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Things that Happened in Hong Kong in the Past Two Years — On Alternative Art Spaces in Hong Kong: Taking “Things that can happen” as an Example

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Post-Umbrella Movement and Alternative Art Spaces

2015 was an interesting year to the local art community, during which a number of alternative art spaces emerged in Hong Kong: “Neptune” in Chai Wan, “Floating Projects” in Wong Chuk Hang, and three in Sham Shui Po, namely “100ft. PARK” (relocated for the third time), “Things that can happen” and “Holy Motors.” Adding to the Sham Shui Po list later on were “common room & co.” and “Form Society” while “PRÉCÉDÉE” chose Yau Ma Tei as its base. (There were all kinds of other experiential spaces but only those deployed as exhibition space are listed here.) Mainly run and managed by young artists, curators and art practitioners, these alternative art spaces were soon associated with the Umbrella Movement in 2014 by a group of sensitive art critics. The phenomenon was tacitly regarded as local artists’ response to a failed social movement.

Indeed, this social movement was unprecedented in the history of Hong Kong. It successfully mobilized the majority of local young artists and art practitioners, who accumulated and together contributed to the surreal scenes along Harcourt Road in Admiralty. They built the “Harcourt Village” to materialize utopia on the occupied streets. Nonetheless, seventy-nine days passed; with the police’s clearance operations, the Umbrella Movement ultimately ended in silence and failure. No actual changes were brought while a deep and traumatic sense of powerlessness remained.

Artists seemed to have taken their time to heal and clear their minds. Apart from Ho Siu-nam South’s solo exhibition “good day good night” (September 2015, Blindspot Gallery) and Tse Ming-chong’s “The Road.” (September 2015, Karin Weber Gallery), there were close-to-no Umbrella Movement-themed

Plate 1

Things that can happen.
Image provided by the
writer.

works or exhibitions in the year following the Movement. Undoubtedly, artists and the commercial galleries they collaborated with had their own considerations and hold-backs. On the one hand, except for protest art which usually contains in itself explicit and direct messages, art is not simply about making statements. Before a proper transformation takes place, artists need the time to digest and let things set in. For instance, it took as long as three years for Pak Sheung-chuen to hold a response exhibition to the Movement at Para Site in September 2017.¹ On the other hand, if the participation in social movements had enabled artists to look into the possibility of expressing themselves without any art media, the swift rise of alternative art spaces after the Umbrella Movement might have shown us the context of their contemplation. In other words, the artists managed to (re)discover the politics of space through their earlier occupation of public spaces.

Opened in September 2015, “Things that can happen” (Things) states the following on its website: “Recent political developments in Hong Kong have triggered a spirit of political and civil urgency amongst the city’s population. These resistance movements are not only shifting the socio-political landscape but have also roused a creative awakening amongst the people of Hong Kong and inspired a profound re-imagination of the city and its citizens. It is vital at this juncture to provide platforms that continue nurturing this sense of curiosity, especially in a city where imagination and experimentation continue to find little structural support.”²

“These resistance movements” actually refer to the Umbrella Movement. When writing the mission statement, Chantal Wong, one of the founders of Things, described the Umbrella Movement as a key turning point. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the space is intended to be a continuation of resistance or that the space is solely for exhibiting works of protest art or political art. In fact, other art spaces never mention the word “Umbrella” at all. In this sense, what are they responding to? Probably to “the little structural support” for imagination and experimentation as pointed out above.

The absence in the local art ecosystem

Chantal Wong’s decision to start a new project outside Asia Art Archive where she was working was prompted by a visit to Shanghai, during which she was utterly amazed at the rapid development of contemporary art there. Since Expo 2010, there indeed have been a substantial number of infrastructure and investment projects that led to the establishment of a couple of large art museums and commercial galleries. This attracted many Chinese young artists to Shanghai, which, in turn, created a myriad of experimental spaces and studios there. By contrast, the development of art in Hong Kong has come to a standstill and even been lagging.

1 “Chris Evans, Pak Sheungchuen: Two Exhibitions” presented by Para Site, September 23 to December 3, 2017.

2 Please refer to <http://www.thingsthatcanhappen.hk/about-things6537221673201071.html>.

In terms of public art museums, the Hong Kong Museum of Art has been closed for renovation and expansion since August 3, 2015 and is expected to re-open only in 2019. The construction of M+, a museum of visual culture in the West Kowloon Cultural District, began back in January 29, 2015 and the first stage of work was scheduled for completion in 2018, with a public opening set for 2019. If we exclude the Leisure and Cultural Services Department venues which undertake curated projects, such as Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Oi! and the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, and only count those continuously and systematically engaged in the curation, collection and research of contemporary art, between 2015 and 2019 happens to be a vacuum period (though the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the M+ teams kept organizing curated activities during this period).

On the other hand, local commercial galleries are also facing market transformation. Rising rental has caused the cluster of small galleries along Hollywood Road in Central and Sheung Wan to either shut down or move to the more spacious industrial buildings in with lower rent Chai Wan or Wong Chuk Hang. “Gallery Exit” and “Blindspot Gallery,” which mainly showcase works by local young artists, are two examples. In this way, an embryonic art hub has since disintegrated. In 2015, “Hong Kong Art Fair” was acquired by “Art Basel” and officially renamed “Art Basel Hong Kong.” Hong Kong instantly became a major contemporary art market in Asia and renowned international galleries such as Gagosian, Perrotin and White Cube started to open in high-end commercial buildings in Central one after another. On the surface, this is all good and flourishing; yet, it is in fact harder and harder for local small galleries and artists to survive.

The growth of the art market has not brought about significant changes to the local non-profit arts organizations like “1a space” and “Videotage” either. Relying on the funding provided by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council or Home Affairs Bureau, these organizations continue to encounter the same problems, as the complicated and bureaucratic funding mechanism requires them to spend a considerable amount of time and manpower on making applications. In the end, a large part of the allocated funds goes back to hiring staff to make plans and write activity proposals strategically as part of the application procedure. This may seem to be putting the cart before the horse, but one cannot really blame them, considering the need to secure sufficient funding for future development.

As for artist-run spaces and studios, Para Site, the first of its kind in Hong Kong, also moved from Sheung Wan, where it had been based for nearly twenty years, to an industrial building in Quarry Bay. With more space and a team of international art practitioners, it has expanded and transformed into a medium-sized organization of global vision. Its exhibitions no longer limit themselves to local artists and issues. On the other side of Victoria Harbor, Woofer Ten, which aimed at bridging the community and artmaking, left 404, Shanghai Street on November 22, 2015, where it had occupied for two years, after the funding from Hong Kong Arts Development Council was discontinued in 2013. Also in 2015, “Fotanian” disbanded upon consumption of a grant. Although some Fotan artists continue to organize Fotan Studio open days, the heyday is gone; despite the fact that there is still some recognition from

the public, it has lost its initial purpose of encouraging exchange amongst artists themselves as well as that between artists and investors.

The myth of community (and) art

It was in such context that a number of alternative art spaces emerged in 2015, and the most interesting part concerned the choice of the site. Apart from Floating Projects in Wong Chuk Hang, these art spaces are usually separated from the gallery clusters and hidden in a quiet corner of the city. Coincidentally, Things that can happen, 100ft. PARK and Holy Motors were founded in the old district Sham Shui Po one after another in 2015. Together with “C&G Artpartment” in Prince Edward (“Green Wave Art,” which took over the Shanghai Street premise from “Woofer Ten,” is not counted as its operational positioning is not quite clear for now), these art spaces formed a small pre-M+ cultural district in western Kowloon.

From an operational perspective, the rental in Sheung Wan is no longer affordable to non-profit spaces while rents in the pre-gentrified old districts in Kowloon remain reasonable. As to the audience, Sham Shui Po is in Kowloon, right in the center of Hong Kong. It is highly accessible and in the vicinity of art schools. Besides, from the production perspective, there are hardware stores and shops selling all kinds of raw materials, second-hand goods and electronic appliances at a very low price. Not only does this facilitate the process of artmaking, but it also creates a kind of bustling urban atmosphere. Artists can actually breathe the same air as local grassroots residents and seek connection and interaction with real life. It was the first time for most of the artists-in-residence received by Things to get around Sham Shui Po (Saviya Lopes made a souvenir T-shirt embroidered with the words “Sham Shui Po” exactly because this place was never mentioned in any official tourist information.) (Plate 2) They preferred Sham Shui Po to Central and Sheung Wan, as they felt that it demonstrated “the actual facet” of Hong Kong.

When deciding on the location of Things, Chantal Wong and her artist partner Lee Kit did not only consider the rents, but also tried to distance themselves from the commercial art districts as much as possible. The *tong lau* (old tenement building) at 98-100 Apliu Street was the property of a local art collector's company. After some deliberation, the company agreed to rent the connected rooms on 1/F of 98 Apliu Street to Things for two years. The two connected rooms featured around 600 square feet of space: the front was used as an exhibition venue while the back served as the office, co-working space and the living space for the artist-in-residence. The original residential setting, (Plate 3) which included the extravagant chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, (Plate 4) the dropped ceiling and the patterned wallpaper, was retained. From the very first beginning, there was no plan to create a “standard” exhibition space; instead, it was hoped that artists could intervene in and transform the space. Here, the question posed by Things to artists and audiences was: could we depart from the usual white cube

approach to making an exhibition? When the site itself did not have a “standard setting” (for instance, white walls and spotlights) and was filled with noise and its own context, how could artists utilize the space? Before Things officially opened, Chloe Cheuk, a young media artist, conducted an “experiment” there, as she intervened in the space’s setting like the lamps and doors to make site-specific art as well as to explore the possibilities and some already-known issues regarding the new space. (Plates 5, 6)

Apart from the utilization of the physical space, site selection also concerns the relationship between the location and spatial practice. Nesting on 1/F of a Aпли Street *tong lau*, Things and 100ft. PARK were not traditional spaces that settle on the ground; in order to make a visit, one had to first ring the doorbell to gain access to the building then can one reach the space. Some say that this erects a barrier between the space and the neighborhood. Nonetheless, such saying is established on a moral, rather than artistic, presumption that people who make art in a community are obliged to get in touch and connect with the community. Sham Shui Po became a major redevelopment project under the Urban Renewal Authority following those of Wan Chai, Yau Ma Tei and To Kwa Wan, so naturally it invited debates about the role of art in communities. As organisations like “Woofer Ten,” “Very MK rooftop farm,” “Tak Cheong Lane Vegetarian Cooperative/So Boring,” “Kai Fong Pai Dong,” “Hong Kong House of Stories” in Wan Chai, “Chingchun Warehouse” in To Kwa Wan and Form Society founded last year on Tai Nan Street in Sham Shui Po, strive to make use of art intervention to reflect on and resist urban redevelopment, people automatically equate “art in the community” with “community art” and regard the setup of every art space in the community as a political gesture.



Plate 2

T-shirt embroidered with
“Sham Shui Po.” Image
provided by the writer.

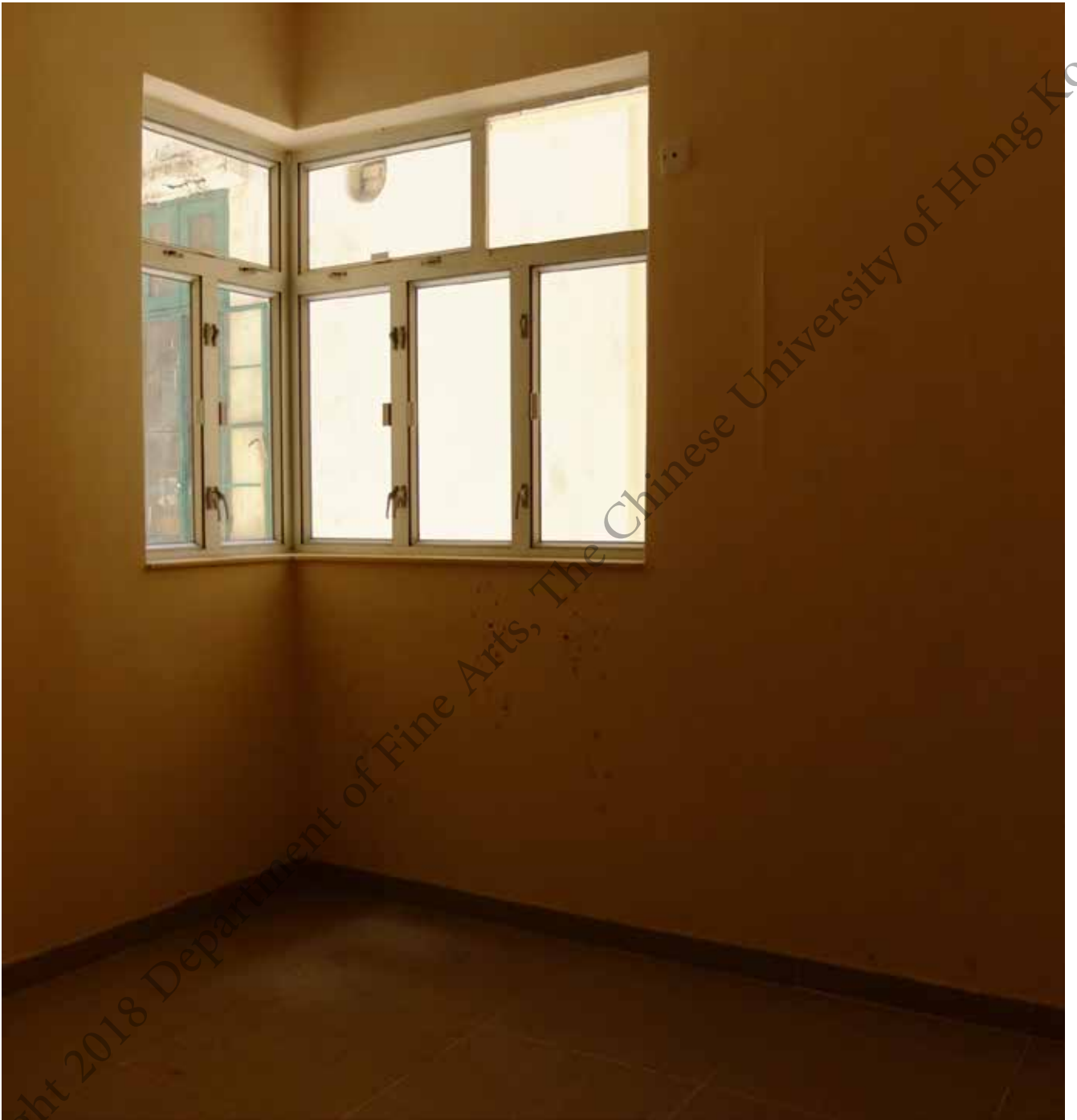


Plate 3

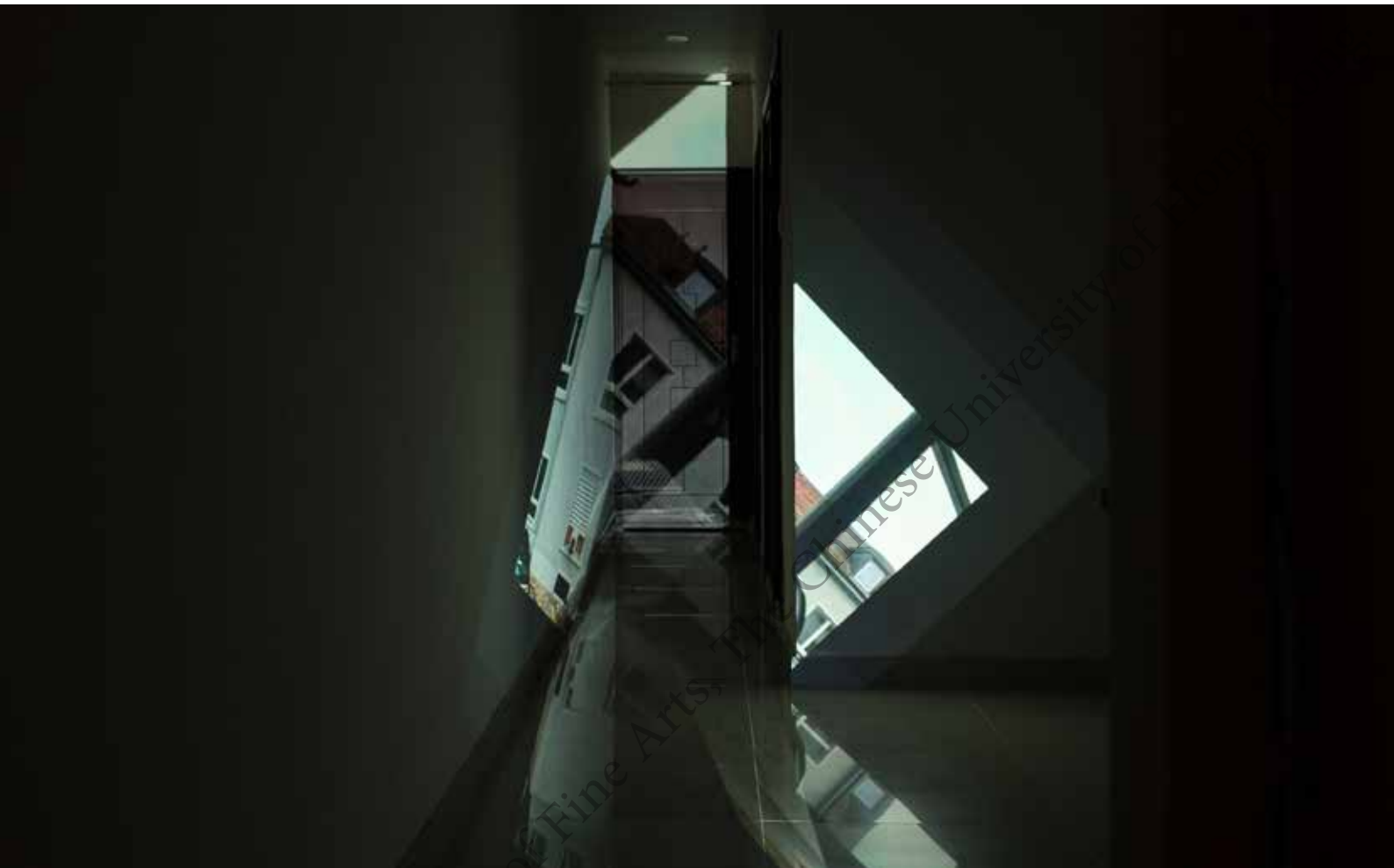
The original residential setting. Image provided by the writer.



Plate 4
Extravagant chandeliers
in the original setting.
Image provided by the
writer.

An alternative art space per se is supposedly a political gesture, but it does not necessarily have to be so singular-mindedly direct. As an institutional critique, Things did not focus on how to employ art to intervene in the community. Art and social movements which encourage direct actions are in two different realms. On the one hand, the politics of art precisely lies in how indirect and non-political art is; on the other hand, we do not believe that art is powerful enough to save the world. Amidst the hustle and bustle of Sham Shui Po, Things and 100ft. PARK lived and rested as the other inhabitants of the community who were too busy making a living to be concerned of who was more superior than the other. Actually nobody cared what kind of art you were making. “Art” did not call attention to itself nor did it brag of its role in the community; as part of the community, you simply had to respect your fellow residents and do your own job.

During his residency in Things, Ocean Leung wrote the following in his journal: “What’s the difference between intervening out of curiosity and interrupting? A vacant apartment full of chandeliers. Her indifference tells me that she is nothing but a space hanging on the first floor of a *tong lau*. I go



downstairs. Those people and things scattering on the street are nothing to me either; I cannot force myself to resonate with them or make any sense out of them. To maintain a strictly transactional relationship with the street is not only about keeping a distance, but it is also a matter of respect. Who needs you to intervene in their life, and make small talk?"

During our two years in Sham Shui Po, we never made any special effort to engage the *kai-fongs*, nor did we intentionally exclude them. In fact, putting aside the general public who usually consider art irrelevant, even the groups of arts-loving youngsters who worked around the neighborhood seldom showed up in Things (including a couple of small independent businesses like coffee shops and leather workshops along Tai Nan Street, which is three minutes' walk from Things, and which organize street markets and other cultural activities under the name of "Sham Shui Po Art Tour.") Most of our visitors were practitioners in the local and international art circles. While residents living on the same street as us probably never knew about such an exhibition space at all, we had artists and curators visiting us all the way from Europe and America. Perhaps one should define *kai-fongs* by ideological and language

Plates 5, 6

Installation by Chloe Cheuk at Things. Images provided by the writer.



rather than geographical communities. After all, what Things showcased was mostly incomplete experimentation that might be hard to comprehend by audience who had no experience with contemporary art. In this sense, Things was primarily a space for artists and hence did not consider the audience or the community as much.

As a matter of fact, we did once invite artists to start their work here by responding to the space and/or the community. However, we soon realized that such a request was actually an unreasonable limitation or, like Ocean Leung said, merely wishful thinking. (Plate 7) The interweaving of artists and the community was always easier said than done, not to mention there were usually only one to two months for each artist to work. Oftentimes the idea would be reduced to formalism and cheap slogans. Besides, apart from the participation by the *kai fongs*, one essential aspect of community art is that the resources produced by art will go back to the community. And this could hardly be achieved by simply one exhibition or one residency. Interestingly, though, after we gave up the said prerequisite, artists started to respond to the space and their personal experience with Sham Shui Po in their own

ways. Undeniably, some artists found it difficult to disregard the appropriateness of site-specific art and very few of them questioned the role of residency and art intervention in the community like Ocean Leung did. In any case, we were glad to see artists treat Things and Sham Shui Po as a living place that provided them with creative inspirations and energies. To us, it was the best thing that has ever happened, and the most natural relationship between artists and the community.

The relationship between urban renewal, gentrification and art

What is the relationship between art and gentrification? Does art have any moral responsibilities towards the community? In March 2016, there was a heated controversy surrounding Sham Shui Po in the art sector, as “HK Walls,” an organization that promotes the culture of graffiti art, chose to host a large-scale Street Art Festival in Sham Shui Po during Art Basel Hong Kong. A number of local and overseas graffiti artists were sponsored by an international fashion sports shoes brand to paint in the district, stirring up dissension within the art and cultural sector. Some deemed that street art, once linked with commercial activities, would have lost its subversive spirit. While significantly changing the urban landscape of the district, the project showed little concern for the local residents. Aside from brand-building for the organizer and the sponsor, no benefits had been brought to the community itself and this might even accelerate the gentrification of a grassroots community. In response to these criticisms, some pointed out that certain Hong Kong artists tended to overestimate the power of art. Indeed, gentrification in Hong Kong is, to a large extent, directly caused by the government’s land policies and major property developers: starting from the Wedding Card Street project in Wan Chai, the Urban Renewal Authority has been wantonly demolishing old buildings in various old districts. Unaffordable luxury apartment buildings are now seen in neighborhoods where ordinary people have spent their life living and working hard, while hawker centers and wet markets are replaced by malls run by Link REIT and corporate chain stores. In truth, the graffiti did not lead to the increase in rents in Sham Shui Po; the landlords were responding to the market, not art.

As soon as Things settled in Sham Shui Po, it was accused of being an accomplice in the gentrification of the area. The *tong lau* rent by Things had already been acquired and would be redeveloped for commercial purpose. In recent years, as the cultural and creative industry has been thriving in Hong Kong, by any chance Things was also a corporate publicity trick? Having attracted people in the upper art circle and collectors who would supposedly never set foot in Sham Shui Po to visit the place, Things seemingly was paving the way for the future development of luxury homes, malls, high-end restaurants as well as artsy coffee shops (symbol of the hipster culture) in the area. In comparison, in spite of the fact that 100ft. PARK was located on the same street, it did not receive such criticisms. This was probably due to the different circles to which the two spaces and their founders belonged. South Ho, co-founder of 100ft. PARK, actually gathered a specific group of local young artists who also happened to be the exhibiting artists and major audiences of the space. Although the resultant energy and harmony was not to be neglected by curators and art critics, there was quite some distance between the



Plate 7

Two banners hung by Ocean Leung at Things. Image provided by the writer.

space itself and the collectors' market. By contrast, Chantal Wong and Lee Kit are widely recognized by people in the industry, including renowned local and international galleries and collectors. It was indeed quite unusual for an alternative art space to get so close to the commercial sector (another example is “Spring Workshop”), which also explains why there had been some confusion over the positioning of Things. As a non-profit and registered charity organization in Hong Kong, we could only try our best to keep our profile low.

One of the main goals of Things was to provide a site for artists to experiment as much as they liked without worrying about the market. Consequently, many of the works exhibited in Things could hardly be considered complete (art)works; titles of the works were intentionally not displayed either. This was rather vexatious to the media, who could not publish the photos of works that did not have a title. As to the audience, it was quite a big challenge as well: What did they see? Where were the boundaries between the works and the space? Some audience stared at a wooden door with a hole in it (created by Ocean Leung), (Plate 8, 9) not sure if it was part of an exhibited work. Yet, they were too shy to ask, for fear that someone else would mock them for knowing too little about art. Apart from creating an ambiguous viewing experience and challenging the audience's common perception, such a setup also totally broke away from the market-oriented approach, as incomplete works could never be sold. Even

if some works were in more complete forms, the artists had complete ownership of them. As a non-profit space, Things was not involved in the buying and selling of artwork at all.

In essence, although Things tried to keep a distance from the market, the brand effect in relation to the founders proved to be inevitable. Many of the young artists exhibiting at Things were offered the opportunity to showcase their works at commercial galleries afterwards. Because of Lee Kit's reputation, since its opening, Things had been featured in various notable art magazines like *Art Review*. The exhibiting artists were receiving attention not only from the art community in Hong Kong, but also internationally. In particular, the works by Chloe Cheuk and Wong Ping (Plates 10, 11) were soon exhibited at other local and overseas art shows. For these young artists who were suddenly put under the spotlight, the professional support offered by a non-profit space as Things, was probably inadequate. The phenomenon that works of art with political implication only to be exhibited in non-profit spaces immediately turned into commodities of the art market is in itself an unsolvable paradox. To be an art space in the current political climate of Hong Kong had almost endowed Things with original sin.

Alternative utilization of space, alternative allocation of resources

Lee Kit used to say in a couple of interviews that Things would not play the game of survival and would be shut down after reaching the two years' mark. As sustainability has always been one of the biggest concerns of art groups and organizations in Hong Kong, Things was actually doing some rather startling reverse thinking there. While the general opinion was that a two-year period was too short for any organization to make an impact on the art community, Things held different views on both "time" and "impact." First, it was believed that one had to give up long-term plans in order to be released from the pressure of constantly seeking funding. A two-year plan undoubtedly could not match the schedule prescribed by most funding organizations. Nevertheless, it was only after a space pulled out of the tediously long and complicated procedure for applying for grants that it could have greater flexibility in time (for example, it took us less than three weeks' time to conceive and open Tang Kwok-hin's exhibition). Meanwhile, artists could also respond to social issues more promptly without having to face the dilemma of biting the feeder's hand. In this sense, it was indeed a matter of economic independence. Although 100ft. PARK, funded by the artists themselves, also enjoyed great autonomy, their resources were relatively more limited. Another example was Holy Motors, which was founded by Hong Kong-based British artist Luke Casey and was several streets away from Things. Located in a small garage at the intersection of Lai Chi Kok Road and Boundary Street, it was bold and incredibly intriguing. Unfortunately, the founder found it too hard to sustain the project all by himself and the space had already come to an end after a year.

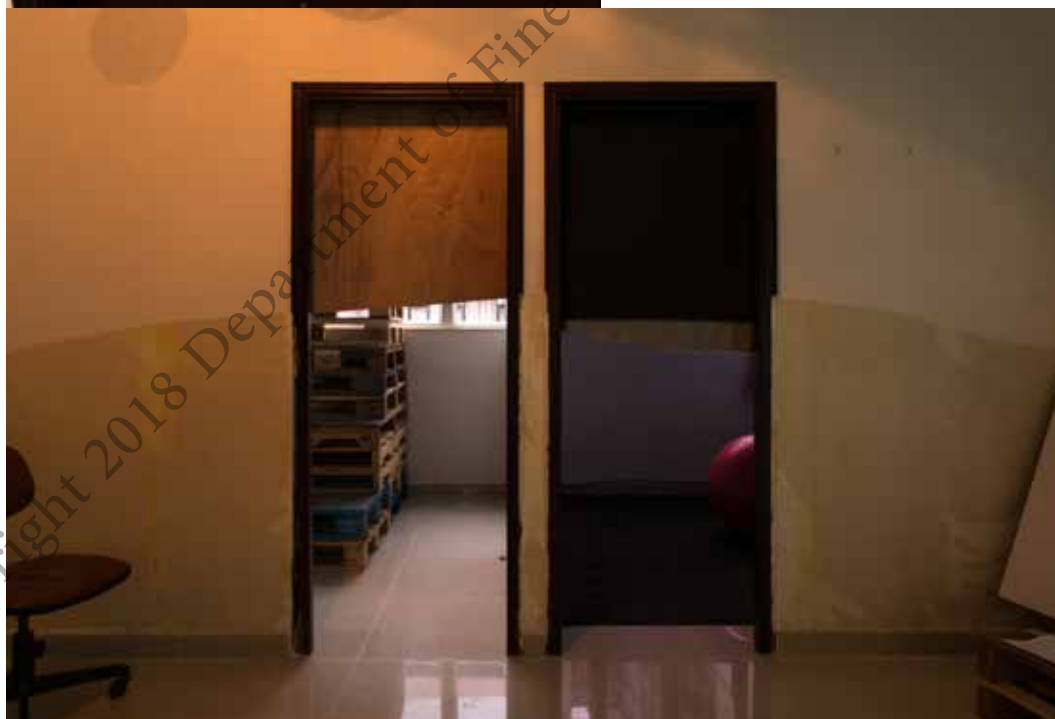
Under the current funding system, art practitioners have to compete against each other for the limited resources. In fact, aside from criticizing the Hong Kong Arts Development Council's funding principle, which aims to distribute, as much as possible, a small portion of funds to every applicant, some in the

sector proposed to work together to enlarge the pool of resources instead. Being aware that people around them actually possessed all sorts of capital such as money, materials, properties, professional knowledge and social networks, Chantal Wong and Lee Kit strived to open up these resources. Lee Kit in particular hoped to redistribute resources in society through Things. Jokingly describing its means as “stealing from the rich and giving to the needy,” Things, however, neither treated “the rich” as its opposition nor considered its supporters as merely regular sponsors. When looking for funding for each project, Chantal Wong attempted to make clear that it was not a transaction from which the supporters would receive an artwork or promotion opportunity by donating. Instead, through contribution and participation, they became part of the work and hence established a relationship with the artist and their actions that went beyond the sponsorship per se. In this way, immobile resources started to flow and more could be derived from this chain.

Artists are always the priority when it comes to the allocation of resources at Things: as we encourage artists to try their hand at non-market-oriented experimentation, it is important to release them from financial pressure so that they can concentrate on their work. Any labor is of value. As resource supplier who was critical of some rather undesirable practices in the local art sector, Things would by no means exploit our artists. In addition to the production costs of the exhibitions and projects as well as artists fees, we also offered a one-off subsidy to artists-in-residence to cover their daily expenses. Our accommodation space had been lent to other art organizations such as “soundpocket” and Asia Art Archive for their artist-in-residence programs. Other units were welcome to hold their activities in Things too. The dance performances by WING and film screenings by Rooftop Institute were some of the examples. In August 2016, considering our planned exhibition had to be rescheduled again and again, I proposed to organize “Things Summer Siesta 2016” with a view to providing our space to other individuals or groups for free. Although no resources were directly put into the community, Things tried to consume within the neighborhood as much as possible. We repurposed materials found in the vicinity (including those scavenged from the streets), and held meetings in the local *cha chaan teng* (Hong Kong style-diners) or *dai pai dong* (food stalls). We believed if we as artists and art practitioners did not play our roles properly, to bring any positive changes to the community would just be wishful thinking. After all, isn't it a paradox to call an artist a very good *kai fong* if he fails to meet the professional code of conduct of an artist?

On time, labor and (art) production

What has been said so far is not new to anyone. However, after two years, I realized that the most experimental thing about Things as an art space was its regard for time. One could probably attribute that to Lee Kit, who was in charge of the overall art direction. There were three members of Things: While Chantal Wong was responsible for setting up the organization and fundraising and Lee Kit was the one who communicated with the artists, I, as the only full-time staff member, had to take care of the daily operation of the space. Although the three of us roughly shared a common understanding



Plates 8, 9

Ocean Leung's artwork resembles a wooden door with a big hole in it. Images provided by the writer.

of what and how an alternative art space should be, at the very beginning, we pictured Things quite differently in terms of the concept and management of time. Initially, Chantal Wong wished to formulate a year plan but she was soon persuaded by Lee Kit not to do so, as Things should not simply follow the usual practice in the art sector. In the current mode of production, artists often have to create in accordance with the patterns and schedules prescribed by the art field itself. With less and less time to conceive and finish their works, they end up being a machine that keeps on producing pieces that are not yet fully polished or refined. For artists, such a working environment absolutely does more harm than good.

Regarding the mode of production of art, Godwin Koay, (Plate 12) the first artist-in-residence of Things, wrote an essay titled “In Search of Affinity: Thinking through Presence, Time, Creativity, and Productivity.”³ To him, the actual writing of the essay on the relationship between the production of art and time was already his utmost output during his residency. Of course, his views on capitalism and queries about the artist’s position in the entire system were fundamentally different from Lee Kit’s. Lee Kit did not question the value of artmaking, but the precondition was to deny the inevitable relationship between that value and the market.

The exhibitions held at Things usually were more like work-in-progress since Lee Kit insisted that our collaborating artists “were not obliged to put up a show.” This was usually incomprehensible to the artists, as we all were used to the idea that any art happening in a space should be presented in a specific way. Therefore, we attempted to unlearn what we had learnt and called each of our projects “an experiment.” Even though the outcomes at times looked crude and unfinished, the form of exhibition was still recognizable (by the way, is it possible to present works of visual art without “exhibiting” them in a physical space?). Some experiments/exhibitions were bound to be less appealing to the audience than others, as the task was not planned to be accomplished in the first place. Perhaps it would, or would not, become part of a finished work by the artist in the future (which we had irresponsibly left for the artist to decide). In any case, we focused on offering the artist the space and resources, instead of continually demanding output from him/her.

Things was not only a physical space, but also a temporal space. Artists stayed in this special space for a while, broke away from the everyday routine and created their own universe there. Besides Ocean Leung, Chan Yik-long Oscar was another local artist residing in Things. Sealing himself into the space, he was completely cut off from the outside world save a fixed phone line and a simple crane structure. The whole act to a certain extent resembled a performance, reminding one of Tehching Hsieh’s performance art pieces which examined the concept of time. Nonetheless, unlike Hsieh, Chan directed his attention to introspection and addressed the relation between his fears and creation through creating a closed space around himself.

3 For the complete article, see <http://www.thingsthatcanhappen.hk/godwin-koay-in-search-of-affinity-chi.html>.



Plates 10, 11

Wong Ping's artworks displayed at Things. Images provided by the writer.

Precisely because of this unpredictable and opaque concept of time, Things had to ensure its flexibility in scheduling and thus abandon most of our control and plans. In fact, unless supported by public funding, alternative art space is not accountable to anyone. More work or less does not really matter. Having said that, there was still a major driving force behind all our endeavors: the rent. Unlike European and American avant-garde artists who had illegally occupied abandoned space as experimentation sites, it is not feasible for Hong Kong art space operators to pay the high rents for nothing. In recent years, there have also been some changes to the prevailing practices in the art circle: While the duration of activities is getting increasingly shorter, the variety wider, and the topics touched upon more extensive, the “openness”, “diversity” and “interdisciplinarity” of the events are stressed. An art space is not only an exhibition venue, but there are also talks, screenings and workshops etc., all of which should closely follow or even overlap each other so as to retain the audience. In this regard, Things actually created a new spacetime both for the artists and the initiators of the space. How to not feel compelled by time, acknowledge the hiatus between different projects and accept that “nothing much” happened (after all, plans got called off all the time) became a huge task to us. (Another extreme case was to spend a massive amount of time and manpower on a certain project. For instance, from the beginning of Things to over half a year after its closure, it took us more than two and a half years to work on the science fiction project by Angela Su.)

In the end, nothing really happened

Whenever I look back on those days, I am filled with remorse upon the realization that Things, in truth, had not achieved “anything”. On the one hand, I am not against, and actually start to comprehend this alternative practice concerning the relationship between time and production. On the other hand, in my opinion, Things had missed numerous opportunities to establish and engage in dialogs. An alternative art space is clearly different from other organizations, as those who run the space basically represent the space itself. Compared to exhibition spaces, alternative art spaces are, in essence, more akin to one single collective, or a group of artist. 100ft. PARK, as aforementioned, has built up its own community of artists, and so have other alternative art spaces. For example, rather than an exhibition space, Floating Projects is more like a laboratory built outside the classroom by Linda Lai, where students from the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, conduct experiments and exchange ideas. The space is basically run by Lai’s students now and holding exhibitions turns out to be less of a priority. Those conversations and exchange (or even the sense of belonging) not included in the official records become the quintessence of an alternative art space. That is to say, the emergence of post-Umbrella Movement art spaces, to a certain extent, stemmed from the needs of building communities and a sense of solidarity. Even if these spaces shut down one day like Fotanian and 100ft. PARK did, it is somewhat because the communities have already been firmly established and the maintenance of these relationships no longer depends on a certain space or organization. (Of course it is also due to the fact that some of these young artists have already been



absorbed by the system. They might begin to exhibit in multifarious commercial galleries and large-scale shows and hence do not need to display their works at alternative art spaces anymore.)

In spite of the fact that Things had caught the attention of various stakeholders in the sector, it did not successfully build a community of artists. To most people, Things remained an exhibition space, instead of a place where they would stay and linger. Although we did set up a library corner in the hope of collecting books recommended by different artists and transforming it into a space for imagination to run wild and serious discussions to take place, it turned out to have followed the footsteps of many ineffective art schemes which emphasized public participation in the first place and our vision did not materialize at all. In addition to its ambiguous positioning, the constant absence of the two founders was also a reason why Things could not attain its initial goals. Both occupied by their own work, Chantal Wong and Lee Kit only managed to spend their time at Things on a part-



Plate 12

Godwin Koay. Image provided by the writer.

time basis and the daily operation of the space was subsequently taken up by me and several young artist friends. The space thus lost its focus and gravity, failing to attract other artists to gather for an extended period of time. Although the way in which Things operated freed the space from certain constraints imposed by funding organizations, because of individual members' tight schedules, there was limited communication and exchange amongst them. Decision-making hence became less flexible and efficient.

Even a physical space full of initial possibilities would one day become predictable after repeated experimentation. Under such circumstances, the uniqueness of Things turned into its limitation. Our discourse took on another direction: at the beginning, we focused on the lack of physical spaces and suggested that “any space could be an art space”; the proposition was later pushed further as “one does not necessarily need a space to make art.” For instance, there was no exhibiting session in any form for Angela Su's science fiction (Editor's note: “Dark Fluid: A Science Fiction Experiment”) or was Anita Dawood's mail art/postcard art; Law Man-lok's “The ABCs of Law” also mainly took place on Facebook. Although no plans have been confirmed yet at the moment, it is very likely that Things will continue to exist as a non-physical space as we ponder our next move in other possible forms. This also explains why we invited Jesse McKee of 221A, an alternative art space in Chinatown in Vancouver, to reside in Things and start a dialog between the two spaces.

Being on the spot, it is difficult for me to assert what Things has brought to the local art world. From 2017 to early 2018, Holy Motors, 100ft. PARK, Things, Spring Workshop and “Connecting Space” all left the party one after another. Yet, in the meantime, new-comers such as “Tai Kwun” and art foundations like “K11” and “Milló” are joining in. And as I am writing this essay, Art Basel is happening and the art field seems more energized than ever. If two years ago, we were responding to the lack of exhibiting space in Hong Kong, then what about today? As the circumstances have greatly changed, we even query if there are too many exhibitions now. Our new question is: What are spaces for?

We like to say that alternative art spaces are of fundamental importance to a delicately-balanced art ecosystem. Nevertheless, unlike the public approach taken by art museums and galleries, alternative art spaces are, in the end, more about the founders themselves and the artists around them. For Things, the learning process and growth of the participants must be its most important legacy, even though it may not be directly relevant to art. For example, Chantal Wong set up a Community College through Things and has been organizing English classes for refugees and asylum seekers with a view to assisting them to adapt to their new life in Hong Kong. A scholarship was even launched two years after that. I, on the other hand, joined the fabric hawkers in Sham Shui Po to protest against the government's forced relocation plan and have learnt considerably about how art intervenes in social issues. All these were not written in the chronology of projects and events initiated by Things, yet they are without a doubt an indispensable part of Things. We started to ask questions through Things, and these questions

and our actions in turn constituted the character and identity of Things. In the most individual way possible and through this alternative art space, we tried to talk and respond to the city and the era we were in.

Mary Lee is a writer/translator/editor/project coordinator. She had worked in Asia Art Archive, and managed alternative art space “Things that can happen” between 2015 and 2017 together with Chantal Wong and Lee Kit.

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**Things that happened at “Things that can happen”
 (August 1, 2015 to September 17, 2017)**

Exhibitions	
August 1 to 23, 2015	“She, herself”: Experiments from Chloe Cheuk
September 5 to November 15, 2015	“Jungle of Desire”: Things that can happen’s opening exhibition by Wong Ping
January 28 to February 28, 2016	An Intervention by Ocean Leung
March 19 to May 1, 2016	A Response to An Intervention by Ocean Leung
October 1 to 30, 2016	An Exhibition by Yogesh Barve
November 24 to December 4, 2016	“Offhand-over”: An Experiment by Tang Kwok-hin
March 9 to April 2, 2017	“Tick-Tock”: An Exhibition by Yang Chichuan (Part I)
April 29 to June 4, 2017	“Soliquid”: An Exhibition by Chan Yik-long Oscar
August 19 to September 17, 2017	“The ABCs of Law”: Things that can happen’s closing exhibition by Law Man-lok
Residency	
September 3 to October 2, 2015	Godwin Koay
December 1, 2015 to February 14, 2016	Ocean Leung
February 2 to March 20, 2016	Mark Thia
June 16 to 30, September 20 to October 3, 2016	Yogesh Barve (& Saviya Lopes)
December 2 to 31, 2016	Devora Neumark
January 26 to February 26, 2017	Chan Yik-long Oscar
March 2 to 28, 2017	Yang Chichuan
April 4 to 20, 2017	Jesse McKee (221A)
Others	
2015	Community College
2015 - 2017	“Dark Fluid”: A Science Fiction Experiment by Angela Su
October 1, 2015	Conversations with Godwin Koay
February 13, 2016	Screening: “The Way of Paddy”
August 4 to 28, 2016	Things Summer Siesta 2016
November 9, 2016	A Performance by Mark Thia
October to November, 2016	“Postcards from a Library”: A Project by Anita Dawood
April 19, 2017	Screening: “Governing the Effects of Retrograde Part I”
May 19, 2017	Screening: “Governing the Effects of Retrograde Part II” “Fire Makes No Sound”: Audio Performance by Julian Hou
September 2, 2017	Pre-order & book launch: <i>Dark Fluid: A Science Fiction Experiment</i> by Angela Su