

REFRAMING THE INTERNATIONAL

An interview with Samson Young 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 perceive myself as an artist who spent most of his teenage years in Hong Kong but also lived for a considerable period outside of Hong Kong. And I'm happy for that description to... for the meaning of that description to end at that whole phrase that I just described. And I see that as the same kind of problem when I try to describe my practice, because I do so many things, right? So, I either tell people that I'm an artist or that I'm a multimedia artist because neither of those things mean anything. Which is perfect, right? So, I think that is how I would approach the question of definition.

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

I don't know how to answer that question because I guess that is sort of what artists try to figure out all their life, right? I mean, it's kind of like an on-going project. At this very moment in time, as you can see, a lot of my works deal with issues of culture and cultural politics especially, and the political situation in Hong Kong and elsewhere. But when I make work it tends to be an exercise in trying to process these issues, out of more of an internal desire for knowledge and for clarity for myself. Whether that extends into what I think what artists should do, I'm not sure. It's more kind of how I deal with that question.

Q: How has the presence of international art world professionals and institutions developed in Hong Kong?

I know that it is sort of the necessary evil to use a term like the 'international', right? But I wonder whether we can come up with a better terminology. Because what I'm mostly interested in as somebody who is practicing from here, is for that cosmopolitan spirit to persist. So the danger of using a term like 'international' is also, like to lump all of these influences and forces all in one go, is to implicitly make the assumption that 'international' has an agency and wants something. Which is not the case. And which is what the conservative fraction of Hong Kong, and maybe the Beijing government want us to think, when they evoke notions such as 'foreign international influence'. When you have no precision with terminologies like this you risk sort of the perception of these forces as external; as not an integral part of what you have always been, and putting that as something to resist. So, I think for me that is a very important thing to think about. So maybe we should talk about... Maybe we should be very specific, like standards of conservation, or you know, protocols of

market, standards that have to do with transaction. These things are more practical. And by doing that you make it more boring; but that is actually exactly what you want to do, to not frame it in these very vague terms.

Q: What have been your interactions with – for lack of a better word – these ‘international’ art world players, and do you think they are different from interactions in the homegrown art scene?

No, for all of the reasons that I just mentioned. I think... And I’m not answering ‘no’ as like a rhetorical rebuttal or anything like that. It is just that when you see things in that sort of light, it is like, those mechanisms have always been in place. But whether they were widespread or whether they were localised to certain institutions, that is another issue.

Q: Could you tell us about your personal experience with these ‘international’ players?

No, not if I don’t see myself not as an international player. You know what I mean. Then it’s just like, oh, I’m interacting with the art world. So, yeah. Sorry if this is not very useful for you.

Q: Do you think that the presence of the ‘international’ art world professionals has changed the kind of art that is being produced and presented in Hong Kong?

I don’t think so. I don’t think it has changed the kind of work that is being produced, because... I mean logically, for that to happen, it would mean that increasingly more practitioners are being... or proportionally more practitioners are being let’s say coerced by the market forces of the art world, right? Whereas I think that in Hong Kong there has always been, and there will continue to be a very strong cohort and contingent of artists who are not operating in the art world. The only reason why there is an impression that maybe there is a shift of focus, is because there is actually very bad archiving work, as to what these artists do. Just over the weekend, I was in the library looking at the work that... I use Para Site as an example because their work is well archived, right? So, the things that Para Site has produced and continue to produce, and the kind of really wonderful and super weird things that Hong Kong artists have produced in, and I’m sure that you have an awareness of this, in the past two or three decades. But the level of archiving is such a problem that you don’t really see these things. And then of course, when, let’s say, when quote – unquote institutions, or the market is involved in certain aspects of art making, those things are often better publicised or better archived. So, there is the impression that maybe there is now more of that, and less of what was happening before. And again, this is an issue of language. So, there are still a lot of specialist small independent things that are run... There is still a language barrier. I cite one example: a local critic, Chan Sai Lok. He makes this kind of kitchen sink list of all the exhibitions that are happening in Hong Kong every month, and he shares it through the *Art Appraisal Club*. A lot of those are in Chinese. So, if one either doesn’t have access or doesn’t know about the

Art Appraisal Club and that list, or doesn't read Chinese, they have the impression that only certain things happen. And of course, when something like an institution or a market is involved in making an event, then they make more of an effort for it to be bilingual. Whereas small local events that are maybe happening at *Foo Tak*, they may not care to do it in English too. So that contributes to the impression, I think.

Q: You mentioned Para Site; would you agree that this institution itself could be a metaphor for the increased presence of the 'international' art world?

Yeah, I think my perspective is different, or my understanding of that trajectory is different from yours. I think what you see in a place like Para Site, is actually a natural trajectory of an organisation that is honestly soul-searching and looking for what is uniquely Hong Kong. So, it went from a place where it started with a bunch of young artists looking in a way that is more inward, for a kind of identity of the city. And as the organisation progressed, to my understanding what they realised then, what is uniquely Hong Kong is this cosmopolitan spirit. So, they have moved into a model where it is actually more cosmopolitan, and actually I would say more Hong Kong. What you see now, which I think is worrying, that we are in such an infancy of the search for what can be aptly defined as a Hong Kong subjectivity, now we are back at the place where two decades ago we thought that these very closed of little things are what Hong Kong is. And then you have a kind of a closing off to people outside. And it is basically a conservatism, a xenophobia. And that is not the cosmopolitan spirit that I see as defining of Hong Kong. So again, I think the danger of framing the narrative in that way is to reaffirm the notion that localism is a rejection of the outside. Whatever these outside influences are, I think one needs to have a very strong sense of agency; knowing exactly what you are about. And I think that Hong Kong has always had that, but accepting these influences and then through a very tai chi turn of the time, making it our own. So, I think that needs to continue for Hong Kong to thrive.

Q: What are the benefits and the positives of the presence of the 'international' art world in Hong Kong?

There are... Because there are more institutions at home... And that doesn't necessarily have to do with... That might actually more have to do with the fact that, ever since the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District, there is more emphasis on institutions. So, institutions tend to do things different. Especially if they are collecting institutions. One of the things that they do different drastically, compared to independent spaces, or even galleries in Hong Kong, is their standard of conservation. So, you definitely see that in many ways changing, because people are more aware of procedures and so-called best practices for conservation. So that is different. Artists instead of just making a work like a multi-part installation that has a gazillion things and they are forgetting about it. They are struggling to make an installation manual for example. That is important for the archive. Galleries have started for installation manuals for example. Those kinds of things are... You see that as changing. But I think I want to footnote that comment by saying that although I

have been practicing as an artist for a while, my participation in – for the lack of a better word – Hong Kong contemporary art, is much shorter in terms of my... the duration of my full career as an artist, because I started in a concert hall as a composer and as a musician. So those things are still relatively new to me. So, my timespan of comparison is maybe... in terms of the practicality of things anyway, maybe six years, seven years versus the last two years. So, take that for what that is worth.

Q: What are the disadvantages or the negatives of the presence of the 'international' art world in Hong Kong?

I don't know. I'm not sure if... Not that I cannot... I mean we can talk about more specific things I guess. We can talk about assuming, let's say, we can begin a discussion on what are the problems of the forces of market coercion in the arts? And let's talk about that in general, like all over, and not just Hong Kong. And then we can begin to talk about that. But again, when you talk about... I'm sorry it is like answering the question all over again, but when you talk about that, you begin to fall into the trap of assuming that there is less of an agency of the local practitioner, but also that there is this force called 'international' which has kind of a singular agency. So as a way to respond to that question.

Q: When you look at yourself personally, do you feel that your access to the 'international' side of the art world has been easy?

Yes, I think I'm very blessed and fortunate that I lived in Australia and New York for a considerable amount of time. So, I already have friends and networks there. So, it has been in some areas easier for me. When I need to make a show in the US and I need musicians and I have people who I could ask for those contacts. I think speaking English is important. If you are speaking only Cantonese that would be a problem. So yeah, I count myself to be lucky, because I was educated elsewhere.