

Art Writing and its Circulation: Three Moments in Hong Kong

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Introduction

This essay considers the kinds of art writing that document, critically respond to and generate discourse about art. Creative writing responses to works of art are a separate discussion that beckons another piece of writing itself. Here at Asia Art Archive, art writing is one of the predominant types of content in the materials we come across. From secondary materials such as art historical volumes and essays in exhibition catalogs, to primary materials like typescripts of exhibition reviews, drafts of lecture notes, curatorial statements, personal correspondences; the list goes on.

We often use art writing to prove a viewpoint, or frame a narrative. This can sometimes be at the expense of the stories that art writing, their medium, and the circulation itself tell. The vast amount of art writing that we encounter on an everyday basis at the Archive, and the many forms they take, prompts us to try thinking the other way around – to focus our attention on the art writing itself and its circulation. How does a particular space and time shape a medium in circulation? How and why did a particular medium of art writing start, what did they actually do? What kind of ideas were beings sent out, and to whom? Did it build up a community of writers and readers/audiences, and if it did, who were/are they?

This essay tries to tell the stories of three of these moments; hence this piece's descriptive nature. Through the presentation of these three moments and open-ended associations made possible by placing them next to each other, this essay also hopes to open up a space for others to pursue further research. The first case study that this essay takes is *Meishu Sichao* (美術思潮), an art theory magazine published in Wuhan, China from 1984-1987. The second one is *NuNaHeDuo* or *Dislocation*, a photography magazine that was included as a supplement inside the long standing Hong Kong-based salon photography magazine *Photo Pictorial* (攝影畫報) (1964-2005) from 1992-early 1999. The last case study is "HistoriCITY", a curatorial residency that looked at art historical writing in Hong Kong, undertaken at Asia Art Archive in 2007.

These case studies are neither exhaustive nor representative of the various holdings of art writing currently available at Asia Art Archive, and other resources of art historical materials such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Heritage Museum Resource Centres, Hong Kong Art Archive at Hong Kong University, and the Local Art Archive at Chinese University's New Asia College Ch'ien Mu Library. These case studies are also not related in historical linearity, genealogy, or geographical locations. They are chosen because of the questions and areas for further research that their specific conditions of emergence and circulation can open up.

The selection of these case studies is also informed by a personal location in the field of researching contemporary art. *Meishu Sichao* has been my subject of ongoing research for the past three years since completing a Masters degree in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. This particular interest in periodicals has been further kindled when Kalen Lee, during his research period as AAA's research grantee in 2011, introduced me to *Dislocation*. My gratitude goes to Kalen, and also Janet Chan, my colleague at AAA, who with much care and thoughtfulness, has been developing and taking care of many of the Archive's collections of materials, "HistoriCITY" being one of them. Being AAA's Hong Kong-based researcher, projects such as the Hong Kong Art History Research Pilot Project, which is a collaboration with the Hong Kong Museum of Art, has also played an instrumental role in shaping this essay's intent. This essay is thus an exercise that opens up the space for me to embed this curiosity within a larger system of publications, institutions, and as we come full circle to where we started, the circulation of art writing.

Meishu Sichao

Published in Wuhan, Hubei from 1984-1987, *Meishu Sichao* was a magazine dedicated to discourse on theory and hardly had any images. The magazine circulated nationwide, and received critical acclaim. It was also considered one of the most progressive magazines at the time, alongside its contemporaries such as *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* (中國美術報) founded in July 1985, and *Jiangsu Huakan* (*Jiangsu Pictorial*), founded in 1974. *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* named the establishment of *Meishu Sichao* one of the most important events in China's art circle in 1985; the Hong Kong-based magazine *The Nineties* also covered *Meishu Sichao* in its 9th issue of 1986.¹ (Plate 1).

The establishment of *Meishu Sichao* had everything to do with the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and the rehabilitation of government officials that ensued. Zhou Shaohua, the founder of *Meishu Sichao*, was one of the them. He was also the person in charge of the Artists Association at Hubei Province, a major governmental unit in the cultural sector.² Zhou was in his fifties in 1980s, and was known as an "open-minded" and "conceptually innovative" mid career official that some celebrated as "the banner of change in Chinese painting."³

Meanwhile, Zhou Shaohua was not the only cultural official known for a freehand editorial management at the time. He Rong, the editor in chief of Beijing-based magazine, *Meishu* (美術) from 1976-1983, was also highly commended for similar reasons. *Meishu* was originally founded in 1950 but shut down during the Cultural Revolution; He Rong was one of its founders and took charge of editorial work after the magazine's reinstatement in 1976. Suo Fei, Chief editor of Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, and editor of *Jiangsu Pictorial* Liu Dianzhang were also instrumental in allowing new writing on art in 1980s China to be published.⁴

Peng De, a staff member of a Cultural Centre in rural Hubei, was put in place to be the editor of *Meishu Sichao* after He Rong recommended his writing to Zhou Shaohua.⁵ Peng De's interest of being

in the contemporary played a key role in setting *Meishu Sichao's* tone and position – the magazine was to be not only an informational carrier that would report on emerging artistic trends, but also an energetic conductor of ideas and concepts that could potentially change the way of thinking of an entire generation.⁶ *Meishu Sichao's* determination to stay in and be of the present can be read from its mission statement, which is to “[stand] fast in the contemporary and faces the future.”⁷ And instead of building a brave new world, *Meishu Sichao* “seeks ardently for the maximum point of tension between tradition and change without causing any rupture.”⁸ Although the slogans of propagandistic rhetoric that occupied the back cover of the magazine may serve as a subtle reminder of the recently ended Cultural Revolution, it was also an indicator of the cultural euphoria and hunger for ideas and knowledge that erupted after the ten year of suppression and persecution ended.⁹

After founding *Meishu Sichao* and placing Peng De as editor in chief, Zhou took up the position of associate editor, allowing Peng De to steer the magazine's direction and content. Peng then took in Pi

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Plate 1

Peng De's personal document, which is a photocopy of two clippings. The upper clipping is from *The Nineties*, and the lower clipping from *Meishujia Tongxun* (*Artists Communications*) quoting *Zhongguo Meishu Bao's* coverage in 1986, naming *Meishu Sichao's* establishment as one of the ten most important events in the China. (Photo courtesy of Peng De)



Daojian, Yan Shanchun and Lu Hong as the editorial team. The editorial structure quickly expanded to include guest editors from different parts of the country, such as Li Xiangting, Huang Zhuan and Yang Xiaoyan, who were responsible for “curating” and editing specific issues as guest editors.¹⁰

Typically an issue of *Meishu Sichao* contained a section dedicated to “Theoretical Discussions”, with different writers contributing research essays on a vast array of topics, ranging from debates on socialist realism, to interpretations of then emerging artists as Huang Yongping amongst others.¹¹ There was also a section for “Translated Texts.” Throughout its three years of publication *Meishu Sichao* circulated translations of texts by writers as Gombrich, Jean Paul Sartre, Henry Moore, John Clark, and many more. The rest of the magazine issue would make up of a combination of contributions from readers, feature articles on particular artists, exhibition reviews, etc., depending on the editorial decisions of the issue’s guest editor.

As a state-run magazine, *Meishu Sichao*’s content was answerable to the authorities. At the same time it had to meet its readers’ expectation, which could differ drastically from the state.¹² The huge amount of readers’ letters that poured into *Meishu Sichao*’s editorial office reflected the hunger for information in 1980s China. The rapid circulation of the magazine and feedback from readers despite a lack of images in *Meishu Sichao* also suggested an informed and self-selective readership that was able to continuously make sense of and respond to the magazine’s content.¹³

It was noted earlier that *Meishu Sichao* covers a wide range of content. The following paragraphs seek to take a closer look at the content of *Meishu Sichao*, and reflect on what questions and areas might it lead us to consider.

Issue 2, 1986 was an issue focusing on sculpture edited by Li Xianting. In this issue British sculptor Henry Moore was featured alongside Chinese sculptor Wu Shaoxiang. Wu Shaoxiang’s work was printed in colour on the back cover, with no title or information attached. The Roman alphabets “WSXZP” printed at the lower left of the page would however suffice for readers with a command of Chinese phonetics to identify “WSXZP” as the acronym of “Wu Shaoxiang Zuopin,” which means in English “The Oeuvre of Wu Shaoxiang.”

One of the articles featured in this issue of *Meishu Sichao* is a short story titled “Moer Xiansheng, Ni Hao!” (“Hello, Mr. Moore!”) by Sitao Chang. In this fictional short piece the British sculptor Henry Moore (which, in another article, was mistaken as French) found himself on vacation in China (more specifically in Guangzhou), talking to a Chinese old chef who spoke fluent English.¹⁴ The two elderly men exchanged and debated their different views over the aesthetics of sculpture.

While Moore took his own works as examples, the Chinese chef referenced bonsai. The two men’s views seemed to have strike a note of resonance when both saw their views as culturally conditioned. But perhaps Moore was the one more eager to find a “common artistic language”, violently agreeing to anything the Chinese chef raised, despite the lack of specific articulation.¹⁵ Moore was revelling in his

discovery that “abstraction originated in China” so much so that he cut off the old chef before the latter could finish his sentences, not to mention detect and process the sarcasm in his words.

[The chef said,] “I find your exclamation a bit superfluous. It is like motorcars and trains - they run on different roads and tracks. I am used to drinking tea, and you love drinking coffee...”

“I love drinking tea, too. You know, it can help one lose weight, and it reduces blood pressure.” Mr. Moore began speaking about tea with much enthusiasm, and an attitude like he is an expert of tea drinking.

“Exactly. You drink Chinese tea like it is medicine and coffee tastes just like medicine to me. [We have] different ways of living. Maybe, maybe if we get used to each other’s [beverages], we may slowly find them fragrant and delicious!”¹⁶

This remark, and the entire short story can be read as a mocking caricature of disparate parties attempting to instantly strike a note of resonance and find a “common artistic language”.

“Hello, Mr Moore!” was immediately followed by a translation of Moore’s writing on the purpose of a sculptor – an editorial gesture that in fact left it open for readers to decide for themselves how they might relate to Moore’s practice and beliefs. It must also be noted that throughout entire issue, there are no images of Moore’s work.

This reference to Moore invites the association to other materials related Henry Moore at the Archive, such as the exhibition catalogs and posters of the Henry Moore exhibitions held in Hong Kong by the then City Hall Museum and Art Gallery (later renamed Hong Kong Museum of Art) in 1964 (Plate 2) and 1970 (Plate 3). What can the curatorial statements of those exhibitions reveal to us about the presentation of Moore’s oeuvre and practice in a Hong Kong context? How would they differ from that of *Meishu Sichao*? And to extend this association even further, can we imagine how the exhibition of Moore in Hong Kong might be written about in *Meishu Sichao*?

Drawing this case study to a close I would like to suggest that *Meishu Sichao* may not be as far away from Hong Kong as we thought – Zhou Shaohua was invited to lecture in Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1985, and his lecture was published in *Meishu Sichao* 1985 issue 3.

In this piece he shared not only his works, but also his views on the limitation of focusing only on lineage and not looking and referencing laterally to other cultures, and the vernacular. Zhou was a painter – and as par *Meishu Sichao*’s usual, none of the slides that were shown as part of the lecture was included in print. Zhou spoke of the necessity to critically and openly evaluate influences from Chinese traditions and western trends -



Plate 2 (left)
Poster for the "Recent British Sculpture" exhibition in 1964, organized by the Hong Kong Museum of Art. (Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Art)

Plate 3 (right)
Catalog cover of the "Henry Moore Exhibition" in 1970, jointly presented by the Urban Council and the British Council. (Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Art)

We should especially strive to understand and apply tradition with a broad and open perspective and a modern spirit, instead of defending it with conservative ideas. This [approach] includes development that stem from existing foundation; it also includes new methods and forms that are created as an inevitable response to the passing of destruction.¹⁷

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The allusion to the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath here is apparent; the lecture's subsequent publication also demonstrated a concrete exchange between *Meishu Sichao* (and the Mainland) and Hong Kong. While the possible impact of Zhou's lecture on the discourse on art in Hong Kong beckons its own research endeavor, it is an entirely valid question to ask. How did it fare with the audience in Hong Kong? What kind of responses did it invite?

Indeed, there are other Hong Kong based magazines that established contact and exchange with Mainland China as it emerged from the Cultural Revolution. One of these magazines is *Photo Pictorial*, which in fact is related to our second case study in this essay. *Photo Pictorial* began circulating in Mainland China in 1980s, making it one of the first magazines to enter China's newly opened doors. Its circulation within Hong Kong, South East Asia and China, which is still understudied, offers another reference point that can put the exchange between Hong Kong, Mainland China and other parts of Asia post Cultural Revolution into context.

Photo Pictorial - Dislocation

The introduction to *Photo Pictorial* has already begun at the end of first section of this essay - A salon photography founded by Mak Fung, Li Qing and Tchan Fouli¹⁸ in 1964, *Photo Pictorial* published every month on the 15th, and ran until 2005. Throughout its 41 years of publication, *Photo Pictorial* circulated

widely in Hong Kong and South East Asia. In 1980s, under the editorial leadership of Sylvia Ng (chief editor of *Photo Pictorial* from 1981-2005), *Photo Pictorial* became one of the first photographic magazines to circulate in Mainland China. The magazine, which is an area for research that is very much understudied, as stated earlier, can potentially open up inquiries on not only the exchanges between different regions, but also the magazine's role of circulating works and writing on of salon photography, the development of photographic technology and pedagogy of photographic practices amongst many.

This essay, however, chooses to look at a moment in *Photo Pictorial* in the 1990s and more specifically, from 1992-1998. During that time, a special supplement titled *Nu Na He Duo* or *Dislocation* was included at the back of each issue of *Photo Pictorial*. Upon Lee Ka-sing's suggestion to Sylvia Ng, Lee Ka-sing, Holly Lee and Lau Ching-ping, who were all practicing photographers at the time, started *Dislocation* as an editorial project (Plate 4). Although subscribers and readers of *Photo Pictorial* would receive *Dislocation* as part of *Photo Pictorial* (the two were bound together), *Dislocation* was editorially independent of *Photo Pictorial* and runs its own subscription as well.

While the cover designs of the two magazines suggested a distinctive aesthetic paradigm and content (Plate 5), Sylvia Ng's "Afterward" in *Photo Pictorial* issue 321 (April 1992) noted the magazine's posture towards *Dislocation*.

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Plate 4
Front cover of *Dislocation* trial issue, 1992. Cover work by Lee Kam-fai. Copyright Lee Kam-fai, Lee Ka-sing, Lau Ching-ping, Carmen Lee. (Photo courtesy of Lee Ka-sing and Asia Art Archive)

Plate 5
Front covers of *Photo Pictorial* issue 321 and *Dislocation* duo issue 3-4, April 1992. The cover of *Dislocation* is a work by Antonio Mak photographed by Lee Ka-sing. Copyright Lau Ching-ping, Lee Ka-sing, Holly Lee. (Photo courtesy of Lee Ka-sing and Asia Art Archive)

The special issue of *Dislocation* is published alongside *Photo Pictorial* and it brings in a different attitude and perspective of introducing different concepts and methods of creating photography. This is a new experiment. All art is subjective, and it is so for photography as well. There is no editorial note from [*Photo Pictorial*] on *Dislocation*, we are merely “displaying” it, to let all of you know that there is such a thing. Whether you appreciate or not, that is another issue. Slogans as “let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend” has been going around loud and long enough, here we are merely trying to take a stride along this path. We welcome any comments and suggestions from readers.

The slogan of a “let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend” (百花齊放、百家爭鳴) is borrowed from the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956, during the period which the Communist Party of China encouraged its citizens to openly expressed their views over the government. The movement ended in 1957 with a crackdown against the expressions that the movement originally encouraged. The usage of such a slogan and a language familiar to Mainland readers, perhaps signaled *Photo Pictorial's* close association with the PRC, being one of the first magazines that were able to officially circulate in Mainland China after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

This statement above is one of mutual acceptance and respect, and showed an awareness of the vast and evolving field of photography. *Dislocation* also always had a right hand side page as its cover, allowing *Photo Pictorial's* editorial note to be on the left side of the same spread. This arrangement allowed for *Photo Pictorial* to introduce and highlight content of *Dislocation*. Such a generous arrangement, coming from a long-standing salon photography magazine that had enjoyed robust circulation not only in Hong Kong, but also Mainland China and South East Asia, can indeed be read as signs of a healthy relationship between *Photo Pictorial* and *Dislocation*.

Photo Pictorial's editorial further demonstrated its understanding of its circulation and readership by addressing both *Photo Pictorial* and *Dislocation* readers.¹⁹ The inclusion of *Dislocation* was arguably a gesture that widened the readers' base of *Photo Pictorial* in Hong Kong. By putting on the same publishing platform two circuits that might otherwise not encounter each other, it was an acknowledgement first and foremost of co-existence, and an invitation for the two to interact by inhabiting the pages of the same magazine.

In the October 1992 issue of *Dislocation* (*Photo Pictorial* issue 327), fellow contributor to *Dislocation* Carmen Lee contributed an essay that noted her view on photography-

Throughout the evolution of modern art, one of the most important impetus was the liberation of art from being the representation and portrayal of real life, be it scenery or objects. Surrealism further proposed that reality is unreliable, and that fantasies might have a bigger impact on our daily lives. As a result of such development in artistic thought, photography is also moving away from the practice of pure realism, and aspiring to convey abstract ideas and sentiments. [...] Instead of a passive observer, the photographer should become an active creator, directly intervening into or even controlling the construction of a photographic subject, thereby turning their ideas into images that can be captured.²⁰

In response to this view over photography, which differed greatly from that of *Photo Pictorial*, Sylvia Ng responded with the following -

This issue of *Dislocation* opens with a short text by Carmen Lee, which explains their stance [towards photography]. [*Photo Pictorial*] basically agrees with this stance, but our publication and editorial direction remains unchanged. Artistic expression cannot be divorced from the cultural background and living standards of a place and nation. *Photo Pictorial* is rooted in Hong Kong and Mainland China. On one hand, the cultural dimension of this vast region is still very different from that of the West. On the other, this land is undergoing the most drastic changes in its history. We believe that there is still much room and value for pure photography, or photography that reflects real life, to exist and thrive. [...]

The contradiction and unity of *Photo Pictorial* and *Dislocation* is the reflection of an objective reality. We believe that both creative practices and attitudes will continue to coexist for a long time.²¹

For the first few years of *Dislocation*, the magazine invited contributions from photographers for each issue, and each issue in turn focused on a different topic.²² These issues varied from "Insanity" to "Digital Imaging," "Photo booth", and many more, reflecting a vast spectrum of topics, ranging from the personal to social-political and technical in photography, that interested the *Dislocation* editors and contributors.²³



While issues such as 1992 issue 7 “Soundworks” took the approach of an international open call, some issues had designated curators, such as 1993 issue 9 “Fabrications” curated by Oscar Ho (Plate 6).²⁴ On top of photographic works, some issues also featured writing that corresponded to the specific topic, such as David Clarke’s “Photography and the Production of Social Domain” in the “Public VS Image” issue of 1993 February²⁵.

Photo Pictorial extended its experiments towards exhibition making as well. In March 1993 “Dislocation Original Works Exhibition - Chapter One” was held at Visage Too, Shek O Village²⁶ (Plate 7). (Visage One, another reincarnation of the Visage spaces, now finds itself a barbershop cum Saturday-night jazz bar, relatively quietly tucked away in one of the many nooks off Hollywood Road.)

In the 1994 February issue of *Dislocation*, Lee Ka-sing also reflected on what *Dislocation* was able to do in the past year as it evolved organically.

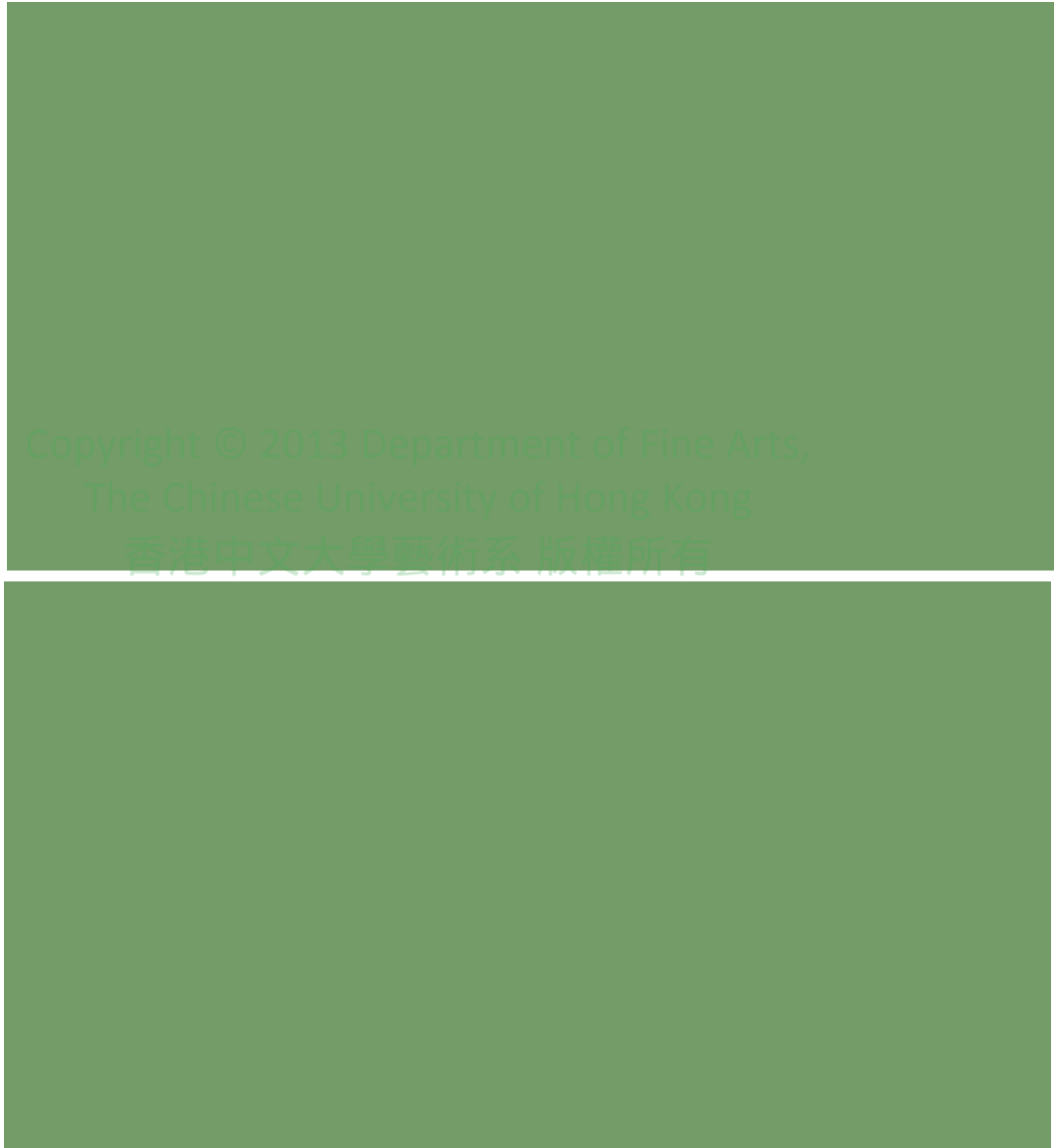
Dislocation is not only just organizing [existing materials], the organizing we are doing may have a broader dimension, and to say the least it has some “enabling” capacity. Take the previous issue on digital image as an example, it indeed enabled some practitioners who work with digital technology to create their works. This is also a kind of organizing, because it enabled artistic practitioners to materialize images and concepts that are brewing in their minds or hands. [...] *Dislocation* basically does not take up any grand mission as its foundation. We rather hope that it is a work that evolves, one that can continuously adjust its perspective more than a task that is driven with a clear goal or striving. [...] *Dislocation* is an idea, an idea that grows.²⁷

Plate 6
Front covers of
Dislocation issues:
Soundwork (issue 8,
1992), *Fabricaton* (issue 9,
1993), *Photobooth* (issue
5, 1995). (Photo courtesy
of Lee Ka-sing and Asia
Art Archive)

Much more can be said about *Dislocation's* content and its relationship with *Photo Pictorial* in later issues of *Dislocation*. One such moment was in *Dislocation* volume 4 issue 3 "On Identity." In this issue, one artist's work was deemed too violent and obscene by the editorial of *Photo Pictorial*. As a mutually agreed solution between the two magazines, a semi-translucent band with the text "Censored 11-3-1995" was placed over the images that would otherwise be taken out and not published²⁸ (Plate 8).

Plate 7 (top)
Invitation card to
"Dislocation Original
Works Exhibition
Chapter 1" at Visage
Too, Shek O, 27 March -
24 April 1993. Copyright
Lee Ka-sing, Lau Ching-
ping, Holly Lee. (Photo
courtesy of Lee Ka-sing
and Asia Art Archive)

Plate 8 (bottom)
From *Dislocation* issue
3, 1995, in which Kary
Kwok's work was deemed
inappropriate for
publication. *Dislocation*
and *Photo Pictorial* editor
mutually agreed to
covering the image with
a semi-translucent band
with the text "Censored
11-3-1995" in order to
ensure clearance for
publication. Copyright
Kary Kwok, Lee Ka-sing,
Lau Ching-ping, Holly
Lee. (Photo courtesy of
Lee Ka-sing and Asia Art
Archive)



This incident was quickly followed up by both *Photo Pictorial* and *Dislocation* – the latter dedicated the issue immediately after to the topic “On Censorship,” featuring a conversation between artist Phoebe Man and Sylvia Ng discussing the censorship incident and the art of pushing boundaries when introducing content that might be seen as subversive by some.²⁹

The questions to ask perhaps are such as did the momentum of such a conversation carry on any further? How did socio-political events such as the Handover in 1997, affect the content and editorial of *Dislocation*, and its relationship with that of *Photo Pictorial*? What kind of a counterpoint do these two magazines form with other institutions of display at the time, such as the Hong Kong Arts Centre and Hong Kong Museum of Art? On top of the generous, open interaction *Photo Pictorial* and *Dislocation* shared despite their different positions, these questions are amongst the various research inquiries that can be taken further.

HistoriCITY

The last case study of this essay is “HistoriCITY – Art Historical Writing in and on Hong Kong” (HistoriCITY), a curatorial residency undertaken by Lau Kin-wah Jasper at Asia Art Archive in 2007. The curatorial residency generated three smaller projects – namely a small-scale exhibition at Asia Art Archive, a reading group formed by interested individuals, which looked into the subject of art history as such, and thirdly, a roundtable symposium that looked at the writing of art history (or the lack thereof) in Hong Kong. The symposium took place at the Hong Kong Museum of Art lecture hall, involving twelve speakers based both within and out of Hong Kong. A project with an intention to look into art writing, HistoriCITY itself became a form of art writing as its project files and documentation are retained and kept in the Asia Art Archive, and made publicly available online (Plate 9).

HistoriCITY’s exhibition was held in Asia Art Archive from 15 June – 19 October 2007, in which nine Hong Kong based artists responded to Jasper’s invitation to take Zhu Qi’s 2005 publication *History of Hong Kong Fine Art* (香港美術史) as a departure point. Artists were invited to create works using the publication itself, or responding to the broader issue of Hong Kong’s art history.³⁰ *History of Hong Kong Fine Art* was the first book on Hong Kong’s art history written in Chinese. And due to Zhu Qi’s position



Plate 9
Project file of
HistoriCITY, currently
available at Asia Art
Archive's library in
Sheung Wan, Hong
Kong.

as an art historian from Mainland who had not written on art in Hong Kong before the said publication, it stirred up much discussion in the Hong Kong art scene.

While some found Zhu's publication a loose compilation of already existing materials on Hong Kong's art, some regarded the publication as a reflection of limited or thin materials on Hong Kong's art history.³¹ And perhaps a more common sentiment was what Jaspar Lau also expressed, that the volume was not something that practitioners based in Hong Kong would identify with.³²

The project documentation at Asia Art Archive suggested that the idea of a project in response to Zhu's book began developing as early as 2005, when Lau, under the name of mMK (mini Museum von Kaspar), initiated

an art book project in [association] with a co-organize[d] reading group [still planning] to generate discussion surrounding the content of the book itself as well as the writing of history of Hong Kong art...[I]nterested artists will be supplied with two copies of the publication, one for their reference and reading, another one as the material for their artistic creation.³³

Behind this project is a curiosity to see how different individuals, and in particular artists, "(engage with) a disconnected history," instead of a demand for "a better version (of Zhi Qi's text)."³⁴ And yet as Norman Ford noted in his correspondence with Lau, the very act of "sending out (Zhu Qi's) book to artists has an implicit critique already built in."³⁵

The subversive qualities of such an act did inspire some artists such as Pak Sheung-chuen Tozer to reflect on the power politics in the writing/construction of art history (Plate 10).



Plate 10
Email correspondence
between Jaspar Lau and
invitees to the "Artist
Books Project" in 2005-
2006. From HistoriCITY
project file, Asia Art
Archive.

>Tozer Pak [18/09/2005]

Jeff (Leung) brought a copy of *History of Hong Kong Fine Art* back to the studio. I flipped through it briefly; it was quite thick. [...] I came up with the idea for a work called *Good Ladder*, where I would cut out several ladders in the book pages. One only needs to flip over [that part of] the book, and the ladder would double in height [see picture]. This is a satire to art history/historians' power to push artists up [the ladder] to a different position of power [this does not apply to this book in particular.]

By September 30, 2005, six to nine artists have expressed interest to participate in the project and were instructed to pick up their copies of *History of Hong Kong Fine Art* from the Cattle Depot the same weekend.³⁶ The project then took a short break as Lau went on a trip to US for the latter part of the year, and resumed development in January 2006, with Habitus Design Space as a potential site for the exhibition of the artist books.³⁷

A proposal for a small-scale exhibition in Asia Art Archive that included the Hong Kong Art History Art Book Project was submitted on August 30, 2006 (Plate 11). In April 2007 Lau wrote to fellow artists who expressed interest in the Hong Kong Art History Artist Book Project, that “[a]fter an indefinite delay, the [project] is finally moving again,” and that it would take place in Asia Art Archive’s new premise when the Archive was moved in.³⁸ Lau writes,

[the] project aims to highlight possible self-reflection of artists upon art historical writings, whether it is their specific attachment to Hong Kong art history or their



Plate 11
Proposal for mini-scale Exhibitions in Asia Art Archive, addressed to Claire Hsu from Lau Kin-wah, August 30, 2006. From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art Archive. (Photo copyright and courtesy of Asia Art Archive)

relation to Art History in general, or theoretically. An accompanying roundtable by Art Historians, together with other scholars and practitioners will [be] held in late Sept[ember].³⁹

Monthly reading group sessions on related topics were also initiated by Lau to engage practitioners with the discipline of art history. Five reading group sessions were held from June to September 2007, with reading focuses such as “Hong Kong Art Historical Writings,” “New Art History,” “Writing, Self-reflectivity,” “Critic-Historian-Aesthetician Thierry de Duve,” “Modernity as Narrative?” and “Visual Arts to Visual Culture.” Readings collated for these reading group sessions spanned from Hong Kong’s own David Clarke, Jack Lee, to authors as Hans Belting, Arthur Danto, James Elkins and Nicholas Mirzoeff.

Perhaps even a more interesting area for future research is a list of recent writings on Hong Kong’s art and art history that the reading group sessions gathered. These texts, some written in Chinese and some in English, span from full volumes of books to exhibition catalogs, individual articles published in anthologies, magazines and daily newspapers, reviews in academic journals, and chronologies.⁴⁰ These different forms of art writing were written by Hong Kong-based writers across both Chinese and English language groups. Almost all of them addressed different time periods, reflecting a multitude of efforts trying to amass an art history of Hong Kong from different starting points and perspectives. These writings may not take the form or the position of an epic history book as Zhu Qi’s, but are indeed the different art histories that Hong Kong has produced from within. The discussion that we should be having, perhaps, is not that Hong Kong does not have an art history (or why it does not have one), but how we can make these different histories (of various forms and looking at different times) engage with each other. (Plates 12 a/b/c).

Plates 12 a/b/c
Reading list (partial) for
HistoriCITY reading
group, held from June to
September 2007. (Photo
copyright and courtesy of
Asia Art Archive)



In the list of Hong Kong related reading materials for the HistoriCITY reading groups sessions, there are multiple entries of writing from the period of 1990s. These included David Clarke's *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (essays written from mid 1980s- mid 1990s), the anthology *Through the Transition and Over the Millennium: Self-Selected Visual Art Criticism Essays by Seven Critics* (writing produced in 1990s by Matthew Turner, Ho Hing-kay Oscar, Jack Lee, David Clarke, Leung Po-shan Anthony, Edwin Lai and Siu King-chung), as well as *Someone Else's Story - Our Footnotes: Contemporary Art of Hong Kong (1990-1999)*, co-edited by David Clarke and Oscar Ho, for an exhibition that never materialized. The Hong Kong Museum of Art also produced two publications in 1990s, namely *Hong Kong Artists: Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art [Volume I]* (1995) and *Hong Kong Art 1997 - Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, Beijing & Guangzhou Exhibition* (1997). Both were also on HistoriCITY's reading list.⁴¹

These writings and volumes published in 1990s and 2000s contained more than just text about the present state of the art ecology. In fact, most of them took a historical perspective. Jack Lee's own selection of writing for *Through the Transition and Over the Millennium: Self-Selected Visual Art Criticism Essays by Seven Critics*, although all written in 1990s, were mostly on artists who were active decades before then. These figures featured in Lee's writing included Lee Bing, Yu Ben and Li Tiefu, who were active from 1930s onwards. The exhibition catalogs published by Hong Kong Museum of Art chronicled the development of artistic practices with reference to its collection, which is one of the narratives of Hong Kong's art history - and one told from an institutional standpoint.

One of the most noticeable elements of these publications is that volumes on narratives that has been well circulated remains so, while thinner narratives - the ones with less visible materials and fewer outspoken champions struggle to accumulate information and circulate. This difficulty is perhaps reflected in the dominance of chronologies as information container. These chronologies include David Clarke's *Art in Hong Kong: A Chronological Guide to Exhibitions (1985-2001)* and its digital database twin *Hong Kong Art: A chronological database of art exhibitions in Hong Kong* (<http://web.hku.hk/kaa/>), and Edwin Lai and Jack Lee's, "A Chronology of Visual Arts Activities in Hong Kong, 1900 -1930," from the inaugural issue of *Besides: A Journal of Art History and Criticism*. The efforts to build chronologies have been undertaken by other scholars as well, such as Sophia Law, who in 2009-2010 compiled the "A Chronology of Artists' Activities in Pro-Beijing Newspapers in Hong Kong between 1940-1959," which was later published in the *2010 Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook*.

Information from certain time periods or subjects may indeed be extremely difficult to collect (either because of scarcity or destruction of materials, or old age or death of individuals who have access, whether via experience or ownership of physical materials) that a chronology may be the result of an enormous undertaking. When presented or treated as a complete document instead of a continuously developing container for information to accumulate, chronologies may under perform in what it sets out to do - to show interesting developments of a certain issue or geography over time, which in turn invites more investigation. Art historical volumes that take a more polemical position, or assume such a position

because of its book form, can more readily ignite discussions and drive discourse. These different vehicles that contain Hong Kong art historical information hence reflect not only the varied levels of accessibility of historical materials, but also illuminate the ease with which certain narratives attain their visibility and circulation.

The multiplicity of voices demonstrated in the HistoriCITY reading list was further affirmed by the presence of the twelve speakers at the symposium held on September 29, 2007 (Plate 13), and the proceedings of the conference was later published in the January 2008 issue of *Yishu* magazine. The transcripts of the roundtable symposium are now available online at Asia Art Archive's website as well. The twelve speakers spanned three language groups (English, Cantonese and Mandarin), and their bases included Hong Kong, Mainland China, as well as overseas locations such as United Kingdom. The two sections of the Roundtable were devised based on the speakers' languages of delivery.⁴² The attendance of the symposium, audience participation and general excitement on such an event also reflected the desire and effort to generate a discursive field.

The Hong Kong art scene clearly recognizes and seeks to address a “lack” of art history in the city. While it embraces the idea of multiple perspectives on its art history that may not necessarily come from its own territory, it paradoxically desires a voice of its own. These two forces are of course not mutually exclusive. And if so, how does one explain the severe dissatisfaction one particular perspective, i.e. Zhu Qi's, generated, when it is supposed to be, and can be seen as, one voices amongst many? This can perhaps point us back to how different forms of writing carry within themselves a different weight in their ability to make a mark in the field (take art historical volume versus chronology of events as example).

The double bend of embracing multiple perspectives while desiring a local voice is no less apparent in HistoriCITY's curatorial statement, which opened with the question “When will we have the first publication of Hong Kong art history written by a Hong Kong author?” Yet it seem to immediately contradict itself by noting that

Plate 13
Speakers at HistoriCITY
- Art Historical Writing
in and On Hong Kong:
Roundtable Symposium,
held on September 29,
2007. (Photo copyright
and courtesy of Asia Art
Archive)



What is important is not who is going to write art history for Hong Kong but what kind of knowledge and interpretation of Hong Kong art history is presented in each publication. As we keep demanding of ourselves that we understand history via multiple perspectives, there is, however, an absence of local voices on the history of Hong Kong art.

The question or issue that grips our participants does not seem to be a contradiction between a single or multiple perspectives. It may be one that pertains to the good old issue of identity - What kind of a voice would suffice as a self-representation for Hong Kong? How would, and how can this sufficient self be articulated?

The construction of a self-representation necessarily goes back to narrative building. And for the case of Hong Kong, there seem to be a generous amount of building blocks. Perhaps an even more fundamental question here is how can we better understand and use existing art historical resources, and build on top of them.

The materials collected via this curatorial residency spans from creative responses by artists towards the notion of art history, to writings on art history for the reading group sessions, as well as the participation of speakers at the symposium. As much as these documents will become materials for the future, available to those researching Hong Kong's art history, they are also a sliver of the collective psyche of Hong Kong's art and cultural practitioners - materials that are of equal value, if not more, as we seek to understand Hong Kong's art ecology.

Conclusion

The introduction of this essay noted that the three case studies were chosen for the specific conditions from which they emerged, and in which they circulated. Indeed, *Meishu Sichao*, *Photo Pictorial & Dislocation* and *HistoriCITY* are distinctively different examples of art writing that are produced by different urgencies and channeled different ideas. All three of them did make an impact in the art ecology they were embedded in. By being publicly available as materials for research now, they can be activated for other purposes by other practitioners. The possibilities are many - from further academic research, to education, creative practices and the curatorial. The limit is our collective imagination.

One other element that these three case studies are distinct from each other is the physical materiality of their respective medium in circulation. *Meishu Sichao* was printed in the 1980s, and in black and white only. In fact, its printing quality was what Peng De himself would refer to as that of an underground magazine. Readers of *Meishu Sichao* handwrote letters to the editors in an amount that instantiated the cultural fever at the time.

Meanwhile *Photo Pictorial* and *Dislocation* in 1990s were printed in full color. The high quality of paper and printing was integral to *Dislocation's* function as an exhibitory site in the form of a magazine. The

conversations between the two editorial teams and readers took place within the medium in circulation itself, creating a steady, and consistent flow of interaction between writers and the audience.

HistoriCITY's materials embodied the digital age – correspondences were conducted in emails, sometimes even in instant messaging. Responses and coordination were immediate, and ideas spun by artists overseas could be quickly communicated and executed by counterparts in Hong Kong. The vast array of reading materials HistoriCITY collected also illustrated the flow of ideas less limited by national boundaries. The forms of documentation also expanded to include video recording.

Language, however, remains a boundary in all three case studies and limits access of materials to only members of some language groups. We must not forget that a vast amount of art historical materials on and in Hong Kong are available only in Chinese.

If the most vital element to an accumulation of discursive density is circulation, then the key to a robust circulation is that of access, and hence the need for translation.

This invitation for translation is not one that attempts to jump onto the “international” bandwagon that inevitably heads towards Euro-America. It is an invitation for us to look inwards into the various language groups within Hong Kong, the multiple perspectives that the city already holds within itself, as its many peoples inhabit its land. It is also an invitation to look laterally to the rest of Asia. Indeed English may continue to be the common language for fellow Hong Kongers to communicate amongst ourselves and with different geographies, there is hardly any reason to limit English as the only language that we would translate our texts into. This essay, although still limited to Chinese-English translation, is nevertheless an attempt that aims at juxtaposing cases that when translated, can make visible other narratives, and open up areas for new inquiries.

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¹ "The Ten Most Important Events in China's Art Circle, 1985 (85年全國美術界十件大事)," *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* issue 9 (1986). (in Chinese).

² "Peng De Interview, Xian Academy of Fine Arts, September 18, 2009," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art 1980-1990*. (in Chinese).

³ "Pi Daojian Interview, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, 19 February, 2009," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art, 1980-1990*. (in Chinese).

⁴ *Meishu Sichao* issue 6, 1987. And <http://www.artnow.com.cn/Discuss/Special/SpecialChildArticle.aspx?c=748&ArticleID=24875>

- ⁵ “Peng De interview, Xian Academy of Fine Arts, September 18, 2009,” *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art, 1980-1990*. He Rong proceeded to place Peng's writing on Zhou Zhaohua's desk and asked Zhou to read it. After reading his writing, Zhou then wrote a letter personally to Peng, inviting him to join the Hubei Province Artists Association at the city of Wuhan in August 1984. By October 1984 Peng De was in place as the editor for a newly conceptualised publication, which would later be known as *Meishu Sichao*.
- ⁶ See Note 2.
- ⁷ *Meishu Sichao* trial issue (Wuhan, Hubei, China: Chinese Artist Association, Hubei Branch, 1985), 1.
- ⁸ “《美術思潮》在立足當代、面向未來的前提下，努力探求傳統與變革不發生斷裂的最大張力。”，*Meishu Sichao* trial issue (Wuhan, Hubei, China: Chinese Artist Association, Hubei Branch, 1985), 1.
- ⁹ Do you want to be a pioneer of contemporary art/ Are you willing to take part in contemporary art activities/*Meishu Sichao* shall be your ears, eyes, throat and tongue (你想做當代美術的開拓者嗎/ 你願意參與當代美術活動嗎/ 美術思潮將是你的耳目喉舌)，*Meishu Sichao*, trial issue (Wuhan, Hubei, China: Chinese Artist Association, Hubei Branch, 1985), 1. (in Chinese).
- ¹⁰ Such as *Meishu Sichao*, issue 2, 1986. (Wuhan, Hubei, China: Chinese Artist Association, Hubei Branch, 1986)
- ¹¹ Yan Shanchun published one of the first readings of Huang Yongping, interpreting Huang's works with reference to both Hegelian dialectic and Zen Buddhism, and has been considered as one of the earliest, and most important reading of Huang Yongping in China. Yan's article is in *Meishu Sichao* 4, 1986, 6-8.
- ¹² When *Meishu Sichao* covered the “6th National Fine Art Exhibition” extensively for two consecutive issues in 1986, angry readers' letter that hurled insults at the editors made its way into the otherwise well-meaning, gratitude-filled pile.
- ¹³ *Meishu Sichao* was running at a print run of 30,000 copies per month in 1985 as a monthly magazine, and by 1986 it had become a bi-monthly magazine. *Meishu Sichao* ceased publication in 1987 when the cultural climate once again tightened. Throughout its three years of publication, *Meishu Sichao* enlisted content from more than 40 key contributors across the country.
- ¹⁴ Sitao Chang, “Hello, Mr. Moore!” (摩爾先生，你好!)，*Meishu Sichao* 2 (1986), 34-35 (in Chinese).
- ¹⁵ “In China we also have art that pays attention holes and hollows.” The old chef continued. (「在我們中國也有講究洞的藝術。」老廚師又說開了。)” Like the artificial mountains in gardens, such as the Rock of Taihu. It has to ‘breathe’ in order to have an aura. That is like...I cannot articulate it myself; it can only be felt, it cannot be explained.” “Oh?” Mr Moore was shocked, and said hastily, “Understood. I totally understand.”(「那是園林的假山，太湖石。要說『透』才有靈氣。就是……，我也說不清，只可意會，不可言傳。」「呵？」摩爾先生吃了一驚，連忙說道：「明白，我完全明白。」) From Sitao Chang, “Hello, Mr. Moore!” (摩爾先生，你好!)，*Meishu Sichao* 2 (1986), 35 (in Chinese).
- ¹⁶ Sitao Chang, “Hello, Mr. Moore!” (摩爾先生，你好!)，*Meishu Sichao* 2 (1986), 34-35 (in Chinese).
- ¹⁷ Zhou Shaohua, “Lateral Transplantation and Inter-generational Inheritance - a lecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (橫向移植與隔代遺傳 — 在香港中文大學的演講)”，*Meishu Sichao*, issue 3 (1985), 1-3. (in Chinese).

- ¹⁸ Narratives surrounding the three figures, especially Li, are low in visibility and circulation. For more information on these three figures and Kalen's research on *Photo Pictorial*, please send request to Asia Art Archive.
- ¹⁹ “高興的是，在原有的讀者層面上，本刊有加添了一批新的讀者。我們希望新來的讀者對本刊慢慢的了解，逐步對本刊習慣刊用的作品風格，有所瞭解及欣賞。(lit is thrilling to us that] a new group of readers will be joining the existing readership of *Photo Pictorial*. We hope our new readers can slowly get to know [*Photo Pictorial*] as a magazine, and come to understand and appreciate the style of photography that the magazine brings out.)” *Dislocation* duo issue 3 -4, *Photo Pictorial*, issue 321, April 1992 (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Limited, 1992) 98. (in Chinese).
- ²⁰ *Dislocation* issue 9, *Photo Pictorial*, issue 327, October 1992 (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Limited, 1992).
- ²¹ *Photo Pictorial*, issue 327, October 1992 (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Limited, 1992).
- ²² “《娜移》從開始編輯至今，都是以邀請作品為主。我們擬定了刊物影響方向和對攝影的態度；可以說，這時主觀的設定。(From the first edition of *Nu Na He Duo* until now, we have invited photographs with a specific purpose in mind and these works have formed the basis of the magazine. We have established the attitude of the magazine towards photography and the direction of the photography within it. One could say that the process of establishment has been a subjectively-directed one).” *Dislocation* issue 7, *Photo Pictorial*, issue 325, August 1992 (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Limited, 1992). (in Chinese).
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- ²⁹ *Dislocation* volume 4, issue 4, *Photo Pictorial*, issue 357, April 1995 (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Limited, 1995).

³⁰ From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art archive. Participating artists included Ching Chin-wai Luke, Fung Mei-wah May, Law Man-lok, Lee Kit, Leung Mee-ping, Pak Sheung-chuen Tozer, Tang Ying-chi Stella, Tsang Tak-ping Kith, and Wong Yui-hin James.

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³² Email correspondence between Jaspar Lau and Norman Ford [13/09/2005]. From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art Archive.

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³⁵ Email correspondence between Jaspar Lau and Norman Ford [15/09/2005]. From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art Archive.

³⁶ Artists who expressed interest to participate in the Hong Kong Art History Artist Book project as of September 30, 2005 are Leung Mee-ping, Tozer Pak, Siu King-chung, wen yau, Law Man-lok, James Wong, Rick Yeung, May Fung and Tse Yin-mo. Email from Lau Kin-wah to artists expressing interest (September 30, 2005). From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art Archive.

³⁷ Email from Lau Kin-wah to participating artists of Hong Kong Art History Artist Book Project (September 1, 2006). From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art Archive. Habitus Design Space was an exhibition space founded and ran by Tsang Tak-ping Kith in early to mid 2000s.

³⁸ Jaspar Lau, email with subject "Re: mMK'HK AH art bk project - artists updated [2007] [slightly edited]. From HistoriCITY project file, Asia Art Archive.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ http://www.aaa.org.hk/cms/Content/upload/research/rp/HistoriCITY_Reading_Group_Outline.pdf.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² http://www.aaa.org.hk/cms/Content/upload/research/rp/HistoriCITY_transcriptsession1_abridged.pdf and <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/59>.