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Hacking Hong Kong

The competition between Asian cities to become the leading global city in the region reshapes the urban fabric in Hong Kong too. Amidst the urban redevelopment and art market hype, artists and urbanites initiate varied forms of urban creativity for local needs. The new agencies and strategies of urban creativity have a growing ability to raise awareness of socio-political issues, although not always without conflict. Provoking contradictory views is, however, part of the strength of urban creativity to generate new subjectivities.

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IN OCTOBER 2007, the local think tank Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre proposed in its policy submission paper that Hong Kong should aim to become a 'creative metropolis' and sought "to establish creativity as a major force in transforming Hong Kong's cultural and socio-economic landscape." 'Urban spaces' were suggested among "the five areas that require substantial improvement and social investment."[1] As Marissa Yiu elucidates, the growing presence of financial power and creative industries has transformed the structure of the city and especially the waterfront of West Kowloon that "anticipates future culture-led growth. Architecture and urbanism in the skyline are celebratory, as companies cultivate new identities and a global urban image."[2] While the vibrations of art and culture are felt around the city, the redevelopment of West Kowloon Cultural District, and especially the co-operation with Art Basel, are transforming Hong Kong into a hub of the global art scene. At the same time, urbanites from various backgrounds and professional identities (including arts and design) are engaging with urban creativity to voice their concerns. I posit that the new forms of agencies and strategies of urban creativity (such as street art, art interventions, urban gardening, performances, media art, among others) have a growing power to negotiate space for new forms of participatory urbanism.

These new forms of urban creativity also partly resonate with Chantal Mouffe's views on an agonistic approach in critical art that provokes disagreement and "makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate." For the agonistic model, public spaces provide an array of discursive planes for varied forms of articulations to confront hegemonic projects "without any possibility of final reconciliation." Artistic activism that questions the prevailing authorities by, for instance, reclaiming the streets, represents this struggle and may have an essential position "by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities".[3]

During the past decade, similar tendencies have become ever more prominent among urban creativity in Hong Kong, because of the specific geopolitical circumstances and their reverberation in the society as a whole. Even though a majority of urban creativity has been non-political, vigorous waves of socio-political interventions, oscillating between socially engaged art, political participation and vandalism have gained popularity,[4] especially in relation to recent social movements, such as 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace' in autumn 2014. Yet, because of opposing opinions and needs, conflicts are unavoidable. The positions taken and effects caused by urban creativity have become ever more complex and require more nuanced, interdisciplinary research.

Even though any forms of unauthorized urban creativity can be understood as 'hacking the city', this paper focuses on two forms of recent and novel interventions, to clarify the growing complexities of artistic and creative practices in urban public space: the freedom of expression, societal and communal responsibilities and proprietorship.

Repainting political banners

Hong Kong's urban fabric is known for its compelling (neon) sign-boards. While the old-fashioned ones add a touch of nostalgia to the city, especially for international tourists, the ever increasing intensity and intrusion of commercial visualization exasperates many locals. In January 2007, São Paulo implemented the Clean City Law, to improve the city's urban landscape by eliminating pollution and environmental degradation, and at the same time to preserve cultural and historical heritage, including visual and sonic spheres. Advertisements were considered to be visual pollution and effectively removed.[5] A few cities around the globe were inspired by the positive results and have partially or temporarily banned or replaced advertisements (e.g., Paris, Chennai, Tehran, Grenoble). While similar policies have not yet come ashore in Hong Kong, urban public spaces continue to be contested sites between authorized and unauthorized advertisements, art and creativity.

A tangible example of this reconfiguration of visual values is provided by a local graffiti artist, RST2, and his interventions: spray painted banners of political parties. The banners have maintained their popularity as a means of political advertising that started to emerge in the 1980s. However, RST2 is critical of how current banners emphasize not only the personality but even the appearance of the candidates at the expense of any political merits. In the past the banners would indicate the achievements of legislators, but recently banners tend to be limited to a greeting and a portrait, transforming the signs to similar self-aggrandizement used by celebrities of popular culture.[6]

In 2011, RST2 started his experimentation with the seasonal banners of New Year greetings. He took a few banners to his studio, wrote his name on them with colors akin to the original composition, returned the banners, and waited to see if anyone would notice the modifications. The banners were left unnoticed for a month, leading RST2 to conclude that "Hongkongers are completely ignorant to what happens around them, and therefore I continued to paint them." At first, RST2 chose banners from the parties he politically disagreed with, but gradually he started to target the banners of the better known figures to gain more public attention. For instance, in April 2011 when Hongkongers rallied in support of Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei, RST2 repainted the banner of Paul Tse Wai-chun, "Superman of Law," who was indifferent to Ai's detention (fig. 1). RST2 spray painted a cartoon-like speech balloon below the legislator's face on the banner, which made it appear as if he were asking, "Where is Ai Weiwei," a popular question at the time. This modified banner, which hung on the busy Sai Yeung Choi street in Mongkok, caught the local media's eye too.

In March 2013, RST2 re-used a set of three banners of the Democratic Party and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong. This set illuminates RST2's stylistic shift to cover up the surface with visibly eye-catching elements rich with visual and linguistic puns. Employing visuals from the video game and animated movie *Angry Birds*, and the Cantonese homophone for the game's name, the poignant message depicts the politicians as 'shitheads', the pigs targeted by the 'angry birds' (fig. 2). In RST2's oeuvre, which usually relies on multileveled local references, *Angry Birds* represents a combination of transcultural and local elements, and also clearly illuminates the agonistic notions. RST2's three main dissatisfactions are the inability of people to pay attention to the details of their everyday surroundings, the current political system in Hong Kong and the growing use of public space for political advertising. The modified visual language of the banners questions both the right of the political parties to use the public space, and their aesthetics. At the same time the banners challenge the citizens' (un)awareness of and (dis)engagement with their own environment.

RST2 names New York based artist Brian Donnelly (a.k.a. KAWS, b. 1974), who successfully subverted billboards in the 1990s, as one of his predecessors. The interventions made by both RST2 and other Hong Kong citizens, however, resonate with more international and intricate forms of civil disobedience than mere North-American 'adbusting'. Targeting the political banners reminds us of Eco's call for "semiological guerrilla warfare," "an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation."[7] Along with Eco's ideas of a 'cultural guerrilla', the other highly inspirational predecessor among (especially street) artists and art activists is the 'Situationist International' (SI) and their adaptation of "*détournement* of preexisting aesthetic elements," as "the integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu."[8] Hijacking and modifying elements is one of the 'anti-spectacular tactics' developed by the SI and it defamiliarizes "the spectacle's already estranged images in order to bring about unexpected re-appearances. It does this by damaging and polluting given spectacles so as to trigger or re-mediate a different social imaginary based on non-alienated relationships."[9] *Situationists* valued graffiti as one form of *ultra-détournement:* a constructive strategy contesting the hegemony of public space from below and providing immediate social criticism.[10]

Especially in the US, *détournement* motivated resistance to and subversion of the interrelated hegemony of media, politics and consumer culture—usually known as 'culture jamming', a concept first introduced by the experimental music band, *Negativland*, in 1984.[11] Similar practices were, nonetheless, already being employed by various international activist and artist groups, for example: *Spassguerilla* [fun guerrilla], *Provo* and *Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions* (BUGA UP).[12] Originally, the tactics and intentions of the various groups across the borders represented quite a versatile oeuvre,

Fig. 1 (above): A spray painted banner, ***Where is Ai Weiwei?***, April 2011, Hong Kong. Courtesy of RST2.

Fig. 2 (below): A set of three spray painted banners, ***Angry Birds*** by RST2, March 2013, Hong Kong. Photograph by the author.

Urban creativity as dissidence and participation

including countering political ideologies and institutional positions through inventive hoaxes. Although culture jamming is not necessarily only against capitalism, after the *Adbusters* magazine (founded in 1989) gained international popularity, for most activists and scholars alike, culture jamming came to stand for 'consumer activism' focusing on defacing advertisements and global brands through 'subvertising'. The limited definition is further emphasized when culture jamming is seen primarily as a Western phenomenon and "situated into a broad tradition of antimaterialism in Western culture, which extends from early Christian asceticism, is sifted through mid-eighteenth-century Romanticism, and persists today in anxiety over contemporary definitions of the 'good life'."[13] Even though this genealogy could be considered relatively fitting to the most well-known forms of adbusting and media hoaxing, the observation appears to be an oversimplification of a rich history with highly varied motivations. This framing becomes especially questionable if we wish to analyze similar practices in Asia today, such as interventions with political banners, or as discussed below, by utilizing media screens as art exhibitions.

Digital hacking

Large scale media screens are mainly used to transform marketing channels into spectacles, although in recent years their adaptation for media art projects has gained popularity. At the same time, aspirations to reinvent contemporary graffiti and street art are voiced and experimented with; projections, reflections and laser tagging are used to spread a message and, at least in theory, to avoid accusations of vandalism. While 'old-school' notice boards and billboards have provided fruitful sites for subverting messages, remote-controlled digital screens push the challenge to a whole new level: how to create digital interventions and hack the screens operated by advertisement companies, global corporate and city officials.

The 77,000 m^2 LED screen on the International Commerce Centre (ICC) – the highest skyscraper in Hong Kong – is not used for advertising, but it provides an unprecedented site for media art in the city. Initially, the facade was made available to a German musician and artist, Nikolai Carsten (b. 1965) as part of Art Basel in 2014. In the same year the long term collaboration, *Open Sky Gallery,* between City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media and the ICC was initiated to exhibit both established artists' and students' works. In spring 2016, the ICC tower was selected as one of the sites for *Human Vibrations,* the 5th Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition, funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). The screen was also the site for *Open Sky Gallery* ISEA2016, a new partnership with ISEA (International Symposium on Electronic Art).[14] While the official opening of *Human Vibrations* was on 18 May 2016, its media art was already displayed a day earlier during the opening reception of *Open Sky Gallery* ISEA2016.

Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai (a.k.a. Add Oil team) submitted a media artwork to *Human Vibrations,* entitled *Our 60-second friendship begins now* (fig. 3). The work is a series of six animations that all refer to counting. According to the original statement, the intertextual reference derives from Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai's (b. 1958) film *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and "the artwork invites viewers to celebrate the memorable cinematic moment" and "encourages people to have impromptu interactions with each other." Coincidentally, the opening of the exhibition took place during the Hong Kong visit of the Chinese state leader, Zhang Dejiang. Throughout the visit the city put a large number of high level security measures in place, which not only severely interrupted the daily lives of residents, but which were also believed to function as a veil, obscuring from Zhang any anti-China sentiments expressed by the citizens of Hong Kong. Sampson Wong, as a result, was compelled to consider how he could 'hijack' their own work to make a statement.[15]

Consequently, after the first display of Wong's and Lam's work on 17 May, alongside the other 28 nominated works, the title was changed to *Countdown Machine* and a new artistic statement clarified that each night, for one minute, the artwork would display a digital clock counting down towards 1 July 2047.[16] In an interview, Sampson Wong clarified that the adapted artwork referred to another Wong Kar-wai film, *2046* (2004), which is filled with metaphoric use of the number, but also represents the last year of the 'one country, two systems' policy. Significantly though, the 'clock' on the ICC display repeatedly counted down the same minute, showing the same series of numbers every evening, never getting nearer its final time. In fact, its stationary condition questioned the work's main message. On the Add Oil team's website, however, the time was ticking away towards 1 July 2047. The meaning of the work was not only 'hijacked', but also 'hacked' by the virtual addition online.

Unsurprisingly, the recontextualization of the work and its subsequent early elimination from the exhibition on 23 May 2016 launched intense public discussion on censorship, artists' rights and responsibilities, and the future of arts in the city. Statements and clarifications were made by the partakers and opinions supporting both sides were strongly voiced. While some hailed the artists' wittiness, the majority of the art community seemed to feel they had crossed the line and had used the exhibition for self-promotional purposes. And the fact that the artists had accepted the fee from the curator complicated the matter further as it turned the work into a commissioned one. Importantly though, Sampson Wong insisted that the content of the work had not been altered after submission at the end of April, and that the curator and organizers knew beforehand the meaning of the work.[17]

Artist and curator Oscar Ho spelled out the major concern of how artistic rights are more than about individual intentions. The moral responsibility to and respect for other stakeholders, such as curators and participating artists, are essential cornerstones of artistic professionalism. Even though subverting the original meaning was not illegal, it shattered the wholeness of the exhibition and was considered inattentive to other participants. The unprofessional behavior, rather than the content of the work, was the primary reason for the curator, Caroline Ha Thuc, to withdraw the work. For her it was not an act of censorship, but a professional sanction.[18] Analyzed from the broader perspective of the art community, the reframing of the work as activism with political implications also put the shared artistic freedom at risk, as Ho maintains: "If an isolated case causes a termination of the sponsorship of the venue, it would be extremely unfair to other artists, including those who are unwilling to talk about politics. We have to protect all kinds of freedom of expression, including the right to talk, and not talk, about politics."[19] Ho's statement was unfortunately somewhat prescient, as the *Open Sky Project* was indeed consequently cancelled later that year.[20]

The right to hack the city?

While Ho's opinion might seem more supportive of the institutional stance than artistic expression, it also echoes Harvey's understanding of Lefebvre's often reiterated 'right to the city', with an emphasis on the collective aspects of the possibility for social change. It is a "right to change ourselves by changing the city" and therefore, "a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization."[21] Even in instances of civil disobedience, Harvey's defense of collaborative actions to reshape the city is inevitably valid: long-term social change requires participation and group power. But what he seems to ignore is the possible need of individual agency for an agonistic approach, as the initiative not only raises awareness but builds engagement with(in) the community. An individual like RST2, working anonymously and alone, or the short lived 'digital hijacking' by the Add Oil team, will unlikely bring about long-term social change, but they will most likely have an impact on public discussion, and on agency active in the urban public space – especially because they launch conflicting opinions, which can provoke people to adopt a critical stance and develop new subjectivities.

Hacking the city through urban creativity can vary from beautification to destruction, and from involvement in urban planning to civil disobedience. Some strategies and interventions are more successful in their engagement with communities, while others may have unexpected and unwanted consequences. What they usually have in common, is the ability to employ urban public spaces as discursive planes for provoking new perceptions. The importance of artistic and creative rights, possibly including 'hacking', cannot be excluded from the discourses of the future cities and their well-being. How these rights are defined and what forms they are allowed to take requires further research with new theoretical and methodological approaches.

The complexities and interrelations of urban creativity in today's Hong Kong cannot be fully grasped if reduced to mere reflections of adbusting or cultural jamming with their Western connotations. *Détournement* provides more versatile possibilities for analyzing the varied forms of urban creativity, especially as a form of hijacking and artistic activism, but it too has its limitations; despite the resourceful oeuvre of the *Situationists*, the main theoretical framing emphasizes the targeting of spectacle, caused by neo-liberal capitalism. Similarly, at first glance, many interventions might seem to fulfill Mouffe's emphasis on struggle against neo-liberal hegemony, but as elucidated by both RST2 and the Add Oil team, the great spectrum of personal, communal, societal, political and cultural intentions clearly exceed the myopic focus on anti-capitalism despite the dominant corporal power in and privatization of urban public space. In the case of both RST2 and the Add Oil team, the primary concern is the future of Hong Kong and its current geopolitical position.

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Fig. 3: Sampson Wong and Jason Lam, *Countdown Machine* on the ICC tower, 21 May 2016, Hong Kong. Courtesy of Sampson Wong and Jason Lam.

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12 I wish to thank researcher and artist, Dr Javier Abarca, for insights on culture jamming and adbusting.

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