Making Art (A Public) Matter in Asia: The Social Intervention Aesthetics of Tintin Wulia in Hong Kong

Michelle Antoinette

To cite this article: Michelle Antoinette (2018) Making Art (A Public) Matter in Asia: The Social Intervention Aesthetics of Tintin Wulia in Hong Kong, Public Art Dialogue, 8:2, 258-289, DOI: 10.1080/21502552.2018.1500230

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2018.1500230

Published online: 18 Mar 2019.
MAKING ART (A PUBLIC) MATTER IN ASIA: THE SOCIAL INTERVENTION AESTHETICS OF TINTIN WULIA IN HONG KONG

Michelle Antoinette

How does contemporary art function as cultural activism in Asia today? What is the contribution of contemporary art in effecting political transformation in Asia’s public spheres? This article considers such questions in view of the intensified public visibility of contemporary art in Asia in the twenty-first century and newly defined public significance for art, artists, and art audiences in directly affecting contemporary Asian societies and their futures. One significant demonstration of this is the prevalence of contemporary Asian artists directly engaging and relating pressing socio-political issues in Asia through relational, participatory and collaborative art practices with publics, underlined by a socially transformative, activist aesthetics.

This intensified relationship between contemporary art and “the public” in Asia is forcefully demonstrated in Hong Kong, the focus site for this paper. As scholars such as David Clarke, Stephanie Cheung and Carolyn Cartier have shown, art and culture can be key means to facilitating public discourse and activism in Hong Kong on urgent local issues. In recent decades, this has been especially pertinent to the maintenance of democratic rights and freedoms considered at risk since the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 under the “one country, two systems” agreement with Britain. The huge scale of protest art accompanying the “Umbrella Movement” pro-democracy protests of September 2014 is a key case in point. Artists and everyday citizens took to the streets of central Hong Kong in their wide opposition to proposed legal changes to Hong Kong’s electoral process. The umbrellas, initially used by protestors to deflect attacks of tear gas and pepper spray from the Hong Kong police, took on iconic significance for the movement.

The protests spurred an explosion of protest art in the form of public art installations and sculptures and artwork on banners, tents and the umbrellas themselves, turning the streets into a huge public canvas for creative political
expression. With a long-held interest in community-engaged art, Hong Kong-based academic and curator Oscar Ho Hing-kay remarked of the Umbrella Movement: “The entire city is a work of art, and everyone is an artist. What impresses me is the totality of it.” For artist and curator Isaac Leung, the movement signified a shift in the potential of public art to directly effect public discourse and action: “It changed the idea of public art in Hong Kong” from traditional notions of public art commissioned for public plazas or inside government buildings to now “really touching on the idea of public-ness, where art is being utilized as a tool to express certain things in the public arena.” Importantly, while some may argue that the Umbrella Movement failed in its objectives, scholar Jeroen de Kloet regards the protests’ legacy as having “explor[ed] a politics of possibility” for which he argues, following philosopher Jacques Rancière’s work, aesthetics played a crucial role in facilitating a “redistribution of the sensible, challenging the status quo” and “articulat[ing] a hope for a better and different Hong Kong.”

It is within this transforming context for public art and its renewed possibilities for affecting Hong Kong’s futures that contemporary artist Tintin Wulia began her self-described series of “public interventions” collectively entitled Trade/Trace/Transit (2014–ongoing). Wulia’s project began earlier the same year of the Umbrella Movement and also sprung from an “occupation” of Hong Kong’s Central District — that of Hong Kong’s Filipino migrant community, who gather socially in Hong Kong’s Central District every Sunday on their one day off a week from their contracted employment, usually as domestic workers. Theirs is therefore not an occupation of the streets as overt political protest but, as I will discuss below, their gathering nevertheless bears significance for community building and collective identity in the face of their continuing marginalization within Hong Kong public culture. Despite their prominent public visibility on Sundays and within domestic life in Hong Kong, the life stories and conditions of Filipino migrants continue to be largely invisible or, extending from the work of Rancière, insensible to the social order of the public sphere. Indeed, far from just a set of publicly located spaces, the public sphere emphasizes the discursive activity of participatory citizenship for the collective deliberation and generation of public opinion — a participatory citizenship that is fraught with challenges for the transnational, migrant domestic worker community.

Wulia’s public interventions for Trade/Trace/Transit explore and intervene into the lives and livelihoods that intersect with the cardboard waste trade route in Hong Kong, highlighting socio-economic inequalities of global capitalism that are ironically sustained by profound webs of socio-economic connection. More specifically, Wulia’s project traces and documents the cardboard waste route in Hong Kong through a socially engaged enquiry. Central to this is understanding the significance of cardboard waste material to the
lives of Hong Kong’s Filipino migrant community as one-day-a-week shelters, and as part of a thriving informal economy of cardboard trade supporting this. The larger Trade/Trace/Transit project, thus far, is composed of several individual critical interventions or manifestations: the Wall Drawings (2015–16) public art project, undertaken in collaboration with migrant workers on the streets of Hong Kong’s Central District; a series of interventions into cardboard recycling collection points around Central, entitled Corpus (2015–16); the installation Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories (2016); the filmic work Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest (2016); the conceptual intervention Delta (2016); and the filmic work-in-progress Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest.

In this article, I particularly focus on three of these public interventions – Wall Drawings (2015–16), Delta (2016), and Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories (2016). In so doing, I situate Trade/Trace/Transit within Wulia’s ongoing practice of an “aesthetics of resistance.” I also consider the projects’ various public manifestations, and explore their connections through different forms of public art and publicness, and the different relational and representational politics inherent in these public art interventions. Following Rancière and de Kloet, I argue that Wulia’s interventionist aesthetics provoke the strategic disclosure, collision and relation of different publics in a “redistribution of the sensible” in Hong Kong, harnessing the subversive and transformative possibilities of art to renegotiate public cultures under the imbalanced conditions of globalization.

MAKING A HOME, AWAY FROM HOME: “THE REAL HONG KONG”

Though people have tried, you can’t drive [the workers] away from the squares. …It is where they feel at home. It’s where they can be themselves.

Cynthia Abdon-Tellez, Co-founder, Mission for Migrant Workers

Every Sunday, thousands of Filipino migrant workers, mostly women, gather in the Central District of Hong Kong, enjoying each other’s company on their one day off a week. They find comfort and solidarity in spending time with each other, bonding in their common experiences as part of the Filipino diaspora community. Most are domestic workers who work for Hong Kong’s wealthy families and are expected to carry out long work hours, six days a week. With little money for recreation activities, they gather in central Hong Kong transforming prominent public spaces into places that they can temporarily call their own for the day. The gathering, as one journalist observes,
forms “a pop-up little Philippines in the heart of Hong Kong... [as the migrant workers] appropriate streets and sidewalks, flyovers and footbridges, parks and pedestrian overpasses and underpasses, into a space of their own” (Figure 1). As scholars such as Lisa Law and Ming-Yan Lai have discussed, this kind of appropriation of public space by the migrant workers — installing a “Little Manila” in the heart of Hong Kong — serves as a vital means for engendering cosmopolitan community and connection through their shared experiences as Filipino diaspora and as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Moreover, as Law relates, the Filipino community connection is enlivened through a shared “geography of the senses” such as the embodied and sensorial acts of sharing in a meal of Filipino food and speaking Filipino with each other, including exchanging news from the Philippines and debriefing on their workweek.

A further distinction of this mass gathering is the way in which the migrant workers demarcate their occupation of public space by installing temporary cardboard shelters and floor coverings for themselves, turning cardboard “waste” into temporary “homes.” These homes serve a dual purpose of partitioning individual and smaller groups of migrant workers from others,
while at the same time giving conspicuous visibility to and publicly registering
the collective experience of this assembly of people, as migrant workers and
Filipino nationals. The irony is, as one reporter has observed, that “these
boarded spaces on Central’s grounds echo the minimal privacy and cramped
conditions of [domestic migrant workers’] living quarters in their work places —
the homes of their Hong Kong employers, whose average apartment size is
usually between 400 to 700 square feet only.”16

These cardboard spaces are also important for the complex “informal
economies” that thrive around them. As Wulia observed in conducting her
research for Trade/Trace/Transit:

South Asian men sell cheap T-shirts, bags and shoes, and Hong Kong
locals covertly sell jewelry. Many of the women provide services to their
fellow domestic workers, from manicures to making coffee, to
supplement their incomes...On Saturdays and Sundays, in these
“houses,” they gather to chat, eat, play cards, nap and conduct their side
businesses.17

There are an estimated 321,000 migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong,
roughly 10% of Hong Kong’s total working population, and one of the highest
percentages of domestic workers in the world.18 Of this, Filipinos working on
temporary contracts make up around 52%, the largest number of domestic
workers in Hong Kong, with most of these being women.19 This picture of the
Filipino migrant domestic worker community is a very familiar one since the
1970s and 1980s and the ensuing gradual normalization of migrant domestic
labor as a constituent part of the Philippines’, and now even global, economy.
Indeed, if there is an emblem of the modern Philippine nation, it is certainly
embodied within this figure of the diasporic Filipino as migrant domestic
worker.20 Once a temporary measure to alleviate shortages in the Philippines’
labor market, the country now thoroughly depends on overseas migrant
domestic workers to sustain its livelihood through the remittances that Filipino
workers send back home to their families.21

In Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers fill a labor market that has
arisen with Hong Kong women’s increasing engagement in the workforce, mar-
rriages later in life, and an aging parent population requiring assistance to care
for their children, as well as caretaking of elderly parents — a task traditionally
undertaken by Hong Kong women within the family home.22 Typically,
migrant domestic workers are hired by middle and upper class employers to
undertake domestic duties that are not confined to housekeeping and includes
caring for children and the elderly.23 In their 2009 study, economists Patricia
Cortés and Jessica Pan reported that at least one migrant domestic worker is
hired in every three households in Hong Kong with young children.24
While the average working week for Hong Kong citizens is 40–50 hours, domestic workers average around 71–72 hours — about 12 hours a day for six days of the week, leaving workers with only one day off. Furthermore, within Hong Kong, domestic workers are subject to the “live-in” rule, which forces workers to live with their employers. Various studies have attended to the trauma and stress associated with the experiences of migrant domestic workers, including “the pain and suffering experienced by migrant parents and their children...caused both by ‘the destructiveness of distance’...and by the discrimination, exploitation and abuse experienced by shockingly large numbers of migrant workers...”

In this context, the weekly Sunday gatherings for Filipino migrant workers can be understood as a vital opportunity for “cultural connection, social support, and political performance,” where such connection, support and political agency is otherwise lacking within the everyday domestic work and life spaces of Filipino migrant workers, as well as within the larger public sphere in Hong Kong.

**SITUATING ART AND LIFE**

Much of artist Tintin Wulia’s practice to date has been concerned with examining the effect of geopolitics on shaping identity and belonging — in particular, the borders that demarcate national territories and migratory politics and determine citizen access and belonging. Indeed, as contemporary art theorists such as Irit Rogoff, Marsha Meskimmon and Nikos Papastergiadis have argued, this critical aesthetics of migration has been prevalent in contemporary art since the late twentieth century with artists “increasingly engaged in a critique of globalization and the rearticulation of universalist visions.”

Wulia’s particular interest in the contemporary politics of identity and belonging stems directly from her family’s background as Indonesians of Chinese ethnicity — an ethnic minority in Indonesia who experienced discrimination and persecution under Suharto’s authoritarian New Order regime (1965–98). Wulia’s grandfather was forcibly taken and likely killed during the 1965 “anti-communist purge,” and her family silenced and stigmatized in the ensuing decades. Since the downfall of Suharto in 1998, Wulia has been recovering her family’s silenced histories during this dark period of forging the modern Indonesian nation state. Although now based in Brisbane, Australia, Wulia still carries an Indonesian passport for her international travels and has faced significant obstacles in gaining entry into other countries. This combined experience of dealing with the discriminations of both Indonesian and international citizenship is, in many ways, at the center of Wulia’s broader interest in the geopolitics of migration, borders and belonging.
The kinds of art media and methods Wulia employs are often interactive or participatory, requiring a level of critical engagement from her audiences — such as in her interactive installation *Eeny Meeny Money Moe* (2013) inviting audiences to play a free arcade game to try to win their own fictional “passport,” and “game-performances” such as *Terra Incognita, et cetera* (2009) inviting visitors to “claim their own land” by pinning flags and drawing borders on a wall map. Wulia’s *1001 Martian Homes*, shown in the Indonesian Pavilion for the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, included the participatory installation *Under the Sun* displaying numerous visitors’ eyes on video monitors embedded in a staircase wall, after their eye’s image had been recorded by “peeking” into a small hole in a door at the top of the staircase. Wulia produced *Make Your Own Passport* (2014) as part of her residency at the Art Gallery of Windsor comprising an installation and workshop-performance held in public spaces (markets and community centers) in the bordering cities of Windsor and Detroit. It presented an installation of passport templates from 144 countries around the world. The workshop invited participants to make their own passport after being dealt a country through a random “lucky-dip” process and then picking out the related passport template, which they personalized and could then take home with them. In some cases, however, participants were left “stateless” after receiving “stateless status” from the “lucky” dip. For her Mexico City residency, Wulia produced *Three Études for Mexico City*, “a set of three site-specific public art events in various locations [in Mexico City] responding to the challenge to develop and present public art that was autonomous, requiring no maintenance and leaving no residue in situ.”

Wulia produced *Make Your Own Passport* and *Three Études for Mexico City* as part of a series of self-initiated residencies she undertook in North America in 2014 to explore the socially engaged practices of La Galería de Comercio in Mexico City, Immigrant Movement International in New York City initiated by artist Tania Bruguera with the Queens Museum, and the Art Gallery of Windsor at the Windsor-Detroit border, continuing her interest in the issues of migration, borders and nationalism. As theorized by art historian Claire Bishop, these types of socially engaged art practices can be linked to European and North American art practices of the 1960s and 1970s concerned with civil rights movements of the period, and continue an interest to move art beyond traditional fine art contexts to engage in and activate social issues within the public sphere. In Wulia’s case, it can also be linked to the politically oppressive conditions of Suharto’s Indonesia and the cultures of resistance that developed in response to this, including in the arts where experimental, socially-engaged art practices were often adopted to activate critical public consciousness on pressing social issues.
If there is a critical playfulness in Wulia’s earlier works in adopting modes of mimicry and game-based engagement with audiences, her residency projects in North America register a shift in trajectory. Echoing the work of public art theorist Claire Doherty, the residency projects provided Wulia the opportunity to consider how her art practice might more directly intervene within the situated reality of migrant life: to effect social change through situated social engagement while still maintaining attention to the role of objects in this. This served as valuable preliminary research for her Hong Kong project *Trade/Trace/Transit*, situated within the reality of migrant life as experienced by Filipino workers living in Hong Kong.

**MIGRANT LIFE IN HONG KONG AS SITUATION**

“I remember what a man in the business told me back then,” Zhang Yin said. He said, “Waste paper is like a forest. Paper recycles itself, generation after generation. ... After the boxes are thrown away, the cycle starts all over again.”

Excerpt from Tintin Wulia, *Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest*.

Over the course of her regular travels to Hong Kong for her art projects, Wulia became increasingly alert to the situation of Filipino migrant workers there, the ubiquitous presence of cardboard in Hong Kong, and the significance of cardboard to sustaining and linking different communities:

I was coming to Hong Kong every year and I saw all the cardboard that Filipino domestic workers were using to build cardboard houses on Sundays. ... Then next to Osage Gallery there’s this recycling point, and I saw lots of elderly people pushing trolleys with cardboard on it. And then I found this article about this woman called Zhang Yin, who owns a company called Nine Dragons Paper, and at the time she was one of the 10 richest people in the world and her business was recycling cardboard waste. So there was this cycle that connected all those people.

In her observations of Hong Kong’s central business district, Wulia discerned “two distinct personalities” signifying Hong Kong’s economy. One characterized by the formalized routines and rhythms of Hong Kong’s business economy, the “gray suits” who are the people sustaining this economy during the working week. The other personality emerges over the weekend, when swarms of Filipino domestic workers fill the space with their temporary cardboard shelters, escaping from their domestic duties, and revealing a thriving informal economy supported by recycled cardboard (Figure 2).

Alongside the striking materiality and spatial architecture of the workers’ cardboard shelters, Wulia learned the cardboard waste is central to a vital
informal economy in Hong Kong, covertly traded among the migrant domestic workers and helping to sustain their Sunday gatherings. Wulia explains,

Around Central, Hong Kong, this cardboard route is extraordinary. Filipino domestic workers gather in Central for their day off, and re-use the cardboard waste to build temporary “houses.” In this decades-old tradition, I discovered how a complex informal economy is born. The monetary value of the cardboard waste is multiplied through covert, hand-to-hand transactions, where intricate trade and trade-offs between cardboard waste collectors, suppliers, distributors, consumers, the hawkers, police and passersby take place.

Throughout this trade and trade-offs, the cyclical re-collecting and re-selling amplifies the social meaning of the “waste.” The waste becomes inhabited by the lived experiences of the agents of its journey, who contribute their various circumstances. Artefacts of these lived experiences are then amassed and compressed at the recycling collection points. Every day of the week, they are trucked along Hong Kong island’s northern coastal area to the transit port, to be shipped to China.39

Thus, much more than the simple stuff of everyday packaging, cardboard material is given added meaning in understanding the range of human
transactions and motivations that support its consumption and circulation in Hong Kong and globally. For Wulia, it highlights the social life of objects and their webs of socio-economic connection within and across geopolitical borders, and inspired her to follow the cardboard waste route around Central and intervene at its “nodes.” This led to her “series of interventions into the recycling collection points around Central” entitled Corpus (2015–16). For Corpus, Wulia became part of a waste-collecting group, equipped with her own trolley, and was able to directly liaise with workers at recycling collection points to learn about the trajectory, technology and practices for receiving the cardboard waste, compressing it into bales, and then delivering it to the port for shipment to China.

Significantly, for Wulia the (art) object or “thing” is still a primary consideration in connecting people. Citing Nicholas Bourriaud’s work on “relational aesthetics,” Wulia expresses concern that the object or thing is neglected in his theories of relational aesthetics, as if forgetting its valuable place in encouraging and understanding human relation and connectivity. In other projects, Wulia has focused on “the wall,” “the map” and “the passport” as objects for tracing issues of migration and border politics. Trade/Trace/Transit shifts Wulia’s focus to the contemporary materiality of cardboard in Hong Kong as profoundly influential in conveying issues of global migration and belonging and revealing the connectedness of otherwise disparate and unequal social worlds. Explaining her motivations in this regard, Wulia remarks:

This is what’s powerful about holding a tangible object in your hand, because objects embody more than what’s visible to your eyes. A gallery setting usually severs this object–human relationship in creating an aura of value, of the object being untouchable, which is why in my most recent body of work [Trade/Trace/Transit] I turn to public spaces to see how humans and objects coexist and how material culture grows transactions into relationships.

Wulia embarked on her project Trade/Trace/Transit in 2014, intermittently carrying out ethnographic research fieldwork over a period of two years, to get to know some of the Filipino domestic workers around Central and to better understand the cardboard waste economy in Hong Kong. This involved “inserting herself” within the migrant workers’ weekend homes and gaining the trust of “host groups” to adopt her, to be able to engage, dialogue and collaborate with them on her project. Alongside this, Wulia physically investigated and followed the flow of cardboard waste in Hong Kong’s Central District to understand its different phases, engaging with various cardboard waste stakeholders along the route. With the permission of those she encountered during her research, Wulia filmed her observations and interactions, leading to the work Proposal for a Film.
Recalling art critic Hal Foster’s observations of the “artist-as-ethnographer,” Wulia became highly attuned to both the site-specificity and socio-cultural world underpinning the Filipino migrant workers’ Sunday gatherings in Hong Kong’s Central area. Moreover, she grew knowledgeable about the social dimensions underpinning the cardboard objects so integral to the workers’ weekly gatherings — or, in anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s terms, the “social life of [these cardboard] things.” Elaborating on her motivations for Trade/Trace/Transit, Wulia explains: “With my games [such as Terra Incognita, et cetera (2009)] I was creating objects that made a link between people, so I thought, ‘Now I’ll try and find the object first, and see how that object links people and how different people use that object.’” Just as with Appadurai’s observations, Wulia’s Trade/Trace/Transit project literally demonstrates the changing social cycle within which “things” are implicated, such that “today’s gift is tomorrow’s commodity. Yesterday’s commodity is tomorrow’s found art object. Today’s art object is tomorrow’s junk. And yesterday’s junk is tomorrow’s heirloom...[revealing that] all things are congealed moments in a longer social trajectory.”

In this context of “deep hanging out” in the field, Wulia created Wall Drawings (2015–16) — “a series of ‘murals’ on the temporary ‘houses’ built by the Filipino domestic workers,” beginning as “simple decorative drawings.” The artist drew “flowing lines resembling flowers and trees.” They were “intentionally simple and structural to facilitate participation” from the worker groups (Figure 3). As Wulia explains in her related film Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest, “Reflecting on the various strategies of street artists, [she] decided to...draw on site. The murals which start very simply as decoration that the domestic workers [could] join in on drawing gradually evolve[d] into a tool for [her] to communicate [her] deepening knowledge [to the domestic workers] of what happens at the other nodes on the [cardboard recycling] route,” becoming “a storytelling medium” as Wulia spent more time with the groups (Figures 4 and 5). Notably, Wulia’s invitation to the migrant workers to collaborate on the drawings was not always taken up. As Wulia explains:

The members of my first host group were younger in general, and they were more excited about drawing together with me. But that group, unfortunately, broke up. So at that point I was left only with my second host group, Ate Manang’s group (the distributors — although later on I was adopted also by a few other groups who were not distributors). This group consists of older women, and they had all the excuses for not drawing together with me (e.g. too old, eyes not good, hands shaking — I think they might have been just more tired, as they’re more engaged in other businesses like the cardboard distribution). They were still really happy about my drawings, [though], and several of them actually kept my drawings.
Because of this, over time, as my knowledge of the route increased, my drawing style also changed. It started as simple flowing lines so that my host group (the first one) could add on things (leaves, flowers), but then it ended up as more narrative drawings/scenes from the route. These were the drawings that got on the bales [of “Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories”].

The collaborative process underlining *Wall Drawings* directly influenced the styles of drawing. As mentioned, it also facilitated social exchanges between Wulia and the workers, especially for the Filipino migrant workers to convey their stories to Wulia and fellow workers, and in turn, for Wulia to elucidate to the workers the larger context of cardboard waste recycle and trade. Moreover, it disclosed to the respective domestic worker and recycling-point worker groups, especially, their own and other stakeholder participation at various nodes along the cardboard waste route:

It was interesting from the recycling points’ point of view as well, I guess, as [the recyclers] gradually got more and more understanding of what the project was about — first they just saw random decorative drawings, then gradually they [the recyclers] realized I was drawing the route, and they actually had quite a few questions as several of the scenes were not familiar at all to them (e.g. the scenes of the distributors

Figure 5. Tintin Wulia. *Wall Drawings*. 2015–16. Ink on paper. Detail of drawing, waste cardboard node at Central, Hong Kong. Courtesy of the artist.
selling cardboard to fellow domestic workers — they’ve never seen that happening). The same happened to my host groups, of course — they were really curious to know what happened after the recycling point. Ate Manang [one of the cardboard distributors who formed part of Wulia’s second host group of domestic workers] specifically wanted to know how much the bales were sold at the port (it’s twice the price she got from selling to the recycling points — but of course she might have gotten more from re-collecting and re-selling them to fellow workers).52

The collaborative social intention also underlines the social processes that are integral to the production of Wall Drawings, where the “artwork” in this instance is not confined to the art object per se — in this case, the image on cardboard or literally, the wall drawings — or the authorial imprint of the singular artist. Rather, Wall Drawings highlights that art and creativity are no longer contained to a static material object or tangible creative output but can be counted as immaterial and impermanent processes including discursive situations of social engagement, intervention and collaborative participation.53 Following the work of art theorist Grant Kester, the social or dialogic processes themselves might be considered as constituting the artwork.54 Prominent Indonesian contemporary artist FX Harsono has also reflected on the type of socially engaged art installation that emerges from the Indonesian social context, arguing, “The resulting art installation is known as participative art. In this type of art, the participation of the public is vital.”55 This transference in the meaning and value of the artwork is also highlighted by the often ephemeral nature of socially engaged projects. For instance, the cardboard images comprising Wall Drawings were never intended to be kept; the majority “were either collected by waste collectors at the end of the day, kept as souvenirs by the inhabitants of the house, or stolen while being stored for redistribution on the waste distributors’ trolleys parked on the streets of Central.”56 Wall Drawings therefore became part of the extraordinary recycle of cardboard waste in Hong Kong (Figure 6).

Wulia’s Wall Drawings intervention extends art practice beyond the circumscribed spaces of art galleries and museums directly engaging and intervening within the everyday public space, communities and economies of Hong Kong. As with the larger Trade/Trace/Transit series, Wall Drawings, I would argue is not an overt protest art that declares its political intent through an “imposed message” to “explicate the world.”57 As Rancière argues, “An art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops wanting to emancipate us.”58 Thus, following Rancière, I would argue that the activist politics of Wall Drawings
— and Trade/Trace/Transit — lies precisely with its ability to activate the sensible and insensible, the visible and the invisible, through an aesthetics informed and constituted by its situatedness within the reality of life. With Wulia’s direct engagement with cardboard stakeholders and her elucidation of the “hidden” cardboard economy, Wall Drawings enacts a social and aesthetic intervention into Hong Kong’s socio-economic dynamics for a redistribution of the sensible in Hong Kong’s public sphere. In the same vein, Wulia carried out a further “public intervention” for her related Trade/Trace/Transit project for the 2016 Art Basel Hong Kong art fair.

**DÉTOURNEMENT INTO SITUATION**

Tell me something anything about the world...worn out, built up, flattened, sold, built up, collected, collected, flattened, sold, compressed, compressed, worn out... Tell me something not just anything.
Within the glitz and glamour of one of the most prestigious art fair series in the world, Art Basel Hong Kong, Wulia presented the installation *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories* and the accompanying filmic work *Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest*. In this 2016 edition of Art Basel Hong Kong, Wulia’s works were included in the curated section entitled *Encounters*. The installation comprised a set of 16 suspended cardboard bales, each weighing up to 350 kg and together weighing five tonnes. Some found the installation to be unsettlingly *out of place* for its incongruous materiality — essentially, Wulia presented a heap of cardboard waste within the context of “the largest, swankiest art fair in Asia,” held in the grandiose space of Hong Kong’s Convention Center. As one observer described, “it was made from bales of cardboard that Wulia had collected from recycling centres around Hong Kong, so looked rather different to the easily collectible paintings and sleek, shiny sculptures that surrounded it” (Figures 7, 8 and 9).
The title of the installation, *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories*, pointed to the social significance of the cardboard bales, acknowledging their original purpose and value as meaningful one-day-a-week cardboard shelter to Hong Kong’s community of Filipino migrant workers. Added to this were the stories these cardboard bales imaged and narrated on their exteriors about the lives of this marginalized community and others along the cardboard waste route (created as a result of Wulia’s related socially engaged and collaborative projects *Wall Drawings* and *Corpus*, and integral to *Delta*). While the installation might have initially invoked the monumental with its heavy sculptural architecture, I suggest it operated more as “anti-monument” on at least two levels: by inviting embodied engagement from audiences to actively move through and “read” the personal stories depicted on the bales, and by provoking the audience’s affective responses to these stories as well as to the installation’s distinctive cardboard smell and imposing materiality.

Likening the bales to “thick books drawn with covers” that “contain physical traces of people, stakeholders that make up the nodes of the route,” Wulia used the prominent space of the art fair to relate the “understories” of
Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong — “moments of profound human frailty”\[66\] — prompting the *Wall Drawings* project to perform at another level of political intervention. It is these “understories” of Filipino migrant workers and the cardboard waste trade in Hong Kong, stories otherwise suppressed in the mainstream of public discourse in Hong Kong and globally, that Wulia sought to make known. Indeed, the high public profile of the art fair provided Wulia with an extraordinary opportunity to highlight huge social inequalities and prejudices within Hong Kong society, to a privileged local and global “art world” audience. At another level, as with the understory that is integral to a forest’s life cycle and ecology, Wulia registered these migrant-worker stories as markers for the crucial contribution of migrant workers in sustaining Hong Kong’s and the global economy.

Wulia’s contributions to the art fair were a transfiguration of the previous phases of *Trade/Trace/Transit*, now reconceptualized for a private art fair.
audience and deliberately resituated within the space of the art fair — a “re-intervention of the [cumulative Trade/Trace/Transit] project into the art world.”67 This “re-intervention” was itself a further manifestation of the Trade/Trace/Transit project entitled Delta (2016). Separate from the installation Five Tonnes and the Proposal for a Film, Delta was the larger conceptual and physical intervention of the social worlds informing Wall Drawings and Corpus into the art world context. Crucially, in realizing Delta, Wulia strategically intervened within the preparation of the cardboard waste bales and their usual route. At the recycling points, rather than exchanging her cardboard waste for money she asked the machine operators to employ some of the Wall Drawings as the outer layers for the bales; and they agreed. Further, Wulia intervened in the usual trajectory of the bales from the recycling point to the port, organizing to divert them into the space of the international art fair:

At a recycling collection point in Sheung Wan, the daily harvest of waste from Central [was] compressed into bales, sometimes with the murals [from the Wall Drawings project] replacing their usual structural outer layer. Every day, the recycling collection’s truck would transport these bales to the transit port at Heng Fa Chuen/Wan Chai in several trips. On each trip, the truck passes near the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the venue of the annual Art Basel Hong Kong, but [usually] never stopped there.

These two worlds met as I diverted the route to Art Basel Hong Kong 2016. This diversion made waves.68

Alongside its materiality, Wulia’s installation thus reflected incongruity of another kind through its representation of social worlds not usually part of elite art fair contexts — the Filipino migrant worker community and other cardboard waste stakeholders. In fact, the sense of the work being “out of place” was a deliberate strategy by the artist — integral to her intervention project Delta — for which Wulia sought to bring different worlds of Hong Kong into intersecting view in the art fair context and in so doing, make them visible to each other as part of a “regime of the sensible.”69 In theorizing this regime, Rancière writes:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. ... The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the
community based on what they do and on the times and space in which this activity is performed.70

In bringing together usually detached social worlds at Art Basel, Wulia sought to “bridge the gap between the art fair and the real Hong Kong,”71 and thereby reveal the commonality and connectedness of these worlds in order to, in turn, (re-)inscribe their disparity into the (public) regime of the sensible. The uncomfortable responses by some to Wulia’s Art Basel intervention were likely for the politically charged implications of her political art action as much as for the palpable incongruous waste materiality of *Five Tonnes*, thus resonating with art critic Claire Bishop’s antagonistic relational aesthetics.72 The public intervention *Delta* is, moreover, an antagonistic aesthetics of “*détournement*” (“rerouting or hijacking”) — the technique of the French Lettrist International and Situationists towards subversive acts of antagonism or opposition to the status quo.73 By literally “rerouting” the course of the bales and subversively “hijacking” the capitalist expectations of the commercial art fair, Wulia’s intervention *Delta* makes a public situation possible for a redistribution of the senses, to confront Hong Kong’s “understories” as part of the regime of the sensible. Through the deliberate diversion of the bales from the waste depot to the art fair, Wulia’s project provokes the strategic disclosure, collision and relation of usually divergent yet contingent publics, harnessing the subversive and transformative possibilities of art to renegotiate the public sphere under the imbalanced conditions of globalization.74

Alongside the installation, Wulia also invited various stakeholders along the cardboard waste route for a public forum entitled *Cardboard Lives*, supported by the Asia Art Archive’s Open Platform talks for Art Basel.75 She had originally invited several migrant workers and cardboard traders to be part of the Open Platform discussion. In the end, however, only one could attend. Another five workers originally agreed but had to cancel on the day: three reported that their employers suddenly changed their work schedules without discussing this with them, even though it was a Sunday, their one day off a week; the other two had to cancel because their recycling points were too busy in the end and couldn’t be left unattended.76 The inability of the Filipino domestic workers and cardboard recycling-point workers to participate in the *Cardboard Lives* talks reinforces the social and economic disparity across the two worlds that Wulia sought to bring together for dialogue at Art Basel. Their uneven economic and social freedoms meant that while visitors to Art Basel could afford the cultural privilege of attending the art fair, Hong Kong’s working class, even if somewhat enabled by the new work opportunities brought with global capitalism, were at less liberty to take leave from their work without the risk of losing their jobs and jeopardizing their and their families’ livelihoods. Nevertheless, I suggest, this collateral event
alongside the presentation of *Five Tonnes* was a further means by which the social life of the cardboard objects could be contextualized and activated into political action — in this case, to help activate social agency and public discourse around otherwise silenced issues regarding the plight of migrant workers in Hong Kong.\(^7\)

In particular, *Cardboard Lives* intended to facilitate the direct dialogue of cardboard stakeholders and consumers: on the one hand, Filipino domestic workers, cardboard traders and recycling-center workers, and on the other, middle and elite classes who benefit from the labor of the former under global capitalism. Often separated from each other’s realities, Wulia’s project reinforces how the livelihoods of these groups are contingent and registers the complex and uneven socio-political structures underpinning globalization with its imbalanced distribution of resources and wealth.\(^7\)

Notably, Osage gallery, who supported the presentation of Wulia’s artwork at Art Basel Hong Kong, originally intended to hold a solo exhibition for Wulia including *Five Tonnes*, following Art Basel. The commercial gallery expressed concerns, however, about not being able to sell the installation work because of its constitution from paper, and about not having the capacity to store all 16 cardboard bales, only three.\(^7\) With this in mind, Wulia’s original intention was to put the remaining 13 bales back into waste circulation at the point of the exhibition de-installation and have the three bales for Osage gallery delivered to their premises in Kwun Tong in the Kowloon industrial area. At Osage gallery, the three bales would then be “dismantled into loose cardboard waste in preparation for [Wulia’s] solo show a few months after in June 2016.”\(^8\) The other 13 bales comprising 9,831 kg would be driven to the port, ready for shipping and recycling. This would have meant rerouting the art commodity back to trash as a further and obvious intervention into the commercial expectations of the art market and object-status of the cardboard bales within the art fair.\(^8\)

However, the solo exhibition at Osage gallery never transpired. Osage’s suggestion to keep only three of the bales did not make sense to Wulia given only part (three-sixteenths) of the story would have been kept.\(^8\) Instead, during preparations for Art Basel, Wulia concluded that for her, an even more powerful intervention was possible: “If they [the bales] were let go they would only be absorbed into the global wealth and the stories [would] have gone with no material trace.”\(^8\) Wulia instead found an alternative “value” and moral and ethical significance in the bales’ preservation, for their continuing reminder of the migrants’ important stories and of the human connection underpinning the project. She explains, “Ate Manang, for example, decided to keep some of my drawings. She said they keep her warm in her room (in her live-in employer’s house). I don’t think she meant ‘warm’ temperature-wise—I believe she meant that the cardboard drawings are a material reminder that someone is thinking of her, and therefore [they] give her warmth.”\(^8\) In the
end, Wulia kept all 16 bales. Interestingly, since the time Wulia began the Trade/Trace/Transit project, China has progressively tightened its waste import policies restricting the types of material possible for export to and recycling within the country, with major repercussions for local and global economies of waste.

**REIMAGINING REALITY**

Papastergiadis has described a key characteristic of contemporary political art as its ability to participate in the critique and critical reimagining of social realities:

> The aesthetics of resistance in contemporary art assumes a different stance towards public participation, aesthetic form and political theory. A critical stance is defined not simply by claiming to be standing outside or against power, but also by finding ways to rework the meaning and form of power through collaborating with the public. The point of art is not the exposure of the truth but the creation of public situations for reimagining reality.  

The public interventions comprising Trade/Trace/Transit can be read as “aesthetics of resistance” that ultimately seek to produce a “redistribution of the sensible.” In particular, Wulia’s Trade/Trace/Transit critiques the social and political inequalities brought with globalization within contemporary public life in Hong Kong by intervening within specific situated realities that bring these inequalities into relief: the situation of migrant domestic workers, the cardboard waste route and the activities of its stakeholders, and the art fair and its patrons. In realizing and foregrounding the connections between these social worlds, Wulia makes visible and more real “the real Hong Kong” by revealing the commonality and relatedness of these worlds in order to, in turn, (re-)inscribe their disparity into the (public) regime of the sensible. In so doing, her project registers the possibilities of art to intervene directly into the hegemonic frames and discourses sustaining the inequities of global capitalism, offering a platform for counter narratives in the public sphere. By probing and excavating the complex and uneven socio-economic structures of global capitalism, Wulia’s art performs a critical subversion creating a critical space for public dialogue and giving visibility to pressing socio-political issues surrounding migration, geopolitics, identity and belonging in the twenty-first century.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [grant number DE170100455].

279
NOTES

1 This paper forms part of a larger research project on the topic of “Asian Art Publics” and is funded by the Australian Research Council [ARC; grant number DE170100455]. Broadly, the project sets out to understand new kinds of public engagement and participation in art and museum projects in Asia, and alongside this, new kinds of publics for Asian art (Asian Art Publics: Understanding New Art and Museum Participation in Asia). See the project website: https://www.monash.edu/mada/research/research-projects/art-into-the-world/asian-art-publics (accessed 29 May 2018).


5 For a focus on the project’s cartographic impulse, especially in “mapping” the cardboard waste route, see: Elaine Peck Leng Chiew, “Traumatised Topologies: An Examination of Map Art and the Revealed Psychic Subjectivities of War Trauma and States of Alienation” (MA diss., Singapore LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017).


16 Moya, “Domesticating Public Space.” A further affinity may be the balikbayan cardboard box (literally a “repatriate box”) that allows for bulk shipment of gifts sent by overseas Filipinos to their family and friends back home in the Philippines. Artist duo Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan (Philippines/Australia) have made balikbayan a feature of their installations such as in *Project Be-Longing: In Transit* (2006) and *Project Another Country: Address* (2008), which included balikbayan alongside stacked cubes of the artists’ and their family’s personal belongings. Cardboard is a regular material of other installation works by the Aquilizans such as *Passage: Project Another Country: The Eight Fleet* (2009), *In-Habit: Project Another Country* (2012) and *Foreigner: Project Another Country* (2014).


19 Altogether, 51% are from the Philippines, 45% are from Indonesia, and the rest are from Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. See: *Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics*. See also: Christopher Bagley, Susan Madrid, and Floyd Bolitho, “Stress Factors and Mental Health Adjustment of Filipino Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong,” *International Social Work* 40 (1997): 373–82.


21 “The Philippines is one of the largest exporters of labour in the global economy, with an estimated 9.5 million Filipino migrant workers living and working overseas (around 10% of the population). … Remittances constitute a major part [of the Philippines’ economy] — in 2010, [there was] an estimated US$21 billion for the Philippines.” Hans J. Ladegaard, *The Discourse of Powerlessness and Repression: Life Stories of Domestic Migrant Workers in Hong Kong* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.


26 Moya, “Domesticating Public Space.”


35 For instance, in the 1970s, artists associated with Desember Hitam (the Black December protest), Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (GSRBI, Indonesian New Art Movement) and PIPA (Pameran Seni Kepribadian Apa, What [Is] Identity Art Exhibition) made a radical break with the colonial-inherited modernist traditions of decorative fine arts emphasising exotic visions of Indonesia; instead, these new collectives influenced the future direction of contemporary Indonesian art with their interest in experimental, socially-engaged art practices with activist intentions. See Ahmad Mashadi, “Framing the 1970s,” Third Text 25.4 (2011): 409–17; and Patrick D. Flores, “First Person Plural: The Manifestos of the 1970s in Southeast Asia,” in Hans Belting et al., ed., Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 224–71. In their manifesto, GSRBI stated that they were striving for art that is “more alive, not confusing, natural, useful, and a living reality throughout the whole spectrum of society.” As quoted in Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai, Exposing Society’s Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art Since 1966 (Adelaide: Flinders University of South Australia, 1991), 26 (from Jim Supangkat, ed., Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia [Jakarta: P. T. Gramedia, 1979], xix). Notably, it was Wulia’s architecture training in Indonesia that first exposed her to socially-engaged and participatory practices.
45 Giles, “How Tintin Wulia’s Art Exposes Inequality.”
49 Wulia, “Trade/Trace/Transit: Wall Drawings.”
50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.

56 Wulia, “Trade/Trace/Transit: Wall Drawings.”

57 Jacques Rancière, quoted in Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, “Art of the Possible: In

58 Rancière, in Carnevale and Kelsey, “Art of the Possible,” 258.

59 “Proposal for a Film.”

60 The “Encounters” exhibition at Art Basel Hong Kong 2016 was curated by the Australian
curator Alexie Glass-Kantor. Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories was presented at
Art Basel Hong Kong, 24–26 Mar. 2016, as part of Wulia’s ongoing project Trade/Trace/
Transit (2014–ongoing), supported by the Australia Council for the Arts’ New Work — Mid-
https://naorococo.net/2016/03/18/catch-tintin-wulia-at-hong-kong-art-week/ (accessed 31
May. 2017).

61 Tintin Wulia, in Giles, “How Tintin Wulia’s Art Exposes Inequality.”

62 Ibid.

63 On “anti-monuments,” see for instance: Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth
Fazakerley, “Countermonuments: The Anti-monumental and the Dialogic,” The Journal of

64 Notably, while the bales comprising Five Tonnes were originally intended to be ephemeral,
adding to this sense of anti-monumentality, Wulia’s intentions for the work shifted during its
presentation at Art Basel. All 16 bales were finally kept by Wulia and continue to play a role in
the ongoing Trade/Trace/Transit project.

65 Giles, “How Tintin Wulia’s Art Exposes Inequality.”

66 “Salon | Encounters: New Materialism,” moderated by Alexie Glass-Kantor, with Brook

com/tradetracetransit/?portfolio¼five-tonnes-of-homes-and-other-understories (accessed 23 May
2017).

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei often harnesses the art world context for protest on a variety of issues.
This includes his striking 2016 installation of 14,000 discarded refugee life-jackets wrapped
around the columns of Berlin’s Konzerthaus coinciding with the Berlin International Film
Festival, and his projects Remembering (2009) and Names of the Student Earthquake Victims
Found by the Citizens’ Investigation (2008-11) honoring the many school children killed during
the devastating Sichuan earthquakes in China in 2008, which Ai blamed on government
negligence in ensuring safe school building construction.

68 Tintin Wulia, “Trade/Trace/Transit: Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories,”
Trade/Trace/Transit. http://www.tintinwulia.com/tradetracetransit/?portfolio=five-tonnes-of-
homes-and-other-understories (accessed 29 May 2017). The “waves” Wulia mentions refers to
the fact that “In just a few days, 82 single articles were published in different media and more
are still being written about the issue as well as the project.” See Tintin Wulia, “Trade/Trace/
May. 2017).

69 Tintin Wulia, email to author, 7 Jul. 2017.

70 Rancière, Politics of Aesthetics, 12.

71 Tintin Wulia, in “Art Basel Conquers Hong Kong: 4,000 Artists Showed their Works at the


73 Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations” [1957]. In Situationist International

284
In reflecting on art and its public, Hong Kong-based curator Valerie C. Doran finds “the question of how and where the locus for the meeting between the artist’s work and the public audience is positioned as the crucial question.” It is through this strategic positioning, she suggests, that public audiences beyond the art world can participate in and influence curatorial paradigms. See: Valerie C. Doran, “Some Thoughts on the Locus of Encounter,” in Who Cares? 16 Essays on Curating in Asia, eds. Álvaro Rodríguez Fominaya and Michael Honghwee Lee (Hong Kong: Para Site Art Space, 2010), 170.

“Catch Tintin Wulia at Hong Kong Art Week.”

Tintin Wulia, interview with the author, 29 Nov. 2017.

On the political capacity of representation and meaning-making as active sites and processes of political contestation, see: Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980); and Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1997).


Excerpt from Wulia, “Proposal for a Film.”

This recalls similar objectives for the fate of other contemporary art works following their exhibition. For instance, British artist Rachel Whiteread’s sprawling sculptural installation Embankment (2005) at Tate Modern comprised 1400 white polyurethane boxes, cast from cardboard boxes, of varying sizes and piled up in irregular forms across the Tate’s Turbine Hall. The exhibition deinstallation took on an added performative element as the work was shredded in situ for recycling into bottles.

Wulia explains: “Osage’s suggestion, of only keeping 3 of the bales, didn’t make sense to me from the start, because this means that there will only be three-sixteenth[s] part of the story that would have been kept (there are 16 bales in total) – so the [original] plan of dismantling the 3 bales was a response to this suggestion. During the fair I had to decide which 3 would be delivered to Kwun Tong, and so more and more I felt that the work might have been repressed and compromised into merely numbers and logistics with minimal considerations to meanings.” Tintin Wulia, email to author, 14 Oct. 2018.


Since Art Basel, Wulia has personally borne the cost of storing the bales. She explains further, “As an artist, my act of keeping the bales is not a simple act. While the intention is to keep the stories in a material presence, I am fully aware that this act also means that as an artwork, they are entering a new value system. This also raises further interesting and important questions, which I am currently investigating.” Tintin Wulia, email to author, 14 Oct. 2018.


Papastergiadis, Cosmopolitanism and Culture, 97.
Wulia herself has acknowledged Papastergiadis’ thinking on an “aesthetics of resistance” as resonating with her practice. See: Wulia, “Aleatoric Geopolitics,” 84.


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Clarke, David. *Hong Kong Art Culture and Decolonization*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001.


*Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics*. Hong Kong: Government Logistics Department, 2017.


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Michelle Antoinette is a researcher of modern and contemporary Asian art. She is an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow (2017–20) and Lecturer in Art History and Theory at Monash University Art, Design and Architecture (MADA), Melbourne. Her current ARC DECRA research project (DE170100455) explores new public engagement and participation in Asian art and museum contexts. She was previously an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow at the Australian National University from 2010 to 2013 for the project, “The Rise of New Cultural Networks in Asia in the Twenty-First Century” (DP1096041), which researched the emergence of new regional and international networks of contemporary Asian art and museums. Her ongoing research focuses on the contemporary art histories of Southeast Asia, on which she has published widely. Her major publications on contemporary Asian art are Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990 (Brill | Rodopi, 2015) and, as co-editor with Caroline Turner, Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making (ANU Press, 2014). She was co-convenor for the major international conference, The World and World-Making in Art: Connectivities and Differences (ANU Press, 2011), and a convenor and lecturer at the Australian National University for courses on Asian and Pacific art and museums.