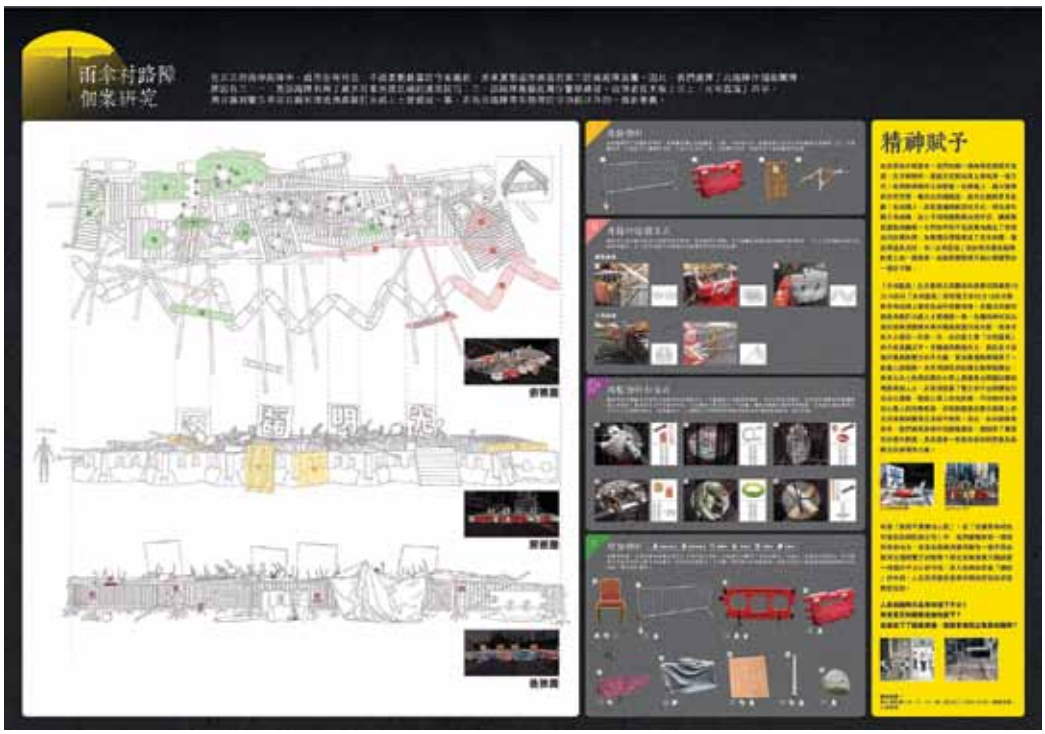
Sally Lai

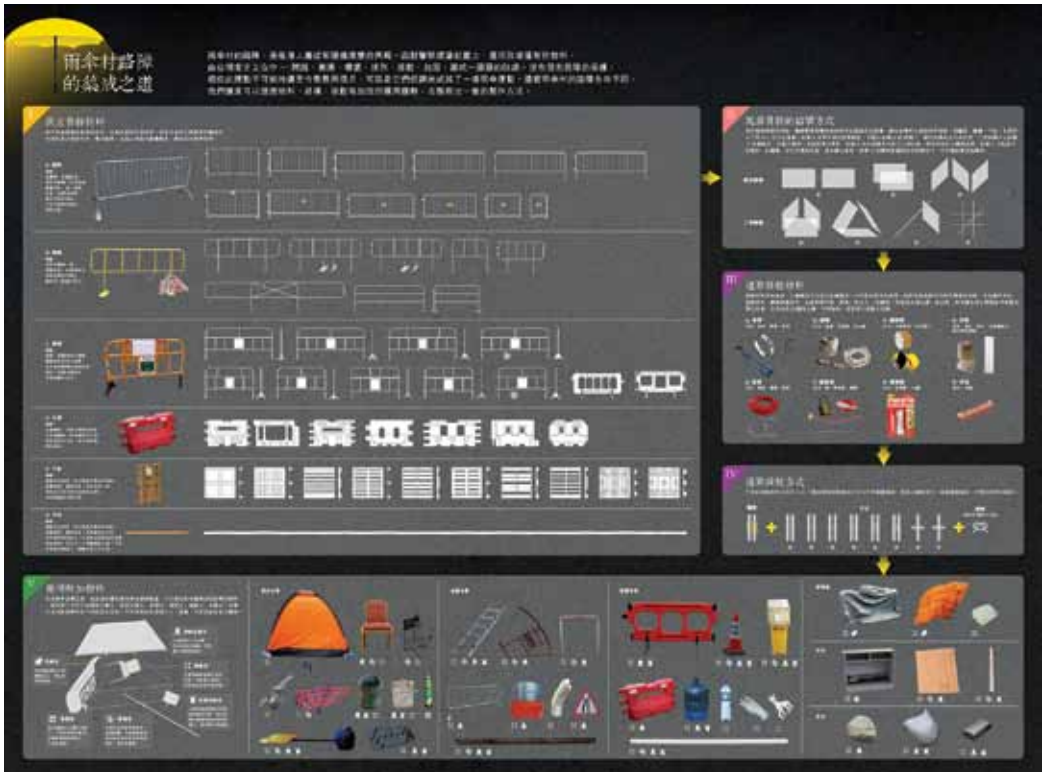
A Conversation with Siu King-Chung about the Community Museum Project

Objects of Demonstration, 2002, 1a Space, Cattle Depot Art Village, Hong Kong. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

Siu King-Chung is an art and design critic, installation artist, and independent curator. He is actively involved in arts policy and art and design curriculum development in Hong Kong. He is Associate Dean and Associate Professor at the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where he also leads the BA (Hons.) Art and Design in Education Programme. In 2002 he co-founded a curatorial collective, Community Museum Project, a platform for visualizing under-represented local histories and practices, often through cross-disciplinary collaborations and public participation.

Sally Lai: You are a founding member of Community Museum Project. Can you tell me how that collaboration came about?





A student project, analyzing the design and structure of a barricade created by the protestors during the 2014 Occupy Movement in Hong Kong; an exhibition version will be showcased at the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rein, Germany, in February. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

Siu King-Chung: My late friend the curator Howard Chan, together with researcher Phoebe Wong and I, were doing research at the School of Design of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in the mid 1990s. We came to the realization that documentation of local creativity was scarce and that the popular understanding of creative culture was very limited. This was reflected not only in the local discourse on art, design, and culture, but also in our museum collections and curatorial practices. With this in mind we started to explore themes in local visual culture and began to curate experimental exhibitions with my students in the Art and Design

in Education course. In the late 1990s we were preparing to curate an exhibition on local protest objects, but it wasn't until we met Pakchai Tse, who in 2001 was completing his graduate studies in the Applied Social Science Department of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, that we were widely introduced to activist circles in Hong Kong and were able to collect substantial material for the show. In order to apply for funding to realize the exhibition, we also had to come up with a formal organization (as required by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council), and so we came up the name Community Museum Project.

Sally Lai: What was it about objects made for protest that particularly interested you? What were the themes in local visual culture that were being articulated through these objects?

Siu King-Chung: We thought that objects made for protest were unique cultural manifestations of the populace and had cultural value similar to that of elite artworks made by artists. They are ephemeral, grassroots, yet ingeniously created as political expression. People employ a lot of artistic tactics in demonstrating, though they don't perceive it as art. The fact that people are able to create and display these objects in processions, deploying ad hoc situational tactics and transforming makeshift materials (perhaps with limited skills) into expressive resources, not only demonstrates a sense of versatility in the people, it also reflects tolerance of different cultural and political views as well as the resourcefulness of a culture.

Making these objects fit whatever timely purposes arise in changing ideological situations is the basic ingenuity of this particular practice. Furthermore, unlike traditional art movements, these creative expressions can be instantly replicated or scaled up for a demonstrative procession or even into a movement or culture. With these performative objects, protests become powerful visual and cultural manifestations of a place. If we were able to look at them systematically and comparatively in the course of history, it would certainly tell a lot about the indigenous nature and creativity of a culture, not to mention its ideological views. The phenomenon of street demonstrations could also become a "freedom index" of a place or country, yet very few museums, collectors, or curators in Hong Kong seemed to pay serious attention to them in the past, especially in the 1990s.

Sally Lai: What was it about that specific moment in time, the late 1990s, that made the objects particularly interesting?

Siu King-Chung: This was around 1997, when Hong Kong would return to China's sovereignty from British rule. The changes in political position and cultural perceptions of the Hong Kong people made their street expressions worth documenting and studying—especially the "before and after 1997," although we were able to trace only local demonstrations back to the early 1990s. Yet we were quite determined to put up the exhibition *Objects of Demonstration* on June 30, 2002, the end date of the first reign of the first Hong Kong Chief Executive, Tung Chee Wah.

Sally Lai: It seems that the public is now even more engaged with visually communicating their protests. I am thinking particularly of the Yellow Umbrella demonstrations against mainland China's vetting of electoral candidates and in turn influencing the race to be Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2014, and the recent fashion demonstrations in Hong Kong protesting against the demolishing of the Pang Jai fabric market in Sham Shui Po.

Siu King-Chung: Yes, these recent developments are really interesting. My students and the Community Museum Project are now completing a project on the Yellow Umbrella Movement. The work will be showcased in the *Protest by Design* Exhibition at the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany, in February 2016.

Sally Lai: How did the activists respond to having their objects presented within an exhibition?

Siu King-Chung: I remember when we had an opening at 1a Space at the Cattle Depot Art Village in Hong Kong and almost none of our friends from the art world came; nor did they attend our weekly seminars, despite the fact that the events were well publicized by the local media. Instead, the opening and seminars were well attended by our activist friends. They were enthusiastic about our program; some even regularly brought in new exhibits during the show.

It was as if they had finally found an alternative platform to publicly showcase and receive recognition for their role in various social movements; the objects did not remain ephemeral but represented more lasting statements of their political desires. It was perhaps this illusory sense of permanence that a quasi-museum setting temporarily provided for them.

To the social activists, the exhibition may have become a visual statement of their culture, though Community Museum Project deliberately avoided promoting any of their particular political views. What we were interested in was the different forms of indigenous creativity and visual tactics that were manifested through the (temporarily) collected items—the "objects of demonstration."

Sally Lai: One thing that is interesting about the *Objects of Demonstration* project, as well as the objects themselves, are the categorizations that you employ to identify them—the Readymade, for example—which mimic museum categorizations. Can you tell me more about this and whether it serves as a way of organizing the material beyond the objects' initial political context and function? For example, not all the objects related to the end of British rule and the return to China are grouped together.

Siu King-Chung: We were employing certain museum methodologies in thinking about the show, the first of which was to categorize our collected objects. We were able to devise a few categories, namely Readymade, as you

Objects of Demonstration captions showing each object, explaining its use, and defining its use. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

mentioned, as well as DIY Object, Text, Pictorial, Monument, and Body Performance. In fact, back then we anticipated these categories would need to be extended to include what I call "Mass-produced Protest Objects" and the "Internet-object." In looking at these different forms of demonstration, we also came up with three levels of representation or potential discourse in regard to each individual object; that is, the material Object itself, the Object-as-defined and the Object-in-use. This was not unlike Joseph Kosuth's chairs series. We wanted to showcase how these objects were being defined and used in the political, cultural, and visual contexts during the demonstration, and in the exhibition. We were using this format as a caption to some of our exhibits, though we had tried not to overemphasize their political agenda. To the Community Museum Project, the exhibition was more of a statement about Hong Kong's material-visual culture than its political culture. We acknowledged that we were fulfilling the longstanding museum prophecy de-politicizing everything in its possession, yet we thought were making a little tweak within curatorial art practices in Hong Kong.

Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, chair, photographs. Collection of MoMA, New York. © 2016 Joseph Kosuth/Artists Rights Society, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Although such "art-world language" might not be fully acknowledged by our activist friends, they were, in reality, already practicing it. They also became more aware of the kinds of visual tactics and strategies they had unconsciously derived for and from their political actions. In hindsight, this might have had some implicit effects on the way demonstrations were designed and carried out in Hong Kong in the years to follow.

Sally Lai: Because of your interest in local visual culture, you have often worked with ordinary people who are not art professionals in order to explore material culture. What are the unique challenges and benefits of collaborating with ordinary local people?

Siu King-Chung: Slowly we are becoming more acquainted with our non-artistic friends, and we are learning more about community. We no longer think in terms of "our" artistic community and "their" activist community,

and we have become more aware of the potential of our museological and visual tools in building community. If we wanted to build our art audience, we needed to build a community audience; if we wanted to expand our art community, we ought to build a bigger and broader community of practitioners. This was the motivation for the Community Museum Project: to work with non-art individuals.

Having built our network with activists and NGOs, we were introduced to people involved in other social movements, primarily against the gentrification of Hong Kong. One, the Lee Tung Street project, was related to a real estate redevelopment project in Wan Chai, initiated by the Urban Renewal Authority. The Community Museum Project was by no means political in its original intention, we just decided to visually document the street facades as a means to preserve the appearance or visual histories of the soon-to-be-demolished street. However, because of our unique visual approach (we made composite panoramic views of the street and invited the residents to tell stories in front of the panoramic images), the work attracted a lot of media attention. Not only was the Community Museum Project interviewed, but also the residents who were affected by the redevelopment agenda. Our work had unexpectedly become a way in which the residents could unveil their personal stories and for the voices affected by the redevelopment to be heard, so that a debate around these issues could ensue. This is how visual culture works; it needs uncommon images to mediate or promote social discourse.

Around the issue of gentrification, we started to investigate the impact on the community and people who would be affected. One domain was that of craftsmen, whose livelihoods have been threatened by the redevelopment plans in many districts of the city. We wanted to create exhibitions that showcased their craft and provided a platform for them to reveal their craftsmanship and trade, which had been sustained for decades. We also hoped to revitalize some of their crafts by introducing young designers to collaborate with them, so that there might be some cross-generational synergy on a creative and practical level. This was the 2007 project *In Search of Marginalized Wisdom: The Craftspeople in Sham Shui Po* in Hong Kong.

Working with non-art professionals made us more humble and socially more skillful. We had to develop a lot of different tactics to communicate with them, to win trust, to explain our "visual" and research approach, and to convince them to take ownership of what we requested of them. They also had to be impressed by the end results and to be proud of the collaborative processes. After all, for the Community Museum Project, making an artwork or an exhibition is only a by-product of all the social relations that have been successfully built with different stakeholders.

Sally Lai: In recent years there has been much discussion about the visibility of the "local" in relation to the development of large-scale organizations in Hong Kong such as M+. Do you feel that this has been resolved?

Siu King-Chung: There seem to be more "local initiatives" in the Hong Kong art scene nowadays; many work in the name of or with the "community." However, they may be seen as too subversive, too grassroots, or sometimes too amateur and hence not deemed worthy of public money. I doubt that M+ would pay serious attention to them; nor are they yet interested in investigating these local, "lesser" movements.

But somehow, I think, someone will soon start to make sense of these local projects and reframe them into something that speaks the elitist language of the art world. Until that day, these local projects, although sometimes rather aggressively addressing certain critical local issues, will remain silent and humble in the art world. They will infiltrate naturally into our daily lives without being considered art, including by the initiators themselves. There have been many such projects within social work or the welfare circle, and now some artists are starting to become aware of and are being inspired by them.

Shop owner Mr. Chui became a docent of the exhibition, telling stories of his livelihood to the audience. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

Sally Lai: How do you connect this wider practice with your role as a lecturer?

Lee Tung Street: The Street as You Have Never Seen Before, 2005, A-link Gallery, C. C. Wu Building, Wan Chai, Hong Kong. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

Siu King-Chung: Teaching at the School of Design allows me to create assignments for the students to look into wider aspects of visual culture in Hong Kong. In other words, the research for many of the Community Museum Project's projects were inspired by the students' projects. An example is the *Fridge Project* (2008), where we tried to make an extensive visual inventory of the contents of refrigerators in twenty-four households of differing social and economic backgrounds in order to reveal their food consumption patterns and, by implication, something about their livelihoods and lifestyles. This

Lee Tung Street: The Street as You Have Never Seen Before, 2005, panoramic view of Lee Tung Street's east facade. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

was an idea informed by an assignment that I initiated for a student study trip to Singapore in 2000. The aim was to make visual comparisons of "city characteristics" between Hong Kong and Singapore.

One group of students came up with the idea of comparing the contents of refrigerators from the two cities, another group proposed comparing the contents of people's wallets, and others proposed comparing the display patterns of goods at wet markets, etc. All of these provided food for thought for the Community Museum Project, and by referencing the students' "project-prototype" (initial form/design) we slowly became more aware of the approaches and methodologies that we were employing in our Community Museum Project projects. We started to invent names and concepts for them: for example, we tried treating the "Street as a Museum," by going through a process called "Cultural Scavenging"; and we collected visual data from the streets (or social situations) through a "Photo-stocktaking" method, so the community could be "visualized" using our information and exhibition design skills.

In Search of Marginalized Wisdom, photographing the trolley-making process as a means to conduct research into local craftsmanship. Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong, 2006. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

In Search of Marginalized Wisdom, featuring eight craftspersons at a to-be-demolished public housing estate in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong, 2006. Courtesy of Siu King-Chung.

Every year I am able to test these methods and approaches to visual culture topics with the design students. More and more students understand and get to practice some of these approaches in their own work. Hopefully this continues even after their graduation. Of course, there is always the social or community dimension in our projects; we use our design approaches to re-present and sometime intervene in social contexts. One example of collaboration between Community Museum Project and my students is the project on the Yellow Umbrella Movement that I mentioned.

Sally Lai: Within the context of what is now a very commercially focused art scene in Hong Kong, are the students responsive to a less commercially focused perspective?

In Search of Marginalized Wisdom, trolley-makers Mr. and Mrs. Lee collaborated with designer Brian Lee to design and prototype a table using the craft of trolley-making.

Siu King-Chung: I am lucky to be teaching in a design school and not an art school; students are doomed to be primed by a commercial mindset by some other tutors. Most of them will find a job or are already working in the commercial world as designers, which is why they sometimes prefer to do non-commercial projects as a break in their routines. They are able to employ their design skills to visualize their social research and ideas. In recent years in Hong Kong there has been a lot of discussion about social innovation or social design. These discourses originated primarily from social work and design circles, although socially engaged art already had been prevalent in the scene for a while. The Community Museum Project, with me teaching at the design school, is able to take advantage of not only the students' experimentations but also of the discourses in these different fields.

Left: *You Are What You Freeze: Food Storage and Our Everyday Life,* 2008, A-link Gallery, C. C. Wu Building, Wan Chai, Hong Kong.

Right: A statistical visualization of the contents of refrigerators in twenty-four economically varied households in Hong Kong.

Perhaps design students may not see themselves as artists at all and therefore don't necessarily feel the pressure of making "art" commercially for a living or for fame. They are inclined to do something more "social" in order to offset or counter their commercial work. This is why more and more commercial designers are engaging in social projects nowadays. I have students who have chosen to leave the design field to become full-time organic farmers-cum-social activists, supported by freelance design jobs on the side. Some have become part-time or full-time designers for NGOs and social enterprises, creating projects with communication and aesthetic appeal. Most significantly, these design guerrillas employ their design thinking and practical skills to influence some of the local social discourses and practices. For example, they have produced maps, exhibitions, and community programs that promote local farming or sustainable rural-urban lifestyle, etc. projects that would have been very different had they been produced by the social activists/workers on their own. I think these synergies among different social fields, on a practical and everyday level, are a lot more interesting than what is happening in the commercial art world in Hong Kong.