

# On the Umbrella Movement and Visual Arts: From the Occupied Areas to the Art Field and the Social World

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## 1. “Actor-Network” of the “Art of the Umbrella Movement”

The 79-day “Umbrella Movement” that began in September 2014 was developed under the name of the “Occupy Central” campaign, initiated by Tai Yiu-ting Benny, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong, eighteen months earlier than the movement actually took place. However, the civil disobedience actions in the movement, which were never seen in Hong Kong before, started in a most unexpected way. Thousands of Hong Kong citizens occupied three major city intersections and stayed out on the streets where the traffic would have been heavy if not for the occupation. The surprising form of demonstration was a direct result of an event that no one had seen it coming. Late in the afternoon on September 28, the Hong Kong police fired tear gas at the protesters.<sup>1</sup> The incident itself and the videos and images that captured it decided the basic form of demonstration. A large number of citizens and political leaders started the long struggle by occupying the streets, which delivered an unpredictable outcome in such a mass movement, and which gave rise to this essay’s main focus: the role of the arts in the Umbrella Movement. It attracted much attention and was one of the most controversial aspects of the movement. In other words, the arts (especially visual arts) has occupied a central position in the event that will go down in history, and will be an important case study in art history for the understanding of the relationship between the arts and politics.

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1 Tang, G. “Mobilization by Images: TV Screen and Mediated Instant Grievances in the Umbrella Movement.” in *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2015): 1-18.

How should the arts of the Umbrella Movement be understood? This essay cannot be a full account of the arts created during the movement because the historical distance is not great enough, and because there should be a huge amount of publications on the movement available in the future. This essay is rather a presentation of the perspective from an active participant and some first-hand material, which could serve as reference for other researchers. I happened to position myself in multiple roles in relation to the overlap between the Umbrella Movement and the arts, and the development of an eighteen-month long post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong. Therefore, by reviewing my personal experience and thinking process, this essay gives a brief but reflexive account of the political movement.

I first took part in the Umbrella Movement through my arts, showing my artworks in the occupied areas every day. Later, as a co-founder of the “Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective,” I collected the visual products of the occupation and put them in the archives. When the occupation phase ended, I was keen on continuing to be a participant in different ways. I immediately began the academic research and writing of the Umbrella Movement and the arts, curated exhibitions to provoke discussions and joined the movement-related exhibitions curated by other people as an artist. In general, the multiple roles I have played allowed me to be involved in much work relating to the topic of “the Umbrella Movement and the arts,” including a series of overlapping actions, such as creating art, curating exhibitions, taking part in exhibitions, providing administrative support, giving lectures, writing on the event and being interviewed. Naturally, I have directly involved myself in the migration from the occupied areas to the art field and the social world, which was the field of production of the artistic and political issues. Those fields would be the highlights in this essay. To give volume to and make discourses of the “Umbrella Movement and the arts,” one should add up the individuals in different fields. For that reason, this essay outlines the actor-network<sup>2</sup> and poses the problematics of the arts of the Umbrella Movement with the positionality of the roles mentioned above.

## 2. Interaction between Artists and Social Activists

I am one of the initiators and creators of *Stand by You: Add Oil Machine (Stand by You)*. Through my participation in the creative process of the project, the earliest questions that came to my mind were: How did the political leaders of the pro-democracy movement and the figureheads that emerged during the movement look at the roles of the artists and creators? Have they consciously thought about the aesthetics of the protest objects in different phases? In fact, my friends from

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2 For the application of actor-network theory to art and design, see: Yaneva, A. “Making the Social Hold: Towards an Actor-Network Theory of Design.” in *Design and Culture: The Journal of the Design Studies Forum*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2009): 273-288.

*Stand by You* and I had hoped to have direct involvement in the forthcoming mass occupation with our artworks after the annual July 1 march and the “Occupy Central rehearsal” in 2014. As there was some time before the occupation occurred, we were able to contact members of the “Occupy Central” campaign. That gave us an opportunity to have a basic understanding of the decision-making and the logic of a political movement, and allowed us to know how those activists saw art intervention and how they would react to it.

This essay proposes to examine whether the fundamentals of the interaction between politics and the arts are about how the individuals from the two fields interact and the way they see each other's actions. Although the organizers asked visual artist Wong Chiu-tat Justin to design the logo and promotional graphics for the “Occupy Central” campaign shortly after the launch, it is important to know whether the organizers and the supporters had the idea of art intervention alongside the delivery of supplies on their to-do lists. The other way round, it is necessary to know how many artists had prepared to intervene the campaign with their profession before the occupation started. Based on my personal experience, being part of the campaign with a creative plan beforehand is contextually different from joining the sudden and spontaneous Umbrella Movement with one made in the short time. (Plate 1) By comparing the differences between the two thinking methods, by understanding what the artists would consider when they decided to intervene and how they changed according to the nature and the number of the movement's artworks during the time they were intervening, will enrich the image of political art intervention. Many of the most-heated discussions about “Occupy Central” took place during the “pre-occupation” period. When the anti-Occupy Central camp mobilized thousands of people in all types of activities, that was between July and August 2014, artist wen yau launched the performance art project “Anti-Occupy Central,”<sup>3</sup> calling for artists' responses to the anti-Occupy Central actions. The artists held up the cardboards with the message “I suppose not to occupy Central, because...” and showed them to the petition booths of the anti-Occupy groups in different districts.

It is certain that the organizers of the Occupy Central campaign, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism must have thought about the aesthetics of the occupation and making use of art activism to some extent, but the creators had not been keen on proactive organization, a phenomenon comparable to the increasing trend of decentralization after the Umbrella Movement had started. The last mass protest before HKFS organized the boycott of classes was the *Black Cloth March*, in which 4,000 protesters turned up and carried nine 50-meter-long black banners - an unusual but carefully planned movement. HKFS also created *avatar generator* for online users to upload their own student photos (either old or existing ones) as the

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3 See: [https://www.facebook.com/on9AntiOC/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/on9AntiOC/info/?tab=page_info). Accessed on May 20, 2016.



Plate 1

Political Reform Concern Group, School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, *Ju San Shu (The Tree of Umbrellas)*. Displayed at Admiralty. Photo courtesy of Sampson Wong.

Plate 2

Painting in progress at Mongkok. Photo courtesy of Sampson Wong.



avatars on the social media in order to show their support for the student movement. Obviously, apart from graphic design, photographs and videos, cultural activism and struggles through art-making would be the strategic considerations that the campaign organizers had to take into account. As a result, activists and artists were being drawn to each other in the second half of 2014. By comparing the differences in the development of their ideas and in how they put them into practice, it helps to understand the rarely seen intimate connection between politics and the arts in real situations.

There have been discussions and studies highlighting that many art objects in the occupied areas were produced by people who had never created art before and who did not define their practices as “artistic engagement with social movements.” This is without doubt a main feature of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. In many other Occupy movements around the world, the art and protest objects are made by the people who often express their political thoughts with their artistic production. The active participation of the “outsiders” in the movement has attracted much attention. (Plate 2) Another important inquiry to be made is that, if more questions are to be asked besides explaining the specific conditions for the active participation of the “outsiders” with the use of the arts, in terms of their thinking process, to what extent did the information about politics and the arts circulated around the world, as well as the artworks and images produced by the local artists, determine the presentation the “first-timers” chose? Those are important considerations that must be taken into account in order to understand how various creators



Plate 3

Drawings displayed at Mongkok. Photo courtesy of Sampson Wong.

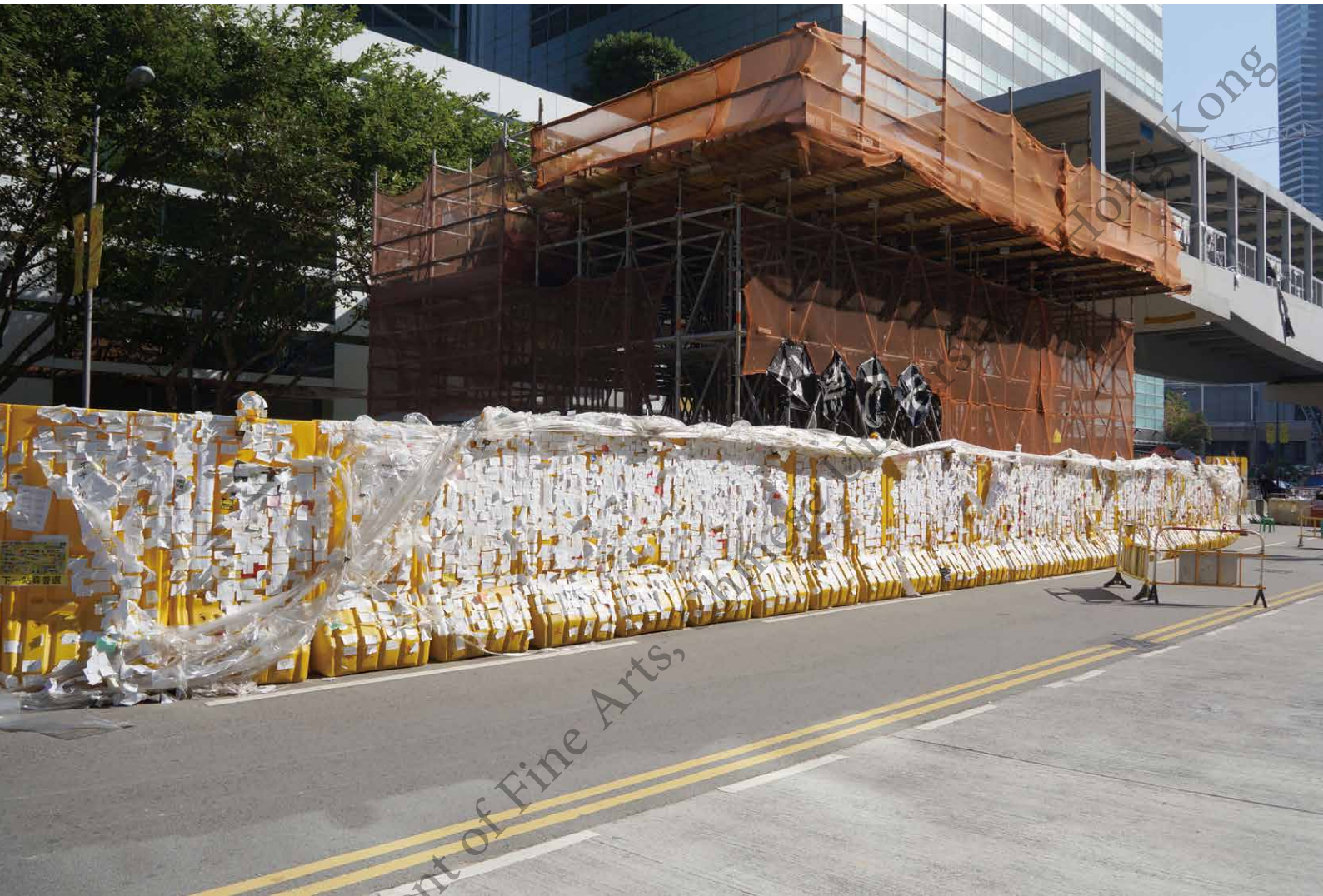


Plate 4

Traffic-barriers-turned-display-panels. Photo courtesy of Sampson Wong.

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Plate 5

Vertical pennant at Causeway Bay. Photo courtesy of Sampson Wong.

University of Hong Kong

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interacted with and influenced each other in the movement. Thousands of posters that appeared in the occupied areas are one example of the interaction between the creators as the posters' distinctness explains the mutual influences of their aesthetic choices. (Plates 3 and 4)

### 3. From the Occupied Areas to Exhibition Spaces: The Desire to Organize and Reconstruct the Occupied Areas

Perhaps not many people noticed that the curating of protest objects had started long before the police cleared the occupied areas by executing the court injunction orders and the protest leaders decided to retreat. For one thing, the protesters were aware of the fact that the large number of creative works produced in the occupied areas kept changing, and that it was impossible for the "audience" to see all the works. For another thing, people like curators and art lovers would suddenly feel an overwhelming desire to "organize" and "exhibit" the occupation art by separating the works from the occupied sites, as they well knew those who had never been to the occupied areas would not know how diversified the arts created on site was. This essay characterizes such desires and actions as "curatorial practices of intervening the occupied areas," and this could be an area in which many topics are worth discussing.

The protest art extended beyond the occupied areas quickly and appeared on various media, being arranged and shown by whatever means possible. It came to light on social media before all else as art practitioners photographed different types of objects in the occupied areas and categorized them in online photo albums. Their actions are practically primitive practice of "curating". The difficulty in "grouping" the objects under the conditions of the occupied areas is an interesting topic in itself. Since it was impossible to arrange the artworks of the protest sites in groups based on the existing art classification, how should those involved create a new classification system? The "Umbrella Movement Art Preservation" group on Facebook<sup>4</sup> (of which Hong Kong artist Kacey Wong is one of the initiators) categorized the photos of the objects and put them into thirty-five online albums,<sup>5</sup> trying to classify the objects from the sites that contained any creative elements in a comprehensive way. Despite all the hard work, the word "objects" here seems to fail to encompass every type of art about the Umbrella Movement. (Plate 5) Now the question is: Are the artworks made inside the occupied areas and those produced outside the areas, given that some of the "outside" works are distributed on the Internet only, intrinsically different to each other? If the reconstruction and the curating of art involve image representation and display, is it all

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4 See: <https://www.facebook.com/umbrellamovementartpreservation/>. Accessed on May 20, 2016.

5 See: <https://www.facebook.com/umbrellamovementartpreservation/photos/?tab=albums>. Accessed on May 20, 2016.

right to lump the objects from different places together? Interestingly, while the curating could be done outside the occupied areas, it could also be carried out from the inside. In an occupied area outside the Government's headquarters, there were "curators" who would reproduce the online contents and photographs about the movement and display them at the site from time to time. A photographic exhibition showing the pictures on the balustrade would be among one of the most familiar to the occupiers. Are there other exhibitions like this one in the occupied areas? It would add another dimension to the way of curatorial thinking by understanding, in other political movements worldwide, how physical space and virtual space influence each other, and how the exhibitions about the interaction of the two spaces happen.

In addition to social media and the digital space, the news media is among the earliest to describe the occupied areas as "like an exhibition space" and "like an art gallery," and popularized the referent of the description for the general public. The fact is that the media did not just call the occupied areas an exhibition space, but also applied the rationale for "seeing exhibitions" in the coverage of the mass occupation. More importantly, some newspapers even published maps for the people who did not spend much time in the occupied areas, or who had not been to the protest sites, guiding them around the exhibition areas with a map of a "selection of iconic artworks." Nevertheless, the interpretation of such "semi-exhibitions" hides a forgettable fact that the setting of the occupation areas and objects was not governed by the conventional top-down rationale for mounting exhibitions. The idea of a "selection of artworks" painted a picture of the occupied areas and provided the readers with different paths to enter that particular space. What does it take to be the good (selected) artworks? How different are their selections from the professional curatorial choices? Those are the questions that could be raised around the curating of the movement's artworks.

"87: A Documentary Exhibition of the Umbrella Movement Art" ("87") was the first curatorial attempt in a physical gallery space during the movement before the police's clearances ended the demonstrations. The exhibition was on view briefly for just six days in an art space of a tenement building in Sham Shui Po.<sup>6</sup> As a co-creator of one of the four sets of the works exhibiting there, I have had the opportunity to look at the considerations the curatorial team bore in mind. It opened amidst the dynamic atmosphere of the ongoing protests for good reason. The curators clarified the chief purpose in a sharing session during the exhibition, stating that they wanted to take the artworks outside the occupied areas and that the arts had an essential role to play in the

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6 "87: A Documentary Exhibition of the Umbrella Movement" was held between November 13 and 18, 2014 on the Level 1 gallery, "22 Degrees North," 88 Nam Cheong Street, Sham Shui Po. See: <https://www.facebook.com/22degreesnorth/photos/a.463559350416755.1073741844.448214851951205/594866577286031/>. Accessed on May 20, 2016.

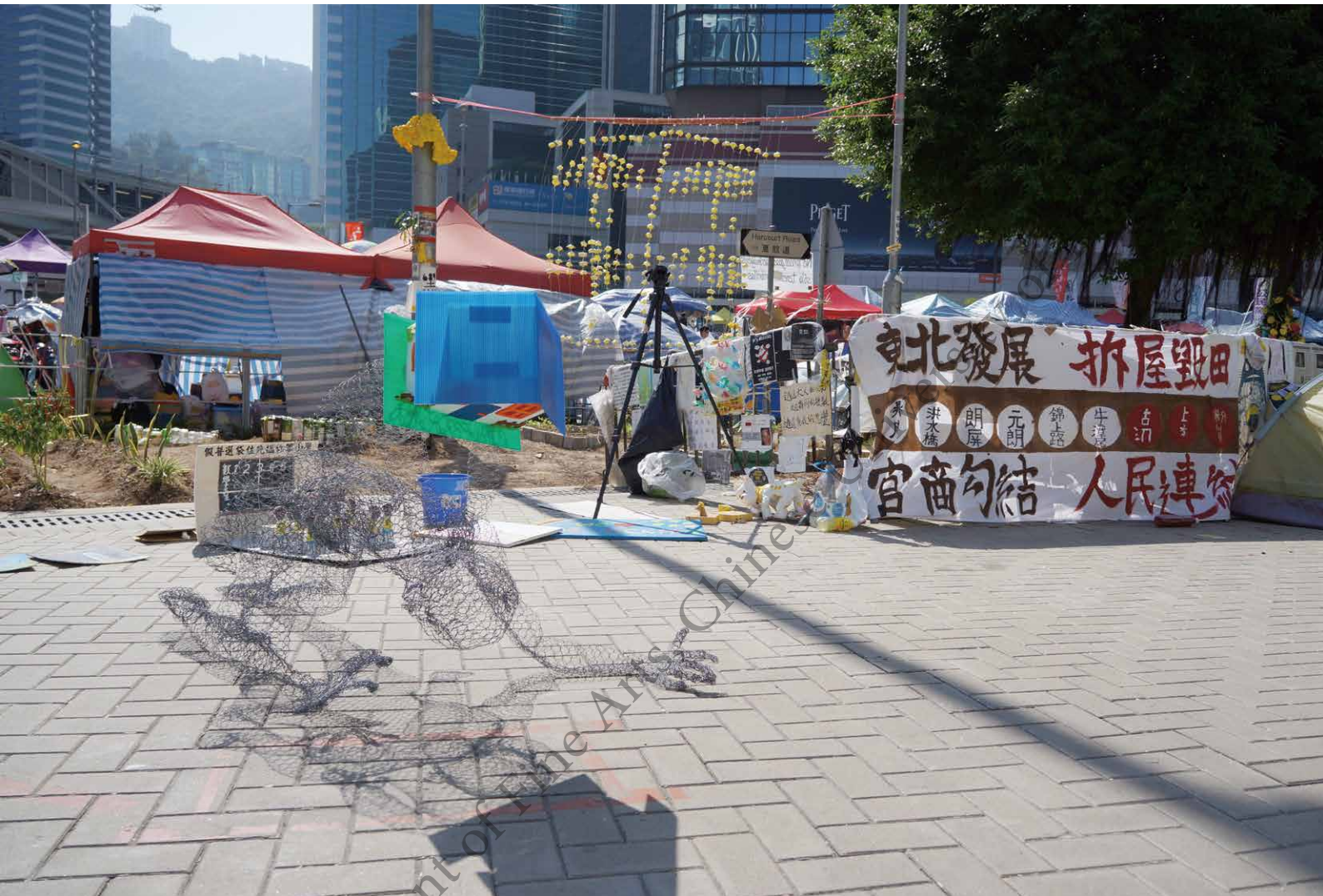


Plate 6

Installation by citizens  
outside the Central  
Government Office,  
Admiralty.  
Photo courtesy of Sampson  
Wong.

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movement. As someone said, “Perhaps the arts (of the occupied areas) is the only thing that could be removed from the occupied areas without inviting objection from the people not involved in the occupation.”<sup>7</sup> This message is easy to understand on the surface, but also provides an important clue: How are we supposed to perceive the Umbrella Movement-related exhibitions that opened one after another when the occupation ended?

If “87” had aimed to “mobilize people” and “strip away the controversy,” the same curators discussed the topics very differently by organizing an exhibition a year and a half after the end of the occupation, showing a deviation from the context of the occupied sites and protest art. This essay intends to provide the following framework to categorize the strategies and concerns of exhibitions as such. The first thing to clear up is whether the exhibitions target at a Hong Kong audience or audience members outside the city. The potential Hong Kong audience had seen too many images and graphics relevant to the movement in the last few months of 2014, and it had complicated the curating regarding the considerations and ideas. Knowing the police would clear the occupied areas around the end of the year, many people rushed to the protest sites before the protesters retreated to see the occupation art that was inside the original conceptual framework. (Plate 6) To organize an exhibition about the occupation art quickly after the clearance, the curator must think deep thoughts about what sort of “post-occupation” thinking he wants to exhibit with the same artworks from the occupied areas. When I was curating the exhibition “Hereafter: Objects from the Umbrella Movement” for the first anniversary of the movement,<sup>8</sup> I asked myself a similar question during my discussion with team members. The most striking local exhibition “Umbrella Festival,”<sup>9</sup> organized by Ho Hing-kay Oscar and the MA students from the Cultural Studies Division of the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, also faced many questions in public forums about the curating. Both Ho and I have curated exhibitions for the Umbrella Movement outside Hong Kong. From my point of view and other aspects, the objective of curating such exhibitions overseas is obviously clearer and more direct, which is to provide an outline of the protests to the audience who have no connection to the movement. A comparison of those considerations would be among the first questions that people address when studying the curating of relevant exhibitions.

Moreover, similar to the curatorial considerations of “87”, what types of works and information are supposed to be legitimate material in the “post-occupation” exhibitions? Are there ethical issues about re-exhibiting the archival material collected from the protest sites? Do the curators

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7 This is quoted from one of the “87” curators who wishes to stay anonymous.

8 See: <https://www.facebook.com/events/398259890366598/>. Accessed on May 20, 2016.

9 See: [https://www.facebook.com/umbrellafest/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/umbrellafest/info/?tab=page_info). Accessed on May 20, 2016.

incline towards exhibiting the online material or the artworks created at the sites? Together with the attitudes of the artists and creators towards “participating in the exhibitions,” those are profound questions to understand how the creators comprehend the nature of occupation art. The exhibition “Objection! Protest by Design,”<sup>10</sup> curated by design studio MIRO and held at the Vitra Design Museum Gallery in Switzerland, included various aspects of the demonstrations. Initially the curators did not know where to start and had to go through a process of “learning,” which was irrelevant to spending time in the occupied areas though. After that, the curators decided what to put into the exhibition by evaluating how representative the works were and what happened to the creators in the “post-occupation” period. Information about the creators, like whether they were contactable, whether the anonymous creators could be tracked down and what attitude they adopted towards the exhibitions, was influential in the curating and might need further investigation.

Lastly, many research topics related to the curating of such exhibitions include discussions on the artistry and the aesthetics of the exhibitions. The objective of an overview exhibition is mostly about “promoting social movement.” For example, the introductory text of the “Umbrella Festival” and “Hereafter: Objects from the Umbrella Movement” expressed the idea of “continuing the movement.” Regarding this topic, an intriguing but often-neglected question is how to deal with those which cannot be defined as overview exhibitions, particularly solo exhibitions and medium-specific exhibitions. The former includes one-man exhibitions of professional artists about the Umbrella Movement and the latter photographic exhibitions and illustration exhibitions. When the solo or medium-specific exhibitions come within the scope of the Umbrella Movement, they allow people to question the nature of “occupation art.” Aesthetically and theoretically, do those exhibitions try to present the distinctiveness of this type of art purposely? When discussed in a global context, can “occupation art” be a type of art in its own right? It is always easier for non-overview exhibitions to answer the above questions because they focus on one artist or a single medium and do not need to meet the objectives stated in an overview exhibition.

#### **4. Hereafter: Archiving, Analysing and Studying, and the Artistic Aftermath of the Umbrella Movement**

Having a deeper understanding of the creators and the curatorial considerations mentioned above, and tracing the actor-network will provide the substantial resources to support the studies and discussions of the Umbrella Movement. The lively discourse of the movement is also a remarkable

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10 The exhibition was on display from February 26 to May 29, 2016. See: <http://www.design-museum.de/en/exhibitions/detailseiten/objection.html>. Accessed on May 20, 2016.

phenomenon to investigate. The last chapter of this essay offers an overview of the activities that are not entirely related to the creating and the curating and that began after the launch of the movement. The questions raised in the previous chapters will lead us to the answer to another frequently-asked question, the one last question with which will close this reflexive process.

During the street occupation, there were people creating art and curating exhibitions inside and outside the protest sites, but at the same time there were also people carrying out the archival action. The archival action here refers to the action that people take to collect and arrange the relevant material for the study of the questions raised in this essay. An interesting fact is that there has been an awareness of “self-archiving” since the early stage of the Umbrella Movement – the participants were aware of the politics of the event and quickly historicized it. The statement “the event that will go down in history” circulated widely before the movement reached its climax. What is worth studying is that the urge of “collecting the artworks and objects from protest sites” and its immediacy had made the “artistic archival action” appear before the initiation of other types of public archives. (Other types of archives include one launched by former Government Records Service Director Chu Fook-keung Simon and the Archives Action Group by contacting different parties to collect the documents pertaining to the movement, and another one established by Ng Ngoi-ye Margaret as an archive of “testimony.”)<sup>11</sup> As a co-founder of the “Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective,” I have experienced the particular ethical, theoretical and technical problems one could face in the archival action.

Museums across the world have kept up to date with the collection policy concerning the creative works produced in political movements. The Occupy movements have begun on a worldwide scale since 2010. Thinking of the fact that many objects are lost, destroyed or discarded because of the protesters’ hasty retreats, the museums have been studying and following specific strategies to take on the challenge of collecting those objects. However, outside the official or existing institutions, some bottom-up community archives arise for self-archival purposes as the movement participants are experimenting with the organization, which follows the ethical reasoning and describes their mobilized state. The “Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective,” started in early October 2014, is one of these archives and has collected around 400 objects from the occupied areas and more than a thousand posters. What is more, there are serious questions about the art archives started by political movements, such as what ethical problems the

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<sup>11</sup> According to *Next Magazine*, Ng Ngoi-ye Margaret was initiating an “Umbrella Archive,” asking a group of lawyers to help the witnesses and participants of the movement to make witness statements. “Bing fen liang lu: jiang zhanling lishi liu xia qu 兵分兩路——將佔領歷史留下去 (Preserving the History of the Street Occupation in Two Ways).” *Next Magazine*, November 15, 2014.

various archives encounter during the experiments, what conflicts there are between the roles of archivists and occupiers and the differences between an art archive and an archive of other types of documentation. In contrast to the interaction and the curating mentioned in the previous two chapters, archival action falls in a rather metacognitive field, but it mediates the possibility of the study of raising questions and answering them. The analysis and study of the arts of the Umbrella Movement are, after all, directly linked to the state of the archival material.

From a meta point of view, performing analysis and finding research focus from the artistic aspect after the end of the Umbrella Movement would raise some interesting questions. Organizing the information from the forums and seminars and conducting literature review provide some basic frameworks mentioned previously to examine which parts are over-emphasized and which parts are neglected. The studies and discussions of the arts of the Umbrella Movement themselves reflect the perspective the art world adopt to discuss the topic, and the perspective of the art world is bound to be different from that of the other fields, but what differences are there between them? To make sense of those differences is the ultimate aim of this essay, which I find highly critical.

The studies and discussions so far can together be regarded as an attempt to answer a question which has been repeatedly brought up, a question which I have heard from the journalists and the public most often since the Umbrella Movement: Will the arts of Hong Kong change because of the movement? What changes will there be? There are no shortcuts to the answers of these questions. The research motives this essay finds are just the beginning of answering those seemingly easy questions. At the end of the day, one needs to collate the information and details of the events so as to link them with the artistic phenomenon after the Umbrella Movement.

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