

*In Name Only:  
Democratic Paralysis and Potential  
in Post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong*

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**Abstract**

The guiding principle of the 1997 Handover of Hong Kong was stability. The city's status quo is guaranteed by Article 5 of the Basic Law, which stipulates the continued operation of economic and political systems for fifty years after the transition from British to Chinese sovereignty. Since the Handover, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) have imposed purposive interpretations on the Basic Law that restrict Hongkongers' civil participation in local politics. Some official documents of Hong Kong, such as court judgments and public statements, show how the Hong Kong government avails itself to perpetuate such discursive violence through manipulating a linguistic vacuum left by translation issues in legal concepts and their cultural connotations in Chinese and English languages.

Twenty years after the Handover, the promise of stability and prosperity in fifty years of unchangedness exists in name only. Highlighting this connection, this article exemplifies the fast-disappearing space for the freedom of expression and for the nominal status quo using the ephemeral appearance of a light installation, *Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now*. Embedding the artwork into the skyline of Hong Kong, the artists of this installation adopted the administration's re-interpretation strategy and articulated their own projection of Hong Kong's bleak political future through the motif of a count-down device. This article explicates how Hongkongers are compelled to explore alternative spaces to articulate counter-discourses that bring the critical situation of Hong Kong in sight. The artwork also sheds light on two levels of dimensional shift in Hongkongers' struggle for democracy—namely, the exploration of alternative discursive space, as well as the efforts to retain “Hong Kong” in the discourse of global politics.

Article 5 of the Basic Law stipulates that the way of life in Hong Kong shall remain unchanged for 50 years from the 1997 Handover. Today, the political and social landscape of Hong Kong is embalmed in this statutory promise. With the Chinese Central Government's successive re-interpretations of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's promised degree of autonomy has been called into question. As such, despite Hongkongers' collective efforts to maintain economic stability, this fetishized unchangedness and the appearance of prosperity can no longer be taken as a sign of political stability. The cityscape sustained by the economic contributions of its inhabitants reflects a resounding absence

of popular political participation in its constitution. Hongkongers' attempt to acquire greater political agency in the Umbrella Movement failed, and attempts to engage in local politics were frustrated. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong residents' freedom of expression has been further hemmed in by government officials and their manipulation of legal translation and interpretation.

Language was a political tool used in the colony to delineate social class. Before 1997, the use of English language prevailed over Chinese, but the exigencies of the 1997 Handover prompted the translation of the existing body of legislation into the Chinese language. The commonsensical meaning of an English term, when translated, can be modified by cultural connotations embedded in the Chinese language. When, upon the 1997 Handover, lawyers and linguists of the Legal Department had to reference traditional Chinese laws for terminology (Hsu 133–34), the translation of Common Law concepts into the Chinese language had yet to liberate legal instruments from implications of their “rule by decree” sanctions. The example of the English term “rule of law” versus *fazhi* 法治 in Chinese illustrates how culturally-determined features of a language inspired the positioning of the “legal” before and above “subjects.” Thereby, the implication of the term in Chinese legal language makes possible a manipulation by government officials to execute their desired rhetorical strategy. Worsened by the current purposive interpretation of law and order by the Hong Kong government, even access to public space is excised by legal restrictions in order to contain the dissemination of political messages. Hence, the political landscape of the city can be charted through an examination of cityscape, i.e. analyzing the political semiotics embedded in the organization/regulation of public space.

An example that illustrates this intersection of political landscape and cityspace is the light installation *Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now* (hereafter *60-Second*). In May 2015, five months after the Umbrella Movement ended, *60-Second* was chosen to display on the wall of the International Commerce Centre (ICC), the tallest building in Hong Kong, as part of an outdoor art exhibition. Embedding itself in the skyline of Hong Kong, among the running display of the work was a one-minute countdown device that projects the artists' pessimistic outlook of Hong Kong politics. Despite being taken down soon after its inception, *60-Second* illuminates how the shift in spatial dimension reinserts political participation into public space, inaugurating an alternative site for political struggle. Its ephemeral appearance reflects how the post-Umbrella Movement public space is crafted to filter political messages to align with official discourse. Its transient “intrusion” into the harmonized cityscape was like a negative film that captured the current state of affairs in the city. The discourse

captured has yet to be developed—if indeed it has the potential to be developed.

### **Cityscape as Political Barometer**

According to David Harvey, the “city’ has an iconic and symbolic history that is deeply embedded in the pursuit of political meanings. [...] [T]he city as an object of utopian desire, as a distinctive place of belonging within a perpetually shifting spatio-temporal order—all give it a political meaning that mobilizes a crucial political imaginary” (xvi–xvii). Political meaning is given to the cityscape when residents exercise their freedom of expression such as sit-ins and demonstrations in public space. Conversely, public space is primarily regulated by governmental bodies. The administration organizes public space, for instance through the construction of monuments or government offices, to manifest its presence and status. Read this way, the cityscape serves as a political barometer. In keeping with this understanding, urban public art is a nexus between freedom of expression and public space as a discursive site.

In the case of Hong Kong, under the dictate stipulated in Article 5 of the Basic Law, the post-1997 political imaginary is a replica of the pre-Handover imagery (*Basic Law* 2). The article states: “The socialist system and policies shall not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years” (2).

Applying this dictate of status quo to the cityscape, the transition of colonial Hong Kong into post-coloniality cannot occur; instead, it is a perpetual return to the past. In his contemplation on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy on history, Ackbar Abbas likens direct confrontation with history to a Medusan gaze. I borrow Abbas’ theorization to describe the historical moment of Hong Kong’s Handover as a combination of fascination and terror (*Fascination* 56). When Article 5 of the Basic Law petrified the city into a state of unchangedness, the pre-1997 cityscape was frozen to configure the socio-political stability of the post-Handover era.

Nevertheless, the static appearance of political stability reflects a fetishization of pre-Handover social conditions. Projecting a collective yearning for economic prosperity in the cityscape, the Victoria Harbor front continues to be lined with neon-lit commercial buildings to symbolize political stability *as it was*. In other words, as soon as the 1997 threshold was reached, the dynamic progression of time was transformed into a fixed fetish of motion, one that does not progress. This process of petrification did not paralyze the city’s motion *per se* but its imaginative mechanism (*Fascination* 58).

During British colonization, Hong Kong garnered attention as an economic center. Its strategic location for British transcontinental

convoys led to the lease of Hong Kong to the British Empire as part of the peace terms in the Treaty of Nanjing after the defeat of the Qing dynastic empire in the Opium Wars (1839–1842). The trajectory of British colonization was presented as triumphant, illustrated by the narrative of Hong Kong's rise from a small fishing village to world financial center.

The 1997 Handover of Hong Kong did not alter this colonial narrative. It simply ensured the substitution of another patronizing narrative to justify the ruler's hegemonic status. The Basic Law describes the Handover as the "recovery of Hong Kong" fulfilling "the long-cherished common aspiration of the Chinese people" (*Basic Law* 1). The fifty-year buffer zone was designed to uphold the principle of stability by easing Hong Kong's transition from showcasing the operation of free market economy under *laissez-faire* governance to the servicing of ideological ideals of a one-party authority.

According to Pang Lai-kwan, in the period between 1982 and 1997 (i.e. the years that bookended the Sino–British negotiation on Hong Kong's future and the change of sovereignty), international media hovered over Hong Kong, monitoring the volatile diplomatic relationship between China and the West (209). The media gaze exerted pressure on the Chinese authorities, as proven in the case of the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 4, 1989. This served as a lesson for Hong Kong: that its social and political future would be subject to scrutiny by international media (Pang 209). The benchmark image of pre-Handover Hong Kong in the media gaze was one of unending economic boom. *Prima facie*, it was due to the ruling principle of "small government." However, the labor force in Hong Kong had another compelling reason to be hardworking. According to Abbas, under the British colonial administration, Hongkongers were deprived of outlets for political idealism and their energies were therefore channeled into the economic sphere—in which freedom was synonymous with the "free market" (*Disappearance* 5). The outcome of the June 1989 lesson was Hongkongers' misrecognition of economic self-interest as political idealism (5). This scrutiny from outsiders, combined with the strain of maintaining a self-conscious performance of stability, has given rise to a self-objectifying form of agency—one used to strive for political stability and continued economic prosperity. As such, the governing principle of stability froze the cityscape.

When Hong Kong was handed back to China, it was on condition that the status quo would be maintained until 2047. To recall the Medusan gaze metaphor that encapsulates Hong Kong's socio-political landscape upon the Handover, the promise of unchangedness essentially engendered a half-century of *rigor mortis*. In the context of China's one-party state political system, there is no cogent reason to accommodate a highly autonomous state within its territory. Nevertheless, to assure Hongkongers that unchangedness remains the

governing principle of Hong Kong, Beijing and Hong Kong government officials often reiterate their commitment to “rule Hong Kong according to the law” (*yifazhigang* 依法治港). The manner of ruling remains unchanged in name only, however, since the Central Government has conducted a succession of new interpretations of the Basic Law. Thus, although the previous legal framework remains unaltered, it has undergone significant reconstruction to align the Hong Kong system with the one-party state’s political model. One particular instance of these alignment efforts triggered the Umbrella Movement. On August 31, 2014, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) announced that universal suffrage would be implemented in Hong Kong by 2017. Under this plan, Hongkongers would elect their Chief Executive from two to three candidates selected by a nominating committee that comprises 1,200 members from four sectors, in equal proportion (*Basic Law* 146–48). Even though eligible residents—3.7 million in total—would then have the right to vote, the right to be elected would still be reserved for the candidates favored (if not appointed) by Beijing. Triggered by such reinterpretations of the Basic Law, the Umbrella Movement was an act of civil disobedience that enlisted its protesters in a breach of law; however, this does not mean that the protesters’ quest was not legalistic (*Legalistic* 65–66). Read this way, both the government and the Hongkongers in question had acted with legal backing. The crux of contestation is thus interpretations—or rather, the mischief or disingenuity that can be seen in the interpretations imposed on the legislation.

### Translating and Reinterpreting the Law

The freedom of expression of Hong Kong residents is protected by Article 16 of the Bill of Rights Ordinance (BOR), incorporated in Cap. 383, Laws of Hong Kong, subject to protection of public security or public order (Article 16 (3)(b) BOR). The ordinance incorporated provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as applied to Hong Kong. Article 39 of the Basic Law recognizes the continued validity of ICCPR alongside the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as international labor conventions as applied to Hong Kong, and their implementation through Hong Kong laws. When personal freedom comes into conflict with public interest, it is dependent on the attitudes of the judiciary and law enforcement to determine how well an individual’s statutory right is defined and protected.

In the case of *HKSAR v. Koo Sze Yiu and Ma Wan Ki* (2013), where the defendants were charged for burning the HKSAR flag in 2012, the court was asked to weigh individual freedom against regional dignity. Article 16(3) of the BOR, which subordinates freedom of expression to “national security or public order (*ordre public*),” was a point of

litigation. As the BOR incorporated the clauses of the ICCPR, whose validity is explicitly endorsed by Article 39 of the Basic Law, the litigation at hand concerned this constitutional right. In their appeal against the conviction of “attempting to desecrate the regional flag”—contrary to section 7 of the Regional Flag and Regional Emblem Ordinance, Cap. A620 (“Regional Flag Ordinance”) and section 159G of the Crimes Ordinance, Cap. 200 of the Laws of Hong Kong—Koo and Ma asserted that the restrictions upon “attempting to desecrate the regional flag” were incompatible with Article 16 of the BOR, which protects freedom of expression and therefore makes section 7 of the Regional Flag Ordinance unconstitutional (HCMA 482/2013). In reaching this decision, High Court judge Derek Pang acknowledged that the standard in permitting the application of Article 16(3) of the BOR “was the court’s duty to evaluate public order and that the court should not attach any weight to the views of the legislature” (para. 32). The subject matter in the charge was the desecration of the regional flag of Hong Kong. The ordinance was construed to preserve the dignity of the national/regional flag (Schedule 3, Regional Flag Ordinance). To maintain judicial independence, the court expressed the view that it should not be turned into a political platform and excluded civil disobedience as a distinct mitigating factor (HCMA 482/2013 para. 43–44). Ultimately, the appeals against the sentences were allowed and lighter sentences were imposed. This court decision acknowledged the individual right and freedom to contest the nation/region. However, while the court demonstrated respect for the imperative of preserving room for public contestation, law enforcement took a different view in the name of the maintenance of law and order.

Since the proposal of Occupy Central with Peace and Love (OCLP) came out in 2013, Hong Kong government officials have continuously maintained that civil disobedience foments social unrest. This view asserts the illegality of civil disobedience. In his decision to the injunction application by vehicle companies to seek a court order to clear the occupied sites and to thereby end the Umbrella Movement, High Court judge Thomas Au quoted Lord Hoffman in *R vs Jones* (2007) to construe the meaning of civil disobedience as follows: “[C]ivil disobedience on conscientious grounds has a long and honourable history in this country.” Immediately after this opening, Au interrupted the quotation to promptly remind all parties that, “[t]hat is in England.” Au then continued to quote Lord Hoffman:

People who break the law to affirm their belief in the injustice of a law or government action are sometimes vindicated by history.<sup>1</sup> ... It is the mark of a civilised community that it can

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<sup>1</sup> However, the following in Lord Hoffmann’s decision was elided from Au’s decision: “The suffragettes are an example which comes immediately to mind” (UKHL 16/2006).

accommodate protests and demonstrations of this kind. But there are conventions which are generally accepted by the law-breakers on one side and the law-enforcers on the other. The protesters behave with a sense of proportion and do not cause excessive damage or inconvenience. And they vouch the sincerity of their beliefs by accepting the penalties imposed by the law. The police and prosecutors, on the other hand, behave with restraint and the magistrates impose sentences which take the conscientious motives of the protesters into account [...] (quoted in HCA 2222/2014, para. 64)

Though he was quick to refer to the former sovereign state, the judge's clarification that "that is in England" unwittingly sheds light on the diverging path taken by Hong Kong courts after the 1997 Handover. When civil disobedience failed to bring about democratic progress in the broader political model, activists strove to initiate change from within civil society. The prerequisite for such political pursuits is freedom of expression, so that circulation of political ideas will not be impeded. It goes back again to the question of how well this statutory right is protected.

As the BOR was enacted in 1991, it was partly an answer made by the British authorities in Hong Kong in response to the June 4 massacre in 1989. Although the Beijing government warned that "the supremacy [of the BOR] over other laws in Hong Kong would violate the tenets of the Basic Law," the Bill was actually beneficial to the then-ongoing modernization efforts within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was attempting to make its way back into global politics and economic affairs after the Cultural Revolution (Hsu 112–13). The background of the BOR enactment reveals the disparaging legal attitudes of the British and Chinese sovereigns on the question of human rights. The former sees human rights as political idealism, whereas they constitute a double-edged sword for the latter's political practice.

Hong Kong's Secretary for Security Lai Tung Kwok, in charge of the Security Bureau (SB for short), adopted the Chinese sovereign state's attitude by considering civil disobedience purely as *actus reus*, i.e. a breach of the law. In a press release dated June 12, 2014, a few weeks before the anticipated demonstration of OCLP on July 1, Lai cited the following "Reason for Sentence" (in inverted commas in the quote below) in a court case that concerned the conviction of two legislators, Raymond Wong and Albert Chan, for unlawful assembly:

There is no justification for anyone for whatever reasons, including "civil disobedience," to be above the law.  
[...]

“*Any* unlawful or non-peaceful assembly could entail a tendency or a risk to *jeopardise the rule of law* in an open and extensive manner. The rule of law must not be *jeopardised* because *instability* is *detrimental* to the development of the society.” (Lai, “The Nature”; italics mine)

This quote from the June 12 press release is the SB’s own English translation from the original judgment (which was in Chinese). However, the judgment was in fact made on May 19. There is uncertainty as to whether the official English translation made by the Department of Justice (DoJ) was already available to the SB by June 12, for a comparison between the SB’s translation (cf. the above quote) and the DoJ version (below) shows that the former exaggerates the severity of the impact of unlawful assembly as seen in its diction (e.g. “jeopardized” above versus “damaged” below; “instability” of society versus “endanger[ment]” of the rule of law; “detrimental” versus “impeded”). The DoJ version reads:

“[A]n unlawful demonstration or procession or one which is not peaceful has a clear tendency to do, or *poses a clear threat* that it will do, *extensive damage to the spirit of the rule of law*. The rule of law is not to be *damaged*, because if the rule of law is *endangered*, social development will definitely be *impeded*.” (HCMA453/2013, italics mine)

If the SB did not have access to the DoJ translation before they made the June 12 press release, then it may be seen that the law enforcement branch (i.e. SB) attempted to manipulate public opinion with their translation. Indeed, this doubt cannot be done away because on the same day of June 12, Lai also published the press release in Hong Kong’s largest English newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*, as an opinion editorial (Lai, “Occupy Central”).

In any case, by preempting the DoJ’s translation, the SB sidelined the voice of the legal profession, and yet instrumentalized the credibility vested in the latter by the general public. The criminality of civil disobedience is disproportionately inflated in Lai’s statement in order to transcribe it into a jeopardy of social stability. Per this interpretation, law enforcement is then given a sense of legitimation to remove the potential harm to Hong Kong’s sociopolitical stability in order to maintain public order.

On the other hand, the court formulates its proposition based solely on one hypothetical scenario, instead of generalizing about any act of civil disobedience. The projected harm was not stated in absolute terms, nor is the harm presented as impossible to remedy (social development is “impeded” instead of “jeopardized”). One apparent discrepancy with the Chinese version is the “spirit of rule of law.” The court’s translation



accurately reflects the statement. However, SB's translation disregarded contemplation of legal principle in its framing of illegality.

Civil disobedience intends to break the law in pursuit of an ideal. In the press release above, government officials invoked the etymological root of the Chinese notion of *fazhi* 法治 to lobby for public support to mandate a narrow interpretation and enforcement of the law. Regarding the Chinese "rule of law," an important text is Agnes Ku's study on Hong Kong's civil rights, in which she writes:

In Chinese, the notion of *fazhi* can mean "rule of law" within the common law tradition, which is more commonly understood among the legal profession and the pro-rights groups. It can also mean "law and order" in a general sense, a conception which is held by the conservative groups and the lay people to stress "rule according to the law" or law-abiding behavior. (146)

Ku's insightful analysis is evidenced by the English translation of the Secretary for Security's statement above. The omission of "the spirit" of rule of law in the statement would seem to be less an oversight than a deliberate display of discursive power asserted by the law enforcement branch over the judiciary. Manipulating the court's judgement as a legal backing for his operational purposes, the Secretary for Security takes a stern tone in addressing English and international media as well as local elites to fend off criticism.

According to the Department of Justice, during the Umbrella Movement, police officers relied on "section 50 of the Police Force Ordinance (Cap. 232), [...] to effect arrest of the person concerned if they ha[d] reasonable suspicion" (LCQ 4). This was acceptable as a measure to maintain public order in the context of mass demonstrations such as the Umbrella Movement. The last published figure dated February 2017 shows that among the 1,003 arrests made as a consequence of the Umbrella Movement, 48 were effected only after the Movement. When the occupied sites were cleared, the chain of evidence was broken and witnesses dispersed, those post-Movement arrests cast a shadow over the alleged "apolitical manner" of the judiciary. Furthermore, the DoJ claimed:

the numerous incidents involved in the "Occupy Movement" are often inter-connected, rendering it impossible to handle individual arrestees separately. Quite the contrary, it is necessary for DoJ to consider the cases of numerous arrestees in a comprehensive and holistic manner. (LCQ 4)

Thus, the comprehensive and holistic approach went beyond what was necessary to maintain public peace during the lifespan of the Umbrella Movement. In the aftermath, Hong Kong authorities exploited the intensified functions of the region's enforcement and

judiciary branches. The possibility of arrest was intended to deter the population from activist pursuits for fear of attracting legal liability. The personal cost of participation in civil activism has increased, bringing with it a higher risk of arrest and prosecution. It has become increasingly difficult for demonstrations to amass participants. The site-based mode of protest is under threat of disappearance—if not rendered altogether inoperative.

### From Site to Sight



Figure 1. *Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now* (Credits: Add Oil Team)

Since the Umbrella Movement, pro-democracy activists have not only been countering the government discourse, but also dispelling its rhetoric. Appearing in May 2015—five months after the Umbrella Movement ended—the light installation *60-Second* (Figure 1) appropriated the government’s rhetorical strategy in its presentation. The artwork, once inserted into the skyline of Hong Kong, sustained the discourse of Hong Kong’s economic prosperity. While the sixty-second countdown in the artwork drew its cultural reference from Wong Kar-wai’s *Days of Being Wild* (1990), the artists stressed the “count-down” motif and intended it to refer to Hong Kong’s imminent “death” in 2047 under the Central Government’s political intervention. The artwork was removed from display not because of its aesthetics, but because its hidden political message disturbed government officials. The emergence of *60-Second* represented the unfinished political struggle inherited from the Umbrella Movement. At the same time, it represented the diminished space available for political struggle after the failure of the Movement. On the other hand, the artwork’s premature disappearance was, in a sense, the expected outcome, given

the evolution of the government's executive branch's attitude toward civil liberties in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement.

The Umbrella Movement represents a significant change in the city's socio-political development. During the 79-day occupation of three major business areas, namely Central, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok, Hong Kong civilians confronted the Chinese Central Government—without mediation by politicians—to demand democratic elections, which were deemed non-existent within the central Chinese political system. The triggering point for the Umbrella Movement was essentially Beijing's interpretation of the election laws, which debased the meaning of popular mandate. The Beijing-designed universal suffrage is considered a “small circle election,” void of democratic element. The defiance of the general public's legitimate expectation was closely followed by the disillusionment of political representation by the Hong Kong government as well as elected lawmakers. The public sustaining the Umbrella Movement was in fact composed of highly individualistic and self-reliant Hongkongers, who assembled to claim political agency collectively. After the clearance of the occupied sites, to prevent the recurrence of demonstrations of a similar kind, the government administration tasked itself to disengage individuals from public sites. When it comes to law enforcement, the administration stretched the meaning of public peace in order to catch even the slightest irregularity, to further tighten control over access to public sites. This aftermath of the Umbrella Movement has driven activists to explore alternative sites to manifest their political statement. In this vein, the light installation *60-Second* repositions the post-Umbrella Movement socio-political coordinates to disengage from political affiliation but foregrounds individual participation.

The art project was on display on the façade of the ICC as part of the fifth Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition “Human Vibrations,” which opened on May 18, 2016. The exhibition was themed to “enable people to keep track of how they connect to their environment, and to learn about themselves” (“Human Vibrations”). Artists Sampson Wong and Jason Lam described *60-Second* as an homage to Wong Kar-wai's film *Days of Being Wild*. The title of the light installation was taken from a line in the film when the to-be lovers are both staring at a clock to count the minute that begins their friendship. The on-screen lovers spend minutes and hours together, but the relationship eventually turns sour. This classic scene in the film, through the interpretation of the artists, was a sign that signifies an unhappy ending. According to an online news article:

one minute of [*60-Second*'s] nine-minute and 30-second display [...] showed a countdown to the expiration of the “one country, two systems” arrangement in 2047, reflecting Hong Kong

anxiety over Beijing's increasing control over the city's affairs, and a potentially bleak future. (Chow, "Hong Kong")

Wong and Lam claimed that the countdown in seconds was the core theme of their design, and that the idea was communicated to the two organizers—namely, the curator of the exhibition and the Art Development Council (ADC) (Lam and Wong).



Figure 2. *Countdown Machine*. (Credit: Add Oil Team)

Parallel to the launch of the light installation, an artist collective to which Lam and Wong are members, the Add Oil Team, recorded the display of a one-minute countdown on the ICC. The one-minute recording was then adapted as an artwork entitled *Countdown Machine*, which was posted on the website of Add Oil Team (Figure 2). After drawing public and media attention in the political message of *60-Second*, *Countdown Machine*, an online project, sustains and facilitates public discussion on the future of the city.

In response to the political/artistic expression, the curator of the Human Vibrations exhibition, Caroline Ha Thuc, along with Ellen Pau, Chair of the exhibition's Advisory Committee, believed that the appearance of *Countdown Machine* altered the concept and title of the *Friendship* installation (Ha Thuc and Pau). According to the joint statement they issued, it was a breach of trust and an expression of disrespect by the artists "against the original agreement and understanding made with the curator and HKADC" (Ha Thuc and Pau). The art display was removed four days after its appearance, instead of being exhibited for over a month as originally planned.

The launch of *60-Second* coincided with the visit of Zhang Dejiang, the Vice-Chairman of the CCP. The constellation of elements in *60-Second* showcased the symbols of a world city, such as world-renowned film directors from Hong Kong, skyscrapers, large-scale art projects, displays of technological advancement, to name a few. They combined

to reinforce the image of Hong Kong's economic stability to the Central Government in Beijing. Putting on the disguise as a welcome message to the party leader, *60-Second* visualized the counter-discourse to the public. The work's "unfortunate" end augmented the political discussion over Hong Kong's democratic development.

The timing of the artwork's appearance and its premature disappearance substantiate David Harvey's idea of the cityscape as a site in which utopian desire is articulated. Furthermore, *60-Second* exemplifies the spirit of spontaneity in the Umbrella Movement. According to Sebastian Veg, the most important aspect of the movement was its "'spontaneity' (*zifaxing* 自發性) as expressed in the anti-tear gas protests on September 28 (sic)" ("Creating" 10). Further on in his analysis, he states that:

[Since] the instrumental demand (citizen nomination of candidates for the chief executive election) had already failed before the movement began (evidenced by the August 31 NPC–SC decision), [...] the slogans and other textual materials [in the occupied sites] can be seen not simply as the expression of well-defined claims, but as part of a broader "performance" of the democratic or spontaneous nature of the movement itself. (10)

Performance and spontaneity have continued to frame the *modus operandi* of counter-discourse in Hong Kong. These two major elements characterize the object of my analysis of *60-Second* (top left in Figure 1). The artwork's adaptive performance is a backlash against the discursive violence that the Central Government and Hong Kong government officials inflicted upon socio-political structures. Both the Beijing and Hong Kong governments demonstrate how to invent mandates through paradoxical discursive mischief to circumvent popular participation. The performance of *60-Second*, however, appropriates the officials' re-interpretative strategy: the artists infiltrate the official discourse to articulate and disseminate their discontent with political disenfranchisement. Dwelling within official discourse, the artists–activists' counter-discourse can reach the general public while circulating alongside the former. In so doing, the interpellator becomes his own addressee. When the artwork is removed, self-contradiction is highlighted by the fact that the interpellator–addressee detests the discourse he deploys. The unfolding of the course of this artwork, from installation to removal, foretells the prospect of Hong Kong's civilian political participation and the factors that suffocate those possibilities. The pronouncement of *60-Second's* political reading invited a Medusan gaze on itself, which was followed by a four-day *rigor mortis*. But the political discussion it was tasked to generate was reincarnated in the contingent appearance of the *Countdown Machine*. The latter is still running until 2047. Furthermore, the removal of *60-Second* drew

international media attention which covered the incident as an example of political censorship.<sup>2</sup>

Given the news reports and its durational performance through *Countdown Machine*, *60-Second* is undoubtedly a political art. Therefore, the artist duo's denial of political engagement of their work was a performative act that mirrored—if not parodied—the rhetorical strategy of the administration.

## Rhetorical Strategy and Subversion

To untangle the relationship between official rhetoric and civilian subversion, in what follows I employ the term *Redekunst*, the German compound noun for rhetoric. This word is composed of *Rede* (speech) and *Kunst* (art), and succinctly captures the meaning of the catchphrase 語言藝術 *jyujin ngaiseot*,<sup>3</sup> the art of speech. The homonym of this word, 語言偽術 *jyujin ngaiseot*—in which the character for art is exchanged for the homonymous character for deception, thus carrying the meaning of “speech deception technique”—is now a wordplay widely used by Hong Kong's democrats and regime's critics in recent years as a satire, in order to criticize government officials' default undertakings in public policies. The Secretary for Security's press release discussed earlier is a good example of this manipulation of rhetorical strategy.

In the face of the government's *Redekunst*, *60-Second*'s subversion is precisely such a nominal reversal of order or an act of *Kunstrede*. The meaning of *Kunstrede* cannot be easily captured in a single English term, but usage allows it to be construed as “eloquence.”<sup>4</sup> I use *Kunstrede* to describe the kind of transposition tactic that resides within a discourse to question the schema. In the case of *60-Second*, it was in perfect sync with the grand discourse of translating economic prosperity into political stability. Adapting to the official rhetoric, the artwork inserted and constituted itself as part of the official discourse and delivered itself to the eyes of the public.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to headlines of online reports on the removal of *60-Second* first by *CNN Travel* on May 19, 2016 (Yu, “The daring message hidden on Hong Kong's tallest skyscraper”), and then on May 23 by *MailOnline* (“Hong Kong axes provocative skyscraper art installation”), *New York Times* (Qin, “Political Light Installation on Hong Kong Skyscraper is Pulled”), and *The Observer* (Voien, “Piece Criticizing Mainland China Removed from Public View in Hong Kong”).

<sup>3</sup> This is Cantonese romanization in the *jyutping* system. The satire can only be felt when pronounced in vernacular Cantonese.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Kunstrede* is used by a German critique of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (*DVE*) to describe the work as “Abhandlung über die Kunstrede in der Volkssprache,” literally an “essay on the eloquence of the vernacular” (Stammerjohann 143; my translation). In another translation, *Beredsamkeit*, which also means eloquence, is used in place of *Kunstrede* in the title (129).

Such a non-interruptive approach also summarizes the lesson learned from the failure of the Umbrella Movement. David Harvey suggests measuring the effectiveness of political protests “in terms of their ability to disrupt urban economies” (118). By that standard, the Umbrella Movement failed because Hong Kong’s economy was not disrupted *per se*. Meanwhile, the appearance of a disrupted economy caused fear in some members of the public about their livelihood. Such individuals then withheld support for the Umbrella Movement, favoring short-term economic gain over long-term social progress. Learning to coexist with the economy-minded general public and law enforcement’s “apolitical” attitude, *60-Second* engendered a new tactic to impart democratic claims into everyday life, while at the same time refraining from interrupting the city’s everyday routine.

To the uninformed and unsuspecting audience, the *60-Second* installation does not stand out from its setting. The political message is articulated through a shift in the “spatio-temporal order” (Harvey xvii), while maintaining a well-received image of prosperous Hong Kong. However, the spell of 50 years of unchangedness imprints the city’s socio-economic structure with an expiration date that runs up to 2047. Read this way, the city is a precarious site. To overcome its imminent disappearance, *60-Second* has been reincarnated as *Countdown Machine*. The reassigned embodiment signified by reincarnation corroborates with the operation of the transposition tactic discussed in this section.

## Conclusion

The statutory promise to preserve the previous capitalist system and way of life for 50 years compels Hongkongers to perform economic activities in exchange for a token political stability. Hence, underneath the seemingly unchanged cityscape of economic stability is a *rigor mortis* mistaken for vitality. With the government’s rhetorical sleight of hand in legal translation and interpretation, the function of public space as a forum for opinion is being removed from public sites. This further pushes civilian political participation away from public space and, thereby, from public access. As exemplified by *60-Second*, the dysfunction of a public site is not a malfunction of the city. The artwork epitomizes, as a Medusan gaze, the spell of the status-quo cast on the city upon its 1997 Handover. Yet the artwork’s use of the tactic of transposition can be seen as a readjustment of this public space/access dynamic towards a departure from, and at the same time within, the confines of official discourse.

Analogous to the pre-destined disappearance of Hong Kong’s judicial and economic systems, *60-Second* was removed when it engaged itself into political discussion and thereby deviated from official discourse. Contingent to the work’s appearance/disappearance,

the political discussion it generated continues in *Countdown Machine*. Its habitus on the internet and on social media signals a departure from site-specific political resistance/manifestation. Media attention and circulation, in a certain way, maintains concern over Hong Kong's political peril in the public discourse. The shift in sites is a tactic to (re)claim discursive space. Visibility is the means to an end to draw attention to the democratic dead-end of Hong Kong. The alternative site might open up space for continued political struggle, but the shift has yet to gather momentum to catalyze visibility into the dynamic to transcend discussion into action for change.

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