

## HONG KONG COLLAGE OR THE INTIMACY OF DISTANCE

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### Abstract

This essay is an attempt at retracing a shared space of artistic inspiration within the intersection of the visual and the poetic in Hong Kong art. Focusing on the artistic collaboration between the quintessential Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan and the visual artist and designer Lee Ka-sing, I argue that the sites of such intersections map out a poetic sensibility that combines close affinity to or sympathy for the un-poetic, as well as a fascination with temporal and spatial distance. I begin with an analysis of Lee Ka-sing's collage of Leung Ping-kwan's poem "Bronze Statues" as a dramatised abstraction of the forces of intimacy and distance that animate the encounter with cosmopolitan art. Additional analysis of Lee Ka-sing's collages of Leung Ping-kwan's poems suggests that the intimacy of objects and memories is composed and visualised as scattered fragments that have travelled a long distance. The collage poetics creatively maintain an engaging tension with the sites of artistic venues (the literary magazine, exhibition, gallery and city) as frames that are also framed. The sense of separation that poignantly emerges out of the collage-like denial of depth moulds the artistic encounters with objects, people and places.

### Introduction

This essay aims to retrace a shared space of artistic inspiration within intersections of the visual and poetic in Hong Kong. Focusing on the artistic collaboration between the quintessential Hong Kong author Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (1949-2013) and photographer visual artist and designer Lee Ka-sing 李家昇 (b. 1956), I argue that the sites of such intersections map out a poetic sensibility that combines close affinity to the context of creation, as well as a fascination with temporal and spatial distance. I begin with an analysis of Lee Ka-sing's collage of Leung Ping-kwan's poem "Bronze Statues" (1986) as a dramatised abstraction of the forces of intimacy and distance that animate Hong Kong's encounter with cosmopolitan art, circulated worldwide. This encounter also reproduces the tangible memory of a specific site of an art venue (an exhibition curated at the University of Hong Kong in the 1980s). Additional analysis of Lee Ka-sing's visual renderings of Leung Ping-kwan's poems suggests that the intimacy of objects and memories is composed and visualised as scattered fragments that have travelled a long distance; then, in turn, the fragments travel on to establish new display configurations. The collage poetics creatively maintain an engaging tension with the sites of artistic venues (the literary magazine, exhibition, gallery and the city) as frames that are also framed. The sense of separation that poignantly

emerges out of the collage-like questioning of coherence molds the artistic encounters with objects, people and places into captures, collections and storages reassembled into intimate museums. The collage technique is an important angle to approach Hong Kong/Chinese visual modernity in the way it resonates with the most cutting-edge experimentation with the limits of visual representation as in the modernists such as Pablo Picasso, while absorbing through a juxtaposition of text and photography visual elements of its urban and creative environment. Not only was collage a vital component of mixed-media artistic production since the 1960s-1970s, but it also reflects the fragmented nature of art, situated amidst a profusion of commercialised images. Finally, the interpenetration of poetry and visual imagery forming mementos of artistic collaboration is comparable to a flattened herbarium preserved between sheets of paper. This style, unique to these artists' work, interrogates the processes of artwork display as multimodal sharing or a distantiated intimacy.

### Art in the Cultural Desert

The collaboration between Lee Ka-sing and Leung Ping-kwan emerges against two decades of creative ferment in Hong Kong, involving education institutions, exhibition space and associations among artists and curators. It is fascinating to see how the place of art in Hong Kong and the place of Hong Kong in Chinese and cosmopolitan art was entwined with the early stages of Hong Kong art history. A number of studies identify the late 1950s/early 1960s as the formative period of Hong Kong art, centred around a movement called New Ink Painting, a genre drawing on Chinese traditional aesthetic roots and modern abstract sensibilities. Art historian Zhu Qi 朱琦 evaluates the development of a distinctly local painting style as result of the modernisation of Hong Kong art through the formation of several important artistic forums, notably the Hong Kong Art Association, the Modern Literature and Art Association, The Circle Group, In Tao Art Association and the One Art Group. Luis Chan 陳福善 (1905-1995), Lui Shou-kwan 呂壽琨 (1919-1975) and Wucius Wong 王無邪 (b. 1936, member of Modern Literature and Art Association) are among the names that stand out during these formative years, along with Hon Chi-fun 韓志勳 (b. 1922), founder of The Circle Group. Very broadly, we can observe a transition from a modernist Chinese to a Hong Kong identity in the development of the art world.

Lui Shou-kwan, son of a traditional Chinese painter, is famous for the way he modernised the traditional medium of ink adding Zen overtones. This gesture toward Chinese tradition, as revealed by Hon Chi-fun, was in turn, influenced by Western abstract expressionism. Lui was not simply an artist, however, as he served as advisor to the City Museum and Art Gallery (the first public space for art) and also taught Chinese painting extramurally at university. In the 1960s the British colonial authorities facilitated the search for a sense of Hong Kong-ness through art by encouraging the development of a local identity distinct from the PRC through exhibitions at the City Art Gallery. These moves were part of an attempt to moderate the social unrest which had culminated in the 1967 riots as a way of distancing the colony from PRC. Art loaned from the UK made this a sort of soft diplomacy. Liu's student, Wucius Wong, also actively contributed to the establishment of New Ink Painting. Mainly known

for his watercolours, Luis Chan incorporated surrealist motifs in his works and from the 1970s started creating collages. Hon Chi-fun, who was mentored by Luis Chan, enthusiastically embraced photography in the late 1950s. The City Art Gallery also showcased world art to Hong Kong, with modern British sculpture forming a kind of introduction. After the opening show of Barbara Hepworth's sculpture in 1960, Henry Moore (1898-1986) featured prominently in the two decades preceding the "Two Bronze Statues" of Leung Ping-kwan's poem of 1986.

In a recent talk, Hong Kong art critic and cultural policy advisor, Oscar Ho Hing-kay 何慶基 (b. 1956) alerted his audience to the colonial dimension of the rhetoric of Hong Kong as lacking art and culture. The metaphor of "cultural desert" or untilled terrain persists characterising stylistic and thematic choices in the work of Leung. We can say that he creatively appropriates such colonial narrative into a lyrical locale of subtle postcolonial sensibilities. The question of the subtle politics of artistic practice as intentional depoliticisation-poetisation in response to economic and administrative forces of depoliticisation is an important aspect of the creative environment in Hong Kong. This aspect accounts for the accentuation of intimacy in Leung and Lee's collaboration.

The founder of the Art School at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Chen Shiwen 陳士文 (1907-2016), educated in France, emphasises the literally groundbreaking possibilities of the city in the following way: "Hong Kong is the new Arcadia *xinyuandi* 新園地 of art: broad, barren and fertile. Those passionate for art are breaking ground, plowing, sowing, tirelessly working without rest" (my translation, Chen 2016: 100). At an exhibition of Hong Kong artists in 1970 Lui Shou-kwan summarised the role of exhibition space in streamlining the creative energies of the city towards a distinct cosmopolitan identity:

The City Museum & Art Gallery has continued to present exhibitions of contemporary Western art, local art and Chinese art, and to organize film programmes, lectures and symposia on art, striving in various ways to enlighten and educate the public in the principles which underlie and the modern spirit which underlies art of all ages and nations. (...)

In the development of Hong Kong from a small trading port to a city of productivity and growth, much difficulty has been overcome. Similarly to change this once barren cultural desert into a fertile domain of creativity, immense courage and sustained effort are called for. (Pamphlet accompanying the Exhibition *Young Artists of Hong Kong 1970*)

The enlightenment of the public appears to have gradually gained some traction among exhibition venues, education institutions and publications. Amidst this art ecology we find experimentation with exhibition space, blending photography and poetry. Wucius Wong was not only a painter but also an enthusiastic advocate for modernist poetry and contributor to the major venue for translation and publication of poetry, *Literary Currents*, in the 1950s. Hon Chi-fun also composed poems. This testifies to a historical affinity between poetic and visual rhetoric in Chinese art, central

to the Chinese literati tradition, albeit transformed in complex ways influenced by modernism and multi-media collaboration. This is so even though a “false impression of unity” or “perfect harmony between Chinese poetry and painting,” as Qian Zhongshu argues, need careful historical scrutiny. (Qian 2014: 34). The eclecticism of tradition and western influences was widely disseminated as an art critical approach in 1960s; the same applied to poetry, especially with the establishment of the local literary magazine, *Qiuying Shikan* 秋螢詩刊 in 1970, founded by Lee Ka-sing and Kwan Muk-han 關夢南.

Between 1971 and 1977, a further significant venue was added as a space for artistic display, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, which facilitated the promotion of photographic art. It is there that Lee Ka-sing would hold one of his early exhibitions with his partner Holly Lee in 1981. In 1984 he began contributing to *Photo Pictorial*, a magazine founded in 1964. In 1991 he proposed *Dislocation*, a friendly rival to *Photo Pictorial*, to encourage more experimental and multi-media approaches to photography. In 1970 Leung Ping-kwan graduated from the English Department of Hong Kong Baptist University and began translating contemporary literature from France, the US and Latin America. Lee Ka-sing was working on commissioned photographic design work, while Leung Ping-kwan worked as secondary school teacher and *South China Morning Post* editor until 1978 when he enrolled for a PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego.

In 1991 the Art Gallery of Hong Kong relocated to Tsim Sha Tsui which, along with the Hong Kong Arts Centre, led to a number of provocative initiatives directed not simply at crossing the East/West boundary of “traditional” Chinese and “modernist” Western art, but also the boundaries between the canonical and the everyday. The concept of “In Search for Art,” (25 October – 17 November 1991, Hong Kong Arts Centre) developed by David Clarke, professor of Art History at the University of Hong Kong, and Oscar Ho, was characteristic of the Hong Kong quest for bridging art with ordinary, domestic or indeed flashy, “vulgar” items. Leung Ping-kwan’s poetic world, as well as his collaboration with Lee Ka-sing, are profoundly marked by these shifts in the creative ecology of the city, where public and private worlds, the experimental and the commercial, the local and the foreign, were brought into new configurations, and then taken apart. In these collaborations, we can see how intimate details of life circumstances and art experience and practice can be transposed in an unsettling journey.

### The Intimate as Method

The legacy of Leung Ping-kwan belongs to the profoundly vernacular, crossing paths with institutional and creative efforts to establish a platform for artistic appreciation in Hong Kong, with efforts to find a “fresh angle.” (“Images of Hong Kong”, Tr. Gordon Osing trans.) Such creative efforts to define the place for Hong Kong art are recorded in Leung’s poems and re-interpreted in Lee Ka-sing’s collages, where the collaboration between the two brings about “a dialogue in the Humanities” (Clarke, 1999). This dialogue is meta-poetic and literal, shaped by the intimacy of a shared space, perceived as distant and removed and “always at the edge of things and between places” (“Images

of Hong Kong”). The collaboration between the two, spanning the late 1970s–early 1980s up to their separation following Lee’s relocation to Toronto in 1997, represents a record of images and poems. On the occasion of the retrospective exhibition and edited volume which appeared a year after Leung’s death in 2013, Lee Ka-sing contributed an essay entitled “Between Friendship and Collaboration.”

It was a time [late 1970s–early 1980s] when we often gathered, either at Ping Kwan’s home in Causeway Bay, or at my place in North Point. (...) I met Ping Kwan in around 1975. [My wife] Holly had known him longer. He was part of her circle of friends that included Donna, Sui Hark, Sik Yin and Betty. (...) I should say, my collaborations with Ping Kwan was founded on friendship. Of course, mutual influence and encouragement throughout our artistic development also nurtured our friendship. (Lee Ka Sing: 2014, 15).

A vocabulary of personal memories, friendship and a cosiness surround the circle of mutual creative influence. In a poetic sense, however, this nostalgic reference also points to the specificity of the artistic life processed through the lens of aesthetic distance. Intimacy can have a paradoxically close relationship with distance, as Svetlana Boym has observed:

I will speak about something that might seem paradoxical – a diasporic intimacy that is not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but constituted by it. [...] Diasporic intimacy can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets. It is spoken in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation.[...] Diasporic intimacy is not limited to the private sphere but reflects collective frameworks of memory that encapsulate even the most personal of dreams. It is haunted by images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile (Boym 1998: 499–500).

Boym discusses the experiences of Russian immigrants and their ambivalent reconstruction of domesticity abroad through collection and display of found objects or memorabilia. Although they lived in very different political and cultural contexts to this, Leung and Lee’s way of relating to Hong Kong through their artwork shares aspects of this sensibility. Their cultural experience combined migration from the Chinese Mainland, exposure to life abroad, a sense of distance both from traditional Chinese culture and cosmopolitan centers of art, as well as a thorough permeation of the urban space. One also senses how new media artists operating in the commercialised environment of Hong Kong in 1970s, unintegrated into international artistic and literary networks, would have experienced isolation from the art world and exile within their own city’s pragmatic social conditions. Eva Man notes how “[m]ass culture and entertainment industries distracted people from reflections on the problems of race, social class, cultural identity, and power structure in colonial rule” (Man 2015: 82). The commercial nature of design and photography was not alien to Lee Ka-sing, who recognised that his commercial assignments could not exist in a totally separate realm

from his creative experiments. Leung did not exclude unsophisticated spaces from his poetry and his sense of being “marinated in the same wretched sordidness pinfa 貧乏” (a line from the poem “Shrimp Paste” from 1997, Tr. Martha Cheung) brings out the richness of his poetic vocabulary. “It has been noted,” Man points out, “that the immediate sentiment shared among local artists after the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 is related to the sad disparity between the colony’s economic modernity and the undeveloped nature of its political, social, and cultural life” (Man 2014:83 ). Diasporic intimacy as a mode of creative expression of Hong Kong’s local artists is related to this shared sentiment of cultural impoverishment amidst material prosperity; however, this disparity provided a fertile ground for what slowly coalesced into a working definition of Hong Kong’s “culture of disappearance” (Abbas). Such culture can be accessed through “indirection and intimation” in the manner of Boym’s “diasporic intimacy,” or a distant intimacy. The affection for the objects, photographs, postcards, newspaper clippings and memorabilia that produces some of the most compelling poetic imagery in Leung’s poems and Lee’s collages was distilled against the backdrop of “culture and politics of disappearance”. It reflects the self-perceptions of the artists as “plotless detail[s] in the weeds of history” (“Leaf on the Edge,” Tr. Gordon Osing), on the one hand; and the concepts of exhibition and museum space for the Hong Kong public that took shape from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, on the other.

The university professor and experimental curator David Clarke, describes the importance of the exhibition *In Search of Art* of 1991 (Hong Kong Arts Centre) as capturing and steering the sensibilities towards the immediate and personal as potential art objects. Clarke promoted awareness of curatorial practices in producing art historical narratives. Therefore and *In Search of Art* which invited the public to share a personal object for the exhibition could be interpreted as a self-conscious attempt of writing one such history. Clarke explains:

*In Search of Art* came into being as a test out of a variety of different assumptions about art, to answer certain questions. One important assumption, for example, was that even people who do not often go to art galleries or think of themselves as art collectors usually have images and objects of some kind displayed at home. Although those things may be very important to their owners, they may not think of them as ‘art’ at all, perhaps regarding them as souvenirs, heirlooms, decorative items, family snapshots, etc. (...) Are there other kinds of art objects which inhabit the more private world of domestic interiors but which are rarely if ever seen in galleries because they might seem out of place in such a public arena? (Clarke 1996: 25-26)

The domesticity infiltrating the public space helped “test out a variety of different assumptions about art” in general, and “identify a Hong Kong taste in art” (Clarke 1996: 26). It also derived from a diasporic or exilic intuition regarding the displacement of a token of intimacy: an object cherished in a private cabinet “exiled” into an exhibition hall. A reciprocal situation, Clarke expected, was also highly likely, in which a “public” work of art becomes an intersection of the curator and the audience’s personal and professional trajectories. If an origami pineapple can be exhibited in a museum, what then would be the reaction of the “Hong Kong taste” to the cosmopolitan art of Pablo

Picasso or Henry Moore? Art can travel to Hong Kong and be displayed in public, but during its travels it undergoes a number of mediations, enabling it to be reframed as a “domestic” piece of art. A focus on the intimate distance exposes the mediations, the reproductions, the roadmaps. Any intimacy is indirect and intermediary, because “translation” between various social classes and artistic backgrounds, as well as ways of belonging to Hong Kong, remains “inadequate.”

### Tropes of Intimate Distance as Art Criticism

The sense of intimacy, as suggested by a line in the two artists’ poem/collage collaboration, embraces the personal dimensions of “the mutual enchantment of two immigrants” (Boym, 1998: 501; both Leung and Lee have moved from Guangzhou at an early age), as well as the creative methods deployed in the “new reciprocity” (Clarke 1999) between words and images, between the pieces of artwork and the sites of artwork display along with their transformation from distant to intimate and from intimate to distant. The poem embodies one of Leung’s “most striking tropes...of pairs of objects in a nonreciprocal relationship to each other” (Abbas 1997: 138). It is meta-poetic in proposing a vision of the access to the core of shared space at the same time as embedding an existing sculptural composition through the critical-poetic dynamics of responsiveness.

Leung’s poem “Two Bronze Statues” (also translated as “A Bronze Pair,” 1986) can be read as a poetisation of distant intimacy and affect as well as a representational device. The poem sculpts a “new reciprocity” that is simultaneously non-reciprocity, a “transformation or mutation from organic to metallic [with] a numb nonreciprocal moment” (Abbas 1997: 138-139). The non-reciprocity, another variety of distant intimacy, organises the poem, and as I will suggest later, Lee Ka-sing’s collage, whereas the explicit trope of sculpting evokes the Cubist “double-voiced quality [of Picasso and Georges Braque]” (Clarke 1999) alternating between two- and three-dimensional space. Leung writes:

we stretch our hands from opposite directions through this space  
I begin to speak intermittently and, in your eyes, travel alone

The opening of the poem outlines a space that is plastic in the way the tense “stretching” of the hands overcomes distance and separation. The encounter, however, at its most abstract level, is animated equally strongly by attraction and rejection. The “intermittent” attempt at communication by one of the sides is unreciprocated and ends in a parallel space as a lonely mirror reflection:

artificial snow gradually changes our faces, the past heavier than the  
constellations  
heavy on the shoulders it deforms today, is this glimmer the original color of  
the skin?

The horizontal forces of stretching from the first stanza are intensified in the evocation of pressing downwards by the burden of the past, a sensation which is magnified to a cosmic scale in the constellation simile. The artificial snow as miniature crystalline stars

accumulates and condenses in the heaviness of the constellation, producing corrosive effects in the encounter: the faces change and the shoulders are deformed. The deformation, however, provides a glimpse of organic memory, eroticised through the reference to naked skin, which nevertheless is frozen in the disembodied immateriality of light:

rust appears after so many touches by people  
 or beautiful patterns with the friction  
 doubts shake the sculptures, the only balance is found  
 in a deep level by level search

The surface of the two exposed forms is further corroded by touch and friction, the rust continues the effect of the artificial snow, and vibration adds to the forces that pull the sculpted figures toward each other and those that press them downwards. The layers of scrutiny point toward a balance as a dynamic interpretation of the contact between the two forms. At this point, midway into the creative process, the “level by level search” introduces a meta-poetic level of sculpturing or molding a form through sustained contact with the surface. The erotic metaphor extends to a convoluted, uneven contact, not only between “positions [in social relations],” as Abbas points out, but also between the sculptor of the statues and the viewer.

In the two stanzas of the second half of the poem, the poetic voice of “I” starts his/her “intermittent speaking.” In the plastic vocabulary of sculpture and molding, he/she verbalises the “desire” motivating the two figures reaching out to each other, the sculptor/interpreter of the artwork positioning him/herself as one of the “clumsy” statues:

many times I have leaned on you clumsy and full of desire  
 wishing that you were the land that holds and gently softens our angles

The destination of this desire, the other side, is closed and reflexive rather than receiving until the glimpse of memory from the second stanza reconnects with a tangible reminiscence of the raw material of bronze, or with bronze’s essence, as concealed responsiveness:

sometimes you are closed as if fallen into destined space  
 unable to pass through  
 through fleeting lights, I recall the raw bronze  
 hoping to meet after a long wait

The climax of this missed encounter, or the consummation of the moment of intimacy between these two inorganic bodies, erupts in the corporeal vigor of the two statues rising up as if resisting the oppressive forces that have immobilised them. This movement is contained within a limited, restrictive space, as it turns out at the end of the poem, of a show window. The mannequins/statues return the gaze in the first stanza, but the gaze travels to the distance in spite of the affective intimacy suggested by bittersweetness, a metaphor of the sense of taste denoting the closest possible proximity:

muscular flowers seem to open again, in the mist, we rise  
 to the position of the show window  
 bitter and sweet found in the long gaze



The eroticised or politicised essence of proximity can be seen in other literary examples where the plastic language of sculpture merges with the verse: one by a Hong Kong poet writing in English, another by the modern writer Lu Xun 魯迅.

Louise Ho's poem "Bronze Horse" (1994) describes a human-horse amalgamation-collision in the sculpture of Antonio Mak, regarding it as a violent allegory of the conflicting ideologies shaping Hong Kong. In contrast, the encounter expressed by the statues in Leung's poem is of a more subtle non-reciprocity. According to Douglas Kerr, "In Mak's sculpture, horse and man are both in trouble, abject, in painful postures, and incomplete" (Kerr 2010: 94). Such compositional metamorphosis of "two contraries forced into the same orbit" (Ho, "Bronze Horse") can be interpreted as being "about a place of fabulous meeting, a contact point of different worlds" (Kerr 2010: 95). Abbas perceives Ho's "Bronze Horse" as "captur[ing] the political tensions and ambiguities of the city." (Abbas 1997: 127) The force and tension generated on the contact point are conveyed in Ho's poem through the use of corresponding images that are reversed to convey the sense of fusion as clash: "the unseen body fully in control, meets the unseen head losing control." Even though there are two foreign bodies involved, in a powerful twist in Mak's sculpture and Ho's poem, their composition evokes a surrealist control and adaptation/morphing of forms into an aesthetic and conceptual unity. Ho's poetic sculpture reproduces the intensity of the piece and, as seen in Abbas and Kerr's interpretation, allegorises that place of two worlds coming together that is Hong Kong. There is no one and nothing external to the "bronze statue" in the poem.

In contrast to Lu Xun's prose poem "Revenge I" (1924) from *Yecao* describing two bodies in a destructive embrace slowly petrifying under the bored gaze of onlookers, Leung's poetic composition aims at a more relaxed range of relationships in the confrontation between the statues, the viewer and the statue, the viewer as statue and the statue as viewer. "The bloodless massacre" of the onlookers in Lu Xun's "Revenge I" suggests what Abbas calls Leung's "violence of disappearance" but the "two of them stripped naked and grasping sharp knives in atrophied confrontation" create a monumentality in Lu Xun's poem that renders it more akin to Ho's "Bronze Horse." The "many touches of people" causing rust on the statues' surface in Leung's poem are both attempts and failures at contact and the exposed sculptures do not take their revenge on the onlookers as in "Revenge I." The rust may form into beautiful patterns. Even though Leung's statues inhabit a show window, they are not merely a spectacle and the perspective from which they see each other, are seen and see the viewer are all in flux. Leung's poetic sculptor/art viewer is neither easily admitted into the element of the metal, nor is he/she rejected as an unqualified onlooker.

Leung's poetic composition has an affinity with cubist collage in which strips of the existing work are arranged side by side with the author's imagery and comments while the edges of the separate worlds are neither explicitly contrasting nor glossed over. The space in Leung's poem is at the margins of the "fabulous meeting" place that is Hong Kong as well as Lu Xun's wilderness. This is the margin of intimacy which emerges in "Two Bronze Statues," as the space shared among the "exiled" viewer and the "exiled" art piece; a margin which is excluded from "Bronze Horse" and denied in "Revenge I."

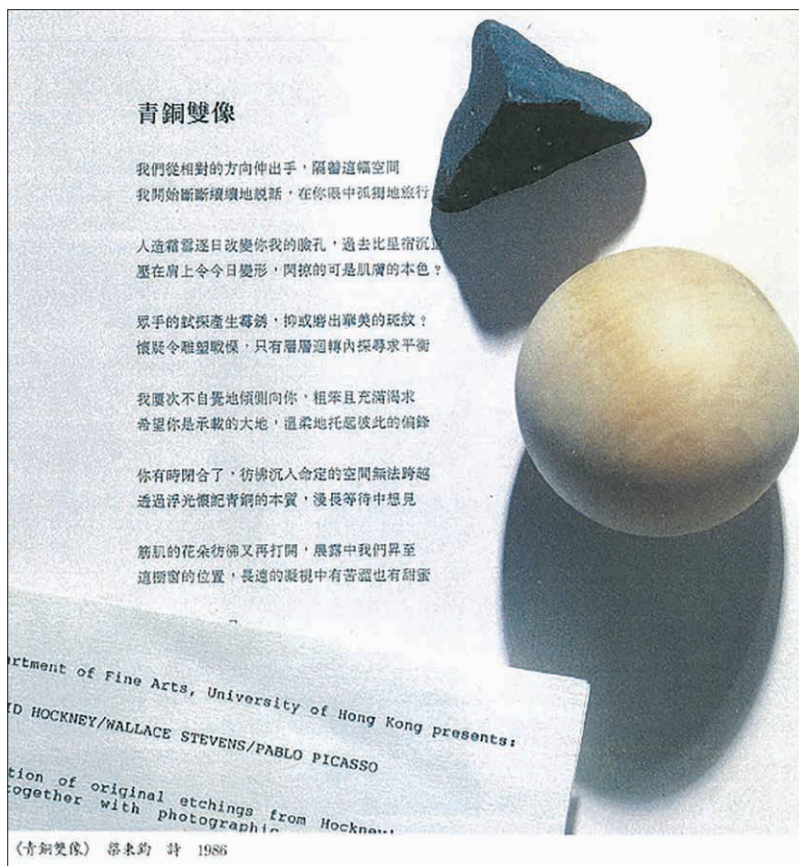


Figure 1. "Bronze Statues," poetry by Leung Ping-kwan, photography by Lee Ka-sing.  
Reproduced from Leung Ping-kwan and Lee Ka-sing (1990).

A collage-style poetic interpretation is also evident in Lee Ka-sing's piece of the same title. The printed poem "Bronze Statues" is presented as a surface on which the artist has placed two objects: a pyramid-shaped rock and a wooden sphere. The rock and the sphere do not correspond to any specific image in the poem, being different from the bronze or metal described in the poem. The distorted shadows of the two objects sharply emphasise the three-dimensionality of the composition and their geometricity evokes a cubist-like form. In their company, the poem itself could be understood as one such abstract object-shape, its text separated into six equal-length stanzas with a larger font on top – as if it was an object with a particular texture, contrasting with the opaque lustre of the mineral and the fine grain of the polished wood in the artwork. There are, however, some semantic moments that invite our interpretative imagination: the

shadow of the rock half-covers just one word from the poem, which is “heavy”, chong 重, suggesting the weight of the rock that accentuates the metaphorical weight of the past on the shoulders of the statues in the poem.

Seeing the poem as the rear plane of the composition, one is tempted to interpret a certain relationship between the two objects, one of contrast (mineral/organic, dark/light, angular/rounded) and one of pairing, which is already richly alluded to in the poem. Then, what would be very explicitly on the front plane is a fragment of an announcement of an art event. The corner of this piece of folded paper covers the shadow of the wooden sphere; therefore it must have been photographed as a third layer. Even though the text is interrupted we can piece together basic information on the event: “Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong presents: David Hockney/Wallace Stevens/Pablo Picasso... Exhibition of original etchings from Hockney... together with photographic...” The reference to the exhibition is a meta-commentary of the collage as it points toward a shared art space not only of creative collaboration but also of artistic inspiration. The reading of the collage can then follow many interpretative paths: associating the geometrical forms with Picasso’s cubism, speculating on the authorship of the bronze statues, identifying Leung’s poem’s referent and establishing a corresponding triangulation relationship between Hockney/Stevens/Picasso and poem/rock/sphere. But above all, there is an art critical quality to this collage as an artwork providing a visual commentary on a poem, which in turns comments on a sculpture. The information about the exhibition at the University of Hong Kong points also toward an event worth recording:

David Hockney/Wallace Stevens/Pablo Picasso was the first exhibition I ever curated. A colleague at the University of Hong Kong had kindly offered us a number of prints from Hockney’s Blue Guitar series, and I decided to build an exhibition around them. The theme of art about art has interested me for a long time, and the link to Wallace Stevens’ poetry offered the opportunity to build bridges to other disciplines taught at the university. I put the text of the poem on the wall alongside the artworks, giving it the same scale and status. Reproductions of images by Picasso and others to which Hockney’s prints make reference were also put on display, along with explanatory texts (Clarke 1996: 157).

Clarke’s debut exhibition of 1985 at the University of Hong Kong is epochal in elaborating a “Hong Kong perspective” or frame for Western art by a British expatriate art historian based there. This idea of affirming the belatedness and peripheral nature of one’s location in Hong Kong during the 1980s in the potential for an “alternative view” surely relates to Clarke’s core concept for this exhibition as “art about art”. It also seems in tune with the art museum initiatives that he contributed to later, such as the already mentioned *In Search of Art*. Clarke’s interest in art’s ability to comment on art corresponds to his understanding of the museum or exhibition space as “play[ing] a more important role in the construction – rather than in the preservation – of cultural identity.” (Clarke 1996:151, 34) This meta-discursivity nurtured by artists and curators at the time provides the background for a collage-inspired experimentation with existing

works and complications of the question of perspective, while records of mundane communication and informal artistic “noise” also find their way into the artworks. The concept of the intimacy of distance discussed earlier plays a major role here for creative compositions by including meta-artistic details and may therefore render the private artistic experience public and, as with the two bronze statues in the poem, a publicly exhibited (foreign) art - interiorised. The formal features of collage as “gluing” together disparate objects and words, where unexpected combinations produce artistic effect, provide a particularly apt media to work with intimate distance.

### The Intimate Distance as Collage

Abbas identifies the social relevance of a suspended non-reciprocity, as the inability to reconcile disparate social positions, expressed through P.K. Leung’s paired objects. The non-reciprocity, however, could be understood as a way to appreciatively come to terms with irreconcilability. This non-reciprocity as engagement is played out remarkably in Lee Ka-sing’s collages. Lee produced a collage to pair with “Two Bronze Statues” (“On March 10 at the breakfast table we talked with Yasi about seeing again Moore for a farewell and we unexpectedly met Zhu Ming fondly remembering T’aichi” 1986). The collage also contains the same poem but it is now shredded into stanzas and re-arranged into non-aligned vertical blocks. The blocks are juxtaposed with photographic strips of fragments of stylised human figures of bronze. The strips repeat the same motif stretching the corresponding image of P.K. Leung’s poem by repeating the lines twice at places without following the original order. The title of the collage is “On March 10 at the breakfast table we talked with Yasi [Leung’s pen-name] about seeing again Moore for a farewell and we unexpectedly met Zhu Ming fondly remembering T’aichi.” This is a most striking title for this work of collage, because it reads like a diary entry for 10 March [1986], all the while containing a fascinating record of the flow of creative energies in Hong Kong at this period. It conveys something of the artistic climate in which Hong Kong artists were immersing themselves at the time of P.K. Leung and Lee Ka-sing’s collaborations. Subsequently this title earned its right as a poem in a “Ten Poet’s Collection,” published in *Quiyin Shikan*. Breakfast shared between them at the foreign correspondents’ club, as explained elsewhere by Lee, evolved into a discussion on contemporary art, which in its turn amalgamates into the collage as an alternative record of the meeting of their minds. The precise date allows us to identify a moment of particular artistic intensity as the background of this collage: an exhibition/installation of works by Taiwanese sculptor Zhu Ming (Ju Ming) 朱銘 who created a sensation with his boldly sculpted bodies engaged in T’ai Chi practice amidst what can only be called ‘Henry Moore fever’ in the city.

[Nigel Cameron] was the art advisor for [property development group] Hong Kong Land when Exchange Square gave [Taiwanese artist] Ju Ming his breakthrough exhibition in 1986. At the time, every single exhibition venue was given to Henry Moore, and it gave the impression that Ju Ming was the Chinese answer to Moore, which did miracles for his international reputation, when in fact he had hardly exhibited in the West (Tsong-zung Chang quoted by Dale 2017).

The bronze sculptures, with a pronouncedly Eastern symbolism emerged “all of a sudden” 忽忙 in the morning shared by PK Leung and Lee Ka-sing on their way back from revisiting Moore’s sculptures. The centre of the collage shows multiplied and shifted shots of the bronze back of a statue with its hand bent at the elbow, leaning on its partner with cropped details of the feet of the statues recurring on several strips in the lower part of the collage. This brings to mind Henry Moore’s bronze couples like “King and Queen” (1957), in which a stylized royal couple are seated beside each other facing the same direction. Nineteen eighty-six was the year of Moore’s death and the artist was at the peak of his fame in Hong Kong; as curator Johnson (Tong-zung) Chang recalls “at the time every single exhibition venue was given to Henry Moore” (Chang 2015) The sculptures were also traveling to this then British colony just like English David Hockney’s etchings at the University of Hong Kong, the influence of Picasso being shared between Hockney and Moore. The pair of bronze statues portrayed in Leung’s poem indeed resonate with Henry Moore’s sculpture, but as portions of the strips on the collage suggest – do so with Ju Ming’s bronze sculptures as well. Ju Ming’s first curator, Johnson Chang (Chang 2015), indicated that Hong Kong Land had recently purchased a pair of bronze statues called *Single Whip* 單鞭. The strips situated in the left pile look like photographs of the distinctive texture of Ju Ming’s bronze statues with the surface of the bronze melted into a stone-like effect. The feet inserted amidst the textured strips belong to Moore’s statues and, in general, the contrast of Moore’s smoothness and Ju Ming’s ruggedness conveys a tangible impression on the collage surface. Since Moore was also experimenting with forms in a more abstract way, as in his series of *Two Forms* (1934, 1966), the geometrical pair of the first collage can be evoked as an abstraction of the pair-motif. This being the last day of Moore’s exhibition, his statues were about to be taken down, explaining the truck motif in the lower right of the collage. In his short essay included in the exhibition catalogue of Leung and Lee’s collaboration, Lee comments on this work. He was pleased with his witty inclusion of another “pair” of bronze statues to match those in Leung’s poem, as well as having “paired” Moore’s and Ju Ming’s bronze statues. The long title/short diary entry introduces an additional variation on the theme in the phrases of farewell songbie 送別 (to Moore) and fond memory huainian 懷念 (for Ju Ming’s T’aichi). This involves the interplay of separation and attachment, which in their incomplete amalgamation resonate with the themes of distance and intimacy.

Lee Ka-sing’s composition with the strips of several photographs of Moore’s and Ju Ming’s statues conveys his dizzy, kaleidoscopic enthrallment with these public exhibitions. Amidst the photographic strips there are PK Leung’s strophes, now rearranged with some of them isolated from the poem and amplified by repetition. For instance, the line “we stretch out our arms from opposite directions through this space” appears at the top centre and is repeated once and followed by “I begin to speak intermittently and, in your eyes, travel alone.” “I begin to speak...” is then repeated on the top right, followed by a duplication of two lines “artificial snow gradually changes our faces the past heavier than the constellations heavy on the shoulders it deforms today is this glimmer the original color of the skin?” The “deformed shoulders” invoke the photographic strip placed at the center and replicated to the mid-right with the line “many times I have leaned on you clumsy and full of desire” repeated twice. Meanwhile, under a rectangular fragment showing a more angular sculptural passage,





櫺窗, the change into ‘plane’ could be Lee’s adjustment dictated by his concept of the interplay of plasticity and intertwining of forms. Since Ju Ming’s martial arts motif of T’ai chi suggests an interplay of power and energy circulated between two bodies, one is tempted to read here the famous “pushing hands” (tuishou 推手) training routine conveying controlled intimacy. As Martha Cheung, translator of PK Leung and creator of the phrase “Hong Kong Collage,” has observed:

It is the ensuing sense of harmony – a harmony arising from the continuous interplay of opposites, with the two parties neither losing contact nor overcoming each other – that gives pushing-hands its intellectual and, some would say, spiritual appeal. For pushing-hands can be practised in all domains, its fundamental principles being (i) attentiveness to the incoming force, or, in philosophical terms, attentiveness to the forces of change around us; (ii) continuous dialogic engagement; and (iii) reacting to force not with force but by displacing it and redirecting it, or even borrowing it to gain leverage over the other, but only if pressed by circumstances to do so. In the domain of scholarly activities, the philosophy of pushing-hands, a holistic one grounded on the interplay of *yin* and *yang* in a continuous process of changing proportions, offers an alternative to the dichotomous mode of thinking that characterizes so much of research practice and theoretical discourse in academic disciplines across the humanities (Cheung 2012:161-162).

As Cheung demonstrates, the pushing-hands approach is “Chinese” but not in the sense of asserting an oppositional tradition. When Johnson Chang perceives Ju Ming’s grand debut in Hong Kong in response as Henry Moore, he also seems to suggest a staged dialogic one, the theme of East-West always being Hong Kong’s preoccupation. This engagement through a “continuous interplay ... with the two parties neither losing control nor overcoming each other” is an aesthetic, cultural and social experience captured as energy in P.K. Leung’s “Two Bronze Statues” and in Lee’s collage. The intimacy of distance as an organising mode of his poetry and his collaboration with Lee is highly receptive to such “pushing-hands” approach. Cheung also suggests that the “Chineseness” of pushing-hands is both distant and intimate to “Western” methods of non-monumental microhistory perceived against a canonical narrative. The two collage works produced by Lee relating to PK Leung’s poem seem to indicate a comparable approach, where the artistic collaboration itself translates into motifs which are metaphors of the encounter mediated through art as incoming force.

### **The Photo Album as History/ The Gallery as a Personal Space**

There is a microhistory of Leung and Lee’s collaboration contained in the breakfast table detail, the announcement for the exhibition at HKU, but it also meanders its way into the content of some of Leung’s poems in a manner mimicking the prose-poetic title of Lee’s collage. There is a poem that appears as a creative translation of PK Leung’s Introduction to the catalogue of Leung and Lee’s collages exhibition of 1990. “Thoughts upon the Photo Album of Lee Ka-sing and Holly Wong” (1984, also translated as “Leafing through Wingo and Holly’s Albums”) is a genuine verbal collage of scattered

thoughts on a visit to Lee Ka-sing (Wingo) and Holly's place. The contrast between the distance of the images and people captured in Wingo's photographs and the intimacy of the gathering reproduces the poetic modality of intimate distance. In the final section of this article, I would like to attempt a collage-analysis of this poem written by PK Leung at the age of 35 and "50 Gladstone Avenue," composed when he was 57, with the Hong Kong turnover of 1997 having occurred in between. In his essay to the retrospective exhibition of Leung Ping-kwan ("Journeys of Leung Ping Kwan", "We Friend – A Cross-Media Response Exhibition to Leung Ping Kwan," 10-28 January, 2014, Hong Kong Central Library, Hong Kong Fringe Club) Lee Ka-sing refers to this poem as an entry into the theme of friendship and collaboration. Lee explains how Leung revised the poem in 1993, achieving a better flow "with more social commentary," but "deep down, [Lee] loved the original version more" (Lee 2013: 15). The English translation of the revised version is produced by Leung himself, but below I have interspersed my translations of the earlier nostalgic piece.

"Thoughts upon the Photo Album" opens with a friendly rebuff to Lee Ka-sing, telling him not to take out his Polaroid to record the friends' heated discussions, while "I" (PK Leung) is commenting on the video they have just watched. Then he rephrases his comments into a question: "How can one better coordinate one's personal feelings and historical developments?" This serves as an introduction to the poem as it comes before a line that frames the central section: "Then I look out of the window, I see the lights stretch afar." An analogous phrase echoes this one to mark the concluding section of the poem: "And now I look out of the window at the immense darkness/ in the quiet there are still dots of cold lights/ as if a still you have taken there/ ...A slide that turned over again/ Merging and changing with different times".

Between these frames of the comments on the video and the perception of the nocturnal landscape, PK Leung has reproduced the bittersweet experience of leafing through the old albums of Lee Ka-sing and his partner Holly. After commenting on some personal photos, "I" tries to express his amazement at the number of preserved slices of life, among which is "Our first Poetry Painting Exhibition (my hair/ covering my forehead, all of us looking naive)." The reference in the brackets is deleted in the revised version.



Figure 3. Photograph from Lee Ka-sing's album: from left to right Betty Ng 吳煦斌, Chak Oi-lin 翟愛蓮, Leung Ping-kwan, Ho Fuk-yan 何福仁, Siu-hark 小克. Image courtesy of Lee Ka-sing.



This photograph (Fig. 3) must refer to the picture found by PK Leung's "I" inside Lee Ka-sing's album in the poem. The youthful earnestness of their early artistic collaborations accompanies the beginnings of their experimentation in visualising poetry. This must have taken place around 1973-74 before Leung went to study in the US. It is only a detail inserted in between Lee's family celebrations and travels back to the Chinese mainland, but the reference to the "Poetry and Painting Exhibition" as a moment in their creative trajectories creates a mise-en-abyme of the very collage featuring the poem on the occasion of the other "Poetry and Photography Exhibition" (1990) involving only PK Leung and Lee Ka-sing (Figure 4). Earlier in the poem there is also reference to fellow Hong Kong artists Donna Lok's and Antonio Mak's work. Therefore the poem takes shape amidst creative flows, while it also documents these as a private archive. The intimacy of this shared memory is rendered doubly distant by the time lapse embodied in the photographic medium and the distant darkness beyond the window. The fine-tuned coordination between the non-reciprocal private and public is summarised in a line addressed to Lee: "You with your method have recorded history within the photographic album." The documentation of the creative exchanges, whether immediate or mediated, itself becomes material for a new piece of artwork, whereas the artwork mentioned in the poems is placed within a collage-like exhibition space. The aesthetic sensibility surrounding documentation and preservation, which P.K. Leung calls Lee's "method of recording history" synchronises 合写 "personal feelings and... historical developments". The "history" relating to the social, political and economic realities of the then British colony of Hong Kong are captured in elusive ways through poetic combinations such as: "The magic lantern [slide projector, xiandengji 幻灯機] brings out millennial rock carvings/ (Who stood up, took his shadow and cast it/ on the rock cave, and walked into history?"; "Exposing our naked [skin] under so many commercial goods and fashion/ how can we produce what we want by reclaiming the left-over film negative?" and "I have lost all my photos/ Our history remains in ambiguity mohubuqing 模糊不清." The articulation of the grand narrative of "history" here approaches Cheung's idea of "pushing hands" with an acute attention paid to the lost, forgotten and discarded; P.K. Leung summarises it thus: "The old photos alert us not to neglect the details xijie 細節."

One of the most memorable aspects of P.K. Leung's poetry is that the history in which he participates in is also an art history by virtue of its focus on the minimal place of art in Hong Kong; and the way to expressivity that he elaborates is closely related to a self-conscious artistic expression. Therefore, the content of the video – a stage production of an early version of *Farewell, my Concubine*, about an aspiring Peking Opera actor lost in the big city only to become a train conductor – at the beginning of the poem, relates to the artistic impulse so easily reduced to irrelevance lunluo 淪落.

The playfulness of Lee Ka-sing's art work can be usefully compared with this poem, containing direct information about the private spaces of his photographs and his home. The collage he helped produce comprises the printed poem as a background at a slightly tilted angle with just the corner of a folded paper evident, probably with black and white floral etchings by Donna Lok, the tip of a red comb placed near the phrase "The old photos alert us not to neglect the details," the rounded upper part of an ornamentally carved piece of wooden furniture, and a decorative goldfish with subdued

colors. The comb evokes the ideas of combing out or combing through, while the paper and furniture emphasise the fragment. The goldfish, as a Chinese symbol of good fortune, appears frozen as if taken out of the metaphorical water tank of current times. In his commemorative essay Lee again argues that Leung understood photography better than a number of professional photographers. Indeed, this poem is profoundly photographic in the way it questions the relevance of personal detail in history.

In the collage *Fruit Family*, based on P.K. Leung's 1978 poem of the same title, Lee has introduced the cover of a special issue of the poetry magazine *Qiu Ying Shikan*. This cover is another treasure box of the artists' collaborations, being designed by P.K. Leung with a painting by another artist, Donna Lok. The poem/collages "Thoughts upon the Photo Album of Lee Ka-sing and Holly" and "Two Bronze Statues" were first published



Figure 4. "Thoughts upon the Photo Album of Lee Ka-sing and Holly Wong." Reproduction from Leung Ping-kwan and Lee Ka-sing (1990).

in this special issue of *Qiu Ying Shikan* in 1986. Therefore, the “Fruit Family” collage through the inclusion of the magazine cover includes “bibliographical references” in its composition, comparable to the way in which Lee Ka-sing’s photo album indexes the friends’ early exhibition. The poem playfully reproduces the pleasure and respect for a number of taste experiences, arguing that food ingredients have soul. This surely represents experimentation with another type of sensory intimacy, that of taste, alluding to a world of relationships that are not taken seriously and are marginalised.

In this vibrant archival space the photographs record private and historical intersections along with documenting the art reception and initiatives. These intersections undergo metamorphoses to feed into new creative initiatives, in which the creative energies intersect with commercial, political and other forces, always reproducing collage-like displays and reconfigurations.



Figure 5. “Fruit Family.” Reproduced from Leung Ping-kwan and Lee Ka-sing (1990).

In 2006 P.K. Leung initiated a new collaboration with Lee Ka-sing through a letter-format poem written again on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition, this time in Toronto where Lee had relocated. The poem reflects a certain melancholic distance, which when read alongside “Thoughts upon the Photographic Album” introduces another variation on the vestiges left behind by time. If in the earlier poem, Leung fixates his poetic imagery on the photographic image, in “50 Gladstone Avenue” he works with the architecture of the gallery under renovation, dismantling it in a way to accommodate the continuities and divergences of the two artists’ distant intimacy: “We communicate in digital language, but don’t we also hear/ the slow murmuring of our past?”

We find our footprints in vintage dust  
 We look out from the vantage of incompleteness:  
 From the 2nd floor, we perceive  
 Tomorrow’s 3rd floor, and yesterday’s basement

The trope of the album derived from the earlier poem has been transformed into a new diasporic space of dynamic display augmented by the digital technology Lee adds to his repertoire.

Take the windows and odds and ends for a rich box of art  
 Then we’ll have new shows forever  
 In front of lenses, murky or sharp  
 You are the site where great events once happened

The “box of art” as a three-dimensional expression of the space of the gallery as well as a container of memories related to their forever “new shows” captures the relocation of Lee to a “different city” through the transformation of its image into “a roomful of boxes.” It is indeed Lee’s digital archive, for instance the “Polaroid, Postcard, Photographs,” that among the “magic” of his new projects and initiatives, harbours some of the most intimate mementos of the history of artistic encounters and separations. The collage technique is also a magical way of narrating art microhistory by constant annotations and re-compositions.

The collage-method suggested by the work of Leung Ping-kwan and Lee Ka-sing, with its aesthetic approach interweaving intimacy and distance as embodied in their individual and collaborative practices, needs to be further explored within the collage-practice of Hong Kong since the 1970s. This refers to collage in the narrow sense as well as wider literary/visual work with objects, stories and urban space. Reminiscent of Leung Ping-kwan’s fondness of the details and footnotes, the art space of Hong Kong can be narrated exactly in a similar kind of relation (of the intimacy of distance) to Chinese art; or even Asian or the cosmopolitan art of the art fairs and the mega-museum in making M+. The visual modernity that is articulated through this collaboration embodies the “photographic” retrieval of unfashionable intimacy and exclusion amidst an ambiguous environment colonised by clichés, advertisements and face-lifts.

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#### Glossary

chong	重
chuchuang	櫥窗
hexie	合写
huainian	懷念
lunluo	淪落
mohubuqing	模糊不清
pingdi	平地
pinfa	貧乏
songbie	送別
tuishou	推手
xiandengji	幻灯機
xijie	細節
xinyuandi	新園地

#### Biographical Note

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