

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: THE ART OF KWOK MANG HO

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The art of Kwok Mang Ho takes many forms. He is interested in calligraphy, a medium with 'traditional' associations, yet at the same time he takes a lot of photographs, always seeming to have a camera with him. In addition to his work in these two-dimensional media, Kwok produces sculptures. These tend to take the form of quasi-architectural structures in or on which a variety of objects or images can accumulate (including the aforementioned calligraphy and photos). Kwok can also be regarded as one of the earliest installation artists in Hong Kong: he often wants to make a relationship to the space of exhibition, using the actual architecture (instead of his own sculptural armatures) as a site for objects and images. Sometimes the creation of these installations is done before an audience, and then one can think of him more as a performance artist.

In his performances Kwok acts like the spider spinning a web from his own body: he is concerned to establish a connection with the site, but using materials that he has brought with him. The creation of a linear structure tends to be the first stage, perhaps achieved by the use of baler twine or sticky tape, forging connections from point to point across space. Objects of various kinds might then be attached - and probably distributed to the audience as well. This last is the most important part, I feel, because ultimately it is people and not things that Kwok is trying to connect up or ensnare in the web of his performance. The logic that dominates the relation of people and objects in the impersonal commercial spaces of the city is temporarily reversed: Kwok's objects (often simple everyday artifacts) are given, not sold. Things are secondary to people, props to be used by them rather than consumerist fetishes to dominate them. The objects are raw materials to enable participation in an act of collective creativity. Something is retained from the happenings and participatory art events of the 1960s (for example those organized by Allan Kaprow): the distinction between the role of the artist and that of the audience is being eroded, the time of making and the time of viewing run together. Chinese literati gatherings (at which art was created and not just admired) might also be recalled. The difference is that now the door is open to all who might wish to enter.

Because of its nature, installation art tends to have only a temporary existence. Perhaps one of the reasons for its popularity in Hong Kong (particularly amongst younger artists) is that it can be created at the site of exhibition and dismantled at the end of its showing, thus not requiring the expense of studio space in advance or storage space after. Kwok's distance from the values of the marketplace is shared to some degree by a lot of Hong Kong artists, as much because the market has no use for their art as because they reject the commodification of the art object.

Given the transitory quality of installations, documentation of them in photographs is the usual practice. In Kwok's case, however, the photographic documentation tends to occur in the presence of the spectators, and becomes a means

by which an installation becomes a pretext for a performance. The camera is a tool for Kwok to spin his web. Photos are taken of spectators as a way of forging a link with them, of breaking down barriers, and the images may reappear as part of a future installation.

One project which has occupied Kwok over a long period of time involves photographing people wearing a pair of `frog sunglasses` he has made. I see this as a sort of mock-utopian grand crusade, having as its goal the frogification of the world, or the unification of humanity into a global tribe with the frog as its totem. Ethnic and other differences become less visible when the glasses are being worn: everyone becomes a member of an extended family. Alienation is dispelled, just as it is when an anonymous environment - to which one would not otherwise feel any belonging - is clothed by Kwok's objects and images.

The frog theme is one which reappears all the time in Kwok's art, not just with his sunglasses project, and he commonly refers to himself as the `Frog King`. A stylized frog-eyes shape is often found in his calligraphy, and might be thought of as being his personal `logo`. As well as recalling a frog, it can also be read as crown-shaped, and thus as a reference to his claim of regal status. The mountainous Hong Kong skyline, or the façade of Norman Foster's Hong Kong Bank Building, might also be recalled.

Ambitious art of the 20thC has characteristically operated at the fringe of legibility, playing with or breaking the dominant codes of visual communication, rather than simply using them. It has wished to critique the clichés of everyday visual communication by standing outside them, but has consequently had to run the risk of not signifying, at least to a broader public. This iconoclastic stance has produced much of great value, but I think it is worth considering, particularly in the case of art, which wishes to communicate with a wider audience, the limitations it imposes. Might not art find itself able to communicate with a larger public if it was more often willing to take an affirmative, socially binding, or even celebratory approach? To be involved with building rather than just with demolition doesn't necessarily commit an artist to a socially conservative position, and is in no sense an easy option. At the moment one might say that affirmative visions are largely the domain of popular culture, which has proved much more successful at reaching wider audiences than high art.

Perhaps the work of Kwok Mang Ho can help indicate a possible way ahead. Markedly at a distance from the dominant commercial values of Hong Kong, his art is concerned with linking, building and affirming. Everything is accepted: hence the additive, accumulative structure of his works, and the marrying of ink with photography. *Everyone* is accepted: participation and belonging are important themes. By creating temporary utopian communities in his performances, Kwok makes an implicit statement about what is lacking in social existence at large, and presents a vision of what a more fulfilling alternative might offer.

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