

Performance Art in Hong Kong 2012: Art and Action of Being

yuenjie, Sanmu & Mok Chiu-yu Translated by Mok Chiu-yu

At the beginning of the 20th Century, photography that had entered public life fundamentally changed the direction of art development. The traditional art forms were declining continuously, becoming barren. The ideas of Dadaism and Surrealism stormed our thinking, and were catalytic in generating various new forms of art. Their criticism and negation of art heralded what was to be referred as performance art. After the traumas and the despairs generated by the two world wars, artists had a thorough reflection on the culture of mankind. There were thoughts and also actions. Performance art was born out of the constraints of the traditional art forms. With an independent spirit of resistance, performance art directly questioned the dominating mainstream culture of capitalism. The Viennese Actionists, Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, John Cage etc. were rapidly and independently shaking up the culture of the time.

The great freedom and liberation of performance art (with respect to the constant subversion of itself as an art form, the inward gaze of spirit and mind, the self awareness of the body, the location of one's existence....) forges well with the tradition of the oriental poetics of China. It is not easy to define performance art but to us, performance art is the use of the body as the medium, to experience people and things and to interact with the environment and society. The performance artist makes use of the process of the action and its result to express his feelings and to construct certain meaning. The art is not simply an actualisation of aesthetics at a visual level. It tries to express some kind of ideas.

In the mid 1980's, performance art in China broke away from the long existing spiritual chains, surged and grew like spring shoots. After 1989, Ma Liuming, Cheung Heung, Chu Ming, Soong Dong, Wang Chuyu, Ho Yuncheong created powerful works and carried on the tradition of resistance in response to a rotten situation of extreme repression. However, their limited resistance was neutralised and suppressed in 2001 by the Ministry of Cultural of the State Council (*Article no. 14 in 2001*)¹. After that, performance art suffered from the capitalist bubbles of the international art market. Some poor performance art works had repeatedly emerged. A difficult situation was confronted by Chinese performance art. Yet artists like Chou Bin, Shu Yang, Chen Jen and Wang Chuyu continued their creative works and persevered under tough circumstances.

Plate 1

Mok Chiu-yu Augustus
(born 1947), *Together
against the Death Penalty
(Ensemble contre la
peine de mort - ECPM)*
2012, Lockhart Road,
Wanchai, Hong Kong,
10 Oct 2012. (Photo
courtesy of Amnesty
International)



Pioneered in 1978 by the “Frog King” Kwok Mang-ho, Hong Kong’s performance art has had a history of 35 years. From 1978 to 1995, performance art happened sporadically (for years Kwok lived and worked in the USA). However when 1997 approached with the sovereignty of Hong Kong to be returned to China, many artists in Hong Kong created vigorously and spoke up. In this atmosphere and environment, there appeared also a lot more performance art than before. Brilliant and memorable works were created by Yeung Sau-churk Ricky, Hay Young, Tsang Tak-ping, Leung Po-shan Anthony, Poon Sing-lui, and others. They were directly taking part in the ongoing social and cultural changes. Poon’s controversial *Incident of the Red Man* (in which Poon smashed the nose of the bronze statue of Queen Victoria in the park of the same name and poured red paint on both himself and the statue) almost prophetically revealed the end of an old colonial era and the arrival of red colonial times.

More or less at the same time, Mok Chiu-yu, Foo Loo-bing, Ko Siu-lan and others were beginning to actively introduce many fine performance artists from abroad and Mainland to Hong Kong, including Seiji Shimoda, Tanaka Teruyaki, Shimizu Megumi, Kuroda Osamu, Takahashi Fumiko, Arai Shinichi (Japan), Tamar Raban (Israel), Roy Vaara (Finland), Hong O Bong (Korea), Alastair MacLennan (Ireland), Chumpon Capisuk (Thailand), Morgan O’Hara (USA), Lee Wen (Singapore), Boris Nieslony (Germany), Chan Tan (France), Yoyogasmama (Indonesia), Huang Rui, Shu Yang, Yang Chichao, Zhou Bin, Duliang, Shang Xishek. Their works widened the perspective and mental space of the local performance artists. “Art Attack” in 2002 began a series of performance art festivals that took many different modes – with many international artists and Mainland artists taking part in the exchanges. The “Hong Kong on the Move” events that began in April 2005 were the first time that an international performance art exchange was supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. These were events of relatively short duration compared to

the longer festivals of other Asian cities. There were different themes every month (e.g. poetry, the written words, women, WTO, antinuclear, June 4th etc..) From then on, performance art began its rise in terms of both quantity and quality. Also the artists moved into communities, schools and also the live situation of the social movement – leading to new audiences and new participants. Furthermore, young artists were sent to take part in international performance art festivals to perform and exchange so that they would have deeper understanding and experience with performance art. The young artists took part in festivals like “TIPAF” (Taiwan International Performance Art Festival), “MIPAF” (Macau), “PIPAF” (Philippines), “NIPAF” (Japan), “KIPAF” (Korea), “Future of Imagination” (Singapore), “Asiatopia” (Thailand), “Undisclosed Territory” (Indonesia), “Beyond Pressure” (Myanmar Republic), “Tai Dao” (Beijing), “Guyu” Action (Xian), “Open” (Beijing) and “Guangzhou Live”.

Copyright © 2012 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有



Plate 2
Winston Lau (born
1981), *Sins*, Voxfire
Gallery, Sheung wan,
Hong Kong, 22 Nov
2012. (Photographer:
Norm Yip. Photo
courtesy of artist)

Involvement in the Community and the Social Movement (A Characteristic of Hong Kong's Performance Art)

One of the characteristics of Hong Kong's performance art is the artists' deliberate and persistent participation in the communities.

One of the characteristics of Hong Kong's performance art is the artists' deliberate and persistent participation in the communities. Compared to the practice of performance artists overseas, Hong Kong's performance art seems to be closer to the common people in the communities. The "Asian People's Theatre Festival Society" has been a keen promoter of performance art since the 1990's and has organised annual performance art activities to commemorate June 4th. Apart from that, there were also irregular performances. "Hong Kong on the Move" (2005), a year-round programme, was subsidised by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. In 2009 the Leisure and Cultural Services Department financed and supported a cultural ambassador scheme that would bring performance art to the 18 districts in Hong Kong in a 9-month programme. It targeted average citizens of certain community groups as audiences and participants

Copyright © 2012 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

Plate 3 (top)
Sanmu (born 1963),
*Why aren't the Israelis
killing the Germans?*, on
a street in Jordan area,
Hong Kong (artist on
his way from Mongkok
to Tsimshatsui), 23 Nov
2012. (Photo courtesy of
artist)

Plate 4 (bottom)
Sanmu (born 1963), *In
Memory of Li Wan-yang on
the 100th day of his death*,
Exit leading to Statue
Square, Central MTR
Station, Hong Kong,
14 Sep 2012. (Photo
courtesy of artist)

of workshops (including one aimed at the women of Tuen Mun). All participating artists were from Hong Kong – it was indeed very much a local performance art affair. Since 2009, there were festivals and events like “From May 4th to June 4th”, “From June 4th to July 1st”, “From 1911 to 2011 Part 1, Part 2, Part 3” which actually sought to blend performance art activities and exhibitions of two- and three-dimensional works created by performance artists. Another organisation that plays an increasingly significant role in the promotion of performance art is “Centre for Community Cultural Development” – it promotes performance art as part of community cultural development work. Meanwhile performance artist Him Lo and his collaborators have been running a programme called “The June 4th of This Generation” for the last few years and has been widely recognised as a significant performance art event in Hong Kong. Him Lo is the head of the “Blue House Hong Kong Story Museum”, who tends also to organise events with a community dimension.

Plate 5
Verena Stenke and
Andrea Pagnes,
“Performance Art
Cultural Exchange
Programme - Panta
Rhei VII Finale, HK
x Germany x Italy”,
Rooftop of Jockey
Club Creative and Arts
Center, 5 Oct 2012.
(Photo courtesy of artist)

Copyright © 2012 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有



Plate 6 (top left)
Vita Au (born 1974), *The Red string#2*, The French Institute, Yangon, Myanmar, 25 Nov 2012. (Photo courtesy of artist)



Plate 7 (middle left)
Him Lo (born 1980), *Sin of Hong Kong 2012*, from Causeway Bay to Central, Hong Kong, 17 Feb 2012. (Photo courtesy of artist)



Plate 8 (right)
Vinci Mok, *Together against the Death Penalty (Ensemble contre la peine de mort - ECPM) 2012*, Lockhart Road, Wanchai, Hong Kong, 10 Oct 2012. (Photo courtesy of Amnesty International)



Copyright © 2012 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

Plate 9
yuenjie Maru (born 1975), *Gazes*, Kat Hing Wai, Kam Tin, Hong Kong, 23 Oct 2012. (Photographer: Leung Chung-kan, Photo courtesy of artist)



The characteristic of Hong Kong's performance art also originates from the fact that its artists come from varied backgrounds (theatre workers, dancers, painters, poets, students, social workers, musicians etc.) Some of the performance artists in Hong Kong would stress that everyone can do performance art to express oneself (emotion or opinion). Any person can join a performance art workshop to experience and learn about performance art, to watch performances while learning how materials might be assembled and installed to communicate ideas and feelings, or directly utilizing one's own body and movements to articulate the relationship between themselves and the world around them. Performance artists in Hong Kong believe that frequent practice and genuine and truthful participation are crux to performance art, and that anywhere in the community can be the site for performance art activities. Certainly they perform in galleries – Osage, Neuberg ArtSpace, Para/site; they perform in small theatres – On and On, the Fringe Club, Macauley Studio, JCCAC Blackbox...also at the rooftop of JCCAC, public spaces, outside Hong Kong Arts Centre in Wanchai, Times Square, Park Avenue, by the side of the Clock Tower at Tsimshatsui, the pedestrian walk in the factory areas, and many more.

There is another facet of the performance artists in Hong Kong which cannot be ignored. They mostly are involved one way or the other in the city's social movements. They endeavor to imprint the trajectory of performance art on the big picture of the society. Tsang Tak-ping and Ger Choi persisted in the use of performance art to open up the struggle to defend the Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier. Although the battles for the preservation of the Piers failed in the end, the people of Hong Kong were very much elevated in their consciousness for preservation of heritage as well as civil participation and civic awareness.



Plate 10
Sanmu (born 1963),
Improvisation from
“Performance Art
Cultural Exchange
Programme - Panta
Rhei VII Finale, HK
x Germany x Italy”,
Rooftop of Jockey
Club Creative and Arts
Center, 5 Oct 2012.
(Photo courtesy of artist)



Copyright © 2012 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

Plate 11
wen yau, *Finnish Sauna*,
Kuntsi museum of
Modern Art, Vaasa,
Finland, 22 April 2012
(Photo courtesy of artist)

The practitioners in performance art in Hong Kong have appeared at the forefront of social movements in the year 2012. The interaction of performance artists and the witnesses of their performances was also an interaction of the spirit and the transformation. This is becoming the core principle of Hong Kong's avant-garde. In the masses marching on July 1st as well as the anti-national education rallies, there were Chen Mei-tung, Leung Wai-man. At "The Power of Silence", Liu Ha's photography exhibition, there were Ger Choi, Au Yeung Tung, Vita Au. In "June 4th of This Generation", there were Him Lo and Vinci Mok. In commemorating Lee Wanyang, there were To Yeuk, Monique Yim. At the "Anti-nuclear actions", there were yuenjie and Mok Chiu-yu. At the last moments of "Occupying Central", there was Sanmu. Other performance artists in Hong Kong like Leonard So, wen yau, members of Project 226, Yukko Chan, Grad Leung, Cheung Tsai etc likewise are equally social conscious. To many of them, performance art signifies their existence and the site where they locate themselves - expressing how they directly observe and understand society, nature, consciousness and existence. To them art is more than self expression, it is a conscious act of self transformation.



Plate 12
Project 266 (Cheng Yee-
man Gum, Chu Yiu-wai
Price, Clara Cheung),
Penalty of Colors III, Hong
Kong Government's
Secretariat, Admiralty,
Hong Kong, 4 Sep 2012.
(Photographer: Carol
Chan. Photo courtesy of
artist)

Hong Kong's performance artists are critical of social problems and the system of dominant values. They criticise the wrongs of society frequently through their works. Their art expresses concerns for the marginalised and the underprivileged, and resistance to the power holders. As such, performance art becomes a part of what is most free and vigorous in Hong Kong's art scene. Compared to some traditional art forms, audience population of performance art is smaller but the mode of expression and its meaning are unique. It resists suppression by the authority; abolishes any fixed formula; breaks the established constraints and allows space for every different person to freely express. It continuously inspires more and more people to use one's own methods for self exploration, to discover others and the world, to raise questions and to engage in reflections. Performance artists in Hong Kong "face the self truthfully – being authentic", "dare to be unique (to create)" and "embrace differences (diversity)".

There exists already a sizable group of practitioners, totaling maybe about 30. However it lacks regular and reliable financial support. There is no comprehensive preservation or collection of performance art activities in Hong Kong (In this respect, performance artist wen yau has done a significant amount of documentation for Asia Art Archive). While being a unique art form and a special cultural aspect of our society, performance art does not exist in Hong Kong's arts education system. Nor is there any performance art reviews. Lee Wen, Singaporean performance artist and a member of the "Black Market International", stressed that "performance art is live. If there is no critical discussion following the performances, the audience would become passive spectators and such performances that instantaneously disappear would be nothing more than the entertainment created by a circus." The constant derogatory remarks about performance art, its being misunderstood and neglected can be explained by this. We should not be optimistically thinking

that “Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present”² in the summer of 2010 was a high point and that performance art has entered the mainstream. We must bear in mind that it is more important to affirm that performance art is the rebel against the status quo. At the same time it subverts itself and it safeguards its own existence.

We can see the difficult future of Hong Kong ahead by witnessing what is going on in Hong Kong now. In the arenas of politics, economics and culture, we will be losing more and more space. In the increasingly obvious contradictions that are surfacing, the doomed situation requires that we

Performance art primarily cannot be simplified to be some kind of art work of visual experience. Works of performance art have power to interfere with knowledge and hence cannot be seen as the same as politics or the social movements.

re-examine our own power. All is happening. “Stop to listen to ourselves (our inner world). This implies that we should maintain very close contacts with things, in order to reach another plane...” (Paul Klee)³. We can remain sober and quietly wait until they show us the essence of life. This is a process, an exchange in discourse. For this reason, we can ignore the aesthetics of the sights and the experience of our senses. Performance art primarily cannot be simplified to be some kind of art work of visual experience. Works of performance art have power to interfere with knowledge and hence cannot be seen as the same as politics or the social movements. Performance art

should avoid supporting and then degenerating into simplistic political manifestation. Very often because of pragmatism, we become incapable of distinguishing the art and the issues that we are concerned with. However we must be careful not to allow bad performance art works to do harm to the rightful demands or understanding of the issues. Those who do performance art works must be really vigilant. They must search for a clearer system and structure in their practice and positioning. They must reflect on the essence of art in order to turn performance art into a social resource and power. Thoughts and actions are to co-exist. This is not just a matter of aesthetics; it is a pursuit to raise questions about the world. Performance art is simple – it is the position of our existence, the relationship between us and the world.

yeunjie and Sanmu are practising performance artists. Mok Chiu-yu is the Director of the Asia People’s Theatre Festival Society.

¹ Article 14 (2001) of the Central Politics and Law Commission of the Communist Party of China, and the Ministry of Culture of China. The Article required abolishment of displaying violent, cruel and obscene performances and objects by describing them as “works of arts.”

² “Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present”, 14 March to 31 May 2010, MoMa, New York.

³ Note by Sanmu, one of the writers: The Paul Klee quotation was from Sanmu’s diary of 8th February 2011, the 6th day of the new lunar year. He was reading some books and was just copying the quotation of Klee in his notebook and he cannot remember what book it was.