

The Street Must Be Defended: Towards a Theory of Assembly on Hong Kong's Avenida
de la Revolución

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Critical Asian Humanities
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

From North Africa and the Middle East to Europe, the Americas, and East Asia, the social movements of the past decade have, without being in explicit dialogue with one another, resembled the same march into the public street. Despite the breadth of the cultural, political, and topographical variations in the spaces and places that these movements cover, even in a city like Hong Kong, where the development of urban space has taken a trajectory and assumed a quality of unique status, protest seems to march to the beat of the same drum in Hong Kong's tropical, urban financial center as it does in St. Louis' suburban neighborhoods. Why, despite the obvious differences from city-to-city and street-to-street, does protest seem to look the same across societies, cultures, and regimes?

This paper explores the theoretical matrix by which discourses of the street have emerged alongside the imperialisms of the nineteenth century to take inventory of the ways in which the street speaks and is spoken about in the city, in politics, in poetry and literature. While these discourses illuminate the coordinates and mediations in the implicit conception of the street, they only complement the very real emergence and mutations of urban space in Hong Kong in the twentieth century driven by finance capital. I chart the contours of the history of the street in Hong Kong and the ways of capturing the assemblies that have always taken place on it in a step towards

understanding how social movement and political assembly can be made effective in contemporary urban space.

Dedication

For Steve, in gratitude and promise; without whom I would be a less interested person.

For Leo and Shai, for not only mentorship, but friendship.

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“Learn, because we will need all our intelligence. Agitate, because we will need all our enthusiasm. Organize, because we will need all our force.”

— Antonio Gramsci, *L'ordine nuovo*, 1919

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“In olden times authors were proud of the privilege to dedicate their works to Majesty—a noble custom, which we should revive. For whether we recognize it or not, Magnificence is all around us [...] We dedicate this to those who, against all odds, continue to fight for freedom, those who suffer defeat only to stand up again, indefatigable, to comfort the forces of domination. Yours is true majesty.”

— Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*, 2017

1. Introduction: Hong Kong, Mall-ed City

At fifteen minutes past eight on a mild winter morning in January of 1841, a small unit of the British Royal Navy led by Commodore Gordon Bremer followed a narrow path in the Western Upper District of Hong Kong Island, making the climb towards the crest of a small hill. Here, on the first of many occasions, the first possessors would raise the Union Jack under the fire of a feu de joie. Her Majesty's health was drank with cheers from the men-of-war.¹ Hong Kong was to become a British possession. A street was cleared in the path of their footsteps; Possession Street, as it was proclaimed, would become the first street in Hong Kong Island's history.

The street and the point of Bremer's first hoisting of the Union Jack have long since been transformed to unrecognizable lengths, in some parts having been filled in by the territory's transformative land reclamation projects. The point from which Bremer first raised the Union Jack has since but disappeared from the coastline; the street, later renamed 水坑口街 (literally, the 'mouth of water trench'), today houses a small and unsuspecting collection of local shops and modest eateries whose riches and fallows have mostly been married to the boom and bust of local real estate speculation; the history of its place in conquest memorialized only by a plaque erected by the Tourism Board, a misplaced nod towards a street of a different time and of a different function.

¹ "H.M. Ship Sulphur's Voyage" *The Chinese Repository* 12 (1843): 492.

Today's Hong Kong lends very little to the recognition of this template of early urbanism naturalized by Possession Street. The nomenclature belonging to more recent permutations of city life, proffered by legislation and planning officials, is that of a Comprehensive Development Area (CDA) which takes as its anchors the instantly recognizable typology of transit-oriented podiums: residential and office towers—situated above—and railway infrastructure—hidden below—podium shopping complexes. These are the agents of a planning control mechanism which takes for the centrality of the mall and the vastness of such complexes the former characteristics of cities themselves. 'Comprehensive Development Area' is here a vague indicator of what is more honestly a continuously woven fabric of mall-oriented complexes at once individualized and collectivized as a "mall city."²

This nominalism celebrates the inescapability of these urban interiors. In Hong Kong, entering a mall is an inevitability rather than a choice. The mall is deliberately placed at the intersection of all pedestrian flows, interfacing the boundaries between perhaps outmoded functional distinctions of residence, work, and transit. Reliance upon the city's public transport infrastructure accounts for nine out of every ten vehicular journeys, with the city's Mass Transit Railway (MTR) system accounting for a staggering half of those. The ubiquity of these MTR connections, often fully integrated into mall

² Stefan Al, *Mall City: Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016).

structures, constitutes a necessary node in the tripartite formation of neoliberal urban life as work-play-commute and its subsequent collapse into one. At what point must we be forced to think of this particular urban form in a new light, as the case of penitentiary-par-excellence that has realized the utopian vision of accommodating captive audiences of up to tens of thousands of people who live, work, and play within a single structure—an inside without an outside.

The street as it has been known becomes less primary, neglected by its kin: the twin accomplices of mall and station. These children bear the genetic dispositions of its parentage. They undeniably mimic the conditions of the public street but can hardly be said to be shy about their divergent codes of conduct and terms of use as prescribed by their private interests. At worst, detractors freely invoke images of an interiorized, air-conditioned mall city provides the self-perpetuating fodder of dystopic ends. A city at the end of time perhaps, but only insofar as the end of time is marked by a shopapocalypse. It is where a post-Fordist impulse finally reaches the point of its own collapse: people prefer to fill their time by being in the mall as much as possible, not only to satisfy the impulse to browse and spend but also to breathe fresh air and remind themselves what it means to feel a cool (air-conditioned) breeze. According to research conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2010, the indoor levels of particulate matters of Hong Kong's malls were 70 percent lower than outdoor, thanks to their large ventilation systems which ironically will only exacerbate the profundity of

this statistic.³ The mall city offers an oasis from the fiery hellscape which its environmentally-negligent consumerism has helped produce.

But something needs to be said of what lives on of Commodore Bremer's Hong Kong. This is not to suggest that the outside survives only as a residue to the interiorized city. It must be emphasized that this is not a case of an inside without an outside. What remains actually thrives. Not in the slightest as the forms in which Bremer would recognize as belonging to the subtropical island which he claimed for the Crown, nor in the image of modern European urbanism, but as a set of motifs, concepts, and symbols which continue to hold importance in the practice of political and civil life in Hong Kong.

Why have these motifs of the street persisted in our imaginary, our discourses, and our modes of relating to each other? What is afforded by their survival even as what is designated by the 'street' as an skeuomorph takes on an increasingly alienated relation to the reality of the functional roles of what exist in Hong Kong's urban exterior? Despite the unrecognizable transformations being laid onto the street and its constituent exterior as the interior is built up at the center of all attention, it remains the foil against which all emerging forms of collective space (that is, space for the collective) are measured, compared, and contrasted. The legacy of the street as it functioned for Chiang Kai-shek lives on with vigor and vivacity as an ideal type with a complete

³ Al, *Mall City: Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption*, 11.

disregard for a nostalgia that it does not recognize, all while surrogates of the city street—whether birthed in malls, MTR stations, or elevated passageways—proliferate in numbers overwhelming and quickly displacing the diminishing place of the original, leaving for the city street little ground upon which to stand.

We have then the anachronistic image of the city street on the one hand, and the commonly proffered image of the interior commercial passageway on the other. They do not always serve the same ends or operate through an indistinguishable set of functions. But they each define a certain human sociocultural construct independently held as indispensable to the functioning—and the imagining—of collective human life. Less than half of a century separates them. It was a time when, in Hong Kong, a series of colonial and postcolonial effects transformed the economy and the polity once and twice over. It was a time of disorienting transformation for the physical landscape of the port city, a time of innumerable projects for commercial growth. New buildings sprung from the reclaimed shoreline, while old fishing villages and merchant pathways were razed. Air-conditioned transit stations and cosmopolitan leisure spaces were drawn and built up. It was a new age for postcolonial Asian urbanism.

Among so many changes, I shall consider two. Lamenters of the old colonial city cite the utilitarian banality of the human gerbil tubes that have somehow mistaken infrastructure for architecture. These elevated walkways, sky bridges, and expressescalators which carried bankers and analysts from their desks to the lunch table

while evading the once-inevitability of sweating through their collars were the first opponents to the street as the matrix of all social relations. The emergence of the non-street as a pedestrian system which operates at the same human scale as the street—its dimensions and appearances replicate entirely the experience of walking on the street—distilled the pragmatic necessity of pedestrianism from the social motifs invested in street life and in doing so revealed the colonization of the social by the street. From the defenses of the preservationists, the staunch defenders of the street, arises the use of the street as an index of sociality. The street becomes the matrix from which all intelligible social form arises. But this is a development that history shows to be paradoxical. The street, in its most elementary form, is but a connection between two points: a trodden path. The street coming into its modern being as a matrix of sociality only occurs in the latter half of the twentieth century in Hong Kong when discourse about the disappearing sanctity of the street as a pure social institution arises to combat finance capital's sweeping transformations of the urban infrastructure. It is not until discourse begins to speak of the street as disappearing that the concept of the street as a slice of the social begins to take on currency. That is, the concept of the street is wedded to a nostalgic relationship with the past.

Second, as if to answer the call of the preservationists, developers and investors began to mimic not only the infrastructural functions of the street but its appearance and programming as well. In this milieu a surrogate was sought for the utopian city street

proffered by the preservationists; the criteria: “a space of varied programs and mixed uses for all citizens and thus a symbol of democratic access and individual autonomy.”⁴ This is the language of finance capital in the latter decades of the twentieth century, where land and real estate speculation imbue buildings and infrastructure with new meaning and new value. The new form of the city is not one with new physical appearances; the new city sees a mutation in the very dynamic of land value. But today the astounding fact of profit without production has all but been accepted as germane. The massive contracts handed out to construct Hong Kong’s comprehensive new town developments and rail links employ the language of necessity—clothing themselves as social mixers—rather than of profit.

On the one hand, what we observe is a genealogy of the street’s gradual subsumption under the wish symbol of the mall. The closer that the realization of a fully mall-ed city becomes, the farther the street departs from the original idea of the street-as-public-commons; but simultaneously, as the reality of a fully-enclosed capitalist program becomes less escapable, calls to defend the nostalgia in the open-aired streets grow to the point that the relationship between the holy street and the unadulterated vision of society becomes fixed, unquestioned, and rationalized.

⁴ Jennifer Yoos, Vincent James, and Andrew Blauvelt, *Parallel Cities: The Multilevel Metropolis* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2016), 12.

New Town Plaza, connected to Sha Tin MTR station by way of an air-conditioned footbridge link to Citylink Plaza— which sits above the transit terminus— would seem to evidence the success of this reconfiguration when in the 1980s and 1990s it became the most visited shopping center not only in Hong Kong but also in the world.⁵ But looking directly at this superlative, there still remains a residue of the attempted effacement of the city street exemplified in the financial investment that was the development of Sha Tin and the New Territories that subverts the interiorized mall's totality. A brightly illuminated street stands in the vacated ruins of the exterior, not as the collective holding onto the nostalgia of yesteryear, but the anticipation of a tomorrow—a revolutionary tomorrow. It is the ruin that bears the interests of a utopic future; not the memories of a destroyed past.

In the territory's 2019 summer of discontent, the same quantity of millions that traffic malls and MTRs on any given day in a life in Hong Kong turned again to the street. In the collective search and imagination of a place of transformation and democratic potential, the territory's populace took the city's streets—the same streets that have, in a strong sense, been relegated to an afterthought; a non-place augmenting the imperializing interiors. It is, in this sense, a contradiction. It turns Hong Kong's

⁵ Al, *Mall City: Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption*, 84

streets into a nostalgic remainder that is as well an ever-present irritant, a provocation, and a catalyst for change.⁶

The street, then, will become—or rather, has become or has been for as long as we can conceive—the most indispensable arena of social and public affairs. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less deliberate action and enters that of abstract and reified consciousness; its effectiveness in social and democratic practice seen as resulting from its inevitability, not as a real index of its functioning. It is the certainty of being seen on the city streets as much as it is the measure of its revolutionary effects that justify the compulsion to take to the streets and consequently ‘defend the street.’

That public assembly in general and street demonstration in particular are intuited prescriptions of a modern conception of revolution is a lesson that we have learnt not so much from history but from the present. In the past decade, revolts have occurred throughout the world. They were certainly diverse in their aims, their local histories, and the way that they took place. They were the revolutionary aspirations of sometimes opposed groups against contradictory threats and status quos. But as if by telepathy or collective intuition, they all took to the city street. In New York and in Cairo. In London and in Santiago. In St. Louis and in Kiev. In Catalan and in Hong

⁶ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22.

Kong. And in Hong Kong, where public life and the social have moved on ordinary days to the predictable and unwavering 25°C dehumidified interior and the outside further less and less a place for pedestrians—less a place for social intersection—why does the revolutionary impulse seem to turn back time to assume the city street once again as the symbol that must be defended and the site of that defense?

There are at least a few possible rationalizations. Perhaps defending, reclaiming, and making common the street is the strongest assertion of an unmediated social will against the impulses of capital and oppressive political regimes; or, perhaps protests all over the world appear to be marching to the beat of the same drum because global capital threatens to erode the same social quality that is present on all streets everywhere. It may even be that nativist understandings of the street as having been there before us, and thus represent the best of society's diversities and interplays, have been so thoroughly reified that assumptions about the street and what the street stands to represent are suspended in a self-referential belief in a conflated vision that does not go far enough in encouraging political assemblies of people to think strategically, think specifically about forms of resistance—and their alternatives—that respond to the immediacy of a fully-reified world and its sociopolitical situations.

That the street and political assembly belong to the same matrix is a lesson that is learnt as much from history as from the present. In recent years, political protest in Hong Kong bears few dissimilarities with protest elsewhere in the world. There are

certainly dissimilarities in their aims, their grievances, the forms of oppression they resisted, and the urban architectures in which they allow themselves to be seen. What has sustained these similarities even while theory aspires to reinforce the local flavors of spaces and places and while global capital threatens to distance the built landscape from the idyllic visions that we have for social architecture and takes the grounds of protest further and further from the shared soil which the people are able to claim as their social common? What is at issue is not the character and appearances of urban architectures—at least, not in the immediate effect—that is already taken up by ongoing debates within the study of architecture; it is an understanding of how the terrain of the city street has developed—in Hong Kong—and whether the most popular methods of political assembly are reconciled with the history of the street or whether their working theories of the street are too primitive or too idealistic. What has sustained these discourses about the street, these memories and invectives? But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not that a real street, an untarnished symbol of the social common, stands by waiting to be uncovered beneath the disorienting antinomies of globalization and financial capital. Whether the street as it is observed in its physical reality today has been reified, invented, substituted, or not, it is a reality-reference with motivations, contingencies, and a history. This history of the street in Hong Kong gathers together the many ways it has been talked about, imagined, and transformed in temporalities of past, present, and

future. It is this whole theory of the street that a theory of assembly must account for, reconcile, and likely accommodate for simple reason that it is one of its tools.

2. All the World's Not a Stage

Let us take the ideal character of the street as it was seen in the eighteenth century. To begin with, the street was something which could be recognized from afar; it bore certain signs: it defined settlement patterns, making the private realm distinct from the very public—areas of living distinct from areas of production and consumption; its hierarchy reflects and clarifies social structures, defining and directing movement; but most importantly, the street must bear the conditions par excellence for social exchange. Although it is true that there emerges this ideal of the street, this ideal, even at its inception, is obstinately far from being descriptive. It is not so much the qualities of ideal operation that these speculations furnish; it is instead the struggle over the balance of these ideal characteristics— movement, exchange, communication—that comes to furnish the concept of the street.

The notion of utility or 'usability' perhaps best captures our preoccupation with street politics. The paradigm of resourcefulness highlights how the way in which we talk about the street seeks a direct application of art, architecture, and urbanism to the everyday-real and also sets up the criteria by which our social values may be determined. Street politics are judged by their impact in context—what they can do, or how they do what they do where they do it— rather than for merely for their intrinsic aesthetic qualities and the alternative relations that those aesthetics would pose.¹ For Baron Haussmann and Paris of the nineteenth century, the street became a place where

¹ See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) for the distinction of Adorno's sociology of art from both hermeneutical and empirical approaches.

development was determined not only by the tides of commerce, but which could possibly be acted upon: widened, expanded, and adapted to determine modes of conduct. The urban legislation of Haussmann's renovation of the city laid waste to whole medieval neighborhoods in favor of new networks of boulevards, avenues, parks, and squares often flanked by street furniture—lampposts, newspaper kiosks, and railings— by which the modern city could be illuminated, measured, scrutinized, and administered. The changes made the city-plan the topographical expression of national characteristics. Whether the verdict holds that he illuminated the City of Lights or vandalized the historic bourg, Haussmann's frenetic planning typified a line of centralized and pragmatist architectural thinking that understood the new urban problematics of the nineteenth century to be *problems* that were not just to be meditated on but were immanently solvable, especially through design. Urban social problems were to be solved in the planning of the new city; the new city was to be the realization and ideals incarnate of social flourishing. The street came to be inscribed with gestures, and thereby structures of feeling. They became monuments to the hatred of mediations which would undermine the apparently seamless link between the concepts of the street and the social.

Haussmann's transformation of Paris saw this distaste for prevarication. In the process of foreclosing the boulevards as effective places of mass assembly, the city also foreclosed the capacity to produce alternatives to taking the streets. Émile Zola repeats this argument in his early novel, *La Curée*: "Paris slashed with sabre cuts, its veins opened, giving sustenance to a hundred thousand navvies and bricklayers, traversed by

splendid military roads which will bring the forts into the very heart of the old quarters of the town.”² Whilst obviously anathema in one respect to the prospect of assembly and insurrection, embedded in this paradigm of the planned city is the rousing of a possibility of protest from the very hatred of protest inscribed in Haussmann’s design. The practice in question proposes—even forces—a certain performativity. To be a citizen of Haussmann’s Paris is to be prescribed an active role which essentially stages—that is, brings down to earth rather than represses—the drama of political assembly in the streets and boulevards of the new Paris.

What is more, the planned city exudes a powerful sense of itself performing, a kind of self-awareness that permeates all dimensions of everyday experience and that had, moreover, a social typicality. A city like Hong Kong speaks of itself in terms of a familiar 21st century grammar known by the language of all contemporary global cities. As if it were a marketing campaign, the city’s way of talking about itself makes performance out of its practices of everyday life. It is in this sense that the city can be said to be performing its social milieu into being, a practice which always remains provisional.

For Hong Kong, the Crown colony, the logic of production that ties the street to the social takes paradigmatic hold at the point when the city became something like a prism through which the heterogeneous issues of contemporary urbanism and architecture, national identity, and historical memory came together in superimposed

² Émile Zola, *La Curée* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 81.

focus. The relocation of financial capital from Shanghai in the immediate postwar period coincided with an influx of migration into British Hong Kong owing to the circumstances of the Chinese Civil War. Between 1945 and 1951, the population swelled from just over 500,000 to 2.1 million. But the exact magnitude of change to the population density of the colony has often obscured the changes which this influx brought to the unavoidable physical detail of the society. From its inception as a crown colony, British Hong Kong had been advantageous commercially and geopolitically as a port. But the character of the urban space changed drastically in the mid-century. By the mid 1950s, Hong Kong had become one of the most densely populated places on earth. This prompted major change. With older urban areas bursting at the seams and the growing demand for new industrial sites doing little to alleviate the pressure to allocate new residential land, the official view was that only limited solutions to these problems existed in the further development of built-up areas.³ Only after seventy years of relative neglect of the land obtained in the 99-year lease of the New Territories from the mainland, the New Territories became the key to the modernization of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's colonial status continued to furnish the possibilities for its path towards modernity. The contemporary new town program that would be billed as the solution to the new demands of residential overcrowding and manufacturing growth would take the character of the British new towns experience. As the evils of urban life for the working class became, theoretical questions aimed at intervening in the mediated

³ Peter Hills and Anthony G.O. Yeh, "New Town Developments in Hong Kong," in *Built Environment* (1978-) 9, no. 3/4 (1983), 268.

relationship between the social and the built started to appear in this new discourse that was to be called urban planning. The new centralized approach to the built environment represented a fundamental paradigm shift in the way that the collective viewed itself. Centralized urban planning and the images of the social that it conjures have been proffered as a surrogate to the social itself. In both theory and praxis, invocations of the street stood in for a myriad concentration of social forces but also for the opening through which the social can be molded, affected, and determined. It was not only the optimism and belief that the details of the street could enact changes to the collective but that in this way of theorizing, the soul of the collective was itself contained in the street. The characteristic novelty of architectural thinking today is the way that it assumes its unmediated relationship to the social.

Henri Lefebvre made the deceptively simple assertion that societies produce space. Societies, Lefebvre argues, dynamically produce space over time, and space in turn shapes societies, imbuing different details of space with different meanings and inscribing them with a specific sense of place. Lefebvre's thinking became paradigmatic for the major writings addressing space and place. The signature quality of these ideas—characterizing the way in which we think about space and the possibilities and conditions of assembly today—is the triumph of representation over what is represented. The outsized comprehensibility of place implied in the humanistic geographies of these theorizations only corroborates the incomprehensibility of the mediations and relationships between architecture and the social—mediations that have been ignored, erased, and subsumed under the falsehood of a direct, equivalent relation

between space and the social. It is important to acknowledge what this equivalence between place and the social affords Lefebvre. It allows Lefebvre to make space and place the ultimate medium of struggle and therefore of a political terrain. As he aphorizes, “there is a politics of space because space is political.”⁴ Where urban planning treats the space as a scientific object with a capacity to be unblinkingly improved— as pure and apolitical— Lefebvre argues that has been shaped and molded by historical and natural elements, through a political process.”⁵

For Lefebvre, the creative occupation of urban space was to be considered a form of sociality.⁶ It was a cry for war against the logic of the capitalist city—the planned city. Le Corbusier’s famous attack on the persistence of traditional street forms in modern orthogonal cities—a practice which he referred to as the “pack-donkey’s way”⁷—marked one of the most poignant moments in the ongoing debate around the functional socialization of the modern city. But what is not being fought for is the very process of mediation that allows the social to think itself. Whether we should “kill the street,”⁸ as Le Corbusier suggests, or rethink his epithetical pack-donkey as one “with an agenda,”⁹ the street stands in singularly for the whole of the world at play. If conformity was collectively planned, then fostering the creative and revolutionary agency of the collective would require a *non-plan*. Be it the plan or the non-plan, what is true of both

⁴ Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre* (London: A&C Black, 2004), 183.

⁵ Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre*, 183.

⁶ Yoos, James, and Blauvelt, *Parallel Cities: The Multilevel Metropolis*, 179.

⁷ Yoos, James, and Blauvelt, *Parallel Cities: The Multilevel Metropolis*, 70.

⁸ Yoos, James, and Blauvelt, *Parallel Cities: The Multilevel Metropolis*, 71.

⁹ Yoos, James, and Blauvelt, *Parallel Cities: The Multilevel Metropolis*, 79.

sides of the discourse is that representation of the collective is in either case the privileged object rather than the collective itself. Whether the pack-donkey possesses an agenda or not, it remains a pack-donkey whose only perceived value is the street that it illuminates. The urban street sits on both sides of the discourse as the object of investigation. There is no categorical question of whether there is a street or whether there is not a street; rather it is always a question of how the street will look. There is an incomprehensibility of the street as object itself, marking a diffuse arena of significance that we visibly recognize as a distinct artifact of social existence but a conceptual horizon as well.

The street—once understood as just as a physical topography—is now an abstract relation. Amid the network of relations of people to each other, the individual experiences of sociality have become quite incommensurable with the images of the street now used to represent those instances of the social. The street is an omnipresent image that represents the entirety of the social itself. One is supposed, schooled by the very interactions that are found daily on the city street, to see what is happening more quickly than the moments of signification that would make the street the social object par excellence can unfold. One often hears talk of the ‘crisis of the street,’ a theme that preoccupies the activity in urban studies. Even to see the street and talk about the street in the present reaches backward with a weak nostalgia.

Among its many emblems, Hong Kong society wears that of the talking street. The street which speaks on end of a common culture in postcolonial Hong Kong. The street is both quiet and loquacious, always waiting and always willing to engage in

dialogue. In this regard, Hong Kong remains the realm of the poet and writer, Leung Ping-kwan. What is central to Leung's poetics is the construction of a persona in the objects of the urban everyday that urges others to speak, to engage, and to come into it. Leung superimposes the categories of thing-poems (*yongwu shi*) and travel-poems (*you shi*)¹⁰ and renders the persona of the city street in a dialogic mode that makes the process of transvaluation possible. In his short story, *The Dentists on the Avenida de la Revolución*, the street has been given life to engage in a dialogue with the unnamed narrator:

"I still remembered the first time I stepped on this broad street and looked up at the sign: Avenida de la Revolución. I couldn't help getting all serious, snapping out of my tourist cool, just as if we were on a pilgrimage to some military establishment or visiting some vertiginous monument."¹¹

The urban landscape invites Leung's narrator to meditate on them. In a gesture commonplace to Leung's sensibility to the global connections shaping the postcolonial city, the street described in *The Dentists on the Avenida de la Revolución* is not in Hong Kong but in Tijuana.

"'This place always reminds me of Shenzhen,' Carlos said gently, referring to the new Chinese city that has sprung up across the border from Hong Kong. In a way it's true. The two places are similar — but at the same time quite different. A friend of mine once said Tijuana reminded her of Macau. That's true too."¹²

The Avenida de la Revolución's commonplace quality has an exoteric effect that inspires the narrator and his companion, Carlos. As if it were essential to us to be able to draw

¹⁰ Esther M.K. Cheung, ed., *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 6.

¹¹ Leung Ping-kwan, "The Dentists on the Avenida de la Revolución," in *Islands and Continents*, eds. John Minford, Brian Holton, Agnes Hung-chong Chan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 21.

¹² Leung, *Islands and Continents*, 26.

from urban space a knowledge of their fundamental quality, Leung's poetic presents an attitude which "opens up space for others to come into," to enjoy, and to discover.¹³ In an interview with his translator Gordon T. Osing, Leung describes:

"A poet in Hong Kong is by the very nature of things distanced from all that grandiose and heroic voice. He is writing like a clown speaking on television, like a cabdriver speaking in the front seat, or someone speaking directly to the inner life, or intimately to his friends."¹⁴

Even in Tijuana, the narrator fashions an urban topography with a unique Hong Kong collective memory associated with the Avenida. In the introduction to the English language collection, Ester M.K. Cheung writes of Leung: "He shares a common impulse with other Hong Kong writers such as Xi Xi, Dung Kai-cheung, Lok Fung, Yip Fai—this is by no means an exhaustive list. All these writers are exploring a common culture for Hong Kong." Cheung continues, "Leung was a pioneer in the politics of the ordinary, and his work has inspired many younger Hong Kong writers. More recently they have found this whole approach relevant to the way they relate to their city."¹⁵

Since 1997, what has been called the 'post-80s' generation that has, in recent years, helped fuel both the Occupy and anti-ELAB movements of the past decade, introduced a new wave of cultural criticism which asked how collective memories can be constructed through the preservation of long-standing local icons and architectural landmarks. This of course included the Hong Kong government's 2006-07 decisions to demolish the old Star Ferry and Queen's Piers. It is interesting to note the convergence

¹³ Cheung, *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan*, 6.

¹⁴ Gordon T. Osing, "An Interview with Leung Ping-kwan," in *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan*, ed. Ester M.K. Cheung (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 225.

¹⁵ Cheung, *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan*, 7.

of interest in Hong Kong's urban topography between writers like Leung on the one hand, and advocates of the new sociopolitical movements of the 2010s on the other. A double petition, in that these nativist struggles are part of a broader movement of protest at the real-estate-led urban planning policy that has moved the city since the mid-century; part of a criticism founded upon discontent with the destruction and construction that have eroded collective memory.

This new wave of criticism exemplified in Leung's poetics gives materialistic and social abundance to ordinary streets.

"It wasn't going to be easy to spot such a plain, tiny figure in the confused riot of colours along the Avenida de la Revolución. We looked on both sides of the street, sometimes turning into Calle Zapata or Calle Diaz, or walking along the Avenida de la Constitución which ran parallel to the Avenida de la Revolución."¹⁶

In Leung's poem, *In Fabric Alley*, for example, Hong Kong's social realm is presented as a layered palimpsest composed of genial objects as ordinary as fabrics.

"All of these stock images, the layers
of colors superimposed to make old patterns,
their many lyrics gone sour, also their erotic suggestions:
can we really see ourselves remade in any of these?"¹⁷

Commonplace quality acquires a special nature predetermined by politics and culture.

Local and foreign topographies are singular in the process of discovery by which

Leung's narrators meditate on space through the symbolic 'things' that dot the

landscape. The palimpsest mediates Leung's process of subject formation, and of Hong

Kong's search for its identity post-1997.

¹⁶ Leung, *Islands and Continents*, 33.

¹⁷ Cheung, *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan*, 84.

Leung's formula sees a completely reified realm of the street reduced to a horizon of nostalgia. Leung's world-making exhibits a condition in which a weak nostalgia in the material objects found on the street has become the horizon of life. Reification, which first appeared as a universal condition in the work of Georg Simmel, posits that something else has replaced primal truth as the horizon of existence. For Simmel, the new metropolis was the image—enlarged and enhanced—of reified existence.¹⁸ Others that followed, such as Theodor Adorno, develop this image beyond contemporary societies to paint a normative portrait of reification as a growing historical expanse between nature and civilization. When speaking about the city as a vivid, colorful, and expressive context, Leung enacts the combative energy of Simmel's thesis which takes the reified world not in itself but as engendering a constant play between singular forms of life and their plural resistances. The social world of Leung's nostalgic creating is the world of the living dialectical relationships between the sensory experiences of the city.

There is room to think aloud about a fundamental theoretical problem: the relationship between the street as a literal fixture in architectural urbanism and the street as a shorthand for the social realm. The street has concerned philosophers, critical theorists, political scientists, geographers, planners, and architects and also captured the unease of writers, painters, and filmmakers, among others. Cities and architecture have changed dramatically and their transformations are visible in the streets of a city like

¹⁸ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 2011), 461.

Hong Kong, in less intended ways might have been thought. As can be observed in Leung's poetics, for in the realm of the spatial, there does seem to exist an emblematic significance that we give to the experiences of the material objects of the city that do not come as easily in objects elsewhere. Interactions with the objects of the built city take on social significance in a way that Western Marxism would lament that other commodity forms do not. Frederic Jameson writes that,

“it has often been observed that the emblematic significance of architecture today, and also its formal originality, lies in its immediacy to the social, in the ‘seam it shares with the economic’: and this is a rather different immediacy than even that experienced by other expensive art forms, such as cinema and theatre, which are certainly also dependent on investments.”¹⁹

This very immediacy presents theoretical dangers. Few could muster a challenge to the rather banal claim that the street has occupied an untouchable place in the lexicon of sociality. Despite the many new social forms and forms of social organization that have emerged as possible alternatives to the open-air city street in the 21st century — malls, rails, pedestrian bridges — it does not seem preposterous to assert, still, that the street is both literally and metaphorically the most fitting symbol of the public realm.

There is optimistic reason to believe that emergent technologies and new mediums of social organization — as much the digital as the new architectural — open up a space in which a new political assembly can emerge; but, to use the time-honored epithet, it seems equally reductive to explain the modes of assembly that we've witnessed — from Hong Kong to Cairo; St. Louis to Catalan — in terms of the new

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso, 1998), 163.

technologies. This type of reductionism fails to respect the autonomy or semi-autonomy of the aesthetic level and its intrinsic dynamics.²⁰ Theories of performativity developed by Judith Butler have tried to account for this immediacy. “Forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make.”²¹ These forms of plural, multitudinal performativity are necessary components of an understanding of the collective ‘people’ even as they are necessarily partial. After all, the odd persistence of the time-honored practice of taking to the street continues to reward those taking part in demonstration with globally-circulated images of the character of popular will. Bald demonstrations of this kind, that take at face-value the discursively-generated idea of the street as one-part social mixer, one-part economic determination, and in all cases, an *idée fixe*, never seem to reconcile the plural demands that are made against—while using—the competing logics of the street. If the positivist critique has brought some insight into the way in which we form collectives, its pretention to analyze only the spatial spatially and in isolation from other elements of the world, has led to an undying optimism that the visibility of assembly alone is the ends of radical democratic practice.

The stylistic principles demanded of street assembly is dictated by our conception of this realm within the social that, with its visual offering, has developed to the point that we tend to think about it as the social itself while, problematically, failing to see that it is governed by its own intrinsic laws and dynamics. Jameson is inclined to

²⁰ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 163.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 8.

designate these zones within the postmodern conceptual configuration as “semi-autonomous”:

“Because it is clear that it is still somehow part of the social totality, as the term *function* suggests; my own term is deliberately ambiguous or ambivalent, in order to suggest a two-way street, in which one can either emphasize the relative independence, the relative autonomy, of the area in question, or else, the other way round, insist on its functionality and its ultimate place in the whole: at least by way of its consequences for the whole, if not its ‘function,’ understood as a kind of material interest and slavish or subservient motivation.”²²

So whether it be in the views of Lefebvre, of the modernist planners, or of Leung, the street is a semi-autonomous realm in the system of representation that we use. We are faced with not the increasing impossibility of representing the collective, but the overwhelming saturation of the number of possibilities for the collective to picture itself. The challenge is not to figure novel methods of capturing the image of the social and its collective will using the optimism of the new technologies, but to understand new theories of assembly underwritten by new observations of the intellectual processes of abstraction themselves, from which simplistic representation is inseparable.

To current practice, these are unfamiliar observations. If we are to follow in the metaphor of the pack-donkey, the lingering, dated ways of political assembly have put the cart before the donkey. They are working with the same cart of tools, playing off the same score, reading off of the same scripted conceptions of the social and its presumed affinity for the street. Let us consider the set of globally-attuned occupations and demonstrations in urban space in the 2010s, which catalyzed in Egypt in 2011, ignited in

²² Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 164.

Hong Kong in 2014, in the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States in 2014, and led further to more explosive assemblies in Hong Kong again in 2019. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri wonder, “Why, then, do we consider them as part of the same cycle and as figures of the same lived reality?”²³ These struggles emerged in very different sociopolitical contexts, and their protagonists live very different, localized forms of life—and yet, they share the same protest repertoire that lead them onto the streets. Thus, regardless of their sociopolitical structure, their contested issues, or their demands, all political assemblies of our time have chosen one and the same theatre: the street. The street is the only stage.

²³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 168.

3. Laying Down the Rails with Jacob's Ladder

In the cycle of social movements that have given hope to the past decade, many of these practices not only reappeared but were also deepened despite the opening of alternative possibilities. Hardt and Negri see the shared urban flavor of these protests as “promoting and constitutionalizing a plurality of diverse social subjectivities.”¹

“Consider, for instance, how a feeling of magic was created at the various urban encampments from Tahrir (Cairo) to Taksim (Istanbul), from Puerta del Sol (Madrid) to Zuccotti Park (New York), and from Ogawa Plaza (Oakland) to Cinelandia (Rio de Janeiro) when activists temporarily *made urban space common*, that is, no longer private for public but instead characterized by open access and experimental mechanisms of democratic management.”²

But what does it mean to make public space common? What does it mean—not for space to be public—but for our unchanging understanding of *public* to impose a set of regulated shared practices that is more fundamental than the plural ontologies that the movements express. This kind of weak nostalgia only reinforces the status quo.

Banks don't often play a leading role in protests, unless they are lending the glistening windows to be broken and the Mammonic columns to be tagged, which makes the contemporary 1980s Norman Foster-built imperial bastion of capital-led democratic rule a usual case. In 2012, the Hong Kong headquarter of HSBC bank was occupied and made into a central symbol in the iconography of the Occupy Hong Kong movement. Police armed with court orders shut down the 306-day old occupy site, forcibly removing the last vestiges of what was once a global movement from the atrium

¹ Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 35.

² Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 35.

of HSBC's Asia headquarter. As bailiffs cleared away the granite street-level plaza at the center of the hollowed out building's design, reports indicated that there was at least one identifiable episode in which "a protester with a megaphone vowed, 'We'll die before we leave!'"³

The history of the successive iterations of the HSBC building in Hong Kong's Central district tells the story of this transformation of systems of representation as well as of the forms of political assembly that have attempted to capture this representation for itself. As the South China Morning Post puts it, "from bullets to cash machines, HSBC's 151-year history is closely aligned with the evolution of Hong Kong."⁴ The first HSBC building was Wardley House, used as HSBC office between 1865 to 1882 on the present site that sits on 1 Queen's Road in Central. It was demolished in 1886 with the second iteration rebuilt in the same year. The second building design divided the previously lone-standing structure into two connected buildings: on Queen's Road Central was the primary Victorian facade with a verandah, colonnades and an octagonal dome, whereas the arcade which harmonized with the adjacent buildings was constructed on Des Voeux Road. In 1934, the second building was demolished and a third design was erected, and it is from this point that the history of this imperial bastion becomes a history of superlatives. The construction of the third building erected the

³ Keith Bradsher, "Occupy Hong Kong Protesters Forcibly Removed," *New York Times*, September 10, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/business/global/occupy-hong-kong-protesters-evicted.html>.

⁴ Enoch Yiu, "From bullets to cash machines, HSBC's 151-year history is closely aligned with the evolution of Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, April 24, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/1938271/bullets-cash-machines-hsbcs-151-year-history-closely-aligned>.

then-tallest building in Hong Kong as well the first building in the colony to be fully air-conditioned. By the 1970s, with the run-up to the 1997 handover of sovereignty to China already underway and the bank's Hong Kong administrative centers bursting at the seams – with offices scattered all over Central – the board came together to formulate plans for a new headquarter with the symbolic politics of the new edifice as the face of the operation at the forefront of their minds. Whatever the transfer to Beijing rule would bring, HSBC was positioning itself to stand through the transition to Communist-party rule as a beacon of reassurance that capital would continue to flower in the fragrant harbor. Conceived during a sensitive period in the colony's history, the brief for the building's design purported to ask Norman Foster to create “the best bank building in the world.”⁵ At the building's completion in 1986, whether this declaration had been realized or not, HSBC had achieved in building the most expensive building in the world.

Few office buildings have rewritten the way in which entire cities are built, but the HSBC building, both Foster's first major project outside the UK and his first tower, rewrote the playbook on how commercial blocks and entire financial centers have been made ever since. Foster aspired to take the mid-century dream of a plug-in, prefabricated city and make it real even, confusingly, in the example of a corporate

⁵ “Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters,” *Foster + Partners*, accessed Feb. 2, 2020, <https://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/hongkong-and-shanghai-bank-headquarters/>.

monument while asserting that it could do so and *still* give back to the city at street-level.⁶

A new account of this building is the intersection in the discussion that is to be staged here: where capital, the urban, the architectural, and the political meet. Behind this corporate pro-capitalist narrative that joins all of these terms, there lies a wider trend in the land development of Hong Kong that must be acknowledged. The people who have written the spatial history of Hong Kong to-date are also part of Hong Kong's financial and political elite. In Hong Kong, where freehold land was the exclusive right of the Crown prior to 1997 and the PRC thereafter, land use has been governed by the prudent commercial principles. From the Hong Kong government's point of view—both the colonial government and the current government of the Hong Kong S.A.R.—the urban development program has been a completely rational one.

Beginning from the post-World War II new town program that established planned communities first in Sha Tin in 1961, land development in the city has been driven by a development-package implementation of centralized urban planning philosophies. These projects, which range from the numerous new towns built in the image of Sha Tin and the scientific precedent set by the British New Towns Act of 1946 to the in-the-nick-of-time Airport Railway project, constitute the transit-oriented, mixed-use, high-density urban model that has been characteristically-Hong Kong in the past half-century.

⁶ *Foster + Partners, "Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters."*

“The implementation of these station developments is to be achieved through the subdivision of relatively small development packages, enabling developers of all sizes to participate in our vision to design and build for future generations. The corporation will ensure that all necessary statutory planning approvals have been granted for these developments and will negotiate land grants with Government. The land premium payable for the development package will be known to tenderers prior to the final offer, and award of the tender will trigger off the land premium acceptance. *A commercially prudent approach is to be adopted with the development and a tendering of these packages.*”⁷

As the program in Hong Kong gained momentum, transforming the city from a merchant port into a global financial center, the developmental trajectory and the fate of individual developments have been determined not by their degree of self-containment and self-sufficiency as the British program began. Rather, Hong Kong has opted for an integrated, transit-oriented development led by the MTR Corporation. The placement of new towns is determined primarily by the availability of an extension to the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). With the rise of each new development, the MTR map grows closer and closer to a faithful representation of Hong Kong’s geography, and the result is one that is celebrated by critics.

“As more and more of the world population moves to cities, Hong Kong stands out as an important ecological model because of its emphasis on public transportation linked to high-rise residential and commercial developments, both in the center and in a network of new towns. As a result, Hong Kong’s per capita energy consumption is among the lowest for any city in the world providing an important global model.”⁸

At this stage we already have two levels of abstractions, both complicated by the role of capital. On the one hand, there is the architectural; that is, of individual buildings

⁷ Angela Tam and 地鐵公司, *The Development of the MTR Tseung Kwan O Extension = 地鐵將軍澳支線的興建*. (Hong Kong: Insitu Pub. Ltd. on Behalf of the MTR Corporation Ltd., 2002).

⁸ Al, *Mall City: Hong Kong’s Dreamworlds of Consumption*, 35.

like the HSBC headquarter especially, which become the image of the individual will of the architect. On the other hand, we may just as easily inquire into the urban, which has been the ongoing object of investigation for planners and municipal officials. These systems in Hong Kong, unlike their British new town predecessors, are generally not promoted by social utopians or the architectural avant-garde, but by more pragmatically inclined government and business elite ready to embrace both the private sector and municipal authorities in their development. In this sense, both levels of abstraction share a seam with capital, as well as a seam with each other and ultimately these seams connect into the shape of the form that collectives wear into protest. These abstractions cannot be overlooked and need to be brought into light in order to be reflected in new forms of assembly that subvert economic determinism. In other words, the theoretical complexity between these levels of abstraction demands new forms of assembly that can examine the myriad contradictions and frictions between them. It would be difficult to continue to assert in light of these relationships that the street can continue to be held as an unproblematized social form. There cannot be calls to take to the street or preserve the character of the street before scrapping the unchallenged notion of the ideal street as being a pristine public, social asset.

We have some indication of how postmodernism achieves this: by integrating vernacular and autochthonous elements into the urban machine. Jameson and Edward Soja have by now canonized the familiar example of Los Angeles' Westin Bonaventure

hotel.⁹ Their intuitions are of great use while looking at the HSBC and its peculiar abstractions. Challenged by the need to build over a million square feet of office space in a short time scale, Foster's plan involved the coordination of the global factory floor at a time when we were only beginning to understand what globalization was. There was a literal gravity pulling its component pieces together. An international kit of parts "made by ship-builders in Glasgow, along with service pods from Japan, lightweight movable flooring panels from America, as well as components from Holland, Germany and Italy,"¹⁰ all came together at the very center of the building, which rather than rising from street-level out of colonized ground and earth, came together upwards and downwards simultaneously, as the building was conceived as a suspension structure. Coverage from *The Observer* described a scene in which, "in the congested center of Hong Kong, the Bank unfurls from the sky, like a mechanized Jacob's Ladder, and touches the ground."¹¹ Foster wrote at the time, "The sheer visual delight of the cladding details on the bank could not have happened without a shared endeavor, enthusiasm and dedication which extended from a factory in Missouri, through to a Chinese workforce on site, and a highly mobile design team who were as much at home on the shop floor as on the drawing board. It is as much about aesthetics as water penetration

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 39.

¹⁰ *Foster + Partners*, "Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters."

¹¹ *Foster + Partners*, "Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters."

and tolerances, *but it is not about the architect as a remote aesthete removed from the production process.*"¹²

This kind of affirmation reminds us of the interest that architects like Foster have in becoming artists, and more specifically in borrowing from sculpture the sign of art "removed" from the mere calculations of "penetration and tolerances." And yet, eventually, the 'starchitect,' as Foster undoubtedly is, once inflated by the market as much as a project commissioned by HSBC would suggest, returns to a measure of her or himself indexed in the social. The evolution of architectural practice—in what has been called iconic architecture—takes on a preponderance of raised to levels of caricature. Yet it is this caricaturized product that is often bestowed with social significance on the order of symbolic meaning. The HSBC building, specifically, has been self-described and self-inscribed as a celebration of and monument to the global financial giant which name it bears.

In adopting this form of architecture, which by now ubiquitous to anyone familiar with the Hong Kong skyline but a far cry from even the modest—though crowded—Hong Kong of the immediate postwar years, the urban shoreline that once facilitated the growth of the colonial port was restructured to enable a new symbolism that dominates the urban fabric of the city today. Under the direction of Sir Murray MacLehose, 25th Governor of Hong Kong and by the end of his historic tenure one of the most popular figures in the Colony, Hong Kong became Asia's greatest financial center

¹² *Foster + Partners, "Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters."*

to the disadvantage of its former industrial activity. The shift from manufacturing to finance that propelled Hong Kong into the 1970s coincided with the new architecture, the institution of the New Towns Development Program in 1973, as well as the opening of the MTR in the late decade. In each their own way, a refashioning of Hong Kong's urban fabric was underway that would breach the physical barrier of the Kowloon mountains for the first time in human history. Elevating the latter infrastructural plans as the cornerstones of MacLehose's social policy, the colonial government paid scrupulous scientific attention to the vital operations of each community, but much less importantly: its connectivity. This runs contrary to present celebrations of the world-class MTR, but in fact initial ambitions were to minimize the need to commute. As industry was being pushed out of the financial center flanking the harbor, making room for the materialization of the HSBC Building from out of freshly vacated air, and into the suddenly interesting New Territories, they were to be relocated alongside the planned towns and function as live-work sites where employment was to be found less a transit stop away from new public housing structures. The desire, if fulfilled, would curtail the flow of bodies between the new towns and the city center—a separation of labor power and finance capital, as it were. Sha Tin, Tuen Mun, and Tsuen Wan, the most prominent of the early developments, were each adjacent to and built contemporaneously with planned industrial areas (in Sha Tin: Fo Tan and Shek Mun; in Tuen Mun: Tuen Mun

Industrial Area 屯門工業區; for Tsuen Wan: Kwai Chung and Chai Wan Kok Chai Wan Kok 柴灣角工業區).¹³

Such was the ambition that was quickly foiled by the departure of secondary industries from the colony altogether, leaving instead for the lower-wage pastures of Mainland China where manufacturing costs were significantly lower. Consequently, the dream of Hong Kong's self-reliant new towns would quickly pivot as industry departed in the 1980s, having to spark instead a contingency plan to connect the new, distant, and isolated estates to the commercial and financial activities and opportunities that had been spun up in the urban center; a contingency plan that could only be realized by electrifying the rail system. Not only did subsequent new towns planned in the 1980s and 1990s exclude plans for industrial areas, they began to explicitly include plans for built railway nodes instead.

So rather than displacing labor onto the fringes of the Kowloon foothills, the emergence of finance capital on Hong Kong's central harbors created instead a network of bodies shuttled to-and-fro on the intravenous connections of the new financial infrastructure. At the belly of this insurrection against Hong Kong's old industries, the HSBC building crystallizes from the vacated void, jutting out as a self-proclaimed monument to the new architecture. In the realm of the spatial, finance capital took hold of Hong Kong. Profiteering that may have found its plains of gold in the industrialization of open tracts of land and in the privatization of earthbound resources

¹³ "Planning with Vision: Sha Tin," The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/press/publication/nt_pamphlet02/stn_html/index.html.

in the earlier colonial period had then decided to seek its fortune in the downtown harbor whose skyline it would reshape. Until that point, major investments in private physical infrastructure had not been considered a priority on the island. Recall that the first HSBC office was leased from the preexisting Wardley House at the 1865 rate of HKD\$500 a month. It had always been seen as a high-octane pleasure port, a place to make as much money as quickly as possible, while keeping an attentive eye on the departure ferry timetable. Jameson would ask at this point, “What is then the relationship, if any, between the distinctive form land speculation has taken today and those equally distinctive forms we find in postmodern architecture?”¹⁴ For one, the HSBC building is a popular building, visited with enthusiasm by Filipina maids, Occupy protestors, and architecture students alike. The populist insertion into the urban fabric is negotiated by the building’s revolutionary suspension system which lifts the structure from ground-level allowing it to levitate above an area just large enough to be a public plaza. This a gracious gesture in high-density Hong Kong, but makes the building nothing like the old Art Deco banking house that lent itself so readily to serve as the headquarter of the Japanese colonial operation during the colony’s occupation with its *porte-cochère* to stage the passage from city street to building interior. Unlike the closed dwellings of yesteryear, the mutation upon the sumptuous enclosures of the bygone trading port shapes a new perceptual habit that makes the transition from interior to exterior—and vice-a-versa—an unceremonious affair. The pairs of steel masts around

¹⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 163.

which the atrium comes together renders unnecessary an internal supporting structure. In order to liberate the banking floors from the usual tall-office building grid of structural columns and provide flexibility for future changes, the structure was banished to the edges of the plan, with floors suspended from great coat-hanger trusses, dramatically draped between steel masts at either end of the building. In what one is still tempted to think about as the inside, this exoskeletal structure beams light down from a glass ceiling through 25 stories of floor space to the atrium below.

These unmarked distinctions between interior and exterior seem to be imposed by some new category of built space that immediately imposes a new spatial order on the city that surrounds it. But this relationship to the surrounding city is different from that of the monuments of Le Corbusier's International Style, in which the act of disjunction was "violent, visible, and had a very real symbolic significance—as in Le Corbusier's great *pilotis*, whose gesture radically separates the new utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric."¹⁵ Rather than believing in the virulence of social utopianism as it was supposedly embodied by the arbiters of the new modern and the efficacy of the scientifically-measured social principles which were supposed to be include in its design, this new spatial language of financial capital seems very content to simply underscore the contradiction and displacement that it symbolizes.

¹⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 41.

Jameson's reading of the architectural thinking of Manfredo Tafuri—and of Rem Koolhaas, on the other side of the debate—is interested in exactly how Tafuri conceives of praxis in the new symbolic order that is founded on contradiction and displacement—and thus where simple contradiction no longer has efficacy. In short, the HSBC Building would be an affront to Tafuri's ideals, perhaps to the unabashed delight of Koolhaas. For Tafuri's project of crisis, interesting and successful architecture is precisely that which aims itself at reconciling the contradiction between modernism's grand utopia and the reality of the social situations which it often drops itself in. Rather than resolving these tensions through design, the HSBC building only underscores and specifies these problems, viewing itself as a unique event that adds greater symbolic value to the register of architectural typology. Koolhaas, on the other hand, enthusiastically embraces the same contradictions in the aesthetic ratification of he calls the irresolvable.¹⁶ The difference between Tafuri and Koolhaas can then be explained, according to Jameson:

"The work may thus turn out to be a symbolic act, a real form of praxis in the symbolic realm; but it might also prove to be a merely symbolic act, an attempt to act in a realm in which action is impossible and does not exist as such. I thus have the feeling that for Tafuri, Rockefeller Center is this last - a merely symbolic act, which necessarily fails to resolve its contradictions; whereas for Koolhaas, it is the fact of creative and productive action within the symbolic that is the source of aesthetic excitement."¹⁷

In the HSBC Building, it seems that the unfurling of Jacob's Ladder eschews the economic bedrock of opium and imperialism on which Central Hong Kong sits

¹⁶ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 181.

¹⁷ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 183.

henceforth replacing labor capital even of the perverse kind only to suggest itself as the representative, in a new urban architectural order, of the idea of capital proper. Armed with the works of Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin and those postwar Marxists that beheld the city, however depleted, as a natural harbor of social reconciliation, passersby can frolic through the HSBC atrium for as long as they hope that their dynamic activity will impart some sort of social reconstitution of this gaudy financial architecture, but one cannot help but feel that the techniques of narrative analysis espoused by Benjamin's reading of Charles Baudelaire's flaneur and de Certeau's strategizing of dynamic trajectories are dated movements in a new architectural urban machine that has since evolved beyond those narrative paradigms.

The type of walking along dynamic paths that is supposed to produce virtual narratives and stories has been replaced by a new transportation machine which resembles the older promenade only by allegorically referring to the old ways in which that walking was done. This new transportation machine is not just the high-speed elevators that shuttle financial workers between the building's major levels, where they briefly disembark and transition to a zig-zagging series of escalators on which the remainder of office floors are only accessible; it is not either the tunnel-like function of the hollowed-out atrium which allows passage between Queen's Road and Des Voeux Road. It is the entire urban transformation signaled by the erection of the building on the territory around it, stretching from Stanley's shore to the shadows of the Kowloon foothills. From Central Hong Kong to any of the distant new towns banished to the margins by financial capital, the mutation in space disallows for the narrative stroll

which we were tasked to complete with our own bodies. In place of the old streets, the new urbanism of financial architecture opts for the MTR, its malls, and expressescalators which replace movement altogether. From the central space of the HSBC atrium one may descend into Exit K of the Central MTR station. Once beneath the surface, such a space makes it difficult to use the language of distance altogether, since distance becomes impossible to conceive of. Perfectly air-conditioned, incessantly connected, such a system mimics the old, narrative-based city street in destinations only. From Central MTR Station, one could pass over to Kowloon, disembark at Kowloon Station, ascend 118 floors, and find oneself overlooking the city—if the layer of cloud coverage, found alarmingly just below, allows—from atop the highest bar in the world, without exposure to a single particulate of the South China air, with the panoramic spectacle of the HSBC building and its neighboring financial monuments across the harbor framed by the glare-less glass windows through which it is viewed. All of Hong Kong—of all three dimensions— becomes concentrated in the accessible network of rail lines and station walkways. Movement in this space amounts to displacement rather than motion; that is, it underscores the ends of activity while only allegorically referencing the narrative of moving in between. It is the movement of ‘body movers’ rather than of ‘bodies moving.’ The entire city is systematically and deliberately compressed in finance capital’s new arrangement of space, with the referent, Hong Kong, spread out conveniently and alarmingly before every commuter.

The conception of Hong Kong’s financial architecture outlined here attempts to do more than give a stylistic account of the city’s photogenic skyline. It hopes to give a

historical view of this particular style and its consequences for what we often uncritically think of as urban space not to present it as a style amongst many others but one that dominates the logic of inhabiting Hong Kong urban space. This distinction leads to different ways of thinking about the phenomenon: on the one hand, moral evaluations that lead to either a celebration of the aesthetic, post- 'everything' new world, or an equally fervent denunciation of its post-industrial human gerbil-tube infrastructure which lost the utopian fantasies of the great modernisms of yesteryear. This is most often the case in the activism of political groups which actively seek to intervene in history and stall it with the reestablishment of a simpler fantasy past. Yet, if what has unfolded on 1 Queen's Road in the past half-century is a historical phenomenon, then the attempt to grasp at it from either moral camp must be called a categorical mistake.

This is more than the critical theories of the Frankfurt School passively washing up on Hong Kong's shore. The luxury of old-fashioned ideology critique—the brutish, confrontational, moral denunciation of the opposition—is, ultimately, no longer available, but it is the effect of the apparition of that Norman Foster-designed bastion in the 1970s that should convince us that Hong Kong requires new practices of assembly that are deeply immersed in the logic of its financial architecture rather than in the fantasies of the city streets of yesteryear.

The everyday commuter—the ordinary passerby—is so deeply immersed in the financial architecture to the point where the coordinated body is stranded without spatial coordinates and practically—and theoretically—incapable of launching the same

narrative modes of assembly as an attack on history's passive momentum. If forms of assembly that continue to be put in praxis today are founded upon a narrative-based system of representation that understood the scenes of the street and what it experienced in the city as belonging to an order of representation — perhaps what is called 'culture' — semi-autonomous and thus reclaimable from the oppressive device of capital. Underscoring a new logic of the new urban fabric suggests that some of our most cherished and time-honored conceptions of radical revolutionary practice — those that compel crowds to take to the street, defend the street, and subsequently reclaim the street for true society! — may find themselves to be impotently outmoded. The newer financial architecture poses an imperative to those seeking to intervene in the passive course of history to, as Jameson recommends, develop new senses, grow undeveloped faculties, and "expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions."¹⁸

¹⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 39.

4. Street-as-Effect: Photography and the Temporalities of the Street

Through what means can claims to public space be made? 'Take to the streets,' is an idiom spiritually bound to the Western democratic appeal to free assembly, but it is also a phrase that is both explicitly and implicitly invoked in any number of public assemblies that do not share the legal framework of Western democracies. The point of departure in this chapter is not only Hong Kong's globally-televised opposition to Beijing which is being fought upon the urban built environment of the city's financial arteries, but from a globally-shared template of assembly that appear precisely while public space—and the notion of public space—is either sold off or eroding under financial, or authoritarian, control.

The examples of mass urban demonstrations that have taken on—and in some cases—taken down regimes incite a growing number of others to do the same. There is an undeniable virality to revolutionary fervor. Perhaps these assemblies, in their stubborn insistence upon the same vocabulary as the many failed uprisings of the twentieth century have hitherto relied, prompt us to suspend judgment of their backwardness and archaisms and instead ask whether we need to revise our ideas about urban protest in order to take account of the forms of alliance and solidarity that are greater than their appearances in the street. Perhaps it is not that bodies of resistance cluster on city streets because they depend on these spaces of appearance but that they choose to appear despite the limitations that the city streets impose. This is not yet to consider the legal hindrances to political assembly imposed by securitarian control. The

initial contradiction implicates the ideological discrepancy with which the financially-bankrolled and financially-guided development of urban architectures are incongruent with the ideas of 'the people' who carry on their protests amongst, between, and on top of these edifices and arteries and whom make the claim that beneath the veneer of financial adorations, these are structures, institutions, and monuments worth fighting alongside. That they are not merely the built barriers of the opposition, but contain in them some semblance of concerted plurality considered so essential to democracy.

In Hong Kong, Hongkongers have given a name to the undirected movement of peoples in the street. When facing authority, 'be water,' flowing where the power is weak or absent. The most active protesters tell each other, rather poetically, "Be strong as ice, be fluid like water, gather like dew, scatter like mist."¹ There is a physics of dissent inherent in this understanding. Of course, even as protestors in Hong Kong gathered in revolutionary singsong it would still be odd, to imagine this type of public coming-together on the street as a fusion unto a single persecutory phantasm which speaks on behalf of 'the people' and the streets which it defends. Judith Butler claims that, "in fact, 'we the people' — the utterance, the chant, the written line — is always missing some group of people it claims to represent."² This is literally true of representation — especially of the visual type that types place in street assembly — because no visual representation of the crowd can represent the people when not all the people have the power to assemble in the street. The dronopoetics of zooming in and

¹ Mary Hui, "Hong Kong is exporting its protest techniques around the world," *Quartz*, October 15, 2019, <https://qz.com/1728078/be-water-catalonia-protesters-learn-from-hong-kong/>.

² Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, 166.

zooming out from above have no use here, which prompt us to reconsider why those aerial images of Hongkongers sweating it out in the humid summer circulated with such reach and velocity. Is it errant to believe in these images as establishing the character of the popular will, especially where the possibility of constituting who the people are cannot be separated from the technology that establishes which people will count as the people? Often times the people, or some people, fall outside of the street or the camera. Many live on the margins of the metropole, making it especially difficult for those in Hong Kong living in the New Territories to make their way into the central business districts where protestors so (in)conveniently convened. Even before MTR Corporation limited station access in and out of protest epicenters, there existed already a natural barrier to participation to those not already conveniently in proximity to the city streets designated as nodes of assembly.³ This means that the assembly never really arrive at a collective presence that speaks as a unified chorus. Whoever the people may be, it matters less that they arrived in numbers purported to be close to a quarter of the territory's population; they are surely internally divided, appearing differentially, sequentially, not at all, or in measured degree, probably also according to their own conveniences, and so ultimately not a unity. But I offer this not to discredit the revolutionary potential of these movements by drawing disproportionate attention to what might be missed assumptions. Instead, what we might consider is that taking to the street remains effective despite these incongruences. By allowing ourselves to ask

³ Tripti Lahiri, "Hong Kong is shutting down as a new anti-mask law deepens anger," *Quartz*, October 4, 2019, <https://qz.com/1722642/hong-kong-has-shut-down-its-entire-train-system/>.

how they work *when* they do, is to fully imagine protests according to the assumptions that work and reimagine them accordingly with the assumptions that do not.

Organizers claim that on June 16, 2019 more than one million protestors – or nearly one-in-seven residents – filled the sweltering streets of Hong Kong in an immense protest against a proposed extradition bill.⁴ The weight of that weekend in June would send Hong Kong into a bout of mass civil unrest that would last into the New Year. The crowd that careened through the canyons carved out on either side by urban skyscrapers was immediately sent circulating not just along circuitous roadways usually seen by only a handful of passersby briskly travelling at most several hundred meters in the non-temperate controlled outer world before ducking into their air-conditioned destinations, but as well across the connected world. Aerial images of dense slow-moving crowds crawling through vacated roadways were passed around by press coverage that posed the record-breaking march as part of a natural mechanics of the Hong Kong mass. The gravitation of bodies on a spontaneous serpentine tour of the Island was posed as an innate force that compels demonstrators ever towards their democratic yearnings. This impulsion is affected only by the obstacles that law oppose to it. All the political actions of man are the effects of this natural tendency.

There appear two tacit assumptions made by the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. Firstly, that the anti-ELAB movement contains within it a nativist understanding of

⁴ Jennifer Creery and Tom Grundy, “Almost 2 million attended anti-extradition law demo, say organisers, as protesters bed in around governmentt HQ,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 17, 2019. <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/06/17/almost-2-million-attended-anti-extradition-law-demo-say-organisers-protesters-bed-around-govt-hq/>.

collective memories which culturally distinguish Hongkongers from party officials in the Beijing government. The anti-ELAB movement, or, for some, the pro-democracy movement—the mere conflation of these two terms already indicates the loaded interests and assumptions enveloped by a singular mood of discontent—is part of a tidal wave of cultural criticism, of a publicly expressed discontent with the constant destruction that has degraded the city’s collective spirit. In this regard, it is perhaps pertinent to situate this recent wave of protest within the nativist struggle to construct and preserve a common culture for Hong Kong apart from the perceived encroachment of the Mainland. It is, coincidentally, the same poetics of the ordinary relevant to the way that young Hongkongers attempt to relate to the city that have elevated an ahistorical conceptual understanding of the city street to the position of being the antithesis to finance capital-led urban planning policy.

Secondly, the protest philosophy ‘be water’ employs a self-understanding of the transitory nature of street assembly that makes tacit acknowledgment of the limits of visual representation. Formulating the popular will of ‘the people’ not in terms of a quantifiable aggregate of individual bodies that can be summated but instead as a physics of dissent (as ice, water, dew, and mist) to be observed in the street presupposes that the effect of appearance is not to literally reclaim ownership of the sociality presumed to be tied to the institution of the street but rather to establish itself as an effect. Access to the public street presupposes access to some media that propagates that event beyond the specificity of that space and time. The street is utilized as a media effect, and also as part of the expressive apparatus by which an assembled group claims

to be the people. As such, the street is always connected with the media that circulates it, and can no longer be presumed existent—and especially not with the social meanings invested in it—without its media effect. The street, more than the literal packed earth and the buildings that stand along it, is always already dispersed through the media representation without which it loses its representative claim.

The emblematic value of the street as a media effect figures prominently into a new understanding of political assembly that takes into account the new landscape of protest that takes place in the new financial architecture of the post-boom Hong Kong that emanates out from the HSBC building. The street as a media effect, and not as a site to be defended, is the symbolic significance of the street. Accelerating this understanding to catch up with the rapid dispersion of protest media and to abandon lingering articulations of the need to assemble on the street as the defense of the social values we once believed it to embody invents a viable contemporary alternative for the territorial and militant paradigms of political assembly.

Hong Kong is one of the world's most photographed cities.⁵ Lord Palmerston's famous denunciation of colonial Hong Kong as "a barren rock with nary a house upon it," struggles to stand against the now-made iconic image of a junk floating against the Victoria Harbour skyline.⁶ Thousands of tourists congregate on the viewing platform on Victoria Peak each day to capture the ever-same panorama. The photogenic glow of Tsim Sha Tsui's neon-clad night scenes are the oft-repeated captures of tourist literature

⁵ Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 91.

⁶ Louisa Lim, "Deaths Tell the Story of Life in Old Hong Kong," *NPR*, August 21, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/21/159363999/deaths-tell-the-story-of-life-in-old-hong-kong>.

celebrating the eclectic design of an anachronistic Hong Kong frozen in dense Kowloon neighborhoods. Photography, in this way, has always been ensnared in an auto-ethnographic project of capturing and celebrating disjunction in a city that has always relied on its hyphenated status between world systems.

It is in this context of a need to develop a critical discourse on Hong Kong architecture and urban space, where the dominance of visibility is put into question, Ackbar Abbas' still-relevant politics of disappearance must be acknowledged. The poignancy of Abbas' paradigm is its sensitivity to the temporal and spatial disjunctions within the tired postcolonial discourse. By attending to the strategic assimilation of cultural transience even as discourse purports to lament these changing hallmarks, Abbas' arrives at an understanding of "postculture" believed applicable to Hong Kong. "A postculture is not postmodernist culture, or post-Marxist culture, or post-Cultural Revolution culture, or even post-colonial culture, insofar as each of these has a set of established themes and an alternative orthodoxy."⁷

Postculture provides some kind of addendum to the temporal model adopted by postcolonial and neoliberal analyses of the city. The phenomenology of postculture is such that culture does not simply wait around to reflect the economic—as in Marxism—or the political—as in postcolonialism. Postculture describes a metacritical understanding of culture experienced as a field of instabilities. The emphases, Abbas contends, are placed on the "*practices of freedom*" necessary in the absolute present

⁷ Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 145.

moment rather than on abstractions and ideas.⁸ In short, postculture assumes a perpetual fight. In doing so, rather than advancing Hong Kong cultural politics beyond the fallacy of postcolonial localism, Abbas expresses a sentiment equal to the Hong Kong Tourism Board campaigns to hyphenate Hong Kong. Whether we prefer Hong Kong as “where East meets West” or “one country, two systems,” hyphenation dissolves boundaries as easily as it erects them.⁹

The media effect of photographic capture is the strategic practice of freedom best understood only when Hong Kong’s architectural transformation since the 1970s is fully in view. The practice of photography in Hong Kong—like so many other things— came to motivated by the export demands of the colonial apparatus. The Swiss photographer Pierre Rossier’s stereographic view of Hong Kong in 1858 is the first known photograph of the island.¹⁰ One gauge of the defining characteristics of photography’s image of Hong Kong is comparison with contemporaneous representations of Chinese cities and semi-colonial treaty ports, such as Shanghai and Canton. The most emblematic images of Hong Kong during photography’s formative nineteenth century are those of the city of Victoria. If Hong Kong warranted foreign attention and the demand of the photographic export market, it was under its title as a British crown colony, and as such, sold itself accordingly as a British refuge in Asia. The first images of the colonial city were documents of Britain’s architectural presence taken as evidence of the imperial

⁸ Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 145.

⁹ Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 145.

¹⁰ Roberta Wue, *Picturing Hong Kong: Photography 1855-1910* (New York: George Braziller, 1997), 50.

center's positive transformation of the barren rock.¹¹ "The significance of these structures is not as examples of nineteenth-century architecture, but rather, their unexpected appearance in distant Hong Kong. In reality, by 1861, Victoria was little more than 'a long street running parallel with the shore of the bay.'"¹² For these efforts, the imaging of this single stretch of road was still and rational with buildings been shown individually and entirely, with no indication of who might occupy them. Pedestrian and street traffic were mostly absent, partially owing as well to the technological constraint of requiring long exposure times. Rather than to Hongkongers, these *cartes-de-visite* and stereoviews looked upward instead to the edifices of British expansion: St. John's Cathedral and the newly erected Clock Tower amongst the two most popular scenes of this period.

Ho Fan, triply famous (Hong Kong's most awarded photographer, Shaw Brothers actor, film director), was the first of Hong Kong's street photographers to demand of this modern category of 'street photography' as theorized by Henri Cartier-Bresson its indissociably democratic stance. Photography, of its democratic nature, enjoys a high level of prevalence, pervasiveness and popularity in Hong Kong – from a 'Kingdom of Salon Photography' populated by amateur photographers after the World War II, to the recent establishment of a citywide Hong Kong International Photo Festival that celebrates the photographic medium as an vitalist art practice.

The age of democratic photographic practice had begun. By 1949, when the adolescent Ho and his family arrive in Hong Kong as part of the wave of Shanghainese

¹¹ James R. Ryan, "Imperial Landscapes: Photography, Geography and British Overseas Exploration, 1858-1872," in *Geography and Imperialism, 1820-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 53-79.

¹² Wue, *Picturing Hong Kong: Photography, 1855-1910*, 40.

migration, the stereoview photoscapes that dominated the Hong Kong's photographic had all but been replaced by a vogue spirit of street photography that claimed to be more humanistic. The lyrical trend in photography of the twentieth century is a phenomenon with which art historians are well acquainted. Photographers dreamed of a world encapsulated empathetically in a solicitous vision that would echo the ideals of democratic society. But, for a long time, it has been regarded in an overall way as a humanist phenomenon: less mediation, fewer impositions, more kindness, more respect, more humanity. In fact, these changes are accompanied by a displacement in the very object of photographic documentation. Is there greater photographic representation of the *fantastique social de la rue*? Perhaps. There is certainly a change of objective.

But we must not be misled. Beneath an apparently determined, impatient search for humanity, one finds in Ho's work the regulated mechanism just as deliberately activated as the colonial eye of power. Street photography makes the smallest thing into a great subject. "The little human detail can become," as Henri Cartier-Bresson, who would often look at his contact sheets upside down to judge the images separate from any implied social content, remarked, "a leitmotiv."¹³ In the practice of photographing the unassuming, intentionless street, the city and its people were bound together: they worked together to present an apparent wholeness of two ideas no longer distinguishable without the other. It is as if the street—not just the built architecture of man—and the people which passed through had become mixed. The street did not

¹³ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 1-14.

begin when each brick was laid; it did not begin when colonial surveys photographed a single row of buildings newly erected on the harbor; detail by detail, it was constituted by each of the elements that made it possible to recognize the social without being present. The camera could be wielded so discreetly that it enabled Ho to photograph while being virtually unseen by others—a near invisibility that turned street photography and photojournalism into a primary source of information. He was drawn to the city and its inhabitants, in search of their story missed by the naked eye; he was seeking not the city's flesh but its soul.

Ho's dramatic images display a fascination with the cohabitation between individuals and the geometric patterns cast by light and shadow. Now, curiously enough, his work is still called timeless and un-aging, even as the institutions and architectural forms dominating Hong Kong have—and continue to—change. If as an architecturally-barren nineteenth-century port of call what was photographed were buildings in isolation, then a reversal takes place in the mid-twentieth century, when after the island would have been unrecognizable to Palmerston, photography decided instead that it would no longer seek marvel from the massive edifices that could finally make iconic British influence in the colony, but that the photographic essence would be found between alleys and storefronts—in the lives of the individuals living under the shadow of the harbor skyline—and later, the HSBC tower. The lives of a growing number in the population took on the pictorial characteristics of the buildings around them. Street photography sought in the street a soul.

Ho's documentation transformed the social from an abstract and universal concept often missing from the visual capture of nineteenth century Hong Kong into a symbol of a nostalgic and rhetorical form of moral deliberation. It was the representation of the street that sparked dynamic dialogues of the social as an entity under attack. In his 1959 book, *Thoughts on Street Photography*, Ho was already keenly aware that some of his favorite photographs hadn't yet had their moment to shine.

"My photographs with a strong pictorial aesthetic are still highly favored among the salons," he wrote in the last chapter of the book. "Documentary style street photography or portraits are rarely selected although they are among my favorites. Maybe one day the opportunity will present itself for me to show this body of work. In the meantime, I will just keep trying."¹⁴ Ho understood that his images of the street would not live until reaching their afterlife. They belonged, unlike the *cartes-de-visite*, not to the present but to the future. Urbanism looks backward at images of the street as they once were, in order to conceive of what urbanism might become.

The coincidence of the development of street photography in Hong Kong with the colony's postwar-becoming of a capitalist city was certainly not accidental. The bleakness in the way that Ho's photographs are seen—always nostalgically—always stem from the principled absence to any fantasized solutions to the dilemmas of the capitalist city. Fred Jameson writes of this weak nostalgia, "The ghost story is indeed virtually the architectural genre par excellence, wedded as it is to rooms and buildings

¹⁴ Wall text, "Fan Ho, Portrait of Hong Kong," *Blue Lotus Gallery*, Hong Kong, April 28, 2019.

ineradically stained with the memory of gruesome events, material structures in which the past literally ‘weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.’”¹⁵

But what I mainly want to appeal to Jameson for is his second-order account of how social value appears in urban architecture. Photography tells us that at some point in the twentieth century, the street that was once just a site for construction—a thoroughfare between destinations—became grounds for a planification of the future. For Ho, the temporality of his work was always an aesthetic exploration of this question about a way in which specific futures come to be structural features of ongoing work: something like planned obsolescence in the certainty that the social milieu captured in his images of the street as it was in the 1950s and 60s would be appealed to in order to illustrate something of a reactivation project. Ho’s works reflect this legacy of the street: the street as legacy. The dronopoetic shots of the two million demonstrators taking part in the June protests say as much. The newer moment longs for a return to political realism (‘we are insisting on our own democracy!’) when in fact it is only a dislocated replay of the stereotypes of all of those things. But the temporality of the new media effect is not found in the nostalgic past in which political realism was possible—before the financial architecture rewrote the rules on how we protest and where we must protest. While the new media effect catalogs the stereotypes of a political past—the socially-infused street, street-level commerce, communal squares—it deals in political futures. Just as the new architecture trades in financial futures turning infrastructure

¹⁵ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 187.

and shelter into speculative gains and losses, the new political assemblies as a media effect trade in the future objects of a speculative politicized society no longer under attack, but on the attack.

5. Conclusion: Towards Performance, Towards Life

Since Gordon Bremer's hoisting of the Union Jack in 1841, Hong Kong—then, a strategic port-of-call; later, a model of neoliberal economic growth in East Asia; and now, a Chinese specially-administered region in flux—has undergone transformations to its cultural, political, and visual status unprecedented even alongside the global developments of the 19th and 20th centuries.

To look closely at the spatial history of Hong Kong is to arrive at contemporary outrage, from some, over the indistinguishable boundaries between private mall space and public usage forums, and lament, from others, over the eroding sentimentality for street-level exchanges summarized by the decaying appearance and prevalence of the city's iconic neon shop signs. The city has transformed; its land coverage extended, its concourses no longer just on the surface but passing above and below the colonial streets of the old port which once facilitated the noticeable movement of goods. It's present-day collection of new town developments and rail link malls express a very different sense of urban space than that thought by early urban planners of the European 19th century, and yet the language of those socialist utopians remains central to the thinking against the human gerbil tubes that continue to overtake the dignity of a city that once saw itself as a unique bridge between civilizations, but now increasingly coming to resemble a redundancy—just another member in the line-up of

interchangeable Chinese urban developments, all of which seeming to come off the same manufacturing line.

Each of the towering multi-story structures across the city are haunted by this nostalgia. Very often, this nostalgia dominates the perception of architecture and the surrounding environment. Every corner, every street, and every scene is measured against what it once was. Buildings are inextricably built with the memories of past places, material structures in which the past weighs on the society of the living. The inescapability of Hong Kong's interiors—mall, concourse, MTR, office, apartment—is also the inescapability of this nostalgia, which is a nostalgia pointed towards an imaginary whole—perhaps of life before-1997, or the decadence of the 1930s which brought air-conditioning to the now air-conditioned city.

Hong Kong, as a specific architectural identity worth studying in itself shorn of all of its self-fashioned world-city—or the more cliché, East-meets-West—overtones is a relatively new idea. The compulsion remains to turn stories about Hong Kong into stories about its politico-cultural allies and adversaries—China, Taiwan, Britain; as if the cultural space of Hong Kong has no audience beyond those trying to carve out an identity that must always be responding to Beijing's growing influence or Britain's colonial legacy. Perhaps since Margaret Thatcher's visit to China, stories about Hong Kong are unanimously inclined to make mention of Hong Kong's unique historical line of development, its unique confluence of imperial cultures, and its unmistakable skyline

set against the rolling Kowloon hills, but even then these unique qualities are exhibited with an eye towards a political agenda on the Mainland or in appeal to potential allies in the West.

That is, there is a tendency towards one of two nearly ubiquitous images of Hong Kong. There is the tourist image of Hong Kong set as desktop wallpapers of junks in the towering bank-clad harbor. On the other side, there is the view of Hong Kong as a semiotic, informational, or infrastructural city defined by cities-within-itself—a collection of identical new towns and housing developments with points, nodes, and interchanges but without the social soul of its citizens. As Abbas writes, “We find therefore [in Hong Kong] not an atmosphere of doom and gloom, but the more paradoxical phenomenon of *doom and boom*.”¹ This, might point towards a method of understanding the type of mass demonstrations that have become commonplace in Hong Kong in the past decade for the hundreds of thousands that take part. The slow lesson since the economic boom years of the years immediately leading to the Handover has been unpacking the popular logic expressed in the building of the HSBC building that loudly asserted that political idealism could be paired with economic self-interest, when ‘freedom’ understood as a distinction made against Beijing could be made synonymous with ‘free market.’ The process of un-learning this association in the age of the rise of China has come with the observation of the development of a radically-

¹ Cheung, *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan*, 45.

different Hong Kong that has unfolded under the architectural authority of Norman Foster's HSBC building. Hong Kong is no longer so much a space than an increasingly-homogenous space of transit. Where the air-conditioned interchanges in malls and stations are more trafficked than what continue to be called streets, the role of the traditional street in protest asks for new theoretical definitions that ask how they can be understood as effective sites of resistance at the confluence of Hong Kong's finance capital-driven urban developmental history, its political idealism, its narrative structures, and the ubiquity of global protest media. The new form of protest that took over the streets in Hong Kong in the sweltering summer months of 2019 were no longer in defense of the street. If one prominent feature of its appearance had changed between the occupation of Umbrella Square during the 2014 movement and the fluid 'Be Water'-minded protests in 2019 it was the shift from the ground-bound physics of sit-in occupation wedded to the street beneath to the fluid dynamics of dissent less concerned with territorial takeovers and more aware of the media effect of being seen. It was neither as well conjuring the type of spectacle that simply demands to be photographed. How the mass demonstrations were to be photographed was potentially of greater interest to those meandering the streets as well as those responsible for its visual capture. The connection of the street with new media means that dispersion happens on two levels: both the physical and the virtual. The effective street is not the social-given that exists and must be defended by the people; the street is the effect which is always

already furnished by the media and without which it loses its representative claim. The street, once understood as the background of society becomes its explicit object. The injunction to think about the public common space of the street as an effect rather than as a pre-given thinks anew about a political relationship in which the demonstrating mass is on the offensive. As a consequence, the street is effectively defined by its forcible passage during protest.

Political assembly requires a body that appears, acts, and in its action seeks to constitute a different social world than the one it encounters. This means encountering oppression without reproducing its terms: territorialization, occupation, marginalization. A theory of assembly which recognizes the street as its effect has the potential to constitute the world in a new way. It responds to finance capital's arrangement of the city into a space of transit where capital moves. The new assemblies do not claim their place by remaining static in a displaced urban architecture, but works in the aim of constituting an alternative urban space— one more suited to the social realm—by re-routing social energies into spaces of exposure in ways that are vulnerable, aspirational, and potentially revolutionary.

There is no political realism without demonstration. Assemblies must reject every transcendent or ideological proposition of a telos and instead embrace the immanence of a telos constructed within the desires least suggested by the cities' antagonisms. Relevant, in this regard, are Michel Foucault's injunctions to create a

genealogy of institutions that moves a history of the present forward to the invention of new practices to constitute a better life. Foucault's oeuvre defines something like the path that assembly is taking. The constitution of a new life, for Foucault, is not a purely political category, nor is it purely sociological. Life in Foucault instead comprises both the individual political will and the dynamic of interplay between individual subjectivities. A new life in the given context is not the old reliance on folk images of the street to remind the people of the values that they believe to have once existed. The new life only comes into view when it is able to redirect and deploy in revolutionary praxis the paradigm of the present. A theory of assembly and struggle derived from the paradigms of the past cannot be superimposed on the present, not lest as the present is constantly being reconfigured in transit.

There is a question that ethics returns to time and time again that is appropriate once again in its recurrent way. It is a question asked by Foucault² in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, and posed differently by Theodor Adorno in aphoristic form in his *Minima Moralia*.³ How does one lead a good life in a bad life?⁴ If the city and the world, at this moment, is what Adorno is compelled to call "the bad

² Foucault writes, "The major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism [...] And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us." In Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xlii.

³ Adorno writes, "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly." In Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York: Verso, 2005), 39.

⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 15.

life,” and Foucault, a life lived with “the fascism in us all,” then life cannot be changed without first becoming critical of those historically-developed categories and structures that differentially value life itself. In the end, it is probably not possible to think about life outside of its particular historical contexts. Life in Hong Kong in the year 2020 is unique to itself in that it is best understood as having arisen out of a particular set of historical contingencies that do not owe to any singular shaping cause. Yet, that is not to say that those contingencies make Hong Kong unique to the effect of possibly being dismissive, as in nativist ideology, of external forces as part of the set of contingencies, nor, of course, is it to say that Hong Kong has been shaped entirely by imperial (whether it be British or Chinese) capital. The new assemblies which aspire to carry forward proposals for a new life must think within the contingencies and contexts which have shaped the old one. The new assemblies cannot be the old assemblies playing with new media—new toys; the new assemblies cannot simply be the old assemblies by other means. The new assemblies have to show themselves to be implicitly performing the ethics of the new life, for it is only through the performance and manifestation of the new alternative to the old one that the political value of assembly can be seen.

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