PASSING HONG KONG

Henry Tsang

1994. I stand beside my father on a sidewalk in Mongkok staring up at a wall of apartments. We used to live here, he tells me. Five-storey walk-ups, back in the '60s. Now they're all twelve, fifteen storeys. Maybe next decade, they'll be thirty.

Door: Access Gallery, Vancouver. Hundreds of bamboo cages are stacked to form a U-shaped skyscraper apartment block. A matrix of cells that once housed finches as they were transported to markets to be sold now envelops the viewer. Inside the cages are thimble-sized cups containing water and feed, along with small colour photographs of back and side streets in Hong Kong. Property ads, circa early 1997, are posted on or near the cage doors.

A sound-track chronicles Kum Chi-keung's journey from his apartment to Bird Alley. Begins in his subcompact 40 square metre home near Kennedy Road where his view of the harbour will soon be blocked by a planned new high-rise. Down to the MTR,[1] to Kowloonside, surfaces, then moves on to where he begins his search for cages. At ease in fluid urban and subterranean spaces, Kum Chi-keung finds refuge in the market, filled with the songs and trills of birds and humans enmeshed. Like the quick snapshots of the changing nooks and crannies of Hong Kong streets, this moving aural history becomes fixed in time, within an era about to fade away or be torn down, a document of the laws of motion that exemplify Hong Kong's existence. In the spring, after decades of landmark status, Bird Alley is demolished and redeveloped.

Another Door: Hong Kong Art Museum. Kum sets free dozens of live finches inside the gallery. They find other places to perch, but come back for food and shelter; the artwork is claimed as their own. It's easy to focus on the cage as a statement about living conditions for the masses or as a commentary on the colonial disenfranchisement of its non-British subjects. In demonstrations, the Pro-Democracy Party also uses bird cages, symbolically smashed. But it's *Door*, not *Cage*. *Door* invokes the fluidity of space, home and identity. Hong Kong is about migration, a city of refugees, and the "return" of Hong Kong to China marks another chapter in a story of movement and dislocation.

Hong Kong Art Museum. This architecturally prominent visual arts institution on the lip of TsimShaTsui only recently began showing photography and installation art. The more progressive Hong Kong Arts Centre uses visionary interdiscipinary exhibitions to explore what art, design and culture may be, but funding constraints limit curatorial programming. The Goethe Institut recently opened a gallery, occasionally exhibiting local artists. Most accessible is the Fringe Club Gallery, providing first-come, first-served exhibitions in an open-mike programme. Other venues include the Regional and Urban Council centres, colleges and universities, most notably Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Centre for the Arts. Commercial galleries seldom show provocative work, with the exception of Hanart Gallery which nonetheless specializes in Mainland Chinese artists. Then there are collectives such as Para/Site that rent spaces and organize temporary exhibitions.

Installation art in Hong Kong is relatively new. Many artists who had been using paints or inks most of their careers began building sculptures and installations in the early 1990s, influenced by younger graduates of foreign art schools and international art magazines. A new sensibility started to take shape, and propelled by the heady countdown to 1997, political statements and responses to censorship became popular concerns. In 1995, *New Man*, by British sculptor Elisabeth Frank was displayed in a commercial building only to be declared indecent by the Obscene Article Tribunal and its exposed penis subsequently covered. Protests by the art community resulted in changes to legislature. In 1996, a Mainland Chinese artist who recently moved to Hong Kong caused considerable debate over a performance piece in Queen Victoria Park. Poon Shing Lui poured a bucket of red paint over the 19th century bronze statue of Queen Victoria, then smashed in her nose with a hammer, "liberating the Hong Kong people from colonial culture while reminding them of their return to their motherland."[2] What this action crystallized was how, from a Mainland perspective, Hong Kong was perceived: once again it was the lost girl-child waiting to be returned to her mother. Ironically though, Hong Kong's history is as a site of refuge for millions who fled civil unrest from the so-called "motherland," to risk all for a chance elsewhere.

Work, in Hong Kong, must be assembled instantly, displayed quickly, then it's gone. Next! Space is held at a premium, rents are staggering, studio space uncommon, experimental galleries unfeasible. Perhaps the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, formed in 1995, will give artists more opportunities than before and provide those with foreign passports more reason to return.

Astronauts are the latest class produced by 1997, emigrants abroad who return to Hong Kong for their livelihood. In Vancouver, where many astronauts roam, *doors* are open, condominiums and houses vacant, waiting for their birds to land.

1967. My family's history was shaped by coinciding incidents: riots in Hong Kong and changes to Canadian immigration policy that relaxed preferences for those of European descent. So we joined the exodus. I remember the excitement of the move as a young child: big jet plane with visits to the cockpit, stopover in Tokyo where people talked funny, motel on Kingsway in Vancouver, then a small apartment in Burnaby. By this time, physical and psychic displacement set in. From my child's eye view, the world (Canada) had become inscrutable. Our dominant cultural privilege was lost and therefore our sense of normalcy.

The Cage Maker evokes the sense of loss through cultural dislocation. Cages are used again, but made of wire mesh, suspended from the ceiling with small ceramic cups, photographs and texts laminated onto slips of translucent fabric, placed within. More fragments are strewn across the floor. Lone light bulbs, amber and orange, dangle amidst the skeletal frames of a bed and chair.

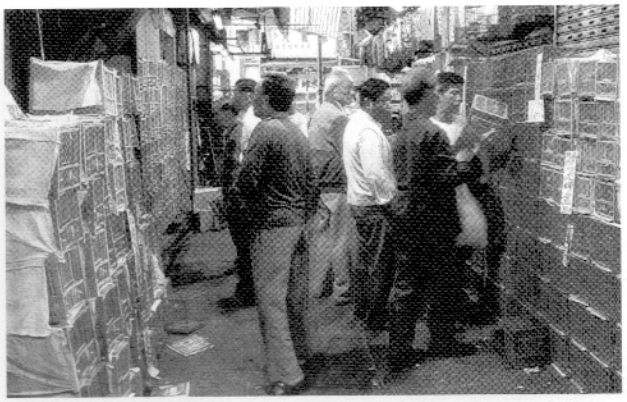
The images and texts from personal and media archives contain vestiges of Mary Sui-yee Wong's family photo albums intertwined with newsworthy events such as historic policy changes to Canadian immigration laws and Hong Kong's imminent repatriation. The bed, chair and cup are basic home furnishings stripped more bare, even. The melodramatic lighting and slowly rotating cages evoke a sense of cultural and visceral dislocation, in a space spacious yet constricted. For those whose migration is involuntary, who embark on a journey into uncharted experiences, their frames of reference in the new world may make no sense at all. Understanding has been skewed. Fear of the unknown, of a dominant foreign culture, language and customs, can rupture one's sense of reality, creating a miasmic longing for familiarity, similarity. *The Cage Maker* commemorates those who have endured intense alienation and psychic anguish in their struggle to adjust and adapt to a new cultural environment.

Jamelie Hassan takes a different tack. Instead of moving away from Hong Kong, she sails towards it. She begins with knowledge of historical connections between West Asia,

India and China. Her research on European imperial expansion and trade exposes the movement of ships, people and capital between three port cities; Bombay, Hong Kong and Vancouver, a series of transfers that stretches over two oceans and two centuries. "So began my search for a suitable boat to bring to Vancouver for the exhibition . . ."[3] Years ago, it was Jamelie who posed the question to me whether artists in Vancouver were responding to Hong Kong '97. And so this project began.

The storefront vitrines at Access Gallery were filled with *Not Unlike Hong Kong*. Blacked out, the two flanking windows each have a hole through which passers-by peer in from the street, as voyeurs who consume slide projections of Hong Kong and Lantau Island on one side, of Bombay on the other. The moving shadow of a boat interrupts the dissolving imagery, as the Bombay-built bamboo souvenir—a remnant of its naval glory—dangles in front of each projector. The central vitrine contains a sea of shredded paper where more bamboo boats bob about. The exteriors of the glass cases read a text in English, Chinese and Hindi highlighting the role Bombay played in Hong Kong's history.[4] During the Opium War, the British used Bombay as a base from which swift "China Clippers" played a significant role running the drug. On such a ship, the treaty ceding Hong Kong Island from China to England was signed. This work exposes how the machinations of British imperialism transmitted from one Asian seaport to another, and how, after the original contract expired 150 years later, the movement of people and trade continues on to a third city, Vancouver.

1997. More Asian immigrants in Vancouver than ever before, visible proof that indeed it sits upon the Pacific Rim. Public school system struggles to indoctrinate "minority" children (who comprise the majority) with a new way of thinking, called English as a Second Language. Dominant language is under siege, or so perceived by those who think that since English took over as the primary mode of communication in the late 19th century on the west coast, things would forever be spelled the same. Conversely, Modern Language courses include Japanese, German, Spanish, plus immersion in French and Mandarin. No Cantonese, that's not official Chinese. Hong Kong along with most Chinese-Canadian pioneers dissed, disenfranchised again.



Bird Alley, Kowloon

In *Past & Future*, Choi Yan-chi's installation simulates a public school classroom. A grid of student desks face a blank blackboard and teacher's desk, on which a television monitor sits. A video plays a sequence of children raising their hands in response to a question. Bells ring at intervals, followed by sounds of scraping chairs and desks on the floor as students get up to leave. Notebooks on a shelving unit nearby contain completed assignments, documents of work done, lessons learned.

The artwork is strict in layout, controlled and regimented. Systematic education indoctrinates Hong Kong youth for future subordination in the crown colony. This is the site for establishing the relationship between the governing mechanism and public, as if everyone will grow up to become a civil servant. The bells ring to signal the end of this lecture, this era. But as each class ends, another begins, and the British curriculum will merely be replaced by that of the Chinese.

A respite, nevertheless, is found within this repressive space. A series of colour photographs on the walls, of

graffiti scribed and carved into desks the artist found in a working-class neighbourhood school in Kowloon, detail unsanctioned activities when the teacher's back is turned. The architecture that houses the missing bodies of the students has been indelibly inked with mental driftings and engraved pop cultural quotations. These desks are the site of personal expression, they trace illicit conversations between constituents of this arena, their complaints, their juvenile concerns, their subtle acts of resistance.

In *Foodscapes*, voices are also prominent, but not covertly, of two individuals deeply immersed in dialogue. The result is a series of ten inkjet on canvas panels by Lee Ka-sing that converse with the poetry of Leung Ping-kwan. Original and found images are layered with literary texts, engravings, postcards, faxes; whatever is encoded with meaning understood between these two as they engage in musings about the infinite details and love of life and eating. The world is approached through its multitudes of cultural cuisines and traditions, how such gastronomic experience exposes specificities of cultural experience. Communality is integral to life, as in the act of eating with others, how these others are special, or become special, in opportunities for sharing, learning, tasting. Tasting as a transgressive act, cultural or personal, and first and foremost, an experience to be shared, an act of dialogue.

Pun Choi on New Year's Eve. A traditional Hakka dish, a New Territories version of a potlatch, a huge ceramic bowl filled with everything available stewed forever, set in the centre of huge tables and shared. "Your divorce finally came through," Leung's text reads, just in time for 1997. "Goodbye to one relationship. Hello to another. Are you happy?" It's New Year's Eve, and what is being celebrated? Different agendas for different people, allegiances, desires. Ruminations for the future abound, yet the details of everyday existence remain, like the foodscape of Pun Choi. Life continues after New Years, as it will after July 1st.

In Lee's inkjet image, is the flight of the phoenix a metaphor for the emigration of Hong Kong capital and expertise? Or the long-awaited reunion with the dragon, the mythological marriage between the yin and yang? Or a journey from one cultural or imperial space and into another? The phoenix carries a lady, empress, guanyin, who in turn carries a symbol of longevity, a plate of peaches. Auspicious times, but are they fleeing? Maps of the celestial heavens are in German and Latin, suggesting foreign territories yet to travel. Arrows in the skies point to different forces that affect destiny, concentric semicircles are like "Fireworks, umbrella-like, cascade from the skies," over the heads of the phoenix and passengers. Pun Choi signifies the end and the beginning.

I've only had it once, in a restaurant on Fraser Street and they used a plastic tub instead, looked like a garbage can. Had to stand up to reach in, tasted good but not familiar even though I'm half Hakka. When my great grandmother died, my family hosted a feast in the village that lasted for three days, three meals a day. I don't know if they'll do that on July 1st. Pun Choi is all mixed up, offers everyone something different. Leung writes, "From a brown hotchpotch you take a mouthful. Is it meat? Or vegetable? Are there vegetables I like?" Shall I take another bite? Or is it too late to emigrate? Hard to know what the future will bring, except, like Pun Choi, it won't be more of the same.

1. Subway.
2. *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, September 17, 1996. Quoted from Oscar Ho, "Toward 1997: A Curatorial Response," *West Coast Line* 30.3 (1996).
3. From an early draft of her artist's statement.
4. Original English text excerpted from Myriam Kaye, *An Illustrated Guide to Bombay & Goa* (Hong Kong: The Guidebook Company, 1990) 34. Chinese translation by Leung Ping-kwan, Hindi by Mosaic Translation.

CITY AT THE END OF TIME

CHOI YAN-CHI

JAMELIE HASSAN

KUM CHI-KEUNG

LEE KA-SING

LEUNG PING-KWAN

MARY SUI-YEE WONG

HONG KONG 1997

Texts by Leung Ping-kwan, Scott Toguri McFarlane & Henry Tsang

ORGANIZERS & CURATORS

Henry Tsang & Scott Toguri McFarlane

EXHIBITIONS

Choi Yan-chi

Jamelie Hassan

Kum Chi-keung

Lee Ka-sing & Leung Ping-kwan

Mary Sui-yee Wong

POETRY READINGS

jamila ismail and Leung Ping-kwan
hosted by Jim Wong-Chu

PUBLIC LECTURES

Ackbar Abbas: "Seeing Through Hong Kong: Cinema and Architecture"

Rey Chow: "Larry Feign, Ethnographer of a 'Lifestyle': Political Cartoons from Hong Kong"

K. C. Lo (Lo Kwai-cheung): "Muscles and Hong Kong Cultural Identity: On Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Wong Yuk Long's Kung Fu Comics"

Leung Ping-kwan: "Representations of Hong Kong"

Mary Sui-yee Wong: Artist's talk

Choi Yan-chi: Artist's talk

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Artspeak Gallery

Foto•Base Gallery

Helen Pitt Gallery

Vancouver Art Gallery

Simon Fraser University Harbour Centre

Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design

PUBLICATIONS

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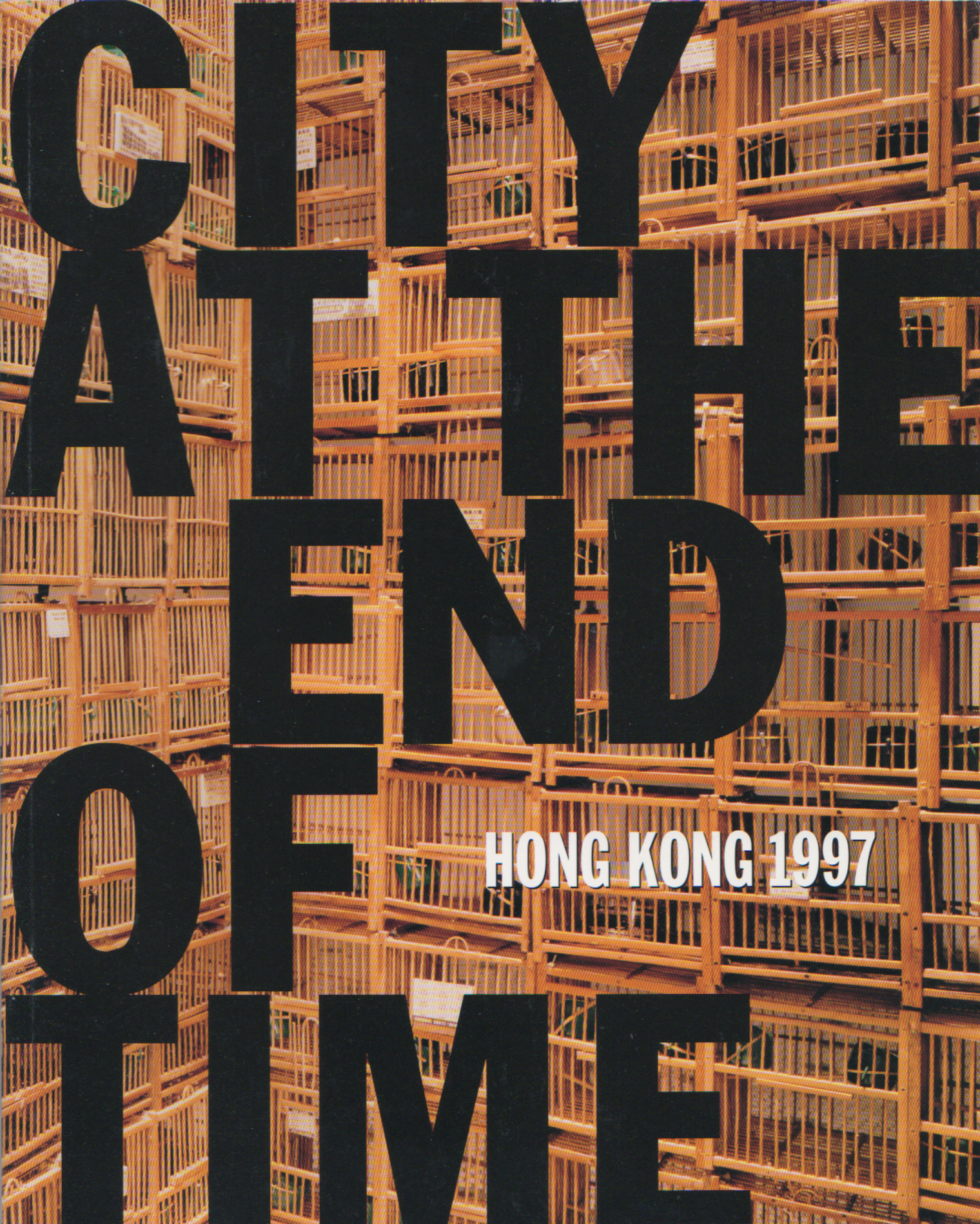
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