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# Exploring The Aesthetic of Hong Kong Community Arts

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Aiming to showcase a place's distinctive features and empowering the underprivileged, community arts is becoming more prevalent in Hong Kong and there are a large number of exhibitions, seminars and other activities in relation to it every year. Nowadays, the gap between arts and everyday lives is narrowing. When it comes to the arts, everything goes. But what makes good community arts? What are the aesthetic standards? How can we assess it? How can it be developed? Controversies often arise when the definitions are not clear enough. For instance, in 2013, the eighteen district councils in Hong Kong successively commissioned building projects of the so-called district landmarks, the unsightliness of which, however, drew much criticism from the local online community.<sup>1</sup> In the same year, the well-received art group Woofer Ten's application for contract renewal was rejected by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). Last year, attempts to beautify the community by graffiti were even accused of allegedly contributing to gentrification of the area.<sup>2</sup> In this way, what should community arts do?

## Contextualization

As Scott Mardsden says, "Community art is a practice that believes the production of arts is a social activity that expresses people's lived experiences. Community art, by its very nature has

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1 "Ugly landmarks blocking streets in all 18 districts, as claimed by citizens," *Ming Pao*, January 30, 2013, page A02.

2 Karen Cheung, "Art and poor communities in Hong Kong: A positive influence or a stalking horse for gentrification?", *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 3, 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/04/03/art-and-poor-communities-a-positive-influence-or-a-stalking-horse-for-gentrification/>.

no common aesthetics standard.<sup>3</sup> The aesthetics of this art form is fundamentally grounded in its content and culture.” Thus, the source materials of community arts basically come from the community itself, aiming to discuss the sense of community or to transform the society. In the wake of constant urban renewal in Hong Kong, urban development becomes a common subject matter of community arts here, hoping to enable residents to voice out their concerns, discover the locality of their community and preserve distinctive places. For example, in November 2016, the murals and road signs painted by students under the “Village For Life” project<sup>4</sup> not only showcased the history of Yau Tam Mei Tsuen, but also revealed the various problems faced by the villagers as caused by urban development. On the other hand, “My Street, My Understanding, My Writing” is a project through which participants reflect on the relationship between themselves and their community via writing. Most community arts strives to empower the disadvantaged and break the social stereotypes of certain groups of people; for instance, it lets the disabled dance, allows sick people to receive positive energy through art and energizes the elderly through art creation. In May 2016, “Art in Hospital” arranged for a group of elderly people to join an “Arts and Ageing Workshop” at Oi! and interact with artworks. Despite their initial shyness, these seniors later felt comfortable enough to make art in bold colors. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in order to create an appropriate environment for all parties involved, some subjects might be considered taboo. For example, according to *How to Apply Art in Hospital*, special attention needs to be paid to the design of murals in hospitals to ensure that no undesirable feelings are aroused amongst the patients and their families; empty chairs and beds, dead and flying leaves, as well as drifting persons and animals are often associated with death and thus should be avoided.<sup>5</sup> This is obviously different from contemporary art, which often sets off to discuss and break taboos. When “v-artist” shoots videos and works with the grassroots community, props are also used to substitute for the underprivileged on camera so as to avert labelling.<sup>6</sup> Evidently, it is important to take into consideration the feelings of one’s targets and the overall context when making community arts.

### Collaborative/relational: artists and the community

Instead of merely drawing inspiration from the community, the artists attend to the feelings of the audience and emphasize the connection between their artworks and the people. This is exactly the gist of “connective aesthetics” and “relational aesthetics,” as proposed by art critics Suzi Gablik and Nicolas

3 Marsden Scott, *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*, Peter White ed. (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery and Banff Centre Press, 1996), 195.

4 “Village for Life” community building project in Yau Tam Mei, Yuen Long was sponsored by Hong Kong Jockey Club “Heritage × Arts × Design Walk Project” and organized by Hulu Culture.

5 Cheng Grace, Leung Jaclyn and Lee Susanna, eds., *How to Apply Art in Hospital* (Hong Kong: Art in Hospitals, 2011), 17.

6 “v-artist: Sham Shui Po in Hong Kong,” Forum on Community Arts and Heritage Preservation, 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www6.crs.cuhk.edu.hk/communityarts2016/index.php/v-artist/>.

Bourriaud respectively. In September 2016, derived from such aesthetics, Yu Yeuk-mui Cally curated “As the leaves fall,” a collaboration art project that stressed “company” and “connection.” The participating artists and the elderly would first share with each other how they entertained themselves; after knowing one another well, they would create together. The outcomes of the exhibition were very honest, to the extent that examples of failed collaborations were also showed. While there were different ways for the artists and the elderly to collaborate, the ultimate artworks they made were of great diversity and high quality. The professional artists might have taken a more leading role in the exhibition, but the short film that documented the creation process also reflected largely the elderly’s wisdom. It is believed that both parties taught each other something and there was not much difference in their authority over knowledge. (Plates 1, 2)

Plates 1 (top),  
2 (bottom)

The participating artists and the elderly engaged in interactions. Image courtesy of “As the leaves fall” collaboration art project.



### Collaborative/relational: artworks and the public

The connective aesthetics, in fact, has shed some light on the appreciation of this kind of works: when we look at community art, it is never just about the works themselves. For instance, as disclosed by Woofer Ten, reports of HKADC reviewers<sup>7</sup> actually pointed out that improvement

<sup>7</sup> The problem of setting up exhibits is mentioned in the project grant (visual arts) report on “Twinkle Twinkle Christmas Light Project” in 2011-12, the two reports on “Hong Kong Artist DSE” also in 2011-12, and the year-end evaluation report 2012-13.

was needed in Woofers Ten's skills at setting up exhibitions. I suppose it was referring to the mix of new and old works exhibited at the same time; considering how exquisite and meticulous art exhibitions are held in high regard nowadays, these comments did not come as a surprise. However, from the perspective of connective aesthetics which emphasizes communication and contact, perhaps the audience should simply adjust their viewing habit and take the initiative to talk to the staff on site so as to understand both the history of the old community artworks and the rationale of the new exhibition. On the other hand, Green Wave Art, which took over HKADC's Shanghai Street Artspace from Woofers Ten, adopted a different approach: whenever there is an event in the art space, the ongoing exhibits are pulled back; exhibition areas are also clearly defined. Some may criticize that this is the white-cube way to neutralize spaces and erase history, but Sanmu Chen, who is in charge of Green Wave Art, considered this better conformation to the principles of fair use which allows more people to gain access to the public resources there.

Connective aesthetics suggests that the ideal way to appreciate community arts is to directly participate in the activities and build one's connection with other individuals. Rather than looking solely at the outcomes and the static exhibitions, the process is more important. I joined one of the activities organized by "Seeding Hong Kong"<sup>9</sup> that centered on leftovers in 2014. It was simply about having a meal. At the beginning, the organizer spoke about the rationale behind the activity: although the tableful of delicacies was made from leftover food, the organizer was not trying to advocate environmental protection by consuming leftovers. Instead, it was all about waste reduction at source. As long as no excessive food was produced, there would not be any leftovers. Whilst eating, one should pay attention to the texture of the food; do not swallow it all at once, but chew your food around eighty times and discover its sweetness. Do not talk whilst eating to show your respect for the food. Through participation in exchange activities like this, audience would be able to comprehend the ideas better. If one only looks at the exhibits without experiencing the interaction amongst individuals firsthand, one would have missed the whole point of such community arts projects. (Plate 3)

### Anti-art or believing in art

To regard having a meal as arts might be a way to compress the distance between everyday life and arts. Nato Thompson calls this "living as form."<sup>10</sup> Woofers Ten always called itself the community center of arts. Its first Director, Lau Kin-wah Jasper, once declared, they "utilize the resources

8 The writer interviewed Sanmu Chen at Green Wave Art on April 9, 2017.

9 "Seeding Hong Kong: An Arts, Nature and Community Experimental Project" was presented by Yaumatei Gardener and held at different places in Yau Ma Tei in 2013-14. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/635010383218357>, accessed April 30, 2017.

10 Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York: Creative Time, 2012)

## Plate 3

Having a meal as art in  
“Seeding Hong Kong.”

Image courtesy of Phoebe  
Man.



of the art circle to make something avant-garde, something that is not yet incorporated in the art circle.”<sup>11</sup> But is this idea understood by the participants? I spent some time in Woofer Ten observing the visitors and found that passers-by just naturally walked into the place to chat with the others or get a copy of *Woofer Post*. People considered this space a friendly one that allowed them to freely get in or out and to make conversation. Some residents in the neighborhood even left their kids there and it was how an arts center could also serve as a child care center! A lot happened at Woofer Ten as a result of the flexibility of the arts. Cally Yu, member of Woofer Ten, described the aesthetics as “very lo-fi,”<sup>12</sup> meaning that the works were easy to understand and that everyone could make art. So, can their target audience receive the same message about this kind of artistic characteristics? We interviewed Irene, a volunteer of Woofer Ten,<sup>13</sup> who said there was neither restriction nor threshold for Woofer Ten’s arts. They did whatever the people in the neighborhood needed. All they wanted was to make life interesting and bring people closer to each other. Although Irene was not an artist, she fully participated in Woofer Ten’s activities and clearly saw the point of it. On the contrary, Farzana, a neighbor of Pakastani descent,<sup>14</sup> confessed that she had no idea what Woofer Ten was exactly doing. She simply thought the group of people who were running the place was nice and she felt happy around them. There were always parties and Farzana even held a workshop at Woofer Ten teaching the others how to cook chicken curry. She could not go to the cinema because of religious reasons but she could watch a film at Woofer Ten. In spite of her unawareness of what Woofer Ten was doing, there was this place that made her feel free and joyful and where she could blend in with the other local neighbors regardless of their

11 Tong Ying-tung Yentl, “Art or Non-art”, *50 Years of The Chinese University of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Editorial Committee of 50 Years of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016), from the website of Woofer Ten, [http://woofertenews.blogspot.hk/2017/03/blog-post\\_13.html](http://woofertenews.blogspot.hk/2017/03/blog-post_13.html), accessed April 20, 2017.

12 Alice Ko, “An interview with Cally Yu,” *Reverse Niche*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a13w2FYIhkc1>, accessed April 20, 2017.

13 Ivy Yeung, the writer’s Research Assistant, interviewed volunteer Irene Hui at Woofer Ten on October 17, 2013.

14 Ivy Yeung, the writer’s Research Assistant, interviewed Farzana at her home on October 29, 2013.

respective religions. Isn't this what art always aims to achieve, namely to enable people to perceive life differently?

In fact, this whole practice of “life is art” followed by Woofar Ten and many other community arts group or artists goes back a long way in terms of art traditions. As early as in the beginning of 20th century, artists were already reflecting on the essence of arts through Dadaism and the anti-art movements. Nonetheless, it seems that this practice did not live up to HKADC's expectations, as the examiners reportedly “hoped (Woofar Ten) could raise artistic standards of the general public.”<sup>15</sup>

Possibly affected by the examiners' feedback, Green Wave Art (which succeeded Woofar Ten) tends to interact with the neighborhood in the actual mode of arts. For example, in the “404 Family Photo” project<sup>16</sup> which is still ongoing by the time this essay is being written, artists are invited to take family photos for people in the neighborhood. On one occasion, I observed that the photographer actually discussed intensively with the neighbors on how to take the photos and which photo is better, etc. It is possible that art concepts are spread out through such communication. (Plates 4, 5)

“Art in Hospital” further believes in the power of art, as it strives to “let the elderly patients have fun with art creation as well as to create a cheerful atmosphere in the wards.”<sup>17</sup> “The workshops can help the elderly patients shift their reliance on medication to arts and calm them down.”<sup>18</sup> As to “v-artist,”<sup>19</sup> art even helps cultivate the temperament of citizens. Through arts, one can sort out his/her own thoughts while understanding those of the others—this is also where its beauty lies. Communication has always been the keyword in art. If everyone can “think independently, listen earnestly, be compassionate, respect the others, seek interaction and consensus; in other words, not only blindly follow opinion leaders or majority vote, we might as well reach the ideal of having all beings equal. Once comparison is drawn, it is not hard to find that the very nature of art activities almost embodies every temperament a self-conscious citizen requires.”<sup>20</sup>

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15 Yeung Tin-shui, “The Business of Art: Woofar Ten's Contract Renewal and HKADC”, *Apple Daily*, August 5, 2013, <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/financestate/art/20130805/18364465>, accessed April 20, 2017.

16 Organized by Green Wave Art, the “404 Family Photo” project is held at Green Wave Art from March 5 to September 24, 2017. For details, see [https://www.facebook.com/404familyphoto/?hc\\_ref=SEARCH](https://www.facebook.com/404familyphoto/?hc_ref=SEARCH), accessed April 30, 2017.

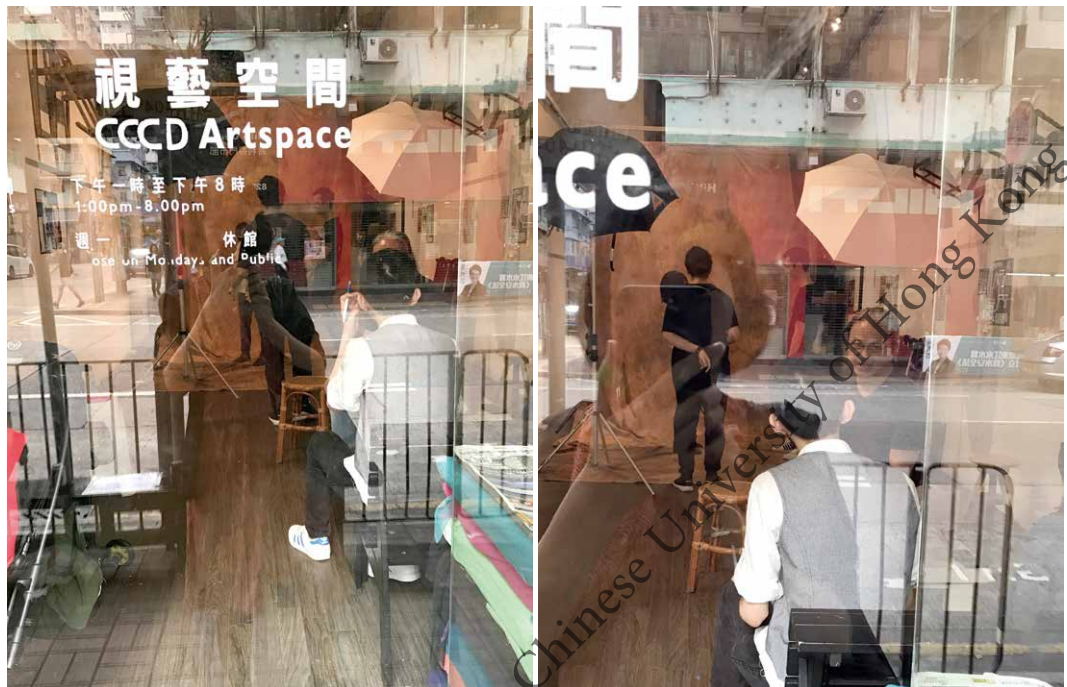
17 Chan Sai-lok and Susanna Lee, eds., *Art Cherish Holistic Art Workshop for Elderly Patients Operation Manual* (Hong Kong, Art in Hospital, January 2015): 1.

18 Ibid: 60.

19 Please refer to <http://www.v-artist.net/>, accessed April 30, 2017.

20 Lee Wai-yi, “v-artist: Let Images Return to the Site”, Hong Kong Social Movement Film Festival, June 5, 2010, <https://smff2010.wordpress.com/2010/06/05/v-artist/>, accessed April 20, 2017.

Plates 4 (left), 5 (right) “404 Family Photo” took place at Green Wave Art in April 2017. Ongoing exhibitions were temporarily closed to make room for participants. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.



### Promoting inter-neighbor relations

A number of arts, social service and district-based organizations such as Woofers Ten and Blue House (run by St. James' Settlement)<sup>21</sup> have been using community arts to nurture the disappearing relationships amongst neighbors and create an interdependent and sharing culture in the community, in the hope of improving residents' standard of living and the economy. On the one hand, all of these organizations stress the importance of communication and a bottom-up design of activities; on the other hand, the approaches towards their target groups differ from organization to organization. For instance, Blue House has a clear classification of their targets while Woofers Ten adopts a more random approach.

Blue House serves three main target groups, namely:

1. Blue House residents and tenants. For example, people who long for a strong sense of community are recruited under the “Good Neighbor Scheme” to live in the Blue House as residents.
2. Local partners and residents in Wan Chai. Example includes the “Community-oriented Mutual Economy Hall,” where exchange of community goods and services takes place.

<sup>21</sup> St. James' Settlement operates “Wan Chai Livelihood Place” at 72-74A Stone Nullah Lane, Wan Chai. Since the outer walls of the building are painted blue, it is often referred to as the Blue House.



3. The public. Hong Kong House of Stories, dessert and vegetarian restaurants are some of the example activities.

Most of the participating artists basically come from the community. For instance, the workshop instructors, (Plate 6) exhibition and community docents (Plate 7) for programs like “Auntie May’s Tips” and “Wan Chai Kai Fong Chateau” are all neighbors who also happen to be experts on some specific areas. Even when it comes to matters that involve decision making, representatives from different neighborhoods would take part in the process. In this way, the neighbors are connected in all aspects and at all levels. (Plates 8, 9)

As for Woofer Ten, its most remarkable activities in connecting residents in the nearby neighborhoods was its first exhibition titled “Lots Awards, Little Reward” in 2009. A group of students were first recruited to explore the community and present awards to various small business owners. After that, they would bring activity participants to visit the award-winning shops. This did not only successfully narrow (the artistic rationale of) the art space and the neighboring businesses, but also contributed to the economy by showing the public into the community. (Plates 10, 11) The awards were also full of humor. For example, “The Savior of Rough Boys Award” was given to a hawker who always taught the others how to cook Chinese soup—it was hard to imagine a standard social welfare organization presenting funny awards like this. Because of its relatively small size and lack of resources, the other activities organized by Woofer Ten tended to cater to a smaller number of participants. While sometimes the neighbors just joined the activities on the spot, there were also gallery visits with full attendance. Although their artists mainly came from outside the neighborhood, some projects were also led by residents such as Mother Fred, Mr. Cheng and Mr. Wong. Despite the small number of participants, the activities were of greater flexibility: how arts center also served as child care center was one good example. The organizers did not set out specific strategies to analyze the composition of the neighborhood and mark out their target groups; the activities were mostly for fun and did not emphasize efficiency as much as social service organizations.

### Gift economy

The above-mentioned community arts organizations advocate the anti-capitalist notion of gift economy and focus on the exchange of resources and human interaction. Whereas Woofer Ten hosted the “Woofer Market,” (Plates 12, 13) there was “Up for bargains!” for the Blue House. Even after Woofer Ten’s funding support was terminated, the “Woofer Market” was still held without the application for any of the required license(s). People come along, offering to sell, give away or exchange anything they feel like; the emphasis is on community imaginations, economic autonomy and humanity. For instance, a painter chats with his/her painting subject(s)

Plate 6 (top left)

Auntie May of “Auntie May’s Tips” shows her facebook page to the writer. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.

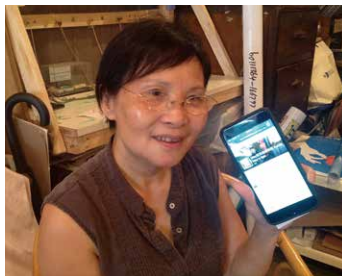


Plate 7 (right)

Community docents of the Blue House. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.



Plate 8 (center left)

The Blue House emphasizes bringing the arts into life. Its signs are interesting and friendly. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.



Plate 9 (bottom)

The Blue House promotes the sense of neighborhood through community arts. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.



Plate 10 (left)

The humorous “Lots Awards, Little Reward.” Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.

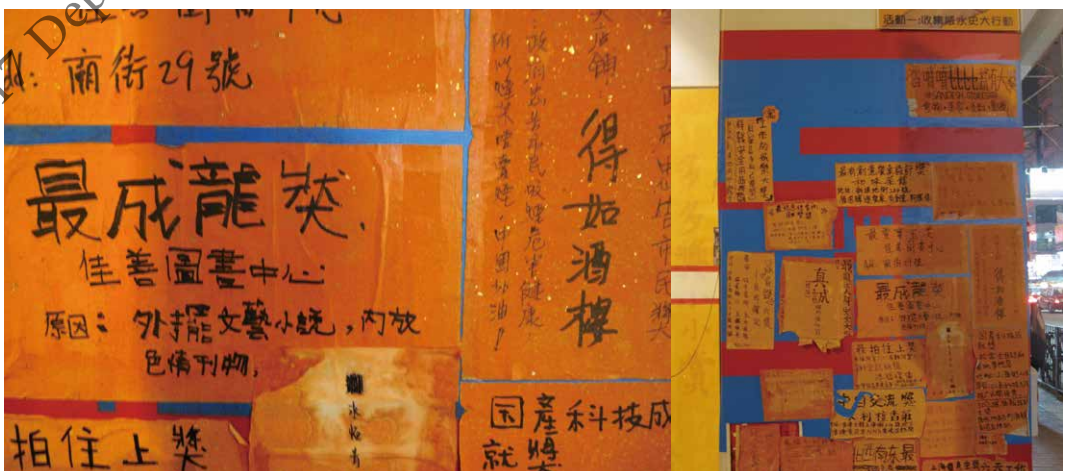


Plate 11 (right)

A variety of titles under “Lots Awards, Little Reward.” Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.

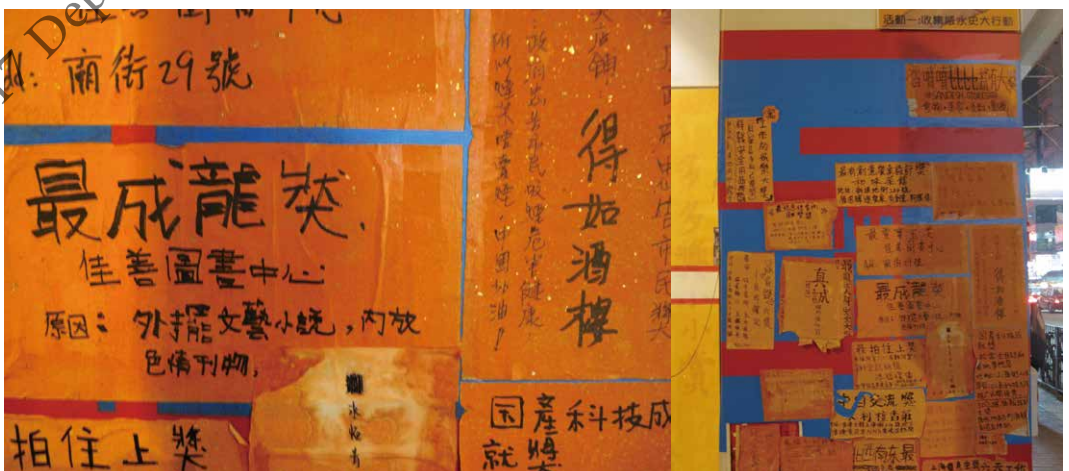




Plate 12 (left)

“Woofer Market,” 2015. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.

Plate 13 (right)

The “Woofer Market” 2015 is not about profit-making. The sign says “Pay as you wish.” Its atmosphere was relaxing. Image courtesy of Phoebe Man.

while coming up with the portrait. Similarly, “Up for bargains!” did not aim at trading or earning profits but emphasized talking, chatting, bargaining and bartering. People were also encouraged to sing, dance or tell a story etc. to exchange for goods or services as well as to communicate with the others. As Blue House is subsidized by the government and commercial entities, its market was held right in front of the Blue House in a more traditional and serious manner whereas the “Woofer Market” had a stronger sense of resistance to the establishment with its utterly free style of setups and trading. The goods were of a wider variety in the latter too. In addition to “Woofer Market”, Woofer Ten also followed other community organizations’ practices and conducted the monthly “Goodies for the Neighbors”, in an attempt to connect the neighbors with free goods. Nonetheless, different from those district associations which give out “snake soup, vegetarian dishes, mooncakes and rice dumplings”<sup>22</sup> for free in exchange of votes, Woofer Ten upheld the principles of reallocation of resources and strived to utilize public funds to pass valuable materials to residents in the neighborhood. At one time, “Easter eggs in jasmine tea” were given out in the neighborhood in order to imply the association to the “Jasmine Revolution” and the pursuit of social justice.<sup>23</sup>

### Handling controversies

The extent to which social workers and artists confront or avoid controversies differ. For instance, at a seminar in 2016, a social worker<sup>24</sup> recalled that he once hosted an arts activity which targeted at young parents. During the activity where story writing was discussed, a participant mentioned a sex-related topic and he was instantly forbidden by the other participants to further speak on

22 “Snake soup, vegetarian dishes, mooncakes and rice dumplings” is a figurative representation of political organizations in Hong Kong, especially the district councils or pro-establishment organizations, giving out free gifts or offer free meals to people in the neighborhood during festivals.

23 Alice Ko, “An interview with C&G”, *Reverse Niche*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a13w2FYIhkc1>, accessed April 20, 2017.

24 From a speech given by social worker Lau Kit-wai at “Social Exchange with Creativity” Forum organized by Hong Kong Community College at PolyU Hung Hom Bay Campus on October 29, 2016.

it; the social worker on-site did not stop the ban either. Sex is a tabooed subject, but apparently it was also the topic that could not be avoided by these young people who became parents during their secondary school years. The other participants refused to discuss such topics probably because they endeavored to distinguish themselves from the socially unacceptable practice of underage sex which they once engaged in. It was a way for them to avoid any sensitive discussion of it and project a positive image of the prodigal son. If social workers do not shy from dealing with tabooed subjects, arts practitioners, by training, in general embrace controversies. A lot of contemporary arts actually aspires to reveal societal conflicts in the first place. Artist Man Ching-ying Phoebe organized a workshop on comfort women, a subject which requires her to handle the topic of sex. She asked the participating students: would you use the “comfort tickets” and sexually assault the comfort women if you were a Japanese soldier in the Second World War? Some male students honestly admitted that they would, saying that it was a legal benefit and the protection of human rights could hardly come to the mind of anyone who were presumably going to die in a war at some point. Phoebe Man appreciated the honesty of these students—there is indeed always a dark side of human nature. By referencing to the notion of “the banality of evil” raised by Hannah Arendt, she advised students to think whether it is human nature to obey the authority and follow the majority while at times were simply too weak and cowardly to make moral judgment and thus became accomplices of the rich and the powerful. Discussion on ways to arouse empathy and overcome the dark side of human nature was also initiated. Controversial issues would not be banned but only transformed into some meaningful topics for further discussion.

Social welfare organizations and arts groups often have different emphasis when making community arts. Although Woofers Ten was a self-proclaimed “community center,” member Fong Wan-chi Vangi well understood that its role was to “inspire” rather than to “serve” as what traditional community centers are expected to do.<sup>25</sup> Social welfare organizations usually have a strong network that enables them to mobilize and offer a range of comprehensive and follow-up services. On the contrary, arts usually starts with asking questions and doing experiments next. Compared to social welfare projects which emphasize clear goals and effective mechanisms, there could be no tangible outcomes for those in the arts. In this sense, both sectors are creating impacts in their own ways.

### The role of artists

Lee Chun-fung of Woofers Ten likes to say that the most ideal way to run an arts space is to “hand it over to people in the neighborhood;” more explicitly, “to develop the self-awareness of each stakeholder of the community, so that they would actively seek out ways to participate and re-

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<sup>25</sup> Alice Ko, “An interview with Fong Wan-chi Vangi”, *Reverse Niche*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a13w2FYIhkcI>, accessed April 20, 2017.

establish their connections with the community.”<sup>26</sup> It is truly ideal if a community can just speak up for itself. Ho Hing-kay Oscar also opines that when making community arts, “one has to give up all the elitism and values associated with traditional arts and recognize that the general public is also equipped with an equally important cultural sense and ability, but only in a different language with different values.” He points out that community arts serves to recognize and unearth the potential of the community. Art practitioners play the roles of animators or the supporting role of an intermediary in these projects. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a community is a social unit of great complexity and diversity.<sup>27</sup> Cally Yu bluntly admitted that she used to argue with some rather chauvinist men in the neighborhood.<sup>28</sup> Sanmu Chen also recalled that when Green Wave Art was showcasing some nude performance art, some neighbors simply kept commenting on the “boobs” and “butts” of the artist, leaving the other audience all uncomfortable. There were also neighbors who wandered about the exhibition venue just to read horse racing newspaper in an air-conditioned environment. When Sammu ran out of means of leading these neighbors to think over arts, they had no choice but to ask them to leave.<sup>29</sup> It is thus apparent that civilian culture is never entirely romantic; a considerable amount of communication and adjustment is actually required in the process of bringing arts to the public. Individual differences has to be shown and discussed and it is never just about how one side yields to the other. Like Yuen Fun said, “The underprivileged is a contextual notion instead of a set-as-stone categorization.” The creative process of community art projects requires “the disadvantaged, organizer or arts practitioner to listen to each other and make your various voices heard and comprehended. Together they negotiate and achieve creative transformation.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, he believes that “in lieu of ranking these three roles, they should be regarded as partners of equal status. Each of them should remain highly sensitive to the divergence between their power and strive to attain equilibrium and equality through creating together—even though their creativity may lie in different areas.”<sup>31</sup>

In fact, many artists would combine the three roles in their works: they are not only members of the neighborhood/the disadvantaged, but also artists and organizers. By doing so they avoid the possible exploitation or consumption of the underprivileged, as the artists talk about the issues they encounter and take them to the public domain for further discussion. With a strong belief and a good caring heart for society, this kind of powerful and compelling works would naturally come along to move or change the others.

26 Woofer Tens Ideas: <http://woofer10.blogspot.hk/2013/08/blog-post.html>, accessed April 20, 2017.

27 Ho Hing-kay Oscar, “Community Arts, Difficult Arts”, *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, April 16, 2007, page 34.

28 Alice Ko, “An interview with Cally Yu”, *Reverse Niche*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a13w2FYIhkc1>, accessed April 20, 2017.

29 The writer interviewed Sanmu Chen at Green Wave Art on April 9, 2017.

30 Yuen Fun, “Also on Community Arts: Beautiful arts,” <https://vpflow.wordpress.com/%E6%AD%B7%E5%8F%B2%E7%89%87%E6%AE%B5/%E7%BE%8E%E5%A5%BD%E7%9A%84%E8%97%9D%E8%93%EF%BC%8D%EF%BC%8D%E4%B9%9F%E8%AB%87%E7%A4%BE%E5%8D%80%E8%97%9D%E8%A1%93/>, accessed February 26, 2016.

31 Same as above.

Collaboration between the three parties on an equal basis offers some fresh insights into the whole “arts aggravating the gentrification of community” issue. In March 2016, HKWalls launched a wall painting project in Sham Shui Po, arguably the poorest district of Hong Kong, thus prompting a heated debate over gentrification. The question was: once those artists coming from outside of the community managed to beautify the neighborhoods, would that attract a large number of visitors from somewhere else and drive up the rents, subsequently making life even more difficult for the local grassroots population who were already living in poverty? However, to prevent this from happening, do we just ban the employment of arts to beautify communities?

Perhaps we can take the approach of Brazilian graffiti artist, Thiago Mundano, as a reference. He put graffiti on recycling workers’ trolleys and portrayed these workers as heroes, in recognition of their contribution to environmental protection. (Plate 14) With the help of crowdfunding, he even purchased quality equipment for the workers with a view to improving their working condition. In mid-March 2017, Mundano came to Hong Kong to attend a seminar. A couple of days after his arrival in Hong Kong, he already got around to observe the local laborers. In a talk, showing photos of some elderly waste-pickers to the audience, he expressed that he was shocked

Plate 14

Mundano graffiti on the trolley of a recycling worker. Photo courtesy of Pimp My Carroça.



Plate 15

Artwork created by Mundano in Hong Kong. Photo courtesy of Pimp My Carroça.

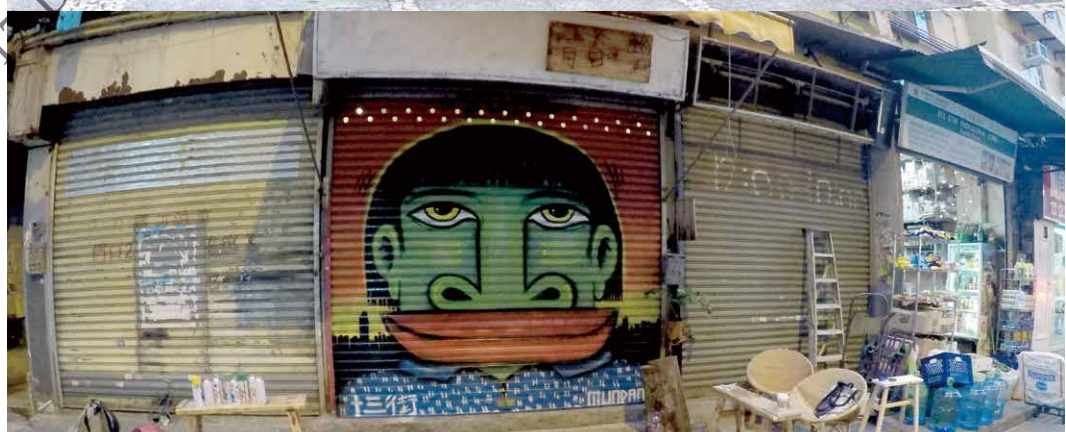




Plate 16

Mundano colored the trolley of a Hong Kong recycling worker. Photo courtesy of Pimp My Carroça.

to know that old people in Hong Kong had to collect waste paper in order to earn a living. He even cited statistics to prove how people involved in recycling had contributed to the protection of environment in Hong Kong. Later, after meeting Him Lo who also made community arts, Mundano heard the story of Sister Poon, a recycling worker who always left the wood she found on the street at the doorway of Chingchun Warehouse for the Warehouse students' use. He subsequently painted Sister Poon's trolley and also helped Sister Wa, another recycling worker, apply fluorescent adhesive tape to her trolley to ensure her safety. On Chingchun Warehouse's front gate, he painted a close-up portrait of a worker against the silhouette of the city skyline to commend the workers for their contribution. Sister Poon and Sister Wa were both delighted that Mundano was not bothered about their soiled trolleys at all and even colored them. (Plates 15, 16) Although Mundano only stayed in Hong Kong for a short time, he cared about the disadvantaged here and tried to convince the public, with statistics, of the contribution of recycling workers. Moreover, he even joined hands with local organizations to paint the tools used by the underprivileged in order to recognize and empower them so that they become visible to the others. His approach is probably easier for others to take in. For artists that would like to stay in the community for a longer period of time, reference could be made to the mural project at Yau Tam Mei Tsuen in 2016: in addition to mural painting, guided tours and markets were also organized, through which arts was integrated with everyday life and the villagers, together with the public, the organizers, students and artists, were able to reflect together on the urban and rural development of Hong Kong as well as issues in relation to conservation. With the equal participation of multiple parties in the process, the project could be conducted more efficiently and thus more widely accepted by the community and society.

### Empathy and joyous resistance

"Joyous resistance" refers to the usual practice of local artists and social activists. Artist wen yau<sup>32</sup> explained that it was a satirical way to respond to the absurd when reasoning no longer worked.

<sup>32</sup> Editor's note: wen yau, Hong Kong performance artist. There were the (pro-) "Occupy Central" and "Anti-Occupy Central" camps in Hong Kong during the 2014 "Umbrella Movement." People in the "anti" camp supported, to a more or lesser extent, the sovereignty by the establishment. Respective supporters of these two camps gathered at different locations in Hong Kong during the Movement. wen yau has, more than once, stood among the "anti" camp, holding signs with satirical messages, to "support" the antis based on ridiculous reasons.

With imagination, she would attempt to approach a situation with someone else's perspective and exaggerate the unreasonable part(s). For example, she held a cardboard which said "I am anti-Occupy Central because I got the police and FEHD (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department) backing me up" and blended into the anti-Occupy Central crowd to protest.<sup>33</sup> Such interesting acts could attract more people to take part in the activities and pay closer attention to the issues concerned, thus making an impact. It is different from the "joyous resistance" put forward by Chin Wan, which means to "embrace a jolly heart and confront your suffering; enlighten and gather the masses; harness the collective power of the people and make the oppressors fear; spread the civilians' joyous way of living so that the oppressors would feel ashamed and surrender, hence the liberation of one another."<sup>34</sup> What Chin Wan says refers to social movements, but the same can actually be applied to the community arts, which often raises questions such as the discrimination against the underprivileged and estranged interpersonal relationships. With an underlying spirit of resistance, arts can help improve these problems or offer a new perspective on the issues in a positive way that emphasizes locality, correlation, process, connectedness, participation, sharing, communication, collaborations, sincerity, empathy and empowerment. Its aim is to construct some beautiful imaginations we can believe in or to pursue social justice, so that everyone is satisfied and happy and the deficiencies of the authorities or the blind spot of prejudices could be brought to light. On the other hand, individual awareness is also of considerable importance. Gift economy which touches upon neither business operation nor the maximization of profits could be a prototype of how bazaars are run. Mutually beneficial relationships between neighbors should be encouraged and prioritized over personal interests. Instead of solely chasing after development, we should learn to preserve our own history. Community arts is believed to possess the positive power to unite people and inspire them to reflect on social issues as well as to seek out more democratic ways to attain happiness. All these acts of joyous resistance do not only change the society, but they can also be considered as an aesthetics of community arts: an aesthetics of the pursuit of democracy, justice, equality, fraternity and freedom.

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33 wen yau talked about the notion of joyous resistance at a public talk under the theme "Curating for Social Change" held at Connecting Space Hong Kong on March 31, 2017.

34 Chin wan, *Zhongji pinglun, kuaile kangzheng (The Ultimate Critique, Joyous Resistance)* (Hong Kong: Arcadia Press Limited, October 2010)