

# INSTITUTION FOR THE FUTURE

*Co-edited by Biljana Ciric and Sally Lai*

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## Keeping it Real: Art, Activism and the "East Asia Multitude"



View from the covered public plaza where Occupy Central keeps camp, at the base of the HSBC headquarters in Hong Kong, 2012.

The last time I rode up these Sir Norman Foster designed escalators was an emergency trip especially to Hong Kong island after my bank card was swallowed by an ATM machine in Kowloon. That particular blunder of entering my passcode incorrectly three times was an inconvenient mishap; the aunties joked in their usual humour, "You didn't have to try to treat us to dinner if you didn't have enough money, you know." But inconvenience and embarrassment before chatty aunties was softened a few days later by the lovely ride on the Star Ferry across the harbour, being treated with genteel courtesies by bank employees (always refreshing after the less-than-human reception by mainland Chinese service attitudes) and free coffee. Experience both wastes time and produces new variations therefrom.

Now I'd arrived more than one year later to the HSBC headquarters again, more on a whim than the result of an

accident, having decided at the last minute to take a train from Shanghai to join 麦 巔 Mai Dian, who was invited to present Womenjia Youth Autonomy [1] Lab at the East Asia Multitude Meeting organized by Hong Kong-based Wooferten. The accident resurfaces laterally though, and Mai Dian calls while I'm on the train to say that he won't make it due to a complicated *hukou* [2] problem; he's being refused a recognition of origin by his hometown village so decided not to risk complications at the border and stayed in the mainland instead. Even the stability of being born at some particular place in time isn't enough to guarantee a form of identity. Hmmm...inconvenience.

Visually, the scene in Hong Kong is an apocalyptic meeting of architectures, for the dramatic escalators going up to the mahogany leather sanctuary of HSBC now look like funny props next to the rest of the backdrop: a few rows of tents, loosely arranged old furniture (*a lot of Ikea, yes*) and the makeshift hangout, discussion, broadcast and announcement zone made by the activists of Occupy Central. Of course it looks like a squat, and of course it looks like a Thomas Hirschhorn installation—depending upon your reference—but here there is the added value of simultaneously sitting under the literal and symbolic weight of the HSBC headquarters and nestled amidst several huddles of garrulous Filipino domestic workers enjoying a holiday weekend picnicking in one of the limited "public" spaces of the city. The unique geo-politics of Hong Kong are what lead to this wondrous combination, so I guess we should not be so surprised about the private corporation's attitude of leniency towards a group of leftist activists perched in their lobby. One visitor points out that HSBC would receive harsh resistance from the public were it to close off this block-sized passageway that represents its history and relation with the city, because it was by agreement that the bank leave public access to the property that it was allowed what has now become the extremely symbolic devouring of this piece of finance and fengshui-rich real estate formerly housing a part of city hall. As for these relations, one of the campers says, "We don't communicate [*with the bank*] much, except when they tell us to move sometimes for cleaning."

This first direct contact with the Occupy movement is poignant considering the clearing out of New York protesters' base at Zuccotti Park last year and just a few days before the May Day general strike. About 50 people including organisers, participants and audience gather in the middle of the open lobby. While a series of presentations periodically interrupted by power generator hiccups ensues, the Filipino





ladies squawk loudly, play cards and eat McDonald's, and tourist groups trickle by occasionally, pausing to take photos. Without Womenjia, four groups are represented: Amateur Revolt from Tokyo, Indie Culture Network AGIT based in Busan, G Straight Café from Taipei. Woofer-ten. It's a luxurious form of mapping our current condition, and this summit's subheading call to the "world after revolution" is a government sponsored gathering (Woofer-ten is funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council) that allows us to present and exchange ideas about what this world could possibly look like. Of course, it's uncertain whether we are supposed to be identifying and describing a present condition, or make predictions about a world to which we're headed. Likewise, the two questions that came up repeatedly over the course of the meeting—"What can we do, or what direction should we develop?", and "Is there a 'common' here?"—seem to belie the disjunctures between a better future to be activated and the inconsistencies about what the current state of affairs really is. Experience is both ambiguous and produces new variations of uncertainty about production itself.

李俊峰 Lee Chun Fung from Woofer-ten begins the afternoon by explaining MAI Dian's absence as due to a visa problem: the authorities won't let him out. This sounds a lot more in line with the zeitgeist of China-bashing (later in the meeting it is mentioned that what the groups share in common is the enemy: China and the United States) than Mai Dian's personal admission that it was his own fault for missing a deadline. But whatever the case, accidents and a mis-turn of events may very well be an opportunity for the authorities to rein in, or at



least a chance for "soy sauce hitters" like me to join in on events. [3]

Beginning with AGIT, Ryu Sounghyo offers a brief timeline of its origins as a small reclaim-the-streets party in Busan, where musicians and artists wanted to make space for the very tiny creative scene there (described either as a departure city for most local artists—Seoul is where one needs to be—or a regimented system with an outdated museum and a conservative biennale). Ryu's presentation seems to emphasise the party atmosphere of a subcultural network—reinforcing Lee's opening remark that the thing they all discovered to have most in common is the avid enjoyment of a good drink—and images and video show gatherings, demonstrations and rallies for humanitarian cause blending unidentifiably with parades, raves and music festivals. The musicians and artists are given the stage to perform and show their work at the same time that they visualise and affectivise a political mission. AGIT's celebratory means of raising awareness for global issues such as nuclear power has garnered a mass appeal that grants them both private and public funding, as well as more leeway with the city and authorities. Unfortunately, language difficulties left many details and smaller scale endeavours amiss, and Ryu's fast flipping through Korean text in a PowerPoint presentation leaves us with a meta-picture of a post-revolutionary babel lit by strobes and stage lights.

G Straight Café's three representatives began by woefully announcing that their coffeehouse would be closing in a few days, as they are being forced out by their landlord, unwilling to continue the lease. We find that the housing community in which G Straight is located has had enough of the noise created by these rowdy youths and complained with the landlord to have them removed. As such, the group seems to have reached a critical moment to reflect upon their evolution as a young, autonomous space with an uncertain future. In 2009, lengthy discussions among members led to the practical solution of investing in the café as a simple means for the public to support and engage with the group and their activities, but now that this capital would be prematurely guillotined and the seed money spent, G Straight will have to rethink the possibilities of form to shape their sociopolitical ideas. Indeed, the work and interests of the group seemed to work on two levels—either as an internal discourse on self-organisation or as a platform and gathering spot to engage larger-scale sociopolitical campaigns, including actions against forced demolitions, No Nukes and LGBT events. As one audience member pointed out during the Q & A,

less energy may have been devoted to engagement with the immediate surroundings of the local neighbourhood, and this, of course, complicates the sustainability of realising longer term goals amidst the practicalities of everyday relations and the lived environment.

As host group, Woofert-ten did not go into many details about their work, except to mention that those familiar with them may have noticed a changing face in the last year. Without knowing too much about them prior to this visit, I can only assume internal politics have been in flux, resulting in a turn of direction. But the community and arts platform appear to be composed of a well-rounded group of artists, critics, curators and educators established and connected enough to have given them low-rent access to a prime storefront space (formerly a gallery) on Shanghai Street in Kowloon—and government support. The artist-run nature is most prominent here, with programmes including artist-activist in residence, workshops led by local craftsmen and thematic exhibition projects which engage the Yaumatei area community. When chatting with Cheetah (of G Straight) and Lee later, Cheetah's direct query of the limits of Woofert-ten's autonomy due to government-sponsorship proves difficult considering the luxury of being self-funded or the counter-illusion of autonomy under consumer-based exchange. Lee points out the tiny loophole of freedom that Woofert-ten has found within the largely conservatively allocated pool of HKADC funding, and Cheetah nods while listening—perhaps in agreement, but who knows, possibly just as well in acknowledgement of the highly fissured relativism that we may have to consign ourselves to when speaking about autonomy in a post-revolutionary world.

Probably the most internationally known of those presenting, the activities of Japanese group Shiroto no Ran (Amateur Revolt) are known for helping to put the Kōenji neighbourhood in Tokyo on the map of underground culture. Matsumoto Hajime's secondhand clothing store of the same name is the home base for his interactions with the public, and along with it, he and others have nurtured a lively alternative scene which has led to Kōenji being known as the birthplace of punk in the city. Its location and access relative to the centre, as well as density of small "bedroom community" housing make it a natural setting for a gentrification narrative, and the story has unfolded not unexpectedly to include a large population of young people, live music venues, inexpensive bars and restaurants and an active leftist culture. As a protagonist, Amateur Revolt has served as the hatching pod for a number of demonstrations in Kōenji and elsewhere, and Matsumoto's insistence upon taking to the streets as a

way "to stop acquiescing with passive democracy and regain true, participatory democracy" has catalysed rallies ranging from that against the PSE law restricting the sale of electronic goods built before 2001, to unemployment, poor economy and anti-nuclear power generation. Like AGIT, Amateur Revolt's activities take on a celebratory atmosphere, and other endeavours like a mobile bar and the Nantoka Festival, described as a "social experiment in co-working" where all participants are also organisers, are festive, artistic attempts at a new political imaginary that try to offer answers to those questions "What can we do, or what direction should we develop?"

It is Matsumoto who first heralded the call to find a picture of this post-revolutionary world by which the Multitude meeting is named. But when language again limits our possibilities to understand the theory behind his terminology (the Amateur Revolt presentation is given in Japanese with minimal Cantonese translation), we are asked instead to imagine a scene during a rooftop event, where revelers and activists enjoy themselves as dour-faced salarymen pass by from the metro line that overlooks their building. "Is this revolution?" he asks.

With the rambunctious Filipinos under the shaded comfort of the HSBC headquarters lobby, it feels somehow outdated to mention revolution anymore. But I guess that is exactly what Matsumoto is talking about. In an interview with Essex-based student group Radical Politics, Alain Badiou refers to his generation of colleagues as a now old generation moulded by the Sixties and their revolution of completely renouncing politics, resulting in what turned to become another politics of the State. Now looking from Asia and the points of view of four young collectives engaged in a "new" situation, asking what to do or what is in common is precisely the practice of an ethical dilemma: "Now the problem for you is much different. The problem is the following: what experience are you committing yourselves to? What is your experience? This leads to a new form of the creation of rationality."

The consideration of experience is the importance of a meeting such as this, and exchange and discussion between Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the mainland is actually crucial not because they are "in common", per se, but because the distinctions between localities of experience lead to different rationalities and modes of sustenance. The financial distinctions between AGIT, G Straight, Woofert-Ten and Amateur Revolt indicate obvious ethical strings complicating any question of autonomy and institutionalisation. It is not

easy to answer the question of "the best way" to go about autonomy, and even more fundamentally, which variations between an artistic practice and an activist one are more "true" to a cause? In a contemporary moment of "no demands", there simply is no singular engine to drive the advent of the coming community, so the matter of authenticity becomes a more politically acceptable way to respect difference and singularity as being for itself. It is for the same reason that a return to the local is so present in popular culture, and this subjective current is the same reason why Lee can immediately distinguish my own practice in Beijing with HomeShop [4] as lodged in foreignness, composed of people coming/returning from overseas. This is one of the most common axes upon which HomeShop is evaluated by both Chinese and foreign visitors, and this measure of a-locality is one to which I can only lower my head and acknowledge. While degrees of alienation are not to be equated with degrees of inauthenticity, of course, it appears that within the realms of art and activism proximity towards the thing which one speaks of remains proportional to one's legitimacy in action.

Somehow authenticity has become a standard barometer for gauging experience, to the point of a matter of principle. Have you really done time in jail, or are your lyrics just playing gangster? Why does a foodie consider fusion cuisine such a no-no? Being "real" enough telescopes and translates experience between actors and audiences; authenticity is a filter and a measure of one's trueness and one's soul, heart and money-wrenching variables in a market society. Even in a *shānzhài* [5] -rich economy such as China, regionality and specificity are seen as "religious dictates" or—in the case of the great Sichuan specialty of mapo tofu with its officially endorsed "true" recipe—at least government sanctioned ones. But the anarchist spirit of *shānzhài* means that the gauge of authenticity will never be judged in quite the same degree as that one authentic Italian trattoria in New York City, so might we consider food critic Todd Kliman's raving of NYC chef Mario Carbone's Jewish crostini that "to cook Italian also means honouring your immediate surroundings—your micro-culture"? In this regard, whether we're talking about luxury bags, industrial technology or critical theory, looking at the social, historical and economic background of China means to understand *shānzhài* fever in China as an authentic experience, but one too oft comparatively read against a western one. To stop at some critics' consideration of Womenjia in Wuhan as merely a Euro-style squat with Chinese characteristics is not enough. But when independent cinema protagonist Zhang Xianmin playfully critiques HomeShop's *Wear* journal as being "too authentic", is it that our consideration of a

certain form of "local" is too international, too disparate and too internalised—or simply that we are not marketable and accessible enough to the public? Beyond a first manner of judgement, what propels one to look further, or simply be bored and move on?

Returning to the multitude present at this meeting under the HSBC building in Hong Kong asks us to reconsider authenticity in the context of modes of self-organisation. If it is traditionally judged as a form of loyalty to certain localities in concentric measure from the self, Woofer-ten's activities keep its efforts for social change in close relation to the very specific visual culture of Yaumatei; AGIT represents the other end of the spectrum, whereby art and activism are less specific, more global manoeuvres; Amateur Revolt creates its own locality by way of varying levels of sociopolitical engagement, and G Straight finds itself wavering in its own categorisation of participants as either members, clerks or activists. HomeShop could spark all manner of critique, perhaps never to be recognised as authentic enough to validate any directly activist work. But to understand the variations between these groups requires greater understandings of the cultural and economic contexts that have given rise to them, and amidst this relativism, we may come to understand that authenticity can be much more relevantly looked at now with Badiou's advice, as a measure of commitment to an experience rather than an axis of purity.

Examining ourselves retrospectively, understanding HomeShop's attention to documenting the everyday and the vicinity of our *hutong* alleyway has been a commitment to a specific micro-culture of experience. But if there is an authenticity to be considered here, even it is presumptuous, what Kliman says is "a purely arbitrary, purely subjective surmise of a purely impure thing." And this is the complicated wedlock between art and activism today on all fronts. In German, the *Künstler* is one who is "able to do something", stemming from the noun *können*, or "can". "To be able" is to activate, either as a visual trickster or a politicised one. Where taking to the streets may represent the most direct form of participation in politics, working as an artist speaks of an indirect participation in an affective imaginary that is also politically relevant. But for both art and activism, autonomy is relative, yes, and experience multiplicitous. To say or to do, like any manner of experience, both spends time and produces new forms of experience in time. Commitment implies a certain kind of loyalty of the things that we say or do to life as we experience and produce it. But what is commitment in a post-revolutionary world? We are described an image of



salarymen passing by revelers in the rooftop jacuzzi, followed by that of rebel clowns and the designer-clad cops blocking them, all while seated under the shadow of the HSBC headquarters with the McDonalds value meal, Filipino domestic workers and post-revolutionary discussion. It seems absurd or flippant, perhaps, but is it “real” or “authentic” enough? Perhaps it is an unnecessary question, but it is one both simple and immensely challenging in its implications. ...It’s only a matter of commitment.

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01. Womenjia Youth Autonomy Lab is an experiment in leftist and anarchist culture based just beyond the ambiguous “green zone” that marks the slowly diminishing bank of the East Lake in Wuhan, Hubei province. Since 2008 it has been operating as an open house, meeting place, music studio and library for activists, artists, punks, travelers and others.
  02. The hukou is the official household registration system used in mainland China. It designates citizens as either urban or rural dwellers and designates specific social privileges or limitations based upon where one is from, among areas including education, property rights, family planning, etc.
  03. The term “soy sauce hitter” is a humorous translation from 打酱油 *dǎ jiàngyóu*, which originates from the term used for buying soy sauce by volume but came to popularity in 2008 as an internet meme when a man used the phrase when interviewed on CCTV about the Edison Chen celebrity sex photo scandal. It references the fact of being an uninvolved passerby, insinuating a lack of knowledge or accountability with the situation addressed. It is referred to humorously here to reflect my role as an observer of the event, rather than active participant.
  04. HomeShop is an artist-run project space and collaborative community-based experiment based in the *hutongs* of Beijing, currently organised by myself (Hong Kong Chinese-American), Michael Eddy (Canada), Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga (Greece). Ouyang Xiao (China/US), Twist Qu (China), Uemura Emi (Japan) and Cici Wang (China). [www.homeshop.org.cn](http://www.homeshop.org.cn)
  05. 山寨 *Shānzài*, literally translating as “mountain fortress”, is an old term which has been rejuvenated as a popular meme in Chinese culture to refer to bootlegged or copycat goods, ranging from electronics to brands to personalities. For an extremely provocative account of the *shānzài* phenomenon, please see Yu Hua’s take in *China in Ten Words* (Pantheon, 2011).

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*Elaine W. Ho (1977, HK/USA) works between the realms of time-based art, urban practice and design, using multiple vocabularies to ask questions about how people, space and organisations intertwine with the micropolitics of everyday life. Often working collaboratively, her audio/video work, documentary gestures and interventions focus on alter-possibilities of an intimate, networked production. One of her current endeavours is HomeShop, a storefront space turned home base for interactions with the local community and the surrounding public space. Via the organisation of collaborative events and workshops, research and field recordings, HomeShop and its independent journal publication Wear seek to develop an open platform that examines relationality tied to but outside of other economic modes of production. She likes to drink coffee and tea mixed together and is a frequent contributor at [www.iwishicoulddescribeittoyoubetter.net](http://www.iwishicoulddescribeittoyoubetter.net).*

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She trained as a contemporary art curator (Goldsmiths' College, London) and has worked in the visual arts in various guises including as a curator, consultant, advisor, visual arts officer and occasional writer. She has been active in promoting contemporary Asian art and international exchange and has a particular interest in emergent forms of practice and supporting the ecology of the sector. Sally was a Clore Fellow in 2005/06.

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**Alexandra Hodby** is an art worker. Based in the North West of England, she is currently administrator for Redeye, (a network organisation for photography), a tutor, trustee of Quarantine (a theatre company in Manchester), and a freelance curator. Alex is currently researching 'new institutionalism' and undertaking a part-time AHRC funded collaborative PhD with Tate Modern and Goldsmiths, Department of Politics.

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