

Building, Dismantling: Community Orientations and Counterpublic Art in Hong Kong

by Yet Chor Sunshine Wong

Underweight

While waiting for the MTR, there are clear place markers that let you know where to stand so as not to obstruct those who are trying to leave the train. Once you shuffle in, signs abound telling you not to eat, drink, or smoke, to give up your seat to those who need it more than you, and to aim higher: improve your English, study abroad, lose weight, invest in property. At your destination, a looped recording (trilingual, in the local Cantonese as well as in Mandarin and English) accompanies your escalator trip back to street level: stand on the right, watch where you're going, don't just look at your mobile phone. Finally, one last piece of audio instruction as you exit: do not patronise hawkers or give money to beggars. This one I only heard at specific stations.

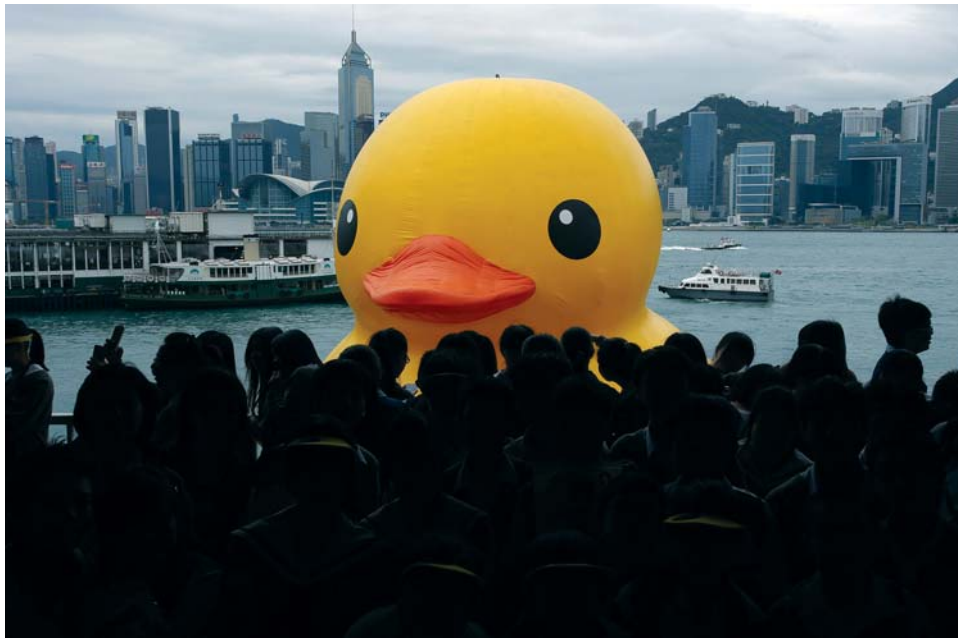


MTR place markers. Courtesy of Logatfer's Travelogue, http://logatfer.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/dsc_00672.jpg

As an overseas Hong Konger, my visits back are always marked by a difficult struggle for a sense of belonging. On my most recent trip, the city was in the midst of a similar struggle—but on a much more urgent, fundamental scale. In June 2014, over 800,000 people voted in an unofficial referendum for universal suffrage. Preparations were being made for the next stage in the fight for Hong Kong's long-deferred political autonomy: a week-long classroom strike was to take place in

September 2014 which, at the time of writing, has culminated with a three-day protest that has spread throughout the city. All the while, the official emphasis on order and consumption has become ever more palpable and oppressive. The rise of social awareness, particularly amongst the “post-80s” and “post-90s,”¹ is a change that many of my parents’ class and generation (educated professionals, born shortly after WWII) find unsettling. This is condescendingly evident in the label *mei gau ching* given to Joshua Wong Chi-Fung, the 17-year-old spokesperson of the Scholarism² movement: meaning “underweight,” it is a colloquialism for being underage. When pro-Beijing Legislative Council (Legco) member Chiang Lai-Wan belittles him on live television (“How am I supposed to debate with a *mei gau ching*?”), and government-backed bodies like the Hong Kong Youth Association are paying people off to take part in anti-civil disobedience demonstrations,³ the dominance of state power—be it through such examples of arrogant posturing or desperate acts of self-preservation—is constantly being reinforced. And the locus of this power is found some 2,000 miles away in Beijing, undermining Deng Xiaoping’s promise of “one country, two systems.”

In the face of elusive self-governance, skyrocketing property prices, and reckless urban encroachment, a more basic need for subjective and physical spaces is being articulated. The crowded cityscape spills over with chain stores and franchises, including elite educational institutions such as the Savannah College of Art and Design, which opened its Hong Kong campus in 2009 at the renovated former North Kowloon Magistracy Building, charging upwards of US\$30,000 in fees per year. Under communist China’s twenty-first century imperative to outdo capitalism at its own game, Hong Kongers have had to contend with an impossibly free, state-supported market. So, what are the alternatives? Can other possibilities survive and where might they be found? Over the last decade, a disparate group of artists have been looking for ways to extend their practices into the social, the political, and the activist in order to create and/or retrieve space for “new imaginings.”⁴ Though the approaches are, of course, multiple and varied, I would like to focus particularly on three different projects in Hong Kong that have responded to rapidly disappearing notions of belonging, intimacy, and neighbourliness. Here, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone—artists, friends, strangers—who took the time to share their thoughts with me. In many ways, I felt I was similarly “encroaching” upon their deeply rooted practices from the perspective of a semi-outsider. One of the hardest lessons to learn from the process was the importance of a lived understanding for an analysis that would do these art practices justice. What I was able to achieve in my short research trip was merely to map out, rather imprecisely, some contours of a community-oriented art that differs entirely from the dominant Euro-American discourse.



Florentijn Hofman, *Rubber Duck*, 2013. Photograph by Adam Taylor. Courtesy of Business insider, http://static3.businessinsider.com/image/5193a7ab6bb3f7c4770000a-3000-1831/ap238968524263_3.jpg

Defending place, creating space

A recent study by Vivian Ting Wing-Yan and Emma Watts demonstrates the overwhelming influence of the private art market in the way visual art is equated to wealth and spectacle⁵. Shopping malls and luxury brands often collaborate with artists, using their work as a means of enhancing the shopping experience. With over 150 private galleries and only seven public museums—compared to the ratio of one to one in the UK—the commercial art world has come to define the viewing habits of the general public in Hong Kong.⁶ Visual art is seen to bear no serious cultural responsibility and is purely a form of entertainment.⁷ Emerging from this debilitating consumerism are initiatives like *Woofers Ten*, *People's Pitch*, and *Ping Che Village School Festival*, all of which are conscious attempts at delineating a meaningful socio-political role for art in an increasingly oppressive hyper capitalist landscape.

1. *Woofers Ten*

Located on Shanghai Street in the district of Yau Ma Tei is a small, ground-floor storefront run by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). Since 1999, the space has been a dedicated testing ground for different types of artistic practice, with projects generally running on a two- or four-year basis. Its current form as *Woofers Ten* (“activation / regeneration space,” an ironic play on the Urban Renewal Authority’s promise to “regenerate” poorer areas) has been around for almost five years, though HKADC stopped funding the operation in September 2013.

In its early days, the ten founding members were mainly concerned with two questions: 1) how to run an “open-door space”, and 2) how to use art to think and do politics.⁸ During the first ten years of HKADC’s stewardship, there were a number of attempts at turning the storefront into an exhibition space, none of which explicitly dealt with questions of location. As a densely populated grassroots neighbourhood, Yau Ma Tei is home to many long-term residents (*kai fong*) as well as tradespeople who specialise primarily in mechanics and carpentry. Rarely did the contemporary art objects on display pique the interest of passers-by—nor was that,

to be fair, the intention of those who were in charge of the space. The turning point came in the two years leading up to the start of *Woofers Ten* in 2009, when some of the loudest, most visible mobilisations against the destruction of historic, public, and rural sites took place. Artists played a prominent role in drawing attention to the demolition of the Star Ferry pier in Central (2006-7), as well as to the commercial monopolisation of the public space in front of the Times Square shopping centre in Causeway Bay (2008).



The Star Ferry protesters occupy the adjacent Queen's Pier, which was also due to be demolished. Photo by Thirteen Wong Sap-Sam. Courtesy of http://le914.blogspot.co.uk/2007/07/blog-post_29.html

As members have come and left the collective over the last five years, their projects have also transitioned from an artist-led directive to a community-led one. "[At first,] there would be an [artistic] idea that the *kai fong* (neighbours / local residents) could only accept. In the past year, our roles have begun to reverse; the *kai fong* come up with the ideas and [it's our turn to] accept them," current *Woofers Ten* artist Vangi Fong Wan-Chi notes.⁹ Yet her colleague Roland Ip Ho-Lun offers a caveat: "Sometimes you have to say no, because there is a limit to the openness." From earlier projects like *Prize prize prize* (shop owners and residents nominate different local traders for a special award, for which the artists make bespoke trophies) to the recent weekly *kai fong* meetings, the trajectory betrays the desire for the initiative to become firmly anchored within the area. Or to "belong" and "grow roots," as both artists affirm. Though most of the original founders have moved on, the three remaining members adamantly insist on staying in Yau Ma Tei, "because it will be something else entirely if we move."¹⁰ Beyond matters of site-specificity, the refusal to leave is also aimed at shedding light on HKADC's mismanagement of resources, particularly that of vacant units; with one just a few floors above *Woofers Ten* and another in a residential high-rise nearby, it is a disconcerting realisation as small art organisations are often forced into closure due to "a lack of resources." As support for these initiatives continues to wane, artists are left to deal with a hugely unaffordable and uniform environment that is hostile to the slow cultivation of alternative ideas.



A *kai fong* meeting at Woofer Ten.
Photo by the author)

2. People's Pitch

Contrary to *Woofer Ten's* immersive investigation of a community that extends over a number of years, artist Him Lo's *People's Pitch* focuses on districts earmarked for "urban renewal" by temporarily occupying a street for a game of football. The first match took place as part of Free Space Festival, an event that fell under a larger, long-term public programme for the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD). In reference to the festival's namesake, participating artists like Lo were encouraged to think about the significance of "free space" and activities related to it. Since the WKCD was first put forward in 1998, the government-proposed project has been wrought with controversies, including the environmental cost (due to land reclamation), the focus on consumer experience over cultural development, and the US\$8.5 billion price tag.¹¹ These concerns, amongst others, have been furiously and repeatedly challenged.

As such, the first *People's Pitch* set within the framework of Free Space 2012 was more of a direct response to the idea behind the festival, i.e. to figuring out what kind of "space" remained open to play and autonomy in an area like West Kowloon. "When I came up with the idea [of *People's Pitch*] and put out a call online, the response exceeded my expectation. Many players either work in the cultural sector or are interested in critically understanding the impact of urban development,"¹² says Lo. Having formed a core group, they then continued to meet at different locations, including Kwun Tong district's Yan On Lane in August 2013. The event was prefaced by a few informal games that varied in the number of players, even including intimate one-a-side matches. As Yan On Lane, like many other neighbourhoods, succumbs to urban encroachment, members of *People's Pitch* have attempted to use the planning process of a football match to think through the rapid disappearance of organic, spontaneous forms of playing and living. Though the games take on a quality of an "urban ambush," they in fact demonstrate quite literally the neighbourhood's distinct sense of place: who sells football jerseys or t-shirts? Where can we send them for printing? And which streets are tucked away from traffic? For Lo, these investigations—along with the resulting conversations between themselves and the *kai fong*—constitute a process that paral-

lels making art: "There is a search, a transformation, and a form. [You see a transition] from content to materialisation, which can all be found in art."¹³



A *People's Pitch* match in Kwun Tong's Yan On Lane, August 2013. Photo by Him Lo. Courtesy of Him Lo.)

Aside from the socio-political urgency that has affected many art practitioners like Lo is what he calls the "Western," "imported," and "colonial" education of Hong Kong art schools: "I want to abandon my artistic learning. It's not because I don't want to do art; it's more of an undoing." The struggle against the encroachment of physical space turns out, in Lo's case, to be simultaneously the struggle against the encroachment of formal learning and artistic production. Confronted by an impossible economic landscape and broken promises of legislative autonomy, institutionalised authority is equally regarded with some scepticism. According to art critic Kurt Chan Yuk-Keung, Hong Kong "cannot rely on its status as a 'Special Autonomous Region' to garner special treatment from Beijing,"¹⁴ as the last seventeen years have proven. What many artists and, in the end, Hong Kongers are striving for now is a sense of "Hong Kong-ness"¹⁵ that is critical of what the city has become after the 1997 handover. Passed on from one system of dominance to another, the "handover" has turned out to be nothing short of "re-colonisation,"¹⁶ a process that has made the examination of the city's selfhood all the more urgent.

3. Ping Che Village School Festival

A large part of this evaluation entails locating the historical traces in an environment that is subjected to permanent change. Textural remnants of the past are rarely felt amidst cycles of demolition and construction, though small, isolated spaces are occasionally still left to pasture. In the outer reaches of northeast New

Territories, artist and geographer Sampson Wong Yu-Hin began a research project on ruins along with two colleagues, which aimed to extend beyond the masculine, “predatory” hunt for “ruin porn.” That decay is frequently beautified without contextual responsibility led Wong to question the ways in which he can engage with these places more meaningfully. “The reasons why there are ruins have to do with political economy: why ruins of certain kinds appear in particular cities and how they let us understand urban development through their traces,”¹⁷ Wong explains. As a group, the three co-founded EmptySCape, which would go on to organise the 2013 *Ping Che Village School Festival* in one of the last rural villages along the Hong Kong-Chinese borderland.

Its concept and structure both borrow heavily from the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, for which Wong was a volunteer in 2012. Ostensibly an international art festival with what he calls a “complex” backstory, the first Triennial in 2000 took ten years to organise due to the lengthy period of trust-building with the residents. What was billed as a programme of “site-specific art” featuring art stars like Christian Boltanski and Yayoi Kusuma became, upon closer inspection, a strategy for attracting a global audience (and a much-needed influx of capital) to a forgotten corner of eastern Japan. Like the Niigata Prefecture, Ping Che was neglected as a marginal area of Hong Kong, though its sleepy, quiet way of life is now threatened by the prospect of regeneration. Witnessing first-hand how volunteers built and negotiated lasting relationships with the residents of Niigata Prefecture demonstrated to Wong the highly social and heteronomous infrastructure of production that both supports as well as enables the autonomous sphere of art. It is precisely in the “supporting publics”¹⁸ or “props” that performance scholar Shannon Jackson locates a potential for artistic action. By positing an aesthetics of “systemic procedures,” Jackson aims to demonstrate “their intimate and ever-shifting co-imbrication.”¹⁹ In other words, she erects a proverbial stage for the “support”—the frenzy happening in the wings, the staff, the innumerable planning meetings, etc.—to highlight its performative potentials, allowing for a renewed critique of systems that enable artistic labour (e.g. she discusses the maintenance art of Mierle Laderman-Ukeles). Wong and the co-organisers of *Ping Che Village School Festival*, however, are less concerned with the examination of systems than they are on the “supporting publics” themselves and the ways they are facilitated through art.

This goal may resemble that of the 1970s community arts movement in the UK, which sought to broaden the making of culture. In the wake of the political and subcultural radicality of the late 1960s, more and more artists began to question “the purpose of art and habitual modes of its production and reception,”²⁰ which led to collaborative experimentations with groups of people and a commitment to cultural democracy. Yet Ping Che is motivated by a more complex set of problems related to shared, embodied enactments of situated-ness that Wong describes as “a coming community”.

Conscious of his and his colleagues’ non-native status, the festival co-organisers were nonetheless immediately welcomed by the residents and encouraged to undertake anything that would bring visibility to the area. “As soon as a platform opens up, all kinds of people will want to enter, and for different reasons. They also become interested in the future of this place. These people from various social backgrounds then make up a temporary community.”²¹



Like the disused school that so captured Wong's imagination, the villagers had similarly been left to fend for themselves. The tiny building became an impetus for relationships and recall, for eliciting stories that would finally fall on listening ears. Over a few months' time, Wong and his colleagues became personally invested in the struggles of the area, attending Ping Che Alliance for "Saving Our Home" meetings as well as helping with their campaigns. This "grounded-ness," which Wong explicitly emphasises,²² translates into a balancing act of mutual generosity between organisers, artists, inhabitants, and visitors. With a plethora of workshops, site-specific sculptures, performances, and guided tours that spanned two weekends, months of preparatory work were needed. Everyone chipped in where they could; the fact that many villagers were tradespeople meant that they often helped with the realisation and installation of the works. The collaboration, conversations, assistance, and criticisms made up some of the most important "socially engaged" aspects of the project. Some villagers, for instance, were shocked by a few artists' apparent lack of "manual skills," while others had long talks with artists like Ah Hei, who spent a fortnight sculpting a school chair out of a rotten tree stump at the entrance of the school.

The Ping Che Village School Festival.
Photos by Sampson Wong Yu-Hin.
Courtesy of Sampson Wong Yu-Hin)



Ah Hei's chair, 2013. Photo by
Sampson Wong Yu-Hin. Courtesy of
Sampson Wong Yu-Hin)

The discussion of art and regeneration is rightly seen as a euphemism for gentrification in many urban contexts. But, as Wong asks, what about when art is employed as a means of “regenerating” peripheral, rural areas? Like the UK’s [Cit[ies] of Culture²³, Ping Che and Niigata Prefecture require an injection of pride and ownership; contrary to the British cities, however, these poor rural areas are seen by their respective governments as unwanted responsibilities that stand in the way of greater prosperity. To start with an artistic research project on ruins and end with a concrete question of art’s role in rural regeneration demonstrates art’s extradisciplinary contemporaneity, which has the uncanny ability to intervene in systems, to pose as another in order to harness what lies at its core. For the politically urgent context of Hong Kong, it specifically means challenging our diminishing right to define the spaces we live in.

A counterpublic art

“A community that questions its own legitimacy is legitimate.”²⁴

In describing the subsets of community structures found within the 1993 *Culture in Action* programme, art historian Miwon Kwon borrows the concept of an “unworked” community from philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. She proposes that the optimum form of togetherness is one in which the links between people are always already contingent and stem more from a sense of “being-in-common” than the harmonious unity of “common beings.” Yet beyond the curatorial mandate of this particular art event, Kwon does not examine how a “community” comes to be or stays together. These questions are especially relevant for self-initiatives such as Woofer Ten and Ping Che Village School, which have different dynamics and *raison d’être* than commissioned projects of community art.

Literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner’s concept of *counterpublics* offer some crucial insight at this juncture. Its focus is on groups—or publics, in his words—that define themselves “by their tension with a larger public”: “Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.”²⁵

Of note here is Warner’s recognition of publics that function against normalising pressures. For Hong Kong, the “pressures” are generated by relentless urban encroachment and intensifying political anxiety. However, unlike Warner’s North American bias that posits a radically critical of democratic society, Hong Kongers are currently demanding for that very thing: for citizenship through voting, which includes a government that is legitimately elected by its people. I would therefore argue that counterpublics do not clearly “mark off” their identification with persons or citizens as Warner suggests, but rather refine and reclaim the fundamentals of personhood and citizenship through what he calls “alternative dispositions or protocols”.

Another key aspect of counterpublics is that it has a demographic of “indefinite strangers,”²⁶ i.e. their membership is open-ended, mutable, and dispersed throughout a network that defies closure. In the promptness of present day communication via social media, they now more frequently exist through the circula-

tion of text—visually, sonically, etc.—whether voluntarily or inadvertently. These counterpublics exist simply from being addressed: one need only be within receiving range, however “somnolently.”²⁷ By identifying the uncontainability of counterpublics, Warner recognised their latent, liquid potential that resides precisely where it cannot be coalesced.

But rationally comprehending that subjectivities resonate elsewhere, indefinitely, is not always enough. There are times when these connections need to be rendered more tangible, especially when a singular, unambiguous force is materially dominant. Groups of bodies—let’s call them *physical* counterpublics—then acquire a powerfully affective dimension, especially when they incapacitate the normal order of life. Warner’s emphasis on the virtuality of counterpublics can therefore only apply when power is not blatantly wielded as absolute. Just to illustrate the pressing state of affairs: in the time it took to complete this essay, a government-funded campaign was launched to deliberately confound the “Occupy Central” protests with “violence,” and tanks have casually rolled through the city streets shortly before China announced that there would be no real universal suffrage in 2017. At this moment, Warner’s “indefinite strangers” understandably feel the need to cohere, lest their demands be condemned to obscurity and neighbourhoods like Yau Ma Tei, Kwun Tong, and Ping Che continue to be destroyed.

The three art initiatives embody separate possibilities of Warner’s counterpublics, by producing acts and sites that remind and that gather those who are similarly positioned against the grain of dominance. These (artistic) counterpublics have taken place intuitively, purposefully; less so impulsively, though I would like to stress that this can—must—also happen, both within and beyond the realm of art (cf: the protests in Ferguson, Missouri this year, in the wake of Michael Brown’s fatal shooting). Through the forming and negotiating of relationships, the artists—in conjunction with various cohorts—experiment with collective self-assertion while resisting prohibitive state control. Borne of shared witnessing and frustrations, I believe that these counterpublic art projects have developed in direct correlation to the need for shaping what happens within one’s own society. In a perfect storm of spatial scarcity and political ire, indignation seeks amplification wherever possible. As Warner argues,

When people address publics, they engage in struggles—at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tactic to mute cognitive noise—over the conditions that bring them together as a public. (Warner, 2002, p.13)

This collective sense of grief, loss, or rage belongs to economies of negative affect, which queer and feminist scholar Sara Ahmed locates in processes of transference. The feelings “do not positively inhabit *anybody* or *anything*, meaning that ‘the subject’ is simply one nodal point in the economy rather than its origin and destination.”²⁸ Thus, for these counterpublic art projects, the signs and objects related to the disappearance of spaces and memories become the nexus around which the “surface[s]”²⁹ of counterpublics are formed; the instant that these binds take shape is when the nebulous sense of loss can be recalibrated into systemic deprivation. Or simply, when enough affective energies stir into a momentum that propels change.

Notes

1 Hong Kongers refer to those born in the 1980s and 1990s as “post-80s” and “post-90s” respectively.

2 Started in 2012, Scholarism began as a group of secondary school students who questioned the legitimacy of compulsory Moral and National Education. Now, they are actively engaged with the city’s struggle for universal suffrage.

3 On 17 August 2014, the government-backed Peace and Democracy Movement organised a demonstration against the pan-democratic Occupy Central Movement, who have been demanding full universal suffrage in the 2017 elections. An i-Cable news report (17 August 2014) revealed that government affiliate groups were handing out cash to those who would show up on the day. See: http://cablenews.i-cable.com/webapps/news_video/index.php?news_id=439448

4 Artist Luke Ching Chin-Wai talks about the importance of “new imaginings” in his practice, referring specifically to “the lack of imagination in politics” (conversation with the artist, 6 August 2014). Translated from Cantonese to English by the author.

5 Ting, W. and Watts, E., *Engaging in Art: On Art Ecology and Cultural Consumption in Hong Kong*. Paper presentation at Sapienza University in Rome, 25 June 2014.

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*

8 From a conversation with artist Wen Yau, a co-founder of Woofer Ten (17 July 2014). Translated from Cantonese to English by the author.

9 From a conversation with artist Vangi Fong Wan-Chi and Roland Ip Ho-Lun, current members of Woofer Ten (30 July 2014). Translated from Cantonese to English by the author.

10 *ibid.*

11 Josh Noble. 2014. “Hong Kong’s West Kowloon Cultural District—and its real estate.” *The Financial Times*. Accessed 03.09.2014. <http://on.ft.com/1kcsPUQ>.

12 From a conversation with artist Him Lo (28 July 2014). Translated from Cantonese to English by the author.

13 *ibid.*

14 Kurt Chan Yuk-Keung, “A Short Story About Hong Kong Art: from the Colonial Phenomenon to Guerilla Aesthetics,” essay in *Hong Kong Eye: Contemporary Hong Kong Art*, Skira Editore S.p.A., 2012. pp. 63-7.

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

17 From a conversation with artist Sampson Wong Yu-Hin (30 July 2014).

18 Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Routledge, New York, 2012

19 *ibid.*, p. 149

20 Bart Moore-Gilbert (ed.), *The Arts in the 1970s: Culture Closure*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, London and New York, 2002

21 *ibid.*

22 *ibid.*

23 Started in 2009, UK City of Culture elects a winning city (now every four years) to host a number of highly publicised cultural events, e.g. the Turner Prize.

24 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002

25 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.56

26 *ibid.*, p.106

27 *ibid.*, p.87

28 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, p.46
29 *ibid.*

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