

From Stake-holders to (Re-)grounders: a philosophical re-grounding of the role of artists and the arts for 21st century Hong Kong | Dr. Linda C. H. Lai

從持分者到基礎【再】 打造者:重構二十一世紀香港藝術實踐的哲學思辨 | 黎肖嫻博士

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Introduction

Moving image practices is my tactical location. That is me speaking as a media cultural historian, an art educator with a Critical Theory orientation, and as an experimental artist who cares about pushing boundaries. This is also the point of departure from which I build a divergent network of relations – to connect personal callings, aspirations and desires, doubts and questions of survival with the institutional and techno, to bring together different domains of knowledge and the dialectical relations of these different planes and moments. This map of connectivity is affinitive with the concept of “general organology” that Bernard Stiegler develops from medical biology and the study of musical instruments, which to me is more embracing than many conceptual models that seek to explain art-and-society relations. To advance my reasoning for critical, experimental practices, an “organological” approach is in need, which shows how moving images occupy the interstitial – between different social organs, apparently incompatible ethos and pathos, between sub-zones within the realm of art, between circulation and functions, epochs and generations, between representation and knowledge, control and enlightenment, and between consumerist marketing activities and artistic creation. In the course of my discussion, I hold onto the thought that art is supposed to be a realm of progressive thinking. Following from this, the realm of moving images, no matter how problematic it is, or how it is subject to the capitalist logic, is precisely where critical response or experimental action for change should begin. In this sense, I want to be a stake-holder (in art) who acts out and articulates demands and discontent, and, if possible, also to be someone who seeks changes and participate in inciting transformation, a role that analytic philosopher Amie Thomasson calls a “grounder of a name’s reference.” What kind of re-grounding do I attempt? Refreshing the kind of ontological questions to ask of art; ensuring a dialogical model; re- enlivening our sensual, cognitive-perceptual experience; instilling participation; opening up the meaning of art; engaging critically with the question of why preserving the autonomy of art is important and what that means; reinstating the importance of research-creation and what it means... This essay will use several examples of my practices to substantiate this ongoing self- dialogue.

It is not so far-fetched to start with a philosophical standpoint...

哲學的起點並不牽強,也不造作

To think philosophically for art is necessary. Philosophy's primary commitment is to seriously consider a practice, such as art. To do that, one must first of all step outside the realm of norms and standards of a certain practice to ask on what ground one should stand in order to see better and to make sound judgment. A second implication is that art is always part of something else that is not apparently "art." Every organized component of society has a bearing on, and linkage direct or indirect to, art. According to French philosopher Alain Badiou, philosophy depends on non-philosophical domains, which are the "conditions" of philosophy. He thus says, "[The future of philosophy] does not depend principally on philosophy and on its history, but on new facts in certain domain, which are not immediately philosophical in nature." (Badiou, 1-4) In Badiou's view, the four major types of conditions to the work of the philosophers include science, politics, art and love. New experiences manifest in new practices and produce new knowledge, which subsequently innovates philosophy. What, then, are the unique conditions of art in the 21st century that require philosophical innovation? And what specific problems (of art) in Hong Kong should we tackle? What new issues of art has media art, closely connected to science and technology, brought forth? These are the thoughts that undergird the writing process of this piece. These questions also imply the need to take seriously once again certain ontological issues, such as the frustrating question of what art is and why art is inevitable, or even vital, in our contemporary times. Without the least intention to fall back on essentialism, my "self-dialogue" here is to take Badiou's position as my point of departure, then to take these questions performatively to see where they may take me to sort out plans for action.

Art is radical, visionary thinking, a unique form of rationality

藝術是前進、帶願景的思維,是獨特的理性的一種

Let me start with my first assertion -- that art is the location of radical thinking in society. Unlike experiments in the natural sciences and other empirical-based research, art has its own orientation for discovery. Fellow artists should agree with me, which also more or less defines the tasks of art interpreters and historians: not only does art lean towards the phenomenological and processual, it also allows hypothetical thinking to take high ground whereby through a leap of imagination, a work entails a unique world of its own. Art enriches our world with "praxical knowledge," the endpoint of which is not in its pragmatic functions, nor whether such knowledge can be objectively verified. The unique knowledge art produces could be mind-independent facts, asserting imaginary and invented realities, inciting a broader range of perceptual-cognitive activities than required by everyday rationality. (original quote in Chinese 「在自然科學實驗和驗證式研究之外,藝術有其獨特的“發現”的座標、現象、過程。... 藝術的知識生產,固然可以是發現思維以外已存在的事物,也可以是想像、發明、綜合等思維感官活動的結果。」 (Lai, 2017: 125) Take moving images as an example. On

the macro map of organology, moving images are often in some kind of a “middle zone,” in between dreaming and awakening, between one generation and the next, (Benjamin FN4), between the market economy activities of consumerism and progressive thinking in personal, artistic creative endeavors, between expression and knowledge... It reflects multiple states of consciousness, embracing thought paths, phenomenal surfaces and the potentiality of forms and material presence. Art advocates a specific mode of consciousness. It is not bounded by black-or-white, it embraces ambiguities and seeks for many phenomena, or perhaps facets or states, of the same reality. Knowledge production in art as such can be mind-independent facts, but also the results of imagination, invention, comprehension, and other thinking or perceptual activities at work all at once. Art does not only represent what there is or was, but embodies what is hypothetically possible. It is ignited by tools and incites the invention of new tools. Art is the locus of radical thinking because the practice of art embeds potentiality, that is, the drive to shoot up from the roots, to move beyond what is concrete, defined and normalized. As for literature, American analytic philosopher Martha Nussbaum defends it as an integral component of university education: narrative activity nourishes our capacity for inter-subjectivity, thus empathy. Through stretching our range of expressions and enriching imagination, literature and, by extension, art, re-train our capacity to pay attention and our understanding of the subtlety of human interaction. How, then, could we allow art to remain to be misunderstood as strange, of minority interest, and counter-productive?

It is important for Hong Kong society to be able to preserve the space that accommodates free flow of ideas and embrace imagination for the surprises it brings us. It is perhaps not difficult at all to make such a case for art within the art community. But it would be great if an artist's articulation does not always need to answer for whether it is “useful” or not, meaningful or not, comprehensible or not. Having said this, I am fully aware of the arbitrary appraisal mechanism propagated by the presence of the art market. Straight-forward observation finds this a constant force to preserve the cult value of art and the star system for the individual artists. Hui Yuk and the DOXA publication have alerted us to art's being equated with design in projects of gentrification. Art is in need! New gentrified neighbourhoods need art; real estate enterprises need art for their malls; our government needs art for public spaces. “Socially engaged art” becomes a popular umbrella, but with the term we conflate activism, relational art, propaganda and community service as if they are one and the same. A trait of our “instant food culture” is to reduce everything, including each art work/event into a short message that can be told in a minute. Strangely, art in Hong Kong is often expected to “instruct” life with a quick fix. Arts are valuable because they are vessels of lessons, not because the arts open up experiences, stretch our perceptual range, or deepen our attentiveness. We also allow, rather passively, funding organs to define art's sustainability. To make sound arguments for support, art also leans

towards social work ethos or means to change society. This last point has a deep root in Hong Kong's colonial history of government, the long-term impact of which is that education is a project of human resource management, and art is part of the larger share of leisure and sports – and both premised on the principles of benevolence and welfare objectives, implicitly functional for the taming of the self.

Claire Bishop points out a phenomenon we may also share in Hong Kong, “The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. Artists are increasingly judged by their working process – the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration – and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation.” When art is entrenched in public resources, this is what artists have to answer to.

The Experimental Edge of Art 藝術的實驗性的利刃

The avant-garde, or the experimental, is not a style, nor just a specific historical moment (movement) in the West. Being experimental is an attitude, and experimental action could only be understood contextually. Any experimental initiatives would one day become established norms and ossified standards. (The Situationist International called it art in the state of decomposition.) Ami Thomasson finds it important for at least some individuals in the realm of art to commit themselves to the task of innovation, reframing, or even paradigm shifts -- and she calls them (re-)grounders “of a name’s reference.” Thomasson’s view on the definition of art is straightforward -- stakeholders of art will know. They will be, through personal beliefs and practical experiences, able to provide the necessary frameworks. (Thomasson 2010: 119-120) Stakeholders, however, can contribute more: they should also be in the pursuit of (re-)creating the conditions for grounders to function. These are the stakeholders - artists, museums, critics, online galleries and so on – who consciously or unintentionally involve in the formulation of when and under what conditions we may accept new things. How could we strategically create the space for negotiation, to preserve the environment for the emergence of innovative artistic possibilities, and cultivate the room to be self-critical? This is not simply a one-way responsibility of philosophers or theorists, but we should benefit from the “subjective” insight among the artists. Thomasson emphasizes that artists’ sanction is of critical importance - to allow public groups outside of the art scene to understand their motives, intentions, or even the operational know-how for artists. It is sanction with affirmation, a responsibility of all stakeholders. (125) Thomasson’s point, I understand, is not to divide the different art-related organs into stakeholders and grounders, but that all stakeholders should, at different points, and necessarily, be a grounder. It is in the above context in which Thomasson clarifies the state of experimentation in art.

Stiegler maintains that the avant-garde is redemptive; it is “a call for rejuvenated response” to the crisis of our time. On the one hand, Stiegler warns us that the “trajectory of contemporary art is ‘at stake in new articulations’ of its concept,” or, to speak in Thomasson’s terms, re-grounding is critically in need. On the other hand, his “aesthetic socio-political critique” proposes that experimental practice should aim at disrupting prevalent socio-political attitudes, in which creation as critical reflection, or as a making-doing approach to cultural critique, remains an urgent task. This is where artists come in.

Humans and technology are co-constituted. The avant-garde is an epistemic territory. 人與科技是相互構成的。前衛涉及的是知識的領域。

To make my case for experimental practices in moving image arts, I first need to step back from taking for granted a normative media theory orientation. Rather than regarding the moving image as a specific medium, I should begin with the material conditions under which moving images function. Moving images are new forms of rationality afforded by the technologies that make images. Along this line of thought, I look for philosophers and thinkers who explore the technical facts of moving images as new modes of consciousness, asking how our perceptual experience of the world opens up. And so there is Gilles Deleuze, drawing from Henri Bergson, articulating how the actual practices of moving images make possible unprecedented time-space experience and expanded modes of imagination. The moving image was/is new mode of consciousness. Yet the epistemological status of the photographic image (for its surgical quality of indexical transparency) has to be distinguished from that of celluloid film (montage and dis/continuity), and that of analogue video (performative immediacy and signal manipulation) and digital imaging at large (data processing and camera-less imaging). Technological affordance is one thing, and human extension of technical potentials requires a next level of scrutiny. The status of media art is closely tied to human-machine co-agency and an invitation to a new, yet to be clarified, epistemic territory. Media art raises many new questions for art that have not been sufficiently addressed, and are yet to be turned into the realm of general knowledge. To Stiegler, the avant-garde pertains to a creative contingency that maintains the ability to effectuate change in corrupted socio-political structures. “This he believes is possible through an uptake of ‘those new tools and instruments’ unique to the digital age, which can facilitate qualitative and appropriate subjective expression, such as open source knowledge, electronic networking, machinic mental and physical augmentation.” (Stiegler, 14)

So far, I have highlighted several conditions of art that require theoretical rejuvenation. First: Art is separated from politics or, in the other extreme, charged with the burden to

incite political changes. Second, art is equated with design, architectural or audio-visual, and often implicated in gentrification projects. Third, our discussion of art is not catching up with the new tools and technologies which are unique to the digital age; we are often still stuck with meanings, messages, measures of beauty, or catchy eye candies, and when it comes to technology, our “illiteracy” leaves us to be absorbed consumers of gadgets. Fourth, self-identified experimental art could be rather slow in “practicing” and “performing” challenges to existing knowledge structures. Lastly, what used to be called culture industries, which highlight the mass media’s fantasy propagation via entertainment, massifying the everyday persons to be the object of consumerism (Adorno 108-110), has taken an economist turn in the name of the “creative industry,” and currently “society of total control.” (Deleuze) Stiegler warns us that the consequence of Big Data is not only our constant loss of the position to know, but also that our imagination, aesthetic sense and our temporal being are constantly documented and homogenized. The digital age nowadays is one in which aesthetics is part of the machine of control. In Hong Kong, in what specific ways does “total control” take the form of aesthetic and affective appeal of sight-and-sound machines, ruling the way we know and remember the past? For those of us with “privileged” access to aesthetic means and technological resources, what do we do? How may critical participation take place? How is it possible to preserve art as a domain of radical thinking in and for society?

Being an individual stakeholder... 自覺的持份個體。

I consider myself a montage artist. A lot of my reflection on art stems from my experimentation in moving images, and the politics of such practice.

Following from the premise that moving images are new modes of consciousness and alternative rationality to linguistic-logical realism, my pedagogic practice is to side-step moving-image-making that mainly conform to industrial standards. Instead, taking a materialist approach, I invite my students to think of an image fragment beyond its representational value – as an objectile (對象域/客體態) with projective, generative potentials. Imaging in this way is about (nourishing) our attitude towards the lifeworld. I have invented exercises to encourage students to play with still images as moving images, and to turn moving images into the experience of time, highlighting an image’s descriptive power. I am pro-intermedia games and would ask a student to reproduce a famous work of analogue electronic signals into a digital work of pixels and noise; to make a video based on an experimental sound score, or turn the notion of *musique concrète* into “concrete videos.” To uphold new modes of thinking, I prefer “montage” over “editing,” to deprive the latter of its emphasis on continuity as often is the case with illusionism in fiction film. Montage, instead, emphasizes moving images as a stream. As such, a moving image sequence

inscribes the spectator in specific ways – so we may as well aim at making our viewers see more and see differently. (Lai, 2005a: 83) All this has been worked out under the pedagogic project of “Micro Narratives” (MN), oriented toward “the creation of time and space,” since 2003. (Manifesto Team, 127-133) MN is a challenge I pose to artists and moving image makers, premised on our accountability to our audience. Why preach, and why entertain, if our imaging fails to open up new sensibilities or stretch their mode of attention?

Most important of all, I invite students to be a theorist – to articulate their purposes and come up with their own methods of imaging. A “manifesto” project came out summer 2018 as the result of three years of diligent work with a group of students. In my epilogue “Code Name ‘Micro Narratives’: initiations into our Manifestos,” I write, “Through the years, it became increasingly clear to me that MN is not to design a set program on how to do ‘experimental videos’, but rather to uphold experimental actions and preserve the space for the freedom to find out what one can do. In 2015, I decided that it is of utmost importance to encourage the artists I work with to provide their own reasons and reasoning for, on the one hand, doing experimental art and, on the other, why they must make video and what they may do to keep experimentation alive. This is the context for the writing of a manifesto to go along with 13 weeks’ experimental exercises...” (122) What is a manifesto? “I refused to give concrete examples... I would really love to hear them formulate their own purposed and thoughts, not just based on what they aspire to be, but also based on an understanding of what they have already injected into the works they have made. ... On the surface level, it seems the Manifestos writing project is anti-mainstream and anti-Hollywood. We know that the only thing we are really against unanimously is uniformity by rule or homogeneity by standard, which stigmatizes differences and destroys the space for doubts and queries.” (123-124) I have no interest in turning “micro narratives” into a “religion” of sorts.

Whereas moving images as thought paths is a main characteristic of my own montage practice, I also turn to moving images that came before me as if it is a rich, infinite archive of the past. There I conduct *longue durée* (long duration) and deep-time historiographic experiments, taking a long view of a human past that is not only factual and documentary, but also artistic articulation of desires through technological means. My found footage works do not necessarily align with second-hand creation, which is already a tradition in the West and mostly about re- interpretation. My found-footage work springs out of my fascination with archives that require my activation, driven by epistemic curiosity and a historiographic quest. Through my theory of (sight and sound) “fragments” and “montage,” I bring together image creation and historiography.

Being a stakeholder -- Acting Out... 行動的持份者。

I speak from my subject positions as a media culture historian, an art educator, and as an artist. I hope to be more than just a stakeholder in art, but if possible, to participate in the revitalization of art with concrete actions. Joseph Beuys's idea of social sculpture and Claire Bishop's discussion on social engagement both help to shape my own practice on an artistic level that also aims to recast the relation between art and society.

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), an active member of the German Fluxus, was a happening, performance and installation artist who was also a sculptor, art theorist and educator. He created the idea of "social sculpture," by which the definition of art is stretched to include the care for the potentials of art as an integral component. On such basis, the artist has a creative and participatory role in shaping society and politics, and he said, "Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death-line." To fellow artists, he spelt out the need to "dismantle in order to build a social organism as a work of art." In this sense, "every human being is an artist who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the total art work of the future social order." (Beuys, 48)

The Floating Projects (據點。句點), re-vamped in 2015, is my response to the ambivalence lingering among us as the Umbrella Movement (the autumn of 2014) faded away. From one perspective, FP is an artistic production site. It is an experimental playground for artists to try out and show their works, from work-in-progress to its final presentation, an open platform to host workshops, seminars or critiques to unfold our diversified artistic practices, to evoke new possibilities, and to expand our understandings by means of reading, writing, and continuous conversations among members and the public audience. It is a place for "de-proletarianization": to re-entrench art makers with the knowledge that prescribes their work. FP is about "co-individuation," from being solely an artist to holding multiple mobile identities within the collective: an administrator to facilitate ongoing programs and events, a librarian to maintain our archive, or a barista to serve a nice cup of coffee. It manifests a "green" principle in which each member's dedication and devotion is critical towards keeping the vitality of the space, regardless of their active engagement in maintaining the physical site or showing support and care for other fellow members' artistic development.

FP is not really about starting an art space to show art, but an embracing experiment that seeks to experience art as an organism, artistic, social, economic and economical (sustainable). In one survival project evolving around space and cash, FP members loosen

up the boundaries of art and art-making, allowing ontological questions of art and media art to emerge. There is also a tough effort to ensure a dialogical model that strengthens hypothetical thinking and progressive sentiments based on things that have happened. Trust, care and accountability are constant moments of trials and tribulations. No matter how imperfect circumstances are, the determination is clear to preserve FP as an arena in which “autonomy” is a feasible point of debate. The intention to ponder the workability of alternative cash forms via mutual exchange of skills and talents (artistic labor) does not always measure up to the needs to survive in a monetary-based everyday reality. What should we do to realize an “economy of contribution”? (Neil Cummings) Yet it all seems worth trying... The fact that many young artists are looking for the space to stage a show has by chance turned FP into a precious space of exchange, so, too, with young artist groups from overseas cities. Three years in the heavily gentrified Wong Chuk Hang now transits to FP 2.0, our second 3-year, by which all members share the monthly rent, asking more robustly how to maximize the new space at JCCAC to sustain FP as a meaningful space for the members’ own dream, and to share our artistic knowledge without surviving for survival’s sake. As for me, what is FP’s shaping power? Where does it lie? How do we maintain a collective in which we all have our own full-time job and yet with committed faith in art? Is it really too crazy, or too idealistic, to spend time and effort to maintain a zero-sum game? What is our prospect? If we need to justify our existence for external help, and we have to prove it with all kinds of measurement, can we do that, and would we do that? There are many more questions. “Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system...,” says Beuys. Are we really on that track? In Claire Bishop’s discussion in “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” she points out, “The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian’s good soul. In this scheme, self-sacrifice is triumphant.” While socially engaged art has become increasingly prominent in on-going art discourses, is FP a feasible model with a future?

Research-Creation, a double-take 研究與創作的聯線發現

Research-Creation refers to conceptually informed creative activities that, on the one hand, push theoretical boundaries and, on the other, innovate artistic practices. Whereas with theoretical pursuits I gain new meanings and relevance when making art, I also find artistic methodologies and the language of art enriching the activities and vocabulary of academic research.

I think of all artistic pursuits of mine as ‘research creation’, by which artmaking, substantiated by conceptual languages, becomes a new form of critical enquiry. As said, experiments in art association are to me artmaking, and so are experiments in advocate

curatorship. My strong affiliation with Critical Theory has been instrumental: it re-shapes the ways an artist relates to the world and herself, and alerts her to the institutional conditions that prescribe and constrain her practice. On such ground, experimental art is simply an ethical commitment to change, the materialization of art as a domain of visionary thinking in society. Experimental art and Critical Theory have strong affinities: both refuse to take norms and conventions for granted, valuing innovations and hypothetical thinking.

Experimental filmmakers and theorist Malcolm Le Grice points out that artistic creation in itself is a unique approach to explore and interact with the experience of existence. "The forms and structures of an art work can become models by which experience outside art can be organized." (LeGrice 1980/2001: 188) French anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu also uses the concept of "fields of cultural production" to explain that creation is far more than the tracing of aesthetic trends and tendencies, and that creative works are the makers' negotiation with how they make sense of their world.

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