

THE ARTIST AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

An interview with wen yau 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?

To position myself I always call myself an artist slash researcher. Although I see that most people in Hong Kong or in the local art view will call me a researcher. Or they take me as a performance artist, not just an artist. Because I think there is a ... I didn't graduate from a local art institution. I'm a self-taught artist. But I've been working as a researcher at the Asia Art Archive from which people mostly know me through. That's why people will think that I'm a researcher. And on the other hand, I find it very strange that people just put the label performance artist on me, although I have never confined myself to performance art only. I do conceptual art, I do social practices, politically engaged and politically concerned work, even some institutional critique projects. So it is very strange how people position me and how I position myself in the local art view.

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

I quite like a title of a paper written by Carol Becker, my favourite art writer. The title is 'Artist as the public intellectual'. And I position myself as a public intellectual as well, because as I said I am not only an artist, I am also a researcher. And the idea of public intellectual is about the publicness of our practice. It's not only about the public responsibility; it's about how we are facing the public; how we are facing a wider public. We are not only serving a small group of people in the gallery or in any art institution and I have quite a strong belief of this in my work.

Q: Do these ideas about the role of the artist also relate to your suggestion that we do this interview at this location?

Yes, the artist as public intellectual, and publicness is quite a key word of my practice. And this is the Tamar park, of the Central Government Offices. This actually has a nickname called 'doors often open'. But the doors are not really open, because especially after 2014, the Umbrella Movement, we realised actually that our voices have never been heard. Or only a few voices have been heard by the government. So I... Whenever I have an interview I will invite the interviewer to come with me to the Tamar park. I feel that this is my space, this is not only the government's space. I want to reclaim the publicness of this space. And you asked me for my office, I think this is my office, this is my space. This is my city, this is also my harbor. That's it, that is why I wanted to come here.

Q: What is your personal experience with interactions with international art world's professionals?

I think I am kind of lucky because as a performance artist I really have to travel to different places to present my work. I am not only sending my paintings to different places. I have to be there, so that's why I say I am lucky. I have a lot of chances to travel around the world. And this is how I meet the so-called international art world. And maybe because of this I have more exposure to the international art scene. I find that actually my work is quite different from other local artists, and in this sense I have to say that most of the time when I show my work it's not in Hong Kong. I got invited to quite a lot of so-called international events and that's why actually, I think maybe it's lucky, maybe not, I'm not sure, but in this sense that I ... When I meet the so-called international art world, it is not only in Hong Kong, but when I travel abroad I have a lot of chances to meet different people. And I really, really value these kind of opportunities of cultural exchange, because Hong Kong is such a small place, and when I have a chance to see what other people around the world are doing, I have got a chance to understand the culture of different places as well, and it enriches my practice. So in this sense, actually, I don't see big changes for me in the past few years, because I have all these chances to meet all these international people. But on the other hand I also, for example when I teach or when I meet some younger artists, I always encourage them to apply for a residency, or to get a chance to travel, to see what others are doing. Don't just stay in Hong Kong, because I see the very high risk of kind of being colonised by all these so-called international people coming to Hong Kong hunting for art. Especially during Art Basel in the past few years. So yeah, I think this is the way not to ... I mean there is a Chinese saying that a frog is living in the well, that means that actually we have no chance to see the world outside the well. So I think this is really, really important for me and also for other fellow artists.

Q: What do these international art world professionals do when they are hunting?

International hunters, that's how I call them. As a kind of imagination, how people will think that they have discovered something from a place that they don't know. That's why I call it colonisation, right?! I still remember, it was 2004 or 2005, it was my first time to travel to a festival, a performance art festival abroad. That was in Beijing. And I've met some friends whom actually I've known already from London and they took a group of live artists to Beijing for exchange and I was there and I still remember that before that, the curator came to me and said: "Wow, we have been to Beijing, we are so excited, we have discovered a lot of performance art in China!" And I looked at them: "What? You have discovered?" Thank you, but actually, in China performance art started in the 80s, or maybe even earlier. Just that nobody knows that. And then now you say you discovered? I mean I feel happy as a friend of them. I feel OK, it's good that you find different kinds of performance art, but on the other hand I feel a little bit offended by the word discovered. Do you think that you are Columbus, or that you discover a new world or something? I think this story kind of illustrates my idea of 'hunting' or 'colonising' the art world.

Q: Does this hunting also have a negative effect for local artists and for their practice?

The negative side of this actually, of all this hunting or exploring local art view or whatever, I can tell that from since Art Basel took place in Hong Kong, I feel a bit irritated by all these art events, every year in March. There are so many things going on, so many parties, so many exhibitions. But I keep on reminding myself, and also my friends, my students, my fellow artists, to actually not have this kind of false hope all the time. Because I think people come to Hong Kong for Art Basel, maybe 80% of them are not hunting for local art at all. They come for parties, they come for shopping, but not for buying Hong Kong art. So it seems that we have a vibe and an art market, but not really: there is not a local art market. So now for example we have the Affordable Art Fair that has just taken place. Maybe it is good for young artists, but on the other hand, I can see some really young artists who just graduated, when they do the work, actually the work is so gimmicky, that they just want to get attention. And I always make a joke saying: "OK, you are like firework after graduation." If you can't make firework nobody knows you and then you'll be dead afterwards. But then the point is, after you make your firework, how can you sustain your work? Quite a lot of them get famous, or so-called famous, in one or two years' time. And then you get a lot of invitations, but then I can see that the work is so bad afterwards. I mean the problem is like this: how can you sustain it? And in Hong Kong I see the problem is: OK we have this Art Basel, but on the other hand we have a lot of big institutions coming up like M+, Tai Kwun and some other places. But they are not really focusing on nurturing young artists. So, OK you have to be a firework otherwise you're dead, and the others actually they're dead all the time. So I'm lucky that I started my practice, or started exhibiting my work in 2003. At that time it was still quite quiet in Hong Kong. I still had a chance to develop my work in a more quiet and subtle way. So I feel that actually this is more healthy, you know, to work slowly, comparatively. And at the same time I have space to develop myself. But for young artists nowadays, actually most of them, or quite a lot of them really, they realise that there is a market, an art market. And they really care about that as well. So this is quite a problem.

Q: Do you feel that the growing presence of international art world professionals in Hong Kong has been a challenge for local art organisations like Soundpocket, Videotage and 1a Space?

I would see it like this actually, even before Art Basel took place in Hong Kong, or before the so-called art market boom, or something like that, even during colonial times, we had quite a lot of international events going on in Hong Kong. That's the way how this so-called local art scene developed as well, because we depended a lot on sources of information from abroad to develop our local art scene. So the problem is not about the so-called international art world, but the art market. That's how I see the problem. So even like Videotage, or Para Site, or even 1a Space, from time to time, even before Art Basel, they have all these international events, or cultural exchange events whatever you call it. So the problem is that actually now, like Para Site, every

year they spend a lot of money to do an annual big show every year during March, right? And this is OK, that at least they have one big show. But on the other hand I'm kind of more sceptical about this, especially for smaller organisations like 1a Space, or even Soundpocket. Maybe there is a risk of kind of again the false hope of doing something, I mean, I think they don't have to feel pressured to do big things. But I see actually this kind of stress, maybe not for Soundpocket, but like 1a Space, I see that: "Oh why are they doing a big show this year, a so-called international exhibition?" But not only for this year, I can see that for a small organization international events take a lot of resources, not only money. How are you facilitating all these exchanges? It takes a lot of manpower as well. So that's why I am sceptical, and I'm not really sure if it's only just one big show. I mean it's so spectacular, but then how do you relate this project to the local community in Hong Kong? So I think Para Site is working hard to find a balance. They have quite a lot of supporting public programmes, so I find it justified to have such a big show. Like even the show they have just finished is about colonialism, I think it fits very well the context of Hong Kong as well. But if it is just for the sake of doing big things, international things, I don't really agree with this kind of logic.

Q: Do you feel that the international art world somehow colonises the art world in Hong Kong?

Yeah, I see this kind of colonisation going on. Like M+, you see that actually quite a lot of curators, or the management, are not from Hong Kong. And I wouldn't say that they don't care about Hong Kong, but on the other hand I expect more understanding or that they have a closer connection to local cultures. I know they work hard, but still actually they're not from the local culture and they don't position themselves as only a local institution. They position themselves as an international, or world-class, leading museum of visual culture or things like that. Or even Tai Kwun, actually I've been to the rehearsal exhibition that they had during Art Basel. I am a little bit disappointed. I talked to Tobias; actually we talk a lot. I mean, before this show I knew that he is very, very keen on making connections with local culture, but at the same time I am not really sure how we can develop a kind of like curatorial practice, based on our own culture, but not just copying what Europe has been doing. So that's how I see that actually there still is a long way to work things out. As long as we are still borrowing other's experiences it's not easy to develop our own culture.

Q: What are the positives of the arrival of international professionals in Hong Kong and what are negatives?

OK, for the positive side, I have to say now Hong Kong is in such a precarious situation that we need international attention somehow. Considering the umbrella movement, we need international attention so as to give pressure to the government; local government or even mainland government. Maybe it works, maybe it doesn't. But still actually we need that. And maybe the booming art market, or Art Basel, or things like that, can help somehow. Because of that a lot of people travel to Hong Kong. At least maybe 10% of the people, they are willing to travel to, say Cattle

Depot, which is far away from the art fair. I still think it is good that at least more people are trying to understand what's going on in Hong Kong. That's how I see, actually this is kind of a political, how to say, or at least politically it may help, or this is my expectation. About the negative side, it is also related to the political situation in Hong Kong as well. In the past few years, localism or nativism, has been quite a big thing in Hong Kong. And we're defending our local culture, we're defending our local identity in the face of this oppression from the mainland government. But then on the other hand I see that people in the art world are quite happy with all these art market things. I'm still trying to figure out what is up here. We are so inconsistent in this sense. While we are embracing the international art fair, or international art world, on the other hand we are defending our local culture. I don't say they are mutually exclusive, but I think we have to find a way to work this out.