

## CLOSING THE GAP

An interview with Yuk Mui Law for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion coming soon • เร็ว ๆ นี้

23 May 2018, Foo Tak Building, Wan Chai, Hong Kong

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

Since I graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong with a Master of Fine Arts in 2010, I think the Hong Kong art scene has developed a lot. When I graduated, or when I was still studying, *Asia Art Archive* was already set up. Then there was *Art Hong Kong*, the predecessor of *Art Basel*. Actually, I think my role in Hong Kong has always been both to be an artist and to work for different institutions to promote art in this art circle. Before I set up *Rooftop Institute*, I worked at *Soundpocket*. I worked in different institutions and commercial galleries. I lived in Japan and Beijing. So, after graduation I have not always been living in Hong Kong. So, I think that I create artworks on the one hand, and promote Hong Kong art on the other. When I see it as a big industry, then I am one of the labourers in this industry. My goal with *Rooftop Institute* was to stimulate cultural exchange and art education. I think that I am both an artist and a promotor of art education at the same time.

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

My opinion on the role of an artist in society results from how Hong Kong society is structured. Hong Kong society values the commercial sector very much. Maybe many people would ... The general public in Hong Kong regards art as a rather high-end thing. But I think that the role of artists is similar to that of normal people in society. In fact, I know many different creatives, perhaps in literature, drama, or any other cultural fields. Actually, I feel that everyone in this society is a citizen. That is, they basically need to vote. They are normal people. And I think that art itself should be a profession. Therefore, I always use a professional approach to think about the role of artists in society. Sometimes I think besides making art, I always think... how artists can do more than what they are always doing. I think that artists can do much more besides making art. And in my opinion art education in Hong Kong has quite a big defect. Between the general public and art, I feel there is a huge gap. Therefore, I think artists should enhance the general public's perception of Hong Kong artists and of Hong Kong art, and I believe that artists can be more than artists.

*Q: What is your personal experience with interactions with international art world players like international gallerists, curators, and artists?*

I think that I interact with many international professionals, including curators and institutions. Recently, these sort of interactions have become much more frequent.

Maybe this is also related to my art practice. I have been creating more in recent years, because since I have a studio in the *Foo Tak Building*, I became more focused on my practice; maybe because I solved the space problem. I think it would be hard to say when I would be ready. It is because, actually... I don't know when that moment would be. I would think, whether there are any differences in terms of interaction between a local institution and an international one, I think that the difference is actually not that big. The difference is only in communication. Maybe you would change the language, maybe you would use English to talk about your art with others. Even when cooperating with local institutions, the kind of interaction would not be so different, because my practice starts from a more personal level, and maybe some of the topics involve more globalised issues. It might be related to refugees. Or it might be related to city space. Actually, these are very local topics but at the same time they are global topics as well. So, I think the difference is not actually that big. When I think of all the international institutions that I have worked with, then, for example, a Hong Kong organisation like *Asia Art Archive*, would that be considered a local institution or an international one? I would think they are a very international local institution. Actually, I am collaborating with the *AAA* on education. Based on the knowledge and information gathered in the archive, I have been invited as one of the artists to develop workshop programmes for secondary school students. That is our collaboration. I think the whole process is very local, because the workshop that I developed was about a Hong Kong artist named Ha Bik-chuen. I organised this workshop based on their Art Archive in Fo Tan. I think this content is very local, but the whole creation, and the discussion, even the interaction with the students, and their method of handling things, I would think that... The organisation of the project uses an international approach, an international approach, but the content would be very much local. Foreign artists may not know Ha Bik-chuen, because he is a very local artist. My personal experience of meeting overseas curators was during my own exhibition at *Para Site*. In March this year, *Para Site* commissioned me to make a work. But actually, I have been thinking and working on it for a long time; it is about refugees. In this project I was involved as an artist. The curator was from China, and the director of *Para Site* is actually a foreigner. It is hard to define these things. I participated in a group exhibition at *Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art*, it was a show that involved exchanges between three places. It was a group exhibition of three Chinese artists and three German artists, the curator was German, the artistic director was Chinese, and the museum was in Guangzhou. There was a lot of international exchange, including discussions with the curator on how to present the artworks, on how to articulate my work within the exhibition, and on how to connect it with the topic of the joint exhibition. Much of the communication was very broad and involved many different elements. There was a very mainland-style operation, some very local Hong Kong content, and a very international way of working and administrating. Therefore, I think it was a great mix.

*Q: Was the arrival of international art world institutions and professionals a challenge for local art organisations like Soundpocket?*

I think it may not have been a challenge, but a chance to communicate. I can use *Rooftop Institute* as an example to illustrate this. Because I am one of the founders of



*Rooftop Institute* I experienced first-hand how it has grown from a tiny institution. Even though it is still very small, I have experienced how it started from zero. I think this doesn't only bring challenges, because more people are visiting institutions like ours. Because maybe compared to *Ia*, or *Videotage*, or *AAA*, they might be more interested in smaller institutions like ours. Especially since our institute is an artist-run institution. So, when people come they want to see what small institutions like us do. Also, small institutions need to network with each other. Therefore, while some big institutions would visit us, many small institutions often visit us as well. Because in different Asian countries, maybe Japan, Southeast Asia, even Taiwan, there are many small institutions like us, but there aren't many in Hong Kong. There are very few of these kind of alternative spaces in Hong Kong. So everyone is constantly finding ways to strengthen the bond between each other, to strengthen our culture. To guarantee that we won't have to close when we cannot pay the rent, we explore private funding, besides relying on the government. I think when people come to Hong Kong, this kind of increased exchange is a benefit that I rarely see in large institutions.

*Q: What are the benefits or positives of the arrival of international art world professionals and institutions in Hong Kong?*

I can discuss the benefits of international professionals arriving in Hong Kong. I think that there are many benefits as an artist, because there are more exhibition opportunities besides those in Hong Kong, that is the first point. The second point is, I think that... Maybe some art professionals bring an international vision to Hong Kong institutions. Take the example of M+. Before Yung Ma used to be at M+; now they have hired a new specialist in video art, a curator from Australia named Ulanda Blair. My artwork is mainly video art, and I actually knew Miss Blair in person. I think that she adds an additional international perspective in reviewing video work. And I think this is a benefit.

*Q: What are the disadvantages or negatives of the arrival of international art world professionals and institutions in Hong Kong?*

Disadvantages or negatives... I think they exist both. These so-called disadvantages result from greater competition. Compared to my time, there are now lots of students that graduate from art schools or cultural programmes who have difficulty finding jobs. This is a fact: there is oversupply. When there are more students, are there more positions? No! So, I think there is oversupply, and it might be oversaturated. Therefore, I think this is not a benefit for the new graduates. Although the art scene is flourishing and there are many opportunities now, I don't think it will be better. The other thing that I keep on saying or emphasizing is: the distance between art and the general public is widening. When you move to the international context, you are already removing yourself from the cultural linkage with the local community. This is the first thing. This gap between art and the community will only become bigger with the presence of international actors. I think that the distance becomes bigger and bigger. And this cannot be fixed quickly. Unless there is a big change in the art education in Hong Kong, the gap will only widen.