

Floating Projects, Survival Re-envisioned: spatial occupation, re-production of social relations and the economy of contribution

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The morphing space of the Floating Projects



WCH Assemblage #1: Automatism. One step forward. No Waste
黃竹坑聚疊 (一)：不假思索。多走一步。總有點甚麼。

Floating Projects: minimum renovation; in fact we painted the walls... (late May, early June 2015)



Floating Projects: coffee bar in place, artists' works and found objects as basic furnishing + found furniture... (June-July 2015)



Floating Projects: WCH Assemblage #1 found objects in Wong Chuk Hang industrial area, our first installation (July 2015)



Floating Projects: WCH Assemblage #2 found objects in WCH and other industrial areas (September 2015)

The WCH Assemblage has since then become FP's signature event, always followed by a performance with sound and the objects on display, called "Spatial Pressure Calibration"

Beyond art-and-society: art as a critical component in contemporary society

This essay traces the critical thought origins of, and contextual dilemmas confronting, the survival of an independent art group in Hong Kong, the Floating Projects (FP), founded in February 2010, and reinvented in the summer of 2015.

Speaking of art in the early years of 21st century, where should I begin? Hito Steyerl, German filmmaker, visual artist, writer, and documentary essayist on technology and global imaging, provides a demystifying account of art as a complex field of cultural production, in the context of a discussion on new institutionalism of art:

The art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering, and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also a site of commonality, movement, energy, and desire. In its best iterations, it is a terrific cosmopolitan arena populated by mobile shock workers, itinerant salesmen of self, tech whiz kids, budget tricksters, supersonic translators, PhD interns, and other digital vagrants and day laborers. (2006: 4)

FP's practice of art stands on several assumptions that share and extend Steyerl's sentiments, which I describe as our guiding principles in the following. **First**, our point of departure is affirmation of art's dialectical relation to society. Art is a system of practices closely linked to other systems of practices. Art is not a closed utopic entity, but an assemblage of practices, human intentionality and functionality of skills and technics, always establishing external relations in its social milieu. In the current case of Hong Kong (HK), art is heavily implicated in the HK Government's urban renewal initiatives and projects for heritage conservation and re-enlivening. Conflated with design, art has been turned into the fuel for gentrification,¹ strategically brought in as fashionable decoration or other added values to enhance stability in a municipal community. Amidst the battle between corporatization and preservation of local colors, artists were brought in and art became a domain-in-demand – art is turned into a token “cure” to the disappearance of pockets of local life resulting from gentrification. And before re-enlivening takes place, one fact is certain – the rise of property value in the “renewed” neighborhood. (Hui 2014, 8-9) The problem to address, then, is not only the place of art in the process of gentrification, but how to re-think space as a location for the re-production of social relations, a central thesis in Henri Lefebvre's writings.

Second, we must seek new modes of human agency, activate participation as a principle of art, and aspire to the possibilities of the production of new knowledge. While art as a social system shares the capitalist logic of the rest of society, we have witnessed art students being turned into free labor in the guise of internship programs. In the name of art, many art organizations employ graduates with sub-standard salaries. Many graduates I know fell out of art administration jobs that they once believed would make a difference. Their disappointment is not unfamiliar: an organization and its leader's lacking in vision, repetitive and alienating daily tasks, exploitation due to endless over-time work hours often due to under-staffing, the lack of prospect and upward mobility and so on. The result is not only the loss of faith in art but, more critically, a situation that Bernard Stiegler, adapting Marx, describes as “proletarianization,” i.e. the loss of knowledge, individually and collectively, and

¹ “Gentrification,” a term in urban planning, refers to shifts in community lifestyle alongside the increase in affluent residents and businesses by demolishing worn-out building and old, existing communities.

“the loss of ability to do and make [*savoir-faire*] and to live [*savoir-vivre*],” resulting from prolonged processes of grammatization of gesture, desire and affect in locations where art is produced. (Zechner and Hansen on Stiegler)

Third, we need to reconfigure the idea of community and art association: how do we overcome generation gaps, gaps in qualification, separation due to differences in expertise, levels of technical competence, savviness in digital media, intensity of vision and so on; and how to connect with other individuals without being bogged down by organization?² The gap widens between the different strata of art production – at one end the commercial galleries spot talents before they graduate, at the other, young media artists in particular struggles to help the general public to understand the machinic aspects of their works as they look little like traditional art pieces. Alignment with future patrons before graduation becomes necessary strategies, or in fact survival tactics, for all art students. While the impact of Art Basel’s arrival in HK remains to be observed, it certainly stands in as incidental “art education” to the general public, occupying the most spectacular spot of the city, the HK Convention & Exhibition Centre, where trade fairs of all kinds, from books, diamonds, motor cars, toys to wedding accessories and IT innovations, roll in to bring enthusiastic crowds. Growing concern for art’s input to social and political disputes gather in unprecedented attention to the what’s and how’s of “socially engaged art,” highlighting participatory models. Yet institutional lines of division of fields of art production fail to articulate dreams and visionary energies of individuals whose line of action do not necessarily follow a social deterministic model, or else, the question of social work using art Vs art as a form of social work generates unresolved dilemmas. The response to many of the questions above materializes in artists hunting for a space where they gather to chat, to share resources, or to work out their ideas of art.

The complex realities of art demand an organological view: in Stiegler’s words, the psychic, the technical and the social are involved in one another as a “dynamic system” weaving relationships between different instances of the different aspects. (Stiegler, interview by Lemmens, 37) The first step to extend Stiegler’s vision is to “de-center” art as a cultural domain without losing hold of the integrity of art ideals and art histories.

Fourth, art must be experimental; art must be society’s location of radical thinking. And that is an important belief shared by FP members. It is easy for us to link “radical thinking” to the autonomy of art. However, many such discussions equate autonomy with unlimited freedom. Autonomy is about critical ‘separation’ (as opposed to dehumanizing separation in Marxian critiques) -- the room to be separate from life and free from functionality, whereby an artist – in consideration of its connection with society and institution or not – supplies one’s own purpose in art practices. In this sense, art is always a paradox, being spatially and organologically “part of” society and yet “separated” in purpose.

As progressive thinking, art practices should be critical of art itself, as well as what is dominant and over-powering. The experimental nature of art therefore seeks to recreate its relation to life. Part of that should be realized in fighting against instrumentalization and yet enacting art’s proactive social relevance. Experimentation in art, too, cautions against the decomposition and ossification of existing practices.

² The question of the formation of artists’ association, or the self-organization of artists, has marked many of the key experimental moments in the history of art – the Dada, the Surrealist, the Fluxus, the Situationists International, the OuLiPo, to just name a few.

In Steyerl's wording, art should "dissolve within life" without being turned into "routine incursions." Stiegler calls this a general "aesthetic war" as she writes: a battle needs to be waged against what has led to "capitalism's destruction, and our own along with it." It is "a matter of fighting against a process which is ... the attempt to eliminate the 'spirit value'." This war is "simultaneously aesthetic, economic, political, institutional, scientific, technological and industrial – not to mention the theological ground from which it comes and on which it is irreducibly based" (Stiegler 2015: 4); and this battle partly involves "finding new weapons and forging them," which must go hand in hand with learning "how to live," that is, to exist, through thinking and working, to transform oneself. (2015: 5) In Hui Yuk's introduction to a DOXA's Chinese-language publication, he argues for art as one of the many outlets of social institutional miseries of the here-and-now. To him, art must be sustained as activities of progressive nature in order to generate new singularity of the individuals as well as new collectivity through the will against oneself. Stiegler adopts terms such as co-individuation, based on Simondon, and "care for others" to express this.

The Battle: Reproduction of Space

What actions to take – that is the question. Some actions are recommended. Developing artistic (re)sources as technics is one of them. We may also focus on the micro-politics of re-orientation, re-occupation of space – for physical inhabiting, for action, for thinking and negotiating. And this is FP's primary orientation: to assert the occupation of space – a vessel that shapes how we move, how we rest, how we play, but also on which our being floats. This is also what "being in the world" means to Heidegger in his later writings: space-bound being, our being performed and narrated through doings in concrete space. Space is the product of action, making and narrating. Hui Yuk further highlights the contingency of the "space" situation of Asia in general and the specific meanings of spatial occupation: there is no given space. Space is the object of constraint and control techniques (Hui 2014: 11), as the example of HK demonstrates. In this light, he suggests our action should shift from survival and adaptation to adoption. To survive or adapt is to become part of the environment – we become increasingly insignificant whereas adoption is about performing space as an element of our lives.

In FP's story of survival in the first 6 months, the Lands Department's interruption through codification has pushed us to tactfully turn our industrial unit into a legitimate enterprise without giving up our proactive negotiation with how art adopts new sense of orientation, that is, the ability to separate our own position and direction from the familiar environment. Re-orientation to FP is about spatiality, realized in understanding the allowance and prohibition as occupants in an industrial unit, the physicality of the place we occupied, our objectives in battles of art, individual objectives and how all this and more together form a network in action. (Hui, 2014: 12)

From the Battle of Art to Care through Spatiality and the Economy of Contribution

At this point, it would be necessary for me to highlight that FP is self-conscious in taking roots in Critical Theory outlined above, highlighting the need to re-produce social relation, in the context of gentrification, proletarianization and professional separatism. The emphasis on action and propensity for change is grounded not only in the Frankfurt School's critique of

culture industry as one of the many industries, but that art and design form the supporting pillars of what is known as “creative industry.” Art should not be considered as fine products, but as the domain of “general aesthetics.” (Hui, 8-9) FP responds to all this by preserving spatiality (our sense of space), which takes root in the “practice of care” – to embrace and anticipate, the ability to reflect and look back together in order to take action through noting the complexity of society, the threat of dehumanization and our loss of orientation in a social milieu marked by endless adaptation to a techno-driven consumer culture. Care connects our individual existence to general existence. As Stiegler and Badiou have articulated in their works, art is what provides us with a “practice of care” that is different from the “logic of care” promoted by capitalist society and neo-liberalism, by which care equals money, and the care for oneself equals spending money on fashionable commodities. Our reclamation of our sense of space rooted in care manifests in our (re-)occupation and (re-)adoption of space: our reproduction of social relation takes place in the “factory,” ironically the original site of abstraction of social relations that bred exploitation.

The care for others is a way to realize art’s progressive nature. The re-definition of care also takes material form through the concept of “economy of contribution” (EOC). We seek to open up alternatives to cash (money) in forms of knowledge, skills, experience and individual talents. Although in many instances, “economy of contribution” looks optimistically for new affordances in communication technology, my emphasis here is more on an economy that honors gift-giving exchanges and reciprocal obligations. It is an alternative way to think of positive externalities (values to be exchanged), such as “the integration of amateurs and professionals into new forms of coproduction and exchange.” Neil Cummings explains, “An economy of contribution is often consolidated into communities, networks and non-monetary valuation systems.” At FP, the practice of economy of contribution is also our reaction to un-cautioned reliance on a take-for-granted welfare model of art-funding. We seek to move away from pure charity. EOC is a materialist approach: trust, experimental spirit, and care for each other do not rule out compensation. The basic facilities of an industrial unit generate basic rules of sharing of resources, collaboration and individuation to allow unexpected synergies to take place, subject to members’ tying in their concerns and experimenting with a purpose. We also need to keep FP alive with WIP (work-in-progress) Inspection and open-house production sessions to continuously bring in visitors who will find the presence of a café bar a stimulating presence and would contribute through voluntary donation. ‘Care for each’ begins with doing things together and reflecting.

The Basic Story of Floating Projects

(2010-2013) Floating Projects Collective (FPC): [an incubator for interdisciplinary arts](#)

✕ [an experiment on dynamic community](#)

✕ [a meeting point for artists, curators and writers](#)

✕ [a testing ground for young, emerging art practitioners](#)

(2015) [The Floating Projects Collective \(FPC\) + art production site](#)

(2015-2016) **"Floating Projects is a site of collaborative-individuated art experiments, and itself an art project that interrogates questions of space and being."**

Floating Projects began in 2010 as a collective of four members (FPC 「句點」) with the single-minded objective to protect and advance personal dreams in artistic pursuits, especially for fresh graduates involved in interdisciplinary art with serious attention to questions of digitality. In two years' time, the three young members all found their next steps – to further on their graduate education in the US and UK and/or to gain work experience overseas. For almost 2 years, FPC maintained minimum activities through art writings published on its website and occasional forums and semi-open screening events. After 6 months' discussion and a series of action steps, FPC evolved into a collective with 20+ additional members in 2015, and its activities renamed Floating Projects (FP 「據點。句點」, literally “occupation point, affirmative”). FP takes on a spatial turn: from a 360-square-foot 2nd-floor unit in an increasingly gentrified area in the urban core of Wanchai, we moved to occupy a 1800-square-foot industrial unit in a fading industrial district, Wong Chuk Hang (WCH 黃竹坑), on the southern part of Hong Kong Island, where the increase in disused and vacant flats forces their owners to open up to atypical manufacturing usage. At the point when FP inserted itself into WCH, the district was already the home for several commercial galleries in addition to two new boutique hotels on top of various independent art spaces and artist's studios. The rent FP is now paying could have been 30% less a year or two earlier.

FP is not just another white cube or exhibition venue; it is where we gather to see how to make good use of our resources – space, free wi-fi, a library of donated books, a pantry for professional coffee and simply home-style cooking, an industrial neighborhood with magical logistical resources, and a group of member with diverse skills and talents. One of the needs, since we have quite a few young graduates, is to coach each other how to conceive a solo show that lives up to FP spatial specifications.

FP is not just an organization, but itself an art project that interrogates questions of space and being. Re-orientation of art is central to the re-orientation of everyday life, which must begin with spatial re-orientation. FP asks: how do we sustain the progressive posture of art, preserve art's non-conforming character in the age of gentrification, when art increasingly becomes a decoration, or a kind of added value? What kind of a “space of creativity” are we? How do we (re-)generate singularity (of the individuals), promote new collectivity, and enact co-individuation? (Simondon, Stiegler) What does that mean in a digital age in which our feelings and temporal being are the main targets of moderation and control through broad-scale commodification of art and design (Lukács, Stiegler) in the name of urban progress through gentrification (Hui)? Against the backdrop of augmented institutionalization of the artist and art practices – or, in Steyerl's wordings, art turned into an “occupation,” a result of the failure of “new institutionalism” – what do we do to tackle the loss of criticality? Between an unstructured free playground and the product of new institutionalism, where does FP place itself and what do we do? How does FP maintain its orientation as an “institution of critique,” or one pursuing “participatory institution-forming activities”? What new questions should we ask in regard to the formation of artistic association, which has been one of the key experimental aspects of 20th-century art?

If the crisis of art “begins at the externalization of creativity as the object of economy,” and now incorporates internet-based production into the artistic system to “reinforce the instrumental nature of ‘creativity’,” (Hui & Wong, 12) what program should be in place to materialize art's de-proletarianizing potential, i.e. the regaining of one's place in knowing and in producing knowledge? What specifics of experimental action are we on? While inter-disciplinarity has become a token of contemporary practice, what does it exactly mean to us?

FP members themselves bear the symptoms of the condition of “art-turned-occupation” specific to Hong Kong, manifested in the following ways. (1) Growing size in art education venues and variety of internship programs generate not more works of art or critical exchange, but only more competition. (2) Over dependence on funds made available by government and non-profit organizations means that we live for the funds and allow funding application schedules structure our artistic pursuit, and funding requirements define and give shape to what we do. “Art is an occupation in that it keeps people busy.” (Steyerl 2011, p. 2) (3) We make art because funds are available. We also make art when an event is organized and we get invited. Out of necessity, we must organize events. Due to the lack of space, we must have a concrete event proposed in order to justify our temporary entitlement to space. (4) There’s a growing trend among our media art graduates not to enter a regular job for full-time free-lancing – to stay home (to work from home) and work from a single computer often results in isolation, subjectivity shaped by the endless completion of assigned tasks, loss of social relations, and the loss of the chance to learn to negotiate and disagree. Such kind of totally survival driven situation leads to the loss of spatiality and temporality, thus the loss of subjectivity.

In the short period of seven months, a few signature event series have emerged to be place-holders of individual desires and the practice of care for others. The conference presentation (and the full essay) will elaborate on how our purposes are realized in the following programs – WCH Assemblage (on re-purposing dumped material into art installation and object performance), Work-in-progress Inspection, Spatial Pressure Calibration (improvised sound-making plus the play with everyday objects), Floating Teatime (an on-line writing platform encompassing art reviews, conceptual expose, journals of daily encounters and poetry), and other free contribution from FPC members specific to their talents -- all occurring on an open-to-all indoor space furnished with a charity café with a free wi-fi reading environment to encourage person-to-person conversations, and a growing library and digital archive to promote the culture of documentation as many of us are media artists. As a response to the problems of the lack of rational accounts of media art history in Hong Kong, we have also developed a culture of documentation, of what we have done, and to beg the question of what it means to be good documentation for history-writers.

By going back to an actual factory space to turn its symptomatic symbolic meanings head on, we also turn representational space of exploitation into a new dramaturgical site of fluid performing and experimentation. We encourage “making things” and streamline the growing “occupational” process – such as administration, writing grant proposals, over planning, precise division of labor – which are often “accessories” that delay art-making. We also play with the notion of an assembly-line into game-and-play. In the context of the internet age, the production of social relation needs not be through contact in physical space, but through contacts in information network. But we reassert space as a constructive impetus to social relation. The value of public space is now reduced to shared memory. But what kind of shared memory? Tokenization? Buzzwords? Our multi-media mnemonic system is more often a form of commodities, generating at most marketable, if not fake, identities. FP emphasizes its space as a gathering place. (end of draft essay)

Official website for Floating Projects:

<http://floatingprojectscollective.net/>

Documentation of FP performances, including the Spatial Pressure Calibration series:

<https://vimeo.com/floatingprojectsvideos>

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