

Contemporary Magazine

# KALEIDOSCOPE

Issue 18 (Summer 2013), highlighting ANDRA URSUTA, SHANZHAI BIENNIAL, SERGEI TCHEREPNIN, YNGVE HOLEN and PETRIT HALILAJ, investigating AN UPDATED NOTION OF MATERIALITY, exploring the curatorial practice of MASSIMILIANO GIONI, featuring our regulars, tips and three special inserts.

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# PANORAMA

## Hong Kong then



and  
now

Leung Chi Wo,  
David Clarke and  
Lam Tung-pang  
in conversation

Photography by  
Ann Woo

**LEUNG CHI WO** Our idea with this round table for *Kaleidoscope* is to attempt to articulate the alphabet of our art development. As you all know, Hong Kong is undergoing a phase of rapid change. There are more galleries opening, in particular blue chips from overseas, the first Art Basel Hong Kong, a number of new residency programs, plus the impending opening of the M+ museum and the Central Police Station contemporary arts center. The three of us are from different generations and have each observed the Hong Kong art scene from our own generation's perspective, so it will be interesting to speak from personal experience. Let's introduce ourselves first. I am Leung Chi Wo. I graduated from the Fine Arts department of the Chinese University in 1990. I had a short stay in Europe with scholarships in Italy and Belgium before returning to Hong Kong in 1992. Back in Hong Kong, I made artwork and survived with odd jobs before pursuing an MFA at the Chinese University again from 1995 to 1997. During this time, I started the non-profit artspace Para/Site with six other friends. I'm currently teaching in the School of Creative Media, which is part of the City University of Hong Kong.



Art Basel Hong Kong  
Exterior of HKCEC

**DAVID CLARKE** I'm David Clarke and I'm a professor in the Department of Fine Arts of the University of Hong Kong. I came to Hong Kong in 1986.

**LAM TUNG-PANG** I'm Lam Tung-pang. I graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2002 and completed my MFA in London in 2004. In 2006 I moved back to Hong Kong where I currently have my own studio in Fo Tan.

**LCW** Dave, what happened when you first arrived in Hong Kong? Can you tell us about the art scene at this time?

**DC** When I first arrived the visual art scene was fairly small, both in terms of its infrastructure and the number of artists working here. One positive thing about Hong Kong is its long history of artistic modernity during the 1960s and '70s, during a time that mainland China was pretty much closed, especially during the cultural revolution years when artists had immense restrictions on what they could do. Hong Kong's openness to the world was a resource, especially its contact with international modernity within the frame of Chinese culture. Although art in Hong Kong had a distinct history, it felt a bit on the sleepy side when I arrived. It took me a few years to find local initiatives that I could get involved with.

**LCW** The first wave of a so-called avant-garde emerged in Hong Kong in the 1980s, and people don't talk about that much now. How do you feel about the term avant-garde?

**DC** It's as good a word as any, but I think the main thing is that at that time there was a move towards making art that was distinctly of its time and place. Although we often break things down into decades, we could also use key dates. When the UK and the PRC signed the Joint Declaration in 1984, a new moment began in which people started to think more about Hong Kong itself and its specific fate. That story becomes more complicated after June 4th, 1989, when the question of Hong Kong's future, and how that related to China, became a major issue. The question of identity in Hong Kong art emerges against this historical background. Not as a programmatic project, but in order to make art that relates to the real situation that artists were living in.

#### Biography

**LEUNG CHI WO** (b. 1968, Hong Kong) co-founded Para/Site Art Space in 1996. In 2001, he was featured in the first Hong Kong pavilion of the 49th Biennale di Venezia. Recent exhibitions include the 4th Marrakech Biennale, the 3rd and 4th editions of the Guangzhou Triennale and solo shows at Rokeby, London and International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York.







LCW Exploring identity issues became a popular concern for artists including myself during the '90s. I also saw artists addressing such issues with a rather obvious artistic strategy that relates to the grand narratives of Chinese and Hong Kong politics. It was also the time that we started Para/Site, in 1996. Many other institutions held shows in this context such as the Fringe Club; that is relatively quiet today. But then it would organize exhibitions of contemporary Hong Kong art, inviting well-known artists to participate in exhibitions with themes about Hong Kong culture. I think it's related to the handover and the artists addressed it in this way. I would like to hear from Tung-pang as someone from the post-'97 generation. How did you see the handover of Hong Kong, and did that somehow affect your choice of art studies or your practice?



West Kowloon project

#### Biography

DAVID CLARKE is Professor in the Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong. He is both an art historian and an artist. His most recent book is *Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World* (2011), and his work was most recently seen in "Market Forces" at Osage Kwun Tong, Hong Kong.

LT I don't know how it was in the '80s or '90s, but in the 2000s art was more like a hobby. At the same time, I can see that art has become much more professionalized in the past ten years because artists have more chances to show their works in local artist-run spaces, galleries and museums—as well as museums and biennales overseas. The infrastructure has changed so quickly over the past thirteen years. M+ and the West Kowloon project took more than twenty years to finish, and many people here question why we didn't have it earlier. But now when I think back, I think that as long as the M+ and West Kowloon Cultural District are still under construction there is a dream. A dream attracts people to come to Hong Kong. I never expected, when I graduated in London, to meet different curators and museum directors, but when I came back to Hong Kong a lot of people would come to Fo Tan to visit me, Lee Kit and Pak Sheung Chuen. It seemed to me that there was no hope or future in 2000—we would make art and just survive, just house up in the studio for five or six years making our work. When we came to meet people, they were surprised by the contrast between artists from Hong Kong and mainland China.

DC Of course it's good that Hong Kong artists are getting more attention. Projects like "Hong Kong Eye" at the Saatchi Gallery in London would have been an impossible to imagine a decade ago. Yet I also have mixed feelings about this process. I would say it's more a process of normalization. Now Hong Kong is starting to become a little bit more connected and integrated into the international art world. We're one of the three auction capitals internationally and now host an edition of Art Basel. The marketplace is showing some interest in Hong Kong art, but in some ways it was better back in the bohemian 1980s when nobody cared about it! The establishment of the Hong Kong Art Development Council in the mid-'90s was a key landmark. Even though there wasn't a market for Hong Kong art there was governmental funding after that. Many art spaces came into being in the middle of the 1990s, like 1A Space and Artist Commune. They couldn't have grown without the availability of ADC funding. You could characterize Hong Kong art—a bit crudely—as having three generations: a "bohemian" generation, followed by a "post-ADC" generation, and then by an "art market" generation.

LCW It's true. I was still a student when I went to the Quart Society, which was one of the earliest arts spaces or independent organizations.

DC That was the first place in Hong Kong that I exhibited any artwork. The reason it didn't last was that it was funded by the artists themselves.







LCW True, but there's also a process of so-called professionalization or institutionalization. This becomes especially clear when you look at different organizations like the Fringe Club or Videotage. They somehow chose to pursue different paths, which shows us that you have a choice in how want to respond to the increased number of commercial galleries and professionally practicing artists. I think it's interesting that recently even Fo Tan, as an open studio event, has somehow incorporated itself as an organization. That also reflects something. Do we have any ideas about that?

DC The politicization of art, and its meaning in relation to broader society, was a big breakthrough after June 4th in the late 1980s. It made Hong Kong an interesting place to work. I remember putting a work that manipulated an image of Mao into a show at the Hong Kong Arts Center for the first anniversary of June 4th. Of course, many artists did similar things in mainland China later in the 1990s, but they weren't really able to exhibit it in China itself.

LCW Artists have always participated in these discussions; this was also the case with the handover in the '90s. Making and exhibiting art became a way to contribute to the conversation about Hong Kong's future, its identity and history. This was extremely fulfilling for artists who participated. They didn't earn any money from that, it was just a good feeling. I do believe that artists today would like to have that sense of fulfillment as well. That said, perhaps artists today have more diverse objectives than in the '90s.



Para/Site

LT I think these diverse objectives are the result of complicated social conditions. There's lost trust between local citizens and their government, and also between Hong Kong and China. You can see this tension when the government proposed national education. Nowadays some artists express concern about political issues, even engaging with them in their practice or playing a role in demonstrations or strikes. Also, government funding for art events and corporate spending that includes art in its marketing strategy plays a role in shaping the structure of the local art scene. Although the art scene seems to have experienced a boom in recent years, critical writing and the development of a local art history still lags far behind the development of the art scene. We have an art opening almost every night of the week, yet there is very little writing about what is going on about the local art scene. The only local art history book is written by a mainland scholar and it contains many inaccuracies.

DC I feel that maybe we haven't put enough effort into developing the whole ecology. The government always focuses on building big institutions.

LT Or they put money into making big events.

LCW Those are the visible things.

DC Things have become imbalanced. Until recently, Hong Kong was far behind other cities of its size and wealth in terms of the number of artists it trains. A lot of artists had to go overseas to study.

LT There's only one book written about Hong Kong's art history, but it is from the mainland and written in Chinese. What about the development of our own local history?

#### Biography

LAM TUNG-PANG (b. 1978, Hong Kong) lives and works in Hong Kong. Lam has been awarded the Arts Scholarship of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the Hunting Art Prizes Young Artist of the Year, the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial Award, and the Asian Cultural Council Fellowship. Recent exhibitions include "Hong Kong Eye" at the Saatchi Gallery, London; Chinese Culture Center, San Francisco; Hong Kong Museum of Art; Hong Kong Heritage Museum; and Art | Basel | Hong Kong.







DC It's an identity problem—the art history of Hong Kong needs to be generated from this site in the same way that the art itself is. Hong Kong art wasn't well-understood in the international arena for a long time. People had a monolithic notion of what China was and Hong Kong just didn't fit that cliché. It was almost invisible. It's only in the last few years that Chinese art has become so well-known that there is now space to understand Hong Kong within it. I still worry that this will normalize Hong Kong art, that it will produce a western-centered understanding of what is interesting in Hong Kong art. When we came up with the concept of the M+ museum, of which I was on the working group, we very much emphasized the importance of an institution that takes a Hong Kong perspective, not just one which simply concerned itself with Hong Kong alone. Because Hong Kong is semi-detached from the rest of China, with an internal border and its own legal system and so forth, it offers a great vantage point to see what is going on in the world. I think you can see more clearly when you're a bit removed from the centers of power. Hong Kong is a bit detached, but it is also very connected to the wider world in all kinds of ways, through the free movement of ideas, people and commodities. That's what makes it work.

LT That's what you think is unique about Hong Kong art, right?

LCW I do feel optimistic in a way. The younger generation of artists and fifteen-year-old student leaders are encouraging. People's social concerns are palpable; they allow themselves to engage with critical situations. However, the economic situation is worrisome. If you want to have an open society and open situations, you also need to envision how people can take part in it economically. Many young galleries couldn't survive here, despite having excellent programs.

LT Even though it's a process, many things are happening at once. The private companies want to invest in art projects, but we've historically lacked education in Hong Kong. When these companies try to organize something or provide support for the arts they have no idea where they should allocate the money. I think we always follow examples from overseas, both in terms of artistic practice and education. We could look closer to home, especially when discussing art and social issues. I think the students here in Hong Kong have a strong sense of belonging to this city. It could be a good start for local education and I really hope that can be implemented in our art education system.

LCW I'm not sure if Hong Kong will make it. Whatever happens depends on whether diversity is possible, as it provides a crucial framework for creative work. Our funding policies, galleries and institutions must account for the diversity of artists' practices. I think that is a key issue in terms of galleries, artists and the people who will write history.



Central Police Station