangement and installation for the working area to reflect this kind of chain of production, which included everything from a relaxed discussion area to a silk-screening station and the ubiquitous photocopy machine. The time was divided such that there were intervals where we worked in teams on personal contributions to the *Almanac*, and also collective sessions where we tried to develop content together. There were moments of play and enjoying meals together, and there were moments of concentrated stress in consideration of upcoming deadlines.

Regarding location and context-specificity of *The HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event, you certainly faced many expectations, demands, wishes and hopes. How and where do these expectations differ based upon the context? What kind of expectations could you handle best? When and where did it become problematic?

In the end, the most ironic surprise that I had not anticipated can be summed up as the gentle and funny contradiction between 'spontaneity' and 'embodied' when working with a large group of people, in an organised fashion. Because in fact it was impossible for our 'spontaneous book' to emerge after three days, and coordinating the production of the final outcome eventually twisted and stretched into an over five-month process. While we know about the kind of spontaneous event that can occur in crowd situations, our embodied commitment toward 'perfection' perhaps detracted from real spontaneity (*ha-ha*).

Regarding the kind of expectations that I can handle best, *hmmm...* I think for sure that my idea and expectation for the project was not the same as for HK Farm, but this is not a problem at all because of mutual respect for one another's work and openness to ways of working. However, those kinds of multiplicities contribute to the complexity of a project like this one; even when there is very clear final outcome to be reached, there is the difficulty of numerous strands of interest and skill to reach that outcome in a compressed amount of time. This is of course a common problem in many contexts.

That issue of 'perfection' was one that I had not anticipated, because while I had hoped to experiment with a rougher, unedited sharing, the direct outcome of which would be whatever we could put together in three-days' time, I think it is much more a part of Spring and HK Farm's aesthetics to make a beautifully crafted product, which of course cannot happen in only three days. Knowing this themselves, Spring and HK Farm anticipated the large workload to be mediated



Neighbours and friends play Wii sports when they can't get tickets to see the Beijing Olympics. "wii would like to play // wii don't have tickets" was part of the HomeShop's day nine 2008 Olympics event in honour of all the 'losers'. HomeShop, Beijing, 2008

by asking contributors to submit their individual contributions, equal to one chapter of the *Almanac*, before the workshop began. Of course with everyone's busy schedules, this, for the most part did not happen, and a great deal of the collective working time during the event was sacrificed so that people could work on their individual sections.

How did you negotiate the roles in your process?

What I found remarkable about Spring Workshop was the amount of care and nurturing that goes into operating the institution, in a manner such that there is not much need to explicitly negotiate roles because everyone helps out on multiple levels based upon awareness and need. Despite its international stage presence, it is a very small organisation greased by a tiny team of six-seven people, and while of course there are divisions of responsibility, it is not unusual to see the director of the space washing dishes too.

I became acquainted with HK Farm⁸ in 2013 via Michael Leung, one of its founders, and while they operate as a collective, the nuances of their collaboration were for a long time a mystery to me because I did not have the opportunity to meet the others in the group until beginning to work on the *Almanac* project.

The goals, orientation and scale of practice for Spring Workshop and HK Farm are very different, making their relationships to the *way of working* also variable.

But my intuition senses that there may also be gender differences at work (Spring Workshop's team is primarily female, HK Farm consists of four young men) in terms of the unsaid understandings between these two highly divergent examples of working together, so my insertion in between as editor of *The HK FARMers' Almanac* was indeed an interesting negotiation itself. You could say I work more similarly to Michael's grassroots ethos, and that means we can work quite independently within collaboration; adding the support and logistical assistance from Spring Workshop really expanded the scale of things we could do and facilitated the entire process.

Did anyone else support the process and how was it supported?

There are many, depending upon which level of the process you are examining! Of course, there are the individual contributors, each making a zine chapter of the *Almanac*, but yes, there is also the intern who helped bind 100 copies of the edition, the farmers who donated soil from the North-eastern New Territories of Kowloon, the translators, the hipster café near Spring that donated food waste for compost, the disgruntled worker in the copy shop, the online retailer in the Mainland that Michael hesitantly conceded to buy from because one tool we needed was too expensive to produce locally, etc. There were couriers and the carbon emissions that delivered the tool; there is the capital, which allows Spring Workshop to operate and support artists; there is a network and culture of media that promotes and disseminates the project. And of course, very importantly, there are the readers.

1 "SON[I]A #218: Pascal Gielen". rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia/pascal-giel-en-podcast/capsula (Barcelona: Radio Web MACBA) 2015 October 12

2 Ho, Elaine W. "Organisation-at-Large". 《假如「在一起」 can we live (together)》 exhibition catalogue (August 2014) pp. 11-14.

3 To follow the "Gentrification Disco" series posted on the HomeShop blog, see: HomeShopbeijing.org/blog/?s=gentrification (accessed Aug 31, 2106)

4 The Institute for Human Activities' (IHA) goal is to prove that artistic critique on economic inequality can bypass it—not symbolically, but in material terms. Since 2014, the IHA has collaborated with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC). Together they set up the Lusanga International

Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI). Through exhibitions, presentations and by instigating critical reflection, the IHA is reaching out beyond the Research Centre in Congo. Furthermore, the IHA facilitates the global dissemination of artwork created with the CATPC, whose profits return directly to Congo to support the makers and their families as well as other community projects in Lusanga. humanactivities.org/about-3/

5 "Solidarity and Unionising". Panel: Artist Organisations International, vimeo.com/119233427.

6 Richard Florida is one of the world's leading public intellectuals on economic competitiveness, demographic trends, and cultural and technological innovation.

7 The Institut für Raumexperimente e.V. (Institute

for Spatial Experiments) developed out of the Institut für Raumexperimente, Berlin University of the Arts. A registered association (e.V.) since January 2015, the Institute continues the work of the original five-year project and its goal of supporting artistic research and education. The Institut für Raumexperimente was affiliated with the Berlin University of the Arts from 2009 to 2014 as an experimental education and research project, led by its founding director Olafur Eliasson together with co-directors Christina Werner and Eric Ellingsen. raumexperimente.net/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

8 *The HK FARMers' Almanac* collection of zines, artist editions, USB, seeds, wooden planter box collaboration between HK Farm, Farms for Democracy, Sangwoodgoon, Very MK, Yaumatei Gardener, Bishan Commune, Hu

Fang, Ming Lin, Kit Chan, Christopher DeWolf and Laine Tam, edited by Elaine W. Ho and commissioned by Spring Workshop in Hong Kong 2015. Inspired by both the ancient *Tung Shing* divination guide and *The Old Farmers' Almanac* published in North America since 1792, *The HK FARMers' Almanac* was a publishing project and practice in embodied knowledge. For three days, urban farmers, artists and writers gathered for a performative production, where words, images, sound and the compost piled up for an in-situ exercise of thinking through farming practices in Hong Kong. spring-workshop.org/?lang=en-/the-hk-farmers-almanac-online/ (accessed Aug 31, 2106)

Image Copyrights: Elaine W. Ho

This publication introduces 21 passionate statements from practitioners in the field of participatory art. Their contributions help to define a complex practice, that takes many forms and is called by many names, but is united by a spirit of giving, receiving and reciprocating in art-making.

Mirroring the essence of the exchange within this practice, the structure of this publication is based on dialogue.

The idea of peer-to-peer conversations was kindled during our initial encounters in the field, the understanding we gained about each other's practices and the desire to eventually learn more from each other. The diversity and messiness of the fieldwork is part of the field, and here, that experience is expressed in the original voices of the practitioners.



**Published by
Goethe-Institut e.V.
2017**

