

*Our 60 Seconds Friendship Begins Now, Victoria Harbour*



# Our 60-second Friendship Begins Now

Dematerialising Commons

從現在開始，我們就是六十秒的朋友

As a city founded upon the colonial “Crown Land” rules, Hong Kong is technically and literally a city without Common grounds. Yet ephemeral fissures that allow idiosyncrasies and accidental encounters can occasionally be found in the city’s complicated topography, complemented by its laissez-faire colonial governance. Here, the focus is on the notion of uncommon Commons, defined as surprising spaces where public interest can be expressed.

Public engagement and political agonism is often seen to be at odds with the late-capitalist economy. The negation of the public domain is found at the frontiers of political struggles. Take the Occupy movement in New York and London, for example, protestors were evicted by force because the spaces for their public activism are in fact privately owned. The seemingly innocent and symbiotic relationship between commercial premises and public squares break down in light of genuinely public political debates. The struggle between private interest and public good continue to play out in everyday spatial reality in acronyms such as POPs and TODs.

Real estate developments are not only the sites of where struggles between the public and the private interest unfold, but they have also become increasingly active players in the shaping of the public realm. When private real estate and public spaces are no longer distinguishable, and public protests eradicated in the name of private interests, where shall political discussion and demonstration take place?

## Our 60-second Friendship Begins Now

A recent case of design activism that manifested the tension between real estate interest and public discourse is found ‘along’ the most valuable real estate development in Hong Kong. ‘Along’, because the site of contention was the façade of the International Commerce Centre (ICC), the tallest skyscraper in Hong Kong and the eighth in the world. On 18th May 2016, two young Hong Kong based artists, Sampson Wong and Jason Lam, installed a nine-minute long animated LED light show along the 118-storey building’s facade. Titled “Our 60-second Friendship Begins Now”, the animation paid homage to the collective memory shared by Hong Kong citizens, referencing a well-known quote from Wong Kar-wai’s film “Days of Being Wild”.

The animation is embedded with a multi-layered political message. “Days of Being Wild” is the first film of a trilogy in which Wong Kar-wai narrated the story of Hong Kong through three love stories set in the past, present, and future. In the film, the main character York’s difficult relationship with his adopted mother, and his obsession with his biological mother evokes paradoxical sentiments looming over Hong Kong before its handover to China in 1997. In the other two films, the unease about Hong Kong’s past and future is similarly underscored. The last film “2046” alludes to the 49th anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover. It will be the last year of the city’s supposed fifty-year unchanged autonomy as stipulated in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. The

light installation, through Wong Kar-wai’s film, reverberates with the fear of post-handover Chinese control that was commonly found among Hong Kong citizens since the 1980s. Despite its conspicuous political connotation, Wong and Lam’s installation was readily accepted as part of the 5th Hong Kong Public Media Arts Exhibition, sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). The uncomfortable Chineseness, the pessimism towards the future, and nostalgia for the British colonial regime are seen as such an intrinsic part of Hong Kong’s cultural history and identity that they are seldom seen as politically sensitive.

## Countdown suspended

After the second day of the installation, by midnight of 20th May, the HKADC issued a public letter announcing that the installation was to be cancelled. The apparent reason was that Wong and Lam had changed the name and the statement of the installation without notifying the curator or the HKADC. The announcement came as a result for the commotion elicited by the last part of the animation, which shows a digital clock to the second counting down to 1st July 2047 – until then China is supposed to fulfil its pledge of “One Country, Two Systems.” The footage of the countdown was renamed “Count-Down Machine” in an online video that drew attention from local and international media including the New York Times. Only then, the politicising message in the installation became apparent to the HKADC.

In their public response, Wong and Lam argued that the “Our 60-second Friendship Begins Now” and the “Count-Down Machine” are two separate, albeit related projects. HKADC’s denouncement and cancellation of the installation, they asserted, merely reflected the government’s increasingly stringent oppression on the freedom of speech, thus legitimising the political critique contained in the installation. The irony was that the countdown clock was not only a self-fulfilling prophecy but an accelerating device. It is hard to discern when the project was merely an evocation of Wong Kar-wai’s nostalgic aesthetic, and when it became a design activism that faced up to the challenges of Hong Kong’s increasingly harsh political climate.

## The ‘Real’ Estate

The provocative nature of the installation is accentuated by the prominence of its site – the ICC’s 468-metre tall curtain wall façade. Wong and Lam’s installation is more than a gambit – it is a reminder of the murky delineation between private real estate and public space due to Hong Kong’s colonial land policy. Since the creation of the colony in 1841, all the land except one church plot belongs to the Crown – the colonial government. Hong Kong law recognises all land leases in Hong Kong as private contracts between the government and the leaser – and it assumes that the Hong Kong government is a private entity who acts on behalf of its own interests. The ICC tower, therefore, is simultaneously a prime commercial development and one of the government’s most valuable assets. The government’s “private” interest was brought to bear during the financial crisis of 2007 when it and its various agencies took over prestige private real estates as their office space to stabilise the market by controlling the occupancy rate.

The Janus-faced impact of the government’s intervention in private real estate includes that private buildings are enlisted in ventures of nominal public uses. Skyscrapers on the two sides of the Victoria Harbour, some of



Countdown to 0:00, 1st July, 2047

them seats of government agencies, have been participating in a daily laser-show entitled “A Symphony of Lights.” The skyscraper facades are either used as projection screens, or fitted with LED lights to create a visual spectacle that targets the millions of tourists arriving from north of the border. The show is free, and everyone in Hong Kong is welcomed to be awed by it. For fourteen minutes every evening, the harbour, the building facades, the light – the immaterial commons of Hong Kong – are visible and available to all.

Even this comes with a price. The unequal economic growth and profits brought by tourism only worsen Hong Kong’s income inequality. Economic injustices make apparent the ingrained social and political tension, which lead us back to the design activism produced by Wong and Lam. Not unlike the Occupy Central and Umbrella Movement activists, they tested the residual spaces from Hong Kong’s land policy and laissez-faire economy: entrance of HSBC, footbridges designed for land speculation, and facades of Grade-A office towers. Such places were designed and constructed to subvert the public realm to maximise profit, yet at times their subversiveness is reclaimed for civic

dissilience. The structures that epitomise Hong Kong’s relentless pursuit of profit are transformed into ready conduits for activism. These “de-regulated” spaces of the neoliberal economy, where conventional rules of civic organisations have already been disrupted, can be unleashed as ephemeral Commons, momentarily illuminating public interests.

## Conclusion

Hong Kong has long been seen as an extreme example whereby the dominance of capitalist development devours the possibility of public space. When the government serves as a stakeholder with private interests, the question at stake thus becomes to whom the question of the public should be posted? When all land has become resources and commodity, where can one locate the commons? Though short lived, the temporary ‘lighting up’ of public engagement nonetheless points towards undiscovered possibilities for dematerialising Commons in Hong Kong, as long as an oppositional energy persists.