

Street as Museum as Method: Stocktaking and Displaying (Visual) Culture

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Who Decide?

The word “artwork” and the word “documentation” go hand in hand. But isn’t all artworks are a kind of documentation (of the artist’s mind and skills using certain medium)? The art historians will certainly agree to this, but may not to that all documentations are artworks. The questions to be raised are: what makes certain documentation an artwork? its content, its method, its meaning, its style, its technique, its aesthetics, its value or its history? And who will decide? To use an institutional argument (from Arthur Danto and George Dickie), of course, it is the Art World and, instrumentally, the museums that make the decisions of what becomes art.

This is why the museum, such as M+, the “self-proclaimed museum of visual culture”, together with certain “self-proclaimed curators” such as myself, can always determine what and when documentations can become artworks. And we, as a panel of delegates here vested with M+’s institutional authority for this 2-day workshop, may sometime have a say on some leading decisions; in theory. Therefore, I will take the liberty to ask and provide a working argument to the question “what is visual culture” before exploring the issue of ARTWORKDOCUMENTATION. I will employ some project examples from the Community Museum Project (CMP), a local curatorial collective with which I am affiliated, to illustrate some of my perspectives or plausible answers to the workshop questions¹ proposed by the organizer.

Making Visual Culture

Contrary to some academic definitions² of “visual culture” derived from the art history faculties, I am tempted to use a commonsensical argument to kick-start the discussion. I plan to divide the concept into at least two different dimensions: There is a dimension of visual culture in its making, and there is the other dimension of it being themed, identified, collected, studied and theorized. Simply put, they are “the making of visual culture” versus “the study of visual culture”. And I propose to start with “the making of visual culture” (as opposed to “the making of visual image”) by offering a seemingly simple, if not simplistic, proposition for our discussion:

Self-consciously or un-selfconsciously, people constantly produce and reproduce visual cultures by organizing and arranging nature and/or artifacts,

¹ See Project Description of M+Matters: ARTWORKDOCUMENTATION.

² Visual Culture/Visual Studies: Inventory of Recent Definitions

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/visualarts/VisualCulture/VisualCultureStudies-definitions.html> Retrieved on 18 Nov 2013.

images, light, spectacles and physical spaces with certain technologies in accordance to certain human intentions in daily life.

That is to say, human unceasingly makes visual culture at every moment; the material world constructed around us already constitutes a scope of visual (and inevitably material) culture, whether or not we identify it as such. It is, in essence, not limited to the visual arts, media arts, film, video, photography, popular art, advertising, architecture, digital art or internet imagery, etc.; visual culture should not be understood only within the ambit of image art, but as a field of material and visible realities that encompasses everything that is seen and is making sense to a particular audience or stakeholder. Visual culture, which is self-consciously or un-selfconsciously constructed by us, constitutes everything seen that makes sense. We are immersed in visual culture as if fishes in water, only that the medium, unlike water, is made by ourselves.

A Metaphorical Detour

I was trained as a painter, and I want to talk about why my painter's thinking has, with time, transformed into my visual culture thinking. Despite all the theoretical and conceptual articulations about painting, what a painter does is to manipulate the elements – paints, colors, brushstrokes, shapes, texture, images, or even objects, etc. - on the white canvas. I slowly become dissatisfied with the limiting white rectangle, and the ways and possibilities to just manipulating the two-dimensional picture plane. I later turned to sculpture, and later, installation art, thinking that at least there were more "elements" to work and play with within the three-dimensional space. One can arrange materials, into three-dimensional forms with sculpture, and things, images, sounds, space, light and even time inside an installation space; and necessarily, one can even direct the flow and experience of the audience within the gallery space. This was how I later became interested in museum studies and exhibition curation. To me, manipulating "things" inside a white cube seemed more challenging and fulfilling than arranging imageries or graphic contents, and often, making "illusions" on a flat surface. However, as I started making installation art and curating exhibitions within the four walls, I came to realize that there were more to do without the white cube than within. There was an array of cultural preconceptions and social relations a curator needed to deal with before even stepping into the white cube. There were important but biased decisions to make in every selection of things and people to be included into such an institutional playground – a playground, namely the Art World, where only a handful of "self-proclaimed art people" were enthusiastically making and participating. But seeing beyond this playground, isn't a city already a vast installation art space where dwellers or relevant stakeholders have already curated? Why do artists and curators restrict themselves within the picture plane and the gallery walls? If we treat a city as a mega art space, it is analogous to a huge installation art exhibition where a multitude of elements – streets, architecture, buildings, plantations, vegetations, dwellings, schools, landfills, traffic, markets, shops, signs, street furniture, people, pets and even air, light, etc.

are arranged, composed, structured or displayed to serve certain expressive, aesthetic, ethical, social and cultural goals.

In short, the urban infrastructure and its social conditions have always been and are constantly being curated by its government and the citizens. City is akin to a museum where our histories, stories and urban artifacts are constantly being constructed, deconstructed, discarded, manipulated, selected, archived and showcased, if only we have a right pair of spectacles to see them. One can imagine the extent of “re-making” (or gentrification) upon the city’s visual landscapes and its cultures under the incessant urban re-development or “city branding” programs advocated by the government and realty developers in every city; is it not a top-down city curation project?

Street as a Museum

It is against this background that an independent curatorial collective, the Community Museum Project, was founded. In 2004, it initiated the *Street as Museum* series of projects in order to explore, collect and visualize what is worth seeing and learning on the streets. If city is a mega museum, streets and alleys can become the various temporary thematic galleries within. The famous Lee Tung Street in Wan Chai - also nick-named Wedding Card Street due to its business cluster - which was demolished and is now being re-built is a case in point: Since the late 1990s, Lee Tung Street and its surrounding areas had become a “civic war zone” between the street’s inhabitants and the Urban Renewal Authority, as the district was subjected to large-scale removal and redevelopment. Despite strong opposition, this historic and unique business cluster and its inhabitants’ livelihoods were to be destroyed. To scavenge what was due to be razed, the CMP began to collect images and stories from the site - a narrow street of barely 9 meters across, comprising a continuous cluster of 5-storey buildings erected in the 1950s. The street was surrounded by Hong Kong’s typical high-rises, which made its complete façades impossible to be seen at any one angle from afar. Student researchers went out to collect anecdotes and images from its varied business and residential settings; CMP photographers were assigned to make detailed photographic inventories of the street artifacts (e.g. letter-boxes, gates, street signs, etc.) and shop-fronts using a unique “photo-stocktaking” approach as explained below. **Figure 1** is a pair of composite streetscape compiled from over 300 images collected frame by frame, illustrating both facades of the building clusters along the street, which is impossible to see from any angle in reality.





Figure 1: The east (above) and west façade of the building clusters on Lee Tung Street.

Photo-stocktaking

Assuming the role of a “cultural scavenger” and in an attempt to contribute to the “preservation” of the street, the Community Museum Project came up with an unusual documentation method, namely, Photo-stocktaking. For over 6 months, two photographers were employed to record, systematically, in grid format the frontal views of *all* the shops and floors from both sides of the street. A crane was used to raise the photographer up to shoot at each floor level. Rather than making a photo-documentary in a journalistic sense, the CMP deliberated on an *impartial* photo-shooting approach, be it of an object, a person or a setting. Stylization and aesthetic input was deliberately avoided. Instead of catering to the aesthetic intention or extraordinary camera angle of the photographer, the emphasis was just to take a picture of the subject matter - say, each shop-front - under a consistent frame with the *same* shooting angle, distance and timing. A designer was then hired for 2 months to painstakingly piece over 300 photographic fragments together into a continuous façade image, using Photoshop and with necessary visual and digital manipulations. The outcome is a pair of panoramic images of the street, which have never been seen before in reality. This is the same familiar street, but from an unusual view, only made possible with digital photographic manipulation, a complement to the usual photographic and archival approach in museum practice. The result was an exhibition of collected stories accompanied by an array of consistently framed images, and a pair of 6-meter visual artifacts representing the Lee Tung Street streetscape. Framing the street into a “museum exhibition”, the panoramic images had incidentally become a storytelling tool for the resident-docents to explain the visual / cultural features of the street; and the published booklet³ had unexpectedly become a visual street index – like the index at the back of a book – for visitors who revisited the real street thereafter.

³ Community Museum Project. (2005). *Street as Museum: Lee Tung Street*. Hong Kong: Community Museum Project.

visual cultures.

Figure 3: Lee Tung Street's (partial) streetscape documented in five stages, from 2005 (top) to 2009.

To illustrate the applicability of “photo-stocktaking” as a method for “the making of visual culture”, one other example will suffice; though, the CMP had made a move from the street life and its spectacles back into the domestic realm. Commissioned by Oxfam (HK) in 2008, the project entitled, ***You are What you Freeze: Food Storage and Our Everyday Life*** was another CMP’s attempt to visualize the social characteristics, tastes and domestic lifestyles of people from different social sectors, basing upon the contents of household refrigerators. Items in the refrigerators from 25 households, ranging from the wealthy to families on welfare, were documented systematically as in [Figure 4](#). Pictures were taken at different levels, revealing not only the overall contents and organization of different fridge compartments – the icebox, the door, the main body, the drawer, etc. - but also each stored item individually. This would allow for further organization, categorization, visual comparison and information design at later stages.



Figure 4: The photo-stocktaking structure of one of the 25 cases.

The collection of images from all the fridges, when sorted and put side by side in comparative categories will allow the audience to see patterns, such as in the “Fridge Demographics” ([Figure 5](#)) and the “Food Pyramid” ([Figure 6](#)) that normal photo-documentation would be difficult to showcase. It not only revealed the unexpected types of food or edibles (and non-edibles) in each



Figure 5: A visual statistics of all the separate fridge contents by food categories



Figure 6: A "Food Pyramid" illustrating the quantity of items in each category from all 25 fridges.

refrigerator, but also the overall quantity of items in each category, revealing the popularity of food categories amongst all our samples. Complemented with interviews of each household, the display allowed the audience to see patterns of

fridge usage and the families' approaches or "desires" for food preservation. For instances, there were nicely packed boxes of Chinese medical ingredients of the deceased father kept already for 20 years; a fridge full of desserts and snacks that served as soothing tools for the couple's hustle and bustle working life; another with many figurine toys, one of which resembled her ex-husband; many of the less well-offs had fully packed into the fridge – perhaps out of a sense of "deficiency-anxiety" or an imagined just-in-case need - dried food items, half-cooked meat, left-over food, medicine and cooking sauces, only to find them expired and became moldy. It turned out that this seemingly common and essential household appliance does not only carry edibles and material items, but also people's memories, wishes, anxieties and livelihood expectations.

This visual-research-cum-exhibition project was conceived to uncover the subsistence issues behind families on social welfare. Through classifying our images collection (akin to classifying artworks in a museum collection) and re-presenting the livelihood stories in forms of information design (display panels), we were able to visualize not only the fridge usages of a handful of households, ranging (implicitly) from the rich to the poor, but also raise related social and cultural questions around the issue of food consumption among families across social classes. This was perhaps an approach to make visible our city's culture, by way of making visual documentation as artwork. By means of studying a certain aspect of (visual) culture in the city, the CMP is, simultaneously, making certain visual artifacts from and for our culture.

Employing a museological perspective, and in the midst of urban re-development and social change, as illustrated in the cases above, the question to be asked, for the future museums of visual culture, is: How do museum professionals start to visually document and collect what are worth seeing, questioning or preserving from our city life?

Cultural Scavenging

For the foregoing discussion, it must be clarified that the Community Museum Project is not a museum *per se*, but a curatorial collective that runs museum projects, in situ. It uses 'museum' as a tactical metaphor, a method to engage 'museologically' in the articulation of everyday spectacles, vernacular cultures and community values through certain curatorial endeavors. To the CMP, the things to be collected need not be the pricey artifacts that most museums aspire to, they can be something as intangible as people's networks or social relations, or as ephemeral ascertain cultural spectacles on a street, which remain unattended by most people, if not museum curators. From here comes the metaphor of cultural scavenging to which the CMP is committed. Assuming the role of a cultural scavenger, these projects pick up what others have left behind in the street (and our culture) and make something out of it. The CMP, therefore, sets out with the mission to do things that formal museum establishments may be unable or reluctant to do, such as collecting the 'un-collectable', or collecting something that is yet to exist, or giving up the collection after the project is accomplished. Such endeavors have subsequently taken form in a series of exhibitions, publications and community engagement projects that have brought public attention and meanings to the uncollected, or the intangibles, or the

knowledge and practical wisdom of the under-represented and invisible communities in our city.

Studying Visual Culture

In this light, the “study of visual culture” can be very different and open. The object of study will be very much extended. It is more than the study of (physical or conceptual) artworks or (static or moving) image-forms; it can become the study of the spectacular environments and the material or visual features as well as their underpinnings of social realities that are constantly being constructed (and deconstructed) by the others and ourselves. It is more than the study of merely “the visual”, but using the visual as a means to reveal and expose the invisibles as in **Figure 7**. What are to be collected from the universe of (visual) culture is yet to be defined, if only we have the eye to see them and the technologies and foresight to collect and display them. The question of Artwork and the question of Documentation are still open for deliberation.

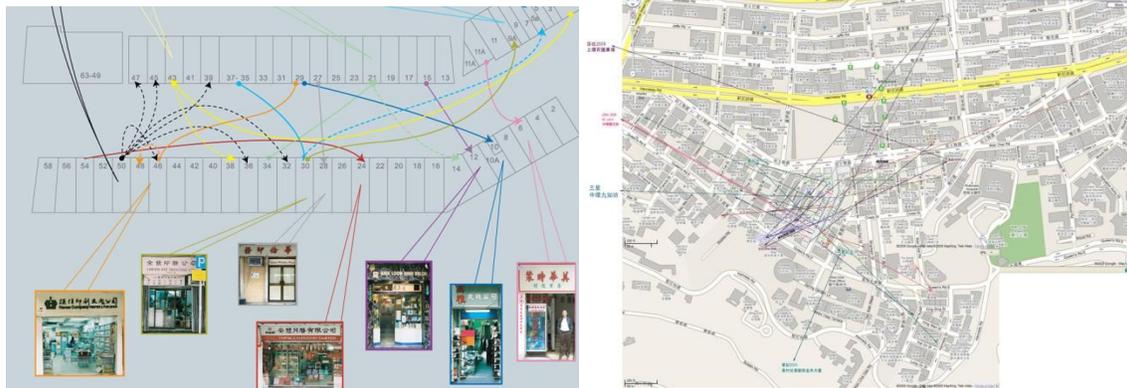


Figure 7: Left - display panel illustrating the relocation of shops in the same Lee Tung Street during 1960s to 1990s, revealing the cohesion of its business community; right - a visualization of the removal pattern of wedding card / printing shops from Lee Tung Street after 2009, revealing the demolition of the original business cluster.