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Techno-Art-Activism; the Implicit Technology of Design Social

Kacey Wong

74–89

This photo essay comments on the influence of art-activism in the process of the 'social'. Moving away from the conventionality of social approach to betterment, the approach follows an artistic take, amalgamating new forms of media with the processes of design and art.

#Techno-Activism

#Mapping Techniques

#Art-Activism

#Technology

#Design Social

Across space and time

Historically speaking, the use of the loud speakerphone has been the primary *technology* to address crowds. In its most basic form, in what we see today, the co-dependency between the loudspeaker and physical space remains interlocked, in as much as the square or stadium as a place is deemed as essential to the message as the technology which carries a message across a vast crowd. At the architectural scale, the balcony remains a typological space of message and influence, where the great orators of history proclaimed their dictatorial or totalitarian position to large audiences (Koolhaas 2015). In the urban sense, this reliance, as observed in the various forms of urban disobedience and civil contestations, remains a dual dependency on the social technology and the spaces afforded to each society.

Contemporary activism, as a way to influence social groups, remains reliant on other forms of technologies. In this, communication has become a dual process. The dissemination of a message is just as necessary as the diffusion of ideas. Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (2014), and the Arab Spring Movement in Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen and Egypt (2011) and Turkey (2013) attest to Hanna Bäck *et al.*'s (2006) emphasis on collective versus selective incitements and the participatory call within crowds.

The promotion of digital technologies and their social media platforms helped to eradicate both the charismatic leader and the loudspeaker. The barrage of slogans by one individual across space has been miniaturized into an individual purpose through a hand-held, mobile device. In contemporary practice that person, activist, or opinion-maker, remains fluid and non-descript as long as they have access to a digital platform and elements that link into these platforms. The speed, intensity, and flow of information traffic places new demands on how messages are broadcast to

each instance of an occurrence. In other words, it no longer is an elementary dependency on an individual being at the right place at the right time, but rather those who have access to the necessary platforms to carry their voices further.

Social media platforms conform to Marichal's concept of *Micro-activism* (Marichal 2013), and are crucial to contemporary causes – Facebook in particular. Without the need to recreate a new platform or seek alternative ways of voicing opinion, Facebook, Twitter, and the visually-driven Instagram remain some of the most effective platforms of contestation (Cammaerts 2015). Facebook's effectiveness is evidenced in its ability to reach thousands of users and generate 600 responses for democratic incentives, which then become the instantaneous events that were previously impossible in history.¹ This is compounded when users share social issues through a platform, which further promotes real-time technology that facilitates activism or what one could call "*techno-activism*".

Furthermore, technology-activism has become a way of life and a condition of contemporary living. The constant scrutiny of users who *check-in*, and monitor the self and the allowances they make for others to observe what activities one is part of, remains an unavoidable consequence to activism on a daily basis. National agencies' continued technological development, which aims to detect and eventually predict demographics (Cesare *et al.* 2017) related to gender, age, and some more personal traits, such as facial recognition, run the risk of social media platforms becoming tools to trace and identify so-called perpetrators of other offences. What was meant to open the diversity of voices and options has effectively become a double-edged sword, and the de-facto state capture of civic agency.



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Figure 1 (pages 76 - 77): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Kacey Wong, 2015.

Figure 2 (page 78): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Ho Leong Kwan, 2015.

Figure 3 (top, page 79): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Kacey Wong, 2015.

Figure 4 (bottom, page 79): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Lucilla Chan, 2015.

Figure 5 (pages 80 - 81): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Ho Leong Kwan, 2015.

Figure 6–9 (top to bottom, left to right, pages 82 - 83): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Kacey Wong, 2015.

Figure 10 (this and opposite page): *Paddling Home*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Kacey Wong, 2015.

Figure 11 (page 89): *The Real Culture Bureau*, 2015, Kacey Wong Source: Kacey Wong, 2015.

Protest art, design and the social

Although instant transmissions, or to broadcast specific creative endeavours, are effective, they can never fully replace rallies through human presence. The presence of art or materialised objects in a space remains a powerful mechanism to draw in users and produce civic energy. For activist-artists human presence remains a vital component to the message, the protest, and the kind of spectator audience. In comparison, a rally fought from behind a mobile phone screen or a television requires different modes of application, or what could be termed a *sideline event*. In comparison, the in-situ effects of rallies, which are driven by physical human movement, voices, and the energy of a speaker, deliver another dynamic through direct engagement with one another.

Further, this represents a return to the *elemental* form of protest, or the primordial desire to avoid technology at all costs. The production of physical objects deliberately sidelines a possible *state capture* or of them being rendered inaccessible by technological means. The production of art as activism, specifically in materials obtainable from stationary and hardware outlets, highlights the human dimension of this type of activism, the art, and of the message.

One such example is found in *Paddling Home* (2010). As a first example of art-activism and the use of an anti-technological approach, the structure of *Paddling Home* is a four-foot by four-foot house that is also a sea-floating structure. This tiny building resembles a typical residential apartment block completed with features such as bay windows, an air conditioning unit, and stainless-steel gates. Like a paddling boat, two paddling oars push out from the two walls, which allows a person to slowly paddle the house away. The concept of this project came from the extremely pervasive living situation across Hong Kong, where people can only afford a tiny apartment, yet spend their

entire lifetime repaying the mortgage due to the high cost of housing compared to their low wages. Real estate developers only follow one successful formula, which compresses housing functions that are marketed to people as grandeur and luxury in order to maximize profit. *Paddling Home* is about mobility and compact living, freedom, and the search for a better urban place. It poses an alternative way to live in the city. The image of a helpless little house paddling away in a vast, dangerous ocean towards the infinite shoreline is similar to using twenty to thirty year's time to repay a huge mortgage loan, which remains both a dangerous and helpless cause.²

Within the praxis of artist-activism, *The Cultural Bureau* is a commentary on the issues that pertain to policy and its bearing on culture. In 2012, the Hong Kong Government announced the intent to establish a Cultural Bureau dedicated to overlook all art, museum, and cultural matters for the Special Administrative Region. At the time, both artists and cultural workers seemed frayed by the appointment of officials with strong ideological and possibly Communist ties. Moreover, the concern was based on how, and in what way, cultural repression may be instrumentalised as a tool for cultural repression from outside of Hong Kong.

The *Real Cultural Bureau* was conceived as a non-technological response to culture and propaganda. The work was inspired by the Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). As a military vehicle, it is a much-used image in both parades, propaganda, and forms of social control. From an artistic perspective, this can be interpreted as both a symbol of military power and a vehicle to suppress freedom by deadly force. In response, I built a pink cardboard version of an APC on top of a trolley. Individuals who pushed the cart from the inside powered its movability. At the top of the APC, the artists represented a Communist official in an official uniform wearing a Chinese tunic suit, Ray Ban sunglasses, and

red pins. Thus, they portrayed the fictitious role of the 'Real Cultural Bureau Director'. With fake printed money, the official scolded politicians and protestors, and attempted to bribe officials into submission for financial gains and military might.

In terms of design-social, the use of materials, colour, and way of representing the specific means, whether monetary values through mimicry, or in as such the use of fake currency in combination with historical devices as loudspeakers, they each navigate a thin line between a true to life reality and the parody of political manoeuvrability. In terms of the social, this overall remains an embodied, anti-technological activism, functioning as commentary that is deeply embedded in not only the uncertainty for the city, neighbourhood, or the territory but one that questions the social at large.

Notes

1. See: Kacey Wong's Facebook account and the Umbrella Movement design competition reaching 5000 users and receiving 600 responses to the online call in 2014. Facebook was chosen for the reason that it provided a familiar platform that was already frequently used by a specific target group. Also see, *HK protests over missing booksellers*, The Financial Times, World Business Newspaper, Asia, 11 January 2016: 1 – 2.
2. See: <http://www.kaceywong.com>.

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Bio

Dr. Kacey Wong's experimental art projects investigate the relationship between men, their social and political environment, and living space. He uses diverse methodologies including sculpture, installation, photography, performance, and social interventions. He was the winner of Best Artist Award in 2010, Rising Artist Award and Outstanding Arts Education Award given by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 2003. He commenced his *Drift City* photo series in 2000, where he dressed up like a skyscraper and travelled from city to city in search for utopia. He later published the photo book *Drift City 10 Years* (2010). Hong Kong public museums and private collectors have collected his mobile home tricycle project, entitled *Wandering Home*, his *Drift City* photo series, and *Sleepwalker* series. Dr Wong's floating house, entitled *Paddling Home*, floated in Victoria Harbour and was the star feature in 2010's Hong Kong & Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism / Architecture exhibition.

