

# Community Turn: Social Practice in Hong Kong Art

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“Artists have taken on the task of creating microutopian interventions that allow us to dream back the communities we fear we have lost.” (Carol Baker, 2012)<sup>1</sup>

Connecting with communities through creativity in daily life or by “telling your own stories” has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Under the banner of “promoting community building with cultural-social innovation” since its establishment in March 2006,<sup>2</sup> “Community Cultural Concern” (CCC) has started various “house of stories,” such as “Hong Kong House of Stories” (founded in 2007 and formerly named “Wan Chai Livelihood Place,” it has been under the direction of performance artist Him Lo since 2012), “Pat Heung Eco-agricultural Community Building Project” (founded in 2012), “House of To Kwa Wan Stories” (founded in 2014)<sup>3</sup> and “Kwun Tong House of Stories” (piloted in April 2015), which is yet to have its own venue

1 Becker, Carol. “Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere.” in Nato Thompson ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time; Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2012): 64-71.

2 See “About CCC”. Accessed on March 8, 2016. <https://communityculturalconcern.wordpress.com/aboutccc/>.

3 “ToHome’ is funded by the Government’s Urban Renewal Fund. We have two aims: one is to encourage community participation to gather the strength of the neighborhood before the renewal project starts so when it comes, the people would have the power to negotiate with the Government; the other is to think about the direction we want for the community with the people.” “Tujia: rang jiefang fangdan jiang gushi” (土家：讓街坊放膽講故事) (ToHome: To Let the Neighbours Tell Their Stories at Ease). Accessed on March 9, 2016. <http://littlepost.hk/2015/04/17/%E8%AE%93%E8%A1%97%E5%9D%8A%E6%94%BE%E8%86%BD%E8%AC%9B%E6%95%85%E4%BA%8B/>.

and thus exists as an exhibition at the Chinese YMCA Kwun Tong Centre for the time being. There are other examples which aim to keep watch over and cultivate the communities, like the experimental community space “18 Pitt Street,”<sup>4</sup> “Mapopo Community Farm” (that has been running since 2010),<sup>5</sup> both supported with unconditional funding, and the “Society for Indigenous Learning” (SoIL). These organizations advocate learning from the community and rethinking our lives.<sup>6</sup> As for individual projects that concern “community X art”, they are extremely numerous. Between August and November 2014, exhibitions and workshops, which were related to the case studies, situation and development of communities / community art, had been organized one after another, for example, “Sparkle! Can We Live (Together),”<sup>7</sup> “Art as Social Interaction: Hong Kong / Taiwan Exchange”<sup>8</sup> and “For the Sake of the People: Forum and Workshop on Community Arts”<sup>9</sup>. Since there were more than dozens of such exhibitions and workshops, it would be fair to say that they have summarized the work carried out for community / community art in that year. Among the most noteworthy community art projects in 2015, there were “Remembering Sing

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4 18 Pitt Street is “a life laboratory,” “a capitalism recovery center,” “a community meditation center,” “a hall of worship,” “a letterpress studio” and “a film developing studio” all rolled into one.

5 Mapopo Community Farm was founded by the villagers of Ma Shi Po village in Fanling North and friends who care about the sustainable development of Hong Kong.

6 Experienced artist Yeung Sau-churk Ricky (who has worked as a secondary school art teacher) is one of the founding members of SoIL.

7 The “Sparkle!” exhibition series organized by Oi! comprised seven exhibitions conceived by young local curators. Curated by Lee Chun-fung, a co-founder of the art collective WoofertTen, “Sparkle! Can We Live (Together)” was the third exhibition of the series and opened between August 1 and October 19, 2014. Exhibiting artists and projects included Michael Leung of the Community Farming Project, Him Lo of People’s Pitch, Elaine W. Ho, an artist who has explored about the leftist and local cultural organizations in Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok, Kobe Ko of the Chow Kai Chin project, etc.

8 Curated by Taiwanese artist Mali Wu and coordinated by Hong Kong artist Leung Mee-ping and Taiwanese curator Chang Chingwen, the exhibition was open between October 17 and November 23, 2014 and showed the works by 30 artists / groups. Exhibiting artists / groups (Hong Kong): CoLAB, MaD (Make a Difference), Man Ching-ying Phoebe, Vangi Fong, Community Museum Project (CMP), Ho Kwok-keung + Kelvin Wu + V-artist, Li Xiaohua + Cheung Tze-hin + Cheung Yung + Chan Wing-sze + Yip Kin-bon + Lo Chi-kit + Sunday Lai, Woofertening community group and Kaifong, Yeung Sau-churk Ricky, Chang Ping-hung Wallace + Kai Tak River Green Corridor, soundpocket and Liang Yee-woo Evelyn. The author has written reviews separately for those two exhibitions, in which some ideas of this essay first developed. “Hou youjie: kuaikuailele di ‘yituan maodun’ xiaqu 後油街：快快樂樂地「一團矛盾」下去 (Post Oi!: Contradictions Continue ‘Happily’)”. *a.m. post* issue 111 (November / December 2014): 110-111; “Gonggan yishu, gonggan shehui – reyan pangguan de zaidi shengeng: cong ‘yu shehui jiaowang de yishu’ zhan tanqi 共感藝術 · 共感社會—熱眼旁觀的在地深耕：從「與社會交往的藝術」展談起 (Sympathy for Art and for Society, the Earnest Cultivation of Communities: Starting from the Exhibition of ‘Art as Social Interaction’).” *Artist Magazine* issue 475 (December 2014): 242-247.

9 The two-day forum and workshop took place at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on November 22 and 23, 2015.

Ping: Village School, Art and Open Market,”<sup>10</sup> “In Search of the Peachland: Art Exchange Project between Kam Tin and Busan,” the publication of *Community Arts Maps of 18 Districts* (The 7<sup>th</sup> Arts Ambassadors-in-School Scheme), “Social Manufacture: Made in To Kwa Wan,” etc.

Recently many exhibitions in Hong Kong are concerned with “socially-engaged art” / community art and it appears that some people are trying to be part of the trend.<sup>11</sup> However, the discussion on the subject falls far short of its practice. The problematics of touching the community / practicing community art, such as “whose community is it?”, participation, ethics of practice, aesthetic forms, intervention effects, and the in-depth discussions of those questions are disproportionately scarce (though honestly it is not easy to handle and to write about the problematics of community art as even Ho Hing-kay Oscar, a well-experienced curator, admits that community art is a very “awkward art” as well as a difficult topic to discuss).<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, this essay traces and focuses on the development of “community art” in Hong Kong since the 1990s, including the struggle between the Government’s policies and resources, the exploration and practices of various artists and groups, and changes in the social atmosphere, in the hope of a more advanced understanding of the practice of community art.

“Community art” is a general name, which is also known as “communal art”, “socially-engaged art”, art intervention in communities, “social practice” and art action / art activism / activism. “Socially-engaged art” is likely the most “fashionable” term for the art practice after 2010. In 2011, “Creative Time,” a New York-based arts organization, launched an exhibition and publication project called “Living as Form” to explore how artists intervened in issues in the public sphere

10 The event was scheduled for August 15 and 16, 2015 but it was forced to be cut to one day since all activities were cancelled on the first day due to heavy rain.

11 Even celebrated sound artist Samson Young, who is much sought after in the art market, has been doing a year-long research-based project “Kaifong Orchestra” commissioned by Para Site.

12 Ho Hing-kay Oscar. “Nangao de yishu – shequ yishu tan 難搞的藝術—社區藝術談 (Awkward Art: A Discussion on Community Art).” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, April 16, 2007, 34. Some time later Yuen Fan, a member of Video Power, wrote an article entitled “Meihao de yishu – ye tan shequ yishu 美好的藝術—也談社區藝術 (Beautiful Art: Some More Discussion of Community Art)” in response to Ho’s article and it was a valuable conversation about the problematics of community art. (See <https://vpflow.wordpress.com/%E6%AD%B7%E5%8F%B2%E7%89%87%E6%AE%B5/%E7%BE%8E%E5%A5%BD%E7%9A%84%E8%97%9D%E8%A1%93%EF%BC%8D%EF%BC%8D%E4%B9%9F%E8%AB%87%E7%A4%BE%E5%8D%80%E8%97%9D%E8%A1%93/>. Accessed on March 16, 2016.) Besides, as an observer, Lau Kin-wah has an in-depth critique of “In Search of the Peachland” in an article and it is rare to have such a meticulous review of a particular community art project. Lau Kin-wah, “Foundation Ground, or De-tour” in *In Search of the Peachland: An Art Exchange Project between Kam Tin and Busan* (Hong Kong: C&G Artpartment, 2016): 82-99.

and participated in communities over the last 20 years,<sup>13</sup> bringing together more than 100 artists' projects that emphasized participation, dialogue and community engagement and blurred the forms of art and everyday life. Nato Thompson, Creative Time's Chief Curator, has noticed that there has been a sharp increase in practices and artworks of this art form with all sorts of names – flash mobs, relational aesthetics, community-supported agriculture, skill sharing, dialogic art, new genre public art, social practice, postmodern activism, DIY crafting, tactical media, alternative school, social aesthetics, social sculpture, community art, living theatre, among others. Yet, Thompson stated, "The projects themselves defy easy categorization, and raise contradictions regarding issues of authorship, and traditional notions of art. In fact, they often have more in common with guerrilla and urban gardens, alternative economic and education experiments, and civic-minded, nonprofit organizations. Such efforts might not be described as artworks, but their collaborative spirit, investment in community engagement, and deployment of cultural programs as part of their operations compel us to consider what they do, not who they say they are."<sup>14</sup>

Swedish curator Maria Lind has traced the turn to "social practice" in American and European art back to the early 1990s.<sup>15</sup> In Hong Kong, however, the practice of community art was limited to sharing the joy of art and to the use of art therapy in the 1980s and 1990s. It was until around 2000 that the notion and practice of community art could really "expand." As the theories of "relational aesthetics" and "dialogical art practice" developed and spread, subjectivity, publicness and dialogicality became the main ideas of using art to connect and interact with communities. For example, Liang Yee-woo Evelyn has been very active in Hong Kong's art circle since the 1980s and is a pioneer of community art. She has been enthusiastically "serving" the underprivileged communities, whether they are women, patients, elderly people or the Vietnamese boat people stuck in Hong Kong. Working as the Chair of the "Garden Streams Hong Kong Fellowship of Christian Artists," Liang founded the "Art in the Camp" project in the late 1980s to organize for the refugees different types of art activities, such as painting, embroidery, music, drama, dance

13 Thompson, Nato, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time; Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2012). After the first exhibition in New York, "Living as Form" toured around the world and expanded the content as it travelled by collaborating with local institutions, adding projects or events organized by the local activists to the exhibitions, selecting certain projects from the first exhibition as the foundation. In November 2011, the touring exhibition came to Hong Kong, where it took the name "Living as Form (Wikitopia Version)". Presented by the "Microwave International New Media Arts Festival" at Videotage, it featured 20 international art projects and 14 activist art practices from Hong Kong.

14 Thompson, Nato. "Curator Statement of 'Living as Form'". <http://thecubespace.com/exhibitions/living-as-form/curator-statement>. Accessed on March 11, 2016; "Socially Engaged Art Outside the Bounds of an Artistic Discipline". <https://vimeo.com/27289754>. Accessed on December 4, 2014.

15 Lind, Maria. "Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice." in Nato Thompson ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time; Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2012): 46-55.

and writing, at the Whitehead Detention Centre, which was the largest of the camps.<sup>16</sup> In 1994, she co-founded “Art in Hospital” by gathering support from the society to further the practice of using art as therapy. Today she is still a firm believer in what she has been doing, continuing her community art projects like “Grandpa Grandma Arts Projects Series” (2012-), which encouraged the elderly to do cosplaying and make self-portraits, gathered and published their recipes, helping the elderly pass the time with art.

### Community – Site

Founded in 1996 and 1997 and located in Western District and Yuen Long respectively, both “Para/Site” and the “Museum of Site, MOST”<sup>17</sup> have the word “site” in their names and it is not a mere coincidence but a manifestation of how popular site-specific art had been in Hong Kong in the 1990s. There were two ways of thinking about venue or site in the context of Hong Kong’s art development at that time, one was opposition to the development of institutional art, and the other was the prevalence of installation art and of the notion of site-specificity. Para/Site and MOST would interact with their own neighborhoods in their practices, but promoting community art is not their main concern.

Leung Chi-wo, one of the founders of Para/Site, shed light on the founding of the art space in *Para/Site 1996* published in 1997: “Hong Kong is a very different matter. Though Hong Kong has sophistication in many and numerous ways, art is never considered as essential nor given any real importance. In many cases, artworks are regarded and appreciated more for their decorative attributes or meticulous craft and execution. In Hong Kong where a general art education is ignored and given no pride of place, it is no surprise to realize what the present state of the arts is and the meager role it plays for its public and its audience. In fact, without the respect of the general public, our museums and art centers, institutions are as marginalized as those labelled as ‘alternative,’ though they may have greater resources and power. Para/Site finds itself in such a position, a paradox – on the one hand it differentiates itself from more formal art institutions,

<sup>16</sup> Professor Law Suk-mun Sophia, Associate Professor of the Department of Visual Studies of Lingnan University, has published a book on community art of the Vietnamese boat people in 2014. Entitled *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople*, the book encapsulates the outcome of two years of extensive research on some 600 drawings as well as hundreds of articles, poems and handicrafts by Vietnamese children and adults at the Whitehead detention camp during the 1980s. By interpreting and analyzing these artworks, Professor Law demonstrates the expressive and communicative power of imagery as a form of language, and illustrates how art can articulate complicated, traumatic emotions when language fails. [http://www.ln.edu.hk/news/20140709/vietnamese\\_boatpeople](http://www.ln.edu.hk/news/20140709/vietnamese_boatpeople). Accessed on March 12, 2016. Law Suk-mun Sophia. *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Para/Site has changed the name to Para Site while the name of “Museum of Site (MOST)” remains unchanged.

taking on a role that at times complements or acts against them, whereas in effect, art in Hong Kong, as for public, is realistically all 'alternative'... And for art to establish its rightful place in Hong Kong, the tactics of 'para-site' are perhaps relevant and a positive approach." Referring to Para/Site as "para-site" means that it is a tentative and non-professional art space, and the members are just guests of the site and do not own it, stating that developing community art is not their ultimate goal.<sup>18</sup>

As for MOST, it explained its core purposes in its mission statement: "MOST is located at Kat Hing Wai, an old walled village in Yuen Long, and the choice of the site emphasizes the (environment-) oriented development of art as an attempt in contemporary art. As to organizing exhibitions, we encourage art practitioners to make use of Kam Tin and Kat Hing Wai for inspiration or as an experimental site to explore the relationship between modern art, ancient relics and communal environment, or to examine the relationship between places and art practices by the methods of and from the perspectives of social investigation, oral survey, visual studies and research in local culture and traditions, or to borrow artefacts to hold response exhibitions at an art museum, or to feel and experience the environment by creating art and giving impromptu performances in the walled village."<sup>19</sup> Independent curator and art critic Lam Hon-kin, who set up MOST, interprets "site" as "environment," emphasizing "environment" as the pivot of their art practice all along.

If referring to how "Community Museum Project,"<sup>20</sup> a research and curatorial collective active since 2002, understands "community," it would be clear to see how Para/Site and MOST oriented themselves and set the tone in the first place. Community Museum Project recognizes the polysemy of the word "community," which can denote neighborhood, people and a common. A member of CMP Siu King-chung pointed out, "The building of a community is determined by how aware each member is of his own cultural identity and of the social situation. As Anthony Cohen has said, 'People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning and a referent of their identity'... By defining the concept of community as 'indigenous' in a general way, the word is free from the restriction on a particular area or subject."<sup>21</sup> Therefore,

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18 *Para/Site: Artist in Western* (Hong Kong: Para/Site, 1997): 6-7. Just to reiterate, Para/Site chose to settle in an old district not because they had community art on their minds, and Leung's introduction shows the general marginalization of art in and before the 1990s, which contrasts sharply with Hong Kong's art development today as the more thriving the development, the more it is institutionalized.

19 <http://geodeg.com/search.php?q=hongkong&language=24&country=43&n=880>. Accessed on March 18, 2016.

20 The members of the Community Museum Project include Siu King-chung, Tse Pak-chai, Joe Yiu and Phoebe Wong.

21 Siu King-chung. "Visualizing the Community: Tools for Exploring Intangible Heritages and Community Building." in Leung Cho-nga and Lo Tin-yau eds. *Education and Heritage: Historico-cultural Perspective* (Hong Kong: Xianggang jiaoyu tushu gongsi, 2011): 54-74 (in Chinese).

to the Community Museum Project, the word “community” connotes “subject matter, settings and creative public interface.”<sup>22</sup>

### Public Art and Community Art Advocated by the Government

The Government has assigned the task of promoting public art and community art to the “Art Promotion Office,” which was established in 2001 and is under the management of the Leisure and Cultural Service Department. It was after the mid-1990s that the Government could put forward the idea of creating a body to promote public art, and before that what public art meant to them was just outdoor sculptures.<sup>23</sup> In his essay, Ho Siu-kee noted, “Whilst preparing for the establishment of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Yim Shui-yuen, the first chief curator, proposed to form a ‘Public and Community Art Team.’ In 1999, the Team was in charge of the Public Art Scheme launched by the then Provisional Regional Council... For the first time, ‘enhancement of public areas and site-specificness’ was listed as one of the assessment criteria.”<sup>24</sup> Over the years the Government is still stuck in a time warp of installing artworks in a public space when developing public art. “...(we) strive to instill a sense of art to Hong Kong’s public space so as to broaden and enrich the public’s cultural perspective and improve the quality of the living environment...By collecting artworks through public competitions or installing artworks through special commission projects, static sculptures and murals gradually evolve into interactive art installations. They not only beautify the public environment but also make life more interesting for the citizens.”<sup>25</sup> This lack of thinking conforms to what art critic Siu King-chung has imagined for public awareness, “‘Public art’ is an institutional issue that needs to meet multiple social requirements and to have a specific public setting. An effective mechanism has to be devised for discussion of issues such as public culture, public authority, public policy and distribution of public resources through ‘art’.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c\\_001.html](http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c_001.html). Accessed on March 12, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> For Hong Kong’s outdoor sculptures, see: Ho Siu-kee. “Hong Kong Public Sculpture and the Cityscape.” in Tong Kam-tang ed. *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2013* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2014): 166-177.

<sup>24</sup> Ho, *ibid.*: 170. See also the author’s interview with Ivy Lin, Curator of Oi!, November 30, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/藝術推廣辦事處>. Accessed on March 14, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Siu, King-chung. “Cong gongzhong yishu dao chengshi gonggong wenhua de yishu xiangxiang 從公眾藝術到城市公共文化的藝術想像 (Artistic Imagination from Public Art to Urban Public Culture).” *Kongjian* vol. 143-144 (February 2003): 53-64. “Liang’an sidi gonggong yishu yantaohui 兩岸四地公共藝術研討會 (Cross-Strait Four-Regions Symposium on Public Art)” was held in Taipei from December 24 to 27, 2002.



Regarding community art, the “Provisional Regional Council” initiated the “Cultural Ambassador Scheme” in 1999 and invited nine groups or individuals (which included representatives of other forms of arts besides visual art) as Cultural Ambassadors to conduct outreach art activities in the communities. Howard Chan and Siu King-chung, successful applicants of the scheme, curated “Home Affairs” to invite members of 16 households to work in partnership with 16 artists and each pair was to create a unique piece of work in or about the particular “home”. The project was a review of the relative positions of “the artist” and “the public” through the mutual contract between the two parties born out of the collaborative process.<sup>27</sup>

In 2010, the Art Promotion Office shook things up and reoriented its policies: “‘Community art’, as promoted by the Office, was to be renamed ‘communal art’, highlighting people in all arts activities. The idea of ‘communal art’ is no longer confined to the regional ‘community’ but involves people of different ages and backgrounds in a community... to use art to show the participatory spirit of different people who live together.”<sup>28</sup>

This statement is very likely a response to the increasing new immigrant and ethnic minority population in Hong Kong as stressing the importance of community integration is a political need. Oi!, opened in mid-2013, is the Art Promotion Office’s main force in promoting community art since its reorganization. Its self-regard as an experimental space invites speculation. Is the effort to combine an “official organization” with “experiments” be seen as a bold act or having a split personality? Nowadays in Hong Kong, the credibility of the SAR’s governance has sunk to an all-time low as people are demonstrating strong civic consciousness and populism is on the rise. The Government has torn apart many old neighborhoods and destroyed numerous community networks<sup>29</sup> while Oi! claims to “inspire communities through co-creative experience that connects them to art” and to “empower.”<sup>30</sup> How exactly does Oi! imagine the idea of community?

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27 [http://www.hkcmp.org/emp/c\\_002\\_home.html](http://www.hkcmp.org/emp/c_002_home.html). Accessed on November 13, 2014.

28 <http://apo.perfectlink.com.hk/en/ca.html>. Accessed on April 13, 2016.

29 Hui Yuk, editor of *Creative Space: Art and Spatial Resistance in East Asia*, has revealed the paradoxical position of art in the introduction of the book “If We Still Have Space.” Unfortunately, when the cultural industry is the main pillar of the creative economy, art and design gradually become a tool to signal class and taste, acting as accomplices to urban gentrification in the context of neoliberalism. The resistance to space – urban space and public space, has never stopped over the last decade. While art is an accomplice to urban gentrification and raises issues of space, certain kinds of art emerge during the resistance as well. Hui Yuk and DOXA eds., *Creative Space: Art and Spatial Resistance in East Asia* (Hong Kong: Roundtable Synergy Books, 2014); wen yau. “An Awakening Lingers at the Periphery: The Strangeness of Hong Kong’s Art and Social Actions.” *Leap* vol. 2 (2013): 123-131.

30 [http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/APO/en\\_US/web/apo/about\\_oi.html](http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/APO/en_US/web/apo/about_oi.html). Accessed on August 25, 2014.



### The WooferTen Phenomenon: (Some) Breakthroughs in the Community Art Organization and Its Practice

Also in 1999, the “Hong Kong Arts Development Council” (ADC) opened a gallery in the community and funded an arts group to manage the “Shanghai Street Artspace”, enhancing the chances of public participation in visual art. Presumably the ADC’s plan of focusing the community in Yau Ma Tei aimed to develop the local uniqueness into tourism resources and to introduce art to the community. The ADC was initially responsible for running and managing the Shanghai Street Artspace and later other arts groups including MOST, Art Map, the Department of Creative Arts of the Hong Kong Institute of Education and “404”<sup>31</sup> took over the site one after another. Despite who managed the place, the art space had been quite consistent in its setups and focuses in its first decade. It existed as a white cube gallery in contrast to the old neighborhood, creating what cultural critic Long Tin called a “division of class”. In the article “Huidao Youmadi: yu shequ goutong de kunjing” (Back to Yau Ma Tei: The Difficulties to Communicate with the Community), Long Tin wrote, “Looking from the outside, the art space seems to be a haven of peace in the middle of the bustling city, whereas looking from the inside, the view outside is real and alive. Naturally the old neighborhood continues to be a subject, and when we are in the art space, it is very easy for us to find only the ‘differences’ outside the place and be comfortable ‘appreciating’ them.”<sup>32</sup>

As luck would have it, the artists could group together and put in a tender to run the Shanghai Street Artspace, but they still had to show their commitment and do something worthwhile. Lau Kin-wah has described WooferTen’s practice, “The WooferTen members believed that the art spaces in Hong Kong lacked vitality and briskness, developing slowly towards more institutionalized practices. As a result, they submitted a bid for the contract to run the Shanghai Street Artspace and introduced new ideas and fresh means with the intention to revitalize the culture of Hong Kong art spaces from the inside and the outside, to make art more applicable to the daily life, society and politics, and to give vitality to the people and society. As regards community art, the members have seen in contemporary art a rapid emergence of practices, which stressed the importance of open process, participation and interactive collaboration, and which applied the principles of relational aesthetics and political aesthetics. They expected that the elements of such practices would be inspirational to community art and would allow communities

31 “404” was a group of three people who worked at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

32 Long Tin. “Huidao Youmadi: yu shequ goutong de kunjing 回到油麻地—與社區溝通的困境 (Back to Yau Ma Tei: The Difficulties to Communicate with the Community).” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, August 12, 2003, 28.

and art to be intertwined as they encouraged art to be an environmental intervention and to enhance the awareness of art, community and society.”<sup>33</sup>

Bearing the logo of a big sofa, WoofeTen first threw out the white cube format since the award of the contract to run the Shanghai Street Artspace in 2009, declaring that the space could be a living room for the public and opening the door to the neighborhood. During the four-year tenancy, the art space started with the artists practicing in the community (Yau Ma Tei) and seeking out ideas and subjects through experiments, and as it developed, things occurred as a result of the “collision” of social scenarios, the local scenarios in Yau Ma Tei and the local residents. In other words, it was the community resources that shaped and led the direction of the artworks and art practices. To be sure, WoofeTen has “revitalized” the rigid thinking of Hong Kong’s community art by opening up different channels to put the ideas into practice.

To summarize WoofeTen’s major breakthroughs: (1) It moulded itself like a community center to run the art space (as WoofeTen member Lau Kin-wah suggested in 2010),<sup>34</sup> introducing a “practical conception of contemporary art” to engage in the community with art that was close to the daily life; (2) It sharpened people’s sense of touch for society and took on social and political issues through art (art action) at all possible opportunities. Kao Jun-honn, Taiwanese artist and project director of “East Asia Multitude Meeting 2013: Post-Occupy (art / activism) Study”, summed up the actions by WoofeTen: “A series of activities involving community actions, actions



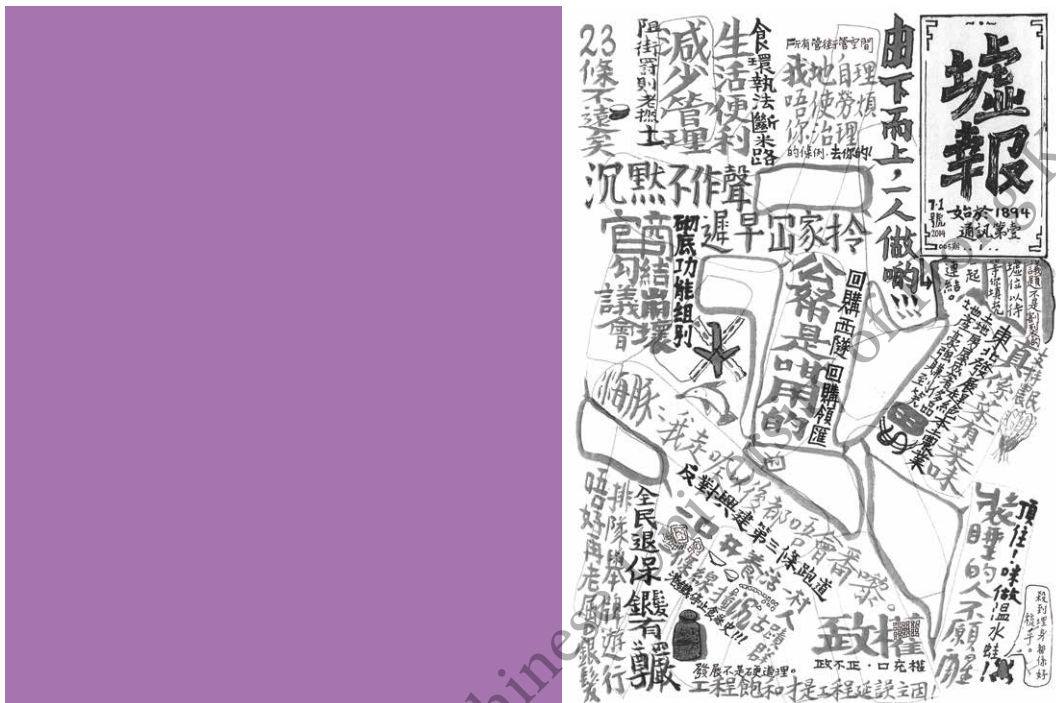
Plate 1  
Woofe Hui markets.  
Photo courtesy of  
Lee Chun-fung.

33 Lau Kin-wah. “Huohua Ting – jiuqing shi bu shi yifaju zui houhui de jue ding? 活化廳—究竟是不是「藝發局最後悔的決定」? (WoofeTen: Is it the Most Regrettable Decision of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council?).” *Contemporary Art & Investment*, March issue (2010): 26-29.

34 wen yau, another WoofeTen’s member, pondered that the community center was merely something the artists imagined it to be. The author’s conversation with wen yau, May 4, 2015.

## Plate 2

Yau Ma Tei Huibao.  
Photo courtesy of  
Lee Chun-fung.



against mercantilism, human rights actions and Asian activists.”<sup>35</sup> (3) Instead of objectifying the community and the residents, it tried to create a platform for their expression.

After the “operating rights” were relinquished on September 30, 2013, WooferTen refused to move out of the Shanghai Street Artspace and the stand-off between the art collective and the ADC lasted for two years. It continued to organize activities like telling stories, Woofer Hui markets (Plate 1), and *Yau Ma Tei Huibao* (Plate 2) first under the name “WooferTen Continuous Working Team” and later “WooferTen x Kai Fong Alliance”. The ADC had wooed to take legal action against it but the “WooferTen x Kai Fong Alliance” managed to stay at the Shanghai Street Artspace until the end of 2015 after much negotiation and bargaining.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kao Jun-honn. “Chouxiang jiqi yu youmu kongjian: yi Xianggang huohuatiang wei li 抽象機器與游牧空間：以香港「活化廳」為例 (Abstract Machine and Nomadic Space: A Case Study of WooferTen in Hong Kong)” 2010. [http://woofertennews.blogspot.hk/2012/12/blog-post\\_2443.html](http://woofertennews.blogspot.hk/2012/12/blog-post_2443.html). Accessed on December 4, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> With the opening of “When Everything Must Go – Closing Down for Real Archival Exhibition”, WooferTen officially moved out of the Shanghai Street Artspace. Subsequently, the Centre for Community Cultural Development (CCCD) took over the management of the space and performance artist Sanmu (Chen Shishen) is now responsible for the daily operation. Sanmu thinks that WooferTen has overemphasized “localness and community before art” so while he is in charge, he would focus on art in the first year. The Shanghai Street Artspace, which now goes by the name of “Green Wave Art”, is to reopen in March 2016 and its first project is concerned with a performance showcase. The author’s conversation with Sanmu, January 4, 2016.

Hui Yuk, who researches and criticizes creative industries, acknowledged WoofertTen's efforts in the article "Weishenme wo (men) yao zhichi huohuating" (Reasons Why I (We) Need to Support WoofertTen), "As far as I know, WoofertTen is the only art organization that can really interact with the community as well as the only group that is consciously and deliberately anti-aesthetic in this highly gentrified city."<sup>37</sup> In fact, what Hui Yuk meant by "anti-aesthetic" resonates with independent musician and activist Ah-kok Wong's call of "community art that refuses to engage a commonly agreed set of aesthetics."<sup>38</sup> Yet what kind of aesthetics is suited for community art? Taiwanese art theorist Gong Jow-jiun has observed that the "Echigo Tsumari Art Field," a triennial event that has taken place (in Japan) for the last 15 years, makes use of "marginal art" to get rid of the pseudo-binary opposition of "art" and "non-art" in community art. The studies of marginal art were made by Japanese sociologist Tsurumi Shunsuke between the 1950s and 1960s and Gong Jow-jiun remarked in his article, "Tsurumi Shunsuke believes that the works we call 'art' today actually belongs to the so-called 'pure art' as opposed to the vulgar and non-art things we call 'popular art', that is the visual objects that are practical and consumable, taken or made from the construction of space, signs and slogans, mass media and street movements. However, in a broader sense, the works on the margins of art and daily life can be called 'marginal art'."<sup>39</sup> It is little wonder that Tsurumi Shunsuke is lauded for his insightful and visionary view on art and many other subjects. For one thing, he criticized the Japanese people for blindly embracing pure art of the West (regarding the evil sides of professional art, pure art is the result of colonialization, and more importantly it is merely textbook knowledge and history of art and unrelated to the daily life). For another thing, he recognized the potential of "marginal art" that came from people's lives and the local strength.

37 Hui Yuk. "Weishenme wo (men) yao zhichi huohuating 為甚麼我(們)要支持活化廳 (Reasons Why I (We) Need to Support WoofertTen)." *Inmedia Hong Kong*, December 27, 2013. <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1019808>. Accessed on March 21, 2016.

38 Ah-kok Wong. "Daobie huohuating yinglai geng jianrui de gonggong yishu taolun 道別活化廳，迎來更尖銳的公共藝術討論 (Farewell to WoofertTen: More Intense Discussions on Public Arts)." in *CultMon* 9 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Culture Monitor, January 2016): 1-4.

39 Gong Jow-jiun. "Xianjie yishu: dadi yishu ji yu yishu de dangdaixing 限界藝術：大地藝術祭與藝術的當代性 (Marginal Art: Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Contemporaneity in Art)." (published in the October issue of *Artist Magazine* in 2015) [http://gongjowjiun.blogspot.hk/2015/10/blog-post\\_1.html?view=sidebar](http://gongjowjiun.blogspot.hk/2015/10/blog-post_1.html?view=sidebar). Accessed on March 22, 2016. See also Sugimoto, Yoshio. "Marginal Art." in George Ritzer ed. *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007). Blackwell Reference Online. [http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781405124331\\_chunk\\_g978140512433119\\_ss1-24](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g978140512433119_ss1-24). Accessed on March 22, 2016.

### Turn of Social Movements and Community Discourses

Tse Pak-chai, once worked as a social worker, is an activist, photographer and a member of the Community Museum Project. Having worked in different capacities in many areas, he has observed a turn in the discourses of social movements as the handling of social movements / struggles and community have shifted from “problematization” to “appreciation” over the last two or three decades and art has been a catalyst for the change.<sup>40</sup> Tse’s viewpoint is as follows:

Traditionally the academic social work education would train those who are active in social movements to see the world from a “problematized” perspective and to let the affected express themselves as a victim. The “problematized” discourses often implicitly present demands for government / state intervention. Nevertheless, since the struggle over the preservation of Lee Tung Street took place between 2004 and 2005, the scenario changed and the public saw the communities and old neighborhoods in an “appreciative” perspective instead. In other words, they have adopted a new attitude towards the interpretation of communities and have doubts about the need for development, all of which reflected a refusal of (the overly restrictive influence of) the government / the state, viewing them as the instigators of community destruction.

Besides, much of the discussion of social issues in the 1970s and 1980s needed to refer to the Government’s figures and documents. This abstract and boring approach needed to be updated and as a result arts action or artistic intervention developed gradually. Actually, the identities of art and social movements were changing as well. Before 2005, when people still favored the “problematized” approach to discuss social issues, how did one see art? For example, the issue of rooftop housing arose in the 1990s and the residents wished to organize public gatherings to draw the public’s attention. Some social workers then helped the “Theatre Community for People” to put on a play in Tsuen Wan, but the cast and crew felt dejected afterwards because they found their performance being more like a warm-up to the gathering. A similar thing happened in the annual July 1 March. In 2003, the “Civil Human Rights Front” invited some members of “Autonomous 8a”<sup>41</sup> to sing at the Victoria Park before the protest march set off. The performers were sadly mistaken as a song and dance troupe of some social movement organization and they were furious about the misunderstanding.

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40 Tse Pak-chai’s point of view is a summary of his speech “Visualizing the Community, Visualizing Northeastern New Territories” at “For the Sake of the People: Forum and Workshop on Community Arts” on November 22, 2014, and the author’s conversation with him on October 23, 2014.

41 “Autonomous 8a” is short form for the “Hong Kong Federation of Students Social Movement Resource Centre Autonomous 8a”.

From Lee Tung Street to the Sham Shui Po renewal project (2004-2008) and the preservation protests of the old Star Ferry Pier (2006) and Queen's Pier (2007), there have been a myriad of images and videos of and about the incidents circulating on both print and digital media. In "Street As Museum: Lee Tung Street" and "Oral History of Sham Shui Po", the organizers have developed a visual inventory and used information design / infographics to describe and represent the old neighborhood / community. According to Siu King-chung, they adopted the method of "visualizing community" to let the communities be seen and discussed,<sup>42</sup> and this became a drive to promote the "appreciative" discourses thereafter. During the demolition of the Star Ferry clock tower and Queen's Pier in 2006 and 2007, young artists expressed their concerns over the incidents using performance art. In the subsequent events like the protest against the Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, the Choi Yuen Tsuen incident (2009) and the protest against the Northeast New Territories New Development Areas Planning (2014), artistic intervention has become a norm: actions, music, photos, videos and Facebook posts would come in large numbers for sure. The invention formats have become more diversified with the increasing number of artists who practiced intervention. The "Prostrating Walk of the Five Districts" prompted much discussion and was the most striking movement in the Anti-Express Rail Link Campaign, which also saw an unprecedented number of images, information design and derivative works. Moreover, some cultural practitioners and artists held "Choi Yuen Tsuen Woodstock: An Arts Festival among the Ruins (2011)," which signified remembrance and resistance in a sense, right on the demolished site to say a final goodbye to the village. A few years later, the number of artists participating in the protest against the Northeast New Territories New Development Areas Planning even reached a record high. Altogether there were more than 90 people in the three groups formed against the development of the northeast New Territories: "YMCArts," "EmptySCape" and "Style of the Northeastern New Territories," and one third of them have closely worked with the community.

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42 Siu King-chung. "Visualizing the Community: Tools for Exploring Intangible Heritages and Community Building." in Leung Cho-nga and Lo Tin-yau eds. *Education and Heritage: Historico-cultural Perspective* (Hong Kong: Xianggang jiaoyu tushu gongsi, 2011): 54-74 (in Chinese).



Tse Pak-chai drew up a table of the turn of social movement discourses as follows:

	“Problematized” discourses	“Appreciative” discourses
Period	From the 1980s to 2004	After 2004
Community / Old neighborhood	Get rid of the problems	Stay intact as a home to the people
Demands for the Government	Providing services, strengthening the legislative regime, allocating extra funds and intervention	Withdrawing the plan and no intervention
Art (Artists)	Simple equipment, not essential	Plenty of equipment as standard

It is worth mentioning that “Video Power,” in action since 1989, and the pressure group “Society for Community Organization” (SoCO) are two excellent examples of truly practicing what Tse Pak-chai meant by visualizing the community, but perhaps their contribution is presenting or detailing the problems vividly. SoCO has been dealing with the situation, problems and policies relating to Hong Kong’s housing (homeless people and caged home residents), poverty, the local underprivileged communities and new immigrants since its establishment in 1972, and it is probably the earliest pressure group of the grass roots to continuously use “visuals” as a tool to draw attention and to give voice to the people. The organization has made use of documentary photography (aesthetics) to develop filming projects, hold exhibitions and produce publications and other outputs, endeavoring to increase public awareness and discussion of social issues. In terms of the housing problems, it published catalogues such as *Photo Album of Cages* (1993), *Photo Album of Cages II* (1999), *Homeless* (2002), *Homeless II* (2007) and *Homeless III* (2014), and curated “Sojourning as Tempura: Inadequate Housing Photo Exhibition” (2012) and “Trapped” (photo exhibition on subdivided units, 2014). All of its publications and exhibitions have had a social impact on the communities to a certain degree. Choi Kam-chuen, worked as a television producer, initiated the activist film organization Video Power in 1989. Acting against the mainstream media, Video Power strove to “change society by documentation and participation using a video camera,”<sup>43</sup> giving emphasis to the double-role of videographer and participant. With the active participation of the members like Cheng Chi-hung, Video Power was the major video activist involving in Hong Kong’s social incidents and struggles in the first half of the 1990s. “V-artist,” created from its predecessor Video Power, has witnessed all sorts of street demonstrations and forced demolitions in Hong Kong in the name of art activist over the past decade and more. As the apostles of “giving art back to the people”, the members would run video courses for the community at grass-roots level and strongly believe that an ideal venue to show their films should be back at where the films are about, or the homes of their neighbors.

43 Choi Kam-chuen. “Luying shehui canyu shehui gaibian shehui 錄影社會，參與社會，改變社會 (Videoing Society, Participating in Society and Changing Society).” *Lingnan Folk* issue 61 (Lingnan University Student Union: 1995): 62-64. [http://commons.ln.edu.hk/lu\\_folk/51](http://commons.ln.edu.hk/lu_folk/51)



## Conclusion

By tracing the development of community art, the governmental institutions and community organizations have always had their own interpretations regarding their practices. The isolated existence of the official and the community's use of art is still conspicuous today. The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation launched the "Arts: Transforming Hong Kong" grants program in 2013, making clear that it aims to "inspire social changes"<sup>44</sup> to the city and use art as a tool to preserve the community culture. The program has supported community projects such as "Remembering Sing Ping: Village School, Art and Open Market" organized by SoIL in 2015, the "To Kwa Wan Community Builders Training Program" developed by "Community Cultural Concern" during 2014 and 2015, "Silver Shining: Documentary Filmmaking Scheme for Elderly" initiated by "Visible Record" in 2014 to produce documentaries about the lives of the elderly and the ongoing "Community Writing" run by the "House of Hong Kong Literature." At the beginning of 2016, the ADC set two objectives for its invitation for proposals of the "Arts • Community" scheme: "to bring arts into the community" and "to carry out arts activities tailored to a particular community,"<sup>45</sup> the first objective being so condescending and ambitious while the second one cautiously conservative. Is it because of some conventional views on art? Do the objectives represent the bureaucracy or the laziness of the Government in arts administration? Or are they avoiding genuine community empowerment? The community continues to explore and moves forward with arts, and the Government and the quasi-official organization's lag in entertaining ideas just has the opposite effect of actually promoting community art.

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44 <http://www.rhfamilyfoundation.org/#!/grant-programmes/3>. Accessed on March 27, 2016.

45 "(a) Arts – Community: To bring arts into the community, to enrich the content of community arts activities, and to carry out more high-quality arts activities. (b) Community – Arts: To understand the lives and issues of the community, to collaborate with community organizations, and to carry out arts activities tailored to a particular community." [http://www.hkadc.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/NewsEvents\\_CallForApplication/20160127\\_ACS/ACS2016\\_Invitation%20for%20Proposals\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.hkadc.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/NewsEvents_CallForApplication/20160127_ACS/ACS2016_Invitation%20for%20Proposals_Eng.pdf). Accessed on March 28, 2016.

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