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**Contemporary “Women’s Art in Hong Kong” Reframed:
Performative Research on the Potentialities of Women Art Makers**

Linda Chiu-han Lai

Overview: Reframing the Question

This research article is a feminist project, my practice of feminism as an artist-cum-scholar.¹ On the one hand, I problematize the use of the term *women’s art* and seek to reground reference of the term *artist* (Thomasson 2010: 120) in the Hong Kong (HK) context through my participatory field study.² This results in my call for the use of the term *art makers* instead, which is the focus of the second half of this article. On the other hand, my feminist intervention manifests in my attempt to gauge HK female artists’ relation to feminist thinking and concrete practices through one-on-one conversations, a performative intervention that seeks to ignite exchange and, ideally, change rather than simply gather views for general analysis.

A discussion about women’s art in HK often has to make two kinds of apologetics: why Hong Kong, and why women. As to the former, scholar

1 Carolyn Cartier (2008: 249) defends the geographic formation of HK as a
2 unique place of art production, against globalization and sinicization: “We
3 might better view Hong Kong art, or art produced in Hong Kong, outside
4 conventional geopolitical (i.e. national and world regional) frames.” Her
5 concern with HK’s “absences from broader regional and international dis-
6 courses on ‘Chinese’ art” (248) is to reveal that such an absence shows how
7 language shapes what we know and how we live. To an HK-local person
8 like me, the sentiments to be recognized, or to be taken as true (Laitinen
9 2011: 35), are rooted in the city’s (post)colonial realities and, in my view, a
10 more solid way to express democracy as gut feelings. To distinguish HK
11 from China is not sheer identity politics but to tackle an existential crisis: the
12 desire to be embraced as who we are, to be fully acknowledged as auton-
13 omous agents with psychological integrity and makers of a complex history
14 of a place whose name (Hong Kong) simply did not exist until around 1841.
15 And here lies the paradox of my project. I reassert differences by giving a
16 voice to concrete space-bound making-as-being of HK individuals, asking
17 also how to remove the concealment effect of Chinese feminism as a general
18 discourse in order to present traces of HK integrities. I also battle against
19 difference that is “indexed on a hierarchy of values premised on binary
20 opposites: ‘us and them’” (Braidotti 2007: 65); I am against reducing “HK-
21 woman-artist” to any form of stable self or otherness. Local HK stakehold-
22 ers are not all that local in their vision and network of acquaintances. They
23 are strategically connected with regional and international communities,
24 although being ethnically Chinese, their identities are not always distinct. It
25 is also likely that their works do not fit the templates of contemporary Chi-
26 nese art in the international art market. Reasserting nondeterministic dif-
27 ferences, I am cautious against any substitutive or definitive account of HK
28 women artists to function as, according to Lata Mani, an “official discourse”
29 that “forecloses any possibility of women’s agency” (quoted in Barlow 2004:
30 365).

31 Why *women*? To sustain nondeterministic differences, an alternative
32 critical reading I want to develop is to see how such terms as *women* or *art-*
33 *ists*, also seated in binaries, operate on a performative level. Why *women*?
34 Why *women artists*? Why not? It is a strategic point of departure for rich
35 conversations on terms many of my research subjects are ready to unpack.

1 I investigate how they self-consciously refuse to be gendered, or turn their
2 gender position into cultural capital and critical/contingent factors in their
3 artistic pursuits. The idea of women artists was controversial to the dozen
4 female colleagues I have interviewed, but it struck off points of negotiation:
5 it was clear that most acknowledge the evolution of women's art as a mean-
6 ingful local discourse, but few rely on it to structure their artistic creation.

7 In structuring my research, I wanted to establish potential feminist alli-
8 ances: I sought female subjects who are articulate about their methods and
9 principles, a direction I share with third-wave feminism and many who
10 regard art as life, or a source of vitality in the Deleuzian mode (Braidotti
11 2007: 69). My research is then at once phenomenological and performative.
12 As part of the research process, I invited my subjects to act as theorists of
13 their own art practices. What does being a woman in HK mean to their
14 art making? How important is it to think of themselves as women as they
15 work, live, and make art? How are feminist sensibilities at work in their
16 daily makings? I probed. I also solicited self-assessment of their ownership
17 and specific use of feminism. My conversation subjects' ambivalence toward
18 the term *women's art*, doubts on the usefulness of feminism, and so on, raise
19 more questions to me on methodology. With a performative orientation as
20 just described, I aim to keep the loop of meanings open, that is, to maintain
21 an open mind to the unknown results from the proposal, What if we talk?

22 Individuals I met arrived in moments of self-articulation by which they
23 reflect upon and substantiate their choice of practice. This approach brings
24 more questions than ready-made answers. I owe such feminist conversa-
25 tions to composer Tara Rodgers's (2010) ten-year coverage of a few dozen
26 female electronic sound artists in an interview series. Problematic as it is,
27 "HK women artists" is a productive framework purporting a deep curve
28 of discovery. I take advantage of woman artist as a legitimate social con-
29 struct and turn it into dialogue series to elucidate concrete realities of artistic
30 practices. Taking them all to be true, I want to reveal similarities and dif-
31 ferences within an apparently simple construct of cultural labor. Questions
32 of feminist aesthetics as visual styles took little time to evolve into those of
33 how to live; our learning trajectory expands alongside a cross-media, par-
34 ticipatory model. My project reveals queries about what a feminist position
35 is and the difficulty of arriving at full-swing solidarity. In fact, a large part

1 of our conversations was to raise questions: Why would I think of myself as
2 a woman? What is feminism? Is this (what I did) feminist? Did I feel I was
3 disadvantaged? And so on. The slippage between being a woman and being
4 a feminist is obvious. What lies beneath?

5 To some, the use of feminism is expressed in the selection of specific sub-
6 ject matter, as in the case of Phoebe Man Ching-ying 文晶瑩 (Phoebe Man,
7 b. 1969), or in models of collaboration, as in the case of Tan Yuk-king 陳
8 玉瓊 (b. 1971), Phoebe Wong Siu-yin 黃小燕 (Phoebe Wong, b. 1960s), and
9 Yang Yeung 楊陽 (b. 1960s). Wong insists she is a person, not just a woman.
10 Wong, Stella Ying-chi Tang 鄧凝姿 (Stella Tang, b. 1956), Rita Hui Nga-
11 shu 許雅舒 (Rita Hui, b. 1970s), and Angela Su Sai-kee 徐世琪 (Angela Su,
12 b. 1970s) prefer to turn feminism into an open question at arms' length.
13 The artistic pursuits of Wong, Yeung, Leung Mee-ping 梁美萍 (b. 1961),
14 and myself are premised on the deployment of the concept of archives and
15 archiving and the recycling of daily objects. Yeung's interdisciplinary proj-
16 ect, Soundpocket (聲音掏腰包), pertains to sound art but specifically culti-
17 vates the everyday person's listening sensibility. Their practice diversifies the
18 types of stories one tells about art.

19 Most of the women I encounter in this research are artists and, at the
20 same time, art educators, critics, researchers, and historians. So-called full-
21 time artists are rare. Their prominent multitasking realities prompt me
22 to think of them as art makers and art facilitators rather than just artists.
23 Each of them in a sense inhabits and creates a world of her own; they cul-
24 tivate new spaces and new species of art activities to facilitate other artists.
25 One may also say that the very act of cultivation and naming is in itself an
26 artistic activity—such is how the interdisciplinary art group Fluxus defined
27 experimental actions in the 1960s and 1970s. In arguing for the basis for
28 innovation in art, philosopher Amie L. Thomasson (2010: 119) differentiates
29 two kinds of players: stakeholders and grounders, the latter referring
30 to those who see their unique role in negotiating the reference of a name,
31 such as “what sort of a thing is a work of art.” Thus, whether someone
32 calls herself an artist is less important than who incite(s) innovation in the
33 general ecology of art. In this research, Phoebe Wong and Yang Yeung are
34 the two subjects with whom I have direct negotiation, to ask, Why wouldn't
35 you call yourself an artist? Both are dedicated to experiments with art

1 group organization and archiving (or documentation) with such care and
2 innovation that I asked, “Why wouldn’t you open up your definition of the
3 artist to qualify yourselves?” In Thomasson’s spirit, I persist in including
4 them among the main art initiators or facilitators of art in HK, in place of
5 looking for women artists alone (see the conversation piece with Phoebe
6 Wong, below). Is this stakeholding or (re)grounding? I reproblematicize *artist*
7 through reframing the questions I asked in my interview-conversations: (a)
8 How would you describe yourself as an artist? (b) How would you charac-
9 terize the cutting features of your works? (c) Have you acquired a firm hold
10 of your own artistic treatise and principles of practice? What is your own
11 theory of art? (d) Please tell stories and recall moments when you were sud-
12 denly reminded that you are a woman, not a man. (e) What has engagement
13 with art brought to your life? How important is it to think of yourself as at
14 once artist and woman? (f) How do you deploy your gender awareness and
15 gender ownership as cultural resources? These questions reopen the door
16 for me to encounter these *art makers* as gender-conscious subjects who make
17 life unique and different for themselves and others by engaging in art.

18 The conversations we have had flowed between the making of everyday
19 life and artistic experiments. This is how I enact history writing that hon-
20 ors what anthropology purports to be methodological mutual dependence
21 (Westermann 2005: vii), by which the study of processes and human agency
22 resides in the articulation of purposes and reasoning (through writings and
23 conversations). The conversations on the phenomenology of (art) making
24 through self-narrative and reflection magnify “embedded perspectives,” in
25 line with “feminist situated epistemology” (Braidotti 2007: 65). My practice
26 of feminism, inseparable from my being an artist, experimental historian,
27 and art educator, is then realized in this project through (re)naming, inscrip-
28 tion, dialogues, and thick description, to gain insights into the production
29 realities and processes of HK contemporary art, at the same time bringing
30 stronger visibility to the artists studied, relating what is the nominal art
31 practice to what is beyond. In the last part of this article, I present three
32 of the dozen conversations to highlight the different sentiments, modes of
33 articulation, processes and manners of negotiation, and coverage of sub-
34 ject matters, “to achieve in-depth transformations of subjectivity” through
35 asserting and inserting “schemes of thought and figurations” (Braidotti

1 2007: 68). These individual portraits I present may seem inconsistent in nar-
2 rative style and density, but I hope that allows glimpses of ruptures in prac-
3 tice and shows gaps as gaps. Each portrait is a different node pertaining to
4 a different world of connectivity. My ensemble is meant to be cartographic
5 (Braidotti 2007: 68). But maps are significant for their absences; they are
6 narratives, with selective juxtaposition of details for a purpose.

7 8 **From Cartography to Historiography**

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10 Within the context of this anthology, I aspire for my article to be what Tani
11 E. Barlow (2004: 1) describes as “historical catachresis,” that is, a “way of
12 taking advantage of the ellipsis and making its analytic inadequacy a posi-
13 tive value.” The historical catachresis I refer to includes the very absence
14 of an elaborate contemporary art history of HK, the distrustful use of the
15 term *women artists*, half-hearted beliefs in feminism, and total alienation of
16 Chinese feminism. The conversation series I attempted was historiographi-
17 cally motivated, prompted by my desire to write a history that has deemed
18 difficult if not absent. Parts of this article may read journalistic, only because
19 description and factual accounting are necessary strategies to start reclaim-
20 ing a lost fabric from which critical accounts may evolve. Making portraits
21 of the concerned makers against the master narratives of contemporary Chi-
22 nese art, I indicate the complex realities and multiple power presences at
23 work in my subjects’ routines.

24 This article provides glimpses of an ongoing research that has at this
25 point covered a dozen female interviews and a yearlong ethnographic study
26 following the organization and production of a group photography exhibi-
27 tion featuring twelve more women. Due to very little coverage of local mak-
28 ers in HK in Western scholarship, and the fact that this is the only piece in
29 this special issue on HK, I bear the burden of asserting its journalistic value.
30 With the many names and shows I deliberately list, my purpose is to leave
31 traces I consider important for future researchers to pick up.
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1 Archiving Existing Accounts of Hong Kong Women Artists

2 As suggested, a kind of inventory exercise is in need, especially for English-
3 language researchers. Who raised the discussions on women's artist in
4 HK? Who have written and spoken about it? (Almost all of the primary
5 sources are in Chinese.) Who were the key players? What were the main
6 concerns? What was lacking? The history from these accounts is neces-
7 sarily the product of its method. A broad survey of the bulk of journalistic
8 writing, art reviews, and documented art programs suggests at least three
9 phases: the recognition of gender solidarity and efforts to promote visibility
10 of female artists since late 1980s (phase 1); the emergence of the notion of
11 women's art tied to a unique form of feminine approach called *shouzuo zai*
12 手作仔 (handmade work), highlighting intense handicraft and delicacy of
13 techniques with the hands in late 1990s (phase 2); and from 2000 onward,
14 what I would call historiography and contestation with increased reflexive
15 attention to how the history of feminist and/or women's art is written (phase
16 3). Key writers who contributed surviving accounts include Phoebe Man,
17 Eva Man Kit-wah 文潔華 (Eva Man, b. 1950s), Anthony Leung Po-shan 梁
18 寶山 (Anthony Leung, b. 1974), and Yang Yeung, a mix of female artists, art
19 educators, and art researchers.³

20 Phase 1—Solidarity, visibility: This is epitomized by two women-only
21 group shows, *Xianggang qingnian nv yishujia zhan* 香港青年女藝術家展 (Art
22 Works of Hong Kong Young Women; 1989) and *Xianggang nv yishujia zuo-*
23 *pin zhan* 香港女藝術家作品聯展 (Art Works of Hong Kong Women Art-
24 ists; 1990), followed by a few similar shows in 1991–94, most organized to
25 coincide with the March 8 *Sanbai funv jie* 三八婦女節 (Women's Day) (Man
26 2004). The predominant art form was painting. Of the twenty-something
27 artists in all of these shows, several appeared in three or more: Liu Siu-
28 Jane 廖少珍 (b. 1950s), Yu Miu-sin 余妙仙 (b. 1944), Man Fung-yi 文鳳儀 (b.
29 1968), Stella So Man-yeec 蘇敏儀, Vivian Yeung Wai-yin 楊慧賢, and Irene
30 Chou Lu-yun 周綠雲 (1924–2011).

31 Phase 2—Consensus on the distinctiveness of women's art: Growing
32 rigor in critical examination of art among artists was marked by curato-
33 rial work and writing. This coincided with the emergence of independent
34 artists' spaces in the countdown years to 1997, HK's change of sovereignty,
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1 and was paralleled by contestation of terminology with debates to rename
2 visual art “contemporary art.” “Women’s art,” “feminist aesthetics,” and so
3 on, were frequently mentioned in art writings and curatorial statements.

4 *Ma’am’s Box—A Metaphor for the Feeling of Love* (婆媽匣子-以物喻情;
5 October 6–31, 1999), a group show of five women, articulated the sensibility
6 of “a distinctive and recognizable feminine style” (Man 2002: 7). Phoebe
7 Man, an artist-advocate of women’s art, described a kind of *shouzuo zai* aes-
8 thetics among women around 2000, highlighting a style and craftsmanship
9 that expresses intense refinement, or “delicacy of techniques” (Man 2002).
10 Man’s description also applies to *Girls’ Thing—Female Artists Exhibition* (女
11 藝術家手作仔作品展; March 2001, Fringe Club; note the Chinese title carries
12 the term *shouzuo zai*, also featuring five female artists. *Wo . . . Man—Arte*
13 *no Feminino? Feminine Art* (女也-女性藝術作品展; 2001), a collaboration
14 of Para/Site (HK), Comuna de Pedra de Macau, and Swirl-oo, opened at
15 the Old Ladies House sponsored by the Provisional Municipal Council of
16 Macao featuring fourteen female and three male artists. Researchers also
17 want to study *Woman Wanted* (眾裡尋她; 2003), with seven women artists,
18 and *Nu-Hung: The Quilt Project* (女紅莊:閨閣廳堂之間; 2003), with eighteen
19 artists, curated by artist Evelyn Liang Yee-wo 梁以瑚 (Evelyn Liang, aka
20 Evelyn Kan, b. 1949), both at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the latter
21 creating art pieces in two workshop sessions. Exhibitions described in this
22 paragraph were primarily initiated by female artists.

23 Some explored the discourse history of feminist art. Phoebe Man, writing
24 for Para/Site Art Space (PS), founded in 1996, insisted on using the term
25 *feminist art* and leaving its meanings open. She wrote,

26 *Wo . . . man* did not further provide a distinct boundary to women’s art.
27 The question is: Do we really need clear boundaries? Or isn’t a somewhat
28 blurry view more embracing, allowing more diverse points of view? The
29 purpose of this show is precisely to collapse any attempt to set up a sin-
30 gular, authoritarian view that most probably would just reinforce clichés
31 of women and women’s art. Visitors may find the show rather obscure,
32 neither male nor female. But that’s the feeling we want. We are rather
33 keen on discovering more marginal creative methods. (Man 2002; my
34 translation from Chinese text)
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1 Three years later, *Manmade—A Project about Masculinity and Art* (男作業;
2 2004), curated by Anthony Leung for PS, featured six male artists. A playful
3 response to the persistence on “women’s art,” Leung invited the male artists
4 to reperform four works originally executed by women artists. “If we have
5 something called ‘Woman Art’, why don’t we have something called ‘Man
6 Art’ on equal terms?”—that was Leung’s effort to resist binary structures
7 through the creation of new experiences. Persistent in her concern with the
8 dynamic of gender, body, and experience, Leung (2001) states she has never
9 considered herself feminist. The 2003 exhibition *Woman Wanted*, curated by
10 Anthea Fan Wanjen 樊婉貞, struck an antiessentialist tone and explicitly
11 suspended the discussion of women’s art: she left it to the seven female art-
12 ists she invited to freely play out their femaleness. Male guest artists were
13 also invited to express their view on femaleness (Man 2004).

14 Three of the four main contributors in writing were closely associated
15 with PS, among the first of the independent artist-run spaces from the
16 period: Phoebe Man, who was PS’s founder and board member and edi-
17 tor of *PS Magazine* (for visual and contemporary art), and Yang Yeung and
18 Anthony Leung (a member of PS’s art criticism class). Leung was once a full-
19 time manager at PS in the early 2000s. The first to attempt a more elaborate
20 coverage of women artists in HK was Eva Man (professor in philosophy and
21 feminist aesthetics), board member of the independent art space ra, founded
22 in 1998. Funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, she covered
23 ten HK women artists active in the 1990s in her 184-page Chinese-language
24 book *Zizhu de zuqun: Shi wei xianggang xin yidai nvxing shijue yishu gong-
25 zuo zhe* 自主的族群:十位香港新一代女性視覺藝術工作者 (*The Self-Directed
26 Group: Ten New-Generation HK Female Visual Art Workers*; 2000), and was
27 notably the first to profile individual artistic styles through personal inter-
28 views.⁴ Placing the ten women in a postcolonial context, Eva Man charted
29 a few characteristics: (a) the personal is the political: artists’ personal life
30 stories were reconstructed as their city’s history, through bodily and emo-
31 tive memories; (b) private (experience) versus public (exhibition): feminine
32 writing and the use of private material contrasted with the male narratives
33 that dominated public spaces; (c) direct engagement with political issues,
34 such as explicit commentary on the 1989 June Fourth Massacres; (d) intense
35 commitment to the exploration of artistic language and media, especially

1 through installation art; and (e) diverse engagement with Western feminist
2 thinking—from rejecting the idea of women’s art, renouncing stagnated
3 social cultural identities, to crossing boundaries, characterized by the exten-
4 sive use of personal experiences as their artistic resources (Man 2000, 2003).
5 Man’s basic orientation was visual art. The ten artists covered are Phoebe
6 Man, Sin Yuen 洗納 (b. 1967), Leung Mee-ping, Sara Wong Chi-hang 黃志
7 恆 (Sara Wong, b. 1968), Stella Tang Ying-chi, Lam Kong 林罌, Anthony
8 Leung, Fiona Wong Lai-ching 黃麗貞 (Fiona Wong), Lo Yin-shan 盧燕珊,
9 and Sze Yuen 施遠. Other frequently exhibited women artists in this phase
10 included Wong Wo-bik 王和璧, Bell Hui Chui-hung 許翠紅, Lily Lau Lee-
11 lee 劉莉莉, Rosanna Li Wei-han 李慧嫻, Caroline Leung 梁仲賢, Evelyn
12 Liang, Chun Hau-ching 秦孝貞, Katherine Lai 黎凱盈, Miranda Tsui Ngai
13 徐藝, Ivy Ma King-chu 馬瓊珠 (Ivy Ma, b. 1973), Bing Bing 冰冰, and Carol
14 Lee Mei-kuen 李美娟. This is a period in which questions of interest were
15 formulated, and concerned individuals gathered to form new communities.
16 How feminism is applied to being an artist remains muffled.

17 Phase 3—Contestation, historiography: Midway through the first decade
18 of the new millennium, the idea of “women’s art characteristics” was much
19 contested. A key project was a face-to-face dialogue with some “owners”
20 of feminism from the West in 1a’s “Bilateral Cultural Exchange Project on
21 Woman Art” with Leeds University (2005). One of the events was the series
22 *If Hong Kong, a Woman/Traveler* (如果香港,一個「女/旅」人; February–
23 March 2005), curated by artist Ivy Ma for 1a, which included a forum and
24 an exhibition with the same title on feminist art. The seminar series fea-
25 tured Griselda Pollock and Alison Rowley. This was also a rare event when
26 local feminist intellectuals, including Eva Man, Anthony Leung, Yang
27 Yeung, Petula Ho Sik-ying 何式凝, Linda Lai Chiu-han 黎肖嫻 (author of
28 this article), and Pamela Kemper, had open dialogs with our guests from
29 the United Kingdom. As a panel chair myself, I recall the first ever con-
30 versations to negotiate alternative ways to articulate and practice feminism.
31 Is it necessary, and the only way, I posed to our guests, to make sense of
32 feminist critique and practice through psychoanalysis? I recall it was not
33 a question many were ready to address. What were/are *my* reservations?
34 While affirming that psychoanalysis effectively directs us to the domain
35 of language to ease deep structures that preserve gender biases, I find this

1 direction confines us mainly to the symbolic and the imaginary and to issues
2 of representation, offering little in performative tactics. So far in this article,
3 I have explicitly attempted a more organological view that brings together
4 artistic expression, social life, personal desires, institutional provisions, short-
5 term activism, and histories. Nonetheless, *If Hong Kong, A Woman/Traveler*
6 as an artistic event exemplified a maturing model of HK women working
7 together across disciplines as art facilitators, whereby the roles and tasks of
8 a curator, artist, theorist, and intellectual blended. This event series also
9 inspired Carolyn Cartier's (2008) essay and fuels my opening up of the term
10 *artist* to *art maker* to describe a pervasive situation in HK.

11 Artist-writer Anthony Leung curated *Manmade—A Project about Masculinity and Art* (男作業 - 關於男性與藝術; March 17–April 4, 2004) at PS
12 and asked why we rarely heard “the male artists’ voices regarding their own
13 situation and experiences as ‘gendered-subjects.’” Leung also asked, “Now
14 that feminism is fast reaching a dead alley of self-ghettoization, would more
15 investigations and experiments of ‘the other sex’ help to deconstruct or re-
16 vitalize the once radical orthodox?” (Leung, 2004) (www.para-site.org.hk/en/exhibitions/manmade-a-project-about-masculinity-and-art). I have doubts about
17 the possibility of equality of discursive space except that one should keep
18 questioning. A more serious problem is how to engage in the conceptual
19 complexity and richness of deployed feminist strategies by many admitted
20 local feminists.

21 Phase 3 also saw the first focused studies of female artists as unique indi-
22 viduals with histories of their own. Both May Fung Mei-wah 馮美華 (May
23 Fung, b. 1952) and Choi Yan-chi 蔡仞姿 (b. 1949) were “rediscovered” in PS’s
24 historiographic attempt to archive active artists through their research-based
25 curatorial-history project, “Hong Kong Artists from the 1980s” series.⁵

26 *Everything Starts from “Here”* (一切從「此」開始; May–June 2002) on May
27 Fung was the first known significant solo retrospective on a contemporary
28 female artist, not only the first initiated in the local artist-run independent
29 art space era but also the earliest effort to collapse the boundary between
30 visual art and media art.⁶ This exhibition overviewed Fung’s works since
31 the early 1980s: her contribution to the independent and experimental film
32 and video arena in HK, and later her personal reflections on art and culture
33 in HK in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting from her active participation
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1 in the local art scene. Fung was a founder of Videotage (1985), HK's first
2 local artist collective to promote video and new media art, and curated the
3 Microwave International Media Art Festival in 2001. For her PS solo, she
4 also made one of her first installation works.

5 The double-bill solo *[Re]Fabrication: Choi Yan-chi's Thirty Years, Paths of*
6 *Interdisciplinarity in Art 1975–2006* (又, 物聚:蔡仞姿跨媒介創作歷練的三十
7 年 1975–2005, 探索性的回顧雙展) was the result of my two-year research
8 of Choi, conducted on behalf of PS. It gives voice to a veteran artist who,
9 exposed to events, performances, installation art, and abstract painting in
10 the Fluxus era in the United States, had difficulty taking root in HK, where
11 these art forms were little known at the time (Lai 2006). The two resultant
12 exhibitions were the reconstruction of Choi's early works, *[Re]Vision*, at 1a,
13 presented like an open book on the wall, and an adapted reconstruction
14 of her performance and key installation works at PS, called *[Re]Fabrica-*
15 *tion*, accompanied by a 329-page catalogue fully documenting Choi's works,
16 editorials, conversations and interviews, found writings, chronologies, her
17 own art criticism, and notes on the research process. *[Re]Vision* highlighted
18 Choi's works from the 1970s, featuring mainly the paintings she did after
19 she destroyed most of her abstract paintings made at the Chicago Art Insti-
20 tute. *[Re]Fabrication* includes Polaroid experiments, her most favorite works,
21 and video documentation of her performances, but the main exhibited
22 objects were two of her major installation series, *Drowned* (1989–97) and
23 *Past and Future* (1997–2000), reworked for PS. Choi had participated in one
24 of HK's first performance art pieces from the 1980s, *Object-Activity* (1989),
25 which was reinterpreted in the form of an experimental video work by sev-
26 eral local media art students. Two open forums with dialogues, titled “The
27 Paths of Inter-disciplinarity: Being a Local Artist of Hong Kong” and “The
28 Practice of Art and the Practice of Criticism: A Projective Dialogue for Art
29 Education in Hong Kong,” explored Choi's struggles as an artist growing
30 up in HK and in her education in the United States in the 1970s as an Asian
31 woman. The project embodied the difficult encounters of an artist who, in
32 the 1970s United States, struggled as both woman and Chinese against the
33 complicit burden of oriental tokenization. And Choi was explicit about this.
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1 Landscape Transformed:
2 Small Battles, Being Multitasking, Making Space

3 The three-phase story I have outlined above is not meant to be conclusive
4 but an inevitable placeholder to mark concrete traces of events and pursuits
5 for more in-depth research. Growing numbers of returning artists educated
6 overseas brought feminist thinking, fragmentary yet sufficient to shift the
7 weight of the “women’s art” question onto crafting the stories of their deeds
8 and reasoning behind their practices, and how to do it. The everyday ter-
9 rain became an important playground for alternative historiographic experi-
10 ments. Active, self-conscious women artists moved beyond making artworks
11 to making things happen. Their efforts proliferated into curatorial experi-
12 ments, experimental organizations, and founding of new groups and collec-
13 tives, (art/cultural) policy advocacy, and art projects that combine traditional
14 roles and integrate disciplines and media. Artists from phases 2 and 3, such
15 as May Fung, Phoebe Man, Ivy Ma, and Anthony Leung, as well as more
16 recent players such as Yang Yeung, Phoebe Wong, and Linda Lai, are all
17 actively involved in curatorship and research and, in many cases, treating
18 curatorial work as artistic, creative experiments and theoretical interroga-
19 tion. They are what Thomasson would call (re)grounders.

20 Yang Yeung, a member of PS’s art criticism class, founded Soundpocket
21 in 2008, an interdisciplinary project she describes as “a promoter, educator,
22 facilitator and gatherer,” working in the fields of sound, art, and culture,
23 grounded in the observation that sound is in diverse and dynamic rela-
24 tions with other art forms and cultural contexts that “gives meanings to our
25 lives” (Yeung 2013). Within the funding framework of the Hong Kong Arts
26 Development Council, Yeung makes it a point not to align Soundpocket
27 with media art or visual art but places it under the multidisciplinary art
28 category. Her emphasis on inciting dialogues strikes the chord of postfemi-
29 nism. Yeung has a PhD in visual culture and received her master’s education
30 in the United States; she is now a full-time university instructor teaching
31 sonic studies in art and culture and theories of culture, feminism, and con-
32 temporary art. She was a participating artist at the Fiftieth Venice Biennale
33 with the PS collective representing HK and has been an active curator for
34 many joint art shows outside Soundpocket. An active art critic and a regular
35

1 contributor to the International Association of Art Critics Hong Kong and
2 the Art Appraisal Club (founded 2013), in 2016 Yeung rented vacant shop
3 premises in the busiest part of HK to make available temporary free spaces
4 for artists to gather and improvise.

5 May Fung quit her twenty-six-year career as a civil servant in 1998 to
6 continue experimental film and video making as a full-time pursuit and to
7 refocus on the Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture, a nonprofit,
8 nongovernment community-initiated organization. She also commits herself
9 to managing, on a voluntary capacity, low-rent spaces for emerging artists
10 and groups. She is the “architect” of the institute’s Lee Shau Kee School of
11 Creativity, which involves experiments with a new secondary school model
12 that ignites creativity and artistic sensibilities among students who may not
13 fit well in a regular grammar school.

14 Phoebe Wong was researcher for the Asia Art Archive (AAA) for about
15 ten years, whose job was to “build” AAA’s collection of local and Asian art.
16 I would describe her as a diligent eyewitness to many local and overseas art
17 events, present in person, taking notes and photographs. Her collection of
18 documents for AAA was paralleled by her being a member and founder
19 of the collective Community Museum Project. In 2014 she became vice
20 chairperson of Videotage (錄影太奇), focusing on materializing the group’s
21 long-awaited Videotage Media Art Collection (VMAC, 錄影太奇媒體藝術
22 收藏). Wong’s recent projects are all strategized around her commitment
23 to “creative nonfiction” as a research interest, seeking new insights for the
24 understanding of documentary media and extended forms. (See also my
25 conversation with Wong below.)

26 Phoebe Man is an eager tester for new ideas. She curated the show *Hong*
27 *Kong Playground* (2006–7) with a focus on gaming found in different artistic
28 genres in works by HK artists, which she brought to Kaohsiung. Known for
29 her installation and works playing with space and objects, she took up cura-
30 torial work as art making, such as *Someone Has Done It Before* (2001) for
31 PS. She has presented many focused curatorial projects in the experimental
32 film/video arena, where she integrates her broad concern for experimenta-
33 tion. Her *The Other: Hong Kong Experimental Shorts* (February 2011) video-
34 tage highlights video works marginal to HK’s popular film culture. She
35 has played a major role in bringing HK artists’ works to the experimental

1 film/video circuit in Asia, in Kuala Lumpur, Nanjing, Taipei, Macao, and
2 Seoul. Her own recent works take a socially engaged approach to problems
3 of women's body in the social space, such as sexual harassment in contem-
4 porary society and comfort women from WWII. Her video works are made
5 as if she were doing sculpture and animation, manifesting the "delicacy
6 of technique" or *shouzuo zai* aesthetics she noted in her earlier writings
7 (Leung 2001). The experimental video program *Second-Hand Material Orig-*
8 *inal Works: Hong Kong Experimental Shorts* (November 2011) she curated
9 for Videotage (also presented in Kuala Lumpur) expressed her concern for
10 freedom of creation and the threat of white terror by developing rational
11 discussion on the artistic tradition of found-footage cinema and like works
12 by local artists. The project also involved legal professionals and government
13 officials gathering in open conversations.

14 I feel obliged to include myself among the female colleagues I mention.
15 I have experimented with art group formation to address notable niches. I
16 founded the Writing Machine Collective in 2004 to unravel the histories,
17 theories, and practices of computational thinking in contemporary art, to
18 ease general discomfort for the technicality of digital art among contem-
19 porary artists. The collective's research-based exhibitions gather together
20 interdisciplinary artists who use computing as an artistic medium. I also
21 founded the Floating Projects Collective in 2010, which I restructured into
22 Floating Projects in the summer of 2015. Floating Projects explores new
23 models of survival and art production, turning questions of community and
24 sustainability into an investigation of what Bernard Stiegler and Neil Cum-
25 mings call "economy of contribution" (Cummings n.d.; Kinsley 2012, 2013).
26 The project encourages mutual support among young artists and chal-
27 lenges the conventional role of artist versus curator through mutual curation
28 (Lai 2016a, 2016b). In line with Floating Projects' ideal, I have maintained
29 a cross-disciplinary approach in my research, asserting my persistence in
30 being artist as theorist and theorist as artist (Daunt, 2015).

31 These artists I have discussed all situate themselves in a multitasking and
32 cross-disciplinary orientation that Leung Mee-ping describes as "integrated
33 creativity" (see below), combining anthropology, cultural studies, the play
34 with everyday objects, spatial intervention, and issues of mediation.

35 To put things in context, organized local women's rights movements did

1 not emerge until the 1980s, which started in the local theater arena. By com-
2 parison, the visual-contemporary art community was about a decade behind
3 avant-garde thinking. The earliest traceable example of self-conscious
4 engagement with feminist art in local theater could be *lie nv zhuan* 烈女
5 傳 (*The Biographies of Exemplary Women*), meaning “heroic women” or
6 “women martyrs,” produced in 1983 by Ho Sau-ping 何秀萍 for the then
7 only local experimental theater troupe, Zuni Icosahedron, founded in 1982.
8 According to a study on women and theater in HK (Fung, 2011), the late
9 arrival of women activist projects, though failing to bring about a broad-
10 base feminist theater movement, did generate some feminist theater pieces
11 such as Ho’s work, in which women’s liberation and gender reversal were
12 played out in the context of the anxious anticipation of the handover of HK
13 to China (Fung 2011: 27–28). The first ever women’s art festival did not
14 take place until 1990, called *Nǚ Liu* (《女颯》, literally “sound of wind by
15 women”), organized by, among others, Ribble Chung Siu-mui 鍾小梅 and
16 Yau Ching 游靜 (b. 1960s), the latter also an experimental filmmaker and
17 theorist in queer studies. In 2001, Chung and Yau organized the first *Girl*
18 *Play* (女兒戲). This event and the next *Girl Play* in 2003, for the Second
19 Women’s Theatre Festival, were significant moments as a number of key
20 players, such as Wen Yau 魂游, Anthony Leung, Lily Lau, and Lo Yuen-yi
21 盧婉兒, who are also active in the visual and media art community. The
22 earliest documented experimental video artists were largely women. May
23 Fung’s *She Said Why Me* (她說為何是我; 1989), *Diversion* (兩頭唔到岸; 1990)
24 by Ellen Pau 鮑靄倫 (b. 1961), and *Old Earth* (老土; 1996) by Jo Law 羅頌雅
25 are all serious contemplations of HK’s city identity and history.

26 As a member of the community of contemporary and media art, I have
27 not recalled many serious exchange on feminism since the seminar series
28 with Griselda Pollock, other than those that probably occur in university
29 curricula. One recent event I attended was a weekend forum following the
30 opening of the group show *What Do You Want For Tomorrow?* (聽日你想
31 點?; August 10–September 26, 2016), featuring twelve female artists, at the
32 Fourth HK International Photo Festival, in which Taiwan feminist thinker
33 Wu Mali 吳瑪俐 was a guest speaker alongside Mary Wong 黃淑嫻, the
34 show curators Stella Tang and Wong Wo-bik, and myself. Although many
35 members of the audience welcomed the return of such a discussion, I found

1 it merely provided an occasion for many to voice doubts, queries, and con-
2 fusion. “I was about to give up feminism because I do not find it useful,”
3 a doctoral student remarked in the floor discussion. “I do not feel unequal
4 treatment in my daily living or work environment. What does feminism
5 give us?” This comment, from one of the speakers onstage, suggests great
6 urgency to defend the relevance of feminism, to reflect on how it has been
7 taught, and to “write” shareable practices.
8

9 Three Conversation Pieces as Historical Miniatures:
10 Artists and Art Generators
11

12 In this section I present three of the dozen of conversation-interviews I have
13 conducted. Readers may take them as three episodes of my field studies,
14 each the portrait of an art maker reasoning through the making of her
15 “world,” by which life and art is one. This is comparable to the practice of
16 thick description in ethnographic research writing: rather than summariz-
17 ing a scenario in the field, I present the process of interaction—the conver-
18 sation exchange itself. The three portraits may function as samples of HK
19 female art makers, but I intend them to be historical miniatures. Miniatures
20 are episodes of depiction without the burden of having to be exhaustive yet
21 allowing the “multiple-layered structure of historical processes” to become
22 probable in terms of “refractions, secondary tones and undertones [and] hid-
23 den motifs. . . . The ‘density’ of life situations and contexts of action can be
24 made vivid and palpable in the form of the miniature” (Luedtke 1995: 21).
25 Speech-based portraits in this research are miniatures with historiographic
26 functions that resist pure typification. Direct speech is preserved as much as
27 possible in what follows—I prefer readers to hear them as people. Together
28 they form a picture of how women maneuver through highly structured
29 everyday life with diverse strategies yet shared convictions.

30 Angela SU Sai-kee 徐世琪:⁷ The day we met to converse, Angela Su was
31 well prepared about her relation to the discourse of feminism as an artist.
32 She found the “women’s art” framework problematic. She had taken courses
33 in feminism, has been proud of being a woman artist, but feels increasingly
34 uneasy with binary oppositions. “It doesn’t really make sense. . . . My label
35 softens. . . . I’m struggling as well.” Still, to Su the label *woman artist* is not

1 without attraction: “It just feels good to belong to a group. This could be
2 naive, but you feel sort of empowered.” No surprise to me, Su brought in a
3 familiar discourse: a lot of women do works that are very labor intensive,
4 and they use their body a lot. “Guess my works also fall into that category
5 one way or other, but I sort of resist that kind of classification.”

6 I was drawn to Su’s play with scientific systems (or her fabricated mythol-
7 ogies of species via hand drawings), which is linked to her undergradu-
8 ate education in biochemistry in Canada. Her artworks have two distinct
9 features: first, competence in technical drawings translated into works that
10 are at once marked with objective clarity and dense mysticism; and second,
11 visual language of scientific systems being turned into inventive fabrications
12 of potential but nonexistent living structures. *Paracelsus Garden* (2008) is a
13 group of drawings and embroideries of insects, plants, and human bodies.
14 Strictly in the fashion of anatomical drawings, Su’s x-ray precision “cuts
15 open” the living things, for whom she creates portraits of what may seem at
16 a quick glance only insect parts, butterflies, buds and flowers, and animal
17 organs forming highly complex composite structures. On closer inspection
18 one finds “bizarre juxtaposition of bones, muscles and organs impregnated
19 with strangely mutated connotations that essentially deny any logical read-
20 ing” (Su, 2008). Su’s garden, then, is a supratopic place swarmed with new
21 creatures originating from zoology and botany, subject to alchemy, inviting
22 the audience to contemplate an unattainable state of truth via intense visual
23 objectivity. *Anatomiae Amphitheatrum* (2010) is a mysterious combination of
24 insects and human parts, commissioned by David Elliott for the Seventeenth
25 Sydney Biennale. This series is loosely based on a view of the universe by
26 Robert Fludd, a fourteenth-century scholar, physician, and cosmologist who
27 proposed that the universe is divided into nine spheres. Valerie Doran has
28 summed up Su’s unique method as follows: “In her artistic process, Angela
29 Su combines the analytical approach of a scientist with a deep sensitivity
30 toward the felt experience” (Su 2012). Su describes her drawings as ranging
31 from the “delicacy of technique” to “unsettling content” of the fantastic, the
32 unnamable in-between of biomorphic forms. Su’s drawings present her as a
33 universalist, but she has a more culturally entrenched side (fig. 1).

34 Su’s mixed media creations center on her body and performance in pub-
35 lic space. *The Hartford Girl and Other Stories* (2012, performance and video

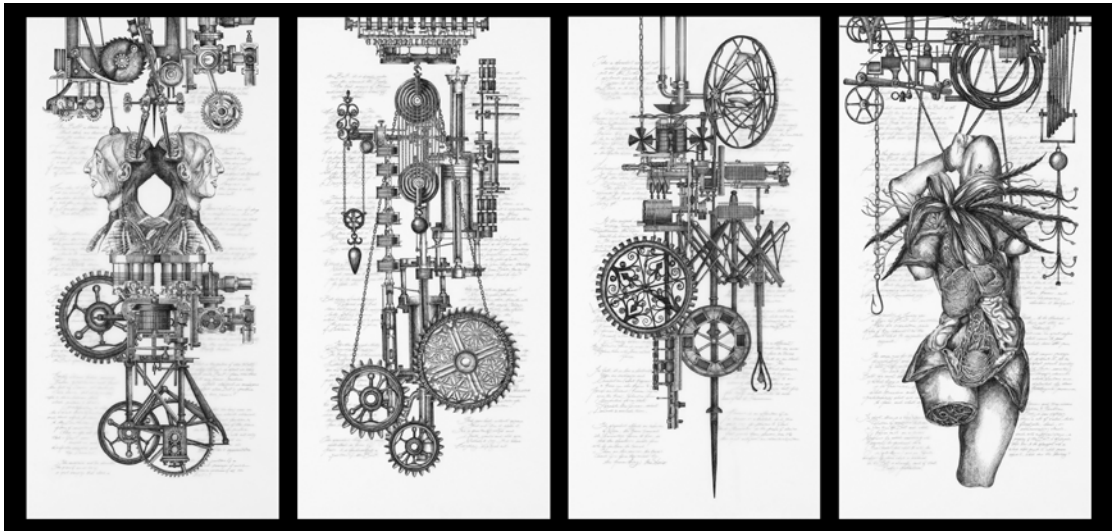


Figure 1 Angela Su, *Deliver Me from All My Automatic Reactions and Restore Me to My True Freedom*, 2012, ink on drafting film, 150 × 75 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

documentation) is “a multilayered, allegorical narrative whose central image is the creation of a complex, inkless tattoo of thirty-nine lines or ‘slashes’ comprising purely of lines of text” (Su 2012). As part of Doran’s curatorial work *Stigmatics*, Su’s tattooed prayers explore self-mutilation practices in contemporary society through body modification and self-harm and their connection with aesthetic practice (Su 2012). *Hartford Girl* is a multilayered, allegorical narrative comprising an inkless tattoo of thirty-nine lines of prayers, alluding to the thirty-nine slashes that Jesus Christ received on his back from his persecutor, symbolic of the ritual of purification. The video has tight framing, documenting the tattooing process filmed over a four-hour period. The sound track of the video is a composite text Su put together from the writings of Richard Selzer’s *Confessions of a Knife* and Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*.

Su has had seven solo exhibitions between 2002 and 2012. Her performance works deal with the gendered body, also a site of experience. In her performance art pieces, “the artist documents, often through both image

1 and text, an experiential process in which she places herself under physical
2 stress or even in a state of danger” (Su 2012).

3 In May 2013, Su did a performance, *une charogne (a carcass)*, at Art Basel
4 Hong Kong’s Artist Parade, which took place along the waterfront path from
5 Central Pier to the government headquarters at Tamar Park. The media took
6 great interest in covering her performance: “The woman who was voluntarily
7 undergoing corporal punishment during the performance is Hong Kong art-
8 ist Angela Su.” During the parade, Su marched along with the procession
9 while being subjected to humiliating and punishing acts. At one point the
10 artist held out her arm on which her “lover” put out his cigarette.

11 Su hardly flinched from the pain. All this took place while contemporary
12 dancers tumbled in the background and a rickshaw puller danced along
13 to the beat of music blasting from boom boxes. The effect was a surreal
14 and rather melancholic parade, dwarfed by the grand setting of Hong
15 Kong’s waterfront and the monumental government headquarters build-
16 ings, a sensitive location for a parade as many political protests take place
17 around here.
18

19 Angela wrote me after the performance, about two months after our
20 conversation:

21 Hello Linda,

22 . . . i have no idea why, i’ve tried to avoid doing anything too “fem-
23 inist” but on hindsight this performance is quite typical of “feminist”
24 performance.

25 although i want the female character to be ambiguous, most ppl seem
26 to only see this as a comment on violence against women, but actually
27 i also intend this piece to be a comment on social class or even the fair
28 itself . . .

29 would love to hear your comments (if you have time)

30 all best, angela
31

32 Su’s mild verbal reasoning with feminist thinking is one thing; her works,
33 by contrasts, inscribe in complex ways a lived and felt sensibility into mul-
34 tigenre and multiple-medium artistic forms, always placing the body in the
35 center. Creative writing is her latest move.

1 Phoebe WONG Siu-yin 黃小燕: Phoebe's undergraduate major was
2 design and graduate education in anthropology. A member of the Asso-
3 ciation for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF) in the early 1990s, and
4 researcher of AAA since its inception in 2000, Wong is self-conscious of
5 ongoing discourses on women's rights and feminism in art. She feels obliged
6 to state her bearing on these issues and the need to not reject it altogether.

7 "I was born in the 1960s and grew up in the kind of local culture in which
8 'boys-over-girls' [zhong nan qing nv 重男輕女] was a dominant value and
9 a fact of life that provoked a lot of daily frustrations," she said. As her teen-
10 age years ended, she found herself in a much bigger world and was free to
11 follow her own interests. The frustration with gender inequality subsided:

12
13 I was aware of people fighting for women's rights in the 1980s, but I
14 wouldn't want to think about it. . . . I understood there were problems
15 and yet I didn't want to indulge in reexamining my personal experience.
16 I took a more rational path joining AAF's activities to "know" more. But
17 I didn't want a radical position for fear that if I did I might find myself
18 renouncing earlier experiences in my own history. Wasn't that already
19 good enough a way to treat myself like a human being?

20 That explains how she has kept a distance from activist involvement.

21 A long way into our conversation, she admitted that she was not totally
22 alien to the frame of "women's art": "It's more accurate to say that I have
23 not totally confirmed my alliance with this frame of discussion as there are
24 things I haven't thought through." In the rest of our conversation, she used
25 the word *suspend* many times to describe her stance of indecision to the dis-
26 course. What is it that she has not thought through?

27 "I don't have the courage to say 'no.' I haven't read enough and so I'm not
28 qualified to reject it." She told me she recently watched the documentary
29 *Women Art Revolution* (2012), which features Judy Chicago and other major
30 women. She couldn't quite finish, which puzzled her. I felt she could be
31 regarding women's issues as being academic issues and from the West. At
32 one point, I proposed we could talk about feminism not with an academic
33 language but as a political response based on our life experiences.

34 We spent some time comparing my list of interviewees with a list she
35 prepared and brought to our interview, imagining if she were asked to do

1 the same research. Many on her list are those noted in my phase 2 analysis,
2 but not all, such as Jaffa Lam (林嵐), Beatrix Pang (彭倩嫻), and Vikky Lai
3 (賴俊穎). Wong naturally associates queer individuals (Pang and Lai) with
4 feminism.

5 Throughout the interview Wong refused to draw any generalization
6 about women. But her sense of self, linked to her sense of time and space,
7 is the result of being able to recognize people of the opposite gender, whose
8 mentalities are “very different” from hers.

9 Regarding gender identification and womanhood, Wong negotiates. To
10 the proposition “I’m like a woman because . . . ,” she fills in the blanks with
11 no hesitation, “There is always one aspect when I know I’m not like men.”
12 She struggled for quite a while, back and forth on having a sense of “legacy”
13 as a key aspect distinguishing men from women she had encountered. The
14 following is what we arrived at: “A sense of legacy is the desire to make
15 a mark, to leave something behind them, something that can be handed
16 down to the generations after them when they die.” Wong pointed out a
17 specific feature of the “legacy thing”: it’s how they imagine their works and
18 the impact of their works. Just like in the case of writing, their focus is not
19 on the process of writing but the consequence of it. We then agreed on the
20 following description of what it means to have a sense of legacy: a writing
21 style that always seeks to take a high-angle, broad view, almost a universal-
22 ist critique of the whole world, taking *longue durée*, comparing civilizations,
23 viewing everything on a grand level, such as comparing five generations,
24 or to contrast the East and West. This kind of writing or art making is
25 not only to craft a voice but also to erect a standard and to insert it into the
26 (future) world of things—what’s good and what’s bad, a desire to have one’s
27 own voice turned into a measure for others, to write and create in order to
28 sustain a tradition or a heritage, thus also one’s membership of that tradi-
29 tion. We went on and on perfecting our wording. In Wong’s view, men’s
30 sense of legacy affects their ways of perceiving the world, its problems, and
31 their own self-understanding. It frames the way they do things. She felt
32 herself “women,” honoring the fine process of creating instead.

33 “Would you consider yourself an artist?” I proposed, and then produced
34 my arguments to probe a more affirmative response:
35

1 It's the way you work—the intensity of concentration and effort, the
2 commitment to innovate and question existing norms. Then there is the
3 entire twentieth century's accomplished art experiments that opened up
4 the notion of art so that art is less about the object than the process, the
5 here-and-now moment, collaboration, performance, the making of rela-
6 tion, events and situations, art as critique, art as history writing, art as
7 theory making, as archiving, and so on. I have in mind the Fluxus, the
8 Lettrist International, Situationist International, Yvonne Rainer, Wendy
9 Ewald, Jo Spence, and our own late Wong Yuen-ling 黃婉玲 who founded
10 Lunar Culture, and many more instances of collecting and documenta-
11 tion as art—all of them to me part of the contemporary emphasis of
12 authors as producers. In a sense, you are one of them—someone with the
13 knowledge of art making who makes things about art happen through
14 carefully crafted events.

15 After much negotiation, she became more affirmative about being called
16 an art innovator or an art initiator. Still, she thought a necessary qualifica-
17 tion for an artist is self-ascription—whether one is willing to subscribe to
18 such a role and the subsequent willingness to bear the implied accountability
19 as an artist. She felt that, once admitting to be an artist, she would have to be
20 answerable to a certain demand of professionalism and a sense of excellence:
21 if you are an artist, you must be assessed for an artist. “I would call myself . . .
22 [searching . . .] at the moment, someone involved in creative works . . . a
23 creative maker [創作人].” She finally accepted my suggestion that she could
24 be called an “innovator” or an “initiator.” She added her own analogy: the
25 continuum between an artist and an innovative initiator is comparable to
26 that between a professional art critic to an art writer. She insists she is an
27 “art writer,” someone who uses creative nonfiction methods to approach art.

28 Over the years, Wong has facilitated a variety of art shows, often play-
29 ing an artistic role that lies between research and curatorship: *Designs You*
30 *Don't Know What to Do With* (2002), *Objects of Demonstration* (2002, 2004),
31 *In Search of Anonymous Designers* (2003), and contemporary art community
32 projects *This Is Not Fake Museum* (2003), *Street as Museum—Lee Tung Street*
33 (2005), and *Street as Museum—Cultural Tour Series* (2005). As founder of
34 the Community Museum Project in 2002, she has facilitated events on Lee
35

1 Tung Street (利東街) on cultural heritage preservation. The Community
2 Museum Project is not just a community project generator but also plays a
3 strategic role in networking with similar groups local and overseas.

4 So, what is Phoebe Wong's "art"? It involves creative activities that explore
5 the variety and diversity of documentation for art and culture. She com-
6 bines art writing and curatorial work. Her events involve multiple skills,
7 the embodiment of Wong's triad, archiving, creative nonfiction, and (art)
8 documentation, whereby which she uses innovative images and texts in her
9 own self-invented mapping exercises.

10 LEUNG Mee-ping 梁美萍: "These are just the things I do and will do,"
11 Leung said as she reflected on her art. Leung received her formal art train-
12 ing in the United States and France, and then her PhD in visual cultural
13 studies back in HK; she is now a professor in visual art in a local university.
14 A recent major appearance of hers was at the Liverpool Biennale 2012, as
15 one of the two artists to "represent the cultural characteristics of here and
16 now in Hong Kong," especially "recent development in contemporary art"
17 in a program called "All Are Guests" (Hong Kong Art Development Council
18 2012). Throughout our conversation, Leung asserted her natural instinct
19 to connect with material objects in daily contexts and people in specific
20 locations. She often responded with the rigor and curiosity of an anthro-
21 pologist (by being "there" in the field repeatedly) and an artist's instinct
22 to transform and reinvent. She feels compelled to establish relations with
23 her surroundings and the people in them. Whereas impulses and instincts
24 lead the way, she diligently responds with rigorous conceptual planning and
25 refined craftsmanship, and especially physical and manual labor—and she
26 calls this the "swing between."

27 *Out of Place* (2012), her piece in Liverpool Biennale 2012, is a video instal-
28 lation with people on normal busy streets of HK projected on multiple
29 screens that are carefully hung to form ninety-degree angles to imitate the
30 rectangular grid layout of streets. Though visitors were strolling at ease
31 through the "streets" together with the "Hong Kong people" in the pro-
32 jection, the larger-than-life-size persons and objects in the images created
33 strangeness out of the ordinary. *Out of Place*, initiated in 2007, lives on as
34 series and cycles, like many of Leung's works. The continuous restaging not
35

1 only keeps these works always in progress, but also over time they become a
 2 self-referential and self-explanatory archive of a designated subject matter:

3 So far, I have already shown this work in seventeen cities and [conducted]
 4 seventeen “one-take” experiments following wanderers. In the Beijing
 5 version (2007), it took me a long time looking on the street without pick-
 6 ing up any wanderers until toward the very end when, finally, one wan-
 7 dering person showed up. . . . In Taiwan (2007) I found a vagabond mess-
 8 ing with Chen Shuibian’s 陳水扁 campaign material. . . . In India (2012,
 9 Varanasi) I found too many vagabonds wandering so I switched to shoot
 10 a cow instead. . . . In Sri Lanka (2008) I captured a person with hearing
 11 disabilities walking on the train track. . . . In Shenzhen’s Window of the
 12 World (theme park), a guy was walking in circles. . . . It was National
 13 Day [October 1].

14
 15 Leung also deliberated how she did this work in the Philippines, Thailand,
 16 Tibet, and so on.

17 Aesthetician Eva K. W. Man (2003) places her among artists who sought
 18 to display private matters in the public. The “public” in *Untitled* (1995)
 19 turned out to be the display of Leung’s “private” stories (her own report
 20 cards, birth certificates, and family photos) placed under some tables, each
 21 with a red light. In *Hong Kong Here and Now: Far Away, So Close* (1995–96),
 22 she turned public experience into an intimate experience: recorded environ-
 23 mental ambience of HK’s local community, hidden in old mailboxes, turned
 24 on and played automatically as visitors drew near. I believe this work is also
 25 the antecedent for Leung’s *So Near Yet So Far* (1996–2001). “Since 1996, I
 26 have collected over 100 mailboxes of different sizes and shapes throughout
 27 Hong Kong, including the outlying islands, remote rural areas and busy
 28 city centers, recording sound and chats where I found the mailboxes.” In
 29 the Mong Kok version (1998–2002), with twenty-one mailboxes, recorded
 30 sounds include chats among domestic helpers, new immigrants, sex work-
 31 ers, tailors, taxi drivers, elderly residents, children, an illegal dentist, Leung’s
 32 own apartment, a housewife, expat residents living or working in Mong
 33 Kok, and so on.⁸

34 “How conscious are you of yourself as a woman when making your
 35

1 works? What were those moments when you were alerted to not only
2 being an artist but also a woman?” I asked. Rather effortlessly she cited two
3 instances in which she found herself being measured against stock stereo-
4 types of a woman. The first instance was her experience of setting up *Two*
5 *Sites* in Shanghai (2007):

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7 The 2007 Hi-Tech Park project was the first time I’d been confronted
8 with gender questions. Proposals were required. I was the only one who
9 passed without further review. I gave them very specific requirement for
10 the making of a sculpture that resembles a super-large Delete key from a
11 computer keyboard. I specified a material that was known to be the light-
12 est and most solid—what manufacturers would use to make motor cars
13 in Japan. I made my requirement and put in them my utmost trust. My
14 work method was shocking to them. “Who’s this guy?” was the question
15 the committee had in mind. They had queries about my gender as well
16 as my age. The precision of my plan and my trust . . . “Where does this
17 person come from?” they wondered. No women worked that way, they
18 thought.

19 The other instance was when she was making *Daily* (2009) in Taiwan.
20 She was being described as a mixture of the masculine (having a macro
21 vision of the world and being able to finish a lot of physical work within
22 a short time) and the feminine (micro vision of the world and an eye for
23 refinement and persistence on details). “I learned from them that I am
24 always swinging between two poles. They detected a tension between force
25 and tenderness in me.”

26 Art making in Leung’s world is not only a way to connect with people,
27 culture, and history but also a form of gameplay, as after laying down the
28 ground rules she would curiously anticipate the unexpected as part of the
29 work process. That is perhaps why most of her works are works in progress,
30 or if they should be complete one day, they all take years to evolve. Leung is
31 a process-oriented artist. In this light, her ethnography of everyday life is a
32 set game premised on such parameters as what if, come and participate, let’s
33 see what happens. Her ethnography does not begin with going to a place
34 with presumed identity and membership; instead, she begins with a disused
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1 place with ambiguous identities or a forgotten object that is also disappearing
2 from our quotidian sensibility.

3 Objects from contemporary everyday city life play a key role: Leung looks
4 for the potentiality of objects, thus possible paths of their transformation.
5 A quick look at her portfolio finds ready-made objects, recycled, modified,
6 reproduced, massed, magnified, or (re)assembled: abandoned mailboxes made
7 of iron, x-ray light boxes, human hairs, sickness bags from airplanes, mass-
8 produced souvenir/trade paintings in a Shenzhen workshop, and so on. And
9 not just objects—she has special interest in the highly specialized industrial,
10 synthetic materials they are made of, such as the highly processed material
11 that formed the gigantic “Delete” key in *Two Sites* and the transparent
12 bricks in *Daily*, or the mirror-finished stainless steel boat in *In Search of*
13 *Insomniac Sheep* (2005–7).

14 The use of the ready-made is nothing novel. Leung, however, deliberately
15 plays up the object—raw material dialectic. Whereas her meticulous material
16 research and precise choice of physical material lead to the objects’ transfor-
17 mation, it is equally important that she “minimalizes” the raw material so
18 that it often “disappears” as a new object is formed. In her practice, ethno-
19 graphic rigor in the everyday terrain redeems our attention to objects that
20 have escaped us—yet their return invokes a sense of the in-between more
21 than just magical transformation. In more than a few cases, the new object
22 is a composite “thing” that lands on the uncanny, lingering in a perceptual-
23 mental zone that is somewhere between horror and the fantastic. One char-
24 acteristic of “horror,” according to film theorist Noel Carroll (1987, 1990), is
25 monstrous beings or impure things outside of the natural order. Carroll calls
26 it “art horror”—as opposed to “natural horror” as in the case of a family
27 member’s death. In Leung’s work, art horror often springs directly from the
28 very material existence of physical things.

29 I can’t help thinking of Leung’s hair shoes in *Memorize the Future* (1998–
30 2008). In this series, Leung collected human hair from across different races
31 and geographical locations—via the Internet, from hair salons, friends, and
32 refuse collection points. The lightness and fineness of the hairs collected
33 vary. Sheer white hairs were mostly from the elderly among different races.
34 “Real hairs from over a hundred races are collected,” said Leung, “and I
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1 used my own hands to braid them into shoe-shaped items. This work has
2 different versions, each named by the number of shoes on display. The work
3 is huge and played by quantities. I spent three years to make them all by
4 myself. No one wanted to do the job for me. It's another of those 'swinging'
5 instances of my work method: I can spend long hours on a work and do it
6 in one minute." There are nearly ten thousand hair-shoes in total to date,
7 each of them the size of a child's foot, about two to four inches. These shoes,
8 placed in the middle of a pure white space all facing the same direction,
9 suddenly form a concentrated island of horror because of the incongruous
10 combination of hair's texture and a shoe's intended function, perhaps also
11 simply the notion of the diverse, unknown sources of the hair. Life, that
12 hair belongs to a human, and death, now that the hair is no longer part of a
13 loving person, is a paradox that invokes what Carroll (1987) would consider
14 to be the uncanny through a tactile, visceral experience. It is like what Mer-
15 linda Bobis says of her short story "White Turtle": "If only we all had porous
16 bone, and thinner skin, when listening to a tale" (quoted in Goedjen 2012:
17 1). Two kinds of touch come together: fragile, innocent, singular, and small
18 versus collective, aging, and multiple. According to H el ene Cixous (1976),
19 the uncanny is the domain of the "strange" and "eerie" and what cannot be
20 categorized.

21 In other occasions, Leung's art-tactile horror bends toward the fantastic,
22 such as in *In Search of Insomnious Sheep* (2004–7), *Daily* (2009), and *Room*
23 *7, Block G, Mini-Building* (2011). *In Search of Insomnious Sheep* is an inter-
24 active public installation and a live event. A mirror-finished stainless steel
25 boat of 4 m (length) \times 1 m (width) \times 0.5 m (depth) was left floating 200 m
26 offshore in HK's Sai Kung (original site). The mirror boat accommodates
27 one passenger per round, which is about fifteen minutes. At a distance, an
28 audience of thirty-five persons on a large boat would be watching the mir-
29 ror boat. The large boat docks every hour for boarding. It is this particular
30 element—the emergence of an immersive environment with the presence
31 of an audience—that achieves the boat's disappearance (due to the mirror
32 reflection). The boat then is the perceptual object of a haptic space.

33 *Daily* (2009, 400 \times 30 \times 280 cm) is a public art piece. More than 2,000
34 glass bricks were inserted with daily objects collected from local residents,
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1 set up on Prince Boulevard, Chiayi, Taiwan. The work was a permanent
2 installation commissioned by the Taiwan National Royal Palace Museum
3 South Branch. The house in *Daily* was built with handmade glass bricks
4 dotted and mixed with some ten red earth ones collected from different
5 Asian cities. The isolation of banal daily objects sets up two thousand-tale-
6 telling possibilities, whereas when the grand architecture of composite tales
7 is erected on the ground with the glass bricks, a system of automatic daily
8 practices unfolds in front of us. Is it a wall, a house, locked-up objects, or
9 a kind of unnamable interstice between history, culture, fantasy, and pure
10 perception?

11 Leung's object–raw material dialectics underscore the “delicacy of tech-
12 nique” culture that Phoebe Man detected among artists active around the
13 turn of the new millennium. But Leung's craftsmanship-intense objects
14 assert an unmistakable anthropological rigor. “I always grounded myself in
15 reality issues, and always began with an object from real life.” On this note,
16 our conversation had totally shifted from gender awareness to the treatise
17 of her artistic methods: the image of accumulation, formation of a phys-
18 ical archive with a growing number of objects, repetition with variation . . .
19 consolidated. I also saw in my mind's eye a wanderer, Leung herself, who
20 was diligently carrying her art-piece-in-progress from one city to the
21 next—Spain, a chapel in France, Dongguan, the Pearl River Delta, a light
22 tower in Portugal . . .

23 Leung is not a maker of art objects alone but an artist who makes things
24 happen. In *Don't Blame the Moon* (2010) in Sri Lanka, she brought chil-
25 dren of different religious backgrounds to “religious” spots where they don't
26 belong. She asked them to pray in front of those “alien” deities and then
27 asked them to talk about their dreams. “It is a process of ‘we’ being ‘me,’”
28 Leung explained, though I find there should have been more caution about
29 the consequences on the children crossing religious boundaries in that coun-
30 try. In *Made in Hong Kong* (2007–10), she made things happen to herself. In
31 this work, she reinterpreted trade/souvenir paintings (*hang huo* 行貨) made
32 for the consumption of mainland Chinese tourists in HK. The production
33 of these paintings was managed by HK but researched and made in Shen-
34 zhen. Leung took a class in a Shenzhen workshop to “advance” her learning:
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1 I painted Disneyland Mickey Mouse, Bruce Lee's film still, electronic
2 product shop, Victoria Harbor's hyper night scene, the Golden Bauhinia
3 Plaza, young gang fill's still . . . etc. The more important is rather the
4 invisible cultural context of post 1997. This is my meaningful year of
5 2007. I used "souvenir paintings" as a vehicle for understanding the
6 nuances of a HK sensibility. Often sold by street vendors in places where
7 tourists hang out throughout HK, these paintings have a distinctive style
8 that was developed by a revered Chinese trade painter over the course of
9 several years, then passed on to the copy artists. For over four decades, the
10 content of these copy paintings preserves the manner in which HK has
11 been depicted and remembered alongside the booms of tourism and trade
12 routes. I also copied film posters. I sold a total of 168 souvenir paintings to
13 a collector in Switzerland plus made a video on how to relearn painting.

14 Even without making it explicit, Leung's works convey a strong feminist
15 sensibility, a direct result of her attentiveness to things in the everyday terrain.
16 She lifts the boundaries between art and everyday life, living and making art
17 with a persistent socially engaged rigor. As we wound up our first conversa-
18 tion, Leung told me she had scheduled her upcoming summer to "work" in a
19 shop that collects recyclable goods. That would be her fieldwork—as a shop
20 assistant, participant observer, and documentary artist (figs. 2 and 3).

23 Conclusion

24 The practices of Angela Su and Leung Mee-ping, presented in two of my
25 three portraits, suggest to the analyst the need for revisionist models of the
26 "text." The socially engaged tendency of their works suggests two fabrics to
27 be read side by side: on the one hand, their art pieces are not just symptom-
28 atic of the social moment but often a momentary stir that generates action
29 and reaction on the spot; on the other hand, the textual core of their work
30 embodies material culture and social history whereby industrial materiality
31 and scientism are raw material to be given a reinvented form. The social
32 fabric, then, is at once the implied/subdued and manifest text. The object-
33 text bears more of a performative moment and its urgency, destabilizing
34 part-and-whole reading since the relation between the signifier and the sig-
35 nified is contingent.

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Figures 2 and 3 Mee-ping Leung, *I Miss Fanta*, 2012–13, recycled ready-made objects (fig. 2) and variable site-specific public installations (before and after the Coca-Cola sign was taken down). Images courtesy of the artist.

1 My conversation-based research process has substantiated my femi-
2 nist take of paying equal attention to the work (what meets the audience)
3 and what the artist says of her own work (self-theorization). It is interest-
4 ing to note how often important decision making occurs in artistic as well
5 as nonartistic matters such as life management. An important category of
6 art, which none of the three guests mentioned but is obviously relevant, is
7 socially engaged art. As Claire Bishop (2012) points out, a main problem
8 with socially engaged art is the overemphasis on artistic creation's social
9 function while ignoring these projects as art. In most of the art makers and
10 events mentioned, the persistence in art is obvious and tactics varied. This
11 deserves a different research approach to unravel their practices.

12 My subjects in conversations have articulated incisive diagnosis of the
13 environment in which they work and responded tactically with medium-
14 specific considerations. But I am also uneasy with the somewhat dismissive
15 detachment some of them showed to the language of feminism that initiated
16 our discussion. I wish there had been a stronger moral pull of a sense of
17 comradeship—to debate what to us in HK is good art, what the interna-
18 tional art arena and circuits mean to us artists, women or men. It will take
19 another dedicated project to study how feminism has been taught, learned,
20 and put into practice.

21 I prefer to consider the events of making art or art making, not just
22 churning out art products awaiting interpretation. Art making pertains to
23 intense moments of “presencing”—“being” as the disclosure of an indi-
24 vidual's thoughts and purposes in the becoming unfolded through actions
25 in specific time and space, in a Heideggerian sense. These presencing
26 moments are the ordinary moments of everyday life from a phenomenologi-
27 cal understanding. As art-making moments, presencing marks out a magic
28 circle with a purposeful script for experiments of designated raw materi-
29 als, where participants and the maker tentatively put on a special persona.
30 These magic circles are sometimes outside daily routines and locations of
31 everyday locations. They can also be at the very heart of our daily event
32 sequences and on the quotidian terrain. In almost all of the art makers I
33 have talked to, what they do with their art always carries a dose of such an
34 open-work mentality.⁹

35 Local (women) art makers of HK have opened up a broad range of the

1 everyday, rich in experiential and ideational contestations. We have Leung
2 Mee-ping, whose quintessential purpose of art making is grounded in the
3 physical material of quotidian found objects. Phoebe Wong's vocation of
4 creative fiction is one of the possible modes to connect to "our past," and
5 Angela Su does it through her "universalist history" of our place as an
6 organism, engrossed in western classical mythical systems of the body.
7 Phoebe Man, as a critic said, displays her craftsmanship in paper cutting, a
8 home-based handicraft for many HK and Chinese young women at their
9 young age (Chak 2011). And she has churned her paper-cut work into a full-
10 range of works, including animation pictures, 2D art pieces, news research,
11 installation works, forums, books, critical essays on the problem of women
12 keeping silent about experiences of sexual harassment in the public space,
13 and a government-funded research program. Yang Yeung's everydayness
14 begins with the individual in action, the exercising of our perceptual capac-
15 ity to nourish new attentiveness. In her project Soundpocket, the attentive
16 listener comes first, followed by exploring sound(s) of our life world. These
17 art makers' practices are potent with historiographic intentions, an objective
18 my own works also share. From a revisionist, subversive viewpoint, the histo-
19 ry of HK is necessarily histories of the everyday, whereas the everyday and
20 everydayness are arguable and subject to revision but surely honored with
21 phenomenological rigor.¹⁰

22 To highlight female art makers who are self-conscious (re)grounders of
23 art is my practice of feminism. "The artist's intentions be made publicly
24 accessible" is a key condition for grounding (Sherri Irvin, quoted in Thom-
25 asson 2010: 125). I have noted in this article that many artists are also writers
26 one way or another. What do they write about? Other than art reviews, a
27 significant amount of their writing is about "fixing the boundary of art" and
28 "the descriptive facts about what is and is not part of the work" translated
29 into models and norms for a possible new species. Artists should not leave it
30 to the critics alone (Thomasson 2010: 128). I have delineated how the decade
31 after the year 2000 saw many women artists not only write about each oth-
32 er's works but also attempt to write the art history of HK. It is, however,
33 not a coincidence that more than just a handful of female art makers are
34 multitasking and involved in changing the environment for themselves and
35 others. This to me is an important point of departure for the understanding

of female embodiment of art in HK. I want to conclude with a most recently published research conducted in Berlin in which HK is mentioned:

72 percent of the graduates from publicly funded creative undergraduate programs between 2001 and 2015 were female. However, from 677 solo exhibitions held in 24 major commercial galleries there, between 2008 and 2017, only 146 (21.9 percent) were by female artists. Considering the fact that not all of these shows featured local artists, the number of HK female artists showing in gallery spaces in their own city is even lower. (Studio Berlin III 2018: 8)

But isn't the story far from a gloomy one if we look beyond gallery exhibition?

Notes

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- 1 This article was originally my presentation to the panel "Women's Art in Contemporary Hong Kong and Taiwan" during the symposium "Female Embodiment of the Visual World: Women's Art in Contemporary China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan," at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, September 27–28, 2013. The original presentation was titled "Auto-ethnography and Everydayness: A Performative Research on Women Artists in Contemporary Hong Kong."
- 2 Amie L. Thomasson (2010) differentiates between the terms *stakeholder* and *grounder*, the latter being those who not only are practicing within normative criteria but also contribute to redefining a name's reference. I adopt this as a way to understand experimental action.
- 3 Eva Man's most recent research focuses on women artists in contemporary Chinese ink. Anthony Leung, a former artist, is now a doctoral researcher on art ecology, the place of independent art space, and the impact of internationalization such as through the annual Art Basel Hong Kong. Phoebe Man has reduced writing significantly and now focuses mainly on socially engaged art projects. Yang Yeung remains an active art critique to make sense of new art languages by emerging artists.
- 4 Man's book was later turned into an academic essay and then translated into basic reference for the Art Education Group of the HK government's Education and Human Resource Bureau (now renamed Education Bureau).
- 5 The series covered a total of six established local artists from the 1980s: May Fung (in 2002), Ricky Yeung (Yeung Sau-churk, 2002, researched and curated by Leung Po-shan), Kurt Chan (2003, researched and curated by Leung Po-shan), Oscar Ho (2004, researched and

- 1 curated by Eliza Lai and Irene Ngan), and Choi Yan-chi (2006). Note the contribution of
2 women artists and writers to this series through research and writing.
- 3 6 An example after May Fung at PS would be an exhibition at ia of digital computer-
4 programmed works by the Writing Machine Collective (first edition), a local new media art
5 group founded by Linda Lai, in July 2004.
- 6 7 Angela Su's online blog can be accessed at angela-su.blogspot.hk/.
- 7 8 The information about the new title and additional description notes are from a portfolio
8 Leung was preparing for research output review at her university. She was generous enough
9 to let me work through the information, which was richly documented with photographs.
- 10 9 One instance of extending the use of the notion of gaming as a magical circle to activities
11 outside conventional games is discussed in Rodriguez 2006.
- 12 10 For example, I completed a historiographic experiment on HK in 1997. I also have written
13 about how to write a historical account of mentalities (see Lai 2015).

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