Abstract

Home to over seven million people, Hong Kong is a paradox that defies typical categories of post-colonial, urban, Chinese, political, and traditional. As a city that has developed quickly over the past fifty years, the changes of the city can be described through the interventions that social activist theatre and art produced during this time. Political activist artists refuse to accept the reality of the spatially challenged city and find alternative ways to perform. They create their own performance spaces for creativity, intellectual exchange, and dialogue where none existed before. The concept of space is not limited to physical concrete terms, but is also interpreted as a free-form venue in which to interact, socialize and communicate with others. One such event that encapsulates an important moment in Hong Kong history is Hijacking the Public Sphere, an event that grapples with the idea of public space while using everyday citizens as their audience and conspirators.

CHiE! and In-Media

Hijacking the Public Sphere was an event that was organized by In-Media as part of a larger festival, titled CHiE! or Culture Seizes Politics, that took place from March 15, 2008 to April 27, 2008. This festival was an exhibition planned by Jessie Chang and Jaspar Lau Kin Wah, who were both participants at the Para/Site Art Space’s curatorial program. Founded in 1996, Para/Site is a non-profit organization that holds exhibitions at its venue, produces publications, and organizes talks and workshops on local and international contemporary art. CHiE! was financially supported by the Hong Kong Jockey Club and the Osage Art Foundation. This project involved works from people in different fields including art, animation, museums, photography, film, fiction, poetry, music, dance, performance art, and new media. The purpose of the festival was to “assembl[e] a network of individuals, self-initiated groups and activist organizations that demonstrate a range of viable models of critical cultural engagement across the different disciplines.”

In-Media was approached by the curators of CHiE! to create an event for the festival. In-Media was an unconventional group of people to organize performances, since it is primarily an internet site that functions as a forum for discussion of public issues. In-Media also runs two other websites (interlocals.net and openknowledgehk.net) that are similar in nature. Their missions are to, “call for social concerns, widen humanistic knowledge and to network critical thoughts and movements of different regions” and they do this by, “facilitat[ing] participatory journalism and interaction between the local and the

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1 The title CHiE! have many political implications as explained by the organizers including, as reference to “a quotation from Bull Tsang,” “a word play on che (Ernesto Che Guevara),” and “in the animation film of McDull, Prince de la Bun, in which the certain proper Putonghua pronunciation for students ended up undistinguished from a common Cantonese expression of dissatisfaction.” Quoted from Jessie Chang and Jaspar Lau, eds, CHiE! (Hong Kong: Donbosco Printing Co. Ltd, 2008), back cover.
3 Chang and Lau, CHiE!, 118.
4 Ibid., front cover.
global.”

Within this online community, there are citizen-reporters, social and cultural critics, and only a few art critics.

**Public Space and the Public Sphere**

Prior to this project's launch, there was much discussion in Hong Kong and within the In-Media community about the issue of public space and how “Times Square has invaded our public space.” The problem of public space being co-opted by corporations (and especially Times Square) for use as private space – for profit – was a hot topic following a discussion on a radio program, “On a Clear Day” from Commercial radio on February 2, 2008. Callers complained that they were being treated unfairly outside the Times Square shopping mall at Causeway Bay, and were not allowed to sit or stand in the area by security guards. The mall itself is owned by Wharf (Holdings) Limited, but the 3010 square meters outside of the space were not part of their property. The government proceeded to file suit against Wharf for illegally leasing this public space to companies, including Starbucks, for the past fourteen years, charging fees ranging from HK2800 to HK4000 on Mondays to Thursday, and HK100,000 to HK124,000 on Fridays to Sundays and on holidays. In response to this situation, the Hong Kong Director of Buildings, Cheung Hau Wai, went on “On a Clear Day,” stating that, “The proprietor [of Times Square] should provide open space for three purposes – as a pedestrian access, a passive amenities activity area, and a venue for exhibitions.”

This incident was soon followed by an investigation by the Lands Department into other public spaces in the city, a total of 150, that were under the management of private companies like Wharf (Holdings) Limited. From this research, it was determined that 156 of these developments had public access, but 33 of them had a similar situation to that of Times Square. Given the seriousness of the situation and the involvement of the Hong Kong government as mediator between the Hong Kong citizens and the corporations, public space was a topic that demanded immediate action and response.

Although the emphasis surrounding the public space debate in Hong Kong has been on the economics of the controversy, the impact of Wharf Holdings’ action should also be understood by its effects on the public sphere. The idea of public sphere is defined by Jurgen Habermas as:

>a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public...Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interests without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely.

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5 Ibid., 98.
7 Chang and Lau, CHIE!, 99.
11 “Visual Arts and Public Space Issue.”
12 Ibid.
While the origins of the Times Square discussion came from individual complaints from the public about poor treatment by security guards, this issue became part of a public sphere when others contributed to the conversation. Habermas notes that the public sphere consists of private individuals coming together, and the Hong Kong public achieved this by using the radio show and new media outlets (via internet websites and blogs) to bring this issue to the forefront.

Building upon Habermas’ idea of the public sphere, Zheng Bo also proposes “four tenants of publicness:”

We need to understand publicness not as a single trait, but as a set of values. Publicness rests on four interconnected elements: the freedom of private citizens to express critical opinions, the attention to matters of general concern, the accessibility of the site, media, and discourse, and the commitment to reflective communicative practices based on reason and affect rather than status, coercion, or profit. Each of these elements is indispensible.

Zheng reiterates the accessibility of public space for opinions, and calls attention to the idea of reflective communication, two important facets that have also played a role in the controversy of public space in Hong Kong Times Square. The artists of *Hijacking the Public Sphere* adhered to this form of publicness and these tenants can be seen from the organization of the event, the method of performance, and response from the spectators.

With the help of Luke Ching, one of the artists who organized *Hijacking Playground*, In-Media put together a *Hijacking the Public Sphere* competition. Anthony Leung Po-shan, performance artist and editor of In-Media, believed that “once that space is open, the public will be able to communicate directly, set their own rules rather than abide by those of the security, government or consortium. Once there is room for public forum, then 'Times Square' finally has the right to call it a 'Square'!” Because of the significant involvement of the public in this web community, the approach In-Media took in organizing performances was different from that of artists who work within more traditional structures of theatre. In soliciting submissions for this event, In-Media posted a call on the social networking site, Facebook.

Leung describes the response from the public following the announcement:

Facebook was swamped by hundreds of feedback comments over a matter of days…Yet, the disappointing part was [that] most responses stop[ped] at the level of “Count me in!” So much for Hong Kongers’ deeply-ingrained sense of freedom that lacks initiations, or for that matter, willing to participate but lacking in imagination.

Despite the initial enthusiasm for the project, the disappointment that Leung expresses highlights the fact that while new media technologies may enable one to reach out to large masses of users, there still exists a gap between virtual participation and real life participation. The submission period from March 9 through April 4, 2008 received fifty entries, and winners were awarded on April 6, 2008. Two of the winning performances included FM Theatre Power’s *Frozen Times: Square Reborn* series, which won the “Unconscious” Prize, and Vasco Paiva (Joao Paiva) and Hector Rodriguez’s *State Change*, which won the “Most Creative” Prize.

**Hong Kong Times Square**

Both *Frozen Times* and *State Change* play with the idea of space in ways that speak to the everyday citizens and encourage those around them to get involved and take action. Taking place in Hong Kong’s

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
Times Square in Causeway Bay, these performances make art in crowded places that are frequented by visitors of every kind.

Constructed in April 1994, Times Square is one of the many additions to Hong Kong’s list of mall takeovers in the city. Times Square is home to 16 floors of prime retail space and “230 world-renowned brands.” It claims to have over 150 thousand visitors a day and declares itself to be an “ideal platform for staging cultural and artistic activities.” Likening itself to New York’s Times Square, Hong Kong Times Square also holds an annual New Year’s Eve countdown and is a major tourist attraction for travelers around the world. The mall’s use of space, both inside for retail space and outside for community events, makes Time Square both a cultural and economic icon for Hong Kong.

The architecture of Hong Kong Times Square sets itself in contrast to the rest of the Causeway Bay neighborhood. Its website proudly exclaims that, “Times Square is very easy to find due to its landmark twin towers rising 46 and 39 storeys high above the hustle and bustle of Causeway Bay.” The open space where approved and non-approved art displays and performances take place is on Russell Street. Its modern architecture is complemented by a short clock tower that is supported by a half dome metal encasing, a science fiction-like design that belongs somewhere in the future. The other distinctive element of this public space is the jumbo screen located on the side of the building which marries technology with its presence.

This postmodern architecture of Hong Kong Times Square does not neatly fit into the Causeway Bay neighborhood. Ackbar Abbas characterizes this incompatibility as…

…an elsewhere that is quite aggressively indifferent to, and disconnected from, the local. One surprising thing about Times Square is its choice of location, on Russell Street, which at the time was a local market street. The mall, however, is not so much sited in a local area as it is a para-site of the local, and not integrated with it. It was designed as an autonomous inner-looking space, indifferent to its surrounds, strangely dislocated.

The contrast of Hong Kong Times Square to the other older buildings in the neighborhood is indeed quite jarring and Abbas’s reading likens itself to Frederic Jameson’s image of postmodern architecture:

The Bonaventura aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city…it does not wish to be a part of the city, but rather its equivalent and its replacement or substitute.

As a building that does not seek the approval of its neighbors, Hong Kong Times Square references another place, that of New York Times Square. This is a type of historicism that Jameson describes as pastiche, or an…

…imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed…Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs…

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
23 Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” New Left Review. I/146. (1984): 81. Wong King Yuen also makes this link between Jameson’s ideas of temporality and Hong Kong in “On the Edge of Spaces.”
Hong Kong Times Square imitates New York’s Time Square not so much through its technical architecture, but from its function as a global market place where people meet, attend cultural events, and celebrate New Year’s Eve. However, the reputation that New York Times Square has developed as a cultural intersection from the presence of theatres, music halls, and other forms of mass entertainment in its vicinity is nowhere to be found in the Hong Kong neighborhood. For Hong Kong Times Square, this history does not exist and the square is nostalgia for a Hong Kong past that never was.

The massive structure of Hong Kong Times Square is not only out of place and time in the Causeway Bay as Abbas suggests, but cannot be fully imagined by its visitors. The enormity of the structure in the narrow streets is impossible to capture in its entirety on the street level from any distance. Second only to an aerial view, the freeway offers the best view of the building as a whole. This is in contrast to the experience of what visitors can see inside the building. Abbas describes this scene:

Visitors to the mall can ride up and down its glass-cased elevators, and thus protected by the mall itself, look out with a certain pleasure straight into interiors and rooftops of the run-down apartment houses just a few meters away on the other side of Russell Street.

The experience of looking is part of the allure of Hong Kong Times Square; while the building itself cannot be seen, Times Square offers visitors the power to gaze at others from its windows. While the performers of Frozen Times: Square Reborn cannot offer its audiences the same sensory experience of the Time Square elevators, the performance art pieces proposes a new way of seeing and hearing.

Frozen Times: Square Reborn

Frozen Times: Square Reborn was organized by FM Theatre Power, a local theatre group that is involved with stage shows, street performances, educational work, and improvisational theatre. It is a performance group that is popular among young audiences, particularly those of high school and college age. This is an important group for FM Theatre Power and other arts organizations to influence since they have not fully been integrated into the work force. This liminal period into adulthood affords youth the possibility of changing the cultural tides in Hong Kong society and the everyday habits of its people. These young supporters of FM Theatre Power are often tech-savvy individuals who keep up with the latest fashion and popular culture and the theatre troupe has the task of keeping up with these constant trends as well. The idea for Frozen Times: Square Reborn was not original with FM Theatre Power, but was borrowed from the work of New York-based Improv Everywhere’s performances at Grand Central Station in January 2008, which they restaged in London and Toronto.25 FM Theatre Power’s application of the latest performance trends from around the world was another way of attracting their young audiences to participate in something new, fun, and exciting.

The series of Frozen Times: Square Reborn involved three different performances of the same nature.26 The performances were simple and required performers to freeze in place for ten or fifteen minutes as pedestrians walked around, stared, inspected, or interacted with them. This may have been particularly jarring for both the performer and the audience, since traffic in Times Square is so intense that occupying a permanent space on the pavement would require interrupting the flow of pedestrians with its large number of participants.

The first performance, on March 20, 2008 at 7:30 p.m., included roughly 100 participants of various backgrounds and many were about high school and college aged. These participants chose a pose and remained frozen in this position for ten minutes as everyday citizens shared the space with them. Many of

25These performances were also staged by other groups around the world in 70 cities and 34 countries. http://improveverywhere.com/2008/02/28/freeze-events-around-the-world/
26March 20, 2008 performance can be found at http://www.youtube.com/user/molai#p/u/27/9IWIDu0b3hs April 11, 2008 performance can be found at http://www.youtube.com/user/molai#p/u/26/RxhHXAopUY, and April 27, 2008 performance can be found at http://www.youtube.com/user/molai#p/u/25/Yxx8a4MzM48
these frozen peoples displayed moments of everyday action including walking, drinking, eating. In one instance, a pedestrian untied a performer’s shoe laces and knotted them back together as the performer stood frozen in a walking pose. Another spectator took the initiative to join the performance and froze with a performer. In her interview with the organizers, she explained her rationale for her participation:

It’s a wonderful thing because it’s all real, but also so fake that reality and non-reality blend and you are confused. So I love this confusion very much. Confusion is all about exciting things in life, right?  

Her interpretation of the performance is quite sophisticated, and yet, simple. This audience member brings to focus some of the important elements of the Frozen Times experience. She addresses the idea of reality and non-reality, which can be understood through Guy Debord’s spectacle or what he defines as “a social relation among people, mediated by image.” In Debord’s critique against capitalism, he states that, “In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false.” The society gives rationality to the dominant ideology based on a commodification of life and Debord suggests that it is only the moments of non-reality and of not adhering to the spectacle that truth can be found. In Frozen Times, there were multiple realities occurring during the performance. The first was the performance itself, which appeared to be an imitation of everyday life. Then there was the interaction between the spectator and the performers. Finally, there was the practice of everyday life by the people who were not watching, and only passing through the public space. What was real and not is blurred and these representations of life by the performers became much more real than the routinized behavior of the pedestrians.

One frozen couple showed this contradiction of reality and non-reality in their imitation of an approved artwork placed at the Times Square open space. Standing next to the statue on display, they imitated it by mirroring the image. A man held a jacket over their heads and shielded himself and his female partner from the invisible rain. This juxtaposition of the cartoon-like statue (itself an imitation of real people) with the real bodies in space challenged the authenticity of the sculpture and became lost in a circle of self-referentiality.

The second performance involved a smaller group of people, but was perhaps more popular. This revamped performance, subtitled the “Councilor’s Version” involved twenty Hong Kong councilors from the Democratic Party. In this performance, many bystanders interacted with the politicians either indirectly by taking photographs of the councilors, or directly by approaching bodies of the living performers. In one instance, the president of the Democratic Party, Ho Chun-yan, was frozen while reading a comic book. Citizens flipped through the pages of the book and read along with him in enjoyment. Another spectator traded his scarf with a Councilor and created his own scene by using props to make a connection between three politicians who were standing near each other, but had frozen in their own independent actions. Here, the spectator was not only an observer but became the artist. He controlled the scene as he saw fit and used his own creativity to manipulate the events around him.

The third staging took place on April 27, 2008, after the Hijacking Times Square competition was over. In this performance subtitled “Echoing Olympics Version,” about fifty participants froze in postures inspired by the Beijing Olympics. In this sports-themed segment, participants brought sports equipment

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28 4
30 Debord further defines spectacle as “the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation of the commodity visible to it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world” in Society of the Spectacle, trans. by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), 42, accessed May 1, 2012, http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/16
with them to use in their poses. Some of these performers chose to freeze with a partner since many sports involve teamwork or direct competition with another opponent. The sports celebrated in this improvisational performance included badminton, track, fencing, boxing, and ping pong. One fencing couple held hot dogs as swords and a netted baseball cap as a mask. This creative way of using everyday items as props for the performance was not only imaginative, but brought attention to how there can be infinite uses and meanings derived from ordinary objects.

Some of the frozen performances also captured dramatic moments. One partnership involved one person dressed up in full body training gear (a helmet, body padding, and a handheld training pad) while standing across from another person who had his fists up, ready to fight. A circle of spectators surrounded these two individuals and when it was time to unfreeze, the unarmored person performed several high kicks on the trainer. Another performer froze with a ping pong paddle in anticipation to take a swing. When he unfroze, he took his shot and dramatically jumped up, put his hands on his head and kneeled down. This over-the-top expression could have been read as either defeat or success. The anticipation and drama that was held in these frozen moments created a sense of excitement and storyline for the performances.

Spectators wanted to see “what would happen next” and became invested in watching these performers.

In all of the three performances, the feeling of surveillance was affirmed through the presence of the security guards. In the Echoing Olympics Version, the security guards at Times Square played a particularly interesting role. The men went up to each performer and showed them a yellow piece of paper that described “Rule No. 7,” which they accused the performers of violating. They told the performers that they were blocking public space. In the documentation of the event, FM Theatre Power interpreted the involvement of the security guards as acting as referees for their sporting event. The look of amusement on one guard’s faces makes this person’s participation in the event appear voluntary and even enjoyable. Unlike the other Times Square security guards, this man looked like he was having a good time and was aware of his special role in the Frozen Times performance. In reality, his occupation was a security guard, but within the context of the improvisational work, he became an actor and the star of the show.

In their explanation of the performance, FM Theatre Power’s objective was to encourage people to think about what these sporting events meant. Some of the issues the group wanted to think through included a critique about class and cultural issues:

The Rich possesses art
The Rich possesses athletes
The Rich possesses public space
The Rich could be the Olympic Torch Carrier
So everyone's eyes are just open for money…
What is sport?
What [are] the Olympic Games?
Sport is unequal to Olympic Games
Sport is not diplomacy
Sport is a lin[k] among people

Their emphasis on the influential parties involved in sporting events such as the Olympic Games brings attention to the inequality in art and culture and how it has been manipulated by those who have authority. By FM Theatre Power’s definitions, sport should be above all else, a social thing that belongs to the people and not a commodity to be sold to or by a particular class. Advancing this idea, their manifesto closes with an intention for action: “A ball is round, Our earth is round, When we lin[k] up through

32 Ibid.
sports, We will round the space.” The concept of attributing space a form and making it round gives birth to a new system of chronology that critiques the system of “evolutive time” that Michel Foucault relates with disciplinary methods. The idea of the round space derives from logic that space should share the same shape of a ball and that the earth is no more illogical than any other kind of organization of time and space.

Each one of these frozen performances was unique and involved a different group of performers who were inspired by a distinct theme; what remained consistent about these three performances was the role of play. Highly playful in nature, their invitation to the public to join with them was successful. The initial response from many of the spectators was one of curiosity and amusement. One spectator exclaimed, “We are interested in playing with you guys because this is a big game right?” This observer is right on the mark and addresses the fundamental element of the performance. While these performances may be artistic and political, at the very root of it, they are playful.

In his discussion of work and leisure, Victor Turner points out that “Leisure is predominately an urban phenomenon:

It is certain that no one is committed to a true leisure activity by material needs or by moral or legal obligations, as in the case with the activities of getting an education, earning a living, or carrying out civic or religious ceremonies. Even when there is effort, as in competitive sport, that effort – and the discipline of training – is chosen voluntarily, in the expectation of an enjoyment that is disinterested, unmotivated by gain, and has no utilitarian or ideological purpose.

According to Turner’s definition of leisure, then, shopping cannot be a form of leisure at Times Square. Shopping has become such a huge pastime for Hong Kongers that it has become a stereotype and some have even labeled this activity a sport. The role of the Hong Kong government in promoting such events as shopping festivals since 2005 at Hong Kong Times Square also takes away the leisureness of shopping. This desire for consumption as driven by capitalism also begs the question of whether shopping is even a voluntary activity for these citizens or something coerced through heavy campaigning.

Echoing Turner, Henri LeFebvre also sees distinction between urban development and leisure. He describes the importance of play in Everyday Life in the Modern World:

…play and games will be given their former significance, a chance to realize their possibilities; urban society involves this tendency towards the revival of the Festival, and, paradoxically enough, such a revival leads to a revival of experience values, the experience of place and time, giving them priority over trade value.

Le Febvre’s desire for the revival of the festival as a way to reinstate the prior relationship of the space and time with the individual is precisely what the frozen performances attempt.

The interaction with the spectators and collective effort amongst the performers generates a sense of group mentality and of community. One performer testifies that, “the experience of performing with a group was a very positive experience.” Other performers validate his experience with their own enthusiasm while they prepare for the show. In the video documentation, we can see the artistic director

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33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
38 Janet Ng also suggests in Paradigm City (2009) that following the SARS crisis in 2003, the Shopping Festival was a way for the government to stimulate economy. This festival continues every year during the summer.
giving the performers a pep speech which culminates in a group huddle. The spectators’ laughter and amused looks contribute to the festive atmosphere as well. These individuals are no longer preoccupied with the exigencies of everyday life at Times Square, and are for a brief moment, caught up in the excitement of the performance events. The role of FM Theatre Power in creating spaces for Hong Kongers to play within a logic of consumer culture is subversive; in the act of play, these performances attempt to reveal the preconscious interests of the individual’s desire for accumulation of goods as part of a society that is directed by the invisible hand of corporate power.

**Consumer Time**

The consumer culture of Hong Kong and the desire for speed and efficiency affect Hong Kongers’ everyday lives, in which there is never enough time and everyone is rushed. From the fast-paced service at restaurants to the rapid rhythm of Cantonese speech, Hong Kong requires one not only to move quickly, but to always strive to be a little faster than everyone else. Design scholar Siu Kin Wai describes this phenomenon as it involves the differences among people who use elevators around the world:

Speed is nearly everything for Hong Kong people – urbaners – who always need to compete with time. Take elevators, a cousin of escalators, as an example. For most elevators in Hong Kong, the standard time for a door to shut after the close-button has been pushed, is 2 seconds. But of course no one ever pushes the close-button just once. According to an international survey carried out by Otis (Knipp, 1994, November 5/6), Londoners wait a saintly 30 seconds before they take a second stab at the button; Tokyo residents wait for 24 seconds; and even more nervous New Yorkers will pause for 17 seconds. But we, the average Hong Kong people, cannot wait more than 5 seconds before unfurling their full fury on the close-button a second time.

In this study, the Hong Kong obsession with quickness beats all others. The intensity of Hong Kong’s urban culture has created a society of impatient citizens who must use their time as efficiently as possible. This preoccupation with time is not just the problem itself, but a symptom of a social problem in Hong Kong urban living.

An example of this social problem of time can be found in John Chang and Pam Hung’s animation short, *The Tired City*, where they explore a dystopic vision of urban living in Hong Kong. The main character works multiple jobs (all done simultaneously) which physically and mentally wears her down. In her depression, she jumps off a building, but cannot find relief even in this desperate moment. On her way down her boss calls and tells her to, “Hurry up!” with her suicide. Unfortunately, her boss catches her before she reaches the ground and drags her back to her work.

While this story may be an exaggeration of life in Hong Kong, this form of time determined by labor is what Guy Debord describes in *Society and the Spectacle*:

> The social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labor, develops within a society divided into classes. The power which constituted itself above the penury of the society of cyclical time, the class which organizes the social labor and appropriates the limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the temporal surplus values of its organization of social time; it possesses for itself along the irreversible time of the living.


41 *The Tired City* by John Chan and Pam Hung is part of a collection of animations by Hong Kong Arts Centre students that were developed specifically for the *i-city* program. These students were directed to develop short films on how they view their city. *i-city* was part of the marathon of films titled “I see my city” that played on June 30th, 2007. *i-city* included an ensemble of animation of varied form and content, but the connecting themes of pessimism, destruction, and depression were visible in each film. A brief summary of each film can easily detect the symptoms of troubled youth growing up in a society that does not offer any outlets for their problems, and *The Tired City* is an example of this world view.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Zdlje6dyYQ

42 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 128.
This appropriation of time by society demarcates temporal values onto the human body that requires people to work into this framework, rather than time being defined by the workers. An organization of time based on the maintenance of labor then, becomes impossible to sustain in the long term.

Time or the lack thereof, is what FM Theatre Power plays with, and there is no space more appropriate for understanding the lack of time than at Hong Kong’s Times Square. This lack in time is emblematic of the problem of consumer culture that Henri LeFebvre argues:

Consuming creates nothing, not even a relation between consumers, it only consumes; the act of consuming, although significant enough in this so-called society of consumption, is a solitary act, transmitted by a mirror effect, a play with mirrors on/by the other consumer.43

LeFebvre’s harsh critique on consumption is echoed by Zygmunt Bauman who describes the consumer drive as, “unlikely to be ever satiated, as it leaves unscathed the basic structures which make this drive the only outlet for the tensions they generate.”44 In this postmodern consumer culture, time is made concrete and given a value dependent upon labor. The transformation of time into an object that can be obtained and managed gives everyday citizens a false sense of security. No matter how much time is earned, saved, used, or wasted, these actions become part Debord’s pseudo-cyclical time and brings one back to the same routine of commodity-time.45 The only action one can take to step outside of this structure is by not following the rules of time. FM Theatre Power obstructed the normal codes of social behavior and one’s relationship of time in the city, carving out a space by which a different reality could overlap an existing one, and turning a place of nothingness into fullness.

Although efficacy remains a difficult quality to quantify, the frozen performances played with the here and now. It became a way for the participants to broaden their own senses by fully existing in the present. In their attempts to stop time for ten minutes in the square, these performances allowed participants to think and reflect on their own lives and possibly about the community around them. One participant, a legislative council member, mentioned that for those ten minutes of stillness, it was “very relaxing” and he was “able to appreciate the space he was in and others around him.”46 Another council member was so relaxed that he did not even notice that the performance lasted 15 minutes—5 minutes longer than the originally scheduled event.47 These spaces are no longer empty, but given the full value from the lived experiences of the performers.

The gesture of stopping time, even for a brief moment, to allow the space to be occupied by a particular person, changes the dynamics of how the space functions and is defined. It can be more than just a transitional place where pedestrians walk from one destination to another, past consumer goods and shopping malls. The opportunity to reconceptualize the public space around them and what it means to exist within another framework may not guarantee a permanent change in spectators’ everyday consumer-driven patterns. However, the simple act of occupying this space in front of Times Square transforms the space to a place of consciousness and action, rather than one of consumption.

“Kick FM Theatre Power out of Mongkok”

Shortly after these performances, FM Theatre Power became the subject of a controversy involving the debate over public space. Facebook had just come into use by Hong Kongers in 2008 and in a period of one day an individual, Roger Lee, had created a “Kick FM Theatre Power out of Mongkok” page which immediately gathered 10,000 supporters. This rapidly escalated protest against the group organized through a social networking site shows that the general population is concerned about public space in their city and is upset about FM Theatre Power’s use of public space.

45 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 149.
47 Ibid.
Following this incident, the founder of FM Theatre Power, Banky Yeung, announced that there would be a public discussion about the Facebook petition in the streets, which took place on August 20, 2008, only a few months after the *Hijacking the Public Sphere* competition. Since the problem which provoked the Facebook response involved the use of public space in Mongkok, Yeung felt that it would only be appropriate to solve the problem in the streets. The discussion was held on the Sai Yeung Choi Street and lasted for almost 5 hours, with different people joining and leaving the discussion throughout the afternoon and evening. Yeung recalls that during the first three hours, he endured profanities and criticisms that the public yelled at him. At one point, he was criticized for situating his table in the middle of the road, thereby giving himself the position of power as people surrounded him. Yeung proceeded to move his table to the sidewalk, but much to the critics’ dismay, everyone discovered that its presence impeded foot traffic and blocked businesses. After this experiment, the table was moved back to the center of the street. Throughout this time, people came and went and profanities continued to be yelled.

Because of the constant flow of people moving in and out of the discussion, there were some who were not present at the time of the table moving and criticized Yeung again for his position in the road. This time, however, the participants who had been there earlier defended his position and criticized the newcomers for their naiveté and for rehashing a topic that had already been discussed. It was at this point, during the final hour or so of the open symposium, that real discussion began to happen. People began to think about what their real concerns were, why they were angry at the theatre troupe, and what they wanted. The particular issue of public space instigated by those people who had always thought that FM Theatre Power’s performance art on the street was a nuisance, soon broadened and moved away from the problem of one specific theatre group to an issue affecting the entire Hong Kong community.

The willingness of FM Theatre Power to place itself in a vulnerable position allowed the public to engage with it directly. Such attempts at exchanging ideas are also ways to forge new relationships between people in the community, and this is one way by which the public space can be reclaimed. As *Frozen Times: Square Reborn* demonstrated, even though a place may be labeled "public space," it does not automatically function as public space; it is only when people use it as such that it becomes a public space. From Zheng Bo’s idea of publicness, it must be remembered that these public spaces are not “things” that one walks through, but a set of values, and it is only through interactions between people that public space can come into being.

**State Change**

Originally conceived as a collaboration between Hector Rodriguez and Vasco Paiva, *State Change* also created public spaces in places where people often pass through, but do not occupy. The purpose of the performance piece was to “show something that we don’t normally see and to show how public space is controlled.” *State Change* breaks the disciplined behavior of the everyday culture by introducing a new order of action in the transit places of escalators. By stripping down the everyday functions of the body into its basic components, with an emphasis on sound, the disciplined body is revealed.

Hector Rodriguez is an associate professor at the School of Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong. He is also a digital artist whose works have been featured in India, China, Germany, and Spain. His scholarly and artistic work is inspired by his interest in media and programming. Rodriguez’s influence for *State Change* stemmed from a variety of sources including: the Situationists / Guy Debord and *Society of the Spectacle*; Harold Garfinkel and ethnomethodology; Maya Deren’s documentary work on voodoo and ritual in the *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985); Ross Ashby and the cybernetics of the 1940s; and Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936). All of these ideas played a role supporting his political idea behind computation and exploring the assembly line behavior in everyday life.
Vasco Paiva (Joao Paiva) was a graduate student at the School of Creative Media, and it was during his time there that he collaborated with Rodriguez for the project. Paiva’s sound and new media inspired works have been exhibited in cities including Moscow, Beijing, Shenzhen, London, Porto, Hangzhou, Sao Paulo, and Vienna.\(^5^2\) His influence for *State Change* came from his interests with sound performance and the Hong Kong based group *Soundpocket* that promotes, educates and supports interdisciplinary arts relating to sound.\(^5^3\)

Rodriguez and Paiva came together to work on a project that would integrate both of their interests, creating a collective performance piece that incorporated political action and experimentations with sound. It was particularly important for the two organizers to construct a performance that would, “not tell Hong Kong people what their subjectivity was,” but rather function as a gesture towards revealing these everyday tendencies.\(^5^4\) Rodriguez and Paiva agreed that the idea of the escalator would be an effective way to develop this gesture as it was a significant part of their own everyday lives in Hong Kong.

The escalator – like other forms of transportation such as the elevator, train, bus, and taxi—is another common way that people travel throughout the city of Hong Kong. Escalators and elevators are particularly present in Hong Kong lifestyles as the frequency and time spent on these devices grow; they are a necessary part of urban travel. It is no surprise that the longest set of escalators in the world is located in Hong Kong’s Central district. These twenty escalators are about 800 meters long, and run up and down a hill from Des Voeux road to Conduit Road; it takes about 25 minutes to travel the whole distance.\(^5^5\) Stairs remain an option, but in a city that is vertically friendly, walking up several flights of stairs is not only time consuming, but can be physically difficult.\(^5^6\)

The name *State Change* came from a basic idea of computation. *State Change* involved performers vocalizing an “ah” sound as the participants rode up and down escalators at malls. These sounds were coordinated on a simple mathematical matrix with 0 = sound off and 1 = sound on: 010, 100, 001, and 111. Depending on what the people directly across from the performers were doing, the performers would “speak” according to this matrix. This required only the use of escalators that had both up and down rides that were parallel to one another.

**The City of Malls**

There were two sites at which the performances took place; the first was at Times Square and the second was at the City University of Hong Kong/Festival Walk Mall. The escalators at the City University of Hong Kong hold a significant symbolic value for this institution, since it is the only school in Hong Kong, and perhaps in the world, whose main entrance is through a mall, the Festival Walk Mall. Festival Walk is the largest mall in Hong Kong and is located near Kowloon Tong. To get to the campus from the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station, students and teachers must travel among the display windows of the latest fashions and technological luxuries that give life to Hong Kong consumer culture. The irony of this school, known as one of the best creative schools for new media forms, is that it is itself situated inside a mall—a comment on how Hong Kong is a “city of malls.” It is not enough that the malls are pathways to the (privately owned) MTR system that a majority of Hong Kongers take, but they now also function as hyper-reality in their command of educational institutions. There is no question that Hong

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\(^5^2\) Full biography can be found at http://joavascopaiva.com/bio.html

\(^5^3\) Rodriguez, Interview, 2010., also see www.souundpocket.org.hk

\(^5^4\) Ibid.


\(^5^6\) Although the escalator is an efficient way to climb up a hilly part of the city, there are other options as well. In a city such as San Francisco (known for its seventeen famous hills), the most popular method of travel on hills is the cable cars that run in the northeastern part of the city. While many tourists take these cable cars as a historic reminder of the city, there are still some locals who use them for everyday transportation. However, on many other steep hills in San Francisco, particularly where there are no buses available, people must walk up the hills on foot. For some, such as the elderly and people with disabilities, this may be difficult (or impossible, without the assistance of modern technology), but walking is still a viable option for many citizens.
Kong is heavily influenced by the market and consumer culture, but to directly combine the educational and consumer architecture completes the merger of Hong Kong lifestyle with mall culture. Like it or not, every person who attends City University is forced to be a consumer of the retail shops in Festival Walk.

The performances took place in five different instances. It was executed once in Hong Kong Times Square and the rest were performed at Festival Walk. These performances involved roughly 10-25 participants in each instance and lasted for a duration of 30 minutes. Although the performance was based on a simple matrix, the performers discovered that it was difficult to maintain the body according to this formula and it took some practice before they were accustomed to the new pattern of behavior. The retraining of the body to a new set of rules required much work and the body to behave in ways that was not necessarily natural or easy. During the last performance, the group attempted to use a more complex method by adding different matrixes, but found that it was unsuccessful because it confused the performers.

*The Curious Spectator*

The performers of *State Change* were intermingled among the everyday people who were also using the escalator. Rodriguez recalls that many of the spectators did not seem to mind or act disturbed by their performance and the only real complaint they received were from the security guards at the malls. People were generally curious and some Mandarin speaking spectators asked what they were doing and why. A few enthusiastic escalator riders even joined in the performance making arbitrary “ah” sounds oblivious to the rules of the game. In response to this, “We would just react to that person according to the rules [of the matrix]. We loved the idea of interference and played along with it.” The escalator riders that reacted negatively only expressed this by making faces at the performers and were not disturbed enough to change their routing.

While there were many spectators on the escalator who chose to ignore the performers, there was greater reception by onlookers in the malls who were not riding on the escalators. This disparity could be explained in several ways. The performers riding on the escalators with the passengers could have prevented other passengers to respond in an overt way, since it would require more risk to do so at such close proximity. The awkwardness of a disruptive passenger might have been difficult to confront when one was standing right next to him or her. Instead, many of travelers chose to respond by not reacting to what was going on and pretend that there was nothing out of the ordinary. This type of response required much discipline and restraint to maintain one’s composure despite a disturbance in the external environment. For the other onlookers not located on the escalator, they could watch this performance from a safe distance.

The spectators in other parts of the mall were alerted to the performance from the chorus of voices echoing throughout the building. It was the visceral experience that attracted the onlookers from the other floors to see what was happening around them. *State Change* utilized ambiguous noises that were meant to be un-specific and do not signify meaning through language. The performance stripped away language to its most basic component, a sound, and left spectators to interpret what these performers were saying. This transformation of the escalator from a mode of transport to one of communication draws attention to the endless possibilities of how sound space can be used and occupied. Here, sound becomes the most powerful tool that the performers had to gather large audiences for their shows. Sound is part of the public domain and can be manipulated to be used as a space for dialogue and communication.

The effectiveness of this particular sound comes from its origins, the human voice. R. Murray Schafer argues that the erasure of the natural soundscape is a result of the development of a new soundscape produced by technology from the Industrial and Electric revolutions. In the scenario of *State Change*,

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57 Rodriguez, Interview, 2010.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
the use of the human voice in an urban soundscape proves that the natural soundscape can be commanding and can overcome even technology.

**The Assembly Line**

Aside from the occasional conversation that can be overheard between passengers speaking to one another (or on a cell phone), the sound on escalators can often be a deafening silence. Even on a busy day when there are masses queuing up to ride the escalator, sometimes the only sound that can be heard is the soft grind of the machine working. These networks of escalators are an impersonal way to travel and the assembly line function of the escalator offers little room for individuality and choice for its passengers.

In his study on industrialism and consumer culture, Zygmunt Bauman traces the historical development of discipline through Michel Foucault and shows the relationship of disciplinary power in consumer culture. He argues that the body is, “made fit to absorb an ever growing number of sensations the commodities offer or promise,” and is drilled into routines. Siu Kin Wai offers a similar argument for the escalator where, “we are expected and treated as standardized components rather than as different individuals with different characteristics and needs.” The process of transforming the natural body into an unnatural one to fit the needs of technology show how inefficient these technologies are in reality.

Alongside the depersonalization of the escalator in controlling the discipline of the body, this mechanical mover also removes the individuals' ability of choice. Siu Kin Wai states:

> Even the speed and direction of a rocket can be controlled by users. Time and flat-numbers for stopping an elevator can be controlled by users. How about the escalator? The only thing for us to select is either using it or not. The freedom of choice is minimized and controlled.

Siu sees the escalator as the most impersonal form of transportation compared to other technologies. However, not all modes of transportation through technology are depersonalized like the escalator. A counter example of this is the cable car, a technology that was developed in the 1800s, and is now preserved primarily as a tourist attraction in San Francisco. When taking a cable car, the mode of traveling involves interaction, dialog, and a sense of community. The tourists share the excitement and experience of going up and down the hills on the hundred-year-old device. At times, when the cable car mechanics fail and a car needs to be pushed up a hill, the passengers onboard are often enlisted to help get the car moving again. The cable car ride is a social activity that defies the normal conventions of modern modes of transportation.

In addition to minimizing the social activity, Siu Kin Wai also suggests that escalators function to isolate individuals. He describes one situation as follows:

> Today, the physical shortening of walking distance is not the main area which we should be concerned with. The most important thing is how escalators shorten our experience, feeling, and instinct, particularly interpersonal relationships, all which are essential for us to realize that we are not just identical and isolated components.

According to Siu, the escalator was created as a means for faster mobilization of people from one point to another, and not as a social space. In the process of producing a more efficient way of travelling, these shortcuts permeate into our social beings, changing the way we act and experience the world. Because of congestion that can happen throughout the day (particularly intense during rush hour), travelers have devised an escalator etiquette, similar to the rules observed when driving on a highway.

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64 Ibid., 678.
The slower traffic should remain on the right side and leave space on the left side for the faster traffic, or for those who wish to walk up the stairs.

At the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) stations, riders are advised on proper behavior on escalators. They are constantly directed to hold on to the railing (in Cantonese, Mandarin and English) from the loudspeakers that surround the stations. These codes of behavior are symptomatic of how people have become mechanized and unsocial by the installation of these devices. During rush hour traffic at the MTR stations, all one can hear is the marching of feet moving along the platform from one escalator to the next. The army-like sound of the passengers marching is similar to what Siu describes in his invocation of troops from Foucault’s detailed images of the short step, ordinary step, and double step in marching. Foucault describes this relationship of the human body and discipline as a coercive force:

> The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it.

The walking bodies at the MTR stations are trained to be obedient in the way that Foucault outlines. There is no strolling or lingering; only walking and waiting for the next mode of transport. Very little social interaction occurs and there are many missed opportunities for community engagement. The MTR station at Hong Kong Times Square is particularly tedious, since it takes from ten to twenty minutes to exit the station, passing through long hallways and multiple escalators, fully lined with advertisements along its passageways. Janet Ng cites Michel de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life* in describing the effects of such everyday practices:

> In Hong Kong, the immense physical compression in the dense city and the channeled individual itinerary a shopping routes endows, and billboard images, create urgency in the individuals’ relationship to consumer goods. These daily conduits-the walkways and arcades that crisscross through the entire city-provide a venue in which the people of Hong Kong take in their daily lessons – “learning to consume.”

Learning how to walk is part of the consumer culture, as everyday citizens are exposed to images of consumer products and desires. The visibility of consumer culture is everywhere and dense in the MTR stations, making these images impossible to avoid.

*State Change* challenges these norms and conventions, and converts the very impersonal ride of the escalator into one that is engaging and social. By imposing a system of habits determined by its own rules, *State Change* makes the current disciplining practice of the escalators transparent to its performers and to other travelers. This break in pattern with an introduction of a new aural experience changes their affective experience in everyday life.

*A Culture of Surveillance*

One of the biggest challenges for this performance was the recruitment of performers. Rodriguez recalls that many of the performers were students and friends. He did not want to advertise this performance in an attempt to conceal the performance from the authorities at the malls. It was difficult for the younger students to participate because for many of them, “they were breaking the rules in an overt

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66 Ibid., 138.
67 Ng, *Paradigm City*, 91.
way for the first time.” Consequently, some performers were discouraged to participate in subsequent performances because of the presence of the security guards.

In one performance at Times Square, the security guard told the participants that they were “obstructing the property,” even though they did not pose any hindrance to the other riders on the escalators. The participants did not attempt to stop movement in any fashion. What the security guard was protesting against was their behavior, the perceived fact that they were acting against the proper codes of escalator etiquette. The forced anonymity of the individual to conduct oneself properly when taking the escalator within the sea of Hong Kong’s seven million souls is defended by a recent campaign launched by MTR in the summer of 2010.

In addition to the loudspeaker voice that warns riders to "Hold on to the railing while riding the escalator" (in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English), the MTR has one-upped itself by heavily advertising the safety of escalator riding through posters, cardboard cut-outs, and workers. Bright yellow signs accompanied by friendly cartoon penguins tell riders, “for your safety, hold on to the rails.” In the past, there have been accidents involving the use of escalators, including the death of a 74-year-old man in 2003 and a 94-year-old woman in 2001. While these accidents have prompted the intervention of the government by pouring money into campaigning, the problem could also be solved by slowing down the speed of the escalators. Instead, they have hired “safety ambassadors” to police the entrance and exits of escalators. Donning bright yellow t-shirts, these safety ambassadors hold cardboard signs to warn travelers to use the escalator safely. This campaign becomes another way of policing the proper codes of behavior. Although these ambassadors do not carry weapons and there have been no incidents of violence resulting from their presence, their symbolic weight is a reminder of the power that the privately owned MTR transportation system has over the everyday lives of Hong Kongers.

While the security guard attempted to enforce his control over the everyday citizen in the public escalators during the State Change performance, he gave the performers an identity that was not afforded to other bodies. At one point in his annoyance at the performers, the security guard looked at each individual whom he believed to be violating the contract of good escalator behavior and pointed at them. He made sure that these performers saw that he was pointing at them and even rode on the escalator himself to do this.

The security guard’s action did two important things for the performers and performance. First, he gave them recognition. These performers were no longer anonymous individuals shuffling through the city, but afforded a distinct identity among the masses. This recognition gave the performers agency and awareness of their own subjectivities. Secondly, the security guard directly participated in the State Change performance. He responded to the performers’ behaviors and became a performer himself and, in doing so, he changed the narrative of their performance art piece. His actions added “plot” to the improvisational performance. The security guard’s performance easily lends itself to a replication of the common narrative of “beginning,” “middle,” and “end.” His action gave the performance a plot where it ultimately led to a climax (the confrontation of the guard with the performers) and to a resolution (the performers ending the performance). The simultaneous performances of those making sounds with their bodies and of the security guard gave the public authority to decide what was really happening.

In response to the security guard, the State Change group devised a plan to handle these authority figures. When they were approached by them, they would turn off their sound. By doing so, they would not force the security guards to participate in something that they did not want to. Despite these changes in the performance, to remain an open system able to change and adapt to the different circumstances, there were some students who were still not comfortable with the situation. Rodriguez recalls:

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68 Rodriguez, Interview, 2010.
69 The loudspeaker at the MTR stations occasionally also warns people to not give money to panhandlers.
71 Rodriguez, Interview, 2010.
It was very painful for some of them. It was fun to do it, but not when you get someone pointing a finger at them. We had to share afterwards and try to work through what it meant for them. [What it meant] not to be compliant. There was a feeling of isolation in the performance. It was very different to those who had a very clear political objective. Because even if you know you’re going to fail, there is a sense that you are doing a grand political objective. This didn’t have that kind of thing. So that was hard and it’s sad for us.  

This painful experience for some of the students exposed the violence of the disciplining system. The performers were not breaking any real laws, but their actions had real life consequences. The extent to which the everyday citizen has become trained to behave in society makes unlearning these habits all the more difficult and painful. This simple act of stepping out of line in such a minute way is enough to cause worry for the authorities, and the security guards attentiveness to these actions show how much this society is under surveillance.

Both Times Square and State Change used simple methods of reconceptualizing public space. Time Square played with the idea of time and space and performed a simple act of not moving in space. Participants in State Change utilized sound in the process of movement. The performances involved untrained performers as well as trained ones, using basic forms of communication to challenge spectators to stop and listen to what they were doing. These performances required no rehearsal and were stimulated by community interaction and the desire to find new ways to speak and to listen in the surrounding environment. Hector Rodriguez’s reflection on the performance events can be applicable to both Frozen Times: Square Reborn and State Change:

The whole point was to do something that I don’t normally do. The Situationists have a thing about inventing your own desires and playing with urban space. It’s like a counter advertising…You invent what you desire. It’s part of a communal activity. In doing this, we discover what we like, what our desires are.

The performance methodologies in Frozen Times: Square Reborn and State Change created space by which one could explore these desires. The consciousness of one’s own desires brought attention to one’s subjectivity and individuality. By going back to the fundamental means of communication of hearing and listening, Hijacking the Public Sphere was a movement that did not use new tools for speaking, but found creative ways to interact using the same tools that people have always had at their disposal – but may have forgotten.

**Appropriations of Street Life**

Beyond the thematic of public space, the significance of Frozen Times: Square Reborn and State Change’s use of improvised performance art also brings to focus the relationship between the body and consumer culture. These undisciplined bodies in real time and space reveal the extent to which consumerism has trained the body to be something that it is not. In stark contrast to events organized by performance artists in the Hijacking Public Sphere competition that seek to reclaim the space of the mall and other public space, corporate investment in the arts works to appropriate street art in a civil, organized way so that corporations can have full control over the creative expressions of artists.

This commodification of performance is a continuation of the process of transforming the body into an image of itself. The power of the affective body becomes a machine for the interests of consumer culture. Mike Featherstone draws this relationship between the body image and the affective body:

…the body without image, the affective body can be represented as an opposite to the body image in the visual ‘mirror-image’ mode, the distant goal of the consumer culture transformative process

Ibid.  
Ibid.
is to bring together – the power to affect others, through the beautification process and enhancement of ‘the look’ coupled with an appropriate body style of presentation.\textsuperscript{74}

Here, Featherstone stresses the importance of two correlated components that make the body powerful and effective in consumer society. The idealized images of the body must be accompanied by the affective body to lead a “lifestyle transformation.”\textsuperscript{75} These desired images of the body are acted out in the affective body and the relationships can be seen through the transformation of street performances in Hong Kong in creation of media images to the performance of live body in constructed spaces.

One recent example occurred at the City Plaza Mall in Taikoo Shing. City Plaza Mall hosted a two-week dance crew event, with many performers from Hong Kong and Korea. These groups mainly consisted of young Asian men who practiced hip-hop-style dancing. The event was heavily marketed at the local MTR station with an image of a male dancer wearing the appropriate hip-hop-inspired attire that hid the identity of the performer. This image obscured the race of the individual and although it was probably an Asian person in the advertisement, the concealed body of the performer gave an impression that these entities could be the black bodies that popularized street culture. This constructed image of an attempt at authentic hip-hop culture was further valorized with the set that the performers danced on: organizers of the event created a “street” backdrop of a graffiti-painted wall with images of black bodies in the background. Building this artificial street within the mall complex was supposed to bring the “street” back into the lives of consumers without their having to leave the air-conditioned comfort of the mall. Even if one disregards the heavily racially-insensitive messages of this event, the manufacturing and appropriation of "the street life" is problematic to Hong Kong society in other ways.

Sometimes the appropriation of the street is also legitimized by the government: since 2008, the Hong Kong Arts Centre has co-sponsored, with Kung Music Workshop, a monthly "Street Music Festival," bringing local street performers into the space outside of the Arts Centre to perform for an audience. While the organizers keep the spirit of street performance alive by offering these performances free of charge and operating the event in the open space in front of the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the improvised nature of street music is missing. Gone are the surprised reactions of the anonymous passerby and the normal risks of performing in the public space of a street; gone, too, is the unpredictable cacophony of live music with everyday street life. The support of such artists is important to legitimize many different kinds of art forms, but the organized predictability of street performance loses its magic in this process. The purpose of these events is to promote diversity in music and to encourage the development of work by local artists, but its approach also does away with some of the qualities that make street music stand out from other forms of musical performance. The spontaneity and the freedom of performing in public places among the crowded streets of Hong Kong disappear and are replaced with a more ordered way of speaking and listening.

Outside the context of this monthly festival, the presence of street musicians (found all over the world, on the street, in the subway, in front of businesses, in train stations) is part of the urban landscape and part of what defines Hong Kong. These local artists must rely on the public for survival, and they must have the freedom to play wherever they wish and to occupy any street on which they want to stand. The culture of the street musician offers an alternative to what would otherwise be a soundscape of people, automobiles, buses, traffic lights, or prerecorded music blasting from the speakers of businesses.

In reaction to the debate over public space, the government mandated that artists could petition for the use of these streets, but the process of applying for such permits delegitimizes their artistic freedom and the space as truly public. In a recent article on CNN Hong Kong, journalist Zoe Lin describes the Hong Kong government’s latest tactics against spontaneous street performances:

The government is drafting a plan to make open spaces, such as the plaza outside the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui, designated areas for so-called "street performance." We say "so-called"


\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
Hijacking the Public Sphere: Performance, Politics and the Everyday Citizen

because artists who wish to perform in those areas will have to audition for it. This pilot scheme is tentatively called "Open Stage" and is aimed at cultivating public interest in the performing arts. Artists will have to be vetted by a panel of arts experts and government officials, and the performance area will be well away from residential areas. Rather than democratize the use of public space for performance, this plan sounds like the authorities will impose control over the who, what, where, and why of street performance in Hong Kong.76

This process of screening and filtering performers before giving them approval imposes a set of rules that can only serve to discourage creative development in these communities. This change in regulation of public art in Hong Kong is important since the government will have its hands on all aspects of the arts in the city. The Hong Kong government has already contributed significantly to developing its city into a cultural hub in Asia and this has included funding many artists through the Hong Kong Arts Council and Leisure and Cultural Services Department. This includes performance art as well, and if they regulate street performance, there will be very little left of an independent art scene in Hong Kong which is not in direct influence of the government. Lisa Law also points out, in “Defying Disappearance: Cosmopolitan Public Spaces in Hong Kong,” that “[w]hen public spaces are developed, maintained and surveyed by developers, they lose their status of ‘public’ spaces.” Public space only remains public when it is not regulated by any set of laws or controlled by any party, and the intervention of any third party to attempt to control this space will only result in the demise of true street performance.

The role of the mall in the appropriation of public space as a site of consumer culture is a relatively new phenomenon that has developed differently in Hong Kong than in western societies, where it was encouraged as a way to attract tourists, rather than for the local population.78 In contrast to mall life, the history of hawkers on public streets has had a more natural form of development that is independent of corporate coercion. Hawkers have existed by their own rules:

The hawkers do not sell their goods in permitted areas, apply for hawker licenses, or fight for legislation that will make unlicensed hawking a kind of legal activity. The hawkers, along with other users of other public spaces, usually do not expect to “share authority” or to “use a legitimate basis to substitute for the existing legitimate basis” (Habermas, 1973/1995, p. 33). Rather, they insinuate themselves into the areas of control and authority of the Hawker Control Teams in order to “survive” (Siu, 2003). These tactical practitioners do not have a space, or, it could be said, their space “is the space of the other” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Their tactics depend totally on time. Hence, whatever advantage the hawkers might win they do not keep. They constantly need to manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities, and continually resort to their own means. As Lefebvre (1984) and Wander (1984) say, this kind of tactical act is “an art of everyday life” and “a radical reorganization of modern life.”79

This example of an alternative form of consumer culture and street life can serve to give hope that appropriation of public space for the public can happen if city dwellers work together to defy government or corporate control. There are lessons that street performers can learn from these street hawkers who have been able to survive despite the takeover of the mall. Their use of guerrilla tactics, of not seeking legitimacy within the realms of governmental authority, is a lesson that performance artists must learn if they wish to be truly in control of their own creativity. This constant “manipulation of events” to create opportunities may be the only way that arts in the public sphere can continue to exist in the future. Public

art should not be determined by corporations and governmental institutions as has been attempted by Times Square. Public art and the public sphere must enable multiple parties’ ways to voice their opinion and display their performance.

From different appropriations of street life and the guerilla tactics of street hawkers, the Hijacking the Public Sphere competition was a small contribution in the long war to reclaim public space. Frozen Times: Square Reborn and State Change involved going back to the roots of communication and using the fundamental elements of hearing, seeing, and movement to involve everyday citizens in taking a moment to stop and listen to their environment.

In some ways, Frozen Times: Square Reborn and State Change did manipulate their surroundings and made them into opportunities for self-expression and enjoyment. By engaging in fluid forms of improvisation, the two performance pieces were able to invite everyday citizens to engage themselves in performance. For many, this was their first experience. One participant in the Frozen Times: Square Reborn admitted that, “I never thought I could do something like this in Hong Kong.” Another performer declared with a sense of irony and accomplishment, “Yes, Mom. I’ve done it!” These methods of speaking and challenging the audience to listen created an intimate connection between sound, movement, hearing and space, heightening the ability for critical thinking and understanding. Despite the seeming impossibility of their task, these efforts to challenge the consumer culture of Hong Kong and public space were not in vain. Their ability to interrupt the flow of traffic, of people, and of everyday living was no doubt remembered by their audiences and performers. The simplicity and ease with which they have manipulated and reproduced space inspired others to do the same. By making public protest and participation a fun and engaging activity, these non-threatening performances were able to draw supporters to their cause and make a gesture towards unveiling everyday actions in public spaces.