

Asian alternative space – World alternative city

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Introduction

The essay aims at mapping out the field for artist run spaces and their relevance to the construction of Asia and Asian identities.

Asia's New Order

Alternative or independent art spaces are generally considered as the third tier within the institutional hierarchy, yet tend to question the conventional order and assume a more provocative position. 'Festival of Vision: Berlin—Hong Kong (2000)', is one event that exemplifies how an alternative organisation such as Zuni Icosahedrons (Hong Kong) could engage in a dialogue of cross-cultural politics. During 2001, 'alternative art spaces' became a key topic for the international symposia organized by *Bamboo Curtain Studio* (Taipei), *Iaspace*, *Para/Site Art Space* (Hong Kong), and the touring performances in Asia curated by *Museum of Site* (Hong Kong).

Official patronage systems or local government subsidies of all the above activities (with the so-called arms-length policy) has further complicated the current power relationship between artists, governments, and non-governmental organizations.¹

Symbiosis

At the Gwangju Biennale 2002, the parasitical relationships between the alternative spaces and the museum system are satirical. Such simulacra of cultural politics reflect the complexity and irony in post-modernism, in particular the concerns with the reality, fabrication, and creativity in the process of historical archiving.

In theory and practice, an art system is constituted by a conglomerate of alternative spaces, studios, libraries, art villages, art colleges, museums and galleries, etc.. Pathological diagnosis of civic and urban issues, as driven by alternative spaces in the case of Old Ladies House (Macau), Fringe Club, Zuni, MOST, Iaspace (Hong Kong), Whashang Art District (Taipei), helps sharpen our vision and justifies necessary courses of action. We can picture this as 'stitching a button on a cloth, but not making a new skirt'. It is impossible for one part either to completely displace or replace the others in the art system.

They are here for now

With a visionary perspective, alternative spaces bring information, enjoyment and delights to the city. They justify the production of visual art projects from around the world. There is now an urgency for alternative spaces to reflect on their existences and political agencies relative of their local community. For example, 'Be Part of Our Vision', says *Plastique Kinetic Worms* (Singapore). When such positive attitude becomes alive, alternative spaces are here for now. Being part of a community fabric, Alternative spaces gear to par-

ticular problems. Alternative spaces like *Bamboo Curtain Studio* (Taipei), *MOST* (Hong Kong) deliberately work with different communities. *Whashang Art District* (Taipei) and *Cattle Depot Art Village* (Hong Kong) are the fruitful outcomes of long-term political negotiations. *Loop*, *Insa Art Space* (Seoul), *Zuni Cattle College*, *Iaspace*, *Para/Site Artspace* (Hong Kong), *Sly Art* or *Shin Leh Yuan*, *Front*, *ITPark* (Taipei), *Dog Pig Art Cafe* (Kaoshung), *DDM Warehouse* (Shanghai), *LOFT* (Beijing) and *Surrounded by Water* (Manila) are spaces devoted to young and emerging artists. Both *Cemeti Art House* (Yogyakarta) and *Old Ladies House* (Macau) dedicate themselves to woman artists. Amongst these spaces, their responses are contingent to cultural conditions of the city that take precedence over art traditions and community history. They are here for now!²

The New Asia

Cultural commentators and critics are now taking the 'Asian ensembles' into a new conceptual ground. The philosophy behind the new 'Asian' aesthetics is neither a Venetian nor a Rococo Revival. Instead of dressing itself up as a nostalgic kitsch, it is deeply seated in the city's dynamism. *The Sai Yeung Choi Street South* (Hong Kong), *Art-Gu*, *Dongdaemun-Gu* (Seoul), *Dong Mun* (Shenzhen), *Lan Kwei Fong* (Macau), *Sin Tian Di* (Shanghai), *San Li Tun* (Beijing), *Si Mun Ding* (the area near West Gate, Taipei), *Boat Quay*, *Robertson Quay*, *Clarke Quay* (Singapore), the open area around *Petronas Twin Towers* (Kuala Lumpur) are new settlements for: shopping arcades, D-I-Y shops, cyber cafes, karaoke-bar cum discos, ethnic restaurants, teahouses and other places which have liberated the cities' physical barriers, unfolding options for all generations. The aesthetics of futuristic cities hinge on openness, fluidity, density, diversity, dialogue, noise, Do-it-yourself, etc. The 'creative industry', as an integral yet subordinate part of tourism, will be crucial for a sustainable development of the urban environment. This topic will be pertinent for discussions in the foreseeable future.

The concept of a novel city's Alternative spaces are the impetus for transforming cultural productions. The mobility and diversity of alternative spaces would likely displace the current establishments. As a consequence of de-colonization, Asian cities are met with unprecedented challenges under globalization. Operating as vanguards for alternative discourses, Asia's alternative spaces are still a local and community-based entity. It would be interesting to differentiate the conceptual visions and practices of alternative spaces and to compare them to various civic museums and galleries. The boomerang effect of Asia's alternative spaces would expose the speculation for an alternative model in Asia. Based on the novel city and developmental concept, it is the cultural differences that presuppose Asia's alternative nature.

Cultural difference and the Asian globe

In the face of homogenous 'one world culture', two issues confront Asia's cities. On one hand, these cities are neither analogous nor identical.



Left: Baena Bamboo Curtain
Bottom Left: at the Victoria Harbor between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon
Right: para/site
Bottom Right: Hong Kong University big arrow

The unresolved tensions between local heritage and communities further intensify cultural and social differences. On the other hand, Asian cities share common problems. Economically, the Asian financial crisis dating back to 1997 was widely felt in the region. The recent 9/11 tragedies further exacerbate the situation. The modernization and renovations of the city bring about cultural development, and subsequently a new space that accelerates acculturations and synchronizations. As colonialism draws to a close, Asian cities are now confronting an unprecedented identity crisis.

However, the development of Asian cities and satellite towns are multi-faceted. The Internet surfers are able to visit virtually the cultural facilities from around the world, undermining the real visit of museums and libraries, turning them as sites for 'amusement'. A new art system in Asia is emerging. Like a conglomerate into greater power and networking, dynamic art villages, districts and open cultural spaces, art and design shops, alternative galleries, city green houses, temporal warehouses, renovated industrial plants, multi-purpose workshops, teahouses, art cafes, 24 hours bookshops, leisure inns, TV art channels, on-line cyber war spaces, renting-out museums, electronic publications, artists' colonies on homepages, are now on the move. These phenomena demonstrate the power to re-define the generic city. The distinctions between center and marginal, software and hardware, permanence and ephemerality, work and leisure are all beginning to break down. The synchronization of Asian cities thus opens up new spaces and dimensions for everything.³

History does not seem to repeat itself under globalization, yet it narrates an incessant story in a local context. The model of appropriation always operates in line with modernization. The next beta version of 'World Alternative Cities' in Asia are 24 hour action-cities in 'non-stop' real time.

The overall characteristic of a new Asia is its pluralism and eclecticism. The creative power of alternative spaces is made adaptive to the marketing strategy of enterprises. In turn, the official art establishment is obliged to form new alliances with artists and alternative spaces. The top-down approach will be scrutinized, thereby transforming the overall planning, programming, and budgeting of cultural policy. By delegating power to the community, creative spaces and strategies will become a conduit for abandoned values and new orders to bridge. A new plateau of humanity is in the making.



The "local" affects the "global"

'Think Globally, Act Locally' is a worldwide strategy that can be applied everywhere on all levels. There is sample evidence that Asians, by acting locally, might affect the Eurocentric 'global'.

Hollywood as an icon for world culture has co-opted the 'alternative look' of Hong Kong cinema in its eclecticism.⁴ The acclaimed Tokyo and Hong Kong International Film Festivals are international attractions. After the reception of popular Japanese culture over the past twenty years, recent Korean TV drama brings new hype to Taipei, Hong Kong, and possibly the world. When it comes to enhancing informational capabilities, Korea is claimed to be at the forefront, having aggressively pursued development and rapid technological advancement. According to a recent article from The New York Times, the penetration of Korea's Internet services now stands at the highest level in the world and has become an essential part of contemporary culture. In 2001, China was recognized as the number one nation that has achieved the greatest economic leap forward. In a recent policy address by the Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the goal of Hong Kong is to attain the identity of 'Asia's World City'. While on the other shore of South China Sea, executive Yuan from the Taipei Cultural Council pursues his city as the 'Asian Media Center' at the time when there are very

few alternative spaces devoted specifically to new media arts as in the case of *LOFT* (Beijing) or *Videotage*, *Video Power* (Hong Kong). With little exception, Singapore's Ministry of Information and the Arts proclaims itself as 'A Hub City of The World', sidelining the issues of censorship towards artist-run spaces like *Substation*, *PKW*, or *Singapore Art Museum*. No matter whether these empty labels for Asian cities are valid or not, if Asian alternative spaces form a united front, the art world order might be turned over in one night!

Stemming from the 80's to the 90's, artists in alternative spaces have been seeking their own identities through rediscovering their heritage and community. They realize the importance of belonging by regaining interests in an abandoned place.

As the system and infrastructure takes shape together with adequate institutional and private support in place, alternative spaces in Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, and Singapore would consolidate their influences.

Modernism: a failure to commitment and post-modern Asian aesthetics

In contrast to small alternative art spaces, the developed Asian system is a mere 'Big White Elephant' that perpetuates Modernism into the corners of Asia. A Modernism, committed to resolve social and technological problems, fails to meet the mass expectation and places efficiency over social and other values. Can alternative spaces still play a productive role in a post-modern age?

The exteriority of Asia's alternative spaces is too often reflective of the changes of the city: exotic pluralism and hybridity, in order to accommodate its alternativeness in an establishment. The theme of 'Pause' would undoubtedly play an active role in continuing the role of the Gwangju Biennale to 'legitimate the underground' into a larger system. The situation resembles P.S.1's affiliation with MoMA in New York City.

Reappearing City

Asian cities are evolving to become a diverse and complex cultural field at the expense of local heritage and cultural identity. Ackbar Abbas's dis-

course on 'disappearance' is undoubtedly a common experience celebrated among alternative spaces in Asia. *The Workshop* (Hong Kong), *Quart Society* (Hong Kong), *SOCA* (Taipei), *Long Tail Elephant* (Guangzhou), *Surrounded by Water* (SBW; Manila), *Art Village* (Singapore), *Studio Shokudo*, *Sagacho Exhibit Space*, *P3 art + environment* (Tokyo), came to a closure with the erasure of many forgotten histories. However, Asia is rich in its potential for the re-appearances of 'past' and 'new' histories.⁵

How independent are independent art spaces?

This is a key question. Can they still be a critical supplement for the establishment of a city? How can they be instrumental in the development of art and culture? How can they question our amnesia towards modernity outside of the museum and gallery system? An assessment of the mission statement of Asia's alternative spaces may give us an answer in the reconfiguration of a new cultural landscape and the conceptual mapping of a new utopia.

One rarely finds a social space outside of the commercial gallery and museum, as in the case of BASH (Beijing), where artists can find the guiding tents for actions and sharing. Alternative spaces provides hope to the asceticism of the establishment, an opposition to the mal-administration, adverse conditions of exhibition venues and insufficient resources and facilities that they usually face.

The new tactics for subverting the art system might be reflected on the art making. To one of these non-profit alternative spaces such as Sly Art or Shin Leh Yuan (Taipei), the sophistication in the production of artworks is not a primary concern. Their anti-object attitude as originated from oriental philosophy is apparent in the strategies of display and the daily operations of the venue.

The limitations imposed on Asia's alternative spaces not only reveal the negative sides of modernism and globalization, but the oppressed existence of alternative spaces also validates a pluralism that the open city should demonstrate. Life under the economic boom is supposed to be stable, cheerful, harmonious and substantial. However, alternative spaces portray a city as a negative spectacle that is subversive and futile. The complete contemporary urban city is now defined by its alternative otherness and rival competitiveness. For examples, the exhibition projects at *Whashang Art District*, curated by Huang Hai Ming, hosted at the same time as The Taipei International Biennale 2000, and the partnership at *East Link*, *DDM Warehouse*, *BizArt* (Shanghai) with The 2000 Shanghai Biennale demonstrated the dynamic and parallel functions of alternative spaces.

City transformation

As seen in the larger context of both regional and global perspectives, the structure of an art system changes relative to the changing ideology of its surroundings. When the time comes, the idea of alternative spaces would be consolidated and realized. No longer a minority or an underground



force, the alternative spaces in Asia will boom with social recognition. A good example is the well-received video project *Port* co-organized by BizArt in a park of Shanghai during 2001. Alternative spaces in Asia are working with new sets of codes, ethics, and working models that will expose the problems and issues of the system. They will set examples to show how public institutions should become more receptive to the community. They can also identify issues pertaining to locality and open up spaces for contemplations. In marked contrast to Rem Koolhaas' description of Asia's 'Generic City', 'Alternative spaces' in Asia have thus far shifted the basis for identifying cultural differences. The campaign for governmental recognition and support by grass-roots organisations in Whashang Art Village, Singapore Art Village and Oil Street Art Village have demonstrated a visionary leadership for a different approach towards to cultural institutions.⁶

Geurilla war amongst alternative spaces

Some alternative spaces in Asia are merely extensions for government to fund activities for international recognition. While some alternative spaces are ornamental—just decorating the pub with some installations or video works—one would not expect any provocative work from these galleries.

Some alternative spaces are well designed and furnished with good ceilings, white walls and wooden paving. Even for an expert, it is hard to differentiate them from commercial galleries without paying attention to the differences in their programming. If alternative spaces were commercially viable, what differences would it make when comparing to commercial spaces?

For years, there has been a split of views in Taipei over the issue of Whashang Art District. The organising of two similar international symposia in the same month is evident of an acute competition between 1aspace (Cattle Depot Artist Village) and Para/Site Art Space. The future of Asia depends on the way different cities and their infrastructure compete.

New City Typology Villages surrounding the city

Government facilitated art villages, e.g. Taipei Art Village (Taipei), International Art Village (Nantou) or Sanmien Artist Village (Guangzhou) are the most generic places that one can imagine. On the contrary, artist-run villages such as Artist Village (Taidong), Tam-awan (Baguio), Whashang Art District, Tongzhou Artists Community (Beijing), Singapore Art Village (Singapore), Kobe Art Village Centre (Kobe) as well as the former Oil Street Art Village (now Cattle Depot Artist Village), have generated a lot of energies in their respective communities, generating controversial discussions among the artists. The incentive for their gathering is not only to attain a stable studio space for long-term development, but also to compete for more exhibition opportunities and support. In comparison with the official art villages, they could gradually become institutionalised and be a part of the city's cultural hub.⁷

Café bar cum showroom

Integration with commercial incentive is a survival strategy for all generations of alternative spaces in Asia. Current galleries such as *Song Ha Gallery* in Art Town (Pusan), *Club 64*, *HOK7* (Hong Kong), *big sky mind* (Manila), *Café Pulilan* (Bulacan), *Cup of Art Café Gallery* (Bacolod), *Blind Tiger Bar* (Quezon) are primal examples for survival nowadays. The presence of bar and restaurant is a sign for entertainment culture. *LOFT*, *Top Floor Gallery*, *Courtyard Gallery* in China also take up commercial strategies to support their continued display of political art. The next generation of alternative space could be those cyber café-bar cum galleries, i.e. *Risiris Internet Pub* (Quezon), which also helps to generate more of the city's new opportunities.

Abandoned warehouse for city regeneration

Modernisation and industrialisation has turned architecture into a commodity for consumption. This process inevitably displaces the original function of a building. Many abandoned warehouses, failing to comply with the city's aspirations and standards, have become a site for artists to conduct experimental projects. In Taiwan, renewed urban spaces, i.e. Whashang Art District and the Rail Storehouse Reused Scheme. The spaces taken by artists to re-model as new sites, such as *Chiayi Rail Warehouse* (Chaiyi) and *Taichung 20 Warehouse* (Taichung), are used for exhibitions and workshops. Also in Mainland China, places like *BASH*, *CAAW* (Beijing), *DDM Warehouse and Eastlink* (Shanghai) are old warehouses being scrutinized in terms of its politics and artistic activities. Regardless of their conservative operations and strategies, they, nevertheless, re-present the forgotten history and narration behind modernisation.

Extensions of artist studios

Whenever an artist emerges, there will be an alternative space. Artists usually use their studio spaces for experimentation. They open their studios and hold public exhibitions to elicit inputs and insights. The past or current *Third Space Arts Laboratory*, *Lupon Art+Design+Lifestyle* (Quezon), *Kwok Studio*, *Happening Group Studio* in *Shanghai Street Artspace*, *Desmond Kum Studio*, *James Wong Studio*, *Para/Site Artspace*, *Workshop* (Hong Kong), *SOCA*, and the *Bamboo Curtain Studio* (Taipei) are well known examples for exhibition and workshops. Besides, there are artists like Carlos Celdrans and Er Dong-keung that employ their homes for public projects.

Embassy-affiliated cultural centers and disguised spaces

There are some embassy-affiliated cultural centers such as The Goethe Institute, which play a



great role in promoting contemporary art and international exchanges. After The 2000 Shanghai Biennale, many alternative spaces closed. *BizArt*, with a sound administrative back up, remains as the most active and popular in Southern China. It seems that the strategy to collaborate with embassy-affiliated institutions can protect the space from censorship and financial deficit. The *Chang Mai Art Museum* (Chang Mai) is itself a disguised alternative space, though it adopts the name of 'Museum'. It showcases students' experimental work from time to time. Strictly speaking, *Galeri Petronas* inside *The Petronas Twin Towers* (Kuala Lumpur) and *Dimension Endowment Of Art* (Taipei) are not alternative spaces. However, their devotion to education, research, publication and display of experimental art make them an alternative among other conventional alternative venues.⁸

Space networking

With the rise of alternative spaces in Asia, a new cultural geography is in formation. Asian cities are now being redefined by alternative spaces with new propositions. The new inter-regional networking is a worldwide strategy and is not exceptional to these alternative art spaces. The Asian counterparts are no longer working alone on the periphery of the cultural arena. In recent years, there is a trend to build up a network for mutual support and recognition in the hope of reshaping the global order. On one hand, the institutionalisation and commercialisation of Asia's alternative spaces could finally defeat some of their original

missions as a counterforce to the establishment. Thus, some of the alternative spaces would become a newcomer of establishment or the Third Force? Alternative art spaces, in my view, can retain integrity by maintaining a smaller scale of operation and closer ties to a local community. They should be visionary, with a clear idea of what to do and what not to do.

Left: Hong Kong Water Market at 1aspace

Footnotes:

1. In early 2002, The Japan Foundation Asia Center published a small booklet *Alternative: Contemporary Art Spaces In Asia*, which sheds some light on selected independent art spaces and museums in Asia.
2. See also Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, *Alternative Spaces: We're Here for Now* in *Transit* Vol. 1, 10-12, pp. 22-25.
3. See *Art Papers* Mar/Apr 2001 Sp. Issue on Conceptual Art.
4. The 49th Venice Biennale saw the erection of a larger-than-scale replica of the famous California landmark, Maurizio Cattelan's *Hollywood* in Palermo, Sicily, an official project outside Venice, witnessing the play and displacement of global influence. For photo, please refer to *Art Forum*, September 2001, p.168.
5. Please refer to *Hong Kong and the Culture of Disappearance*. An Interview with Ackbar Abbas by Geert Lovink in Kassel, Documenta X, July 19th, 1997 and Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong, Culture and Politics of Disappearance*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1997.
6. According to artist Koh Nguang How, the *Singapore Art Village* is still active without National Art Council's support of a permanent location.
7. Steven Pettifor, *Northern Thailand's Artistic Home*, *Asian Art News*, 2001 September-October, pp.62-65.
8. For more information, please refer to Xiaopin Lin's *Beijing: Yin Xiuzhen's The Ruined City*, in *Third Text*, 1999 Autumn, pp.45-54.