

# BETWEEN OBJECTS AND RELATIONSHIPS

An interview with Him Lo for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion *coming soon* •

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

How I position myself in the Hong Kong art world, I think, is a bit strange or in between. Or sometimes even the mainstream art world, I think they know who I am, but also, they think that what I am doing is not really art, or what they understand. But I feel, I mean, at the beginning I expected it would happen, because what I am doing is not really typical contemporary art, or even sometimes in the social context, it is a lot like this. So, it is about being in-between. But for the Hong Kong art world, I think they know that I exist, but don't really understand what I am doing.

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

I remember when I graduated in 2003 in London, and I worked as an artist, and I hoped to be an artist. Then later on, after 5 or 6 years, I worked in a studio to teach painting and I sold artworks as well. I thought: "What is my identity, or my responsibility as an artist in this century?" So, I thought about Jackson Pollock, or this kind of artist in the '50s, or some artists in the '70s; they have a different identity or behaviour. But what is my responsibility as an artist now? So, I think my attitude or what I do, needs to be connected to what happened. What is going on in the world? So, I try to find some way to make art to connect to things happening around me first, and then maybe Hong Kong or something related to the world. That is how I position myself.

*Q: At this moment you are working for Mill 6 as well as for this community art space. What is the difference between these two initiatives?*

I can see that there is a huge difference between the Mills where I work in the daytime and after work, I work with different people here. Because here it is more, what I want to study is not just about art, it is how a space can get a group of people to stay together and work together. Art is just one part of things in this space. And we would like to work on this method; this method means creation. To make things, to engage related people or people who live around. But in the Mills it is very clear; it is all about art. That kind of art is to make people feel more happy. But that is very abstract. What does 'happy' mean? I think that is the difference. I want to make people here happy too. But I am trying to use a different method and study different methods through discussion or through workshops. For example, in a discussion here maybe the pool of people to ask to come to discuss is more wide and open. But in the

Mills it is really focused: it is textile. It is about the nature of the different organisations and the background as well. So, it affects the method. Here if I run workshops and the manpower as well. Usually, I don't really work with schools. I work with the general public. But the general public is also very abstract. What we want to do here is that people need to participate; they need to work on something that they really want to make happen. Then they come. But in the Mills we need to approach people to ask them to come to our space. And then that is about the need. So, if we go back to the topic of art, it is developing two kinds of art. In the Mills it is more textile art and something you can see and experience as well. But here we concentrate more on the relationship between people. So, the scale of people we want to reach is different.

*Q: Would you have an example of the different approaches in these two spaces?*

Actually, there are quite a lot of examples every day. Let me think about it. OK, for example, once I worked with an artist, who would like to run a workshop to work with a local community and he would like to make a painting. So, the difference between us is for me if you want to work with a group of people you have to know them first. If I were him I would go to that community or that group to understand that group of people and talk to them and get their phone numbers and ask them to come on a certain date or in a workshop. But what he thought is: We need to organise a group of people and he will teach them drawing. And I don't think this is participatory art, or community art, because for me the root of community art is that you have to talk to that group of people. You have to know them. If there is no art, you still know them, that is the idea. You know them not just because it is art, it is because you would like to understand more the thoughts from other people, more communication. But in that time it was not like this, so I think that is the difference.

*Q: Is the international art world important for an institution like the Mills?*

Yes. I think the international art world is very important for the Mills. At the very first beginning I was not really comfortable. Because I was thinking: "OK, what is the reason?" But later on, I think there are two sides. Some of the artists in other countries, they are really good. I mean, they are not just making artworks for money, but for sure some of them are. I think now I can see that artists in the Mills, I find most of them are very good and I am pleased. I think this is good. For example, art is very abstract and it has different meanings to different people. So, if in some sense the Mills finds some good artists, even when that kind of art is not my taste, but it is still very good art. So, it is a good chance for people in Hong Kong. Maybe a secondary school student, she or he likes it and then 10 years later, because of this she or he will be a very good artist. I think this is a good point, the international, what it means for the Mills is, because of their background and their capacity. They should do this, I think, to bring in more new things to Hong Kong. But the important thing is, when you bring in those interesting artists, or good art, or even it is not good or bad, how to build a platform to link it to the local art world or to local communities? This is what I am trying to work out. But I think I am not working very well at the moment. Because



some of the language, or the working method is not what I am used to and that is also the reason that I quit my previous job to work in Mills as well. Maybe I will not use that language in the future, but at least I know what it looks like. I mean in my age I think it is a good chance for me to learn.

*Q: Can you give an example of how it is difficult to link the international artworld to something local?*

I think it happens in different institutions in Hong Kong as well. When they have international artists, it is good if they have a solo show. But if not, if they need to work with local groups or artists, how to build this platform into a balanced situation is very important. For example, if I invite an artist from Holland. And they come to work with a local artist, what does 'work with' mean? Not that he has a plan and he asks the local artists to execute it. You have to come to discuss and that international artist has to realise, or can have that space to listen to other people's opinion. I can see that some of them can do that, but some of them ... Maybe it is about the setup or ... Actually, most of the examples are about the setup. When they come it is already top-down. Maybe some of them they don't like this method as well. I think it is about the curatorship and in the art world maybe it is usual, because when you invite an artist to come you just worry that maybe the local groups or artists will give him quite a lot of trouble and he or she is not happy. That is very usual. So if you pay quite a lot of money to ask someone to make a piece of art in a period of time, maybe you don't have that room for them to discuss; you just come to order someone to do it. But I think to build a platform on the same level, that they talk and discuss to make a piece of artwork, that is very important.

*Q: What are the benefits and negatives of the presence of international art world professionals in Hong Kong?*

I think the positive side for international institutions that come to Hong Kong is that we can have more chances to at least see how other people work in other countries. I think that is very important. But that is not the most important, I think the most important thing is how other countries build their audience, it is about art education, it is not just about art making. For example, if I bring maybe Jackson Pollock to Hong Kong, or maybe Van Gogh, do we have an art audience to know how, or to have an interest to see those paintings? You can look at our art education; it is not very good. All we do is, I think maybe now it is better, what we do is still painting, and simple things for results. But not appreciation, or things like that. And I think in this way it is good to have more international artists or artworks to come to Hong Kong. And for me the most interesting thing is to see the contract. In the first place they will send you some guidelines: "OK, they have to live in these conditions, hotel, they have to come how many days, in which airline." I think these kinds of things make the conversations more easy. Even if I cannot afford that money, so I know it in the first place. And I think that is good. Like these kind of art administration things. I think in other countries, maybe the Western countries, this has more developed. And the negative thing, it is less ... It seems there are more opportunities for local artists, but

they are always in the second level. You can see Art Basel. It is interesting: you have Art Basel and then the Affordable Art Fair. I just don't know the idea, what is going on. Why local artists, most of the local artists participate in the Affordable Art Fair? Although they are two different organisations, they try to run these kind of programmes on the same level, even if they cannot reach the same level. And the name as well, I don't know what means 'Affordable Art Fair'. And most of the participant artists in the Affordable Art Fair are local artists. So that is not very good. And another thing is, the international institutions, when they come, sometimes they don't really know the situation in Hong Kong. Even if their programmes are very good. But how can local artists or the art scene catch up with that level? Either in quality, or the process of making art, and the art administration, or these kind of things. It is very obvious, for example, if I work with a local art institution, sometimes I don't even need to sign a contract. Or sometimes the artist fee is not very high. And sometimes for international institutions it is not very high as well. But you have quite a lot of documents to sign and see. Like this gap, I think international institutions have to realise. I think most of the Hong Kong artists, they don't work in this way. Maybe some of them, some mature artists, they know how to deal with it. Like these kind of differences.