

## **My dialogue through images with Kwok Mang Ho**

Kwok Mang Ho and I first met in 1988, and we began planning to have an artistic dialogue many years ago. Finally we feel the time is right to do this artistic interchange, and we have decided that works produced on a photocopy machine would be part of it since that is one area in which our practice overlaps.

The first group of works I produced for this project were a variety of photocopy images using pre-existing source material. Some were works I had already made and was reusing for this project and others were new works especially produced with this dialogue in mind. All were produced using a method I like to employ – multiple generation photocopying of the same image until it transforms into something new, often taking on a hand-made, linear look.

Amongst the existing images I selected were some related to money - an image of Queen Elizabeth from a colonial era (but still legal tender) Hong Kong coin, and a portrait of Abraham Lincoln from the US five dollar banknote. Others were related to an ongoing project involving images of people with the same name as me that I've never met – an investigation of the notion of identity.

Amongst the new images were details from old master paintings and also portraits of Prince Charles taken from a screen capture image of him during the Hong Kong handover ceremony in the period after the British flag had come down (and the British national anthem had stopped playing) but before the Chinese flag had been raised (and the Chinese national anthem had started playing). I am interested in this in-between moment of the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong and those works are part of a larger project I am developing on it which I have called *31 June 1997* after an imaginary 'Independence day' between the last date of British rule (30 June 1997) and the first date of Chinese rule (1 July 1997). A video of Prince Charles which is part of that project can be found on my 'Solubleshark' YouTube channel.

When I gave Kwok Mang Ho my images I received a number of calligraphic works in return, mostly concerning our collaboration itself. I was requested to interact with them and given permission to do whatever I liked to the original works themselves. There is of course a long Chinese tradition of friends writing

calligraphy on each other's paintings and this request needs to be seen in relation to that historical context, but since I have no skill in calligraphy or indeed with the use of the Chinese brush at all I felt reluctant to add my own permanent marks to his images, which mostly seemed quite complete as they were. I therefore decided to make temporary calligraphic interventions on his images, using a Chinese brush and water, but no ink. Partly this was in line with my own somewhat Daoist-like interest in accepting the transience of all things, and partly due to my rejection of the current fetishization of ink in the Chinese contemporary art market. Water is just as much a material of Chinese art as ink is, or the Chinese brush and the paper or silk which provide an absorbent surface for its marks. Since it evaporates before the work is seen by viewers its role is often forgotten, and since it is a universal substance it cannot become the bearer of a signification of 'Chineseness' in the way that ink has. My interest in the role of water in art-making has led me to write a book on the topic titled *Water and Art*, but this is the first time I have focused on water in my own artistic practice.

I have intervened with brushed water marks on all of the images Kwok gave me, but in a few cases I have photographed the marks and splashes I made to preserve them and make them public. Often I only photographed parts of the images, thereby turning Kwok's calligraphy into abstract paintings. In a few cases I did decide to destroy his works by adding ink to them, and I have similarly produced photographs of cropped details of these works, both with and without added water. I obtained different effects in my photographs by the choice of how I cropped the images, but also by using different natural and artificial light effects, sometimes using light on the surface and sometimes light through the surface. I also photographed them from behind and in different orientations, or let the paper buckle in three dimensions. Sometimes I just made abstract shapes with water on the images, or embellished Kwok's existing calligraphic strokes, but I also sometimes wrote on the images (even writing more than once in the same place, which couldn't have been done with ink). I inscribed a favourite phrase from the Dao De Jing, for instance, and the date 31.06.97 whose importance for me has already been mentioned. After selecting various photographs I have printed them and then re-photocopied them as necessary to change them further.

Kwok in his turn made versions of the images I had given him, similarly preserving the originals. In some cases he placed his trademark 'frog'

sunglasses onto the portraits I had given him, and in other cases he made versions which reversed the black and white areas in my monochrome images (a sort of balancing of 'yin and yang'). Colour was also introduced, for example by combining my images with some of his own in multi-layered works.

These works from the first and second phases of the interaction were documented in the format of plastic folders of photocopy works as a kind of 'artist's book'. Works from the collaboration were also installed on 28 March 2014 in the space outside Kwok's studio at the Cattle Depot Artists' Village on Ma Tau Kok Road. Some of these images had been further altered, for example by being printed in versions on colour paper. Photos documenting our interaction for this project were also featured in some of the images placed on display. A limited edition of twenty signed artists books, produced using photocopy as a medium, were also created (with each book in the sequence being a unique creation). Our hope is to continue further with the collaboration over time, and to exhibit works in an indoor gallery location too in due course. Further presentation in book format will also be used if this proves possible.

David Clarke