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CHEN WEI

陈怀
维旧
革命

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Your comment about conceiving of a better future relates to one of the tenets of the 11th Gwangju Biennale: namely, the question of what art does—not in a utilitarian sense, but what an artwork might achieve, even if it does not aim at being critical or specifically engaged. What do you think your work “does”?

In January, when I joined the gathering of artists invited to the Biennale, I could see this concern reflected in the programming; it seemed to make an intimate connection with local communities, favoring small gatherings over press conferences and media play. Many people have critical views of a visual spectacle like a biennale, but I hope this approach represents a positive change.

In the end, I think my works have been trying to engage on the level of sensation. Many of us are going through tough times, but we have no good answers to the problems they raise. Art does not give up questioning, even in the face of conflicts—it seeks different ways to reflect on ourselves and reach broader understandings. That’s why I still do this job. 🌀

ECOSYSTEM

William Zhao meets Mimi Brown and Christina Li, the minds behind Hong Kong's SPRING WORKSHOP



WITH ASIAN CULTURAL SCENES DOMINATED BY PRIVATE FORCES AND INVESTMENT, THE ECOSYSTEM SERIES BRINGS TOGETHER INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS TO DISCUSS HOW COLLECTING CAN HELP PROMOTE A HEALTHY ART ECOLOGY.

On a beautiful late-February afternoon in Hong Kong, I invited Spring Workshop’s Mimi Brown and Christina Li to share their insights on the progress of the art initiative. It was a good time to revisit some interesting topics with Mimi, whom I had last interviewed three years ago, and to see how the organisation has upheld its mission to create programmes that encourage alternative art experiences for both artists and the public. I was also happy to learn that Christina, who had worked with the or-

ganization prior to her appointment as Director, has programmed the space in a way that contributes powerfully to developing the city’s art community.

Mimi, I know you are from the U.S. and have a musical background as a composer. How did you end up founding Spring Workshop in Hong Kong?

MB: I moved to Hong Kong in search of adventure. When I arrived ten years ago, I couldn’t find the music scene I was looking for, but I did discover a magical art scene. I met Claire Hsu at Asia Art Archive and Tobias Berger at Para Site Art Space, and started attending every talk at those two spaces that I could, rapidly getting to know the artists, curators and art practitioners working in Hong Kong. As I began to understand and appreciate the arts ecology here, it made sense to start an organization that could offer extra space and scope to Hong Kong’s non-profit landscape. I also wanted the chance to play with the way that audiences encounter art.

But music and the visual arts are quite different, aren’t they?

MB: Music and visual art are cousins. I see ev-

Mimi Brown and Christina Li are respectively the founder and director/curator of Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Spring Workshop is a non-profit arts space committed to an international cross-disciplinary program of artist and curatorial residencies, exhibitions, music, film and talks.



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everything first as a musician, so I approach what we do at Spring in terms of rhythm and timbre, just as visual art can be seen in terms of form, color and texture. The happenings and encounters here form the notes for the unfolding composition that is Spring.

How many shows has Spring launched? What kind of viewership have they drawn so far?

MB/ CL: The latest count is that we have had 9500 visitors, 102 residents and 128 public programmes over the past three and a half years.

What does Spring actually do?

CL: Basically, we do artist residencies and public programs. Some of the residencies involve time and space in a different manner—for example, virtual residencies wherein we collaborate with curators and artists overseas. There's also a fiction residency I direct called Stationary, where we engage artists in creative writing.

From 12 March–22 May, Spring Workshop will present the world premiere of *Dullian*, a film installation and research project by artist **Wu Tsang** about the life and writings of Chinese revolutionary Qiu Jin.

Christina, how did you become the curator at Spring? I know you grew up here before moving to Amsterdam—have you settled down in Hong Kong?

CL: I was born and raised in Hong Kong, and first got involved in curating at Para Site with Tobias Berger. I left Hong Kong in 2008 to go to Amsterdam for de Appel's Curatorial Program and stayed to work in the Netherlands for eight years. I moved back to Hong Kong in August 2015 to direct Spring, but I'd already been involved in various projects for the organization: *Moderation(s)*, a two-year project organised

with Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, curated by Heman Chong; *Stationary*, a book of short stories Heman and I worked on which led to a show; and “Days push off into nights,” which I curated last year before officially joining the family. I still remember my first hard hat visit to Spring, back in 2012 during Art HK. The space was bare with concrete walls, and I remember imagining the happenings and activities that would occupy it, and what Spring Workshop could become. Over the preceding years, I had been involved in projects in various capacities and observed the organic developments in Spring—both of its structure and the people here. Joining the team has been a soft landing back into Hong Kong, and has given me a lot of insight into Spring’s unique quality and vision, as well as how the initiative could evolve and extend its experimentation.

MB: For years, friends in Hong Kong told me to try to snag Christina, but the timing was never right. I was delighted when she was finally ready to come back to Hong Kong to run Spring. She has a rare combination of local and international experience that is ideal for Spring’s extended community and interests. Beyond that, she is total joy to work with!

The exhibitions at Spring are of high quality, both acclaimed academically and serving to introduce international good artists to Hong Kong. Some of them have been personal

In these pages:
Wu Tsang, Production still from *Dullian*, 2016
Photo credit: Ringo Tang

favourites, and I think they are still the best shows in town. But what are your ambitions? What more do you want to attain with Spring?

MB: Experimentation with artists, audiences and support. We want to explore how art can encourage encounters, and vice versa, how encounters here can produce exceptional art. As we go along in our experimentation, we also observe, trying to spot ways to fill the needs of the audience and the art community. Artists from different fields and from different backgrounds cross paths here and inspire each other over lunch—like Ming Wong, who came to Spring first as a resident and returned to present work to the many people who had been following his research. In *Moderation(s)*, the Barcelona-based curatorial office Latitudes (Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna) came for a residency,





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and instead of doing studio visits, they asked artists to bring them around the city to map out their inspirations and their points of interest. When new international residents arrive, we ask our friends in the arts to take them around the city, so the artists learn about the city, but also immediately build bonds with our community. We see a dynamic ecology growing!

Many artists involved in your projects and programmes are international “star” (popular and renowned) artists. Is this intentional?

William Zhao is an art collector, curator and writer based in Hong Kong, actively contributing to the international contemporary art scene.

MB: We have worked with all sorts of artists, but maybe the “stars” are the most buzzed about. We like to choose projects with very specific topics that can only be executed in Hong Kong. For example, Wu Tsang, whose new work *Duilian* we’ll be showing in March, came to us via Defne Ayas, one of our advisors. Wu was interested in spending time in China to do research on Qiu Jin, a feminist revolutionary who lived in the 1900s in Shanghai. We hosted Wu for two three-month residencies as she researched, traveled and connected to Hong Kong communities, producing

a new film in the process that could only have been made here.

But what of mainland-based Chinese contemporary artists? There haven’t been many included in your programs...

MB: Two of our biggest projects were with Chinese artists! We showed a thirty-meter-long five-

screen film installation by Yang Fudong entitled *The Fifth Night*, and also presented “The Universe of Naming,” a large-scale exhibition by Qiu Zhijie. Even in our last show, “Des notes: a foreigner, a human and an unexpected visitor,” we worked with Yu Honglei. But ultimately, our artist invitations are made more according to the needs of the projects and program than geographies or nationalities.

How do you think the politics between Hong Kong and China have changed?

MB: Well, the fact that M+ softened the title of its recent show before opening in Hong Kong says something. Self-censorship in the arts may be the most interesting aspect of our sector in Hong Kong. In our case, as a privately-funded space, Spring Workshop is free to do as it wishes. I see art as inherently political, so our work is to produce intellectually challenging programs without being gratuitously provocative.

CL: The socio-political tensions that have always been present, and that we all have witnessed or experienced in the past years, have not only increased, but have also now infiltrated different parts of our everyday lives and consciousness. With regard to its impact on Spring’s positioning and programming, our independence is our strength. In our exhibitions and programs, we don’t avoid politics. Our curatorial strategy aims to encourage the creation of an open space for dialogue and exchange, without pushing a particular point of view.

Which is your favourite show ever held at Spring?

MB: They are my babies! I don’t have a favorite, because I dearly love all of them. The whole thing is my favorite show.

Right: Wu Tsang, *Self-Inscription* (2016)
All images courtesy of the artist; Spring Workshop, Hong Kong;
and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin



CL Very true. It is hard to tell. Our programs and exhibitions happen organically, so one could trace the connections between them in our four-year journey. As a curator, it is very difficult to single out one program’s success from another without referencing its related projects. They all are generated from Spring’s continued mission to create a structure that experiments with presenting art, helping us to look at the world through a fresh lens.

Finally, how do you finance Spring Workshop?

MB: It is supported by my family’s private art foundation.

So are you actually like a charity?

Throwing money into a city that is not home to you?

MB: (laughs) Hong Kong is home to me, and it is a privilege to get to work with our cultural practitioners. Since Spring doesn’t focus on producing tangible objects, the encounters and experiences that take place there are its collection. And collections are meant to be shared.

So have you (re-) evaluated your plans?

MB: We are constantly re-evaluating, trying to stay nimble and relevant to the city. Spring Workshop is a five-year arts initiative, and we are past the half-way point now, so stay tuned for the next plan. ☺