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Lumennisum 18 x 24 community photography and the possibilities of photo education in Hong Kong

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Introduction:

In this essay, I want to explore the possibilities of how a contemporary community photography project in Hong Kong is being mediated in the context of photography education project, photo workshop, shooting day and exhibition. Besides, the sub-ordinate promotion comprising event and visual documentary is mediated under the contemporary information flowing mechanism as a popular culture.

The research questions include: How does the general public reflect on a community photo project based on their interests and a focus on photo images? What is their major concern in their community through their images? What kinds of visual possibilities are being explored through their self-engaging projects? How does the photo workshop influence their ways of seeing in their community? Is their political stand reflected in their images? Does this kind of community art (photo) project strengthen the liberal mind of the public? What should be done to improve the community art project as part of the local photo education?

The research is based on the structure and formation of this community photo project and how it is processed at this moment. Besides, one of the focal points is the relationship of the mediation among various parts of the event as a popular cultural formation.

By making use of the analysis of visual theories of Barthes related to photography, criticism of cities and photography of Jane Tormey, community art experience of Kester, and mediation theory of Silverstone and theory of everyday life of de Certeau, a clear picture of visual and mediate analysis is expected to be revealed in this research project.

Before starting the simple research of the mediation of the community photo project as a cultural event, I, as a researcher and an analyst, must state clearly my background and the multiple roles related to the following case study. I graduated in from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in the late 90s, my major being BA(HONS) Photographic design. Then I was working as a photojournalist handling all kinds of photos related to areas from local news, feature sections to photo editing for ten years in a local newspaper. In 2009, I resigned and took up my part-time photo lecturer post at a local college of higher education. At the same time, I started my independent community photo projects in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Besides, I have joined Lumervisum as a core and board member, mainly engaging in the youth education projects until now. As the part-time photo art facilitator, I was invited to teach and conduct the content of the following photo workshops of the “Lumervisum 18 x 24 photo project”. However, most likely, I am not involved in organizing the event, especially in the aspects of budget and event execution. With a semi-insider status, I would like to conduct a research on the mode of education under the mediation of the event.

Content (case studies):

In 2012, a community photography project called 18 x 24 was established by Lumervisum (<http://www.lumervisum.org/eng/>), a local photographic NGO for photo exhibition and education. The 18 x 24 community photo project (<http://lumervisum18x24.org/>) is composed of 24-hour photo shooting days and

public workshops in all the 18 districts of Hong Kong. Those shooting day events have been being executed in the various districts since October 2012. Basically, there is one shooting day in each of the succeeding months until April 2014. The project is mainly funded by the HAB (the Home Affairs Bureau, The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) and partly sponsored by other government departments, e.g. the Urban Renewal Authority, some District Council offices, and some commercial partners, e.g. PCCW. Besides, most resources of the NGO Lumenvisum are being funded by the HKADC (Hong Kong Art Developmental Council).

The community photo project is mainly composed of around 8 public photo workshops in each district, parts of them are being held in secondary schools, youth centers, elderly centers; and at least half of the workshops are being conducted specially for the general public through recruitment over social media and other promotions. Those photo workshops consist of 3-hour introduction to basic knowledge on photography, photo reading exercise, some photographers' work for appreciation, and sometimes technical training is included (Based on the target groups' knowledge on photography). The teaching materials are some reference from local photography courses (mainly contributed by tutors in some local undergraduate courses of photography and photojournalism), and some teaching materials from international photo education organizations, such as the ICP (International Centre of Photography <http://www.icp.org/>). Based on those resources, the tutors are developing a set of flexible teaching materials for their workshops. The teaching teams include five photo lecturers (three of us with a master's degree and two of us with a bachelor's degree in photography), who teach photojournalism and photo documentary in undergraduate courses at local universities and colleges. Most of the team members have experience in conducting community photo projects in Hong Kong.

The emergence of the community photo project was developed from a photo project in 2009. In 2009, the photo event called “24 hrs Photo Adventure in Kwun Tong” (“Kwun Tong 24” in this article) was run by Lumervisum, the photo educational NGO, including a series of community photo workshops and the 24-hour shooting event in Kwun Tong district. Since the Hong Kong Government was planning to start the urban renewal project in Kwun Tong district, Lumervisum had been running a community photo documentary project for several years before the “Kwun Tong 24” project. In that project, over 10 photo workshops were conducted in secondary schools and the 15 photo workshops were provided for the public. A total of 250 participators were invited to post their photos on the database website for public access. (<http://www.re-kwuntong.hk/chi/home.php>)

In fact, some refinements of the photo project were introduced in the workshop of the “18 x24” community photo project in 2012. The major difference from the previous one is the discussion about community in Hong Kong. In addition, according to the aim of this community photo project, collective visual images in the community, which reflects what the public view is one of the focal points in this project.

According to the principle of “straight photography” (Beaumont Newhall, 1982:167-198), the evident proving type of photo style is essential in all the photos of the participators. That means photos should be taken directly with a camera and without any technical, visual manipulation or after-effects such as adding or removing something with Photoshop or other software. However, according the common knowledge and tradition of the optical formation of photography, an acceptable amount of adjustment on brightness, cropping, using black & white photo medium is exceptional.

Since we must consider the mediation of this photo project as a community art project, the website for the public participators to post photos provides interactive functions of ‘marking the theme of those photo taking’, ‘like’ and

'download' under 'CC common' (for non-commercial sharing purpose), which enables an interactive archive for educational purpose and exchanges of ideas among the users, including participators and other viewers concerning those photos. Some interesting observations will be explained in the following part of this essay.

Finding and Analysis

As in the earlier observation of the prototype urban district photo workshops and shooting day, "Kwun Tong 24" in 2009, it started a local photo event which aimed at gathering community creative images of the urban district. The outcomes of the images are diverse in terms of subjects and points of view, but they have a lot of common characters (<http://www.re-kwuntong.hk/chi/photo.php?bas0=0>).

However, we can easily discover that most of the images are the exterior urban space as their subject matter from the image database. Only ten percent of those images shows people. Besides, very few images feature portrait as the main theme. This result is actually a bit out of our expectation. It seems that it matches the evidence what Abbas did in his research about Hong Kong photographic images as part of visual cultural research to prove his assumption of "Photographing Disappearance". he stated that ' The camera lens puts the city on the couch. The visual is a means of interrogating visibility: its puns and parapraxia. Not just an optical unconscious; a spatial unconscious as well.' (Abbas,1997:91) We do not want to easily draw the conclusion that the images of Hong Kong citizen reflect a sense of "Photographing Disappearance" (Abbas,1997:91). However, this case study of the "18 x 24 community photo project"(<http://lumervisum18x24.org/archive>) is being run after three years of the prototype (Kwun Tong 24), it is obvious that a similar type of images are being uploaded by the participators, proving that Abbas may be right.

To analyze the case in detail, I choose the Central and Western District, a recently

completed section of this photo event in May 2013 as a detailed case study. Some observations of the participators are being recorded and analyzed in the two public workshops on 27 April and 28 April and the photo shooting day on 5 May. I commence by stating clearly that it is a self-reflection as a photographic tutor to review the mediation in this event and especially for the purpose of improving the educational methods. It is expected to give inspiration to the art facilitators and educators in terms of information and some outstanding situation observed in this article. Another restriction in this analysis is explicit that the detailed textual analysis and audience research are not the key point when carrying out observations. Actually, the following information is collected with reference to audio recording and recording in the photo workshops and shooting day events during the period mentioned above.

The number of participators of those workshops on 27 April and 28 April was around 15 and 10 respectively. The age range is from 18 to 65. Some of them have strong interest in photo-taking, some of them are beginners, and two or three of them have been amateurs for over 15 to 20 years. Normally, one third is female and two thirds are male. Despite the fact that we provided special workshops for schools, youth centers and elderly centers, there are still a few school teenagers and the elderly in the public workshops. Besides, there are also some supporters from Lumenvisum NGO fans or other art-related groups. Taking the example of the Central and Western District, the educational background of the participators is relatively good: many were studying and growing up in the district. The reason why they come to the workshops may be related to their interest in photography and eagerness to engaging in culture-related activities, while most of them mentioned that they had been living, studying or working in the district previously. These groups of participators are actually very mature in understanding of the environment around them as a living community, where they expressed sentimental experience and memories in everyday life in the Central and Western District. As a result, after the session of visual knowledge, in which photo-reading and some community photo projects of the tutors' artwork were being introduced to them, they became active participants in the discussion regarding relationship between their experience and

the community. (In fact, this situation in other districts is different, depending on the participators' background and their involvement in the community.) Considering flexible learning options, I found photo technical knowledge or an exercise in location photo shooting could be handled in the second half of the workshops. In my memory, one of the groups chose some photo masterpieces for art appreciation; while the other group chose to have a practical location shooting in a Sunday afternoon.

After the shooting day of this district on 5 May, two participators contacted me for further discussion about the photos through Facebook. One of them is Ms. Mandy Chow, in her 30s, a graduate in fashion design who used to work in marketing; she now becomes a physiatrist practicing Chinese Fu Kung for health's sake sometimes. She has been developing her interest in taking photos, and she has been taking a lot of photos in her leisure. She explained the reasons for posting these photos on archive of shooting days in the Central & Western District and Kowloon City District.

photo1a: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/876>,

Photo1b: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/880>,

photo1c: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/896>,

photo1d: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/581>



photo by Ms. Mandy Chow,

photo1e: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/583>,

photo1f: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/585>.

She replied that one of her favorite photos is photo1d, the one showing a tram which is similar to the photo1c; she did not post it without explanation. Perhaps, the composition is not good enough to hold her attention. In fact, few photos in the archive show people (children) as a subject, which was revealed in the photo1d. Mandy's photos are therefore quite exceptional.

Another participator, Mr. Wong ML, in his 30s, is an IT technician, a part time ambulance man and an enthusiast becoming semi-professional with several years of photographic experience, who takes a lot of photos daily and travel frequently. He posted three photos on the archive:

Photo2a: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/748>,

Photo2b: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/749>,



photo by Mr. Wong ML

Photo2c: <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/750>.

He told me that his favorite is the photo2b. In the photo2b, there was a big beautiful wave approaching the coast in the western part of Hong Kong. His photo is a kind of “Pictorial Photography” (Beaumont Newhall,1982:141-166) which stresses on the ascetic pictures in the composition. Although this is a traditional photo style during the invention of photography in the emerging period, many people are still willing to take the photos with such compositional beauty to percept their world. It may be a photo style that never disappears. I would like to know the reason why he takes beautiful scenic pictures only. He explained that he wanted to take some special scenery rather than what other photographers usually do.

I also invited one of the participators, Mr. Lee, a merchant around 55 years old, to share his photos with me in an interview. He claimed that he is an amateur who had taken a technical-based photo course before joining our workshop. He stated that he had experience of taking photos for several years. However, he does not concentrate on phot-taking because of his busy work. He started learning photography again after his family had commented on his photos. He is actually quite eager to learn and involve himself in photography. He is developing his visual sense and view on community photos. For example, he went to different sites in Kowloon and to take photos in the Central and Western District on the shooting day. He showed three photos for sharing as follows:

Photo3a <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/841>,

Photo3b <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/842>,

Photo3c <http://lumervisum18x24.org/photos/843>.

However, his images are other examples of a highly technical “Pictorial Photography” as mentioned above.

Exceptionally, there was a chance for me to conduct a photo-sharing event in one of the photo shooting days in the Central and Western District on 5 May 2013. The venue was the Western District Community Centre. The Staff of Lumervisum photo

NGO set up several laptop computers for the public, who do not necessarily know how to upload their photos at home or want to share their photos with other participators and get comments from photo tutors (I was one of them at that time). In that afternoon, there were around 20 participators, mainly the elderly, retired people and teenagers, staying in the casual seminar. Normally, all of them had several minutes to introduce their individual photos and related ideas. They talked a lot about their feelings of visual elements and contextual matters in their photos. The contents were very broad, ranging from environmental protection, elderly activities to foreign domestic helpers, etc. I was aware of those interesting arguments indicating different values on some social issues. As a photographer and photo lecturer, I did not find those discussions weird or unexpected. Inevitably, documentary photography or even community photography intervene in social or even political issues in one way or another.

However, I met another participator (anonymous in this article) who is running a local small business. He conveyed a very important message to us. Even if he has started learning digital photography this year, he has had some experience in taking photos with film cameras for over 20 years. When he was asked which photo was his favorite, I got an unexpected answer. He told me that he had taken one but he dared not publish it. This was a photo taken at the Cheung Kong Centre in Central, where a banner was set to fight for justice by protestors against capitalism (*photo4).



(*photo4, by one of the 18x24 participators)

He explained why he took this photo was because the chance of fighting for rights against the biggest corporation in Hong Kong was exceptional. When I asked him why he did not publish it, he found it politically sensitive. Actually, he did demonstrate a practice of self-censorship in the selection process. The following conversation among a participating photographer, I (the photo tutor) and my colleague (the Lumenvisum 18x24 community photo event) was also interesting. The participator hesitated to do so because he knew that this event was funded by the Government, and he decided that the photo was too politically sensitive. From my point of view, it is acceptable to post it up because a photographic artwork should be about daily life; I gave the same reminder in the public discussion session. However, our colleague stated clearly that she was afraid of any misuse of the posting act as an intentional intervention by some political organizations (It is totally understandable for the website holders to avoid being overwhelmed by hackers' intentional attacks), I therefore partially agreed with my colleague.

Obviously, the different levels of self-censorship are being considered in the mediation of the photo event. Even though it may involve some other technical

problems from a judicial point of view and the legitimacy of posting images either for or against some institutions or capitalists, I cannot accept the political censorship of photographic images in this community photo project, as I stated very clearly in front of the public at the seminar. This type of social issue is most likely to appear in the everyday life of the community photo project. On the contrary, if there is any photo of protest in the community photo documentary in Central district in Hong Kong, it is not a reality. It is unforgettable that the meaning of photographic images, especially for straight photography, lie in reality representation. As Barthes stated, 'First of all, I had to conceive, and therefore if possible express property (even if it is a simple thing) how Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation..., in Photography I can never deny that **the thing has been there**. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography.'(Barthes, 1994:76)

Although it may not be appropriate to compare nature of community art projects in Western countries with the case in Hong Kong directly, there are many aggressive community artists in Zurich, who create an innovative "art form" to deal with the social issues by the modern concept of community art. The Austrian artists collective WochenKlausur intervened in the drug policy by setting a boat off for a three-hour cruise on Lake Zurich. It provided a chance for the politicians, journalists, sex workers and activists in Zurich to have a roundtable gathering for a community conversation. Cited from Kester, 'For these artists the complex process necessary to bring the boardinghouse into existence was itself a creative act, a "concrete intervention" in which the traditional art materials of marble, canvas, or pigment were replaced by "sociopolitical relationships.'(Kester,2004:3) In fact, this kind of contemporary community art is usual in Chinese society in Hong Kong. Our goal is to conduct a community art project through visual art media, such as photography. I aim at drawing public attention to the relationship between daily life and cultural/social issues and connecting it with our artworks. That means conducting a community art project is₁₂ not to create a type of leisure activity

providing aesthetic experience and appreciating beautiful sceneries. Although I am not an activist in social movements, I strongly agree with Adorno's point of view on Culture Industry. The power of awareness through art should not serve commercial and propaganda purposes only. Our awareness of criticism through "art" to the social and political world is the most important.

Undoubtedly, the meaning of community has changed a lot compared with that in the past. Cited by Silverstone, 'Indeed, the media do community' (Silverstone, 1999:99), the Hong Kong community is being more cyberly developed. The Internet, smart phones and new media such as Facebook has changed the community a lot. The community photo project should be a district-based activity; more participators coming from different areas in Hong Kong posting and discussing their photos in appropriation acts. We, the initiators of the project, originally intend to create a space by providing platforms for discussion on photography. According to our observations after discussion with participators, I heard so many times that they had discovered some photos gained a lot of "likes" after being posted on the website. I am really not curious about it, but their responses show me that they are concerned about the comments/E-support seriously and the justice of the activity per se. Perhaps, as Silverstone said, 'Communities are lived. But also imagined.' We may not understand why the participators care about the photo criticism too much.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, after my brief observation and analysis of the mediation of this community photo project case, I cannot get the unexpected situation out of my mind. The form of mediation reminds me that we cannot just make the content of the workshop better to improve the visual sense, knowledge and social/community awareness of the public. However, one crucial point I observed is the influence of the formation of cultural industries in the world of contemporary Hong Kong art

and education. It is highly affected by the ideology that is being received by the public. Even if we are not a government department, the previous case of self-censorship reflects that the public perceive all kinds of community art activities as official ones. There are some boundaries limiting their creative minds and expressions upon their daily life culture. It makes me rethink about the mode and size of the community art project which should remain simple and small-scale. Maybe, we should not be too ambitious. If we really want to make it interactive and let the public create and speak, it may not be suitable for us to conduct the event-based workshops. I recalled a more successful community photo project three years ago - "The Family photo project". (http://myp.nikonimagespace.com/myphoto/guest.jsp?y=oe9-eRCitKp4L1jHwgc-Eb0EJVx05glAy4EQAI3h6XuQEIAaOvEkutViLYe_5gewvRefI4-XjpeYOC9ZMa0pRmjgizmliq4Cu5WBai_GaPY)

The above summer workshop provided six 2-hour lessons to explore participators' views on family. It was truly an inspiring and creative workshop. Supposing that we want to create something new in the interwoven structure of cultural industries, we should make reference to de Certeau's "tactics" of everyday life (De Certeau,1984).

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