DEFINING SUCCESS

An interview with Yim Sui Fong for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion *coming soon • เร็ว ๆ นี้*

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Q: How would you position yourself in the Hong Kong art world?

I would position myself as a visual artist and an art institution organiser. I established an institution with my friends, called *Rooftop Institute*. I have two identities: one is artist, the other is organizer.

Q: How do you see the role of an artist in society?

I think the role of an artist is creation. And they have a critical mind, to explore; to explore different perspectives to see the system and the order of the world. Or the way you see something. This is my own interpretation. Interpreting a concept through creation, to construct and conceive a world. Make people feel a way of connecting to the world.

Q: What do you mean with critical?

A critical angle might be an innovative idea of the medium that you work in. Maybe what is painting? What is photography? Maybe the innovative idea of the form. You need to have... You can't always follow some form. When you can't follow, you need to have a critical way to explore, to do some experiments. This is one of the ways to be critical. Another way to be critical is aimed at society. The reason for… Inside the system you can... Because the artist is not a follower. Therefore… Not a follower, so they need to have a critical entry point to create work, and share.

Q: Is there a difference between your expectations when you studied art and your experience as a practicing artist?

I started to study art in university. When I was studying in university, I needed to handle the artwork, think about how to make it and how to create. But after graduation, or when you really engage in art creation, the focus is not only on the artwork. There are lots of things you need to think about. For example, how to run your business. You need marketing; you need a good artist statement to express your work; you need a good website, and good documentation. You need lots of abilities in many aspects. When I was studying, maybe I thought that learning and experimenting were very important. After graduation, I thought, ai, lots of things are needed to manage my career, not only creating art. For example, it depends on the person, whether one has discipline. Which means that you need to communicate with others.

When people ask for your CV, and you send it with a bad format. These are some examples. You need to be practical, to handle problems. So, it is… A so-called professional artist is all-round, I think.

Q: Looking back in 30 years' time, when would you say that you have been successful as an artist?

When I think about the definition of success, I don't want to follow some external requirements. That is because Hong Kong always has frames to define what is successful. Maybe when your art has a gallery agent. Many professions in Hong Kong have this atmosphere. Do you have a gallery agent? Do you have exhibitions? Is it necessary for an artist to have exhibitions? Can it be other things? Or can it be only making artworks to exhibit them? Therefore, I think that… For me, I don't want to define my success as mentioned above, whether my art has a gallery agent. I will ask myself how is the relationship between my artwork and me? Is it representing my ideas? Did I test some of my questions in the work? The simplest question is: 'do I like my work?', as a goal for myself. So, so far, I have peace of mind. It is because I work hard for my art creation and I can also run an art institute, which can connect with other artists and become stronger. And it is possible to try different ways or attempt projects. Therefore, I think I am happy and in a state of contentment, this is all I can say for now.

Q: In your opinion, how has the Hong Kong art world changed in the last ten years?

How has the Hong Kong art world changed in the last ten years? When I graduated from university ten years ago, I thought that being a full-time artist was impossible. You needed to find another job to support your art creation. At the time, there were much less exhibitions and opportunities. Now things are flourishing and something is happening all the time. My friends that just graduated feel that it is possible to be a full-time artist, which they can do. It is not important to have another job, not even part-time. But it is… This is the big difference, and the art scene... and always... Especially when the commercial galleries opened in Hong Kong, you could see the work of famous artists. In the past, I felt: Wow! It was so rare. But now, you can see international, famous artists every other month. Usually the exhibition is not only an exhibition; they will have some seminars, things like that. And the art scene… I think there are more insights. Not only creating the artwork, but also expecting research and comments. Before, the end of an exhibition meant the end. Now, you will think: "Wow will it be commented upon?" There are some platforms. That's... yup...

Q: Are there any other changes?

Another thing that I want to mention is, in recent years, there are more individual institutes, including ours. Maybe you are a rich foreigner, or local artists like us, who want to form some individual institutes and practice similar ideas. I think this scenario is very good. You will have more power and energy to work together. For example, *Spring*, they had a five-year plan, going for residencies, setting some timelines. This is

not only… Setting up a company takes a lot of time, but this was run as a project. I think it is good for the ecosystem. But it has ended. *Things That Can Happen,* which was a two-year project, also ended. *100 ft Park*, also ended. But we are new in these few years. There are some new institutes, for example, our *Rooftop Institute*, *Archive of the People*, and... *Thinking Project*. All of these are run by artists, functioning in a group, doing some experiments. It's a situation that would not have happened 10 years ago.

Q: What are the upsides and downsides of the arrival of the international art world in Hong Kong?

The downsides and upsides are maybe the same. For example, I feel like this question is about art fairs, international art fairs; when the international art world arrives. For the upside, when the fair wants to keep local elements they will give some space to Hong Kong art. For example, the art fair has lots of free booths near the entrance. They are provided to Hong Kong institutes to show their work. There are some corners for young artists to exhibit their work. That's great because artists have more opportunities. For the downside... The ratio of this kind of exhibition is very small. Their intention is not only to show Hong Kong art. They want to exhibit international art more than Hong Kong art. Another upside, like *M+* Museum, they make exhibitions and exchange, that brings lots of international things to Hong Kong. They will do some projects with Hong Kong art and international art in a parallel way. For example, they have an education program called Rover. They will collect work of Hong Kong artists. Because their position is to be an international museum; an international museum on an international level, they also give their Hong Kong collection an important platform. Why do I say that? Because the *Hong Kong Museum of Art* does not include as much programs compared to *M+*. Maybe this is an influence of the international art world? It is just my point of view as an outsider.

Q: Does the influence of the international art world only come from commercial parties?

Of course, I am not saying that only art fairs represent international art. I think it is just a key point. Besides, I want to say that Hong Kong has always been an international place. I don't know how to define the arrival of international art, I don't know how to define it. But galleries are one of the key aspects. There is an artist that I liked very much when I was a student. He is a Belgian artist who lives in Mexico, his name is Francis Alÿs. I know that *Tai Kwun* will show his work. I needed to go to London, or other European countries to visit his exhibition before, and now his exhibition is coming here. This is one example. When I see that this kind of artist will come to a gallery or a museum in Hong Kong, I feel that Hong Kong is an important international art place. That's how I feel. This is a specific example. Not just because of international galleries, but also institutions such as *Tai Kwun* that present international artists. I am happy. In the past, I imagined a huge distance between international artists and me, now I feel closer. After seeing their work, I want to be more professional, in concept and in presentation hopefully.

Q: So, do you think that the arrival of the international art world is mainly a positive development?

Yes, I presented it positively. Are there any disadvantages? Let me think. As a city, in such a small place, we don't have many artists. I know almost all of them. For example, 10 years ago, everyone worked for exhibitions individually. I'd rather see the situation like it is now, more international, including Asia, and different forums, and artists coming for exhibitions. I think the latter is better. Not only local, but also international exhibitions and cultural activities. Then what is the downside… I can't think of anything. Maybe the loss of interest? Interests… I think cultural exchange is great. First of all, I don't have a gallery agent. And my artwork is more about social issues, so I do not fit in the art market. Therefore, I can't feel the profit or financial things. I focus on the atmosphere. When the international... Ai… 'international' is old school! Yeah, artists from different countries creating artworks and exchanging ideas in 'the circle' is great.