

# Research on the Development of Sound Art in Asian Countries

Interview with Ms. Yeung, Yang

(楊陽, founder and executive director of soundpocket in Hong Kong)

NAKAGAWA, Katsushi

(Associate Professor, Institute of Urban Innovation, Yokohama National University)

KANEKO, Tomotaro

(Assistant Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Art History, Tokyo University of the Arts)

## Toward the Study of Sound Art<sup>1</sup> in Asian Countries

This article outlines Hong Kong's Around Sound Art Festival (ASAF) produced by soundpocket (SP) and reconstitutes an interview with Yeung Yang, founding member and executive director of SP. SP is a nonprofit organization in the fields of sound, art, and culture.

soundpocket is a promoter, educator, facilitator, and gatherer. We work in the fields of sound, art, and culture. We find sound in diverse and dynamic relations with many different art forms (visual art, installation art, music, theatre, [and] dance, etc.) and with a variety of cultural contexts that give meaning to our lives. We would like to work with all those who share this active interest in sound. soundpocket supports not just an art form but ideas and possibilities that engage with aesthetically meaningful, culturally grounded, and publicly relevant sonic practices, which have a lot to teach about how we understand the world and the experiences yet to be valued. (<http://www.soundpocket.org.hk/v2/category/about-us/>)<sup>2</sup>

The authors have been engaged in research on the development of sound art in Asian countries, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and the People's Republic of China (PRC)<sup>3</sup>. SP and Ms. Yeung have been selected as the starting point of the research on Hong Kong's sound art. This work is a pioneering research on this topic in these countries.

The interview was conducted in English at the SP office in Tokwawan, Kowloon, Hong Kong on November 21, 2015. The authors asked Ms. Yeung to talk about when and how she took interest in sound art and founded SP. The interview went back and forth with her narrating the chronological events as reconstituted below. Please keep it in mind that this interview must be recognized as a type of progress report concerning the situation around sound art in Asian countries: it includes only what we could talk about at the interview. There are several missing factors we could not cover. The authors express their deep appreciation to Ms. Yeung and the SP staff who provided their kind support. Moreover, all URLs mentioned in this paper were verified on February, 29th, 2016.

### **ASAF: “Around is about Listening”**

SP has held ASAF, formally called Around Sound Art Festival and Retreat<sup>4</sup>, five times: 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014 (in two locations; Kyoto and Hong Kong), and 2015. Ms. Yeung wrote the meaning of “retreat,” “festival,” and the act of “listening” in the curation notes from the ASAF Booklet 2009<sup>5</sup>. To Ms. Yeung, retreat connotes “the experience of a time of non-participation,” festival is “the joyful sound rising from the crowd celebrating,” and the act of listening is the focus of ASAF. The emphasis on listening is consistent with her curating. Meanwhile, she shows an ambiguous attitude toward the term “sound art.” “Around” suggests that she does not stick to the category “sound art.”

What follows is a brief description of the history of ASAF. In the ASAF Booklet 2013, Ms. Yeung described ASAF2009 and ASAF2010, which she curated herself, as “test-steps.” ASAF2009 enlisted several venues for the exhibitions and combined performances, talks, and workshops. Hong Kong artists mainly participated in ASAF2009, but the festival also included those from overseas such as Akio Suzuki (Japan) and Miki Yui (Germany/Japan). The two Japanese artists as well as Rolf Julius (Germany) and Felix Hess (Netherlands) participated the following year in ASAF2010. The “retreat” program was also introduced in 2010; in one activity, people spent one night listening to the natural sound of the environment at Mt. Davis with Dajuin Yao (Taiwan/PRC). According to our interview with Ms. Yeung, she spent 2011 and 2012 rethinking the festival’s theme and curation.

Three years after ASAF2010, Ms. Yeung and SP members Alice Wong and Wong Chun-hoi collaborated as curators for ASAF2013. The “retreat” program was held at

Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden. Japanese artists Suzuki, Hiromi Miyakita, Tetsuya Umeda, and Japanese curator Minoru Hatanaka participated in the festival. In 2014, ASAF was held in two places, namely, Amino (Kyoto in Japan), and Hong Kong. Suzuki, who has lived in Amino for decades, and Miyakita curated with Alice Wong and Wong Chun-hoi and hosted the guests who came mainly from Hong Kong. The guests were transported via bus to several places in Amino to experience the artwork and performances by artists. A month later, Carlo Fossati curated ASAF2014 in Hong Kong. Fossati runs a non-profit space for sound art and performance in Torino, Italy.

Aki Onda (Japan/United States) and Helen Homan Wu (United States/Hong Kong) curated ASAF2015. The participating artists included Feng Hao (PRC), Chelpha Ferro (Brazil), Phoebe Hui (Hong Kong), Eli Keszler (United States), Jacob Kierkegaard (Denmark/Germany), Rie Nakajima (Japan/United Kingdom), and Sergei Tcherepnin (United States). Compared with the preceding festivals, ASAF2015 has attempted to reconsider the framework of “sound art.” This shift could be attributed to the term “sound art” being more problematic in New York than in any other places, owing to the city’s strong tradition of experimental music.

Curators of ASAF2015 attempted to show how various contexts consisted the category called “sound art.” This intention was evident in the presence of South American artist in the festival for the first time and other participating artists, such as Tcherepnin, Keszler, and Nakajima, all of whom are deeply engaged in various musical contexts (electronic music, improvisation, and ambient music, among others). The regional differences among sound art contexts in various countries were also discussed at the curator’s talk. Ms. Dayang Yraola, who showcased a sound art exhibition in Manila, Philippines, commented on the differences in the reception of sound art between New York and Asia.

## **Interview with Ms. Yeung: “The Idea of a Pocket Change in Shape”**

According to SP’s website (<http://www.soundpocket.org.hk>), upon graduating from Yale University with a Master of Arts in Anthropology, Ms. Yeung worked as a freelance video documentary director at Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) and other commissions. She earned her doctoral degree in Intercultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 2004. At present, she teaches Western and Chinese classics at the General Education Foundation Programme at the same

university. It was her engagement in Para/Site (PS) starting in 1999, and not her university education, that developed her interest in art; PS was founded by a few artists in Hong Kong. She became an independent curator and writer, eventually founding SP in 2008. She has engaged in a number of exhibitions and books even outside SP. Her articles on contemporary art have been published in magazines and newspapers. Why did a person initially uninterested in art in the beginning establish an institution related to sound art?

## **1. Before SP**

### **RTHK: After 1997**

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Ms. Yeung was back in Hong Kong in January 1997 and in between jobs for a few months. She was later employed at RTHK's video or television department. She worked as a freelance translator and a video director (and also later joined the radio department to read the news on the English channel). When she was asked to do research on Hong Kong art in 1999, she learned of PS.

### **PS: After 1999**

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“Para Site is Hong Kong's leading contemporary art centre and one of the oldest and most active independent art institutions in Asia”, according to its website (<http://www.para-site.org.hk/en/about>). There may be other organizations which could be called as the organization for contemporary arts before PS though the authors can not examine the situation at that time well now. Anyway, a few artists founded PS in 1996 originally as an institution through which they could organize art exhibitions of their work. However, PS has changed overtime. It had invited directors abroad such as Tobias Berger, who is now the director of arts at the Central Police Station project. The number of its members had expanded. It issued its first magazine (P/S magazine, 1997–2006) for contemporary visual art in Hong Kong and provided the educational program for visual art or curation (2012-). PS remains active until now.

At PS, Ms. Yeung was introduced to contemporary art or the art activity in which she was willing to engage. While researching a video program for RTHK in 1999, Ms. Yeung met Kith Tsang Tak-ping, one of the founders of PS and an associate professor in design at Polytechnic University; Tsang Tak-ping would invite Ms. Yeung to join *Habitus* a few years later. She participated in PS's class for art criticism that consisted of 10 persons at the maximum. Students met every week and observed PS exhibitions,

which they discussed during class. Ms. Yeung began writing about art at the time. Her poem<sup>6</sup> and critiques were published in the PS magazine. Later she would become an editor of the magazine for one year (in 2004 or 2005) and begin working in the production and editing of other publications on art. More importantly, Ms. Yeung participated in Venice Biennale in 2003 as one of Para/Site Collective, which was selected to represent Hong Kong in the event. She found her favorite artist and later invited the artist to the first exhibition that she curated [*“in midair”*].

### **Habitus: After ca. 2003**

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While working for RTHK, she began her PhD study in the Intercultural Studies Department, CUHK under the theme “Cyborg and Human: when a postmodern myth meets humanism.” in 2000. At the time, she was interested in such topics as, “can we do without the idea of the human?” Her research referred to the writers such as Donna Haraway and others. During her PhD course, Ms. Yeung participated in Habitus in 2003 or 2004; it is a collective that Kith founded with fashion designer Miranda Tsui, fashion designer Yeung Yee-lin, and Tam Shui.

Habitus’s rented space in Central, and later Western Market, was the members’ working place, studio, and exhibition area. As the building in Western Market was huge enough, exhibitions or music events were held once in two to three months. Ms. Yeung described this time as follows:

I wasn’t particularly interested in sound, but it seems that, gradually, I have been exposed to it not by my choice but [by] artists [who] start[ed] com[ing]...

That is, Ms. Yeung was gradually exposed to the fun or interestingness of artwork using sound through the exhibitions and the music events. Among the participating artists was Cédric Maridet who performed using two microphones on the rooftop that picked up sounds from the street beside the Habitus building<sup>7</sup>. He would become among Ms. Yeung’s inspirations in founding SP a few years later.

### ***“in midair: sound works hong kong 2007”***

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Another important artist who inspired Ms. Yeung to establish SP is Su-Mei Tse from Luxembourg. During her stay in Venice, Ms. Yeung found Tse’s video installation impressive. Tse’s *LEcho* in 2003 was a large video projection that showed the artist

playing the cello on a lush mountainside in the Alps; it premiered at Venice Biennale and brought the Golden Lion Award to the 2003 Luxembourg pavilion. The still image of this work was used for the front cover of *Aural Cultures* (Drobnick, Jim, ed. 2004. Toronto:YYZ Books).

In 2007, Ms. Yeung curated the exhibition “*in midair: sound works hong kong 2007*,” which was held at seven venues from June 15 to July 16, to exhibit Tse’s work.

I saw her work in Venice, and this was the reason why I organized this show, because I really love this work. At that time, I didn’t know anything about curating, whatever. I wasn’t thinking about that. I was just standing in front of her work and thought this is a really good work. If people in Hong Kong could see something like this, it would be great. So I just wrote to her and she replied. Then, I just started thinking in terms of what else to bring in to make the show.

This event marked Ms. Yeung’s first time as curator. Other artists who exhibited in this show included Hess and Maridet<sup>8</sup>.

Among the concepts of this exhibition was that it had seven venues for the exhibition. ASAF also had more than one place for the exhibition and performance. The authors initially assumed that SP had used several places as it was difficult to keep a place for a long time in Hong Kong but it was not the case as explained by Ms. Yeung:

[...] The concept was to suggest [to] people to do this on their own [a kind of sound walk] [that is, to walk around several places paying attention to the sound of the environment] because this was the strategy of the exhibition. At that time, I was thinking that why exhibitions have to be in one place. And so I thought, why not ask people to find their own way.

If only one venue is used for ASAF, the authors would go to only that place and will not experience several areas in Hong Kong. Going to several venues might take a toll on visitors but it would be a pleasant way to experience the layered and multiple structures of Hong Kong. This exhibition obtained a better reputation than expected.

## 2. After SP

After these courses, Ms. Yeung founded SP in 2008. Two points about SP are noted below.

### The open question: The need for intensive research on the situation in Hong Kong

It was apparent from the interview above that Ms. Yeung had never had school education in art and contemporary avant-garde or experimental music. This does not mean that she was never interested in art. She took piano lessons during her childhood for a few years, as well as studied poetry, rhyme, and English literature at school, went to the public library at the City Hall to read the picture books, and listened to popular music on the radio. Further, her parents often took her to orchestra performances and concerts at the City Hall. In other words, Ms. Yeung “was prepared for the kind of imagination art needed.” She explained this situation while expressing her gratitude to her parents for bringing her up in the considerate circumstances.

Based on the interview (and the conversation after the interview via email), the authors surmise that the time of the foundation of SP coincides with the early developmental stage of sound art in Hong Kong. Although this assumption can not be ascertained definitively, it would not be a big mistake to begin the next research on sound art in Hong Kong from surveying this period. This is one of the lessons the authors took away from this interview. Around the time when SP was founded, “many people have been doing things in relation to various fields.” To name a few (from the artists whose name the authors could gather), artists such as William Lane, Samson Young, Steve Hui (aka Nerve), or Dennis Wong, and so on... were active at that time in Hong Kong. Of course, as this list can be much longer and the authors need to understand these and other artists adequately, more intensive research is strongly needed for the study of sound art in Asian countries. The authors express their apologies for their limited knowledge and hope to continue their research on sound art in Asian countries.

Why did Ms. Yeung found SP? When did her interest in sound begin? At this stage, the authors can not say anything definite but hope to put down two things for our further research as they seem to concern with the foundation of SP.

First, this may be regarded as a private catalyst. When “*in midair*” was exhibited in 2007, Maridet told Ms. Yeung the importance of establishing an organization for sound in Hong Kong.

Interviewer: After you created this exhibition [*in midair*], did you decide to focus on sound?

YEUNG: Yes, after this, especially after Cédric [Maridet] said it's really important that there is an organization in Hong Kong. I mean Cédric has contributed a lot because he taught in the University and he was maybe the only one back then teaching courses on sound.

Although the situation in Hong Kong at this time must be examined more as we have already mentioned, this may be regarded as one of the catalysts for Ms. Yeung to found SP.

Second, the authors hope to write on SP's aesthetic direction. In the interview, Ms. Yeung told us, "I don't want to compete with what's existing in the art world, although I also feel that there is something missing in the art world in Hong Kong." From these words, the authors speculated that Ms. Yeung might have chosen sound art as the focus of her own new organization as there was no competitive organization in the existing art world in Hong Kong. In the exchange of views on this article via email, Ms. Yeung replied to this speculation and shared her belief in the power of listening.

Yes [it may be true that Ms. Yeung has chosen sound art because of the reason mentioned above], but also because I believe in the ability to listen (not just with ears, but our bodies) could make us better human beings... by not wanting to compete, I also mean that we are trying to fill in some gaps left open in the art scene.

The authors can not presume to know how to assess this aesthetic direction, but this belief in the power of listening may be deemed a primary characteristics of SP.

According to Ms. Yeung, SP "is not the first of something. Perhaps as an organization devoted to the art of listening, yes, but the truth is, many people have been doing things in relation [to it], from various fields." That is, although more intensive research is needed on the situation in Hong Kong at the time, the characteristics of SP as an organization could be said to rely on this attachment of great importance to the act of listening. This may be the distinctive character of SP compared

with other institutions and artists and this will be one of the clues to the future research on the situation related to sound art in Hong Kong.

### **Directions**

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The authors have also been interested in SP's character as an organization. Does it have ideals or a goal?

Interviewer: How can you discuss soundpocket? Is it an independent organization, NGO, or something like that?

YEUNG: It's a difficult question. It's very recent, maybe last year, that a friend of mine said one thing [to me]. She said, "soundpocket is [a] collective." I never thought of it that way, but I realized, yes, that's the essence really.

The authors assumed the same reason, which was to put focus on the character as "collectiveness." This reasoning is also found in Ms. Yeung's reply to the question on the derivation of the name "soundpocket" in which she referred to adaptability.

When thinking about the name of the organization, Ms. Yeung consulted her friend poet Madeleine Slavick<sup>9</sup> and picked up the word "pocket" from John Berger's *The Shape of a Pocket*. She explained:

Yes, [he is] the author of *Ways of Seeing*. And *The Shape of a Pocket*, I got it a long time ago... the book design, that particular version I had, on the cover, was a photograph of people sitting on the mountaintop, but the photograph was like the people are here maybe not looking into the camera mostly. It's a little bit like after party kind of feeling, so maybe they were just relaxing, and then it's all sky, and then "The Shape of a Pocket." I always have this in mind, and then I don't know how it clicked to connect and then I liked the idea of a pocket changes in shape when you put things into it. But then it doesn't go out, but maybe you sometimes get a hole in your pocket and so something gets leaked out and then you lose a coin or something, real key or something. So I liked that idea of changing shapes...but being together somehow, because it did something with that shape. It shapes and it is being shaped.

## **Tentative Conclusion: Regional Contexts of Sound Art?**

Ms. Yeung does not seem to have started only from the context of sound art defined by Western artists, as curators of ASAF2015 attempted to show. The context shown from the interview might not be the context embedded in the experimental music or contemporary art but her attitude toward the changing social situation of Hong Kong. Alternatively, it might be her idea of the act of listening that cultivated her concept of sound art in such a manner, as shown in the ASAF Booklet, the “retreat” program, and her words on the foundation of SP.

With consideration for the limitations in terms of scope and content of this “progress report” on the status of sound art in Asian countries, the authors recognize the need for intensive research on the situation in Hong Kong in the future. This interview includes only what we could talk about at the interview. There are several missing factors we could not cover. The authors put a premium into conducting a careful consideration of the specific contexts within each country in studying the development of sound art in Asian countries.

1. We might need to discuss “sound art” in detail as a general understanding of what the term precisely means is deemed lacking. What types of works and genre does the term cover? What is its historical background? We are not dismissing the general understanding of “sound art,” or the idea that certain works must be called only as “sound art,” or the notion that “sound art” has a historically defined significance. In this article, we are not covering the issues surrounding the term “sound art.” We only use the term as a general noun referring to art that uses sound.
2. The authors want to introduce a number of SP’s activities related to research and archiving, as they are remarkable. The research aspect relates to “sound art” according to artists working with sound in Hong Kong” (<http://www.soundpocket.org.hk/v2/category/research/sound-art-according-to-artists-working-with-sound-in-hong-kong-interview-excerpts/>). SP publishes semi-structured interview excerpts. The artists interviewed thus far include Phoebe Hui, Steve Hui (a.k.a. Nerve), Anson Mak, Cédric Maridet, Kingsley Ng, and Samson Young, and they have answered to the following questions in the interview:

- 1) How they position themselves in relation to the terms “sound artist” and “sound art”
- 2) How they listen, or the habits of listening
- 3) How they regard the idea of “field recording”
- 4) How they make decisions about the presentation of their works

This booklet would be a valuable reference to not only researchers but also the general public.

As for their archive, it includes (1) *DAY AFTER 翌日 [2014. 9.29 - 12.12]* and (2) The Library by soundpocket

(1) SP gathered fund from cloud funding and has released the CD (*DAY AFTER 翌日 [2014. 9.29 - 12.12]*).

This work is a recording of sound roughly during the Umbrella Movement, described as “a collective album of the sounds of [the] Umbrella Movement. *DAY AFTER* presents [a] chronological order of the recordings from September 29 to December 12, that is, from the day after the police shot tear gas to the day after the clearance” (<https://www.facebook.com/soundpockethongkong/posts/1649068382001930>). The beginning day (September 29, 2014) of the Umbrella Movement was during ASAF2014 in Hong Kong and a number of SP’s staff, particularly those in their 20s, participated in the demonstration at Central or Mong Kok. However, the CD does not give a clear political message.

(2) SP created the platform “The Library by soundpocket” (<http://www.thelibrarybysoundpocket.org.hk>). The website seeks to collect and publish the daily soundscape in Hong Kong (by asking visitors to donate sound clips via email, making a 1-minute clip - unless they specify how long - from them, and uploading it), and to contribute to the formation of a type of listening culture in Hong Kong.

3. We have been conducting a research on the development of Japan’s sound art since 2011. The results of our research were published in the semi-annual scholarly publishing journal *Cross Sections* of The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto in 2011.
4. The Retreat part was added in 2010. ASAF2009 did not have a Retreat part.
5. ASAF Booklets are available from SP’s website.
6. Ms. YEUNG cannot remember the poem nor the reason why she wrote the poem. She said: “I knew nothing about art when I was first involved with Para/Site. I didn’t know what I was doing so I wrote this poem.”
7. Cédric Maridet’s performance on November 4, 2005 was called “\_habitus” according to his website

([http://www.moneme.com/portfolio/\\_habitus/](http://www.moneme.com/portfolio/_habitus/)).

8. The artists were Felix Hess, Robert Iolini, Anson Mak, Cédric Maridet, Kawai Shiu and Anthony Yeung, Su-mei Tse, and Yuen Cheuk-Wa. This exhibition was accompanied by a booklet (Yang, Yeung, ed. 2007. *in midair: sound works Hong Kong 2007*. Exhibition Catalogue. Hong Kong: HKADC). This is a 12-page booklet with six fold-out posters published in conjunction with the exhibition. It is difficult to obtain, but can be accessed at Asian Art Archive (AAA), which actively archives recent contemporary art in Asian countries.
9. Slavick is a German American poet who has been active in Taiwan and now resides in New Zealand. She publishes her poems in both Chinese and English (<http://touchingwhatilove.blogspot.jp>).

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NAKAGAWA, Katsushi

(Associate Professor, Institute of Urban Innovation, Yokohama National University)

KANEKO, Tomotaro

(Assistant Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Art History, Tokyo University of the Arts)