

To Voice: Introducing Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (2014)

Curated by Sampson Wong

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The Physics Room

Politics and Umbrellas

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Umbrellas are ubiquitous in the Hong Kong climate and part of the city's visual culture alongside neon signs, high-rises, red lanterns, and boats. Last year, a massive protest occupied Hong Kong for 79 days, one that has complicated causes and tangled roots in the past, and yet it came to be summed up by the umbrella as a symbol of resistance and labeled the Umbrella Movement. This is not a unique phenomenon. Protest movements are often known by the symbols that represent them; the Ghost Dance War, the Maji Maji Rebellion, and the Carnation Revolution are examples of wide-reaching, complex political movements that became known for a single action.¹ The protest movement doesn't need to be named after the symbol that represents it either: demonstrators throwing crates of tea into Boston Harbor, the Unknown Protestor standing in front of a column of tanks near Tiananmen Square, the woman in a red dress being sprayed with tear gas by police in Taksim Square, Istanbul are all widely known symbols of far less understood political movements. Symbols have a powerful resonance with protests, uprisings, and revolutions.

The protestors in Hong Kong who occupied a series of districts in the central city – Admiralty, then Causeway Bay and Mong Kok – used umbrellas to protect themselves from tear gas fired by police. When photographed and shared, the umbrellas rapidly became a symbol of the protest. However, they went further than the symbols mentioned above, by blooming into an intense plethora of artworks that became a movement in itself—one that was irrevocably tied around the politics of the protest. *To Voice: Introducing Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* curated by Sampson Wong, a founder of the Umbrella Movement Visual Archive, brought to The Physics Room a collection of artworks from these protests. It's a collection that prompts discussion around Hong Kong's sociopolitical history, the protestors of the Umbrella Movement who made the art, and the nebulous line between art and politics; a discussion that requires some understanding of the context surrounding the Umbrella Movement.

¹ The Ghost Dance was a Native American, anti-white settler religious movement mostly practiced by Sioux Indians. Maji is the Kiswahili word for a type of water that rebels in the anti-colonial uprising believed was holy and would protect them from bullets. The Carnation Revolution got its name through protestors placing carnation flowers in the rifles held by the Portuguese soldiers who were sent to stop them.

In the exhibition, roughly cut cardboard placards, hung in a loose mural and scrawled with political messages in Cantonese, sprawled round the gallery walls alongside cartoons, photographs, video documentation and drawings of the temporary structures designed by protestors for the occupied space. One video showed footage and photographs taken of the protest, and another projected 'Stand by You: 'Add Oil' Machine,' a loop of written messages which, during the protest, was an installation in the Admiralty district that projected above the protestors over 40,000 messages of support sent from around the world. A variety of figures are quoted in the messages: Jimi Hendrix, Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, and John Adams. Pussy Riot wrote a message in support. A yellow tent was placed in the corner of the room and in the centre was a gathering of yellow umbrellas, most of them tiny origami ones.

Watching the video documentation of the protest, a contrast between the amount of art made and the much smaller sample occupying the gallery was apparent. Sampson Wong explained in a talk at The Physics Room that the Umbrella Movement Visual Archive was necessitated by the Hong Kong Government's campaign to seize and destroy as much of the movement's artwork that it could. One of the casualties was Umbrella Man, a 10 ft high, umbrella wielding, wooden block sculpture that became an icon of the Umbrella Movement, and that had to be left behind to the advancing police and its ultimate fate at the rubbish tip. Wong also describes how the intention of the Archive was never to focus on the spectacular examples of artwork produced—official organisations and the news media would manage that. Instead, the Archive focuses on how creativity operated on the ground and the widespread artworks of the movement; such as the placards and origami umbrellas in the exhibition, which in the video and photos on the screens can be seen hanging across almost every space.

Hong Kong has a peculiar history. Guangdong China was an important international trading centre through centuries of Chinese dynasties (Hong Kong was a fishing village of around 7,000 people during this time). The city was then occupied and seized by the British Empire during the First Opium War. And after the failed Boxer Rebellion of 1899, Hong Kong was leased out for 99 years to the British, morphed into a commercial capital, and then returned to Chinese sovereignty under an insecure 'One Country, Two Systems' principle. Hong Kong is still known today for its financial prosperity and the sheer neon, glass, and concrete spectacle of its capitalism. A tourism campaign from 1996 (the year before Hong Kong's sovereignty was passed back to China) boasts of having "the most Cellular Phones," "the hardest working People," and "the most Rolls Royces" with flashes of bustling streets, packed restaurants, and smiling hotel clerks in red and gold uniforms all accompanied by an anthemic soundtrack of Tina Turner's 'Simply the Best.' One thing that Hong Kong is not really known for (at least in the West) is protest. The city's colonial history is usually described as peaceful. However, some protestors of the Umbrella Movement draw the beginning of their movement back to the early 20th century, when anti-imperialism was expressed in protests such as the May 1925

boycott and strike, which at the time crippled the British regional economy. Protests and riots dot the rest of the city's century. Particularly in May 1967, when pro-communist groups, inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China and riots in the nearby Portuguese colony of Macau, staged protests in the central city. The demonstrations turned violent, thousands of protestors were arrested, and waves of bombings by leftist militia killed both police and civilians.

With the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on 19 December 1984, Hong Kong entered a new political stage. Negotiations between China and the United Kingdom ended with the decision that sovereignty of Hong Kong would pass back to China on 1 July 1997 and that its political and capitalist system would remain unchanged for 50 years. Hong Kong citizens felt excluded from this decision, and the period from 1984 to 1997 was pervaded by rising concern regarding their city's future. The Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing in the spring of 1989 inspired a solidarity protest march in Hong Kong with 1.5 million people. And since 1997, an annual protest march has taken place every July marking the date of the change in sovereignty. The 2003 march attracted over 500,000 protestors in opposition to a new article of law legislating against acts such as treason, subversion, secession, and sedition. The act was suspended and the protest became a political reawakening. What followed was a period of greater public activism focusing on issues like urban planning, local communities, and international capitalism that prepared the ground for the Umbrella Movement.

With all of this in mind, the atmosphere of Hong Kong was politically tense in 2014. Political activists identified strongly with the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan early in the year.² Political organisations such as Scholarism, a student activist group of secondary school students led by Joshua Wong (whose massive following on social media made him the face of the Umbrella Movement), and 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace', a campaign organised by Benny Tai and Chan Kin-man, Law and Sociology professors at the City University of Hong Kong, had gathered momentum with strident criticism of the Hong Kong Government and widely heard calls for civil disobedience to drive a democratic movement. In May, Occupy Central released a version of 'Do You Hear the People Sing,' an English version of a song taken from the production *Les Miserables*, sung in Cantonese, which was widely shared. The final, igniting spark for the Umbrella Movement was a series of proposed electoral reforms that would allow the pro-Beijing Hong Kong Government to control what candidates could stand for election. The Hong Kong Student Association, another political organisation, had been boycotting university in response to the law, and on the night of 28 September, the last night of their protest, they decided to gather in Civic Square in the Admiralty district of the central city. The Police retaliation the following morning was swift; with pepper spray and batons used against the students who responded with what they could, in this case a few umbrellas. News of the violent police retaliation spread, and more students and members of

² This movement got its name when a florist gave protesting students around 1000 sunflowers as a gift.

the public rushed to support the protestors. Soon Admiralty, as well as other nearby districts, was occupied by thousands of protestors, who overwhelmed the police. In about a week, the protestors settled in and a communal space emerged that became known as Umbrella City.

Charlotte Frost, a professor of art and criticism at the City University of Hong Kong, sees the artworks made by the protestors as the principal act of protest; the protest lying in its “ingenious material culture” more significantly than in the act of occupying a public area.³ Some artworks, such as the Lennon Wall (inspired by the one in Prague), are an overt act of political protest; calling people to express themselves by writing messages on post-it notes, which they did in tens of thousands. Even the colourfully painted helmets protestors wore in clashes with police serve a clear political end. However, the most apparent and widespread form of art are the umbrellas; whether lashed together in a makeshift monument, opened out in defiance amongst a cloud of tear gas on the cover of *Time*, or held high above the crowds in the wooden grip of the Umbrella Man. The political nature of this art is inescapable. The umbrellas gave no real protection against tear gas, but they occupied an important space outside the typical day-in-day-out, commercial, and prosperous sphere of Hong Kong.

The umbrellas are a spectacular symbol of protest to rival spectacular power. A society and power where any attempt to break through the “immense accumulation of spectacles” is simply overwhelmed and absorbed by it.⁴ The artworks in the exhibition are a sample of the extent to which art can act as political intervention. Both Frost and Sampson Wong emphasise that the art was temporary, as much of it was site-specific, by and for a temporary community. Even as police moved in to disband the protests, much of the art was left behind, including banners announcing: “It’s just the beginning” and “WE WILL BE BACK.” In a way, the artworks on display no longer serve the temporary needs of the Umbrella Movement. Instead, their purpose is now an educational one and more permanent: to express what citizenship and participation means and to show what is possible.

³ Frost, Charlotte. Interview with Mary Louise Schumacher. *Journal Sentinel*. 6 Nov, 2014.

⁴ Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 2002.