Handbook of Feelings

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To focus attention on the amplified hostility around the world to the figure of the artist and artistic expression, as well as to attend to the conditions of specific instances of repression and specific tactics of resistance, we have commissioned an occasional series consisting of short contributions by and about artists, critics, and cultural professions at risk around the world, including Slovenia, Cuba, Russia, Ukraine, and now, in this text and the three that follow, Hong Kong.

In October 2020 in Hong Kong, three months after the passing of the National Security Law, I lectured at a film class at ████ University. I opened the lecture with Julio Garcia Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema," a seminal essay written in 1969 that argues for a politics of filmmaking that subverts the technically perfect, pleading for a cinema that is urgent and process-driven. Showing a series of film excerpts from Sky Hopinka's *Dislocation Blues* (2017), Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil's *A Violence of a Civilization Without Secrets* (2018), tooth's *moyah pravda newsreel (2011–2012)* (2015), and Trinh T. Minh Ha's *Reassemblage* (1982), I encouraged the students to see beyond the traditional limitations of the documentary. I wanted them to realize they could make a film with a small budget and argued that aesthetic goals shouldn't supplant urgent storytelling or forsake ethics. The professor, ███, a friend, was familiar with my work and expected the tone and ethos of my references to be political in nature, but still, I hesitated before showing them my own short film *Never Rest/Unrest*, made during the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. Taking up the mantle of Espinosa's manifesto, the 28-minute-long film, shot on an iPhone, presents a diaristic view of the Hong Kong protests in a 16:9 vertical aspect ratio. The experimental short depicts moments of in-between and waiting during the relentless duration of the insurgency, sometimes in the heart of direct action: a challenge to the spectacle and clichés of crisis reportage and documentary. There were three school administrators who sat in on the class. When the images of masked schoolchildren in uniform assembling at a mall flashed onscreen and the chants filled the room, the students audibly gasped. I could feel them shifting in their seats, squirming. I watched ████'s face as an

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anchor. My eyes darted over to the school administrators sitting nearby: Their expressions were blank.

A few months later, when I caught up with my friend █████ again for dinner, he said, "I think the students really enjoyed your film. It was really meaningful to them." It was the first time my film had been screened publicly in Hong Kong, I told him. "I think they were shocked that they were seeing your film in a classroom setting," he said. "Actually, I have to tell you a story." He recounted that, months after my lecture, on a bus ride, he was sitting next to one of the administrators present at the lecture. He asked ███, "How is that filmmaker? How is she doing?" ███ paused for a moment, but then it dawned on him what he really meant. He was trying to ask about my safety and whether I was still in Hong Kong. ███ attempted to answer the question with improvised innuendos. When ████ relayed the story to me, he laughed nervously. There was a bit of theatricality to it, he explained. Absurdity. "It seems that new social norms are being constructed. New norms in how we communicate. Anyway, I don't think you could screen your film at the university now." Since my guest lecture, surveillance cameras have been installed throughout faculty offices, including one that looms over my friend's desk; worries grow among professors that they will be asked to sign an oath of allegiance before long. A rumor has spread that no fewer than 1,000 workers were employed just to observe the education sector alone in the Liaison Office, the official arm of the Chinese central government in Hong Kong.

As the confrontations between protesters and police are no longer seen in the streets, the front lines of conflict have materialized in a different form—one less able to sustain international news attention with spectacles of unrest. These new sites of assault emerge as exhaustive missives: landmark rulings marking the new limits of speech, social-media posts written by artists and activists announcing their exile, lists of new arrests, statements by disbanded unions, and new ordinances such as an exit ban giving immigration officers what some argue amounts to "unfettered power" to prevent anyone from leaving Hong Kong.[1] The remaking of the city unfolds as a gradual erosion. "It's actually happening quite fast," my friend ██████ said recently. "Every week it's something. And sometimes daily." Every quarter brings a seismic headline: forty-seven prodemocracy politicians and activists arrested in a single day; the newspaper *Apple Daily* raided and then pressured into folding; the teachers' union, which had a membership of 95,000, disbanded under political threat. And yet there is another, less visible front line of the crackdown: the bureaucratic process of censorship, the regulation of public spaces and licenses, and the films and artworks the public does not hear about that are never screened or exhibited. You cannot know about what you cannot see.

1. "'Intrusive Power': Concern Over Proposed Hong Kong Law That Could Bar Anyone from Leaving City," *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 22, 2021, hongkongfp.com/2021/02/13/intrusive-power-concern-over-proposed-hong-kong-law-that-could-bar-anyone-from-leaving-city/.

Established in British-colonial Hong Kong, the Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration (OFNAA) is tasked with rating films, and it must grant permission before a work may be exhibited publicly. It is a de facto censor: Freelance workers vet all films and videos shown in cinemas and public institutions to gauge their political sensitivity. In June 2021, it published "Film Censorship Guidelines for Censors," a legal toolbox for the vetting of screenings in accordance with the National Security Law employing language amenable to broad interpretation. "When considering a film as a whole and its effects on the viewers," runs a representative passage, "the censor should have regard to his duties to prevent and suppress acts or activities endangering national security." Applying particularly to documentaries—though refusing to name them as such—the guidelines spotlight films deemed a danger to national security that "purport to be a documentary or purport to report on or reenact real events with immediate connection to the circumstances in Hong Kong" and caution that such work "necessitates an even more careful consideration of its contents by the censor."[2] The same day the guidelines were released, Hong Kong's Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival canceled a screening of *Far From Home* (2021), a fictional short centering on the protests directed by Mok Kwan-ling, citing OFNAA's failure to issue either a certificate of approval or refusal before the scheduled event.[3]

Inside the Red Brick Wall, a feature-length film on the siege of Polytechnic University in 2019, and the short *Taking Back the Legislature*, on the storming of the Legislative Council by protesters, were released in 2020 by a group identifying itself as Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers. The release of *Inside the Red Brick Wall* triggered criticism by the government and state-owned newspapers, thereby illuminating the various mechanisms that define and regulate the licit. Both films were shown as a double feature at Ying E Chi cinema in September 2020. A warning card appeared at the beginning of *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, cautioning, "Some of those depictions or acts may constitute criminal offenses under prevailing laws. Some of the contents of or commentaries in the film may be unverified or misleading." The OFNAA had mandated that the documentarians use such a disclaimer at the beginning of the film, and yet, even after giving it a category III rating—the equivalent of an X rating—the OFNAA asked the documentarians to keep the demand for the warning card a secret.[4] The news was leaked anyway, and there was

2. Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration, "Film Censorship Guidelines for Censors," June 11, 2021, ofnaa.gov.hk/filemanager/ofnaa/en/content_1398/filmcensorship.pdf.

3. Lok.@sumlokkei, "#Hk—local film fest says showing of a short film 'has to be cancelled' becos [*sic*] the Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration 'failed to issue' either a certificate of approval or refusal to approve before the scheduled showing," Twitter, June 11, 2021, twitter.com/sumlokkei/status/1403287794554793988?s=20.

4. Elson Tong (@elson_tong), "Hong Kong Office for Film Newspaper and Article Administration (OFNAA) demanded two documentaries on 2019 7.1 LegCo protest and Nov PolyU siege to add disclaimers. OFNAA then demanded the documentaries to keep it secret that OFNAA demanded the disclaimers," Twitter, September 21, 2020, twitter.com/elson_tong/status/1308017328236363777?s=20.

a rumor that the screening DVD sent to the OFNAA had been "returned broken in pieces."[5]

The fallout implicated various art and film organizations in the city. Ying E Chi cinema became a target of political retaliation. First it was attacked by state-owned Chinese newspapers, then its funding was abruptly cut by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, which is funded by the city government. *Ta Kung Pao*, a local pro-Beijing newspaper, published an opinion article criticizing the Arts Development Council for "funding black-violence movies,"[6] the term "black" being a direct translation from Chinese signifying something sinister and criminal. An illustration featured alongside the piece depicted a reel of celluloid unfurling across the page, secreting black sludge.[7] Citing "personal reasons," three members of the Council—the artist Chris Chan Kam-Sing, the songwriter Adrian Chow Pok-yin, and the theater director Ind Lee Chun—resigned, though it was clear they had been forced out by political pressure. All three had become targets of criticism by multiple state-owned Chinese newspapers, who called them "troublemakers" and "anti-government figures." In addition, Chan was doxxed, his personal details published.

The vagueness of the National Security Law leaves the legality of films and artworks open to interpretation, and the uncertainty over the consequences of violating the law only further underlines its vagueness. Any artist publishing, screening, or circulating an arguably politically sensitive work risks setting off the state's invisible trip wire. Even the act of circulating material potentially in violation of the law implicates all parties involved. The case of *Inside the Red Brick Wall* illuminates the circuits and various arms of the state that censor, intimidate, and threaten artists and filmmakers through both legal and extralegal means. State newspapers, for example, act as searchlights illuminating new targets. In a time of so many unknowns that invites endless speculation and paranoia about political threats, receiving unwanted press is a definitive way to know that you are on the authorities' watch list and that, at the very least, one should be prepared for the consequences to come.

Still, the locations of such trip wires are unpredictable. When Kiwi Chow premiered *Revolution of Our Times* (2021) at the Cannes Film Festival in July 2021 under his own name, the Hong Kong independent-film world was surprised that

5. Hong Kong Liberty 攬炒團隊 (@HKLiberty_Team), "#SiegeOfPolyU Documentary #InsideTheRedBrickWall won @idfa #InternationalDocumentaryFilmFestivalAmsterdam for Best Editing. #idfa #idfa2020 Its DVD was returned broken in pieces after producers sent it to #HongKong Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration for review," Twitter, November 27, 2020, twitter.com/HKLiberty_Team/status/1332291802368520193?s=20.

6. "Hong Kong Artist Kacey Wong Moves to Taiwan," *RTHK*, August 3, 2021, news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1604000-20210803.htm.

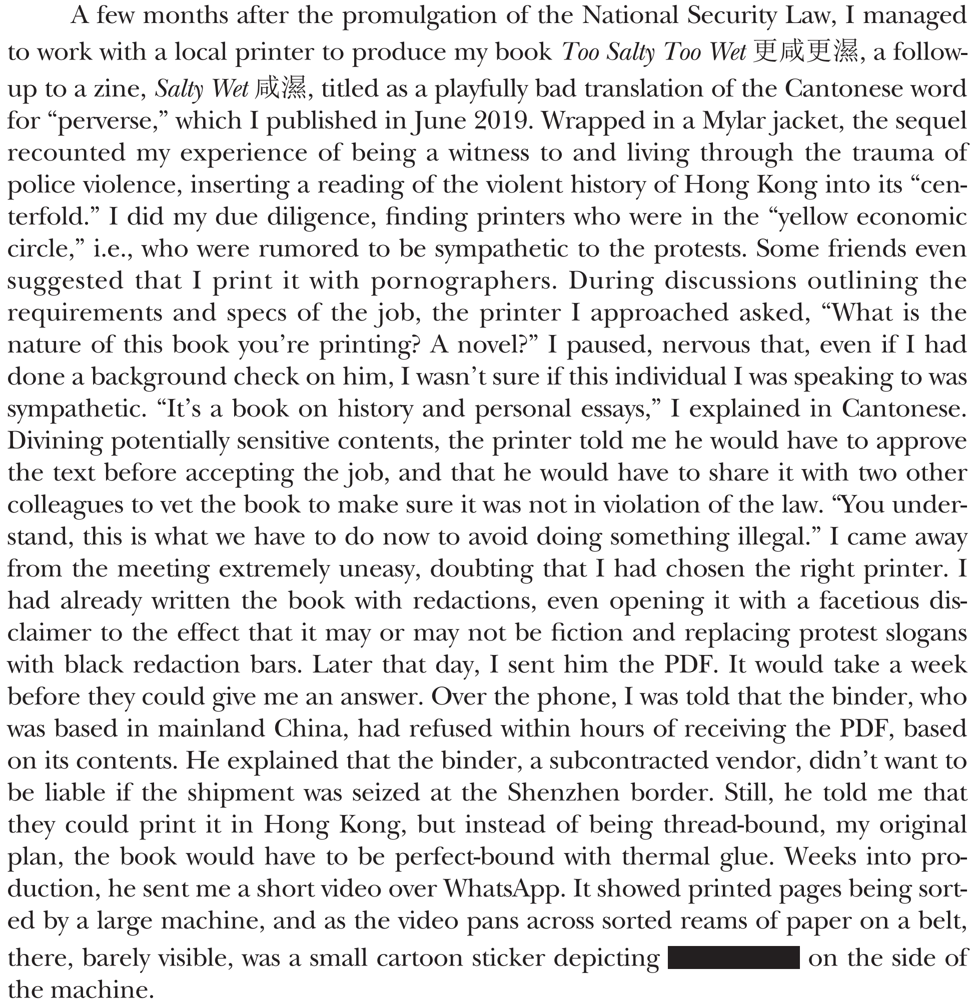
7. Jerome Taylor (@JeromeTaylor), "The latest target for Ta Kung Pao is the Hong Kong Arts Development Council which it accuses in today's front page of 'funding black violence movies'. (TKP is part of the opaquely-owned media group that answers to Beijing's Liaison Office)," Twitter, March 17, 2021, twitter.com/JeromeTaylor/status/1371991962304212995?s=20.

he chose not to release it anonymously. In interviews, Chow has explained that he is ready for the potential consequences of releasing such a film and stated that he won't be leaving Hong Kong despite the risk. Chow's decision to go public could be read as living out the raison d'être of his literally titled vignette *Self-Immolator* in the multi-director film *Ten Years* (2015). The Cannes premiere of *Revolution of Our Times* coincided with a landmark ruling that deemed the phrase "revolution of our times" tantamount to inciting secession.[8] The international press described the last-minute programming announcement as potentially forcing a diplomatic "situation," but local politicians in Hong Kong and state-owned newspapers were eerily, perhaps even strategically, silent about it. *Revolution of Our Times* has only been publicly screened outside of Hong Kong. Yet both the National Security Law and a newly passed film-censorship ordinance leave room for retroactively criminalizing acts—and even for laws to apply extraterritorially, allowing them to extend promiscuously through time and space, far beyond Hong Kong or any Chinese territory.

Even films that get past local censors might still be deemed a breach of the National Security Law. Clement Leung Cheuk-man, the permanent secretary for commerce and economic development, has warned of this potential dissonance, adding that film censors—who are, after all, civil servants—will be given national-security training. While Hong Kong's censors have government affiliation, they are not functionally part of the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in Hong Kong. Nor are they part of the Liaison Office. By hiding behind vague legal language and a complex web of accountability for regulating speech, one could argue, the government leaves both the public and censors to guess where the line separating safe and unsafe speech is. In this way, many fear that organizations such as the OFNAA will end up producing yet another line, invisible to the public, drawn by self-censorship, in order to evade their own liability.

The Film, Newspaper and Article Administration, less known by the public, also performs background checks on artists and filmmakers producing film or video that is exhibited in cinemas or public arts institutions. █████, a friend, told me bluntly, "You couldn't have done the show you did at Artists Space at an institution here," referring to my solo show *Slippery When Wet*, which was exhibited at Artists Space in New York for the first few months of 2021 online and at its 11 Cortlandt Alley space. The show presented paper-based works, sculptures, new-media installations, and films, and its theme centered on developing a "wet ontology" of Hong Kong—a city in a process of ongoing and violent transfiguration—using ink, tears, leaks, and logistical flows. ████ continued, "And if they did a background check on you, it would be very, very interesting." Another friend, ██, surmised, "If artists are censored just because they've posted about the 2019 protests, most Hong Kong artists wouldn't be able to be shown in local institutions or

8. The case concerned a motorcycle driver who flew a flag emblazoned with the words "Free Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" in English and Chinese.



venues anymore." Many worried that for this reason censors were taking an overzealous approach. It seems that the vagueness of the law allows the state to produce the social conditions of fear and paranoia that encourage both organizations and individuals to proactively redact, sanitize, and/or expurgate works of art.

A few months after the promulgation of the National Security Law, I managed to work with a local printer to produce my book *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕, a follow-up to a zine, *Salty Wet* 咸濕, titled as a playfully bad translation of the Cantonese word for "perverse," which I published in June 2019. Wrapped in a Mylar jacket, the sequel recounted my experience of being a witness to and living through the trauma of police violence, inserting a reading of the violent history of Hong Kong into its "centerfold." I did my due diligence, finding printers who were in the "yellow economic circle," i.e., who were rumored to be sympathetic to the protests. Some friends even suggested that I print it with pornographers. During discussions outlining the requirements and specs of the job, the printer I approached asked, "What is the nature of this book you're printing? A novel?" I paused, nervous that, even if I had done a background check on him, I wasn't sure if this individual I was speaking to was sympathetic. "It's a book on history and personal essays," I explained in Cantonese. Divining potentially sensitive contents, the printer told me he would have to approve the text before accepting the job, and that he would have to share it with two other colleagues to vet the book to make sure it was not in violation of the law. "You understand, this is what we have to do now to avoid doing something illegal." I came away from the meeting extremely uneasy, doubting that I had chosen the right printer. I had already written the book with redactions, even opening it with a facetious disclaimer to the effect that it may or may not be fiction and replacing protest slogans with black redaction bars. Later that day, I sent him the PDF. It would take a week before they could give me an answer. Over the phone, I was told that the binder, who was based in mainland China, had refused within hours of receiving the PDF, based on its contents. He explained that the binder, a subcontracted vendor, didn't want to be liable if the shipment was seized at the Shenzhen border. Still, he told me that they could print it in Hong Kong, but instead of being thread-bound, my original plan, the book would have to be perfect-bound with thermal glue. Weeks into production, he sent me a short video over WhatsApp. It showed printed pages being sorted by a large machine, and as the video pans across sorted reams of paper on a belt, there, barely visible, was a small cartoon sticker depicting ██████████ on the side of the machine.

Shortly after the passage of the National Security Law, public art institutions hired legal teams to help assess their risk. Popular protest phrases, such as "Free Hong Kong, revolution of our times," "No riot, only tyranny," and "Corrupt cops, may your whole family die," were widely understood to be banned: One could be arrested just for uttering these phrases on the street. The consequences for employing other expressions were less clear. In preparation for a reading and performance, I was told that the institution hosting it had been advised by its legal team that acts of speech

that may be interpreted to promote or express "secession," "subversion," "terrorism," and "collusion" were to be avoided. "I'm not even sure what that means," I said. It was the responsibility of the institution to avoid hosting an illegal event. "If there is anything punishable by law during a performance, the venue should stop it," I was told by ■■■■■. I was friends with the programmer, so I was sympathetic to the position they were in. They continued, "If we find that there's an issue, we'll say that we're experiencing technical difficulties." The term "technical difficulties," cited as a reason for a canceled event, is widely understood in mainland China as a euphemism for censorship.[9] Some say that Hong Kong is becoming more like the mainland and that Hong Kong artists have much to learn from artists there. Others argue that for the next several years, Hong Kong artists will face much greater scrutiny than mainland artists. The new censorship law, which expands on the National Security Law and which was released while I was writing this piece, specifies three years in prison as punishment for exhibiting banned films in Hong Kong, a more severe punishment than in the mainland. I was still uncertain where the red line was for my reading/performance, so I kept pushing for more legal insight. The programmer confessed, "The line between advocacy and documentary is very fine. It turns out that the law is quite broad, but the lawyer seemed confident. As long as you don't violate the law, he said, it's fine."

In the end, no "technical difficulties" interrupted my reading, though I felt as though I was shadowboxing, having to weave and navigate around an invisible opponent in the form of codes and sanctions. Later, a rumor spread that Hong Kong gallery directors had been invited to a private dinner with Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who advised them on the limits of the law and assured them that the Liaison Office would only go after exceptional cases. "And they trust Carrie Lam?" I asked. "I don't know where the line is anymore," my friend ■■■■■ confided. "I used to think I knew, but I have no idea anymore." When the rule of law is dead, perhaps it is better to go to clairvoyants than lawyers, I joked. How can one be confident in the value of legal advice at a time like this? Even some who interpreted the National Security Law as merely an anti-protest law were wrong. Such a reading was an extremely limited interpretation of it that underestimated its powers; in practice the law would be much more comprehensive and far-reaching. And one must also account for the extralegal political tools—the harassment, surveillance, intimidation by state press, and doxxing.

Political pressure also appears in the form of bureaucratic obstacles. Galleries have been pressured to apply for Temporary Places of Public Entertainment (TPPE) licenses, which are impossible to obtain for art institutions operating out of industrial spaces, as many do. This, some fear, could be a way for police to crack down on such spaces via registration technicalities, even COVID-19 regulations. In June 2021, Parallel Space, an art venue operating in Sham Shui Po,

9. Patrick Frater and Rebecca Davis, "Shanghai Film Festival Abruptly Pulls Opening Film 'The Eight Hundred,'" *Variety*, June 14, 2019, variety.com/2019/film/news/shanghai-film-festival-pulls-opening-film-the-eight-hundred-huayi-bros-1203243335/.

was raided twice by police and accused of operating without a license by the Food and Hygiene Department. The police photographed the works on display after receiving a complaint that they contained "seditious" content.[10] A national-security hotline was launched by police, drawing hundreds of thousands of tips.[11] The regulation of lawful speech implies a system of fear, but loyalists and nationalists are enthusiastic about taking part and are incentivized by political ambition. A culture of informants is only just developing, and lawmakers in Hong Kong, eager to please Beijing, have gone on smear campaigns of their own. At the Legislative Council, pro-Beijing lawmaker and New People's Party chairman Eunice Yung lambasted West Kowloon Cultural District's M+ museum, claiming that its inaugural and upcoming shows were causing "great concern" and asking, "Would the art pieces to be displayed there breach the so-called red line? With the National Security Law in place, we have to safeguard national security." Spotlighting museum exhibitions and public institutions, Carrie Lam responded by saying that authorities will be "on full alert" to make sure museum exhibitions are not undermining national security.[12]

Speculating about the existence of an invisible class of political targets—or, at the very least, of people of special interest to the state and subject to extra surveillance—invites panic. It is easy to overthink. Some people, including my father, who no longer lives in Hong Kong, believe that what they've posted on Facebook, Twitter, and other personal social-media accounts would prevent them from being allowed back. This is an exaggeration, at least for now. Holding an opinion involves a different level of risk than being implicated in organizing in political organizations or trade unions or being the author of or participating in the production of politically sensitive material. The crackdown requires that one deploy specificity as an antidote to fear and paranoia. Rather than simple alarmism, this environment demands careful analysis when determining where the red line is and what actions are still possible. Increasingly, artists become anonymous or release works under pseudonyms. Given the collapsing infrastructure for artists in the form of disappearing university jobs, denied visas, and imperiled government funding, how can they endure? While many are leaving, many are also staying. Some cannot afford to leave, and some cannot leave their elderly parents behind. Others have simply chosen to stay. Some even want to stay to see these events through, even if it means they risk having to leave suddenly overnight; they want to see what's still possible. Others are prepared to face imprisonment. In the midst of all this is the hope that an underground will flourish, but when artists and film-

10. Ophelia Lai, "Hong Kong Art Space Raided Twice by Authorities," *ArtAsiaPacific*, June 15, 2021, https://artasiapacific.com/news/hong-kong-art-space-raided-twice-by-authorities.

11. Clifford Lo, "Hong Kong's National Security Law Hotline Draws 100,000 Tips in Just Six Months, Police Say," *South China Morning Post*, May 10, 2021, www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3132880/hong-kongs-national-security-law-hotline-draws-100000.

12. "We Won't Let Arts Undermine Security: Carrie Lam," *RTHK*, March 17, 2021, news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1581040-20210317.html.

makers disperse, adapt to new methods of circulation, and invent new forms of survival, there is an impossible paradox: The underground needs the public to engage with it, but secrecy enables its survival. Is it possible to sustain hiding in plain sight?

"I stopped reading the news at the end of 2020," someone told me when I had them over for dinner. "It was too much for me. But anyway, are you *really* worried? There are certain people whom the government has targeted, but they are few. It's not that bad." Remarking on the banning of the June 4th vigil in Hong Kong, journalist Louisa Lim remarked, "If the vigil is banned forever, we will all become like the Tiananmen Mothers. Those who remember will no longer be able to remember en masse. When you atomize that, so that people can only remember secretly and silently and in small groups, I think it's a huge loss."[13] When remembering can no longer be a collective activity, it is the responsibility of individuals to do so on their own. Yet those continuing to keep resistance alive, whether in secrecy, anonymity, or through more obscure forms, become more exposed. Threat is experienced unevenly. Describing a man pacing in front of the glass doors of her office, my friend confided in me that she might have been followed shortly after it was announced that government funding was pulled from her [redacted] production company. The entropy of civil society atomizes experience, even after a prolonged swell of collectivity in protest. "Mutual trust," my friend [redacted] observed, "is now untenable in social interaction."

By August 2021, over 90,000 people had left Hong Kong. Making up only 1.5 percent of the population, this segment accounted for almost 2,000 nurses, making up 6.5 percent of the total, as well as a similar proportion of teachers and doctors. About 40 percent of teachers are projected to retire or resign early. Before 1997, 800,000 people emigrated from Hong Kong in anticipation of the handover. After 1997, 500,000 of those returned with foreign passports, making up the "return diaspora."[14] Given that it depends on the future political climate in Hong Kong, predicting whether another return diaspora will form is difficult. From the safety of exile in Taiwan, the artist Kacey Wong recounted to the press his departure from Hong Kong airport, during which a group of extra immigration officers, "spread out as if they were playing American football," were called to stand at the gate to watch "everyone who was boarding for a last-minute tackle."[15] Leaving Hong Kong at this time forces one to confront the possibility that a return may be impossible, given whatever they're on record as having done or will do. The term "bottom line" is used often to state a personal limit on staying in Hong Kong. For

13. Antony Dapiran, "No Place for Tiananmen Vigil in China's New Hong Kong," *Coda Story*, June 2, 2020, www.codastory.com/disinformation/beijing-hong-kong-protests/.

14. Nan M. Sussman, *Return Migration and Identity: A Global Phenomenon, A Hong Kong Case* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011), pp. 6, 34.

15. Amber Wang, "'We'll Meet Again': Why Hong Kong Artist Kacey Wong Chose 'Self-Exile' in Taiwan," *Hong Kong Free Press*, August 14, 2021, hongkongfp.com/2021/08/14/why-a-hong-kong-artist-kacey-wong-chose-self-exile-in-taiwan/.

some, the “bottom line” is having to take an oath at one’s job. For others, it’s when they see people like them in danger that they decide a fundamental paradigm shift has taken place. While I too looked to other artists and filmmakers in Hong Kong to gauge my own safety, people who made work under their own name and were politically vocal—I became unnerved when I realized that some of these people were using *me* as *their* gauge. I felt reasonably confident that I was safe, but the psychological game of locating the parameters of potential exposure or even heightened surveillance produced paranoia that felt increasingly isolating. But when Kacey Wong, an artist whose departure was for some in the arts community their “bottom line,” announces his exile, what then? “I feel like I’ve kept shifting my bottom line,” my friend ████ confessed. If we are to understand ourselves as living inside of history, how do we understand the nature of the times we live in now? Knowing what time in history we are living through right now can only be speculative, and in Hong Kong, questions remain regarding the true gravity of the threat: When will the firewall go up? When will there be no resistance to the argument that universities are no longer “free” places? When will it be time to flee?

For the past two months, I’ve been talking to my parents less than usual. Phone calls would often lead to warnings from them and questions about whether I had seen the news. I could begin explaining to them about all the other people I know who are more politically exposed than I am, but they don’t care. I could tell them I haven’t had any of those warning signs that more well-known and more visible artists have experienced. I haven’t been followed. I haven’t been written about by a state newspaper. I could tell them that my work is too abstract or oblique in its approach. Once when I tried to explain this, my mother said, “They are intentionally unpredictable. You’ve written a book. They’re particularly sensitive about printed materials.” Sometimes my mother says, “You are very brave.” But in a subsequent phone call, the sentiment abruptly shifts to its opposite: “You are very naive.” For my parents—my father’s family fled from Shanghai to Hong Kong as political refugees—the line between leaving early and leaving too late is a knife’s edge. Attachment to a place when it defies pragmatism proves fatal historically, and my parents fear an unrecoverable miscalculation on my part.

Every summer since 2019 has been the hottest one on record. Speaking about the unrelenting heat with a woman who owns a small shop a few doors down from where I live, I tried to stand out of the way of bicycle traffic in the village alleyways as she lamented, “It feels like a typhoon is about to come, but it never fully releases.” The intense and unprecedented heat, signs of broader climate change, of course, is only secondary to the news of crackdowns unfolding every day. The air envelops you when you step out of the house. Your body feels immediately heavy from the humidity. Those jailed in Hong Kong, many of them in the Aberdeen prison on the south side of Hong Kong Island, sit in cells and facilities that are particularly poor at mitigating this intense heat. In May 2021, a “hot-weather petition” with 100,000 signatures urged better welfare for prisoners, including more frequent showers, the provision of cold water, and better ventila-

tion.[16] Jails are almost the only places where air conditioning is absent in Hong Kong, even as more people are imprisoned for political crimes. Where protection against subtropical heat is absent, from the coffin-sized subdivided flats where some of the poorest in the city live[17] to the sleeping quarters of migrant domestic helpers,[18] the abyssal line of the marginal communities that make up the city becomes visible.

For people with any political exposure, it is reasonable to speculate that you are on some kind of list, and also, equally importantly, that the list is ranked in terms of priority. You know the extent of your political exposure, even if your friends may not, and you look to the news to see the people facing the front lines of the crackdown as markers of risk. A personal checklist of threat can be summarized as follows: (1) what news outlets you've been quoted in and what you've been on record as saying; (2) what you've published; (3) the nature of the articles, books, texts, or films you've released and the size of the platforms these materials were distributed through or released on and whether these venues were local; (4) what groups you may be part of and whether that is on record; (5) what you've been documented on film or in writing as doing; (6) whether you've been captured on video in certain actions; (7) what content you've published has gone viral and whether it has been reposted by state media; (8) whether you've been followed; (9) whether you've been arrested, and if at a protest site, under what pretense could you face re-arrest; (10) whether state media have written about your work; (11) if you were quoted in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, how politically sensitive were the things you said; (12) whether you've received threatening messages from individuals or immigration authorities; (13) where you were in particularly significant protest actions, such as the occupation of the legislative council or the siege of Polytechnic University; (14) what your social-media presence is like; (15) whether you run a public space or organization. Some have been careful this whole time. Some are backtracking and saying less. You feel a spasm after each crackdown, especially when someone of a similar occupation or profile becomes a political target or announces their exile. As an enigmatic system of threat grows, it becomes clear that this is a time of many unknowns.

Meanwhile, a well-heeled and hypervisible side of Hong Kong is intent on sustaining its image as Asia's World City, as the official slogan goes. "Nothing has

16. Jeffie Lam, "Welfare Petition with 100,000 Signatures Pours Heat on Hong Kong Prison Bosses to Protect Inmates from Sweltering Weather," *South China Morning Post*, May 23, 2021, www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3134547/welfare-petition-100000-signatures-pours-heat-hong-kong.

17. "Coffin Homes, Subdivided Flats and Partitioned Rooms in Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, *HK Magazine*, February 28, 2013, www.scmp.com/magazines/hk-magazine/article/2035259/coffin-homes-subdivided-flats-and-partitioned-rooms-hong-kong.

18. Jun Pang, "Domestic Workers Need Rules to Govern Air-Con Use, Claims Politician as Employer Faces Backlash over 'Inhumane Treatment,'" *Hong Kong Free Press*, August 10, 2017, hongkongfp.com/2017/08/10/domestic-workers-need-rules-govern-air-con-use-claims-politician-employer-faces-backlash-inhumane-treatment/.

dented confidence here," insists Francis Belin, Asia Pacific president of Christie's, upon announcing a new Asia headquarters in the city.[19] Concurrently, a new contemporary-art museum, West Kowloon District's M+, is slated to open in the fall, and Hong Kong Basel just entered its eighth year. Senior Beijing officials have urged Hong Kong's government to continue to make efforts to improve its international image in arts and culture, especially with the intent of keeping up with competing cities such as Seoul. In a piece in the *South China Morning Post* that interviewed expats on their views on Hong Kong's political outlook, one man, a British art dealer with galleries in London and Hong Kong, described how since the National Security Law, Hong Kong has returned to a "semblance of normalcy again."[20] Moreover, Amazon Video has two series, *The Expatriates* and *Exciting Times*, both based on optioned novels about expats in Hong Kong, simultaneously in development and production. *The Expatriates*, directed by Lulu Wang and co-produced by Nicole Kidman, was described as tone-deaf and soft propaganda by the press, especially when Kidman received special treatment—having her quarantine waived—from the local government.[21] Defending the decision, a statement was issued stating Kidman's exemption "was a necessary operation and development of Hong Kong's economy."[22] These productions of the licit and sanctioned offer a fantasy intent on harmonizing, revitalizing, and stabilizing the image of Hong Kong. The immigration department granted visas for the foreign-film crew, but at the same time, in the past year, it has been denying visas for foreign correspondents and even scholars; foreign correspondents currently in the city worry that their visas may not be renewed. Promoted by financial stakeholders ranging from the state to global capital, the furnishing of this vision of ordinary life in Hong Kong—undergirded by forgetting, redacting, and obscuring—is relentless.

Lauren Berlant reminds us that crisis unfolds as a subtle perversion of ordinary life:

> Yet since catastrophe means change, crisis rhetoric belies the constitutive point that slow death—or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations—is neither a state of

19. "Three Hong Kong Arts Development Council Members Resign," *Artforum*, August 11, 2021, www.artforum.com/news/three-hong-kong-arts-development-council-members-resign-86332.

20. Laura Westbrook, "'This Is My Home': Hong Kong's Foreign Residents Say They Have No Plans to Leave Because of National Security Law," *South China Morning Post*, July 31, 2021, www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3143207/my-home-hong-kongs-foreign-residents-say-they-have-no-plans.

21. Patrick Frater and Rebecca Davis, "Nicole Kidman and Amazon Series 'The Expats' Get Quarantine Exemption from Image-Conscious Hong Kong Regime," *Variety*, August 19, 2021, variety.com/2021/global/asia/nicole-kidman-amazon-the-expats-special-treatment-hong-kong-1235044441/.

22. "Nicole Kidman Keeping Away from HK People, Says Govt." *RTHK*, August 19, 2021, news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1606655-20210819.htm.

> exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants discovered scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock.[23]

While a culture scrambles for survival against various threats, the licit and sanctioned image of Hong Kong as an enduring tax haven and a regional center of global capital reigns. On Twitter, a thread written by a man who describes himself as a Chinese lawyer "here to expose Western hypocrisy" went viral, showing people walking around a luxury mall. "My weekly walk thru IFC in Central to the gym to showcase the worsening 'oppression and unrest,'" the caption read mockingly.[24] Parallel narratives of Hong Kong, between rapid attrition and flourishing, compete in defining the city. In the production of this new political reality, national and global capital are made accomplices. In private, we are left with a handful of feelings, constantly second-guessing, risking, and interpreting the material and spectral shapes that distinguish between danger and safety shifting around us. A sinister calm cordons the streets.

As I write this, still more will change, and in one week, I will have left Hong Kong.

23. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 101–102.

24. Taro (@taro_taylor), "My weekly walk thru IFC in Central to the gym to showcase the worsening 'oppression and unrest' in 'communist' #HongKong Stay tuned for more horror next week! Love and kisses to all China watchers," Twitter, July 24, 2021, twitter.com/taro_taylor/status/1418861679337684995?s=21.