

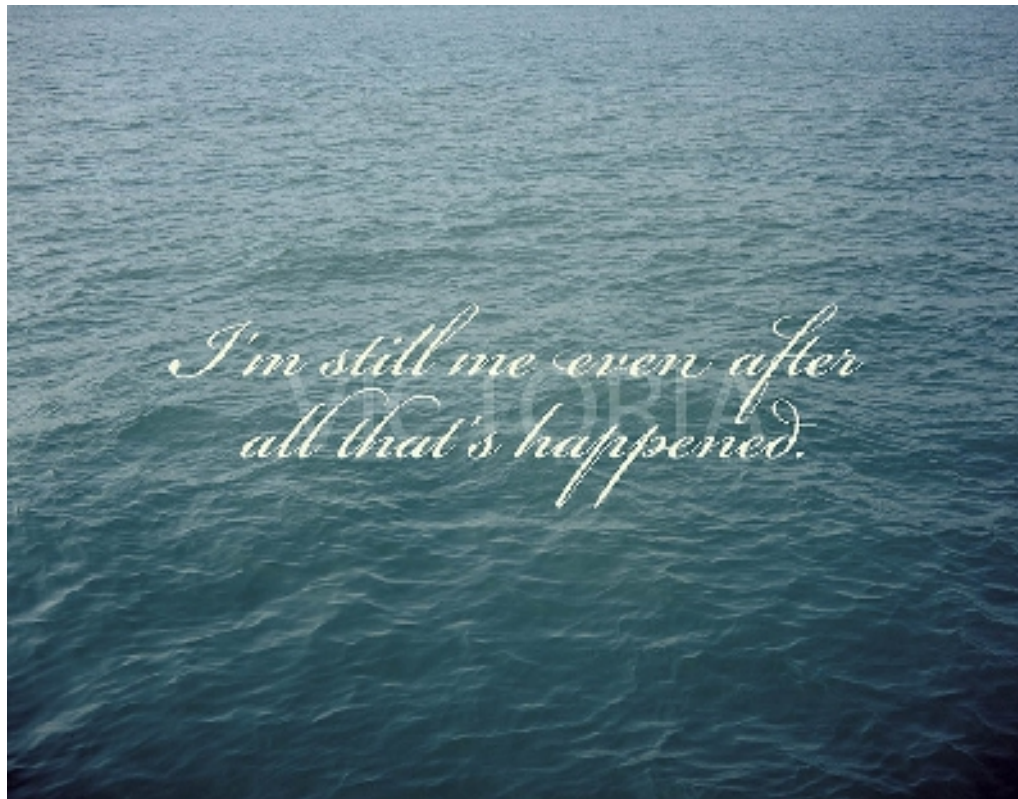


Platform 008

INTERVIEWS

Is This about Culture?

Leung Chi Wo in conversation with Robin Peckham



Leung Chi Wo, *I'm still me even after all that's happened*, 2012. Photograph.
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Robin Peckham: Can you describe the structure of *So I don't really know sometimes if it's because of culture?*

Leung Chi Wo: The structure came into place gradually, and with the materials and sources I was presented with. At the beginning, I had very little knowledge of Morocco, so after preliminary research – desktop and library searches before and after a short site visit – I wanted to find people to talk to in Hong Kong who were from Morocco. I asked friends if they had any connections, and I also went to a Moroccan restaurant to speak with the manager, but I got nothing. Finally, as I continued in my search, I met Assia and Saloua, who I ultimately featured in the project via interviews I conducted with each separately. It so happened that their experiences and attitudes were almost the opposite of each other, both in terms of their backgrounds – one was French-born, the other Moroccan-born – and in their experiences of Hong Kong, since one was a former interior designer and now housewife who came to the city with her investment banker husband, and the other was an architect sent by her firm to start a studio in Hong Kong. I only met them once but the conversations were good. I began with a set of questions and these followed through to a discussion around their personal experiences. Both were really eager to speak about themselves and their impressions of Morocco and Hong Kong.

At first, I had no idea what I would end up with when I spoke with them. After the interviews, I transcribed them and began to re-read the texts until I built up the structure for a narrative. Eventually, my interactions with these women gave rise to an idea of mirroring or reflection. This evolved into two monologues based on the interviews I conducted. After producing these two monologues from the interviews with Assia and Saloua, I set up a basic dialogue structure that linked both of them together. This led me back to the artists and art environment of Hong Kong, where I felt more personally engaged.

RP: How did you develop this idea of returning to an engagement with Hong Kong after meeting with Assia and Saloua?

LCW: After producing the script from my interviews, I started to think about who should recite each part, but rather than just have actors read them aloud, I wanted to create something more reflective. Bringing in new voices to recite the script was a means to distance the narrative from fact and to turn the work into something more performative. When thinking about this, I realized that Laurent Guttierrez of Map Office, who is based in Hong Kong, was actually born in Morocco. Knowing this, I followed the notion of mirroring to establish his position in my narrative structure, which expanded into notions of gender and race within the colonial contexts of both Hong Kong and Morocco. I then looked for a second Frenchman in Hong Kong for the second voice over, and Cédric Maridet, another artist based in Hong Kong, came to mind almost immediately. When he agreed, the structure was complete: I had two Hong Kong-based artists in place to recite reflections of two Moroccan women also living in the city. This is how things became a bit more reflexive. My own interests were reflected in this staging as I now had artists talking about relationships to the city.

RP: In the end, you presented these voiceovers with two synchronized video projections depicting Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour and Victoria Peak, which were overlaid with the translated Arabic subtitles. What did you intend to express through this final design?

LCW: Thinking about how this was to be presented in Marrakech, I wanted to give a bit of context with which to read the text. At the same time, the images of Victoria Peak and Harbour have been recurrent subjects in my work. Yet, when you look at

how these images appear – I filmed them in close-up frames – they could have depicted the landscapes of Morocco or anywhere else.



Leung Chi Wo, *So I don't really know sometimes if it's because of culture*, 2012. Film still.

Copyright the artist

RP: Was it necessary to force a relationship between Morocco and Hong Kong when developing the project?

LCW: There was no clear agenda. I was first flown to Marrakech in 2011 to get sense of the space, place and culture, which I found so bold that I felt like I needed much more time to develop something if I wanted to respond to the architectural and historical aspects of the context. I only spent three or four days in Marrakech, in the old town, to be precise and what struck me most was the very grand but worn-out architecture I saw, which had a powerful effect on me. It reminded me of Venice without the canals, and rendered mostly in earthy tones. I spent some time observing street life, which was actually very busy, and I found something very fresh, and indeed very different from what I was used to seeing and experiencing. At first, I tried to consider the architecture and the language, because I have always worked with things that I feel familiar with. But while the former was just too grand or foreign in a way that made me feel a bit lost, the latter actually provided me with a certain space in which I might be able to address my ignorance, since I have always been interested in the difficulty to communicate or misunderstandings. In this, Arabic became a very strong visual element to the project for me, besides serving as the subtitles for the audience in Marrakech. As a foreigner, the Arabic script is definitely a cultural symbol that may reflect certain stereotypes in western media: generally the

source from which we as outsiders might learn about Arab countries, especially in the part of the world where I come from.

So to answer your question, I never forced things to happen. I returned to a more human-scale and personal perspective. After all, I didn't really try to construct a relationship between these two places. These were just the parameters that I started with: my brief experience in Marrakech, the limited knowledge I had of the links between Hong Kong and Morocco, and the setting of the biennale. From this, I looked at what was there and saw what made sense. Of course, I did want to create something that appeared more fictional: something that departed from the facts I collected. Out of this, sets of antitheses evolved: Morocco-France, native-foreign, woman-man, written-spoken, real-staged, seen-unseen, other-self.

RP: And how did you transfer your research and your interviews into something more fictional?

LCW: Perhaps I dug holes in this narrative, but these holes allow for possible misunderstandings, which is indeed a phenomenon in our reality. Obviously, all four characters could be easily implied to the notion of colonialism that bound both Hong Kong and Morocco into the context. But for me, that was not the main thing. I am more interested in the impression of a foreign culture. Here, all four are foreigners but at a certain point they also need to deal with their own origins and culture. This is a universal condition and I have been contemplating this a lot in my own position as a local in Hong Kong. From time to time, I try to look back and think about a context in which I realized I was a foreigner. Or, I imagine myself as a foreigner in Hong Kong, which of course reflects on the history of Hong Kong itself, which was basically constructed by foreigners. I guess the notion of the diaspora is both local and universal in this sense.

But in terms of fictionalization, it was actually more technical. Dubbing the original lines of the female subjects into male voices easily created a distance from the facts. Also, I insisted on transcribing the exact wordings from the interviews but editing the order in which things were said, which is somehow similar to audio or video editing.

RP: In the end, did you feel a link between Morocco and Hong Kong with this project?

LCW: I actually didn't think about that when making the project, but it seemed that this is what Carson Chan, the curator of the 2012 Marrakech Biennale, was thinking about. I remember he was thinking about the colonial backgrounds of both places, given how even after so many years the relationship between the colonized and colonizer has not soured in either place. Maybe that's the common ground he referred to. But I was actually more interested in how he tried to relate Hong Kong with the former Yugoslavia, particularly through the work of Aleksandra Domanović. Both she and I live in places that no longer exist. We come from political and cultural situations that now only exist in history.

Actually, I think the link was only set in the context of the exhibition: I am an artist from Hong Kong who created a project with elements of Morocco. However, personally I didn't feel a link between Hong Kong and Morocco. Otherwise, I guess my work for the Marrakech Biennale would have been very different. After all, to compare or link Hong Kong and Marrakech was not the core intention of the work. Ultimately, what I wanted to play with was the background of these two characters I met and to subvert the ignorant stereotypes that I had about Morocco. The project is about the interpretation of one's self with reference to another culture.

RP: Self-othering.

LCW: Well, that's the meaning of collaboration. But what I was actually thinking about goes beyond that. I wanted to rethink identity in a neutral way. People's positions in the grand narratives of history are usually cast in a certain way: as collaborators, traitors, for instance. But taking out this original narrative actually frees a space to look at the substance, which here includes a legacy of the colonial era. In the case of Hong Kong, this city is really the historical sin of – or stain on – Chinese history, taken away (as an object) from China and then returned. But if you remove this history and look at Hong Kong from your own position, you find that the city just came as it was. It didn't choose its situation. Thinking about that, how do you deal with this history using your own resources? This is a condition Hong Kong and Morocco share.



Leung Chi Wo, *My Name is Victoria*, 2008. Film still.

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RP: Can you expand on this shared condition? And does this relate to the title of the work, *So I don't really know sometimes if it's because of culture?*

LCW: The subjectivity was always ignored in the context of colonialism. As the colonized, you were always regarded as Other. Of course, a huge difference today is

that Morocco is an independent state but Hong Kong is not.

RP: Your approach is obviously not judgmental. It's more observational. But is it critical?

LCW: There is a statement in there. But on the surface I try not to make judgments.

RP: Do you see yourself in the project?

LCW: Of course – through all these characters, I tried to trace certain links that relate me to their positions.

RP: Can you say more about what those links are?

LCW: In the work, these two Moroccan women, Assia and Saloua, both talk about how they feel triangulated between their positions in Hong Kong and their homeland. It is the same with the French men. It was the complexity and fluidity of their positions as a foreigner that struck me. In the case of Assia and Saloua, things are even more complicated: the notion of home is really uncertain even in their home countries. I think the notion of 'self' here is totally relevant. I was speaking about subjectivity and obviously the self-assurance would be the means to overcome uncertainty. While developing the project, I had been thinking through all of these relationships: being a foreigner overseas or even feeling like a foreigner at home (which was actually the case for Assia). In terms of the art world in Hong Kong, as pointed out by Cedric and Laurent, what it means to be a local or international artist is always questionable.

Now, I can't say that what these people experienced was exactly the same as my own

experiences, but at least they raised ideas that I had been considering. It became more about their relationship with Hong Kong and their origins, which I think ultimately relates to the issue of identity. For Assia, she is Moroccan but feels French. For Cedric, is he a French or a Hong Kong artist? Or, in my case, am I a Hong Kong or Chinese artist? Of course, I don't have another homeland. That's the difference. But the relationship of looking at Hong Kong as both an outsider and as a sympathetic person is familiar. It's similar to my own love-hate relationship with the place. For Cedric and Laurent, it was more straightforward: they're both artists thinking through their positions in Hong Kong and the global art world.

RP: Can you describe how the work fit into the 2012 Marrakech Biennale, which was curated with 'a cartography of the beyond' in mind? Did the project sit well in the context for which it was commissioned?

LCW: I find it difficult to answer this question as it this is for the curators to answer. I actually didn't really notice the theme. But thinking about it now, issues of the diaspora as addressed by the characters in my project could be relevant.

RP: And how does the subsequent publication expand on the context? Has the project changed in the transferal from exhibited, site-specific artwork to a publication?

LCW: I think the book addresses and expands on the narrative form of the original project instead of locating it within its original context. Somehow it carries the same information but allows the audience/reader to enter the work at different points. One main difference is the absence of voice, which was a main feature of the video installation to imply the self-referent link between Assia/Saloua and Cedric/Laurent. In the book, things have become more obscure, which is totally fine.

RP: How do you expect the project to expand or develop now that is being presented online within the context of Ibraaz Platform 008?

LCW: I think online it will operate like the publication, somehow. Of course it still misses the immersive atmosphere in the installation but it does gain global reach.

RP: As an artist, you're still considered primarily in terms of identity and post-colonialism. Now that the conversation, at least in Hong Kong, has shifted away from this position, do you see your work evolving with it?

LCW: There was a time when I was focused on what made up an identity, like the series of works I produced on Victoria, such as *Peak of Victoria*, which I made in 1998: five pinhole photographs taken at five different viewpoints at Victoria Peak in Hong Kong, or my 2008 video piece *My Name is Victoria*, in which messages from over 40 women named Victoria told the story of how they got their name were compiled into a monologue that became the voiceover to a video filmed during my journey walking along Victoria Road from Kennedy Town, from the border of Victoria – which was the capital of this former crown colony, named after Queen Victoria – to Aberdeen where the British landed for the first time in Hong Kong. But I don't focus on such postcolonial themes any more. It is a process of maturity and confidence, I think. I am working with more diversity now, and am happy to knit unrelated things together.

But on the other hand, it is true that this old-fashioned notion of post-colonialism has returned to me recently, as I have been re-reading *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997) by Ackbar Abbas, a professor of cultural studies in the University of Hong Kong. The book mainly addresses Hong Kong cinema and urban space during the 1997 Handover period. But the notion of disappearance perfectly refers to Hong Kong's lost avant-garde generation of the 1980s I am

researching now, and who have been overlooked by curators and critics today.

Of course, re-reading Abbas now I can see the situation has changed. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* was written before the Handover when Hong Kong was still a British colony. But it's interesting to review how people have imagined the future. In his book, Abbas mentions that Hong Kong began the post-colonial process before decolonization. Indeed, now we look at the situation in Hong Kong, in particular the Umbrella Movement, and we might wonder how relevant the so-called post-colonial process was and is. Indeed, many people have analysed that the Handover did not actually happen in 1997, but in 2003, when half a million citizens protested against the Hong Kong government's proposed Article 23 which was blocked as a result, and Beijing started to intervene in local politics. That was when a new kind of colonization began.



Leung Chi Wo, *Peak of Victoria*, 1998. Sculpture.

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RP: In this sense, is there a relation between the concerns of artists in Hong Kong – political activism, the preservation of heritage architecture, better urban planning, and bringing art and culture into the public consciousness – and those of artists living in other contexts?

LCW: This fight – for heritage protection, greater public consciousness and agency, for instance – is happening all around the world right now. People are exposed to a lot more from the outside in global terms, but they also act locally, or at least they want to test whether or not these ideas might work in practice on the ground.

When I did the first site visit in Marrakech in 2011 it was around the time of the elections, and local people explained the political situation to me after the Arab Spring. The king sensed an urgency to do something otherwise there could be resistance there as well, so there was an attempt to improve the political system, relatively speaking. Looking at the situation now in Hong Kong, we don't yet know the response of the authorities to address this urgency. It all depends on how they sense risk. That's something very universal.

RP: So what do you view on the horizon of social change now? From your vantage point, for instance, what is Hong Kong interested in: retreating to a local space, or carrying on as an international city? This of course relates to the challenge of mediating the local/global condition.

LCW: Look at the people on the streets in Hong Kong right now. They're fighting for Hong Kong democracy. The focus is right here. People can also interpret what's happening now as something that might potentially influence China. That's why the mainland government really has to censor everything now. The social development of

Hong Kong is really open, too: you can enter into the movement at a different point depending on your own context.

RP: Would you align what is happening in Hong Kong with events that have taken place within the Global South, or with some other oppositional or anti-hegemonic framework?

LCW: I think that's hard to say because everything is about experimentation now. I do believe everyone is individual: we each have something of our own. Now, everything is so open and connected, so in terms of the arts, of course you will find artists practicing in similar ways in Asia, Europe, or America. We share a lot of things. There's no connecting directly back to some traditional culture anymore. The rupture has passed. Since my generation of artists in Hong Kong, we have less of a problem with appropriating things. You simply borrow and absorb, and you try to credit your sources when you can.

Leung Chi Wo was born in Hong Kong in 1968, and has a Master of Fine Arts from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Leung co-founded Para/Site Art Space in 1996, and was the recipient of the Asian Cultural Council fellowship and the Urban Council Award of the Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial in 1997. He won first prize in sculpture from the Philippe Charriol Art Foundation in 1995.

Leung has exhibited internationally. In 2001, his site-specific project was exhibited in the first Hong Kong pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Recent exhibitions include Busan Biennale (2006), Guangzhou Triennial (2008), *Lights Out* in Museu da Imagem e do Som, São Paulo (2008), *Depot of Disappearance* in quartier21/MuseumsQuartier, Vienna (2009) and *No Soul For Sale* in Tate Modern, London (2010). Leung has also

been a visiting artist to academies and universities worldwide, such as Institut Kunst of Hochschule Luzern and Ecole Cantonale d'Art du Valais in Switzerland, Monash University and Australian National University in Australia, and has participated in artist-in-residence programmes in New York, Banff, Vienna and Sapporo.

His multi-disciplinary artistic practice ranges from photography and video to text, performance and installation, focusing on the relationship between anticipation, perception and understanding in communication, mostly in an urban context. However, his research interests include art & architecture, Hong Kong art & culture, institutional critique, and so on.

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