

A Piaget Group for Hong Kong: A Relational Model to Define Present Art Practices in Hong Kong

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The usefulness of art history in art making

I once wrote that there was nothing inherently “hybrid”, that hybridity is a changing image of things that are in the process of being eventually identified as “native”, since most things come from somewhere else before being seen as belonging to a time and place.¹ But it remains that some things have been seen and felt as inherently “native” for such a long time that they seemed never to have been seen as hybrids. For instance, Chinese painting theory, the one conditioned by literati thinking – itself conditioned by the various forms of “neo-Confucianism” that emerged during the Song and Ming dynasties – was born and developed in China and belonged, for any art historian, squarely to a purely Chinese tradition (although one could always argue that essential parts of Song dynasty neo-Confucian philosophy was profoundly influenced by Buddhism, itself not a “native” Chinese philosophy). In fact, this understanding of hybridity as constantly transforming, never still and impossible to define ontologically, is probably something more clearly belonging to our times of seemingly much faster changes. These changes, very visible at least in the visual arts around the world, are profoundly rooted in the now all-pervasive idea of globalization.

I have often mentioned how what is today defined as “globalization” (at least in the cultural realm, but also very much true in the economic realm) is the result of an intensification of exchanges, a quantitative change having brought on a qualitative one. The speed at which information gets transmitted in our world (although it is obviously still not true everywhere) creates a multiplication of possibilities in the realm of cultural exchanges. If exchange has always existed between all the cultures of the world, the speed of these exchanges has today transformed something in the way art in particular is made, thought about, shown and commodified. When it took a series of coincidences, much time and some planning in the 18th century for Jesuit painters to bring new ideas to the court in Beijing and for their presence in China to create the conditions of a new style in Rococo decoration in Europe, the aptly-called Chinoiserie, it will take a few hours sometimes for some new ideas to find their ways into the art making of innumerable artists in developed countries. The way art students today manipulate images, sounds and videos from anywhere to integrate them into works that still possess many of the characteristics of their own culture is mind-bugling, and is very obviously something that has never happened before the invention of the Internet and the advent of a multitude of Biennales around the world.

In view of the ease of access to an amount of information that would have been impossible to even dream of in the past, it becomes extremely difficult to teach “contemporary art” in the context of an art history class since students are often just as knowledgeable as their teachers. What can be taught though, at least to younger undergraduate students, is a sense of historicity, a way to understand the present wealth of art forms by explaining what came before and contextualizing the present art practices in their social contexts. The expectations of postgraduate students though, more mature and having spent more time taking an interest in art and art making, have become quite a different issue from what they were before the advent of easily available information. If art history postgraduate students will not find much on the Web in terms of original and useful research information on the art of the past, it is another matter for very knowledgeable Master of Fine Arts and Doctorate of Fine Arts candidates. In fact, MFA and DFA students who have to attend methodology seminars often ask a certain degree of “usefulness” from their art history teachers (but that also concerns their studio art teachers, since a large part of their teachings is made through presenting the works of other artists). What appears to be the real problem though is that the way art history has been created in the early part of the 20th century (a methodology entirely shaped by a Hegelian notion of a chronological narrative presenting period styles in the form of “life cycles”), which is still the way art, until the second half of the 20th century, is being taught generally, is certainly not valid for contemporary art practices in their never ending multiplicity. These new expectations would require the content of “art history classes” to be reworked into very different kinds of narratives.

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Are the ideas of influence and period style still valid?

Two of the tropes of art history education, tropes that can only be seen as problematic nowadays, have been that of influences and period styles. Influences from specific artists were of course very clearly visible at times when much fewer practitioners were making artworks in a fairly limited geographical zone. The influence of Michelangelo on some nudes by Raphael in the stanzas of the Vatican, for instance, is very obvious and poses little problems. On the other hand, the question of the existence of an influence of Chinese literati painting on the designs of Chinoiserie designs is much more problematic. It is, first, extremely difficult to prove that there has been any literati paintings in Europe before the 19th century, and, if there has been an influence of literati painting on European tapestries, for instance, it could only have been passed on through several reinterpretations made by craftsmen in China and Europe, any influence could therefore only have been so tenuous as to be almost nonexistent. In the constantly transforming context of a global artworld,² where no institutions are capable of stating what is and is not acceptable, it is very possible that any notion of influence, and even period or geographical styles, has become entirely obsolete outside of the “general culture” fed to university students around the world.

In ways very similar to what happened, for instance, to German Expressionism with its artists’ discovery of objects coming from Africa and Oceania, but multiplied to unseen before proportions, contemporary artists in “mature economies” have at their disposal such an array of visual references

that deciding on a period style for a specified geographical area might have become simply impossible. Other commentators have looked at these new propositions in an attempt to define the notion of “globalization” in culture. Simon During, for instance, in the introduction to his anthology of texts taken from the wide field of cultural studies, gives a working definition of how “globalization” functions:

What’s globalization then? Not simply, as it often seems, Thatcherism writ large, globalization is best understood as the development of global markets and capital so as to skew highly capitalized national economies towards service, information, financial instruments, and other high value-added products away from traditional primary commodities and mass-production industries. Globalization also means more organized cross-national or “diasporic” labor-force movements, along with the amazing growth of export culture industries, including tourism. And, last, it means the accelerated development of communication technologies like the Internet which escape the tyranny of distance. Globalization has both undermined the autonomy of nation states and reduced state intervention in society and the economy – sometimes as a cause, other times as an excuse. It has also drastically transformed and punctured the old metropolitan/colony, center/periphery, north/south divisions, enabling new regions to invent themselves (notably “Asia Pacific”) alongside new cosmopolitanisms, elite and popular. Because it unifies the world *and* divides it, the problem of how to evaluate the consequences of globalization or transnationalism has become a central cultural studies issue.³

In the days of networking and globalization, however, influences of any kind of degree (from direct borrowing to hundred-time removed “quotations”, where an idea has been reinterpreted so many times by so many people from different backgrounds that it becomes impossible to identify the first element in the chain) makes the ideas of influences and period styles increasingly difficult to accept in the realm of cultural production and, very specifically, in the realm of the visual arts. What is happening is, however, not a leveling, not the creation of a so-called “transnational” or “multicultural” environment that would take so many characteristics it would somehow look the same in Paris, Rio de Janeiro and Beijing, but an almost endless multiplication of possibilities where national, supranational and infranational cultures are manipulated by all kinds of artists (from “plasticians”⁴ to writers, from movie-makers to fashion designers) to produce cultural objects adapted to their own environments.

This type of multiplying environment without a center is not about a “postmodern” vision of fragmentation and multiplication. What is already happening is not a world without a center – has there ever been a center anyway outside the minds of the intellectuals of the self-styled “first world” – and maybe not even a world with the contradictory “multiplicity of centers” (and I am partial to this idea) but a world where human beings are still doing what they have always been doing: creating new communities, new cultures by deterritorializing and hybridizing. What is new is clearly the speed and

a certain, very relative, detachment from geographical constraints, all this actually being in its infancy (the internet is not available everywhere yet and not everybody in societies economically developed enough allows for the creation of art forms falling in the categories of the visual, the literary, the cinematic, etc.). But these novelties, which are quantitative changes, necessarily bring qualitative changes in the form of new hybrids (and let me repeat that there is no ontology of hybridity. Hybridity is a purely relational presence whose shapes change according to who is looking and from where).



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Plate 1
Tang Kwok-hin (born 1983), *The Photo Book of Mu Mu Dao*, paper, wood, glass and digital print, 64 x 115 x 53 cm, 2009. Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)

Deterritorializing has been a central concept of my first book on art practices in Hong Kong and it might be useful to define it here quickly. According to its creators, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, one of the most fundamental acts of any living being, and particularly of human beings, is to create territories where they can withdraw from the constant shifts of any context. For them, however, “territorialization” is eventually a dead-end and unavoidably leads to immobility and death. Deterritorialization is therefore the act of breaking down the boundaries of territoriality and moving out of any given sphere. It is the only possibility for the world to remain a dynamic system, generating these renewed “fluxes of desire” Deleuze and Guatarri saw as “not only water, air, magma, blood, paint, electricity, not only grass, earth, sun, but also ideas, people, culture, books, conversations, etc.”⁵ The information and the new systems created in the moving structures of the Internet are both a metaphor and an enacting of the idea of deterritorialization. The art practices generated within these parameters are so different from anything conceived before the advent of international electronic networking that it makes clear the existence of a real break from the past, something that even the idea of postmodernity was not capable of demonstrating clearly (there would be a need to clarify that position, which will be done at a later date). I will only provide two examples from Hong Kong of what “art in the age of networking” can be.

New issues in art making presented by networking

The photo book of Mu Mu Dao by Tang Kwok-hin (born 1983) (Plate 1), is a work created by the artist for his MFA graduation and won the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial Award in 2010. It is an obvious, maybe too much so, example of the kind of art that does not seem to be rooted in anything but the most fleeting of soil, since it does not appear to come from a specific cultural background but from the centerless, deterritorialized realm of the Internet (all the same, if nothing is at all entirely native in the cultural realm, nothing is either entirely without specific cultural roots, if only those of the art practitioner who produced the artwork, an idea that cannot either be developed here for lack of space).

In the artist statement published in the *Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial Award 2009* catalogue, Tang Kwok-hin thus described the work:

I grew up away from the bustle and hustle of the city. Although the district does not have the most charming scenery, it carries a homey atmosphere.

From riding on a bicycle to getting a bus, it is inevitable for us to enter an environment that is constantly catching up with social development. The most drastic change is that everything becomes easily accessible with the high mobility of information. For instance, people over the world would share their personal experiences on the Internet. And what interests me most is the search engine of images.

I searched for more than 100 images on Google by key words like tree, sea, landscape, human, animal, village, building, town, road, car, airplane, etc. Then I stuck the printouts onto 3R size glass plates and carved on the images. They are in a world created by Google. To me, these photos describe an un-existed and contradictory place from different angles. I named this place “Mu Mu Dao”. In Chinese, 「木目島」 (“Mu Mu Dao”) means Photographic Island.⁶

One thing is certain: the translation of “Mu Mu Dao” by “Photographic Island” is anything but a straightforward transposition of a language into another. The three characters of “Mu Mu Dao” are “wood” “eye” and “island”. If the first two characters are joined to make a single character, it becomes 相, which is one of the two characters of the Chinese expression for “photographic” (照相). But beyond this play on words that really makes sense in Chinese only (even the last sentence in the original text in Chinese is very different from its English translation) – which in itself is an example of the bewildering multiplication of meanings created by the transpositions necessary in the context of deterritorialization – it is the almost random choice of images, arranged in small glass display cases that can be moved around within the boundaries of the giant book created by the artist, that raise many questions putting in doubt many of the assumptions attached to the definition of art most people are still very attached to nowadays. The first one that came to mind in my case was that

of intellectual property: who is the owner of this work if all the images it is made of have been taken from the cyclopean repository of the Internet? There is no easy answer to that question. In a footnote to their article on “Hybridity and the Politics of Desertion”, Chan Kwok-bun and Chan Nin mentioned how the ever-present availability of information, and particularly of visual information, will necessarily lead to a reworking of the idea of copyright in a world where millions of people share amounts of information that were unimaginable a couple of decades earlier:

The possibilities for such forms of *détournement* today are of course much broader than they were in Guy Debord’s time. The work of Lawrence Lessig,⁷ Antonio Negri and DJ Spooky⁸ serves as a prolegomena to a copyright law-to-come, calling for a re-evaluation of retrograde property strictures in the wake of the internet, computer editing tools and DJ remixes.⁹

If the play on words of “Mu Mu Dao” was only accessible to those who can read Chinese, the very problems attached to translation in the context of deterritorialized networking became the central concern of a communal work made by three friends sharing a single studio, a very frequent occurrence in Hong Kong. The work I am focusing on was part of a larger show titled *Melts Into Air - Reconstruction of Reality and Representation*.¹⁰ The statement written by Solomon Yu (born 1974), Eddie Cheung (born 1981) and Chan Yu-wo (aka Chan Wingfung, born 1972) started with an interesting combination of references, from the most ancient to the very recent:

A long time ago, in Sima Xiangru’s “Rhapsody on the Imperial Hunt”, there were two characters named “Fictitious” and “Nonexistent” who actually did not exist.¹¹ Nowadays, it is René Magritte’s *This is not a pipe* which questions the ideas inherent in reproduction, language and reality. The topics of reality and reproduction can be said to have always produced discussions. Reproduction, apart from showing the many appearances of reality, also includes the artist’s hopes, thoughts, ambitions, etc. In the past, we once equated these two concepts [of reality and reproduction]; fortunately, all sorts of elaborations [on these subjects] can still produce questions about these two issues. The concepts inherent in reality and reproductions have been shattered to the point that we are starting to doubt the degree of reality of what we see and what we hear, or we even have replaced the real with an experience of reproduction. The two concepts of reality and reproduction are so intertwined that it is extremely difficult to tell them apart.

The mentions of the famous poem by Sima Xiangru (179-118 B.C.) and that of *This is not a pipe* – and one has to imagine that it is more clearly a reference to what Michel Foucault had to say about it – are themselves an interesting combination one could easily interpret as a willful attempt at hybridization. These references are used to clarify the ever present questions concerning the idea of reproduction, an idea explored famously by Walter Benjamin in 1936, also by Jean Baudrillard in 1981 with his concept of simulacra. But it is in their communal work titled *The Essences of “Watching Soaps”* (Plate 2) that the three artists raised some of the most interesting questions of their show. A

display of A4 sheets on the wall started on the right-hand side with an email sent to the Hong Kong artist Lee Kit (born 1978):

Earlier this year, my friends and I went to see your exhibition “Watching Soaps” in Osage Kwun Tong.¹² The show was great, and we picked up and kept the exhibition leaflet as a souvenir. We read through the leaflet when we returned home, and were fascinated by the curatorial text written by David Chan, particularly the Chinese version. We have put the Chinese text to Google Translate and translated it from one language to another, one by one. We have gone through all the languages available in Google Translate, totally 58 languages, and at the end, back to English and then Chinese, see attached document.

After this relay of Google’s translations on 8 May, most of the content of the original Chinese curatorial text have been either lost or turned into something else. However, 3 things have survived:

Jail, Pop, Gallery in English;

獄, 流行, 畫廊 in Chinese.

With due respect, may we ask you, the artist, whether these 3 things are the essences of your exhibition “Watching Soaps” - the universal messages that transcend all these 58 languages used in more than 50 countries around the world?



Plate 2

Solomon Yu (born 1974), Eddie Cheung (born 1981) and Chan Yu-wo (aka Chan Wingfung, born 1972), *The Essences of “Watching Soap”* from the exhibition “Melts Into Air - Reconstruction of Reality and Representation”, 28 May to 10 June 2011, Ch’ien Mu Library, New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. (Photo courtesy of the artists.)

The idea that what all these languages have in common might be the “essence” of the exhibition is, of course, falsely naïve as none of these three artists truly believed that there is such a thing as an “essence” - this old Platonist notion - and that such a thing could be found on Google translate.¹³ The only automatically translated versions one can really assess are of course of languages still rather commonly known in Academia, in my case obviously tongues like French and English. The

French version itself is so strange it actually offers moments of high comedy in its nonsensical renderings to native readers. One can only guess that the other versions are at least just as strange. Whether Google Translate is an extreme manifestation of the normative grammars of the past or just an exercise in word substitution that has very little to do with actual meaning, it remains that it stems from a very optimistic desire at universal understanding, something that is reminiscent of all the so called universal languages of the past but in reverse: not the creation of a single tool for communication, but a recourse to as many languages as possible and their infinite possibilities of translation. The work itself, and the way it is arranged on the wall with its many connections made of strings, can therefore be said to be the product of a deterritorialized exercise in translation seen as reproduction.

An already old solution to a recent problem of classification

For both these artworks without a single “art” reference, the old ideas of style and influence that were so important to a certain form of art history are obviously not making sense any longer. The new conditions offered by networking make the idea of a linear form of historical narrative obsolete. It is therefore no longer possible to see what happens in art making as a succession of events, each one influencing somehow the next, since many of these events happen simultaneously and without clear connections beyond the fact that they sometimes happen in the same place. There might still be ways to organize these events into a structure that could help make sense of the variety of art practices in a place like Hong Kong. I generally try to resist the temptation, quite natural to an art critic, to classify and put art practices into overly neat and tidy categories. But, if only to make reading easier, this desire for classification is also unavoidable and the two dichotomies that have appeared recently in the discourse on art in Hong Kong have made this impulse even more difficult to resist. It therefore becomes mostly a question of how to categorize efficiently, of how to create groupings that would not be too limiting and could even create more interpretations on behalf of the artists themselves. Another way to avoid limiting generalization is not to put an artist into any category, but more simply an artwork or a related series of artwork. Since many artists nowadays explore many different sorts of media and concepts in their art practices, it is always a good idea to avoid looking at a person as necessarily generating a single string of ideas, although understanding the cultural background within which that person is working is also absolutely necessary.

The two dichotomies I have just mentioned have emerged from the discussions I had with local artists and, more simply, from the observation of themes of a number of recent exhibitions. Still, one has to wonder about the validity of these terms that always seem to come by two, like the old East/West dichotomy. Often just as invalid, because they present the same problems of polarities and exclusion, the two dichotomies public/private and traditional/contemporary have been very much on the minds of Hong Kong artists recently. Although still using them at face value present unacceptable problems of over-generalization in academic papers, they are however so much part of the everyday practices and discussions among artists, art critics and academics that it is certainly not desirable to get rid of them altogether. It therefore becomes a question of how to use them without

falling into the trap of essentialization. Although the East/West dichotomy is very clearly just good for the scrap heap, there is a simple way to integrate the two dichotomies public/private and traditional/contemporary into a meaningful debate by simply considering them not as dichotomies (which would force artworks into either category) but as the two extreme points of two scales. Using these two scales in an integrated system, as we shall presently see, will also offer a solution to the problems of using an art historical point of view for the understanding of the present situation of art making in Hong Kong.

For many years I have been fascinated by the attempt at understanding new forms of art Rosalind Krauss made in the 1970s with the practices that have come to be called “Land art”. “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” is an attempt to make sense of the movement of Land art without relying on historicity. Krauss did not want to rely on the usual reference to influences (from the past, from other artists) and wanted to create a structural understanding of this new development in art. In order to do so, she used a Piaget group, a typical structuralist method:

The expansion to which I am referring is called a Klein group when employed mathematically and has various other designations, among them the Piaget group, when used by structuralists involved in mapping operations within the human sciences. By means of this logical expansion a set of binaries is transformed into a quaternary field which both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it.⁴

Plate 3
Diagrams by
Rosalind Krauss in
her essay “Toward
Postmodernism” in
*The Originality of
the Avant-Garde and
Other Modernist Myths*
(Cambridge: The MIT
Press, 1986), p. 284.



Krauss first established the four elements necessary to the establishment of a Piaget group by analyzing the new characteristics of the art practices of her time (Plate 3). The four elements of the Piaget group one could imagine doing in Hong Kong at present includes these four elements in the same arrangement. I guess many commentators on the destinies of art in Hong Kong will be horrified at an attempt that does look like a return to theoretical practices from the past (the 1970s

seem so far away now), but there has been so many mentions of these concepts in the art practices of the first decade of the millennium, mentions that just go on being made nowadays, that I could not help considering their permanent presence as making up the axis and deixis of something that could “both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it.” It helps putting many things into perspective as well as showing that there is a definite coherence to cultural and political discourses in present day Hong Kong (Plate 4).



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Plate 4
A Piaget group with
the public/private
and traditional/
contemporary
dichotomies

A Piaget group for art practices in Hong Kong in the 2010s

Whereas there was no way for Rosalind Krauss to give a name to something that was not a sculpture (which is why she simply retained the idea of “non-sculpture”), it is possible to identify the terms of the “neuter” axis in this Piaget group for Hong Kong: the contemporary is then identified as the “non-traditional” and the public as the “non-private”. Moreover, since there is a continuity in the sequence “Native” Chinese painting – Ink art – Plastician art – Relational aesthetics, while there is a break between “Relational aesthetics” and “Native’ Chinese painting”, it might be better to see this Piaget group not as four different and unrelated zones of classification but as a quadrant, a circle where it would be possible to situate different artworks. For instance, one artwork in the “Plastician art” section that would look like it belongs to ink art without being ink art could be put closer to the point marked “contemporary”, while an artwork made in the context of a reflection on ink but put together as a multimedia installation would be in the zone “ink art” but closer to the point marked “contemporary”. To conclude, and show the validity of such a classification, it will help to define further each section as well as provide examples.

“Native’ Chinese art” represents the art practices that have not been seen as “hybrid” yet and still convey a sense of straight “Chineseness” (remember that the idea of “hybridity” is not a state of existence, but a state of interpretation: things are not more or less hybrid, *they are seen* as more or less hybrid). In the context of this Piaget group, calligraphy would pertain to the section closest to the

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Plate 5

Fong Chi-yung (born 1959), *The sea is the world of dragons, the clouds the home of cranes* (calligraphy addressed by Qi Baishi to Mao Zedong in 1950), ink on paper, 132 x 35 cm, 2011. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)



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term “private” while landscape painting would belong to the section closest to the term “traditional”. There is a higher measure of subjectivity in this classification as there is no reason to believe one art form is more “private” than the other. It is only a way to clarify the position of these specific practices in this relational model. There is however one advantage to this choice, it would allow for instance to put some types of public calligraphy, the one that could easily be called graffiti, closer to the idea of something more public and therefore engaged in the idea of “relational aesthetic” (one could think of course of the graffiti of Tsang Tsou-choi, the “King of Kowloon” whose artistic identity is in constant shift in the hands of the artists and curators of Hong Kong; but then again the status of these specific works is so constantly in shift – from the actual public inscriptions of Tsang Tsou-choi to all the curatorial experiments these words have generated – the concept “King of Kowloon” could even occupy several spots in the Piaget group). As examples, counterclockwise starting from “Private”: a calligraphy by Fong Chi-yung (born 1959), president of the Hong Kong Calligraphers Association (Plate 5); a landscape by Koon Wai-bong (born 1974), lecturer at the Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University (Plate 6), and a figure painting by Zhou Jin (born 1970), associate professor at the Department of Fine Arts, Chinese University of Hong Kong (Plate 7).

“Ink art” would include any attempt seen as “hybrid” but revolving around the idea of the “traditional”, from the curatorial reflections made for the exhibition “Ink Art versus Ink Art”,¹⁵ where more than just the use of ink was considered, to works using an array of techniques and images reminiscent of the past. As examples, also counterclockwise starting from “traditional”, we can consider the portraits of Lai Kwan-ting Sue (born 1985) (Plate 8), who was a MFA candidate in 2011; the strange narrative drawings and paintings of Leung Ka-yin Joey (born 1976) (Plate 9), now a professional artist, and the scratched acrylic sheets of Ng Kwun-lun Tony (born 1964) (Plate

Plate 6
Koon Wai-bong
(born 1974), *Reworking
the Classics*, ink on silk,
mounted on stretchers,
octaptych, each
213 x 45.8 cm, 2008.
Collection of the Hong
Kong Museum of Art.
(Photo courtesy of the
artist.)

10), another professional artist exploring a wide array of techniques. The realms of “Ink art” and “Plastician art” often overlap and there is certainly a certain measure of subjectivity wanting to put some artworks in either categories, but this problem can be ignored here since this relational model is designed for Hong Kong art practices at a time the debate on “Ink art” is particularly lively (one would only have to look at the concerns of the organizers of the Museum Plus of the future

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Plate 7
Zhou Jin (born 1970),
Four Seasons, part 1,
ink and color on silk,
37 x 45 cm, 1995. (Photo
courtesy of the artist).



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Plate 8

Lai Kwan-ting Sue (born 1985), *On the MTR*, a set of two, 95.5 x 175 cm and 81 x 175 cm, ink and color on paper, 2010.
(Photo courtesy of the artist.)

West Kowloon Cultural District to see how important it has recently become).¹⁶ In that sense, an interactive installations like the one of Hung Keung was put in the realm of “Relational aesthetics” when it would have just as much claim to be in “Ink art” as the work of Tony Ng, or even in “Plastician art”. But the use of a Piaget group does not necessitate a rigidly defined proposition since the meaning of a certain art practice is generated by its relative position within the framework.

“Plastician art” is a term coined from the French that allows me to avoid using the term “contemporary art”. Actually, every art practice of today should be considered contemporary even though what was dubbed here “Native’ Chinese art” would generally not be considered “contemporary” by many art commentators. Within this vast realm, the following examples, counterclockwise as usual, starting

from “Contemporary”, may give a brief understanding of its possibilities: the very personal narratives of the paintings of Choi Yuk-kuen Bouie (born 1987) (Plate 11), a young artist soon to be studying for her MFA in London; the borderline art/design installations of Cheng Shuk-ye Eastman (born 1977) (Plate 12), a professional artist who also teaches art, and the video installations of Fong Sum-yu Silas (born 1985) (Plate 13), another very young artist who is taking the road to becoming a full-time professional artist.

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Plate 9
Leung Ka-yin Joey (born
1976), *Connected*,
drawing pen, color
pencil, Chinese pigment
on paper, 185 x 60cm.
2010. (Photo courtesy of
the artist.)



Plate 10
Ng Kwun-lun Tony
(born 1964), *The Diary
of Clouds*, 6000mm(L) x
660mm(W) 1600mm(H),
Acrylic sheets installed
on synthetic stone base.
K11 shopping mall,
Tsimshatsui, Hong Kong,
2009. (Photo courtesy of
the artist).

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Plate 11
Choi Yuk-kuen Bouie
(born 1987), *Removing
Curse*, Acrylic and
mixed-media on canvas,
122 x 122 cm, 2011.
Private Collection.
(Photo courtesy of the
artist.)

The expression “Relational aesthetics” is of course borrowed from the title of the now famous book by Nicolas Bourriaud.¹⁷ I have chosen to put in this category additional elements that could also be easily presented as “Plastician art”, like interactive installations. The realm of “Relational aesthetics” opens up the domain of art itself to possible political actions with a measure of “performance aesthetics” that can sometimes be reminiscent of the activism of the “Post 80s”. Many of these artists do not see themselves using the same tactics as the “Post 80s” (it ranges from painting to installation and video art), they, however, often ask questions about collective memories and whether the narratives of art history should be maintained in a “globalized” world. In that sense, some of these works could also be related to the public actions of the “Post 80s”, these groups of activists who have been recently engaged in what has been called an “urban civic movement”. Even though they do not present themselves as artists, they are clearly participants in the domain of culture and could even be seen as representatives of the sort of art practices presented as a “social turn” in the works of Nicolas Bourriaud. Defending the preservation of the visual elements (especially the architectural elements) of a culture they construe as deeply private, in the sense of being constitutive of a “HongKongness” (that have taken on new elements since I wrote my first book on the SAR), they put their concerns in the public domain in ways that had never been used before in Hong Kong (certainly not at the time of the colony and not as intensely immediately after the handover). But these last developments should probably not enter this Piaget group and I chose to leave the “Relational aesthetic” realm at the sort of art practices which leave no tangible trace. One last round of examples, still counterclockwise, starting from “public”: the interactive installation Hung Keung (born 1970) (Plate 14), a professional artist teaching in the School of Design of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where floating Chinese characters follow the audience on a large-screen; the dialogical performances of Lee Kit (Plate 15), full-time professional artist, who still leaves some tangible artworks in the form of delicate paintings used as everyday utensils, and the fully dialogical performances of Pak Sheung-chuen (born 1977) (Plate 16), another full-time artist.

Concluding remarks

Although Rosalind Krauss was certainly convinced of the scientific nature of her non-historicist attempt to make sense of Land art, I am not at all seeing this classification as anything else but one way to create a relational map of art activities in Hong Kong at the beginning of the 21st century: with this diagram, art practices can be defined not in themselves but in relation with all the others (as we have seen, there is a large measure of objectivity here, I am just not sure how much of it is so). It is a better solution to write a “portrait” of art practices in a certain place, not new but far better adapted to present art practices and not relying on a teleological form of historicity. This diagram rejects the idea of an essence of specific art practices to use strictly a relational form where something can only be defined as part of a network of relationship with everything else in the same class. This way of defining without relying on the idea of essence, unfortunately, does not answer the question of what this “class” is and how it has been established. But answering that question would be answering the question of what is art, a very dangerous attempt since art has put on, over the centuries and in different cultures, so many different forms that it has always been extremely difficult



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Plate 12 (Left top)

Cheng Shuk-ye Eastman (born 1977), *Gymnasium*, Installation View, Breathe Residency in Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, 2010.
(Photo courtesy of the artist.)

Plate 13 (Right top)

Fong Sum-yu Silas (born 1985), *Memoriescape*, 2011, Video Installation, 26-channel video installation on monitors, exhibited in “Memory Disorder”, 21 April -21 May, 2011, Gallery EXIT, Hong Kong. The exhibition was a video installation consisting of 26 videos. The videos were captured by telecine super 8 film, webcam, cell phone, camera and digital video of different qualities.
<http://silasfong.com/news/?p=1187> , accessed 22 June 2011. (Photo courtesy of Gallery EXIT, Hong Kong.)

Plate 14 (Bottom)

Hung Keung (born 1970) + imhk lab, *Bloated City / Skinny Language*, version II, interactive installation, 2007-2009. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)

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Plate 15

Lee Kit (born 1978), *We already lost too many interests*, a performance at the opening of “Portrait of Self Exile”, April 2009, The Shop, Beijing. Artist description: “I kept making and drinking coffee during the four-hours long opening. People were free to join in. I used the hand-painted cloth as table cloth and played a cassette which recorded songs & sound from my studio in HK. I also played one of my video work *Filling up an ashtray*.”
(Photo courtesy of the artist.)



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Plate 16
Pak Sheung-chuen (born
1977), *Going Home
Projects*, 2010. Visitors
to the Taipei Biennial
2010 at the Taipei Fine
Arts Museum could take
the artist home where
he would only stay for
a short while and take
some photographs.
(Photo courtesy of the
artist.)

to give it a stable, enduring definition. As far as we are concerned, I tried to give to art in Hong Kong in the early 21st century the widest possible field, including practices that some artists would not even consider to be art (like many Chinese landscape artists in Hong Kong who still refuse to see aspects of “relational aesthetics” as art, for instance). Exploiting this Piaget group to give shape to a survey of art practices in Hong Kong will be my next project over the following years.

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¹ Vigneron, Frank: “Hybridization in the visual arts – Now you see me, now you don’t.” in *Hybrid Hongkong*, edited by Chan Kwok-bun, Chair Professor, Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Baptist University, special issue of *Visual Anthropology* (edited by Paul Hockings) in cooperation with the Commission on *Visual Anthropology*, January-March 2011, Volume 24 Issue 1 & 2, p 30-45. London and New York: Routledge.

² I am using the term “artworld” in the sense given to it by Arthur Danto of a context purposefully created by artists to give to specific objects an art meaning. Danto, Arthur (1924-): from *The Artworld* (Ross, p. 470-481) (Ross, Stephen David (ed.): *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany: State University of New York Press, c. 1994).

³ During, Simon: “Introduction” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, second edition, edited by Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 23-24.

⁴ Editor’s Note: Vigneron believed that the word “Artist” was used so many times that it was completely emptied of its meaning. To avoid using this word, he used the term “Plasticien” (Artist in French), and even anglicize it by writing it as “Plastician”. For a definition see Vigneron, Frank: *I Like Hong Kong... Art and Deterritorialization* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), p. xi-xiv

⁵ Vigneron, Frank: *I Like Hong Kong... Art and Deterritorialization* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010), p. 31.

⁶ Hong Kong Museum of Art (ed) *Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial Awards 2009* (Hong Kong: The Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2010), p. 54.

⁷ Lessig, Lawrence: *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

⁸ Negri, Antonio: *The Porcelain Workshop* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2008.)

⁹ Chan Kwok-bun and Chan Nin: “Hybridity and the Politics of Desertion” in special issues *Hybrid Hong Kong*, Vol. 24 of *Visual Anthropology*, Paul Hockings (ed), Guest editor Chan Kwok-bun (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 27.

¹⁰ “Melts Into Air – Reconstruction of Reality and Representation”, 28 May – 10 June 2011, Ch’ien Mu Library, New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

- ¹¹ “The longest and most influential composition of Sima Xiangru is the “Rhapsody on the Imperial Hunt” (also known as the “Sir Fantasy Rhapsody” or the “Rhapsody on the Shanglin Park”). This poem takes the form of a debate between three fictional figures who describe the hunting parks and hunts of the kings of Chu and Qi, and then those of the emperors. The poem’s major theme is the all-inclusive power of the ruler, and it treats totality as the defining attribute of power. The poem regards the equation of the hunting park with the world as fundamental to the emperor’s claims to lordship. Microcosm and macrocosm were central tropes in the imagery of power in this period, as in Qin Shihuang’s rebuilding Xianyang as a replica of Heaven, making copies of the palaces of conquered states, and melting down the weapons of defeated adversaries to make statues laid out in imitation of a constellation. The equation of the hunting park with the world derived from the same mode of thought.” Lewis, Mark Edward: *Writing and Authority in Early China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 317-319.
- ¹² The exhibition was titled “Watching Soaps (I can’t recall the day that I last heard from you)” and took place during the period 22 January– 21 February 2011, Osage Kwun Tong. The curator, David Chan, thus described the setup of this exhibition: “For this exhibition, Lee will exhibit a series of artworks that allude to multiple stories inside a single space. An ad hoc cinema will also be set up in another gallery to polarize the tension between our static and theatrical associations of the objects on view. The unfolding of contradictory narratives transforms the exhibition site into a temporary film set, upstaging a tension between what is real and artificial, still and theatrical. What is left is an emotionally charged state, open for the audiences’ improvisation and imagination, and which requires the attention of a careful gaze.”
- ¹³ The site of Google Translate comes with a very interesting explanation of the methods employed: “When Google Translate generates a translation, it looks for patterns in hundreds of millions of documents to help decide on the best translation for you. By detecting patterns in documents that have already been translated by human translators, Google Translate can make intelligent guesses as to what an appropriate translation should be. This process of seeking patterns in large amounts of text is called ‘statistical machine translation’. Since the translations are generated by machines, not all translation will be perfect. The more human-translated documents that Google Translate can analyze in a specific language, the better the translation quality will be. This is why translation accuracy will sometimes vary across languages.”
http://translate.google.com/about/intl/en_ALL/ (accessed 20 June 2011).
- ¹⁴ Krauss, Rosalind (1941-): “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (in Krauss, Rosalind E.: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1986), p.283.
- ¹⁵ “Legacy and Creations - Ink Art vs. Ink Art”, organized on the occasion of the World Expo in Shanghai by the Hong Kong Museum of Art and Shanghai Art Museum, 16 July – 9 August 2010, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China; and then restaged 27 May – 28 August 2011, Hong Kong Museum of Art.
- ¹⁶ The reader can look at sections 5.1.8 and 5.1.9 of the M+ executive summary, Home Affairs Bureau, SAR government: http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr04-05/english/hc/sub_com/hs02/papers/hs020912wkcd-398-e.pdf (accessed on 19 March 2011).
- ¹⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas: *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presse Du Reel, 2002.