

IMPOSSIBLE DIALOGUE

David Clarke

I first really got to know Chan Yuk Keung in 1991 when he and Chan Wai Bong had a two person show in Room 240 of HKU's Main Building. In between the teaching semesters the Fine Arts Department turned that room into a temporary exhibition space, and offered it to various artists, mostly younger and more experimental ones who had few other opportunities of getting their work shown in Hong Kong at the time. Many, like Chan Yuk Keung, had gained their art education overseas and were in the process of trying to connect an art language learnt elsewhere to the needs of the place and time in which they were living - something that was by no means an easy task. There were few precedents to follow: 'traditional' Chinese art didn't offer much help, and the solutions of earlier Hong Kong artists (however hard won) didn't seem relevant to the situation of their younger counterparts growing up in the post-Joint Declaration world. Needless to say, nobody was interested in buying contemporary art, and there was no Art Development Council to turn to for funding.

The two Chans chose to use their exhibition (titled *Impossible Dialogue*) as an opportunity to conduct an artistic conversation – they sent each other a series of apparently meaningless items which the recipient then responded to through artistic creation. Such a dialogic structure perhaps indicates how important mutual interaction was for this small group of returnee artists. Although each eventually found their own personal artistic solution, their own way of localizing their imported artistic training, I feel it was easier for those solutions to arise because there was a critical mass of artists each facing a similar cultural dilemma. An artistic or intellectual peer group provides stimulus and validation (and challenge), even to the most individualistic of artists.

One part of Chan Yuk Keung's own solution to the conundrum of how to make art in this peculiar place and time was a degree of self-consciousness about the art-making process, a conceptual turn that is detectable in most of his mature work. Unlike those European and American artists we associate with the early phase of Conceptual art, however, Chan was not involved with any wholesale rejection of the visual, any 'dematerialization of the art object'. Indeed, his works show a strong concern with objects and materials. Not at first sight the most obvious counterpart to a conceptual orientation, that involvement with technique and concern for the physical properties of things is what gives his work a tautness, and ensures that he is never tempted to merely illustrate an idea.

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