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Artists Working Reality: Towards the Capability Approach, a Means of Evaluating Art in Action¹

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Art is contextual. It changes through time and through social, religious, and political dispositions. The phenomenon of artists working reality of engaging directly in real-life-changes, has been spreading for decades and gained ground in Hong Kong. Experience shows that frameworks for discussing and evaluating such projects have to be fostered so as to provide discursive spaces for sharing, reflecting, and building on the rich experience and know-how emerging in this field. This contribution interrelates more general and Hong Kong-specific aspects and considers the relevance and outcomes of artists working reality. It highlights the need for in-depth descriptions of Art in Action and lays a foundation for further studies on whether the capability approach could be an alternative framework (among others) for measuring the achievements of action participation and learning initiated by artists working reality.

Plate 1

Exhibition view, FOA-FLUX research exhibition Art in Action: Make People Think!, with works by Flüchlingsatelier, Lifepatch, Wooferten, Hong Kong House of Stories, among others. Museum Bärenegg Zurich, July 2014. Photo courtesy of FOA-FLUX.

¹ This text draws partly on material (not always explicitly referenced) that I have written for a publication forthcoming in: Him Lo and Dominique Lämmlli. *Activating Possibilities - Connecting People. Art and Social Transformations* (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2017). This material includes “Artists Working Reality. Connecting People” (2016) and “A Better World” (co-authored with Him Lo) (2017). It also draws on earlier texts devoted to current and ongoing changes in the arts (Lämmlli 2014). I outlined the key aspects for sustainable projects (vague grounds, rolling waves of planning) at the 2016 Build Peace Conference at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology / ETH Zurich (“Peace through technology, arts & research - towards transformation”). The section on the capability approach is based on my panel presentation at the 2016 conference “Philosophy of the City” at the University of San Francisco (the panel was titled “Art and Public Space,” organized by Yeung Yang, and included Stephanie Cheung as panel speaker).

Art in Action

Art in Action² is rapidly spreading worldwide. It is also very much present in Hong Kong.³ From socio-political to caring activities, from alternative economies to urban planning, artists are sharing their knowhow and knowledge with peers and particular neighborhoods. They are applying their expertise to initiate and advance change processes in concrete, real-life situations. As such, they are extending their traditional materials to art processes, interventions, production, and working reality (artists working reality). Such activities often aim to connect people, “to initiate and accompany social movements to create awareness of existing conditions, to activate citizens, and to enact possibilities for ‘better lives.’”⁴

I am thinking for example of the Woofers Ten’s “Art/Activist in Residence” (AAiR),⁵ which brought together artists and activists working on socio-political issues and strives to “build up dialogue and networks among artists/activists in Asia.”⁶ Or Woofers Hui, Woofers Ten’s markets events on the sidewalks in Yau Ma Tei, where neighbors, artists, and whoever wanted to join, shared, exchanged, sold own products (portraits, images, bags, clothes), second-hand goods, etc. Another such initiative is The Ching Chun Warehouse, initiated by Him Lo and established together with Mr. Lung (Plate 2) and Yung Yan. (Plate 3) It aims to share crafts skills, heritage knowledge, and developing DIY attitudes.⁷

Art in Action is therefore reaching beyond traditional contexts of art practice to development activities, community, identity- and relationship building, health work, elderly care, the production of scientific knowledge, and so on.⁸ With this expansion, art practice is outgrowing

2 I am using “Art in Action” as an umbrella term for diverse art practices such as co-art, socially engaged art, community art, experimental communities, dialogic art, conversational art, and so on. The term “artists working reality” refers to artists working directly with real-life settings and dynamics as their “material.” See further Lämmler (2014; 2016) and <http://foa-flux.net/art-in-action/>.

3 See, for example, Lee Chun-fung ed. *Woofers Ten AAiR 2011-2012. Art/Activist in Residence*. (Hong Kong: Woofers Ten, 2014); Urban Diary, www.urbandiaryist.com/en/magazine; Society for Community Organization (SoCO), www.soco.org.hk/trapped/index.htm; Wong, Phoebe. “Community Turn: Social Practice in Hong Kong Art.” in Tong Kam-tang ed. *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2015*. (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016): 86-103.

4 Lämmler (2016: 2).

5 <http://www.leapleapleap.com/2014/03/from-the-woofers-ten-debate-to-the-coming-of-the-community-art-era/>

6 Lee Chun-fung (2014).

7 Also Society for Indigenous Learning (SoIL), <https://www.facebook.com/soilhk2012>; Hong Kong House of Stories <http://houseofstories.sjs.org.hk/>, among others. See also Pheobe Wong (2016).

8 On current developments in art, the problematized art discourses, globalization and the pressure for change on existing frames of reference, see Lämmler (2014).



Plate 2 (left)

Mr. Lung at Mr. Lung's Woodworkshop. Photo courtesy of Him Lo.

Plate 3 (right)

Yung Yan at Mr. Lung's Woodworkshop. Photo courtesy of Him Lo.

and at the same time problematizing art criteria, in particular the adherence to aesthetics.⁹ Art discourses are trying to meet these developments and are under great pressure to change.¹⁰ We urgently need to rethink our conceptual frameworks and points of reference and to extend these to substantial and practice-relevant exchanges on current art developments.

What we see and make seen matters

Following and participating in discussions on Art in Action has reminded me again and again of texts that I read as a young artist in the early/mid 90s and which deeply influenced my thinking. For example, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* by the Afro-American cultural writer and activist bell hooks. She emphasized the need for us to become aware of the choices we make — to realize what we choose to think and write about, and thus to take part in “visual politics” (1995: XVI). Or *Women, Native, Other* (1989) by the Vietnamese born and American scholar Trinh T. Minh-Ha. Her concept of “speaking nearby” is a critical reflection on who is speaking about what from which point of view as well as on practical engagement and actioning multiple viewpoints.

⁹ See, for example, the critique by the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser (2012). He argues that philosophy started thinking about art in order to think about itself, and subsequently misused art as a counterfoil to demonstrate the superiority of philosophical understanding (“Man muss erkennen, dass die Philosophie der Kunst sich der Kunst gar nicht um derentwillen, sondern um spezifisch philosophischer Zwecke willen zugewandt hat [...] dem diene insbesondere die Behauptung, dass die Kunst erst im philosophischen Begreifen ihre eigentliche und letzte Erfüllung finde” [2012: 20]). See also Wang on “critical art” and his distinction between art working with “Chinese Symbols” and art working on a “Chinese problem situation” in Wang, Nanming. *The Rise of Critical Art. Chinese Problem Situation and Theories of Liberal Society*. (Shanghai: Guqiao Press, 2011).

¹⁰ See, for example, Brzyski, Anna, ed. *Partisan Canons*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2007), Elkins, James & Valiavicharska, Zhivka & Kim, Alice, eds. *Art and Globalization*. (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2011), Casid, Jill H. & D'Souza, Aruna, eds. *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*. (New Haven and London: Clark Art Institute, 2014).

These works consider several questions crucial in our present context: Who defines activities and thought spaces for whom? Who is included and who excluded in constructing and shaping conditions and reference systems that provide frameworks for exploring how we view and use art? Who has the right or takes the right to speak? Who has the power to legitimate action? Who decides which concepts are the correct ones to use as reference points for our approaches to life and art, for our decisions, viewpoints, and activities?

Which lenses should we wear?

Until now, contrasting opinions on art's linkages with other social domains have often centered on the question "But is it Art?" Under this title, the American curator, writer, and activist Nina Felshin edited a collection of essays in the mid-1990s that focused on work by artists who were "with one foot in the art world and the other in the world of political activism and community organizing." In the US,¹¹ this tendency "emerged in the mid-1970s, expanded in the 1980s, and is reaching critical mass and becoming institutionalized in the 1990s." Contributions by Patricia C. Phillips, Richard Meyer, Jeff Kelly, and others discussed works by collectives and by individual artists such as Group Material, Suzanne Lacy, Guerilla Girls, Gran Fury, and others. Common to these collaborative works and ventures, as Nina Felshin observed in her introduction, is their innovative use of public space. They all address issues of socio-political and cultural significance and encourage community- or public participation as a means of effecting social change. (1995: 9) The artists discussed are

Exemplary of a viable cultural practice that draws on elements of popular and political culture, technology and mass communication, and, in the arts, Conceptualism and postmodernism, from the 1960s to the present. Together, they are creatively expanding art's boundaries and audience and redefining the role of the artist. In the process, they seem to suggest that the proper answer to the question posed by the ironic title But is it Art? is: "But does it matter?" (1995: 13)

Whereas "But is it Art?" is a question that continues to haunt much academic art discussion, the standard answer by practitioners is "Who cares?" Obviously, such discourse on art does not offer a practice-relevant contribution to working reality. Numerous conferences and discussions over

¹¹ See Chapple, Karen & Jackson, Shannon. "Commentary: Arts, Neighborhoods, and Social Practices: Towards an Integrated Epistemology of Community Arts." in *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 29(4) (2010): 478-490. "The role of the arts in civic imagining proceeded fitfully throughout the twentieth century, with leadership mostly from Europe (e.g., the Bauhaus School of art and design)." Other histories can be outlined in response to further cultural contexts. See also Hui, Desmond. *Public Art Research. Final Report*. Commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. (Hong Kong, 2013), Zheng, Bo. *Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*. (Hong Kong: Future Learn, 2017). <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/socially-engaged-art>, etc.

the past few years have taught me that practitioners do want to talk about, reflect on, and share their experience, know-how, and knowledge of their local engagements and active participation in transformation processes. They are interested in best practices, in the advantages and disadvantages of methodologies, and in tactics and strategies. It is not about what one should do, but about what works where, when, how, and why. Key questions include: “What can I learn from this particular working situation? Which approaches, based on which concepts worked out? Which failed? What remains to be solved?” Such questions concern art practitioners — who mostly do not look for dogmas, but instead for working tools. Practitioners are well aware that theories provide insights, and therefore awareness, equip us with methodologies and tools. Yet practitioners are also aware that such frameworks and instruments always come with specific focuses and premises, and therefore with limited reach. Reality is always far more complex than any theory is capable of addressing. Therefore, figuratively speaking, art practitioners gain experience of knowing, both intuitively and consciously, when to wear which lenses for which tasks. Conversations, interviews, films, and case studies provide good insights into what inspires artists to work reality.¹² Such materials elicit artists’ motivations, aims, beliefs, and approaches — and thus provide ample and rich sources for comparative discussions.

Hong Kong artscapes

Arjun Appadurai, an Indian-born American social and cultural anthropologist, has undertaken a range of field studies on urban cities. He has been interested in symbolic and material life and its fluidity through time and space, including the de-spatialisation of identities. In his analyses, he introduced the categories of ethnoscaples, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes to position sovereignty dissociated from the nation state and to discuss it as transnational flows.¹³ His work enables one to flesh out the various blurred boundaries between so-called contemporary and traditional art, the art market and community art, the wide array of participatory variations, and the inadequate frameworks for discussing ongoing change-processes in the arts, the intense global flow of people, discourse, and means. All of this suggests the appropriateness of introducing the notion of artscapes into the discussion on current art dynamics. This concept accounts for the fact that previously distinct art worlds, which have been theorized differently, are giving way to descriptions of glocal (see below) inter-dependencies and inter-relational exchanges.

12 See, for example, Lee (2014), VA! & Oi!. *Conference documentation: Dialogue! Publicly Engaged Art Practices*. 2013. Available from <http://dialogue.hk/en>, Finkelpearl, Tom. *What We Made. Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013). FOA-FLUX has been organizing several practice-oriented symposia and discussion rounds, for example “Art/Community/Activism & Funding. Discussion Round Hong Kong” (2014) in Hong Kong with Hong Kong Arts Centre and Connecting Space Hong Kong; “Art•Life•Technology” (2015) in Bangalore/India with Srishti, Institute of Art, Design and Technology and Swissnex; Action Art (2016) in Zurich/Switzerland with Zurich University of the Arts.

13 Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

During my frequent stays in Hong Kong in the last three years, I have gotten to know some of its rich and vivid artsapes. Still, many facets of Hong Kong's art and its underlying histories are unknown to me. Engaging with various art groups and artists has proven highly productive when considering the transformation processes ongoing in the arts.

Like other places, Hong Kong comprises various distinct artsapes—although individuals move easily from one to the other. Hong Kong is known as one of the world's most important art marketplaces. According to *artprice*, it is

*One of the world's largest and most dynamic art marketplaces capable of attracting the best art from both Asia and the West. It is also a major outlet for in-vogue artists. Although an integral part of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong has branches of many highly prestigious European and North American galleries. The city also hosts one of the three editions of Art Basel, the world's most selective fair of Western Contemporary art.*¹⁴

Hong Kong also hosts various art festivals, exhibitions, and fairs (traditional, crafts-oriented to experimental, performative, community-based, international). Its Art in Action scenes are especially vibrant. Astonishingly, although parts of Art in Action have become attractive for the international art market and exhibition circus, I have met several curators and critics in this field, including those who have been based in Hong Kong for years or are regular inhabitants, who believe that these activities have yet to be established. However, the contrary is the case: The eventful nature of Art in Action,¹⁵ its varieties, its close linkages with Hong Kong's unique cultural and historical disposition provides exemplary study cases for pondering the ongoing change-processes and their potential, along with how these might benefit glocal disposition and the further development of art. The sheer amount of Art in Action activities in Hong Kong, the artistic fervor, and the correspondences between—yet also the differences with—the rapidly expanding reach of such projects worldwide has arrested my attention.¹⁶

14 <https://de.artprice.com/artprice-reports/the-art-market-in-2016/general-market-consolidation>.

15 Artists take on different roles in social activism, where residents and advocates from various disciplinary groups bind together because of political, environmental, and agricultural concerns.

16 See also “Art as Social Interaction — Hong Kong / Taiwan Exchange” (2014) Exhibition. Curator: Wu Mali, Co-curators: Chang Ching-Wen; Leung Mee-ping. Hong Kong Baptist University. “Sparkle! Can We Live (Together)” (2014) Exhibition, guest curator Lee Chun-fung, Oi! Hong Kong. “International Conference: Art, Place-making and Resilient Cities”. (2017) by Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University. “The Day After To Kwa Wan” (2017) by Jockey Club “Blue House Studio” Cultural Heritage Education Program, Cattle Depot Artist Village, Hong Kong.

Art and real-life issues

Art can address real-life issues in many different ways. These include interventions, statements, reflections, metaphors, visualizations, representations, participatory co-creation, collaborative project development, gatherings, dialogical processes, and so on. Some projects might aim to produce art that will later be displayed in galleries or museums, others focus on effecting real change in specific living conditions. In the latter, art practice is embedded in existing situations, often invisible in traditional art terms because they are about bonding and initiation, about building a “more inclusive and empowering vision of the arts and community.” (Chapple/Jackson, 2010: 480) Here the “social value of the arts” (2010: 481) takes centre stage, and thereby overhauls prevailing perceptions of artists’ expertise and expands their professional reach. “Artists are often familiar with process-oriented and open-ended procedures. Often they are pragmatic and practice-based, used to inclusive approaches to multiple perspectives, as well as flexible and passionate when developing something they believe in is at stake. They are often used to wearing various hats, to changing between the positions of listeners, viewers, and producers. Therefore, artists can draw on a wide range of competencies, bringing technical, practical, conceptual, and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills into many societal and scientific fields. Their impact should be by no means be underestimated.” (Lämmler 2016: 18)

In general, however, discussions within art about what Art in Action might achieve and for whom are still too limited. This is because art discourse still rests on criteria sets that are problematic and fail to analyze crucial aspects.¹⁷ Therefore, prevailing evaluation criteria need further scrutiny. Below, I will discuss how the Capability Approach, among others, might provide a useful conceptual framework for evaluating Art in Action activities endeavoring to enhance life conditions.

Interdependencies of local and global dynamics

Many Art in Action projects, situated at the interfaces of particular life contexts, address and react to the effects of global and local capitalistic dynamics. These ventures aim to strengthen local dispositions and to create alternative behaviors and activities. Discussing these activities, we should avoid contrasting the local and the global. This would be a too hasty a conclusion. Let us instead gain substantial insight into such dynamics by using the concept of glocalization as a means of analysis.

17 I have addressed the limitations of these criteria elsewhere; see Lämmler, Dominique. “Art in Action. Make People Think! Reflections on Current Developments” in *Art. Zurich*. 2014. Available from dominiquelaemmler/texts.

Glocalization was introduced into sociology in the early 1990s by Roland Robertson. He was convinced that comparing globalization and localization falls short of adequately describing their interdependence and interaction. The concept of glocalization enabled him to examine the local and the global as interrelated dynamics.

Originally, the concept of glocalization derives from Japanese: “dochakuka” translates as “global localization” or “local globalization.” As such, it brings into focus local and global considerations. This perspective has been used in the late 1980s to improve products of global ventures to fit micro-markets better. To increase sales in specific regional markets, mass production was partially adjusted to suit local conditions. A “glocal” car, for example, is a universal vehicle. Distributed worldwide, it features “local” adaptations that are designed to meet the needs of particular “local” markets.

Focusing on the inter-relational dynamics of local and global factors is more productive than contrasting the global and the local. This realization made Robertson introduce the term “glocal” to sociology and global studies to reflect on the ongoing shifts in global cultural dynamics. Robertson emphasized that the “local” does not conflict with the “global,” nor vice versa. Rather, the “local” should be seen as “an aspect of globalization” and, as such, as constitutive of the global. Therefore, Robertson suggests focusing on the simultaneity and mutual interpenetration of what has traditionally been characterized as the global and the local. Glocalization, then, does not necessarily assume a tension between globalization and localization. On the contrary, Robertson emphasizes that “globalization” always already factors in the production and inclusion of locality. Developed in the early 1990s, Robertson’s concept of glocalization therefore brings into view specifically the relation and the interplay between macro- and micro-levels of social and cultural processes. (Giulianotti/Roberson 2009)

Individual and collective art practice

This glocal perspective also proves useful when addressing an assumption that is often made in gallery and art market contexts: namely, that art embedded in local dynamics is less universal and attains less quality than the art successfully established on the international art market.¹⁸ One of this market’s key foundations is its exclusionary rating dynamics, which corresponds and supports the price management politics of supply and demand. Art embedded in local dynamics often does not follow the same presuppositions. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that these two artscapes do not match well. This contrariness often goes along with dichotomizing individual and socially engaged forms of art. Some colleagues practicing socially engaged art have told me (emphatically!) that they have reached a stage in their professional life where they have consciously decided

18 See also Wang Nanming on “innerness” and art practice (2011: 258ff).

against producing individual work to work in real contexts, participatory settings, and with dialogical means so as to bring about real change in everyday life.

This construction — of inherently opposed modes of artistic work (individual versus collaborative) — has always struck me as highly counter-intuitive. Thus, the claim of an inevitable clash between these two approaches to art practice needs further explanation. Why does one approach strive to determine the other? Why should individual and collaborative work contradict each other? Such constructions are odd because these two different approaches evidently complement each other very well. Such binary oppositions often rest on hidden, unverified assumptions. These inform understandings of art that, if considered openly, actually reveal their limited scope.

Using the analytical concept of glocalization shows that the so-called global market and local art activities are both highly embedded in transnational flows of exchanges. It also shows that they are often practiced in respect to different value sets and objectives.

Hence, value judgments about relevance and quality have to be made in respect to these references. Therefore, to assume that art embedded in local dynamics attains less quality than art on the international market is mostly a too hasty conclusion. Nevertheless, such preconceptions are widespread and much-reiterated, not least because artists use them regularly to establish their value in a professional context often informed by harsh competitive relationships.

I am convinced that we should instead approach questions of quality and relevance through detailed descriptions of who does what with, for whom, where, when, and how. Taking the motivations, interests, and aims of such projects seriously highlights the inadequacy of existing concepts of art and calls for a thorough reconsideration of the principles and evaluation tools not only guiding but also determining current art discourses. The criteria selected to evaluate projects should be derived directly from detailed context-based descriptions.

I find it highly refreshing that colleagues working in the Hong Kong context often do not seem to be burdened by the (constructed) oppositions between individual, collaborative, participatory, and dialogical art practices. On the one hand, this might be due to the fact that some of the limiting art historical narratives do not straitjacket artistic activity in Hong Kong as they do in many academic European art contexts. On the other hand, Hong Kong's exorbitant living costs place artists under even greater financial pressure than elsewhere, making regular employment essential.

Art is Changing

Let me reiterate the well-known, yet often widely neglected fact (with regards to its consequences) that art practice and art discourses are context-bound, and therefore change over time. We all know that a multitude of canons coexists—and yet many still remain largely oblivious to everything outside their own canon. Why is this so? Does this denial spring from one of the most common human reactions: fear? Perhaps. Yes, perhaps it is uncanny to see one's long-standing, much-cherished thoughts challenged by other canons, other *relata*. I consider multi-perspectivity, that is, a comparative examination of various canons most helpful to bringing into clearer view the qualities and relevance of the various art practices in evidence today. A firmly comparative outlook will raise our awareness of our own thought contexts and their limitations. Multi-perspectivity enhances our possibilities of finding solutions to both real and conceptual problems. The complex dynamics in art and life that we are currently witnessing offer us a rich array of perspectives, descriptions, and normative claims. These await our comparative reflection—for a humane practice and for a better world yet to be constructed.

The contextual nature of all art, and therefore its relativity vis-à-vis societal dispositions and processes, entails the truism that “one and the same notion changes in meaning and preference as you move on in time.”¹⁹ Thus, both the discussion on the transformed meaning of “Contemporary Art” and the use of this term in current debates on art indicate how the shift towards a multi-centered art world has influenced understandings of art.²⁰

Whereas some believe that art needs to “hurt,” that is, disturb, stir, provoke, and somehow (hopefully) revolutionize, we are witnessing an increasing tendency worldwide towards artists “working reality” (Lämli 2014) by fostering inclusion and a sense of community. They aim to connect people, to initiate and accompany social movements to create awareness of existing conditions, to activate citizens, and to enact possibilities for “better lives.” This shaping of reality takes place without endorsing normative and preconceived concepts imposed top-down. Rather, better conditions are conceived bottom-up, through step-by-step suggestions and negotiations. Respect others, create trust, formulate and transform needs: these principles are central to such transformation processes. Meandering is another. The future is understood as being worked on, and not as a defined objective that can be targeted directly. As such, these projects value complex dynamics and provide platforms for multi-vocality and visions nurtured through multi-perspectivity. Linked to these processes, art and its many facets have been discussed worldwide

19 Hans Belting: “It is difficult. World Art and Global Art. A New Challenge to Art History.” Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts and AICA, 29.7.2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLvFavurQBE> (accessed April 30, 2017).

20 See *October* 130 (2009) and *Field Notes* (2012).

in terms of geographical regions and cultural dispositions (see, for example, Felshin 1995, Lacy 1995, Harding 2005, Kester 2011, Finkelppearl 2014, Huybrechts 2014, Lee 2014, Jay Koh 2015). Evident today nevertheless are accelerated and increased dissemination and exchange between various interest groups; locally anchored and globally related, these groups share their know-how, methods, and strategies.

Hong Kong and its cultural trajectories

Hong Kong is a “unique local environment.” (Vigneron 2010: X) Its complex history and various traditional influences inform the ongoing discussions, deconstructions, re-theorizations, and the forging of communal and individual ideas of identity. Part of the current demographic characteristics and tendencies is the increase in income inequality and the decrease of intergenerational upward mobility. Since the launch of the Index in 2003, the freedom of speech in Hong Kong has fallen to its lowest rating in 2014.²¹ Sky-rocketing housing prices are among the highest of the world’s financial hubs.²² The political controversy surrounding universal suffrage, the one-country-two-systems principle, the interferences by the mainland government all influence the atmosphere in which artists and intellectuals work. Against this background, as Law Wing-sang stated in *Collaborative Colonial Power*, (2009) stands an issue that is as pressing as ever: the “growing interest in preserving Hong Kong heritage and collective memory.” (2009: 4) Questioning one’s views, position, and understanding oneself, as a Hong Kong person, remains a central concern for local artists and academics alike.

Common among artists and academics living in Hong Kong is also their high mobility, their desire and ability to establish connections with various thought contexts in different ways, and their willingness to function as bearers of Asian and European, American and Australian cultural knowledge and experiences (African and South American influences are less visible). In “Like a Postcolonial Culture: Hong Kong Re-imagined,” (2001) the cultural studies scholar John Nguyet Erni put it this way:

Many writers and academics from Hong Kong like myself share a similar outline of a trajectory thematized by dislocation, mobility, professionalization in the west, and a chronic need to problematize our “local identity,” “belonging,” and “return.” Writing as a de-localized but returning local, I very much have the themes of movement, transition, and liminality in mind. (Erni 2001: 3)

21 According to the Hong Kong Quality Life Index (2014). http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/hkiaps/qol/sources/PR_QOL_1314Aug_Eng.pdf.

22 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/liyanchen/2014/10/08/beyond-the-ubrella-revolution-hong-kongs-struggle-with-inequality-in-8-charts/#6691d77550b6>.

This unique and culturally versatile Hong Kong disposition adds to the complexity of Art in Action in the Hong Kong context. Its blending of various concepts and practices, while contributing to preserving and establishing Hong Kong's cultural identities, again makes for exemplary studies and proves that it is an excellent source of comparison with Art in Action projects in other contexts.

Hong Kong has a high density of striking art activities that are closely interlinked with actual life.²³ They range from poetic expressions to urban farming, sharing economies, complaint choirs, oral history, dialogical negotiation, enactment projects, FabLabs, and many others.²⁴ Some of these activities aim to create awareness, agency, and identity-building in real-life contexts. Others aim to raise awareness within contemporary art peer groups. Many projects are interested in effecting real change in everyday life settings. Some pursue educational objectives, others are aimed at informed research.

There is a growing local movement that aims to re-establish a sense of Hong Kong's cultural distinctiveness and unique colonial identity in order to resist increasing influence from China. (Wu Ka-ming 2017: 201)

Concept-dominated or practice-led and practice-based approaches?²⁵

The conventional approach to discussing Art in Action projects is often concept-dominated. A particular theory or definition establishes the viewpoint (or reference point) from which a given activity is described. The main shortcoming of this approach is its limited context-responsiveness. Experience shows that embedded projects work best if they are thoroughly context-sensitive. Project descriptions should therefore elicit these particular qualities. Descriptions of participatory art or community projects often do not cover the practical key dynamics essential for the success of — say — a sustainable project. Aspects of bonding, multiplicity, diversity, hierarchy, respect, (g)local connection are often addressed merely on the surface, hence leaving unexplored how interactivity, empowerment, and taking action in a particular context could actually happen or instead be doomed to fail.

23 Mostly these projects aim at — in Wu Ka-ming's words, referring to the rural activists of Ma Shi Po — to “engage citizens, capture media attention, and changed public opinions.” Wu Ka-ming, 2017:216.

24 Very MK rooftop farm, <https://www.facebook.com/verymk/> (accessed April 30, 2017); Mango King guerrilla farming, https://www.facebook.com/pg/communityfarmingproject/photos/?tab=album&album_id=539877076141587 [verified 30 April 2017]; HK Farm, <http://www.hkfarm.org/us.html>, (accessed April 30, 2017); Complaints Choirs of Hong Kong, http://www.complaintschoir.org/hongkong/complaintschoir_about_hongkong.html

25 Candy (2006): “There are two types of practice-related research: practice-based and practice-led: 1. If a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based. 2. If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice-led.” (2006: 1)

Projects working reality need to rely on practical solutions, which seldom concur with the tools provided by pre-defined concepts and theories. Detailed accounts of particular projects are both appreciated and essential: Especially in times of such major change as ours, which profoundly affect our reference systems and problematize existing notions of art, and at a time when sharing best practices meets the interest of practitioners working in various geographical and demographic contexts.

In-depth or “thick descriptions,” so Norman K. Denzin, provide “deep dense, detailed accounts (...), these accounts often state the intentions (...) and meanings that organize actions.” (2001: 98) Of course, as we are well aware, any description is always already an interpretation. Also, placing ourselves inside the descriptive framework, is part of becoming reflexive. (Drake/Heath, 2011: 43 ff.) At a time when collaboration and participation are highly valued for their potential to accompany the change processes actively fostered by activist art, economics, politics, the sciences, development cooperation, spatial planning, social work, management studies, etc., we need in-depth descriptions to ground interpretation, future reflection, and action. Most of all, we need descriptions of artists who are connecting people and working reality to initiate further potentials and actions. The perhaps unprecedented popularity and belief in art and creativity to affect and foster well-being needs to be contextualized within and interpreted from a perspective firmly anchored in practice. This should not be left to concept-dominated approaches alone.

Such descriptions and discussions of how artists work reality might stimulate (re)thinking the interactions of art, creativity and social capital. The latter “refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions.” The same author also argues that “social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society — it is the glue that holds them together.” (Shardlow 2010:229)

Connecting people

A great deal has been published on participation.²⁶ Still, comparatively little has been written about how bonding works in detail, nor about the various inter-relational problems that participation presents. There are so many different modes of participation, which ought to be chosen in a context-sensitive manner — and not because one mode is more en vogue in a particular art scene than another. Why do some participatory settings work in some contexts, and not in others? About three years ago, when I became aware of Him Lo’s Hong Kong-based projects (which he often co-runs with other artists, neighbors, social workers, etc.), I noticed his strong

²⁶ See, for example, Bishop, Claire, ed. *Participation*. (Massachusetts and London: MIT Press and The Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2006) and Huybrechts, Liesbeth, ed. *Participation Is Risky. Approaches to Joint Creative Processes*. (Amsterdam: Valiz/Antennae Series, 2014).

capacity, his perseverance, and patience for fostering conditions to make diverse people (neighbors, artists, academics, children, etc.) exchange with each other, become aware of their potentials, and grow interested in taking action. (Plates 4, 5) Throughout spring 2016, what followed was an ongoing conversation, amounting to nine hours of interviews, many discussions, and practice-based exchange on collaboration through collaborative painting sessions. During these exchanges we explored in detail the questions and potentials of artists working reality with a particular focus on how exactly people might be connected.²⁷ (Plates 6, 7)

To quote from *Activating Possibilities*: “One of Him’s strengths is his sensitivity and respect for local needs. He immerses himself in given circumstances. He creates a relaxed environment facilitating discussion among people irrespective of status, empowering them to share ideas and experiences, and to come up with their own ideas through self-reflection. He instills confidence and thus empowers others to come up with their own ideas, and to act on them. [...] His background in cultural studies, his stringent and penetrating thinking, his awareness of the dynamics in the field, and his firmly practice-based approach allow him to draw and build on existing experiences of working with people while avoiding merely applying concepts and theoretical designs to reality. Instead, his work is dedicated to integrating and developing hard-and-fast strategies for local, community-based projects. Being an artist, and keen to expand his experience and to hone his skills, each of Him’s projects also functions as an experimental field for trying out and enlarging the potentials of art as a tool capable of shaping a better world. Embedded in its surroundings, an important part of Him’s work is his ability to recognize possibilities, to encourage others, and to make people embrace potentials commensurate with their own needs and wishes.”²⁸

Well-being and agency

The orientation towards well-being and agency, and the contextual anchoring of such projects as described above, lead me to consider the capability approach (CA)—among other approaches—as a useful tool for evaluating Art in Action. CA is a framework that was first introduced within economic and development studies by Amartya Sen in 1979²⁹ and then further developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum and others. CA has since been read through various “disciplinary lens[es].” (Robeyn, 2003: 3) “Thus, whenever someone discusses, scrutinizes or evaluates the capability approach, it could help to ask from which perspectives she works, and what she hopes to find in the capability approach.” (Robeyn 2003: 3)

²⁷ See also Him Lo’s Mind Maps.

²⁸ Him Lo and Dominique Lämml. “A Better Life.” (2016) Forthcoming in Him Lo and Dominique Lämml. *Activating Possibilities - Connecting People. Art and Social Transformations* (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2017).

²⁹ Sen, Amartya (1979): “Equality of What? The Tanner Lecture on Human Values,” delivered at Stanford University, May 22, 1979.

Plate 4

Him Lo. Mind Maps: "How we understand space in community" (2016). Photo courtesy of Him Lo.

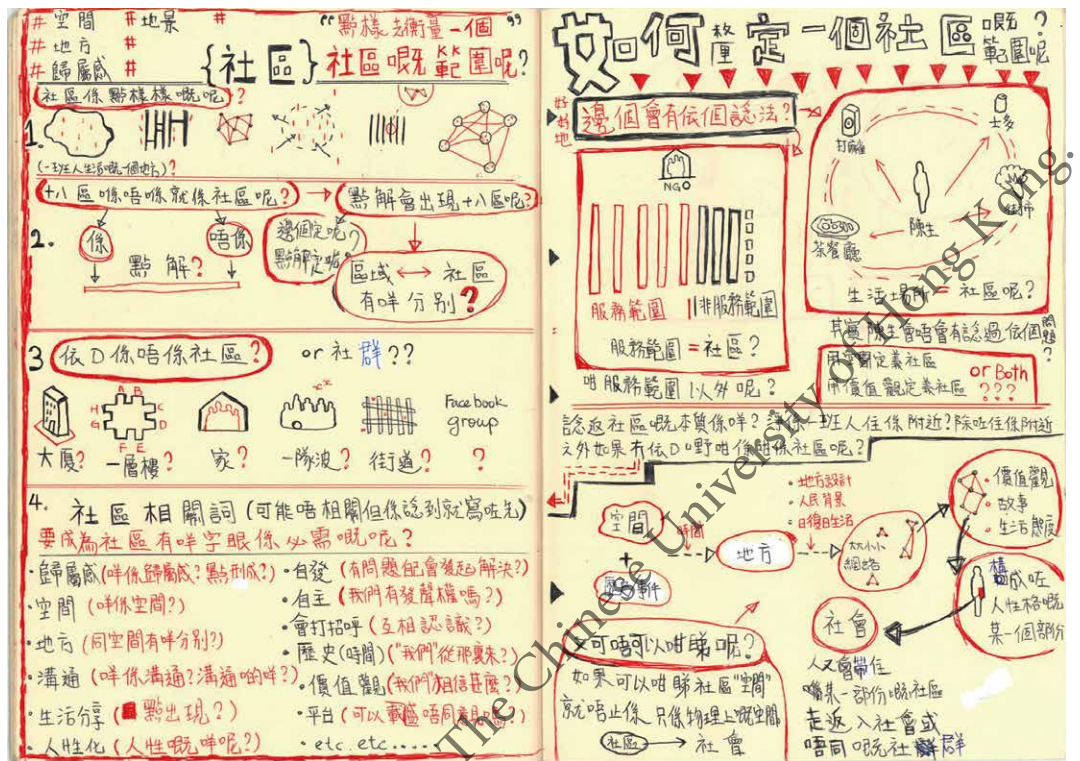
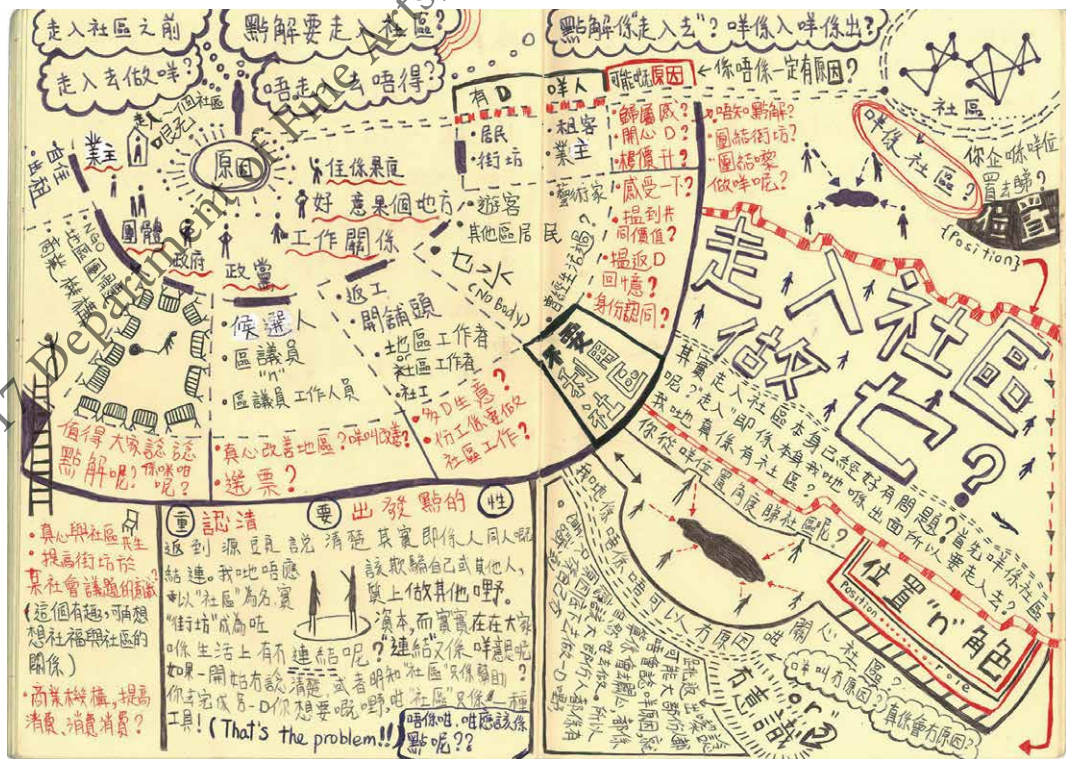
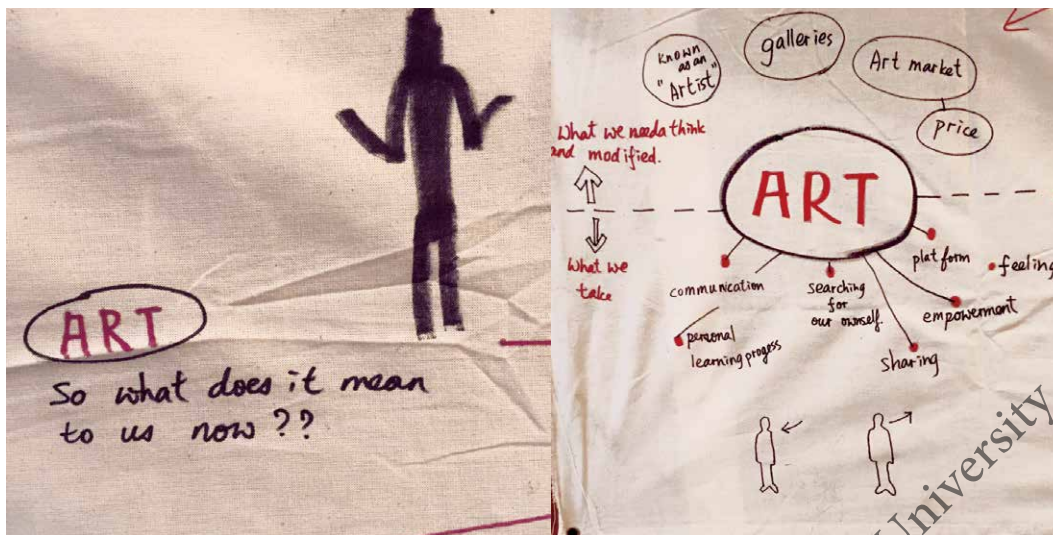


Plate 5

Him Lo. Mind Maps: "Our role in community" (2016). Photo courtesy of Him Lo.





Plates 6 and 7
Him Lo, *Mind Maps*
(Details; 2016). Photo
courtesy of Him Lo.

I believe that the capability approach (CA) provides a useful thoughtscape and evaluation tool for addressing the contribution of some Art in Action projects because it provides a framework for substantially discussing the envisaged outcomes of such projects. A long-term goal of such analyses could be to arrive at a clearer understanding of how art contributes to agency and well-being. Thus, this paper involves a modest attempt to introduce this methodology to the art discourse and to delineate its central aspects.

Does the capability approach provide us with the tools needed to outline the contributions of artists working reality to real-life change processes? Does it enable us to gain insights into art's activating qualities, its ability to make the public happen, and thereby to contribute to human development and well-being? Can art practice and artistic thinking function as means of initiating change-processes directed towards increased well-being, of activating possibilities, so as to contribute to human development and well-being?

The need for alternative frameworks is indisputable. I have outlined several aspects above. Furthermore, the report *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture*, published last spring by the British Arts & Humanities Research Council³⁰ clearly showed the need to rethink the terms of cultural value and its underlying criteria: specifically, we need to look beyond individual production and effect and provide accounts of relational and collective changes. In their chapter on Methods and Approaches, the authors of the above report propose extending analyses of art and culture projects by applying ethnographic, arts-based, and network analysis approaches. Here, I would like to add a further approach: the capability approach.

30 The British Arts & Humanities Research Council, *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture* (2016), which also goes under the title *The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, eds. Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska. <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>.

When researching the motivations underlying the activities of artists working reality, we often find that their main goal is to activate agency so as to create conditions that bring about well-being. Below I discuss one relevant case: Him Lo and Ching Chun Warehouse.

The capability approach was originally devised to study development beyond income statistics (GDP) or utilitarian cost-benefit calculations. It suggests valuing development as *human* development. Moreover, it takes into account of what is seen as constitutive of well-being varies and relates to particular contexts.

Ching Chun Warehouse and Mr. Lung's Woodworkshop³¹

In the following, I briefly consider how two interrelated projects — Mr. Lung's Woodworkshop (Plate 8) and the Ching Chun Warehouse — are relevant to and enhance well-being.

Plate 8

Logo for Mr. Lung's Woodworkshop designed by Yung Yan (2014).



I wish to raise awareness of the complexity and waves of rolling planning that proved to be essential for the outcome of this Art in Action project; I also want to reveal the dynamics among artists, designers, and crafts experts; and I explore how participant status is fluid and involves individuals gradually shifting into different participatory roles.

Initiated by Him Lo, Mr. Lung's wood workshop and Ching Chun Warehouse emerged from a bottom-up strategy and from gradual project development. Although slightly vague at the outset, this strategy allowed individual dispositions and needs to surface over time. Gradually building on this awareness, and slowly initiating possibilities for action, this approach had a long-lasting effect, increasing agency and initiating a spiral of participation. The fact that these projects have grown organically over several years (i.e., slowly!) is key to their sustainability.

³¹ Ching Chun Warehouse and Mr. Lung's Wood Workshop were established in 2014 and ran till May 2017. In June 2017 the initiatives transformed into shops providing and promoting local goods. The knowhow gained in these projects will inform a further project which is in its starting phase.

According to Him Lo, the basic idea behind both initiatives was to seed alternative modes of self-responsible agency in relation to current capitalism. Through hands-on experiences of traditional technology and techniques, and through the accompanying narratives of gentrification, both ventures contributed to activating self-responsible identity-building through shared and active identity-building. Both initiatives employ creativity, craftsmanship, art practice, and artistic thinking to initiate processes of change endeavoring to enhance well-being, to activate possibilities, and to develop capabilities.

Both ventures drew on Him Lo's encounters with the wood craftsman Mr. Lung during his time as director of the Hong Kong House of Stories. (Plate 9) Both projects have been undertaken jointly with the product designer Yung Yan and are now run with other team members. Both are located in Two Kwa Wan on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong (changing their localities from time to time for financial and spatial reasons).

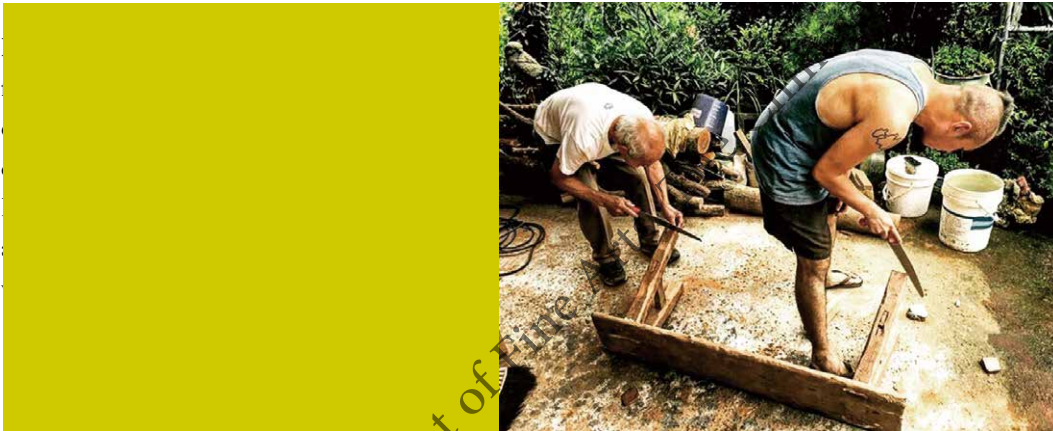


Plate 9

Mr. Lung (left) and Him Lo (right). Photographer unknown.

knowledge- and awareness-raising. In the Hong Kong, this is a common strategy in Art in Action and social activism.³² Remarkably, especially in the context of Hong Kong's exorbitant rents, both projects are to a large extent self-funded, mainly through workshop fees.

A better life

Him Lo's motivation to initiate such projects includes his vision of a better life. Importantly, he leaves this vision highly underdetermined, thus allowing it to be shaped by particular group dynamics and by contextual requirements. Its contents and concreteness emerge over time,

32 See Wu Ka-ming on Ma Shi Po farm's workshop: "The Ma Shi Po farmer's market and the workshop strategy similarly fit into the global middle-class demand for "cultural consumption," in which the consumption of natural products or organic food is now attached with new ethics and values of social responsibility and green lifestyle." 2017:194; Critique of cultural and ethical consumption, see 2017:195.

through ongoing exchange and co-working. This approach constitutes the projects' contents, aims, visions, and structures on a step-by-step basis and based on specific contextual needs, demands, and inter-relational dynamics.

Hong Kong, as mentioned above, is one of the world's leading financial centers. It is characterized by economic freedom, low taxation, and sky-rocketing property prices. It had been under British rule for about 150 years. And, since 1997, it has been a Special Administrative Region of China. It is guided by the "one country, two systems" principle and by efforts to establish national Chineseness. The global trend towards new extremes between rich and poor is also part of Hong Kong's reality. It is therefore barely astonishing that alternative behaviors and identity-building within capitalism are important issues for local artists, practitioners, and academics.

Mr. Lung's wood workshops or the sewing activities at Ching Chun Warehouse provide workshop participants (including us!) with hands-on training and with an opportunity to learn more about Hong Kong's cultural history (explanations are provided by local instructors, some of them elderly). Skill-training also raises awareness of how material resources have changed and how they have been directly affected by gentrification processes, etc. As Him Lo observes, the idea behind Ching Chun Warehouse is to seed alternative modes of self-related agency in relation to current capitalism and to foster identity-building.

Impermanence is an inherent aspect of these projects throughout all their phases. This works because those involved have discovered a common interest and have decided to invest energy and passion, money and time, into developing something together. The projects have evolved through processual waves of rolling planning, definition and adaptation—from content to action, from criteria to goals. And most crucially, artist Him Lo merged what can be called anthropological studies with Action Research to develop an idea that was subsequently seeded in conversations and either discarded or further developed by changing teams. Similar art-related start-ups are sprouting in Hong Kong and throughout the world. Often, they are conscious reactions to global capitalism that are aimed at strengthening local dispositions.

Context responsiveness and rolling planning

The project histories briefly introduced above suggest that if we are aiming to bring about empowerment and agency through creative strategies and Art in Action devised to initiate processes of change, and if we want to establish activities not only anchored in, but ultimately also sustained by local communities, experience shows that starting such projects on vague grounds is a key success factor.



Plates 10 and 11

Mr. Lung's Woodworkshop.

Photo courtesy of Him Lo.

The actual outcome, that is, the current state of Mr. Lung's wood workshop and Ching Chun Warehouse, has developed and been accomplished through mutual Endeavor. Artist Him Lo may have had such an enterprise in mind, similar to many other outcomes that he has imagined. Crucially, however, none of these potentials could come to fruition by Him Lo directing those involved to pursue a pre-defined goal. Instead, it hinged on his sensitivity and responsiveness. In sum, the key ingredients were: spending time together, bonding, moving close enough to understand the needs, frustrations, and hopes guiding each and every one. Such a procedure always risks a dead end, that a project will not gather momentum, that agency and participation fail to materialize. Obviously, funding criteria and best practices for sustainable projects also need to coincide.

For such projects to happen, it is crucial that we do not define key criteria (strategy development, forms of involvement, evaluation criteria, and outcome with people) in advance, but allow these to develop gradually. Ideally, these steps will be embedded in informal, everyday communication. As



Him Lo points out, at first sight, loose and informal communication might not seem as productive as a condensed and focused one-hour meeting. But in the long run, informal communication proves far more sustainable. It instills trust. It involves ongoing evaluation that includes everyone involved. It nurtures a shared field for exchanging ideas and engaging in joint actions. It functions as an ongoing evaluation process. Crucially, it is not top-down or hierarchical, but considers mutual respect as key. As such, it makes for a profoundly reciprocal process.

Live the life you have reason to value

In the above projects, activating agency results in building capacities. This was one of the envisaged goals of these Art in Action projects, however underdetermined their contents. The capability approach is multi-dimensional and hence allows us to focus on people and on contextual specificities.

To conclude, let me outline some central aspects of the capability approach based on the writings of its main proponents: Amartya Sen (2002), Martha Nussbaum (2011), Ingrid Robeyns (2011), and David Schlosberg (2012).

Amartya Sen, building on empirical studies, concluded that a mere focus on opulence (income, commodity command) and utility (happiness, desire fulfilment) is not enough to constitute or represent well-being and deprivation. In contrast, the capability approach according to Sen focuses on human function(ing)s and the capability of achieving valuable function(ing)s. To evaluate how well off people are, he proposes focusing on evaluating people's capability to live the life they have reason to value.

Functionings in CA terminology are achievements, the beings and doings. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in its entry on CA, lists the following states of human beings: “being well-nourished, being undernourished, being housed in a pleasantly warm but not excessively hot house, being educated, being illiterate, being part of a supportive social network, being part of a criminal network, and being depressed.” The doings, the activities a person can undertake are: “travelling, caring for a child, voting in an election, taking part in a debate, taking drugs, killing animals, eating animals, consuming lots of fuel in order to heat one's house, and donating money to charity.”³³

Capability refers to the set of such achievements to which a person has effective access to. “Thus, a person's capability represents the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different

33 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>.

functioning combinations—between different kinds of life—that she has reason to value.”³⁴ Capability therefore concerns the freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings. To be able to do something or be someone, based on one’s values and one’s freedom to choose. For example, “travelling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability.”³⁵ Another example of a functioning is “having enough food.” The possibility to choose whether I want to eat or whether I refuse to eat may be part of a political protest or part of my goal to lose weight.

So, in sum, functionings are achievements whereas capabilities are “freedoms or valuable opportunities from which one can choose.”³⁶ The capability approach therefore focuses not only on distributive ideals “but instead on the range of capacities necessary for people to develop free and productive lives they design for themselves”. (Schlosberg: 2012: 452)

Outlook

In times like ours, when collaboration and participation are highly valued for their potential to accompany change processes actively fostered by activist art, economics, politics, the sciences, development cooperation, spatial planning, social work, management studies, etc., we need in-depth descriptions to ground interpretation, future reflection, and action. These descriptions of how artists work reality might also provide a better idea of how various professional groups address and bring into play change processes. For example, the work done by artists in community contexts is often viewed as a kind of social work. But at the same time, I have also heard time and again that artists go about things quite differently—despite using the same artistic strategies as social workers. How can professional groups combine their practical and conceptual know-how for the better? How to interrelate multiple interests in a way that honors each contribution and improves the capabilities of everyone involved?

My hope is that practice-led reflection of the experiences and knowledge gained in the field by i) working with the capability approach to evaluate the outcome of such projects and the involved processes, by ii) being aware of the various flows informing art- and communityscapes, and by iii) taking into consideration global interrelations and fields of tension will further our thought context for discussing cultural value and its underlying criteria. What we see and make seen is what we make matter!

34 “Sen’s Capability Approach.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/>.

35 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>.

36 Ditto.

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