

The Rise and Fall of Hong Kong's Artists' Villages: A Virtual Interview in a Parallel Universe

Lam Ka-man Carmi

With the so-called “artists villages” (more explanation on the “so-called” later) swirling around my head, I put my fingers to the keyboard and the characters “witch doctors” came out.

The witch doctors of the Mentawai Islands, west of Sumatra in Indonesia, were reported to be surprisingly effective in curing people who suffering from diarrhea. Their magical formula was to have the sufferers lie face down near the edge of a cliff and lick the ground from time to time. Past experience told the witch doctors that it was “mostly effective”, though they weren't sure of the “why”. Later it was found that the soil on the cliffs contained kaolin, the white clay commonly used in some of modern diarrhea medicines. Once the reason is determined, a medicine can be made and trying luck with licking tongues will be history.

In order for things to be repeated, represented and duplicated, one has to strip them down to their origins in the way pure historical documentation will be translated into pragmatic purposes: find the real catalyst, get a firm grasp of it and its occurrence can be repeated with precision. But what if it involves the human factor? And what if one has to take into account the additional element of “cultural policies”?

2011 marks the 10th anniversary of Fotanian.¹ I was thinking: perhaps it is a suitable time for the *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2011* to include an article about the artists' villages in Hong Kong? A browse through previous editions of the past few years reveals no shortage of essays and interviews on the same topic. From the early days of the Oil Street Art Village, the clusters of artists' studios and workshops sprouting up organically in industrial buildings of Fotan, San Po Kong and Kwun Tong, to the Government-led Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, the last two decades have spawned a large number of discussions and commentaries, all of which invariably approach the topic from a handful of perspectives: tracing origins, probing “deaths”, comparing best overseas examples, commenting on the present state and future outlook (or the lack of one).

Thus, a new approach is in order – one that offers a conclusion.

This interview is a work of fiction. It is fictional as far as taking the form of an interview is concerned; the answers are well-founded.² This article attempts to raise a series of questions and then follow them with an archaeological investigation facilitated by my micro-archive at disposal. It has no intention to make value judgments, let alone offering brand new perspectives and constructive

suggestions. That said, there is no such thing as complete objectivity. The instances of things taken out of context and the process of selection and extraction during the compilation of the interview reveal a certain orientation. And it is important to note that old materials excerpted in the interview do not necessarily reflect the present views of the artists.

Allow me to repeat myself: the following is a virtual interview that takes place in a parallel universe over a span of twenty years.

Question One of Virtual Interview: Why does art creation have to have a specific “space”? Can’t you make do with what is given and play with the cards that are dealt, choosing a medium based on the space made available to you?

Kith Tsang: From the 1980s onwards there were the occasional art/exhibition/action spaces in the Hong Kong artist community. The reason that art creation needs space is two-fold: first, it requires reference to works that have been organised systematically.

HKVAYB: Which means exhibitions?

Kith Tsang: Yes. Second, artists are in dire need of fellowship, to discuss and exchange ideas during process of creating art and help free the mind from doubt and uncertainty.

HKVAYB: Which translates into activities such as symposiums and talks, or simply a space to sit down and chat.

Kith Tsang: They were hard to arrange back then when exhibition spaces were rare, rents were high and exhibition periods were short.

HKVAYB: I see. Po-shan, you served as Executive Director of Fotanian Open Studios in 2004 – the first time the event was organised by a non-Fotanian, which Lam Tung-pang lauded as “led the open studio to the next level”³. What’s your view on it?

Leung Po-shan: I’d contributed an article to *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2003*. It contains interviews with individual Fo Tan artists as well as a small-scale survey.⁴

HKVAYB: Are you suggesting me to do my homework?

Leung Po-shan: Ha-ha! *Fotanian Open Studios 2004* (In Chinese) collects some other interviews. You can take a look of it, too.

Sara Wong: Having a studio has had a huge impact on the mode of creating art. In late 1980s the majority of local artists didn’t have their own studios and had to turn to outside workshops for production before they did assembly and add finishing touches on-site.

- Leung Chi-wo: Whether one can carry an idea from conception to realisation depends on the experience and ability of the artist. Hence, installation artworks of the 1990s were of mixed quality. But with your own studio you can run more tests.
- Sara Wong: The “handmade” nature of art makes it necessary to work in a studio where there is time for revision and refinement. A studio offers a space for thinking and the many books on shelves provide handy references within easy reach.
- Lee Kit: My creations are more “private” and I need a quiet place for contemplation. A studio is a private space where I roam freely – it’s not only a place to work.
- Ma Kwai-shun: I do water-based woodblock printing, producing large-scale scrolls of over six feet long. After printing I need to paint in the details – a process that can take up to a year – and several scrolls are placed side by side for painting in order to save time. It’s how things are done, a task not easily accomplished without such a workspace.
- Liu Siu-jane: It is the responsibility of printmaking artists to collect and organise materials related to the art form. Back in the late 1990s I got wind of the sale of a stone lithographic printing press to a buyer in Vietnam and intercepted, getting it at a low price. Ma and I then embarked on a journey of finding it a home. Our studio is now home to several printing presses and a large collection of books and literature for promoting printmaking activities and related research in Hong Kong.

Question Two of Virtual Interview: What are the basic requirements artists have for a creative space? What made you choose the places you’re now working in as studios?

- Woody Lee: My studio in the Cattle Depot Artist Village is where I keep old works and sundries, also for recording and editing. My studio in Fo Tan is bigger – it’s where painting, post-production and any works that require space are done. Although physical space cannot impede inspiration, the tranquil atmosphere of Fo Tan is more conducive to concentration.
- Pauline Lam: I’m fine either way. But Cattle Depot is a listed building that comes with certain restrictions. Woody and I used to be tenants of Oil Street – having set up the first artist studio there – until the property was reclaimed by the government. We finally settled down in Fo Tan and Cattle Depot after a few twists and turns.
- Leung Chi-wo: Fo Tan neighbours my home and it’s relatively free from polluting industries. There are also the bonuses of easy, convenient access to material supplies, shopping malls and eateries as well as reasonable rents.

- Lawman Law: But I find the transport, eating and safety of Fo Tan rather unsatisfactory. What really attracts me to the place is the human factor. We alumni [of The Chinese University of Hong Kong's Fine Arts Department] look out for each other and make sure visiting curators are greeted by fellow artists under the same radar.
- Chow Chun-fai: I chose Fo Tan because it seemed to me a great place to exchange ideas on art with a number of artists already taken residence here. While there were no formal events to speak of, an occasional chat over lunch or an odd incident of borrowing tools all added to a sense of fellowship and cohesiveness. Then again, the quality of space has the most impact on the creative mind and the scale of work. The lack of space is sure to suffocate experimental work.
- Au Hoi-lam: The vast space of Fo Tan changed the way my body responds to the works. I like the fact that Fo Tan is far away from the hustle and bustle, a place where I can set my mind on painting.
- Sisi Chan: Computers used to be my artistic medium. Yet the vast workspace of Fo Tan not only allows a wider choice of material but also stretches the flexibility of the artists and therefore engenders possibilities. I've since had my share of attempts at large-scale 3-D works.
- Tommy Wong: My studio has a high ceiling, ample spaces and natural light which are suitable for creating large works and arranging models for life drawing.
- Marc Leung: High ceilings are a prerequisite to making sculptures.
- Wong Tin-yan: The studio environment allows me to work anytime on sculptural works which produce a great deal of noise. It also offers sufficient working and storage spaces with the extra conveniences of service lifts and loading platforms.
- Phoebe Man: A studio space has a similar feel to an exhibition venue and I can work with greater ease here than at home.
- Christopher Ku: My view is somewhat different. I love large-scale paintings and insisted on painting big paintings even when working in tiny spaces in the past. A studio is an external space and a part of my painting tools, but the greatest incentive still lies within the realm of thought.
- Wilson Shieh: I've worked in Chinese *gongbi* painting for a long time and all I needed was a table. It's so self-contained that I had no interaction with the community of my immediate surroundings. My decision to move to Fo Tan was based on two factors: a bigger space, and the obvious benefits of the clustering effect, closer ties with the tight-knit art community here.

Lui Chun-kwong: Your working environment and the medium of your art are not necessarily related. An environment is good for artistic creation so long as it has no curfew, the freedom to come and go without causing disturbance to your neighbours.

Sarah Lai: For me, any place that offers freedom, convenience and enough space.

Clement Ngan: The biggest constraint is time. I'm in fact more flexible with space.

Question Three of Virtual Interview: What do you think of the term “artists’ village”?

Anonymous: The Open Studios festival was called “Fotan Gathering” back in 2003 and was changed to its present name, Fotanian Open Studios, in 2004. The term “Fotanian Artists’ Village” cannot be found on the posters and publications of 2004. In fact, if you were put up a banner to mark the entrance of “Fotanian Artists’ Village”, you wouldn’t know where. Fotanian has no entrances, walls or fences like those of Cattle Depot and no fixed boundary – these are unnecessary and absolute no-no’s. These days, “Artists’ Villages” are a has-been concept. Where there are artists there is an artists’ village – even when a “village” aura is absent and its inhabitants wouldn’t call themselves villagers. Gimmicks, after all, are more practical than integrity. The festival is called Fotanian Open Studios, and true to its name, it opens the doors to the public.

Otto Li: Fotanian runs as a loose organisation. Any artist who rents a studio space within the Fo Tan district can be a Fotanian. Membership is at the sole discretion of the artists and there’s a huge degree of freedom. Communication is maintained between specific individual units and only a handful of artists meet up on a regular basis. “Thriving on freedom” is the motto of Fotanian – the freedom for artists to participate or not to participate and the freedom to decide the degree of cohesiveness required.

Lee Kit: Fotanian functions best with the least amount of limitations. That Fo Tan is left to its own devices is its biggest draw – the units are kept independent of each other and artists come and go as they please, giving it an edge that encourages a studio-based creative life and diversity in development.

Woody Lee: I seldom interact with other studios, preferring to work alone.

HKVAYB: In other words, a so-called artists’ village is no more than a collection of individual spaces.

Question Four of Virtual Interview: If, indeed, an artists' village has its social functions and duties, what will they be? What directions of development might it pursue? Does it need assistance with publicity?

Patrick Ho: From the perspective of value-adding, an artists' village has to cause a chemical reaction with its environs. The value of an alternative space lies in the gap between the low commercial value of a property or land, and the subsequent increase in artistic value following the emergence of the artists. The government has been researching on the developing of artists' villages but public policy should focus on public facilities and not private spaces like artists' studios.

Howard Chan: Some early programmes of Cattle Depot did point out a few directions: cultural exchange and arts education, both involved the networking factor; that is to say discussing with other groups on long-term collaboration. An artists' village also doubles as a place to collect and disseminate ideas, attach importance to what you want your audiences and participants to take away with them.

Chingman Shum: Bringing different arts groups together, an artists' village is in a better position to create a collective force. Close proximity to local communities helps incorporating art into the society and reaching out to the public.

Damon Tong: It's my social duty as a Fotanian to open my studio to the public!

Stephanie Sin, Timothy Zauho: Agree!

Lo Lai-lai: The present Fotanian Open Studios undoubtedly serves the "social duty" of opening up to the public but it's too early to tell of its role as a channel of communication. Indeed, Fotanian might not be able to assume too great a responsibility. After all it's just an occasion for public exposure. Artists are left to take whatever direction they see fit. Our job, to keep making art aside, is to be true to ourselves!

Castaly Leung: We've opened our studios since the first Fotan Open Studios [in 2001] with the intention of sharing the new format of an artist's studio with others. But... we were twice forced out of our studios which were sold not long after the open days. It's just so exasperating! It's never our intention to turn it into a property viewing!

Lee Cheng: While it's healthy for artists to engage in exchange with the wider community, random but frequent visits do affect the work of the artists. It'd be better that members of the public visit Fo Tan during open days and leave the artists to their work on regular days.

Panger Wong: Fotanian doesn't necessarily need development. It isn't an artists' village, neither a theme park. Before asking the question of development direction, we should first ask if there is a need for development. What are Fotanian's aspirations? What kind of community does it see itself evolving into? Self-resilience and feet firmly on the ground are surely better than a big talk about development without a vision.

Woody Lee: Success stories abroad may not work in Hong Kong. It's hard to network the closed units of Fotan. There's no landmark building but a cluster of them dotted along the hillside. It's far from the MTR station and offers neither cafés nor designer stores for window shopping.

Anthea: I don't think Fotanian has a need for long-term promotion plans. Basically Fotanian is a body of artists' studios. The artists need only to do their duties, produce good works and make good use of the space. Without these, all efforts in promotion will be in vain. Promotion, on the other hand, is the responsibility of sponsors, curators and arts organisations. It's good art that draws those people.

Andrew Lam: Non-planning is a form of planning; non-development is some kind of development. Artists do art, not planning. In some ways, an artists' village is formed by artists getting together without much planning. Is there an ideal model for an artists' village? If there isn't, why would artists and people who have nothing to do with art want to plan and develop Fotanian into an artists' village?

Castaly Leung: Artistic creation is fundamentally personal. There's no need for Fotanian to turn into the stronghold of Hong Kong artist community.

Question Five of Virtual Interview: As an artist of an artists' village, what kind of support do you expect from the government? For the government, what measures will be introduced to support development of local artists' villages?

Patrick Ho: The government doesn't provide for lazybones! Hong Kong artists have been living off government subsidies. They are no different from the unproductive poor who live on social benefits!

Anthea Fan: The so-called idea of "community-driven" has always been used by the government to pay lip service and shirk responsibilities. By doing without government subsidies, artists in the Cattle Depot Artist Village have debunked the long clung-to myth that arts development is only possible with government support. They truly lived up to the spirits of independence, autonomy and free artistic pursuits.

- Choi Yan-chi: Oil Street is a rarity born out of chance, a force triggered by a random stimulus. The former Government Supplies Department Headquarters in Oil Street was vast, bare and cheap to rent, an ideal kind of space for artists' studios. In the summer of 1998, just a few weeks after the opening of Oil Street, an artists' village was taking shape. At its height Oil Street was home to over 30 artist-tenants – unlikely to have been achieved by government planning and advocacy. It's mandatory that Cattle Depot opens to all and has absolute freedom in tenancy matters. The power of cohesiveness among the artists – independent and self-initiated – is indefinite.
- Bono Lee: Oil Street wasn't about the creative use of an abandoned space. It was seen as a place "better to be rented out than left wasted". There's no planning, furnishing or supporting facilities; things were left to their own devices. In comparison, Cattle Depot was better conceived but it's still far from well-planned. But being Hong Kong, if all emphasis was on development and government's attention, Cattle Depot would probably turn into a place populated by still-life painters. It should be about interacting with the public, not rounding up artists and keeping them from disturbing the community.
- Howard Chan: Artists' villages are the fruit of chance. Up to now [2001], they are isolated occurrences rather than products of a mechanism established by the government or the people. Their development processes are telling of the fact the local artist community and the government were merely "taking things as they came".
- HKVAYB: In fact I never quite understand why artists must first prove their worth to the community and live up to people's expectation before they are allowed to have their own spaces – spaces located, paid and maintained by the artists themselves. On the other hand, I don't agree that the government has to answer to every need the artists have.
- Tang Siu-nam: There are two sides to government support: first, policy support, such as setting aside land for artists' villages. But then Fotanian happened naturally and has been growing steadily without government policy support or tainting its image. Second, financial support, including sponsorships for events and publications. But sponsorships seem not important to Fotanian: it can work with budgets big and small; as the event doesn't carry specific themes, publications make little difference.
- Gordon Lo: With the input of resources comes demand. As Fo Tan is self-sufficient, my only wish is for government cultural departments to establish stronger information ties with Fo Tan.

- Tozer Pak: The government is such a schmuck – it's better stays out of it!
- Jeff Leung: When it comes to creative industries, the government is after economic benefits they bring. While they may not sell tickets like performing arts, they are good catch-phrases to gain public recognition for the arts. A senior of mine used to say: more administration leads to less human touch. In fact, failed administration results in the loss of human touch; failed policies leads to bureaucracy.
- Chester Chu: How do you promote community growth? I wouldn't pin my hopes on the government. They can advocate but resources will be limited. There shouldn't be special privilege for art. I believe in a free market economy and history tells us that economic prowess precedes the arts. Those who cannot make a living in the arts can take on other jobs to sustain themselves. One should first make oneself happy before touching the hearts of others. With the economic downturn the government simply doesn't want more unproductive idlers in the society.
- Emil Wong: It's best for Fotanian to retain its autonomy – to do things their own ways and come and go as they please. At most, it's a collective exhibition venue opened to the public once a year. If there is public money to spend, spend it on arts education. Besides, I don't have much faith in the government not changing the ecology of the community as it is now.

Acknowledgement: Enoch Cheng

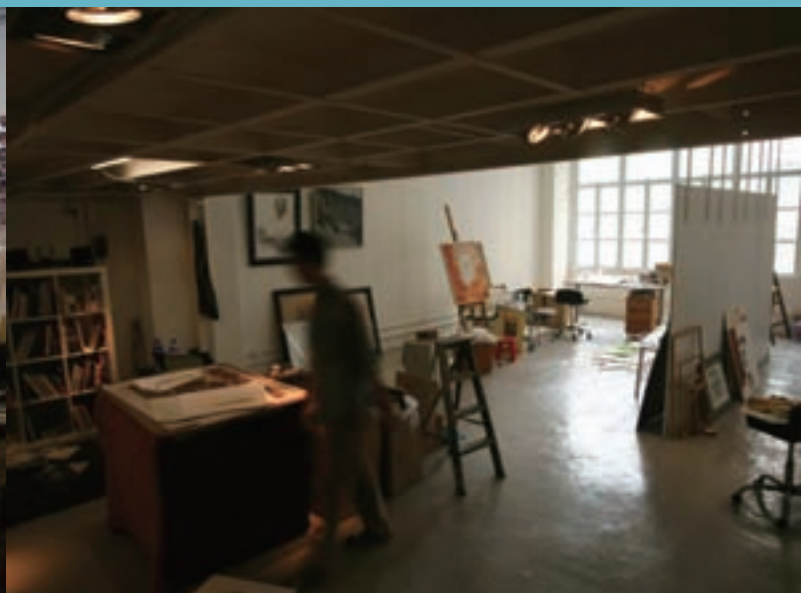
Lam Ka-man Carmi is the Executive Editor of the *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook*.

¹ The 10th anniversary of the Fotanian refers to the Open Studios festival and not of phenomenon of artists setting studios inside industrial buildings. The Open Studios began in 2001 but the name "Fotanian" didn't come into being until Chow Chun-fai raised it at the preparation meeting of Fotan Open Studio 2003.

² Editor's note: For the information sources, please refer to the footnotes of the Chinese version.

³ Lam Tung-pang "From Fo Tan to Fotanian", May 2006.
<http://www.lamtungpang.com/pages/posts/from-fo-tan-to-fotanian30.php>

⁴ Leung Po-shan "Retreating from the Forefront of Officialization: The Example of Artists in Fo Tan Industrial Area". Horald Mok, Chan Yuk-keung (ed.): *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2003* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2004), pp112-143. (Chinese and English)



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Appendix: Selected materials from my micro-archive on “Artists’ Villages / Artist Studio”

(For more, please refer to the Chinese Appendix.)

Books

Harold Mok, Chan Yuk-keung (ed.): *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2003* (Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, September 2004).

Harold Mok (ed.): *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2006* (Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, January 2008).

Chan Yuk-keung, Wan Chui-ki Maggie (ed.): *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2007* (Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, December 2008).

Chan Yuk-keung (ed.): *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2009* (Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, August 2010).

Tong Kam-tang (ed.): *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2010* (Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, September 2011).

10 Years of Fotanian: Open Studios 2011 (Hong Kong: Fotanian, 2010).

Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook

“Essays”

Year	Title	Author
2003	There Is This Cattle Depot Artist Village in Hong Kong	Anthea Fan
	Retreating from the Forefront of Officialization: The Example of Artists in Fo Tan Industrial Area	Leung Po-shan
2007	An Overview of the Transitions Undergone by Major Art Exhibition Venues during the Last Decade	Jeff Leung
2010	Artists vs Media vs Government vs Artists: Using Industrial Buildings Revitalisation as an Example	Lam Ka-man Carmi

“Public Issues”

Year	Event
2003	Cattle Depot Artist Village
2004	Development of the Central Police Station Compound as an Art District
2005	Developing Cultural and Creative Industries and the Creative Arts Centre
2006	Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre
2007	Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre
2008	Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre
2009	Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre
2010	“Revitalization of Industrial Building”

Articles

Lam Tung-pang “From Fo Tan to Fotanian”, May 2006.

<http://www.lamtungpang.com/pages/posts/from-fo-tan-to-fotanian30.php>

“Survey on the Current Status of Industrial Buildings for Arts Activities and Future Demand”, prepared by Policy 21 Limited and Centre for Culture and Development, CUHK, December 2010.

Launched by Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

http://www.hkadc.org.hk/UserFiles/ResourcesCentre/Report/20110127_CSIB/Research_Summary.pdf

http://www.hkadc.org.hk/UserFiles/ResourcesCentre/Report/20110127_CSIB/Research_Report.pdf