

The Inevitable III: Screens on Screens, an Artistic Attempt

Chow Yiu Fai (Hong Kong Baptist University)

還有還有沿途無數蜉蝣
還有還有沿途無數蜉蝣
還有還有原來行到源頭
還有還有原來爬過洪流
《蜉蝣》

Mayflies, mayflies,
Fly to the first of time,
Fly to the end of mine
Mayflies

Vocals: Joey Yung
Song: Kelvin Avon/Katrina Russ
Lyrics: Chow Yiu Fai

Let me start with Shanghai, the city where I am at, incidentally, where I started writing this visual essay.

Incidental, in the sense that the field work that brought me here is not connected to screens. But then, once here, I wondered if there was still any field, any work that escaped their omnipresence. Last evening, an informant took me to the Bund. While he was looking for an ATM machine—a screen that promises, sometimes belyingly, ready cash for the consumption to come—I was seduced, subconsciously perhaps, by some moving illumination somewhere out there. I looked up and met the huge screens on the skyscraping facades. Spectacular skins. Why

are they called “skins”? To underwrite how protective, indispensable and, I suppose, smooth as the human organ? Or, as a social organ? If they are skins, what are those un-screened buildings? Raw? Seated in the stylish club, I tried to search for rawness on the other side of the river, but I ended up viewing the bright lights and, yes, the screens, both on the Pudong skyline as well as on the little ferries traversing, corresponding under it. Finally, I got in a taxi and saw my last screen for the day. Taxis here—at least the ones I took—seem to be invariably equipped with tiny screens, some sort of “interactive” media designed more single-mindedly to feed advertisement after advertisement to any passengers trapped in their back seat. I switched it off. A small icon remained, inviting me, interpellating me to reanimate it, to succumb to some probably human, affective impulse to give life, to see moving lights and sounds; the screen was never completely off.

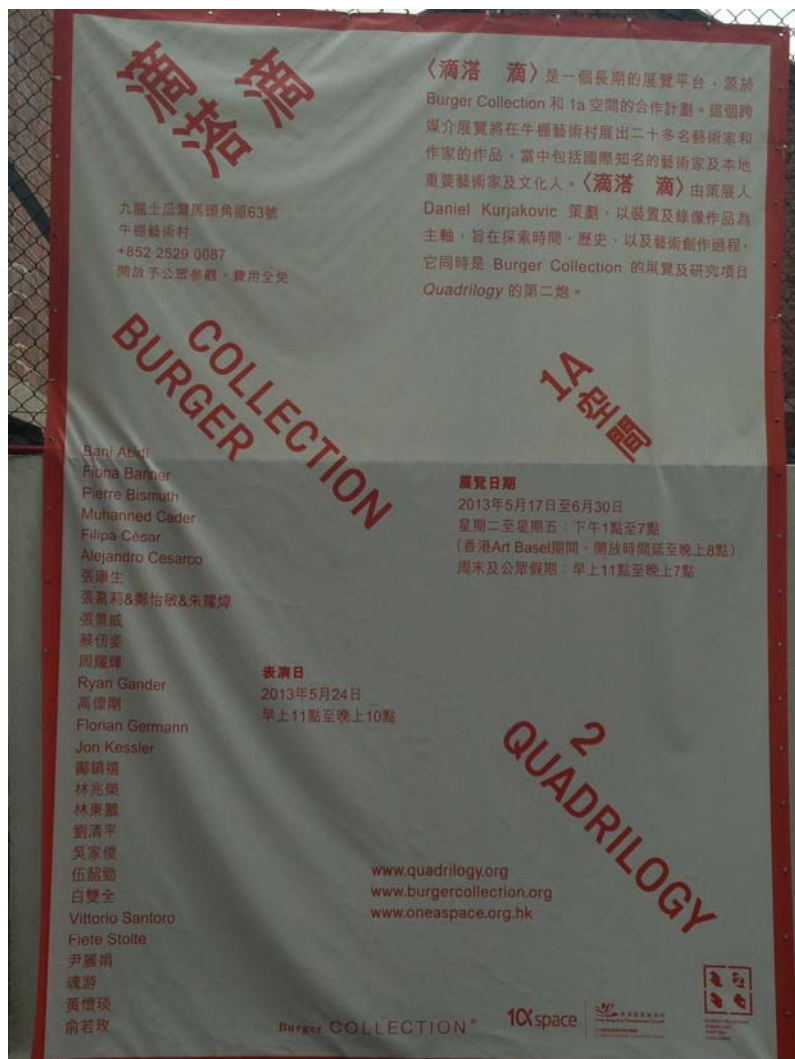
In a city like Shanghai, screens are inevitable.

Inevitable.

That was the word I had in mind when I started thinking about what I could contribute to an art project I was invited to join. Most immediately, I was thinking: what if I create some screens? These screens, housed in a gallery or a similar space, would be different at least in the sense that viewers need to take the initiative, to exert their agency, to enter. That initiative, that agency, always already, I think, unsettles the inevitability writ large, or small, in most of the screens I come across in the quotidian urbanity as I know it.

More circuitously, I was thinking of my other, older preoccupation next to being an academic. For years, I have been producing pop lyrics. When I am in a more poetic, or self-indulgent mood, I love to think that I have been producing not merely words, but sounds that circulate in the city, invisible rivers that flow through streets and alleys, one following the other, year in year out. Carried away by the flow, I am often intrigued by two movements of these sonic circulations, these invisible rivers, that seem inevitable: the chronological and the repetitive. Such seem to be the nature of music and pop. I was given the occasion to explore the first movement at a group exhibition staged at Cattle Depot, a monument-turned-art space in Hong Kong.

Jointly curated by local independent visual art collective 1a Space and the Swiss Burger Collection, *I Think It Rains* was opened to the public in May-June 2013.



Why *I Think It Rains*? I actually don't know—I have to admit now that I am writing and thinking about it. The invitation letter 1a Space sent me said: "This is an art project with art creation and involvement

of intellectual groups to agitate discussion on cultural issues locally and globally. Meanwhile we would also like to explore new ways of curating, art interpretation and process of art creation. An organic intellectual and knowledge sphere will be formed through gathering people from a range of cultural disciplines including artists, curators, writers, critics and scholars” And according to the first press release issued by Burger Collection: “*I Think It Rains* started in November 2012 with conversations between artists and curators of both 1a Space and Burger Collection. These revolved around seeking for ways to create an aesthetically wide-ranging context for contemporary practices. They were motivated by questioning how the project could contribute a close-to-sustainable idea for collaboration in order to complement the existing art programs and the institutional landscape in Hong Kong”

For a while, especially in the formative stage of the exhibition, we, the “intellectual group,” did discuss rather intensively on Facebook as well by emails concerning possible themes and titles; sometimes there were gatherings. Slowly, the conversations quieted down, and we—at least I—retreated to the kind of creative process I was more used to: doing my own thing. After all, we were all busy, and rather often not in Hong Kong. Who said businessmen and academics are the most cosmopolitan sort? I think I would add people in the art world. In any case, I continued talking and corresponding with the curators Choi Yan Chi and Daniel Kurjakovic, but I never asked them how they felt about the conversations they wanted to instigate and perpetuate.

I created an artwork titled “The inevitable I: five ways to remix the chronological.” I engaged with the chronological by mobilizing those elements closest to my creative productions – words, money, singing, listening, the original, the copy More specifically, I delivered two framed collages and three short films to accompany a song whose words I wrote (which earned me a best lyrics award for the year 2012). *Mayflies* was the title of the song. To me, it was a song about possibility, about unpredictability, precisely the alternatives to the sense of chronological inevitability I sought to disrupt. But then, how



to visualize this disruption? I thought of cutting, literally and cinematically. There were three concomitant trajectories, following

one track, a remixed sound track. I asked producer Jun Kung and his assistant Wilmar Chan to help me cut and remix the choruses of the 4'05"-song into a 1-minute loop. In the meantime, given my long-term immersion in this regime of copyright and royalties, I checked with publishing label EEG, which confirmed my screening of the song or any remix thereof would require licensing, as it would involve "1. Public performing right [sic] (contact: CASH for song and lyrics); 2. Public recording performing right [sic] (contact: IFPI for Joey Yung's original recording)." Of course, my friend at EEG also insinuated to me that I simply do it until someone found out. Spurred by my discontent with the intellectual property arrangement in the music or entertainment industry, which I don't want to elaborate and digress to now and here, I took this friendly advice.

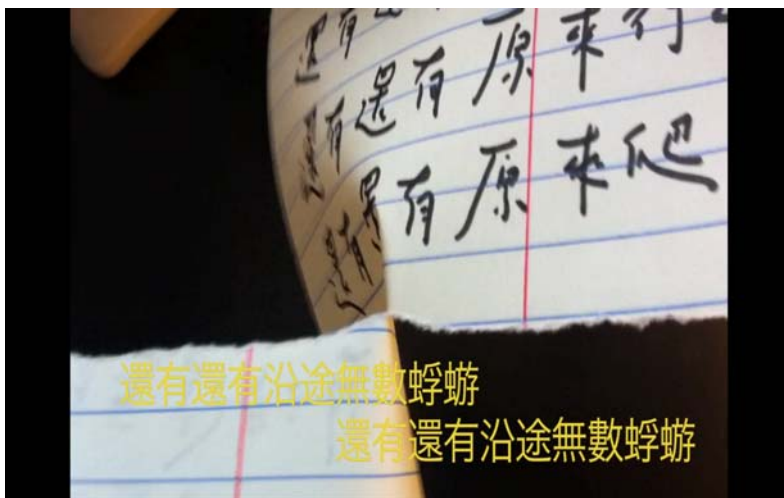
Back to the three trajectories. First, I went to an ATM and cashed a bank note of HK\$1,000, the largest denomination available. Then I cut it into small pieces and pasted them at random on a piece of paper. Second, I wrote the *Mayflies* lyrics on the notebook I used to write lyrics. Likewise, I tore my handwriting to small pieces and pasted them on a piece of paper. For these two trajectories, I let the processes filmed and edited to a short film, or MV (music video), with accompanying lyrics customized to karaoke purposes (that is, with a





jumping dot to indicate which word to sing). I also framed the bank note and handwriting collages at a neighbourhood shop. Mr. Lai Tong, who learned the framing skills as a young apprentice, told me he would soon close the shop and I became his very last customer. Like many other such small neighbourhood shops, Mr. Lai's could not survive the kind of rent increase enabled by accentuating neoliberal capitalism, particularly property development, in this city of our time. Talking about disrupting chronological inevitability, I felt as disenchanted as re-encharmed by Mr. Lai's retirement. I chose two heavy, golden, rococo-like, basically vulgar, frames for these collages to display, and hopefully question, the contemporary conflation of everything with money, of my lyrics with royalties, for instance, and thus the working condition of artists, writers and other creative people are enduring.

I wondered how viewers would react when they saw the MVs screening the cutting and pasting of a bank note and my handwriting. Which would they feel more, lament more, cherish more? More than my bewilderment, I wished they would ultimately deliberate on what kind of world we were living in, and what kind of better world they could imagine. Secretly, I suspected that viewers would care more, much more, about the bank note—I must admit when I cut it, I shuddered, unnerved vaguely by the novelty of destroying money, but



disturbed more particularly by the thought of what this HK\$1,000 could buy—especially for the needy? When this particular MV was being edited, by a helping student of mine Chow Hiu Tung, some fellow student accidentally saw the money-cutting-shots and was shocked. That student captured the shots and put them on Facebook, saying how immoral we were in wasting money like that. I just wished such a reaction, however typical, would constitute the beginning of

some further thinking, indeed, on the morality of money: say, if cutting money is bad, what about accumulating capital? Why do we need money, or such an invention after all? And, why would this student be so prepared to infringe on our privacy, to hijack our images, and post them to another screen namely Facebook? ... Interestingly, Hiu Tung told me later it was the first time for her, while editing, to realize a bank note could be beautiful, when it was illuminated, incidentally, by sunshine.



The third trajectory was more complicated. I invited Joey Yung, the performer of the original *Mayflies* and one of the most popular singers in Hong Kong, to mime the loop I sent her. In addition, I asked another helping student of mine Jim Chim to find eight young women he knew to do the same. Jim got the support of seven. I gave both Joey and Jim no more briefing than: use your smartphone, and sing according to the loop. And I instructed my editor Hiu Tung to treat the recordings of Joey and the other singers equally. The final result was an MV with the faces of eight singing women in a multiplicity of variations: from one close-up to collages of nine. Again, with karaoke

lyrics. What I aspired to do, by way of a smartphone—the gadget that enables so much filming, the screen that delivers content to so many other screens—was sharpening and blurring the boundaries between the singer and the audience, the cultural producer and the cultural consumer, the “original” and the “copy.” Such complex interplay, I suspected, was sustaining this popular screen culture of MV and karaoke, ultimately feeding and being fed by fluid capital, and ontological insecurity. The question I wanted to flag up was: what has such screen culture done to our ability to sing?



It took me one Whatsapp message to get Joey into the project, but it took me much longer to receive the final recording. While waiting, I was wondering if she had changed her mind, or had been stopped by her manager. Probably it was considered not rewarding, either financially or to her image. The explanation she gave me was more simple, but no less grounded in the entertainment industry’s logic of managing her image as capital. Joey said she was waiting for an occasion, like appearing on a TV show, where she would anyway have a make-up artist do her face; it was what she was used to when she needed to appear on screen. But then there was no such occasion or it was too late when she was done. In the end, since my time was running out, Joey did the miming recording with a face made up by herself.

What a daring experiment for her—and I say this without any cynicism. Once a female colleague remarked to me, “I felt naked without make-up.” And I can only imagine how it would feel for a professional female performer who is so used to the kind of make-up specifically for screen appearance. The presence of the camera, the ultimate presence of the screen, and right away you think of your presence in the screen. You don't just sing.

Some of the young women who agreed to join the project responded in ways suggestive of how our ability to sing might be inflected by an imaginary screen. For instance, they wanted to know more specifically what was expected of them, of their performance, as if they couldn't sing without knowing how to sing in front of a camera. According to the notes I invited Jim to write on his involvement, quite a few of them kept “asking for the purpose of the video and how they should act or pose in the video.” These were of course legitimate questions. At the same time, their response, I feel, was also interwoven with the similar logic when Joey wanted to wait for her professional make-up, that is, there is always this imaginary screen, the imaginary gaze, without which, or without a more defined presence of which, we feel uncomfortable, lost, not knowing how to perform.

As I said, it was all very understandable that they would ask for more directions. At the same time, I also wondered why they seemed to have lost the other possible impulse, to just sing, yes in front of a camera, but not necessary to any viewer. If filming can be taken as a moment of registration, or registration of a moment, we should have the moxie to do it our ways, to register what we want to register, to show the world what we want to show, what emotions, impressions, and narrations we want the world to see—not what the world wants to see. I think, or perhaps I hope. But then, in a screen culture where certain screen appearances would be more appropriate, or at least more safe, than others, it would be easy, when there are no particular clues to what would be appropriate, to feel unable to feel, to express the expressionless. Sara, one participant, wrote me when I asked the young women to send me their reflections: “Later, when I got the chance to watch the edited version of the video, where my

performance was placed alongside with other performer [sic], I noticed the emptiness on my face, lacking any emotion.” I hasten to add there were some other participants who just happily sang, or who didn’t ask further because they knew Jim, the other participants, or me.



So, there in 1a Space, two framed collages and three short films, or MVs, if you like. The installation proceeded smoothly according to my wishes. It was only when we tried to play the MVs, one problem emerged. While my intention was to have the MVs play synchronically, they turned out to be less prone to perfect harmony. In fact, the longer the MVs were repeated, the larger the temporal discrepancies were. I asked, and the problem turned out to be a technological one—the computers that played the films had slightly different speeds in auto-repeating. The differences might well be less than a second, but they were augmented time and again, until the films, and above all, the sound tracks, were totally discordant. I didn't mind. Somehow, I took it as part of the uncertainties I actually loved to see. However, this little hang-up did cue me to the first reflection I would like to make on this art project: any screen culture we want to understand may actually be predicated on some degrees of contingency, particularly the technological kind. What we see on screens may usually be smoothness (remember "skin"?); but what do we not see? Wouldn't such technological contingencies gesture to, say, genetic or environmental contingencies that sometimes result in disruptions in the smoothness of skins, of the surface of things?

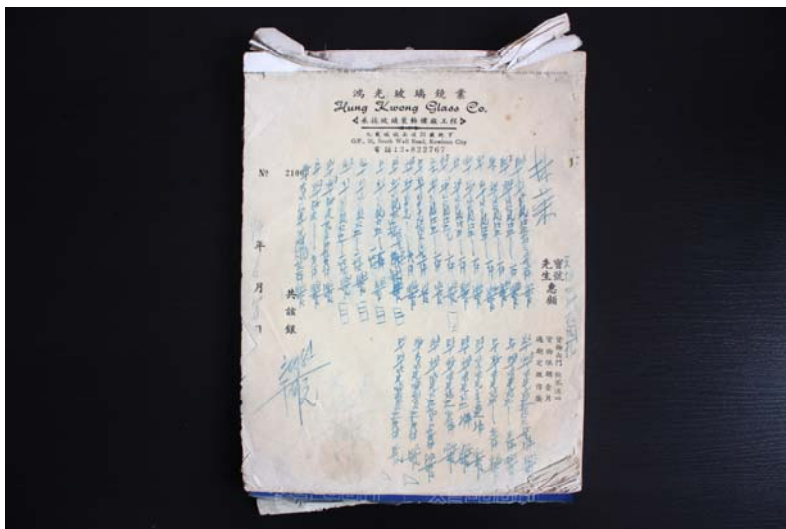
From technological contingency, I want to move to my second reflection, also connected to what we do not see on screens. While reading the notes from Jim and the participants who agreed to sing for the project, I realized that my project was not only about delivering the short films to be screened there and then. It also involved other screens in other spaces. This was what Jim wrote about using his smartphone to record Wah Yan's singing: "[W]e were at a staircase of a shopping mall, the only place we can find that is quite [sic] enough but people are still coming back and forth and gave us weird look. However even under such circumstances, her performance was still joyful and passionate, and it was really impressing to me." Jim's description reminds me of what I tentatively call the "inter-screen" dimension of screen culture. For one particular screen in one particular space, there would always be other screens in other spaces. In the case of my artwork, I am not sure how viewers in 1a Space may

react; I am more sure that the production of which, the evocation of other smartphone screens, thanks to Jim and Wah Yan, has inserted some fun, some curiosity, some unruliness, however transiently, to that space usually configured by market mechanisms.

Thirdly, about the disruptive potentials of artistic practices. Recall what I wrote about the well-intended and well-formulated introductory remarks by the curators, on the *I Think It Rains* project? All the “discussions” and “conversations” did not last long. What I found more disquieting was the silence after the exhibition in summer. I was given to understand that the second part of the project should take place by the end of the year, hopefully November, indeed, the occasion for me to present my *The Inevitable II*, on the repetitive. I heard nothing until one day I came across someone who told me the organizers spent too much on the first part and there would be no second part. When I embarked on writing this essay, I felt compelled to enquire. Yan Chi, of 1a Space, replied: “Unfortunately this BC project cannot make it to the second part because of the complicated rental policy of Cattle Depot. 1a office will send out a message to every artist. Daniel will send out a formal note by BC too.” It is already April when I pen this. Still, no official note. I have to be very careful here. It is not my intention to make any cynical or pessimistic remark, that artistic practices have become not unlike the neoliberal, primarily top-down practices of using and abusing human resources. I have no basis whatsoever to say that. Besides, I enjoyed far too much respect and freedom. I think I just don't want to be celebratory either; I can't, informed by this single experience of mine. For all its potentials in putting up alternative screens—alternative at least in the sense of delivering alternative contents, and of delivering those contents in alternative ways—I want to add: we need to stay sensitive to what is actually going on in the art world, to scrutinize the disruptive potentials of alternative screens in their multiple entanglements with the operational practices and logic of the art worlds themselves.

My final reflection is perhaps the dearest to me, as a person. I joined *I Think It Rains*, with all sorts of intentions as I tried to elucidate earlier. In a way, it could be seen as using screen culture to

interrogate screen culture, or, more specifically, using the screen as an artistic practice to interrogate the screen as an economic practice. Now I want to supplement that we can, and should, see it as a social practice. Because of the production of these short films, Jim engaged in various ways with the young women he invited, some of whom he already knew, some not. They “worked” together: sometimes with fun, sometimes more complicated than that. Jim got to know Hiu Tung and they had to collaborate, with each other, and with me. Most importantly, we spent time together, shooting or otherwise, ending in a more intimate relationship. I would not know how long such sociality lasts, and in this particular case, I would also not claim that our sociality is merely occasioned by the filming—we already knew each other, as teacher and students. What I want to claim is that at least for that period, we spent more time with each other, we communicated more, about the project or not, and we became closer. This social dimension may not be unique to screen culture; but given the democratic inclination of film-making in our time—we are becoming increasingly savvy in front of and behind the screens—it is easier to get others involved. Suppose my project is drawing, or what I am more used to, writing; of course I can still elicit assistance, but it would be less likely to be necessary, and it would probably be, indeed,



assistance, not collaboration, more of the professional and technical kind, less of the social. But again, I am talking about likelihood here.

Talking about the social, I conclude my reflections with two further remarks, perhaps regrets. On the one hand, to the young women who sang for the project—looking back, I should have found ways to include their voices in the alternative MVs, instead of only using Joey Yung’s vocals in the remixed loop. I felt bad when Jim wrote me he felt sorry that some of their good singing was not to be heard. For the kind of politics I intended to let my artwork embody, I should and could have done it differently. On the other hand, to Mr. Lai, the craftsman who closed his shop after framing my two collages—for the exhibition, I did display some photocopies of his beautifully handwritten orders and receipts, for the “artist’s shelf.” But why not turn his entire account books, for which he used this almost extinct way of noting down numbers called “Suzhou code,” to an audiovisual document, ready to be flipped through, as some sort of eBook or part of my artwork? That would have been a productive way of using screens: to preserve and to tempt those who are more used to screen culture to the preserved, to let the almost invisible be visible.

I end my essay in my other home, Amsterdam, a city more eager, proud, and branded for preserving the old, than constructing the new. One of the very few big screens I would come across in my everyday life, is mounted outside a grand three story mansion facing the Rembrandtplein, a small square—what an interesting word play it could be, now that I have typed this word: isn’t a four-sided screen the square of our time?—frequented by tourists. This particular “skin” hardly attracts any public attention, and when I happen to check out what is being aired, it is mostly municipal news (today, it is displaying a commercial for the latest tablet). I recall my transit in Frankfurt. There were no big screens in the airport, apart from the classical ones displaying arrival and departure information. The other set of “informative” screens that caught my eye was hanging in front of customs control. They were showing two passengers, a man and a woman, doing precisely what they were supposed to do, in the name of security: laptops fished out from their hand-carried bags, jackets

stripped, belts undone, bodies searched by the officers In the meantime, they were watching each other, avoiding each other, smiling, scheming, discreetly and suggestively. This was the first time, for me, to witness how an act of surveillance, itself scripted in power, control and the bodily, would be so accurately eroticized and appropriated. In the name of public security. After their round of customs control, this accidental couple left customs control, one earlier, one later, their timing unsynchronized by different speeds of the searching officers and their collection of personal properties. They lost each other, but only for a moment, until finally they were reunited by a chance encounter—where else?—at a Duty Free shop.

Recalling the screens in Shanghai, recalling the screens in Frankfurt, amidst the appropriation by big capital and state power, I wonder if I am offering any alternatives to anyone's chronology. At least, there they were: some alternative music videos. Some alternative screens. In the same poetic or self-indulgent mood, that I commenced my artwork, I choose to say: everything was inevitable—to paraphrase one of my favourite book titles—until it was something more.

一天之中幾多將會有
 去到左會有光 右面或有暗
 浮城尚在晏晝 (要轉左 可轉右)
 從不知一天之中幾多將會有 (也要走)
 去到左會有他 右面或有你
 蜉蝣尚未看透
 再轉左會有

What will happen in one day?
 Turn left, there may be light; turn right, it may be dark
 The floating city is still in the afternoon (turn left, or turn right)
 I will never know what will happen in one day (still I have to go)
 Turn left, there may be him; turn right, it may be you
 Mayfly hasn't seen enough, yet
 Turn left, and there may be...

Notes

I thank the reviewers for their meticulous readings and wonderful remarks. I thank John Nguyet Erni for including me to this special issue. I thank all those who made this art project possible, in particular Hiu Tung and Jim.