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A photograph of two men standing on a boat, looking out over a body of water. In the foreground, a large, vibrant bouquet of pink and yellow peonies is held in a decorative vase. The man on the right is in profile, wearing a dark jacket. The man on the left is further back, also in profile. In the background, a large ship is visible on the water, and a bridge or industrial structure is on the shore. The sky is overcast.

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Words about Memories but Not Exactly: On Leung Chi Wo's Artistic Practice¹



Like Leung Chi Wo, who commuted between Hong Kong and Shenzhen in his youth, I once spent time commuting back and forth between my place of residence in Beijing and Shenzhen. However, that would not have been enough to entice me to curate the exhibition that I did about Leung Chi Wo's work (OCAT Shenzhen, April 25–June 30, 2015). Meanwhile, Leung Chi Wo's experience of crossing the border with his mother, travelling from Hong Kong to the People's Hospital in Bao'an county (now Shenzhen People's Hospital) to diagnose his sinusitis, eventually became the starting point from which he created his latest work, *Shenzhen Mine 1973*, in 2015. For this work, the artist enlarges his old medical record card and covered it with Plexiglas, on which he carved a map of the route from Lo Wu Control Point, the crossing between Hong Kong and mainland China, to the People's Hospital in Shenzhen. Concurrently, an

Leung Chi Wo, *Shenzhen Mine 1973*, 2015, photographs covered with laser engraving on Plexiglas, video projection, electric fan, old magazine cover, aluminum disk, coin. Courtesy of the artist.

Leung Chi Wo, *Shenzhen Mine 1973* (details), 2015, photographs covered with laser engraving on Plexiglas, video projection, electric fan, old magazine cover, aluminum disk, coin. Courtesy of the artist.



Left and right: Leung Chi Wo, *Shenzhen Mine 1973* (details), 2015, photographs covered with laser engraving on Plexiglas, video projection, electric fan, old magazine cover, aluminum disk, coin. Courtesy of the artist.



aluminum disk was installed on the gallery wall, its centre inlaid with a one *fen* coin engraved with the year 1973, around which he inscribed the English word “MINE” and the suggestion “PRESS BUTTON,” rendered in both Chinese and English through the technique of seal cutting, a traditional art form of cutting a pattern or texts into metal. By pressing the coin with one's finger, the audience can activate a fan located within the space, which blows wind onto the cover of an English copy of *China Pictorial* that bears a photograph of a mine worker. As the wind lifts the picture, it reveals a video of the sky, projected on the wall, that the artist captured on his journey from Lo Wu Control Point to the People's Hospital. Once the participant releases his or her finger, the fan immediately stops, and the magazine cover falls back down, covering the projection: the searchlight on the miner's head in the picture can now be seen to overlap precisely with the light emitted from the projector, illuminating the searchlight as if it were still working. On the white podium upon which the projector is installed, the artist placed a Jiangxi elementary school arts textbook published in 1973, set on a wooden ramp so that the wind can blow into its cover. In this work, Leung Chi Wo makes use of verbal puns and objects that are subtle references, as if playing a game of picture matching. In only a few brief gestures, he manages to map the particular context of a historical era and builds several small channels that allow the audience to enter this time period. Leung Chi Wo is adept at translating his own stories into mediums through which changes in a place, a community, or even an ideology are told of; meanwhile, any interpretation

or imagination of geography, politics, and history he undertakes to express is always reincarnated in the form of the individual in his work.

During those three years I travelled back and forth between Beijing and Shenzhen, working in the latter, my attitude toward the relationship between Shenzhen and Hong Kong went through several stages of transformation: from expecting their geographical proximity to produce innate affinities between the two cities' art worlds, to being shocked by the absence of such an affinity, and finally to feeling that I had to do something to fill this lack. Even though the number of checkpoints has increased between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, the number of people crossing at each of these checkpoints has not decreased as a result; nor has the amount of time it takes to pass through them. In the field of art, exchange and dialogue between Hong Kong and Shenzhen have not become more frequent and familiar because of their geographical proximity, simplified administrative procedures, and easier means of transportation. Meanwhile, the historical origin and meaning of this indifference is even more profound. For many Chinese, the decision regarding whether to move to Hong Kong or stay in the mainland around the year of 1949 determined the differences in their fates and in the later trajectories of their thought. Hong Kong's border is not just a physical obstacle—it is also a kind of cultural, ideological, and psychological barrier, and one of identity. Over the course of decades, the economic ties between Hong Kong and Shenzhen have never waned, yet in other fields, neither of the two is really interested in the other. Economic activities certainly fulfill some of the needs of each side, and people seem content to avoid any interaction beyond this level.

As a result of mainland China's massive economic development and the growing confidence of mainlanders over the past decade, Hong Kong is no longer merely a destination to be revered or desired, but one that mainlanders are able to occupy through acts of consumption. In this new context, Hong Kong's history and unique social and cultural texture seem more insignificant and unworthy than ever. While mainlanders' consumption of a variety of goods in Hong Kong—from daily products and luxury goods to real estate and services—is in a sense transforming the genes of the city by providing income and thereby producing a certain dependence, it has also bred various forms of exclusion. More importantly, even if it was once the case that mainlanders were interested in Hong Kong's distinct system and culture, one way or another, this interest and curiosity has grown terribly weak as a result of bloated egos. Recently, the escalating political conflict between the mainland and Hong Kong has uncovered a long-hidden mutual distrust, rendering it both transparent and inescapable.

Admittedly, mainland China's understanding of the artists and art scene of Hong Kong is no deeper than our understanding of the European or American art worlds—nor has our shared cultural lineage generated any mutual approval. In large part, Hong Kong remains a “foreign land,” and

Hong Kong artists are still considered “foreign artists” in the eyes of the mainland art world. Bolstered by today’s rampant apathy of mainlanders towards the difficulty Hong Kong is in, this alienation only keeps growing. Recently, Hong Kong has been marginalized even further, as conflict with the mainland continues to escalate. The contrast between the aggressiveness of the political discourse in mainland China and the sheer disrespect of its people, on the one hand, and the weakness that permeates Hong Kong’s society and its bureaucrats, on the other, has generated tremendous pressure and a sense of loss of political freedom as well as its sense of independence.

In recent years, prompted by frequent iterations of international art fairs, a large amount of Chinese and foreign capital has been flowing into Hong Kong to set up gallery branches, which seem to be gradually transforming Hong Kong into one of the art hubs on which the entire world sets its focus.² However, these changes only allow for more and more mainland artists and international artist-celebrities to exhibit in Hong Kong, and this influx of international art tourists and industry professionals is mostly due to mainland artists because of their strong reputations and the market that supports them. Meanwhile, the reality that local Hong Kong artists and practitioners are already working in a space of few opportunities has not improved as a result of these new arrivals. In this new historical situation, it seems that the work of Hong Kong artists has become even more invisible because others are receiving most of the attention, and we are thus no longer in a position to fully investigate the state and history of artistic practices in Hong Kong, let alone to learn from the sources and methodologies behind its thinking.

Leung Chi Wo, *Domestica Invisible #1*, 2005, C print, 120 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Although I had never met Leung Chi Wo prior to curating this exhibition at OCAT Shenzhen, his work was not entirely unfamiliar to me, for he is presumably one of the few Hong Kong artists whose work has been shown in the mainland rather frequently, and he has previously participated in major group exhibitions including the Shanghai Biennale and the Guangzhou Triennial. The work he is best known for among mainland

audiences must be the *Domestica Invisible* series (2004–07), composed of images he captured that subtly portray the real living conditions of Hong Kong citizens through their “not-for-storage” spaces—underneath furniture items, in the corners of a room, etc.—being filled with miscellaneous objects in common Hong Kong households. These images are each 150 by 120 centimetres—almost the same size as the real scenes they document—and were shot from eye level. Of the more than eighty households



Leung Chi Wo visited, some were those of his close friends, including art practitioners, while others were strangers to him. Conducting interviews with the members of each household (these interviews were not disclosed to the public along with the images) allowed the artist to form more concrete connections with these spaces he was investigating and photographing. While the series is indeed a visual archival record of the use of household spaces, what Leung Chi Wo really values is the human presence in them; the artist considers human figures to be the key component of these photographs, although they are not literally depicted in the photos. The research and effort that went into the making of these images, although not literally visible within the work, still imbues them with an anthropological perspective and interest: it places the individual within a framework of interacting regional, social, cultural, and political contexts, instead of postulating the individual as a category that is entirely formed by one's external environment and material conditions.

Leung Chi Wo, *Domestica Invisible #20*, 2006, C print, 120 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

At our first meeting, Leung Chi Wo explained each of his works to me with the same great patience that he applies to their creation and that prompts

us to reconsider the aesthetic potentially embedded in his works through the investment of time, which is an important aspect of his practice. If we interpret “crouching” (蹲点) as the act of watching over one’s subject of investigation for a long period of time, paying lengthy concern to a subject of investigation, then “crouching” must be considered one of the fundamental methods underlying Leung Chi Wo’s creative practice—more precisely, it involves personally entering the situation of a topic or subject and organically working out suitable ways to depict it through thorough observation and reflection. Leung Chi Wo’s work conveys subtle emotion, wordplay, and multilayered imagination, depiction, and elaboration of the subjects he describes. Through in-depth contact with his work, I have now discovered a vivid picture composed of the various interwoven angles, connections, and aspects of his last twenty years of practice.

Leung Chi Wo, *Asia’s World City*, 2008/2015, wall text, set of 12 photos, inkjet prints, each 50 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist and OCAT Shenzhen.



This survey exhibition was not only Leung Chi Wo’s first mainland solo exhibition, but also the first survey exhibition in his career as an artist. I reached an agreement with him to attempt an exhibition that, instead of merely displaying his artworks, would showcase his multilayered and interlaced working methods. Under such a premise, neither time nor medium could be the basis for the exhibition’s curation. After many rounds of discussion, we decided to weave together the crisscrossing references of his body of work with thirty-one sets of works, divided into five themes: “city and its myth,” “subjective memory,” “text and language of uncertainty,” “my small art world,” and “perceptive space.” These themes were not explicitly labeled in any form throughout the exhibition, but they flow beneath the surface of his work like an undercurrent, with each of the works often simultaneously touching on several of the themes. The two of us soon realized that any attempt to sort out his works by medium of production or discrete category were futile. Instead, the most appropriate method involved nothing more than understanding the origin of these works and the process of their creation, including the personal experiences of the artist, with the same patience he put into making them.



Leung Chi Wo, installing *Asia's World City*, 2008. This is the only remaining banner from the project. Courtesy of the artist.

During the installation process, I had a conversation in Cantonese with Leung Chi Wo in front of his piece *Asia's World City*. This public art project, which he initially created in 2008, was re-enacted on a wall papered in blue, on which an eyeful of wishes was printed.

Leung Chi Wo solicited people's ideas and imaginings about the future of "Asia's World City" through online sources. This title was a product of a Hong Kong government initiative to launch promotional slogans for the city in 2003; however, the ambiguity of this expression left the title's specific reference to Hong Kong unclear. Of the wishes Leung Chi Wo collected, some referred to specific needs for Hong Kong, while others were abstract musings about "Asia." The artist handpicked twelve unaccomplished wishes from the several hundred responses he collected, rewrote them in a negative tone, and hung them as Asia's World City banners along Hollywood Road in Hong Kong's Central district. According to Hong Kong law, any banner must be approved by the government before it is placed in a public space. As a result, all twelve banners that he hung in public were confiscated, except for one, which was displayed outside the exhibition hall.

Soon after graduating from the Fine Arts Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Leung Chi Wo spent a short time with Asia Television and Joint Publishing (HK). Regarding this period, Leung Chi Wo says:

I worked as an assistant editor for Joint Publishing (HK), a job that had a strong and lasting influence on me to this day. It was between 1992 and 1995, a total of two years and a half; since this was just before the return of Hong Kong [to mainland China], whether in publishing or in the realm of culture at large, there was a great expectation for people to understand Hong Kong in this new light, including its culture and history. . . . I grew up learning the colonialist viewpoint; we never studied the history of Hong Kong in our high school and elementary school curriculum, nor were we introduced to its culture and art. Therefore, the two and a half years I spent at Joint Publishing were like an opportunity for re-education. Many of my colleagues were highly educated—the editors at Joint Publishing are extremely knowledgeable, everyone has a doctoral degree, and I learned a great deal about Hong Kong from them—I had a great time working there, and I really enjoyed the job.”³

It is apparent that during his twenty years of practice, Hong Kong has repeatedly returned as the main subject of the artist's work, and its history

Leung Chi Wo, *Tai Wai, New Territories*, 1994, gelatin silver print, 40.5 x 40.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Leung Chi Wo, *To Kwa Wan, Kowloon*, 1997, gelatin silver print, 40.5 x 40.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



and current state are sources wherein the artist discovers endless threads to weave together his myriad practices. In the early 1990s, Leung Chi Wo returned to Hong Kong after studying photography in Italy under the tutelage of Italian pinhole photographer Paolo Gioli; imitating the creative methods of nineteenth-century travelling photographers, he began to record the cityscape of Hong Kong with pinhole photographs taken from the point of view of a tourist, focusing on Hong Kong architecture. Today, twenty years later, many of the places recorded in these photographs no longer exist. The



camera Leung Chi Wo used to shoot these photos is described by the artist as “Leung’s pinhole camera”—a photographic device whose exposure time ranges from twenty minutes to two hours. Since this camera has no lens or frame, the artist can neither estimate the result of a shot with accuracy nor carry out any intervention; however, during the lengthy period of waiting for

Top: Leung Chi Wo, *Prison of Victoria #1*, 2006, C print, 110 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Leung Chi Wo, *Prison of Victoria #2*, 2006, C print, 110 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Leung Chi Wo, *Sky by Liang Zhihe* #5, 2007, C print, from a set of 6, each 40 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



the exposure process to end, the photographer has the opportunity to face and watch the photographed subject for a long while.

Leung Chi Wo, detail of *Sky by Liang Zhihe*, 2007, C print, 40 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist and OCAT Shenzhen.



In 2006, Leung Chi Wo visited Hong Kong's Victoria Prison, which was decommissioned in 2005, and shot photographs inside the building. The uncanny atmosphere of the empty prison, together with the various facilities inside (a prison

kindergarten, where you can see images of the cartoon character Mickey Mouse; the open smoking space; a bathroom inside the cafeteria, etc.), evoke an indescribable sense of absurdity. By naming this series *Prison of Victoria*, rather than using the institution's actual name, Victoria Prison, Leung Chi Wo uses a conversion of language to make reference to Hong Kong's colonial history. Built in 1841, Victoria Prison was allegedly the first Western-style building erected in Hong Kong—the first thing the colonists built upon arriving in a strange land: a prison.

In Hong Kong, the intimate relationship between the use of language and the awareness of identity is particularly prominent against the backdrop of the city's colonial past, and this intimacy also constitutes one of the points of departure in Leung Chi Wo's artistic practice. Many of his works point directly to language, and especially to the origins and motives underlying the ideologies behind cultures of naming, depicting their complexity in indirect and subtle ways. In 2000, when he was invited to participate in several group exhibitions in the mainland, he discovered that his name was often written as "Liang Zhihe," in accordance with the rules of Pinyin, instead of as his English name, "Leung Chi Wo," which is spelled according to its pronunciation in Cantonese. In 2007, the tenth anniversary of the return of Hong Kong, the artist looked up into the sky from the rooftop



of his studio and took six photos (*Sky by Liang Zhihe*), signing his name with a pen on each of the photos in Pinyin, as “Liang Zhihe.” Outside the mainland, most people did not realize that “Liang Zhihe” was actually the same person as Leung Chi Wo; it seemed to them the name of another artist. Since differences in the spelling of a single name, resulting from the translation of linguistic and cultural contexts, can actually indicate steep cognitive disparities, does the translation of cultural and political contexts on a greater scale lead to even greater shock and oblivion? Leung Chi Wo must have had some foresight of these concerns.

Leung Chi Wo, *Only time can tell*, 2010, LED light, etched Plexiglas, C prints, each element 30 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In his work, Leung Chi Wo reflects on the oversimplification of historical records and the perceptual deviations it produces. Created in 2010, *Only time can tell* is an installation work using light. The photos included in this piece are close-up shots of the bullet holes on the former Hong Kong Legislative Council (LEGCO) Building, while the English text etched on the Plexiglas is a quote from Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter at the time, who commented upon the One Country Two Systems policy, “Only time can tell” (as recorded in the minutes of a meeting at the Legislative Council of Hong Kong in 1984). This work is included in *We Must Construct as Well as Destroy*, a series that consists of photography installations, lightboxes, publications, and sculpture. It takes the repaired bullet holes on the former LEGCO building as the starting point of its investigation. These bullet holes are known as products of World War II, whose flames seeped into Hong Kong; during the Japanese Occupation, the entire building became a base for Hong Kong’s gendarmerie. However, no record clearly indicates what party was responsible for these hundreds of bullet holes. Historically, they were simply ascribed to “enemy fire.” In this instance—a site of shifting power and conflict—the “enemy” remains anonymous and indefinite.

Leung Chi Wo, *HKABE2005*, 2006, wood engraving, video performance, 16 panels, each 50 x 70 cm, video, 6 mins. Courtesy of the artist and OCAT Shenzhen.



Leung Chi Wo, *HKABE2005*, 2006, wood engraving, video performance, 16 panels, each 50 x 70 cm, video, 6 mins. Courtesy of the artist and OCAT Shenzhen.



Leung Chi Wo’s practice is deeply rooted in Hong Kong’s art community, art politics, and art history. He is a witness to both people and affairs in this community as well as a member of the community who personally experienced its transformations while recording and commenting on them through his creations at different times. In early summer 2005, Leung Chi Wo was informally invited to be one of the jurors for the Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition; however, he did not accept the offer. Instead,



Leung Chi Wo, *Untitled (Words about Memories but Not Exactly)*, 2012, 7-channel video installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and OCAT Shenzhen.



Leung Chi Wo, video stills for *Untitled (Words about Memories but Not Exactly)*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

prompted by the occasion, he reflected upon the power relation between rules and artistic creation, producing the work *HKABE2005*. He reproduced the English text of the Biennial's Terms and Conditions for participating artists in reverse, with rearranged paragraphs, sentences, and punctuation, converting it into an opaque text with pronunciation of the reversed words and morphology of the format reminiscent of some obscure European language, or a Romanized Asian or Pacific language. This work was first presented as a performance where he read out his altered terms and conditions, and which he was inscribed as a text on sixteen pieces of wood. The text constituted Leung Chi Wo's address and remarks in his would-be capacity as a "juror." To make his more recent work, *Untitled (Words about Memories but Not Exactly)*, Leung Chi Wo spent six months with students at Hong Kong City University where he teaches, compiling, with the help of online search engines, the names of all the artists who have been written into the art history of Hong Kong since the 1980s and then filtering out all except those who haven't left any visible trace in the past ten years. He then invited seven artists and curators who lived through that era to recall their knowledge about the artists remaining on the list.



Leung Chi Wo, *CC Bureau*, 2004, performance and installation of wooden table with an aluminum and Formica finish, chairs, closed-circuit cameras and monitors, glasses of water, books. Courtesy of the artist.



Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong, *Museum of the Lost* (detail), 2015, installation. Courtesy of the artists.



Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong, *Museum of the Lost* (detail), 2015, installation. Courtesy of the artists.



Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong,
*Nun With Hands Behind Her
Back*, 2014, archival inkjet
print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy
of the artists.



Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong,
*French Voter With One Foot
Lift Off The Ground*, 2013,
archival inkjet print, 100 x 150
cm. Courtesy of the artists.

In the early 1990s, Leung Chi Wo co-founded the Para/Site Art Space with his wife, landscape designer and artist Sara Wong, together with a few other artists. Besides co-founding the space, they also collaborated on a variety of other projects, producing artworks such as *CC Bureau*, *City Cookie of Shanghai*, etc. In the last few years, they have committed themselves to a series of artworks that comprise the project *Museum of The Lost*. Taking newspaper photos as their points of departure, like archaeologists, they consult various documents and archives, appeal to personal imagination, and tirelessly retrace the history of the persons and events in the photos until all leads have been exhausted, eventually capturing through snapshots the backs of the human figures involved in the events they have investigated.⁴

These works that Leung Chi Wo has created in recent years are driven by a heightened distrust of the documentation of history and how it is dependent on which perspective people take when looking at it, whether in Hong Kong or the mainland. Due to some essentially artificial causes, some of Leung Chi Wo's artworks were not delivered to OCAT Shenzhen prior to the opening and remained absent throughout the exhibition. To some extent, these absences constitute almost a realistic portrait of the challenges involved in crossing the thin border between Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Throughout the process of our collaboration on the exhibition, Leung Chi Wo tried to communicate with our team in faltering Mandarin as best he could; meanwhile, I also tried to converse with him in my stammering Cantonese, hoping that in his mother tongue he could share more thoroughly his experiences and the thoughts behind his works. Although it was impossible to communicate as effectively as either of us would have liked, ultimately we each managed to enter the other's situation with an open mind, allowing for a space of patience and mutual understanding so that we were less confined by prejudices and preconceptions.

Notes

1. The title of this essay is taken from Leung's *Untitled (Words about Memoryless but Not Exactly)*, a work that calls to mind those creative practitioners who have ceased their activities in Hong Kong's art world over the past ten years and have thus been gradually forgotten, through interviews with those still active and their reflections.
2. Examples include Pace Gallery, White Cube, Pekin Fine Arts, and Galerie Perrotin.
3. "The Obscure Language: Leung Chi Wo in Conversation with Carol Yinghua Lu," unpublished conversation, 2015.
4. These photos are from the series *He was lost yesterday and we found him today*, 2010–14, which is a parallel project with *Museum of the Lost*. *Museum of the Lost* was also the exhibition title when these photos were shown.