

Culture of Reappearance

BY ANTONY DAPIRAN

The search for Hong Kong identity, 20 years after the handover, fuels the city's creativity



HO FAN, *Sun Rays*, 1959. Courtesy Blue Lotus Gallery, Hong Kong.

In 1997, on the cusp of the handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to China, academic Ackbar Abbas published *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Hong Kong culture, Abbas argued in the book, was a “culture of disappearance,” one that appeared only when faced with the threat of its imminent departure. At the time and immediately after the handover, it indeed felt that way. The regional influence of Cantopop was being eclipsed by Mandopop and J-pop. Hong Kong’s previously vibrant cinema had fallen into a slump, its last nostalgic sigh coming with Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000), which felt like both a pinnacle and a valediction—poignantly highlighted by the fact that the film was shot mostly in Bangkok, as the 1960s Hong Kong neighborhoods in which the story was set had long been obliterated. During this period, Hong Kong remained largely absent from the global art

scene. The handover to China had left the city in a grip of what Abbas called a “reverse hallucination.” Instead of hallucinating—seeing things which were not there—people were missing something that was in fact there all along: Hong Kong culture.

Citizens of the city could be forgiven, however, for being distracted by more pressing issues. The years immediately following the handover were challenging. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–98 was followed by the global convulsions caused by the September 11 terrorist attacks. And just when the economy appeared to be stabilizing, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) struck Hong Kong in early 2003, killing around 300 people and shutting down the city for months. In the face of these challenges, the only cultural response that Hong Kong offered was the much-criticized “Harbour Fest” concert series by international performers

such as the Rolling Stones, intended to revitalize the local economy but ultimately condemned as poorly run and a waste of public money.

Meanwhile, on the mainland, an artistic renaissance was in full swing. Beijing’s 798 and Caochangdi art districts were blossoming; Shanghai hosted a successful biennial; art fairs were attracting buzz in both cities. The world of cinema turned its eyes to China due to films such as Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002), and because of Quentin Tarantino’s choice to shoot large portions of *Kill Bill* (2003) in Beijing. Independent bands were building a lively music scene in Beijing’s bars—even Cui Jian, the “father of Chinese rock” who had been banned previously due to his participation in the Tiananmen Square protests, was permitted to perform in public again. By comparison, it felt like



KACEY WONG, *The Real Cultural Bureau* (by Thomas Leung), 2012, framed photograph, 70 x 90 cm. Courtesy Amelia Johnson Contemporary, Hong Kong.

Hong Kong was becoming “just another city” on the coast of China; its cultural endeavors were overlooked.

However, forces were growing inside Hong Kong that would see a resurgence of culture alongside intensified debates about Hong Kong identity. More than half a million Hongkongers took to the streets in 2003 to protest an anti-subversion law that would have posed significant threats to rights and freedoms. The successful protest emboldened civil-society groups to speak out in defense of what they regarded as “Hong Kong core values,” and began an annual tradition of colorful anti-government marches on July 1. Hong Kong’s culture of dissent drew further inspiration from anti-globalization demonstrations surrounding the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference, held in December 2005, and which attracted large numbers of activists from around the globe. Hong Kong artist and activist Birdy Chu, in his 2013 book, *I Walk Therefore I Shoot: A Record of Hong Kong Demonstrations*, wrote that the 2005 protests “opened our minds to the concept of protest,” which inspired the city’s citizens to consciously integrate art and spectacle into their actions as a means of capturing public and media attention.

Subsequent years saw a growing wave of social movements that focused on post-

materialist values such as culture, heritage and the environment. The pre-1997, “borrowed place, borrowed time” colonial attitude, which had enabled Hong Kong’s “culture of disappearance,” began to give way to a sense of homegrown identity and culture. Residents lobbied for “our time, our space.” Heated debates about heritage sites, such as the Star Ferry and Queen’s Piers in Central, and Lee Tung Street (“Wedding Card Street”) in Wan Chai, became the crucible in which concerns about Hong Kong identity and collective memory fused with protest, culture and the arts.

It was around this time that the mainland’s earlier glow seemed to fade. The turning point arguably came with the detention of Ai Weiwei in April 2011, news of which broke in Hong Kong—appropriately enough—during a Sotheby’s contemporary art auction. Hong Kong activists led the global campaign in speaking out against Ai’s detention, with artist Kacey Wong spearheading a march on the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong SAR. Stenciled graffiti asking “Who’s afraid of Ai Weiwei?” appeared first on Hong Kong streets before spreading across the world. While arts in China lost momentum in the aftermath, in Hong Kong the incident marked a turning point where art and



Photo documentation of **CPAK MING**'s projection of his "Who's Afraid of Ai Weiwei" poster on Queensway Plaza, a building in Admiralty, Hong Kong, in 2011. Courtesy Cpak Ming.

activism met. The city grasped a new measure of cultural leadership, which, in contrast with mainland China, permitted unfettered artistic expression.

Simultaneous developments in the commercial and government-sponsored art spheres also contributed to the Hong Kong renaissance. Following strong sales of modern and contemporary art at the international auction houses, Art Basel's parent company acquired the ArtHK art fair in 2011, launching the rebranded Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013. The fair has become firmly entrenched on the global circuit and brought new energy and international attention to the city, forming the centerpiece of a citywide series of shows, events and satellite fairs. International brand-name galleries have rushed to open branches in the city, including Gagosian and White Cube, among others. Local gallery districts have flourished in peripheral locations such as Wong Chuk Hang, Chai Wan and Kwun Tong. Meanwhile, hopes are high for the M+ museum for visual culture, slated to

open in 2019 in the newly developed West Kowloon Cultural District. The landmark gift of the Sigg Collection will form the backbone of the world's leading collection of contemporary Chinese art—much of which could not be displayed in the mainland. M+ has already contributed curatorial expertise to Hong Kong's participation in the Venice Biennale, which has been led by the government's Hong Kong Arts Development Council since 2001.

Yet the most striking feature of Hong Kong's artistic rejuvenation has been the marriage of art and Hong Kong identity—and how the art of identity has met the politics of identity. Nowhere was this seen more clearly than at the protest sites for 2014's Umbrella Movement, which prompted an outpouring of creativity. Roads, building surfaces and structures were plastered with posters, banners, street art and installations, and played host to numerous community art events, from portrait sketching to origami to leather-working. Some of the artworks became iconic symbols of the movement:



WING SHYA, *Left Behind* (2015), part of the "My Neon City" series for the Mobile M+: "Neon signs.HK" project. Courtesy the artist and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Hong Kong.

the patchwork umbrella canopy, made by Hong Kong Baptist University art students from discarded umbrellas damaged by pepper spray and tear gas; *Umbrella Man* (2014), a monumental wooden statue of a man holding aloft a yellow umbrella created by local artist Milk; and the now-famous Lennon Wall, a rainbow of sticky notes covering a concrete wall with messages of support, encouragement and defiance.

Subsequent artistic projects in the city have similarly sought to engage with questions of Hong Kong identity. The M+ project "Neonsigns.HK" catalogued and preserved the neon signs that form an integral part of the unique Hong Kong urban landscape. Kingsley Ng's recent project *Twenty-five Minutes Older* (2016-17) turned a Hong Kong tram into a traveling camera obscura. As passengers listened to excerpts from Liu Yichang's story *Tête-Bêche* (which itself inspired the movie *In the Mood for Love*), images of the passing streetscapes reflected and refracted on the walls of the tram, inviting them to reflect upon the relationship between time, space and memory in this ever-changing city. The images on the tram wall evoked the figures in a Fan Ho photograph. Both felt like they existed only in some forgotten corner of memory, both given form by a fugitive beam of sunlight. It may have been

just this kind of nostalgia, this ongoing search for a collective memory, that contributed to the resurgence in popularity of Ho's black-and-white photographs of 1960s Hong Kong street life in the last decade before his death in 2016.

More recently, the exhibition "Breathing Space: Contemporary Art from Hong Kong" at Asia Society Hong Kong showcased 11 artists whose work addresses experiences in the city. Among them are South Ho, who in *Defense and Resistance* (2013) builds literal brick walls against mainland interference, while Siu Wai Hang's video and photography project *Inside Outland* (2015-16) reflected on the cross-border journey that is at the foundation of many residents' stories. Chloe Cheuk's *If the Moment Came* (2015) directly addressed the persistence of Hong Kong's political protesters. The exhibition was clear evidence of the Hong Kong art scene's dynamism in 2017.

Hong Kong, particularly in the wake of recent years' political turmoil, has, more than ever, become a contested space. And that makes it a more interesting space, where competing ideas of identity and culture will continue to inspire new and exciting forms of artistic expression. Hong Kong may have begun its post-handover life under the shadow of its own disappearance, but 20 years later, it unequivocally enjoys a culture of reappearance.



Photograph of the site of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 in Admiralty, Hong Kong, featuring *Umbrella Man* (2014) by MILK in the background. Photo by Studio Incendo.



SOUTH HO, *Defense and Resistance*, 2013, inkjet print and bricks, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Asia Society, Hong Kong.