

Luke Ching  
Liu Ding  
James Kong  
Sarah Lai  
Swing Lam  
Ellen Pau  
Tang Kwok Hin  
Sampson Wong  
Yuan Goang-Ming



# BEFORE THE RAIN



Centre for  
Contemporary  
Asian Art

On 28 September 2014 images beamed around the world of large-scale civil disobedience occurring in Hong Kong. There were sweeping views of streets filled with protesters offset by makeshift villages of tents populating the city's arterial thoroughfares. Palpable visions of distress, confusion and resistance were witnessed by those in the city and beyond. The Umbrella Movement was a protest 190 years in the making. Over almost two centuries, Hong Kong had been plagued by an anxiety of identity: divorced from Mainland China and remote from Britain, the city has endured a constant tussle of statehood that left it neither British nor Chinese. The 79 days of protest at the end of 2014 were the first perceptible global indications of this long simmering need for the people of Hong Kong to – finally – become the determiners of their city's future.

While the Umbrella Movement emerged in a contemporary context informed by the global urban 'Occupy' movement, in reality Hong Kong has been in a state of occupation since Hong Kong Island ceded to the British Crown in 1841 as a bargaining chip between powers external to itself at the end of the First Opium War. In the following years, the British began to expand the city, first in 1860 by gaining control of the Kowloon Peninsula and then, in 1898, through negotiations that led to control of further land on a 99-year lease. In 1941, a century after the establishment of British rule, Hong Kong fell to the Japanese. Devastated by the occupation, the city was returned to British rule at the end of World War II in 1945. In just over a century the city had been occupied and was a pawn for three distant powers in constant play for the advantage of others. Throughout this entire period the people of Hong Kong remained voiceless.

However, the end of World War II and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a turning point for Hong Kong. In the years immediately after 1949 Hong Kong witnessed a large-scale de-sinicisation process. The devastation of the Chinese Civil War saw Hong Kong residents and recent migrants actively seeking to imagine Hong Kong as not only a political and geographically separate entity, but also one with a clear separate identity. By 1984 the Hong Kong people had built the city into a leading global player in the new service-oriented economy, an advancement that precipitated China's declaration that it would resume sovereignty of the entirety of Hong Kong in 1997. The Handover would be supported by the provision of a 'One Country, Two Systems' principle that would ensure the continuation of Hong Kong's democratic capitalism until 2047.

The events that began on 28 September 2014 were the result of a long and steady accumulation of uncertainty, anxiety and the need to articulate a cohesive identity for the city. *Before the Rain's* exhibiting artists address the tensions that sparked recent political and civil urgency in Hong Kong but also, critically, seek to reimagine its future. Their perspectives, however, are not united. The majority of the artists presented were born and live in

Hong Kong and they seek to tease out the complexities and paradoxes of living in a city facing a future planned by others.

Leading video artist Ellen Pau has been a constant and critical commentator on Hong Kong's future and exhibits *Diversion*, a work from 1990 that encapsulates the city's constant and consistent undulation of allegiances. Complementing her work is a suite of artists of Hong Kong's next generation; all born in the 1980s their identity remains implicitly tied to Hong Kong and they all see their future in the city post-2047. Sarah Lai's work examines the futility of control – where crowd control barriers become a metaphor for Hong Kong's sovereignty – while Tang Kwok Hin presents symbology as a veneer of constructed control where hidden rules are tethered to gestures of political alignment. Furthering this investigation of control, Luke Ching examines institutional and political inconsistencies and seeks to trace those lost in migration through a litter of miniature Hong Kong identity cards. For these artists the civil urgency of the Umbrella Movement is far from over and has transformed into a consistent state of being.

Commissioned for *Before the Rain* is a curatorial narration of the Umbrella Movement and its continuing conversations by Sampson Wong. Working with Swing Lam and James Kong he presents the topography of a city in protest. Large-scale maps of the city are linked to Lam's architectural drawings of barricades as Kong's looped footage of the protests blurs into a continuous remonstrative reverberation. This is further complemented by selected items from the 'Umbrella Movement Visual Archive', a series of ephemeral art works gathered from the streets before the end of the protests in 2014. Together, these works convey the urgency and the dynamism of a protest in flux.

*Before the Rain* responds to a continuously evolving discourse of Hong Kong's identity that has ramifications that reach beyond the city's borders. Accompanying the exhibiting Hong Kong based artists are Yuan Goang-Ming (Taiwan) and Liu Ding (China) who expand the specific moment of Hong Kong's civil urgency into the more complex wider debate of the region. The Umbrella Movement is brought into wider discussion via Goang-Ming's *561st Hour of Occupation* (2014) which depicts the heart of Taiwan's Sunflower Movement. Foreshadowing the Umbrella Movement by only a few months, students in Taipei protested at what they deemed a trade act that left Taiwan vulnerable to the influence of Beijing. From Beijing, Liu Ding's poem to Hong Kong questions what is "sufficient articulation" and was originally written and distributed as part of the Istanbul Biennale 2015. *A Sentence* (2015) illustrates the paradoxical discordant harmony between

Hong Kong and China where support and obstructions can emerge from the same place.

While *Before the Rain* examines the 79 days Hong Kong stood at a standstill in 2014 and reflects upon the 190 years that preceded its occurrence, the exhibition is, at all times, committed to a conversation about the city's future. The city remains in flux. The year 2047 will be a critical fulcrum in world history – which is to say, a history still in the future – and the discussions between China, Taiwan and Hong Kong over the next thirty years will be complex. But they needn't be rash or divisive. The artists of *Before the Rain* reflect the fact that, for the first time in many decades, the people of Hong Kong will play an active and decisive role for their city and for themselves.

## LIST OF WORKS

### Ground Floor:

James Kong, *1 of 79 days*, 2014, 2 channel video. Courtesy the artist.

Swing Lam, *Temporary structure research in Umbrella Revolution*, 2014-2016, works on paper and mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Artist-Activist, Sampson Wong has closely collaborated with James Kong, Swing Lam and the Umbrella Movement Visual Archive to develop this immersive space.

### First Floor:

Luke Ching, *150 Lost Items*, 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Liu Ding, *A Sentence*, 2016, poem. Courtesy of the artist.

Sarah Lai, *Polish your own shoe as long as you can*, 2015, HD video, 11 mins, 11 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

Sarah Lai, *Demarcated area*, 2017, performance with installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Sarah Lai, *Rub it until it is removed*, 2015, HD video, 5 mins 40 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

Ellen Pau, *Diversion*, 1990, DVC, 5minutes 30 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

Tang Kwok Hin, *Offhand-over*, 2016, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Yuan Goang Ming, *The 561st Hour of Occupation*, 2014, single channel video, 6 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

### Throughout the exhibition:

Selected objects from the Umbrella Movement Visual Archive (UMVA).

Via Getty Images: (Bloomberg), *Occupy Hong Kong Protest Kicks Off Early After Police Clashes*, 2014.

# BEFORE THE RAIN

## 21 January - 19 March 2017

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Images: Still from Sarah Lai, *Polish your own shoe as long as you can*, 2015, HD video, 11mins, 11 seconds. Courtesy the artist. Overleaf: Luke Ching, *150 Lost Items*, 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist and GALLERY EXIT, Hong Kong.