

OUT OF CONTEXT RESEARCH PROJECT

Ricky Yeung Interview Transcript

10 November 2017

Yeung's home

Interviewers: Mickey Lee and Alan Chan

'Out of Context' (1987)

Yeung: I was also curious why I was part of the exhibition. Perhaps it was because Michael Chen had seen my works before. But the other artists hadn't. For example, they hadn't seen my works in my first exhibition at HKU and the exhibition at Restaurant Nineteen Ninety-seven. Those works were mostly very violent and bloody, and not pleasing to the eye. Even Choi Yan-chi and Antonio Mak hadn't seen those works, but Michael Chen still put me in the exhibition. To answer your question, I am really local: I was born and raised here, studied here, worked here, and then made art works here. I was not exposed to foreign influence at all, I didn't even read any art magazines. So I am a creative person bred in Hong Kong.

Yeung: They discussed where to hold the exhibition. In the 80s, there were only two venues: Hong Kong Arts Centre and City Hall. The exhibitions at City Hall were usually on ink paintings, very formal. Arts Centre was better, it was quite different, and there were some alternatives, such as works in western media. But they still thought these two venues were quite formal and somewhat too traditional. So they thought, why not do away with these two options? So we brainstormed and thought of the old house on 1 [15] Kennedy Road. We heard that it was about to be demolished and built into Hopewell Centre. So we considered it as a choice. Christine Loh just needed to make a call in the high society and the owner of the house was found. Probably they had a very good relationship, and we could use the house without any problem.

Yeung: I always care about Hong Kong society. After the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, I thought, "Oh no, what will happen to Hong Kong after the handover?" I belonged to the side of "democratic return". I bought into that group of people like Tsang Shu-ki. I read their books and quite bought into them. I was that type of people, but I remained a bit sceptical.

Yeung: I used the cage, partly because I felt my future in Hong Kong was in a conundrum, the other reason being my scepticism towards the handover of Hong Kong. This scepticism reminded me of my painting *Democracy, in China?* in 1979 and 80. At the time, Wei Jingsheng criticised Deng Xiaoping on big-character posters, Deng took offense and put him in jail. My painting was inspired by this incident. I began to be sceptical of the Chinese Communist Party, but my understanding was influenced by that group of intellectuals, and I believed that 'democratic return' was the way. In this state, I had much doubt about the handover of Hong Kong, so all my works from then on were pessimistic. Therefore I projected that the future of Hong Kong would be in a cage. Why did I make a cage? Firstly, it was simply a motif I had been using in the past. Secondly, I felt that I was trapped in a cage regarding the prospect of my future. Thirdly, in a big picture, regarding the whole society out there, I thought Hong Kong was going to be inside a cage too. Therefore, the cage is a symbol that I use frequently, and it has two layers of meanings: the first is personal, the second is about Hong Kong as a whole. So I tried to use the cage in my work. One more reason was that, I had been using it for 7 years and was getting tired of it. How could I continue to make work? Well, let's try this: I put myself inside too. The end.

The opening night of 'Out of Context'

Yeung: I locked it with an iron chain and attached it to top of the cage. To further illustrate the point of me being retrained, I used the chain as the symbol to emphasise the meaning. I started preparing at 5 o'clock, someone did the make-up for me. After that I dismantled a part of the cage on my own, then stepped inside, fixed the cage to the original state and worked on the chain. At 6 o'clock I began my performance, crawled and then screamed. Inside I used my red body, white face and black lips to create an unnerving atmosphere. I crawled slowly around the edge of the cage. When I crawled, I screamed loudly about every 30 seconds. It was really loud and the audience were terrified. I also felt that the sound would make the audience uncomfortable. My friends said that my screams were terrifying, and they would move away a bit when they heard them.

Lee: We saw in Ha Bik Chuen's photos that others were participating in the performance. Could you tell us who you collaborated with, why him and what the meaning of this collaboration was?

- Yeung: First of all, I need to clarify one thing, that there were no collaboration. No collaboration. The work was conceived by myself all along. But during the performance, there were two anarchists, one of them was Mok Chiu-yu, and the other was Uncle Hung (Yuen Che-hung). Uncle Hung did not claim to be an anarchist, whereas Mok still recognises himself as one today. I did street performances with them once or twice, but I am not an anarchist. I don't even know what an 'anarchist' is. I am really not one.
- Yeung: As anarchists they thought I was badly oppressed, chained and caged in such an environment with no freedom. They thought, why not tear down your cage and get you out. They suddenly had this idea. They couldn't stand the sight of an oppressed man screaming. They couldn't stand aside, they had to set me free, and brought me to a free world. So Mok went inside, and really tore out a few frames of the cage, removed the chain, and dragged me out. Mok was good at English, as he taught English at Diocesan Girls' School. As he was dragging me out, he shouted in English, 'You capitalists! You see! This is the person you exploit every day!', something like that. He was dragging me about. My whole body was covered in acrylic paint. Some parts were dried, while some weren't, and touched other people's clothes. I guess Mok intended it, as he specifically dragged me into the crowd.
- Yeung: He dragged and shouted for about ten minutes but ended up taking me back into the cage. I assume he sensed that I was saying, 'don't put me outside the cage', or it might be due to my body language. I think he sensed that I would not like to walk out. So in the end he led me back into the cage. Uncle Hung didn't enter the cage though. He was shaking the cage lightly from outside, trying to break it and see how I would react. To his surprise, I did not react at all. And he seemed to sense that I was saying, 'no, stop shaking the cage'. As to why he stripped down to his underpants, I do not know. He did that out of the blue. Perhaps he saw that I was bare on the upper body, and I was only wearing a pair of gym shorts. So he probably wanted to do something that echoed me and therefore stripped down to his underpants. He tried to shake and loosen the cage to rescue me. From the perspective of an oppressed man, I understood his intention.
- Yeung: I wished to stay for 48 hours, so that when the audience came they would wonder – weren't we here to look at paintings? They would see a man here, with a white face, red body, and a chain. I wanted people to feel uncomfortable. I wanted to make this group of pretentious people, who thought the exhibition would be

grandiose, to face the human condition. The work is called *Man in Cage*. I wanted to see if you had reflected on whether you were inside the cage or not. Your cage could be personal, it could be grand, just as I understood. I wanted to do that, to challenge you, the exhibition goes, on your conventional aesthetics.

Lee: So how did the audience react?

Yeung: My head was hanging low, there were no reasons for me to see how they react. At the time some of my friends were taking photos. While some were watching, some stepped away, some continued to stand without making a sound and holding their champagne glasses, some felt uncomfortable and moved away. I felt they were not comfortable. Of course, there were one or two who pretended to be experienced – ‘haven’t you seen something like this before?’ – and continued to drink champagne. That happened too.