

31 June 1997

30 June 1997 was the last day on which British sovereignty over Hong Kong was exercised, and 1 July 1997 was the first day on which China resumed sovereignty over the territory. This project concerns 31 June 1997, an imaginary 'independence day' between these two sovereignties. It addresses a constellation of related issues, including spatial and temporal liminality; the Hong Kong handover (at the moment of its twentieth anniversary); memory (and false memory syndrome); localism, independence, autonomy and identity; the methods of historical research (including oral history); 'fake news' and 'post-truth politics'; and the reliability of evidence. The exhibition features videos, prints and wall texts by me, as well as contributions prepared specially on the 31 June 1997 theme by two guest artists: Oscar Ho Hing-kay has contributed a sequence of drawings, and creative writer Xu Xi has written a piece of short fiction titled 'The transubstantiation of the ants'. The exhibition is curated by Isaac Leung.

At the core of the project is a looped video which presents a slow-motion transit of the space between the Hong Kong and Shenzhen immigration points of the Hong Kong / Mainland China internal border. We have already left Hong Kong when the video starts but we never arrive in China even though the video is over an hour and a quarter in length. The soundtrack for this video features a collection of oral history interviews conducted with people concerning their memories of 31 June 1997. Around fifty people were interviewed over a period of several years (beginning in 2013). These anonymous interviewees all have some connection to Hong Kong but not all of them were in Hong Kong at the time in question.

A second video, this time without sound, presents reworked imagery borrowed from the official feed of the 1997 handover ceremony. At the heart of that ceremony was a period of dead time ten seconds long – the British national anthem had finished playing and the British flag had come down its flagpole, but the Chinese national anthem was yet to start and the Chinese flag had not yet started to rise. The last five of those ten seconds without signifiers of sovereignty is presented, during which the official feed (perhaps experiencing an anxiety of liminality) cuts to a close-up of the face of Prince Charles (who himself seems to be aware of the strangeness of the moment). By slowing these five seconds down, and looping them, an attempt is made to extend or propagate this apparent space between sovereignties, and make it available for inspection.

In addition to the oral history project about 31 June 1997, extensive online research was also conducted in search of information concerning events that happened on that day. Although no textual information was found concerning occurrences in Hong Kong, extensive data was uncovered about events happening elsewhere in the world. Selected results of that research (gathered between 2009 and the present day, largely from reputable websites of statutory bodies as well as from peer-reviewed scientific publications) is presented in the exhibition in the form of a wall text.

Included also are two inkjet prints – part of a sequence of works produced since 1990 where images are altered through a process of relentless faithful photocopying, a kind of subversive obedience. One features an image of Prince Charles from the

lost time in the middle of the handover ceremony, and the other features the head of Queen Elizabeth from a colonial era Hong Kong coin. Such coins are still legal tender in Hong Kong – one of the ways in which the change of sovereignty over Hong Kong is best understood as a process (that is still going on) and not just as a discrete event occurring at one moment in the middle of 1997.

Because this project involved an extensive contribution from interviewees it already had an innately participatory aspect, but that dimension is extended further by inviting two prominent local creative figures to offer response works that extend my exhibition idea further. Both are people with whom I have already collaborated in the past: artist and curator Oscar Ho Hing-kay (we co-curated *In Search of Art* at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1990), and creative writer Xu Xi (we collaborated on the *Interruptions* book and exhibition in 2016). Oscar Ho has contributed a series of linked drawings continuing a thread of his work first seen in his *Stories Around Town* series of the 1990s, while Xu Xi has contributed a new piece of short fiction titled 'The transubstantiation of the ants'.

As well as these responses that are part of the physical exhibition display itself, we are also inviting contributions and responses from audience members and the general public to an online extension of the exhibition (please visit our dedicated website for details: www.31june1997.com). It is hoped that in this way an opportunity can be created for everyone to take part and extend the project further by sharing their own memories of 31 June 1997, as well as their thoughts about the handover and its consequences.

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