

“Countdown machine (2016)”

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Our 60-second friendship begins now (artists: Sampson Wong and Jason Lam), an artwork commissioned by the fifth “Large Scale Public Media Art Exhibition” held in May 2016, was dismantled five days after the exhibition opening. The exhibition was presented by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) and curated by independent curator Caroline Ha Thuc. A “Joint Statement” issued bearing HKADC letterhead, co-signed by Caroline Ha Thuc and Ellen Pao, the Chairman of the Film and Media Art Group of HKADC and chair of the Advisory Committee of the exhibition, announced the decision and proclaimed that “the disrespect demonstrated by the artists against the original agreement and understanding made with the curator and HKADC is jeopardizing our profession and put at risk any future possibility to work further in the public space.”¹ Wong and Lam argued that they had never changed the title of the artwork while the curator had always been informed of the content (one-minute video of countdown, in seconds, to July 1, 2047, to be projected upon the facade of International Commercial Center [ICC] for a period of time during which Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, visited Hong Kong). The artists attributed the withdrawal to political censorship. Yet neither party produced any document or proof for their respective statement. The curator remained silent and did not explain further subsequent to the Joint Statement.² None of the HKADC staff involved responded or commented publically on the incident except in the earlier responses to media inquiry, that HKADC “did not participate in the discussion of works.” The incident triggered heated discussion in the art sector. Art practitioners, critics and art administrators voiced out varied opinions on areas including consensus and censorship of art in public space, the trust between artists and curators, political expression and professional ethics, the role and responsibility of funding organizations, the operational experience of artistic protests in Hong Kong, and the maturity of institutional condition and discursive language of its handling.

Information:

- Local news coverage and online news portal. For details, please refer to Chinese version.
- Statement issued by Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC)
- Sampson Wong’s Facebook statements

May 2016

• On May 17

Sampson Wong and Jason Lam’s artwork *Our 60-second friendship begins now* debuted its appearance on the facade of International Commercial Center (ICC) from the evening of this day. This artwork was part of the fifth Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition themed “Human Vibration,” curated by Caroline Ha Thuc, held from May 18 to June 22, 2016. Participants included two overseas artists, Laurent Mignonneau (France) and Christa Sommerer (Austria), and six local

1 “Joint Statement,” HKADC, May 22, 2016

2 Till March 2017, Caroline Ha Thuc published a blog titled “Art should remain free” at *Art Asia Pacific*, which was her first public response after issuing the Joint Statement. She wrote, “It is indeed essential for me to insist that this decision had nothing to do with the artwork’s content, and thus did not represent any censorship. This decision was made to condemn the unprofessional attitude of the artists, who used the contractual framework of a large public festival for self-serving purposes.” On February 2017, the artist Sampson Wong protested at another exhibition (titled “Carnival”) curated by Caroline Ha Thuc. The exhibition, presented by Amnesty International Hong Kong, was themed “Defend freedom of expression through art”. See: <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/icc> 倒數機策展人再辦人權藝術展 - 藝術家黃宇軒開幕禮到場示威 /, accessed July 14, 2017

artists, Isaac Chong Wai, Jaffa Lam Laam, Sampson Wong, Jason Lam, Cédric Maridet, and Kingsley Ng Siu-king. Their interactive media artworks at various locations in Hong Kong “encourage the public to experience the invisible frequencies and also question their impact on our daily lives.” *Our 60-second friendship begins now* consists of six segments of videos, one of which is a nine-digit high-speed real-time countdown to July 1, 2047.³

- **On May 18**

One of the artists, Sampson Wong was interviewed by the media on a day which fell on the period when Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, visited Hong Kong. Wong expressed that he wished to “take the opportunity to use the largest screen in Hong Kong [...] to produce a large-scale countdown clock of 2047, with reference to the countdown practice before 1997.” Wong said that “ICC required to preview the artwork and stressed that anything related to politics is not acceptable.” He did not reveal his true purpose to ICC, claiming that “the artwork was an homage to Wong Kar-wai’s film *Days of Being Wide*. The submission got through the review last month (i.e. April 2016).” Wong confessed in the interview that “when he chose to publicize the hidden message of the artwork he was psychologically prepared that the artwork may be removed from the exhibition before its end date.”⁴

Upon the release of the media interview, a spokesperson of the Sun Hung Kai Properties, ICC developer, said, “The fifth Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition currently showcased on the facade of ICC was presented by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (venues), ICC and K11 malls are venues partners. ICC had not participated in the selection process; all related procedures and review were handled by HKADC.”⁵

- **On May 19**

Sampson Wong published an article on the *Stand News*, titled “Why showing countdown of 2047 on the facade of ICC?” The text read, “From the evening of May 17 to June 22, 2016, the ‘Add Oil Team’ will display the remaining seconds to July 1, 2047 on the façade of International Commercial Center (ICC), the tallest building in Hong Kong [...] *Countdown machine*, a public media artwork appearing on the façade of ICC will be projected for one minute on the above mentioned dates [...] *Countdown machine* is a creative endeavor imbedded in another exhibited artwork.”⁶

On the same day, HKADC responded to media inquiry, saying that “The fifth Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition is presented by HKADC. The current artwork showcased on the façade of ICC, *Our 60-second friendship begins now* is created by Sampson Wong and Jason Lam. Inspired by Wong Kar-wai’s film *Days of Being Wide*, the artwork calls on the audience to cherish every moment. The artistic message is delivered through a numeric count down. Hidden message, if any, is the artist’s personal interpretation and does not represent the stand of HKADC. The exhibition is curated by independent curator

3 Exhibition official website: <http://www.mediaarts.hk/?c=mediaarts&lang=tc&edition>

News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Times* A20, May 19, 2016

News coverage, *am730* A51, May 19, 2016

News coverage, *Ta Kung Pao* B15, May 19, 2016

4 News coverage, *Stand News*, May 18, 2016. <http://www.thestandnews.com/art/張德江訪港-icc外牆倒數2047-藝術家-反映對五十年不變的憂慮/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

5 News coverage, *Stand News*, May 18, 2016. <http://www.thestandnews.com/art/張德江訪港-icc外牆倒數2047-藝術家-反映對五十年不變的憂慮/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

News coverage, *Ming Pao Daily* A04, May 19, 2016

6 News coverage, *Stand News*, May 19, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/為何在icc上展示2047的倒數時間/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

Caroline Ha Thuc. The direction, content, participating artists and their artworks have all been proposed by the curator. HKADC had not met the artists to discuss their artworks. All venue sponsors were aware of and accepted the content of the exhibited works and exhibition plan. The program will take place as scheduled tonight.”⁷

- **On May 22**

A statement bearing HKADC letterhead and co-signed by Caroline Ha Thuc and Ellen Pao, Chairman of Film and Media Art Group of HKADC, stated that *Our 60-second friendship begin now* by Sampson Wong and Jason Lam would be removed from the exhibition. The statement said, “After the opening ceremony of the Exhibition held on May 18, 2016, the artists changed the title and statement of their work (now renamed *Countdown machine [2016]*), and publicized these changes, without consulting the curator nor HKADC. Carrying out an exhibition, or a festival, is a teamwork based on confidence between the artists, the curator, the institutions and partners who are supporting the project. We trust there exists a mutual respect between HKADC, the curator, artists and collaboration partners, and such respect is coupled with professional practice. We do believe in the freedom of artistic expression, and do support our artists. Yet, the disrespect demonstrated by the artists against the original agreement and understanding made with the curator and HKADC is jeopardizing our profession and put at risk any future possibility to work further in the public space.”⁸

- **On May 23**

Sampson Wong posted a response on his personal Facebook page, titled “We demand that ADC revoke the ungrounded statement, and terminate arbitrary removal of the artwork,” which read,

1. *The curator is in full knowledge of the content of the exhibited artwork. No changes have been made in the artwork since April.*

From February 2016 onwards, the exhibition curator is in full knowledge that the image shown during the last minute of “Our 60-second friendship begins now”, which lasts for 9’30” in total, is the countdown of July 1, 2047 in seconds. She understands thoroughly that our biggest wish in designing this 9’30” artwork is to display the countdown image. On April 3, 2016, we confirmed with the curator the title and concept of the artwork’s final version. After that, no changes have been made. On April 28, 2016, we submitted the 9’30” video of the final “Our 60-second friendship begins now” artwork. Since then, we have not been able to alter the content of the artwork either. At that point, the artwork was complete on our part. In fact, all publications, online information and textual materials related to the exhibition are released by the organizer. It is not in our power to change any information regarding the artwork.

2. *“Countdown Machine” and “Our 60-second friendship begins now” cannot be the same artwork.*

The “Add Oil Team” formed by our friends and us started an artwork and campaign called “Countdown Machine” on May 18, 2016. This artwork consists of a website and a one-minute online clip. This one-minute clip is extracted from the last minute of another video that recorded the display of “Our

7 News coverage, *Stand News*, May 18, 2016. <http://www.thestandnews.com/art/張德江訪港-icc外牆倒數2047-藝術家-反映對五十年不變的憂慮/>, accessed July 4, 2017

8 “Joint Statement,” HKADC, May 22, 2016

60-second friendship begins now” in Central. “Countdown Machine” is related to “Our 60-second friendship begins now”, but the former is at best an interpretation—hence re-creation—of the latter; or the former can be said to be embedded in the latter. “Countdown Machine” cannot in any way alter the title and concept of “Our 60-second friendship begins now,” which is an artwork lasting for 9’30”.

3. The reason to remove the artwork is ungrounded. Attempts at banning interpretation limit freedom of expression.
4. HKADC’s unjustified and arbitrary removal of artwork endangers the arts sector.
5. HKADC’s statement and decision has made a scandal, and should thus be withdrawn.⁹

Wong Chau-sang Anthony, then HKADC Member, denounced the behavior of the two artists as not only insulting to the Council but also a violation of the code of ethics, misleading the decision of artwork removal into an act of censorship. Another HKADC Member Leung Sung-yum said that no internal meeting had been held regarding this incident. Leung respected the decision as he believed the HKADC had been prudent in handling similar matter; he promised to keep an eye on the subsequent development of the incident as it drew the society’s attention to the integrity of artists. According to Chan Han-pan, Member of Panel on Home Affairs of LegCo and DAB member, it was the artist’s freedom to express his own opinion, yet he should not take advantage of HKADC to express his personal views in a manner which violated the regulations. Chan also pointed out that the artist’s dishonest behavior cost the art sector its public image.¹⁰

Response published online from the art community mostly showed compassion to the artists and challenged the decision of HKADC.¹¹ Community artists Him Lo issued an open letter to the HKADC, “hoping to discuss so a reasonable reply could be solicited.” He questioned (1) On what ground did the HKADC, as a government organization that was committed to the development of art, made the decision of pulling the artwork out from the exhibition? From what perspective did the HKADC approach the arts? What would the arts stand for should it lost its room for imagination and the possibility of thinking through different perspectives? (2) How could we, the art practitioners, trust that HKADC was capable of promoting local arts in a healthy environment considering its approach in handling artwork in this incident? (3) Was the decision an independent one that involved no political censorship? (4) Would this incident trigger the HKADC to tighten the grips on freedom of exhibiting artwork in public space?”¹²

9 Sampson Wong’s personal Facebook statement

10 News coverage, *hk01*, May 23, 2016

11 Lai Chun-wai. “You cannot blame others for your own slip up.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 23, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/自己捉蟲怪不得人/>, accessed July 4, 2017

Justin Chow. “Breach of agreement – an unwarranted charge.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 23, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/莫須有的罪名-違反協議/>, accessed July 4, 2017

Chung Lok-wai. “The protest in community arts: Korea’s experience.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 23, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/international/民眾藝術的反抗-韓國的經驗/>, accessed July 4, 2017

12 Him Lo, “An open letter to HKADC.” (in Chinese) *Stand News*, May 23, 2016. <http://www.thestandnews.com/politics/倒數機事件-盧樂謙給藝發局的公開信/>, accessed July 4, 2017

• On May 24

The media widely covered the incident.¹³ HKADC responded to media inquiries, asserting that “the removal was the decision of the curator and the chairman of the Film and Media Arts Group of this Council after careful consideration.” HKADC reaffirmed that “the artists’ interpretation of the artwork as a ‘countdown machine’ deviated from the creative concept they previously submitted and this violated the agreement the artists had with the curator and the Council. The decision does not involve political consideration.”¹⁴

Columnist Vivienne Chow published an article in *QUARTZ* and quoted Caroline Ha Thuc’s words from their conversation that “amid the visit of Zhang Dejiang, the artists suddenly reduced the artwork to a straight-forward political statement. The artists did not respect the rules. [...] There are rules when it comes to private sponsorship for the arts. The incident has sparked further debates concerning freedom of artistic expression in Hong Kong.”¹⁵

More voices emerged as discussion is on the rise online: some continued to show support for the artists,¹⁶ some analyzed the controversy of the change of the name and concept of the artwork,¹⁷ some discussed the contractual and working trust between the artist and the curator,¹⁸ some questioned the review procedure and art censorship¹⁹ and some reflected on the positioning to take while criticizing the institution.²⁰

13 News coverage, *Apple Daily* A07, May 24, 2016

News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Times* A20, May 24, 2016

News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* A12, May 24, 2016

14 News coverage, *Ming Pao Daily* A14, May 24, 2016

15 Vivienne Chow. “Hong Kong wants to remain a global arts hub while censoring political art”, *QUARTZ*, May 24, 2016

16 Wong Tin Yan. “What is the ICC architect had told IFC that those two buildings are the F words addressing the CPC.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 24, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/culture/> 如果 -ifc- 同 -icc- 個建築師話 - 兩座樓係扁鳩共產黨嘅中指 / , accessed July 4, 2017

“Arts VS Politics: On the controversy of removing ICC countdown machine.” (in Chinese). *hk01*, May 28, 2016. <http://www.hk01.com/01觀點/23106/-01觀察-藝術VS政治-從ICC-倒數機-被停播爭議說起>, accessed July 4, 2017

17 Lee Chun-fung. “Discussing with HKADC – who has jeopardized the possibility of artwork display in public space?” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 24, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/culture/politics/> 與藝發局商榷相誰危及業界公共空間展示藝術品的可能性 / , accessed July 4, 2017

Chong Hong-ming. “Clear the mist of text, speech and political stand: what happened at ICC?” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 24, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/> 撥開文字 - 語言 - 政治立場的迷霧 - 到底 icc 倒數機發生何事 / , accessed July 4, 2017

18 Evelyn Char. “Political censorship? Professional consideration? Five points of reflections on the ‘countdown machine’.” (in Chinese). *hk01*, May 24, 2017. <https://www.hk01.com/01博評-政經社/22656/> 政治審查 - 專業考慮 - 關於倒數機事件的五點思考 , accessed July 4, 2017.

Au-yeung Tung. “Stop the ‘2047 countdown machine’ incident. Instead of HKADC one should criticize Sun Hung Kai.” (in Chinese). *Independent Media*, May 23, 2016. <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/2047-0>, accessed July 4, 2017.

19 Ray Leung. “A couple observations on the removal of artwork of ‘Human Vibration.’” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 24, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/> 感頻共振 - 撤走作品風波兩點觀察 / , accessed July 4, 2017

Andre Chan. “An artist-led farce.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 24, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/> 倒數機事件 - 藝術家主導的鬧劇 / , accessed July 4, 2017

20 Brian Yu. “An artist’s lies.” (in Chinese). *hk01*, May 25, 2016. <https://www.hk01.com/01博評-政經社/22694/> 倒數機事件 - 藝術家的語言偽術 , accessed July 4, 2017.

- **On May 28**

The curator-led guided tour prescheduled for the evening of May 28 was cancelled. No further arrangement of rescheduling was announced.²¹

- **On May 30**

Ellen Pao posted a personal response on the *Stand News* in the name of the elected Chairman of the Film and Media Arts Group of HKADC. She stated that the response did not concern Caroline Ha Thuc or HKADC, though she informed both out of respect. The response said,

“I must make it clear that, as far as I know, ICC or HKADC did not impose any political pressure. They did not request to remove the ‘work’. The decision of removal was jointly made by myself and the curator Caroline Ha Thuc.

Since the ‘work’ attracted continuous public attention, I have actively communicated with the artist Sampson Wong, the curator Caroline Ha Thuc and the HKADC to figure out the controversy within. In the end, as pointed out in the ‘Joint Statement,’ the curator Caroline Ha Thuc and I believed that the artists do not fully demonstrate their professionalism. The change they made to the ‘work’ deviated from what they stated in the original proposal and they did not appropriately and fully communicate with HKADC.

In my judgement, it is unprofessional for an artist to make sudden changes to his artwork and publicized the change without informing the curatorial team. The success of an exhibition depends upon the mutual trust grounded on consensus and contractual conditions among the stakeholders. Obviously, the action of the artists and its consequence betrayed the team’s trust. The curatorial team was left in a difficult position. We had no chance to duly discuss this ‘new’ work under the circumstance at the time. Therefore, we cannot endorse a work that is not created under mutually agreed exhibition principles.

The incident caused emotional reaction from the society, mostly distress. The current outcome reflected an unsatisfied arrangement during this process in which an artwork could have actualized its influence. I have to make a clear statement and apologize for my inadequacy in dealing with this incident and in achieving a timely and appropriate communication.”²²

- **On May 31**

Sampson Wong posted a response on his personal Facebook page. He challenged that “is it appropriate for a curator to tell an artist that there will be ‘no politics’?” He expressed that he held dear social values beyond arts, and that he had spent the past five years engaging in art protest that concerned urban space and art circle. He claimed that it is anti-arts and ethically ungrounded to lean on the professional morals when it clashed with the ideal of arts and social responsibilities.”²³

21 Facebook Group Page of the exhibition: <https://www.facebook.com/mediaartshk/posts/1736210066667953>, accessed July 4, 2017

22 News coverage, *Stand News*, May 30, 2016

23 Sampson Wong’s personal Facebook statement

June to December, 2016

On top of the public responses made by the key-concerned in May, the discussion continued on with individuals in the art circle expressing their views.²⁴ Director of the Master of Arts in Cultural Management of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and veteran curator Ho Hing-kay Oscar referred to the incident as “unlikely a political censorship. It reflected the conflicts on artistic expression and interpretation as well as professional respect between the curator and the artist. [...] An exhibition is more than the activities of artists. It is rather a work of the team, thus respect for every professional stakeholder is due.”²⁵ Art administrator Ray Leung pointed out that the incident revealed the fragile trust between curators and artists, which may lead to reduced interest of the presenters to showcase artworks or more restriction imposed on participating artists. He said, “At the moment, the negative PR impact utterly outweighs the positive impact of a high-quality public art exhibition.”²⁶ Independent curator Yeung Yang contended that the incident offered a valuable opportunity for learning how to debate competing common goods: in this case, with art being staked out to find its place in society – should one cling onto professionalism and the established hierarchy of power and values or work to open up and re-negotiated the latter in order to seek adequately deliberated common goods?²⁷

24 Tang Siu-wa. “Art and politics, exclusion and coalition – the ‘Countdown machine’ incident in Hong Kong.” (in Chinese). *The Reporter*, May 30, 2016. <https://www.twreporter.org/a/opinion-counting-down-2047>, accessed July 4, 2017.

Ray Leung. “Supplementary observation after the response from the Chairman of the Film and Media Art Group of HKADC.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 30, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/藝發局電影及媒體藝術組主席個人回應後之觀察補充/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

Ho Hing-kay Oscar. “Think about the team when protesting with the arts.” (in Chinese). *Initium*, June 1, 2016. <https://www.theinitium.com/article/20160601-opinion-oscarho-art2047/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

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CH Chak. “Different perspective of ‘countdown machine.’” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, June 5, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/藝述毒說-倒數機-多面睇/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

Lam Hon-kin, Andrew. “On the removal of ‘countdown 2047’, Public space = 0 politics?” (in Chinese). *Initium*, June 5, 2016. <https://www.theinitium.com/article/20160605-culture-space-art2047/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

Yeung Yang. “We may never know, but it is worth trying,” *Art Appraisal Club*, November 15, 2016.

Man Ching-ying Phoebé. “Only numbers,” *Art Asia Pacific*, Nov/Dec, 2016, Vol. 101.

25 Ho Hing-kay Oscar. “Think about the team when protesting with the arts.” (in Chinese). *Initium*, June 1, 2016. <https://www.theinitium.com/article/20160601-opinion-oscarho-art2047/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

26 Ray Leung. “Supplementary observation after the response from the Chairman of the Film and Media Art Group of HKADC.” (in Chinese). *Stand News*, May 30, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/藝發局電影及媒體藝術組主席個人回應後之觀察補充/>, accessed July 4, 2017.

27 Yeung Yang. “We may never know, but it is worth trying,” *Art Appraisal Club*, November 15, 2016.