Visualizing Local Identity

Artistic Expression in the Post-2020 Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong's art scene has been subject to relevant changes in recent years due to unprecedented events that characterised the years of 2019 and 2020 (large-scale protests, implementation of the National Security Law, and the Pandemic). These changes have affected the production and self-perception of local artists. In this thesis, a constructionist life story interview is used to investigate how the socio-political changes have influenced the art practice of young Hong Kong local artists and how these artists understand their own identity in terms of Hong Kong's localist narrative. The results revealed that artists responded to the National Security Law's limitations on freedom of expression, funding accessibility, and exhibition spaces, by adopting a more introspective look in their form of art. This resulted in subtler art pieces that addressed a newly invigorated local identity through non-direct visual symbolisms and blurriness.

Keywords: Visuality, National Security Law, Hongkonger, Local Identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

*Painting is an expression of my own self, in particular, the time and space of my
existence and, more importantly, my ideas.*

Irene Chow, engraved in a brick stone on the pavement in front of HKMOA, Hong Kong

Art has the capacity to capture aspects of reality, whether these are the reflections of human perception of external narratives or the artists' introspective reality; it plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of a nation or a community (Belfiore & Bennet, 2008). This became especially relevant in a reality like that of Hong Kong, where the rich history, split between British domination and the Chinese one, provided the opportunity for the formation of a vibrant arts scene that explored the question of everyday life and positioned the individual in relation to a larger context, such as one of the 2019 pro-democracy protests (Poposki & Leung, 2022).

Following the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, a Joint Declaration of "One country, two systems" was stipulated between China and the United Kingdom. In this statement, the Chinese Communist Party vowed to uphold the Basic Law's fundamental political freedoms and protect Hong Kong's capitalist economy. However, in Hong Kong's postcolonial era, the central government's growing meddling in local matters and the realisation that the "One country, two systems" principle would have not been preserved or enhanced democracy as hoped, resulted in rising dissatisfaction and the emergence of "localist" sentiments (Wright, 2018; Kam, 2020).

Starting from 1997, major demonstrations followed over the years. The one that most recently attracted mediatic attention began in 2014, followed by an unprecedented outbreak of pro-democracy protests in 2019. Media coverage of such events did not just focus on the most overtly political aspects: close attention was also placed on the noteworthy flourishing artistic environment fostered by visual artists, who made up the majority of intellectual supporters; on these occasions, they took on a more out-front role as political and cultural activists (Vigneron, 2018). Stimulated by the disruptive elements of society's status quo, they dedicated their creativity to the production of visual elements intended to portray the sentiments of uncertainty, alienation, and disillusionment felt by the local population toward the central government (South China Morning Post, 2020; Hong, 2020). The material produced played the role of

communicating complex messages and aspirations of protesters. It spaced, for example, from satirical graffiti, depicting political figures, to more "hope-spreading" artworks, such as the replica of Prague's Lennon Walls in strategic locations throughout the city, along with slogans, comics, and other forms of "visual thinking" (Fung, 2020; Frederiksen, 2022; McGarry, *et al,* 2020). If this "visual thinking" was mostly aimed at communicating pro-democracy aspirations, it also voiced a renewed sense of place-based identities, mirrored in the artistic production that was independent of social movements (Adjoran, *et al.*, 2021). Over time, artists became increasingly localized in their artistic production and paid greater attention to the "Hongkongers" cultural identity, giving higher relevance to that "local cultural identity" to which Belfiore and Berret referred [1](Clarke, 2000).

Following the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, the artistic environment was once again exposed to changes. The proliferation of any form of "images of protests" or art pieces that could be interpreted as instigating secessionist acts, including the one referring to a Hong Kong identity, was proscribed (Chan, 2022). The repercussions of such a law were also visible in the general artistic production: its implementation comported an erosion of freedom of expression and creativity by blurring the line between what could and could not be produced, despite what has been said in the Unesco's report (2013) on the diversity of cultural expression. Artists found themselves in the condition of living in uncertainty as to "whether they can continue to make artworks that respond to local politics or are risking imprisonment by attempting to push the boundaries of legal definitions" (Koon, 2022).

1.2 Academic Contribution

Starting from the 1990s, there seems to have been an ever-growing presence of literature regarding both Hong Kong's artistic environment and the already largely explored theme of the sense of identity belonging, torn between the heritage of the British colony and the Chinese influence (see, for example, Clarke, 1996; Cartier, 2008). These bodies of literature, however, tend to focus more on the strictly economic and political factors related to the topic, with references to the difficulties experienced by the artists mainly from a market-centric point of view, while also being stuck in the timeline between 1997 and 2019. (Poposki and Leung, 2022) While some have offered an analysis of the visuality that emerged

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[1] The crackdown on democracy that occurred in 2019, generated the strengthening of the place-based identity of Hongkongers, propelling the scission between national identity and local identity and resulting in a rejection of the mainlandization process in the majority of the population.

during those years, in an attempt to give voice to the identity struggle, most literature offers more of a general overview of the art production and the reshaping of the artistic environment itself in the periods characterized by the social movements; only a few scholars have examined contemporary Hong Kong art in relation to place-based identity in the late post-colonial periods (Cartier, 2008). To fill such a gap, this thesis aims to contribute to the academic literature by providing insight into how political and societal changes concretely influenced how Hong Kong's artists define their local identity and the strategies they used to visually express it in their works. Through the adoption of qualitative analysis, the thesis hopes to offer also a more up-to-date overview of the changes in the artistic environment following the implementation of the NSL, while also investigating how this, and the events preceding the implementation of such law, affected artists' way of perceiving themselves and how they navigate in the post-2020s period.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on what was introduced in the sub-chapter before, the main question that the thesis will try to answer is:

How do Hong Kong artists express their identity through artwork in the post-2020?

Through the performing of serial interviews (Read, 2018), which will deploy as a combination of life story interviews followed by a secondary round of semi-structured interviews,[2] this thesis aims to understand how the artists' work has been affected by the period of protests and by the implementation of the NSL, which ambiguously defined what can be considered a separatist act or not, potentially leading to persecution of artists. It will allow an understanding of to what extent artistic production in Hong Kong can still be considered an explicit representation of artists' experiences, and how their personal narratives have been affected by the socio-political environment of Hong Kong. To reach such a goal, the research question will be split into three sub-questions:

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[2] The Interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

(1) How did the artistic environment change between 2014 and 2020, and what challenges do artists currently face in expressing their identity?

(2) How do artists deal with these challenges and how did they develop new visuality in their artwork?

(3) What is the new Hong Kong identity conceptualized in their artwork?

These three sub-questions will offer a clear structure to shed light on the thesis's main focus, which will still be centred on the concept of expression of local identity. In what follows, the thesis will attempt to demonstrate how, among other facts, the limitation caused by the implementation of the new NSL compelled and encouraged artists to use their creativity and, through the internalization of a subtler visuality, to promote the maturation of a new way of expression suitable for the representation of a stronger localist identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand the context in which the research is deployed, as well as the factors that may have influenced or produced specific narratives in contemporary Hong Kong's art scene, this section will first provide a broad overview of the identity issue that has been burdening Hong Kong's population. Then, an assessment of Hong Kong's artistic landscape will be made to shed light on the cultural context in which production is framed.

2.1 Hong Kong's Identity Building

The building of Hong Kong's identity has been an ongoing issue, largely touched upon by scholars. The common idea of Hong Kong's multifaceted identity stems from the understanding of the Autonomous Region being torn between its colonial legacy (1841-1997) and the current Chinese domination in which, according to what seems to be Beijing's narrative, should be recognised Hong Kong's original roots. Authors have often offered a chronological analysis of such a phenomenon, beginning with the colonisation prior to 1997, to then analyse the changes that occurred in the post-colonial period (post-1997); while doing so, most of the authors, such as Fung (2001) and Kam (2020), have relied on the concept of "imagined communities" redacted by Anderson in 1991, which frames the national identity as a fluid and dynamic concept. This principle has been used by scholars to explain the shifting, over the

years, in Hong Kong's sentiment towards their "Chineseness", until reaching a point, in recent years, where the localist discourse overshadowed the national identity.

During the British colonisation, there was an initial appeal for Chinese nationalism among the Hong Kong population, as the latter was mostly composed of mainland migrants who reached the city before the '70s, bringing along a strong sense of "ethnocultural based pan-Chinese sentiment" (Kam, 2020). This was reinforced by the at the time British education reform, which was mostly focused on the teaching of imperial China's splendour (Wong, *et al.*, 2021; Ho, *et al.*, 2014). Before the '90s, that generation positively internalised the recognition of a common narrative and a sense of belonging to mainland China, which provided them with a national identity they could recognise themselves in (Mathews, 1997). That sentiment, however, was built only on the recognition of common cultural roots with mainland China, without therefore entailing any concurrence with the central government political regime (Mathews, 1997; Wong, *et al. 2021*). [3] From here on, Hong Kong's hybrid identity spurred, enabling the coexistence of Hong Kong's cultural heritage, rooted in China's history, and with a political system that was echoing that of the British government.

Following 1997, through Brewer's (1999) theory of optimal distinctiveness,[4] a shift in sentiment among the local population was identified: Hong Kong's cultural identity, which was initially eager to blend with mainland China, unexpectedly turned against Beijing's promotion of Chinese culture as, following the implementation of national education [5] in the region, irreconcilable socio-political differences between the two were highlighted, causing this way the antagonising of local and national identities.

Multiple studies have traced this initial separation back to 1966, coinciding with the post-war baby boom. As a result of this, a predominantly locally-raised community emerged, which grew to be more aware of local affairs and increasingly protective of Hong Kong's values (Kam,2020; Ping and Kin-Ming, 2014). Analysing this phenomenon exclusively from the lens of cohorts, as defined by Wong *et al.* (2021), would nevertheless be simplistic since even older generations experienced a detachment from their national identity; the period effect was also important in this case.

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[3] Wong, *et al.* introduce here the differentiation between cultural-based and political-based identities.
[4] See Brewer, M.B. (1999) 'Multiple Identities and Identity Transition: Implications for Hong Kong', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23(2), pp. 187–197. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(98)00034-0.

[5] This reform was implemented by the at the time Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee-Hwa in 1997 and lasted until 2003 (Kam, 2020).

Lee (2022) identified some core episodes that led to an ever-more-irreversible rift between Hong Kong and China, starting with the Tiananmen crackdown on democracy in 1989. One pivotal event in the shaping of the idea of a Hong Kong community was the 2003 rally for the withdrawal of Article 23 of the legislation,[6] which marked the first significant turning point for a popular political awakening. From this point forward, Beijing's policies had the effect of further strengthening the rise of localist sentiment, culminating in the mobilisation of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. During these protests, a more direct antagonization of Beijing's increasing intervention in the area spurred, undermining any possibility of reacceptance of a hybrid identity in the following years. The Umbrella Movement got then put to a step further in 2019, when the proposal for the Extradition Bill sparked the emergence of pro-independence political discourses (Adjoran, et al., 2019).

Kim and Ng (2008) used social identity theory and closure theory to explain how the rejection of hybrid identity in Hong Kong resulted from the destabilizing societal changes brought about by the policies of the central government. The uneasiness and uncertainty that emerged in 2019 resulted in a general rejection of Hong Kong's secondary identity, further exacerbating the schism between mainland China and Hong Kong. This theory also provided the theoretical foundation for concluding that the implementation of the NSL in 2020, which was intended to increase stability, had the effect of enhancing uncertainties among the local population and heightened the likelihood for the current generation to identify with a community that aims at being the furthest away from mainland China.

2.2 Artistic Environment

Creating artistic spaces in Hong Kong has been and continues to be mainly part of Beijing's political project (Cartier, 2008). This affirmation finds its foundation in Florida's theory of human capital (mentioned in Charrieras, *et al.*, 2018) according to which, in time of increasing international competition and technological changes, the State's interest in developing a cultural centre by attracting a "creative class" is linked to the desire of boosting their economy and gaining a competitive advantage. Despite this

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[6] This article would have drastically limited civil liberties in the name of national security (Lee, 2022).

idea having been rejected by Peck (in Charrieras, *et al*., 2018), [7] many scholars seem to agree that this concept applies to Hong Kong. This means that, since the 2000s, the central government started aspiring to turn the Autonomous Region into a global art hub, viewing it as the most effective way of propelling an economic revitalization in Hong Kong following the Asian economic downturn, while also enhancing its competitivity in the global market (Charrieras, *et al.*, 2018; Poposki and Leung, 2002; Cartier, 2008; Cartier 2008).

Poposki and Leung (2022), in their work, have offered a good overview of the governmental project in reaching such a goal. The development of a West Kowloon Cultural District has been advertised starting from 1998; this aspired to be the largest and most significant cultural project in the world,[8] with at his centre the M+ museum,[9] offering also space and bigger opportunities for the engagement of the art market both locally and internationally (Vigneron, 2018; Poposki and Leung, 2022). In the local reality, however, the expectations for the M+ museum were not limited to its market potential. Advertised as a new government-funded museum that would have kept its independence from the government's Leisure and Cultural Service Department, the public recognized its potential in creating a new space for local artists' visibility (Koon, 2022). Even if this newly built department managed to place Hong Kong at the centre of the market hub, benefitting from the presence of a tax-free market and by the colonial history of the city,[10] issues related mainly to the socio-cultural environment of Hong Kong emerged.

At the centre of the public debate was the scepticism regarding the institutional independence of the M+ museum; with this being the heart of the government's substantial investments in land and property, the probability of it being free from the government's direction was limited (Apollo, 2021; Koon, 2022). A critique that found its roots in the Uli Sigg Collection of contemporary Chinese art, which represented the core of the M+ collection; this attracted the discontent of local artists who failed in understanding the need for a collection that puts on display mainland Chinese artists (Poposki and Leung, 2022). While

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[7] He argued that, according to local conditions, creativity is often a proxy for government spending rather than endogenous growth (Charreiras, *et al.*, 2018).

[8] Once completed it will count 17 venues for music, performing arts, and visual arts (Poposki and Leung, 2022).

[9] Museums whose exhibitions would be focused on 20th and 21st centuries visual culture. In the current literature, the M+ is usually placed side by side with another important exhibition gallery founded in 1996: Para/ site. This gallery, however, with it being an artist-run space seems to have been less subject to local critique.

[10] Hong Kong's colonial history represented the linking point between East and West which resulted extremely beneficial for the art market aimed at the international context.

such a decision could have been interpreted as a Beijing attempt to push a nation-oriented idea of Hong Kong culture and artistic production, with the direct consequence of downgrading Hong Kong art practices to a branch of Chinese art (Cartier, 2008), it could also underline how the artistic environment is still strongly influenced by the central government, which can limit the visibility and the possibility of Hong Kong's visual production by financing structures and having control of the policy-making (Clarke, 1996).

Nevertheless, following the study of Poposki and Leung (2022), the issue seems to be related mainly to another fundamental aspect that affected the development of the artistic environment in Hong Kong: the international art market. Scholars have demonstrated how the idea of Hong Kong art was not as popular in the international market; there was a higher request for Chinese traditional art, which was still surrounded by the idea of cultural purity and more attractive from a touristic perspective (Clarke, 2003; Koon, 2022; Vigneron, 2018). This pushed artists self to pursue the production of pieces of art that were more referenced to traditional "Chinese art" to gain visibility on the market, consequently placing Hong Kong local art in the shadow (Cartier, 2013; Vigneron, 2018); an aspect that got reflected also in the educational system, where the teaching of traditional Chinese ink art was favoured, to the dearth of local art education (Vigneron 2018).

Such a condition was partially obliged by the prohibitively expensive art space: due to the building process of a globalized policy model for the creative city, aimed at raising Hong Kong to the status of "Asia's World City", the government pushed forward policies characterized by a global blending mentality. These policies were oriented towards capital accumulation and tourism, encouraging a transformation in both the urban reality and artistic production (Leong, 2013; Lam-Knott, 2019). The gentrification process that originated from this, initiated a cycle of increasing prices in the real estate sector, which brought the "dispersion of the existing urban community" (Lam-Knott, 2019); artists were mainly pushed to the margins of the city in the peripheral industrial sites, while the gentrified and more central cultural spaces were dominated by governmental driven cultural institutions, which, despite the advertised good intention of promoting local culture, proved to have trouble understanding it (Cartier 2007).

While taking consciousness of how much the market mentality influenced the artistic production in Hong Kong and the government policy-making process, the thesis will use this information only as a contextual one. The strictly political aspect, connected to the always more impellent presence of the central government in artistic institutions, is what is relevant to the thesis purpose, and not the relevance of Hong Kong art in the framework of the global market. A significant issue that derives from the government's top-down administrative strategy is related to the funding available for arts disciplines. In such regard, the government decided to maintain the laissez-faire approach, proper of the previous colonial government, as this would have allowed it to deliberately decide where to intervene, neglecting those areas that were deemed as unprofitable, or a poor fit for its political agenda (Karvelyte, 2018). Whether this condition might have not generated a big difference for the local artists in terms of funding, as there was no real change in the monetary distribution compared to the pre-1997 era, according to Karvelyte's (2018) study, the HKSAR government recently offered regular funding only to the reputable cultural events and to the so-called "Big-nine".[11] Around HK$ 330 million were allocated to these collectives, while only HK$ 120 million were given to the Art Development Council with the task of dividing them between the remaining visual and performing artists and organizations (Yu and King, 2019); this amount of money was relatively little compared to the request number. These data, along with the awareness that the "Big-nine" are the major Performing Arts Organizations, supports Clarke's (1996) statement according to which the HKSAR government always lacked financial supporting the visual art sector, as it would have been less likely to provide an economic return in the commercial art market (Clarke, 1996), argumentation that, despite being made in 1996, still proves to be actual.

With the implementation of the NSL in 2020, funding issues worsened. As demonstrated by Chan's (2021) study on Hong Kong's film industry, considering the especially sensitive time that followed the 2019-2020 protests, and considering the undeniable influence of the government in the cultural sector, securing funding became increasingly hard, especially those coming from the Arts Development Council.

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[11] The "Big-nine" are the major performing groups in Hong Kong, namely: Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, Hong Kong Dance Company, Hong Kong Sinfonietta, the Hong Kong Ballet, City Contemporary Dance Company, Chun Ying Theatre Company, and Zuni Icosahedron.

The socio-political changes that characterized the 2020s are thus believed to have affected artistic production in Hong Kong: young directors were pushed towards a self-censoring process or to the development of independent and self-financed productions (Chan, 2021). This situation was not only limited to the film industry, but to the entire visual art sector, where funding and what can be defined as freedom of production were granted only to those organization that accommodated government instructions. In such a context, also the possibilities for artists to collaborate with art galleries became increasingly hard following the implementation of the NSL, as the latter became warier of taking risks in exhibiting pieces that might have caused them to be persecuted (Ives, 2021).

In light of what just mentioned, it could be argued that the government is both overly involved and under-involved in the management of the cultural sector. It still reserved for itself the power of regulating what was acceptable to be produced and financed, but at the same time it did not sufficiently participate in the financing process as, being art presented as a commodity, funding should come from business sponsorship and economic self-sufficiency (Yeh and Davis, 2022).

2.3 Art Production Responding to Social Changes in Hong Kong from 2014 to 2020

The subchapter above is aimed at briefly showing some of the difficulties that local artists had to face until recently, to gain a visible space in the artistic ecosystem of Hong Kong. Despite their local orientation, and the desire for pursuing a production that can represent Hong Kong's culture, elements such as political control and meddling in the managing of artistic infrastructure, the circulation of capital, and the negotiation of space, drive them almost towards what seems to be an obliged direction in the context of everyday life (Cartier 2007).

However, with the emergence of ever more vocal social movements that exalted post-materialistic values,[12] artistic production experienced periods of detachment from this market-oriented mentality, while giving more space to political and experimental forms of art that Vigneron (2018) labelled as "socially engaged art". This type of artistic production was oriented towards commanding the attention

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[12] This movement was mostly preoccupied with the preservation of key landmarks and Hong Kong's cultural heritage against the increasing cultural domination that followed China's economic interest in the area (Kam, 2020).

of a wider public and reaching higher visibility. It deployed in the form of slogans, graffiti, and hymns, among others, all of which celebrated the uniqueness of the Hong Kong system in opposition to the CCP's political control (Rovisco and Veneti, 2017; Veg, 2016).

Scholars, such as Veg (2016), Cheung (2015), and Lowe and Ortmann (2022), precisely have focused mainly on the production of slogans and street art such as graffiti, and the proliferation of video and images on the web, when analysing the visual representation of protests that emerged in 2014 and 2019. These received the most mediatic attention and played a significant role in addressing the uniqueness of Hong Kong culture through the exaltation of, for example, the Cantonese language which, as demonstrated by Kam's (2020) study, is one of the key features adopted by the "Hongkongers" as defining element of their identity (Veg, 2016; Kam, 2020). These new types of productions were aimed at the visualisation of pressing problems and key events in the Hong Kong community, with the direct consequence of a rising in the population's consciousness, fostering solidarity and mobility (Leung, 2019; McGarry, *et al.*, 2020). Sentiments that were enhanced also by other forms of "ephemeral art" which, despite their temporary and evanescent presence, were charged with long-lasting meaning as presented in Lowe's (2021) and Hong's (2020) studies. Here the attention is placed on a "visceral sense" of belonging and of political participation that in both studies has been enhanced through food, in an attempt to aestheticize common cultural elements such as eatable (Veg, 2016; Hong, 2020). Both in the case of the "Birthday cake" presented by Hong (2020) and in the case of the mooncakes embellished by the pro-democracy movement aesthetic presented by Lowe (2021), the idea was to promote a form of experimental art that, while not being permanent in itself, managed to create a sense of communitarianism among Hongkongers, encouraging a form of resistance.

Even though this type of art is relevant for understanding the reaction to and the recoupment of Hongkongers' identity and Hong Kong's independence through the raising of a narrative that calls for the detachment from the conventional representation scheme torn between East and West, as identified by Ackbar Abba (1997), resulting in the city developing a space of disappearance, it is important to remember that this is a type of art primarily emerged during periods of active protests. It served as a more outspoken form of expression, needed to reach a wider audience that transcended the central government. As a result, the idea of creating what Cartier (2013) has defined as "precarious" and currently

controversial pieces of art destined to become "hunting images" or "smears" under government censorship, was deemed a worthy risk to take (Pernin, 2022).

The studies conducted by Leung (2021) and by Tong (2022) seem however to be more relevant to the thesis scope, since they present the emergence of a more long-lasting art technique that can still be recognized in contemporary production. In his work, Leung (2021) has focused on the concept of video-making and creativity as a vehicle for protestors' resilience and perseverance. He has demonstrated how, starting already from the 1980s movements, artists started experimenting with new art-making techniques such as superimposition and abstraction, to metaphorically represent Hong Kong's complex identity, frustration, and hidden fear among the local population in those years (Cartier, 2013; Leung, 2021). Despite his comment being focused on the '80s, such a condition had been ingrained and preserved until the most recent movements, making that observation still relevant today. Indeed, as demonstrated by Tong's (2022) work, techniques such as abstraction and the "doodling" of faceless characters as a metaphor for a sense of hopelessness and frustration were widely used also during and after the 2019 protests.

As Leung (2021) has suggested, the adoption of such techniques during those periods enabled the documentation and representation of protest moments and locations while escaping the government's strict censorship and redefining the sense of local identity and urban belonging (Lam-Knott, 2019). For this reason, some artists decided to maintain such strategies also after the protests got interrupted as, with the implementation of the NSL, the need to represent such events without risking imprisonment was enhanced. Examples of this are the cases of artist Bouie Choi, who began blending in subtle and abstract ways moments of the civil unrest to represent her changed relationship with the city (Ives, 2021); and of artist Sharon Cheung, who narrated to the audience the pain and loneliness experienced during those years while also documenting Hong Kong circumstances through the painting of 51 featureless silhouettes (South China Morning Post, 2022). These types of productions turned also into a coping mechanism many Hong Kong artists used to regain self-understanding, as they elaborated their subjective experiences of daily life into their own narratives and cultural memories.

In this regard, Lam-Knott's (2019) research is also relevant: in her work, she has articulated the role of storytelling in the spatial politics of youth activism in 2014 Hong Kong as an element that contributed to the polarization of folk (Hong Kong people) antagonized to non-folk (SAR government), enhancing the sense of communitarianism and place-based identity. In this context, storytelling becomes a form of post-colonial reinvention; a process that emerged in Hong Kong only recently as, by passing from one domination to another, it could be argued that its colonial period never truly ended. As a result, the storytelling that emerged, and linked the authors' previously mentioned works, could now be interpreted as an attempted "decoloniality"[13] and a re-appropriation of the community's collective narrative, rather than a proper decolonization (Lai, 2022; Lam-Knott, 2019).

Through these studies, it can be inferred how the freedom of production resulted by those social uproars, enabled artists to develop a new type of politically charged visuality that better represented their identity and sense of belonging to the city. A visuality that has been further altered by the restrictions emerged in the post-2020s, compelling artists to experiment with new strategies and techniques to narrate themselves while overcoming censorship and the risk of persecution, as reported by Ives (2021) and Tong (2022), proving how socio-political changes effectively influenced artists' visuality.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The thesis research question focuses on examining the expression of identity in local artworks, specifically within the context of Hong Kong. To better investigate and understand the formation of a new Hong Kong identity, as well as its representation in the artists' work, this study incorporates Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory and the theories of Storytelling and Truth-telling. The first will offer the framework to investigate how a stronger local identity can emerge as a result of increased constraints, such as those imposed by mainland China on Hong Kong following the 2020; while the latter two theories will facilitate the establishment of a necessary link between the evolving localist nature of Hong Kong and its manifestation in the artworks.

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[13] Refers to the independence from the colonial legacy's influence, which continue to affect the life, knowledge and production of the colonized (Lai, 2022).

3.1 Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed the Social Identity Theory at the end of the 1970s, the beginning of the '80s. This theory sought to explain the sense of ingroup belonging as well as intergroup relations. Given the complexities of Hong Kong's identity and its importance in the research, this theory is pivotal in comprehending the potential formation of a new Hong Kong identity.

According to the Social Identity Theory, individuals determine their belonging to a specific social group (*ingroup)* according to an evaluation process that leads them to seek out and prefer individuals with compatible traits to them. During this process, an *outgroup* will also be identified and used to empower the ingroup members through social comparison (Trepte and Loy,2017). Built on this, the phenomena of *ingroup bias* emerge: members of an ingroup are inclined to elevate key group behaviours and features, while downgrading the ones of the outgroup; this creates a distance between the two social groups based on the uniqueness of one of the two (Brewer,1999). Such a process was exemplified in the Literature Review section 2.1 of this thesis.

3.1.1 Place-Based Identity

Hauge's (2007) work emphasizes the transferrable nature of Social Identity Theory. She has discussed how this theory can be extended to include other aspects that are proven to be relevant in the formation of an individual's sense of belonging, one of which is place-based identification: individuals often describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Bernardo and Palma-Olvera, 2015). In her study, Rose (1996, mentioned in Dixon and Durrehim, 2000) investigated the value of space and places in the context of social comparison: the distinction between "our space" (positive connotation) and "their space" (negative connotation), also positively contribute to ingroup empowerment (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira, 2015).

3.2 Storytelling

In modern history, storytelling has expanded beyond its typical attributes of entertainment and fiction to serve the more socially meaningful purpose of transmitting values and traditions to the next generations, while also creating an emotional connection with the audience; it can involve the listener on a much

deeper level by taking advantage of narrative discourse, capable of constructing social identity (Yoder-Wise and Kowalski, 2003; Lam-Knott, 2019; Ball-Rokeach, *et al.*, 2001).

Through their narration, the storyteller helps the audience to interact with a topic that may seem distant and aloof at first, while also probing the relevance that this might have in their personal lives (Yoder-Wise and Kowlaski, 2003; Stone-Mediatore, 2003). In this approach, an open and ever-evolving conversation will be created, enriched by considerations, retelling and supplementation from new points of view (Stone-Mediatore, 2003).

What needs to be acknowledged is also the role that the storytelling plays for the storyteller itself: as a type of self-healing, the storyteller often seeks solace in sharing their personal challenges, whether they are political or social, through a narrative based on their own experiences. A positive effect that might be attained by empathising with the audience through experience-based storytelling is the raising of awareness on sometimes overlooked socio-political issues and the increasing sympathy towards people facing similar societal struggles. As a result, there is an increase in civic culture and engagement, which can enhance people's sense of communitarianism (Stone-Mediatore, 2003; Ball-Rokeach, et al., 2001).

3.2.1 Truth-telling

This thesis also considers truth-telling to be an essential component of storytelling, as it is central to the narrative creation and reconstruction of the self (Besley, 2013). In his work on the Technology of Self, Foucault (in Besley, 2013) elaborates on this concept, also known as *parrhesia*: he describes it as a verbal activity in which the speaker chooses to pursue the path of frankness and truth in a critical manner, even if it means endangering his safety or life, in some cases, to help and improve other people's conditions (Peters, 2003).

This principle will be applied to art in the framework of this thesis. In his discussion, Paijmans (2019) has asserted that Foucault's self, recognised the frankness and provocativeness of socio-political art. He also recognised the power of art in speaking the truth about oneself, as the introspective nature and self-understanding mechanism implemented in the creation process bring to the visual representation of the artist's personal and intuitive dynamics, making thus obvious the reconstruction of the self, proper of

truth-telling (Besley, 2013, Paijmans, 2019). This beneficial effect is also extended to the audience, who will also be given the opportunity to self-heal.

4. METHODOLOGY

This section is framed as it will first explain the reasoning behind the choice of adopting a qualitative research design, with details regarding the ontological and epistemological stances adopted, which are crucial for the way the data will be approached; a description of the techniques used for the data collection and sampling will follow. Finally, the last two sub-chapters will be dedicated to a reflection on the limitations and the ethical considerations that need to be acknowledged before conducting this research.

4.1 Research Design

The research question that motivates this thesis aims to investigate how artists dealt with the recent socio-political changes in Hong Kong and the ways in which these have affected their personal experiences in expressing their own selves in this new environment. This topic conveyed to the research an introspective character, making, therefore, a qualitative design the most suitable to pursue a study that is explorative in its nature (Clark, *et al.,* 2021). Being that the research is based on the artist's personal narrative, embedded in their pieces of art and their self-perception, a constructivist ontology was adopted. This means that reality is not something pre-given but, in the case of art, it is something that is "always generated as an experience rooted in the cultural, political, and social context". The assumption made here is that with the changes in the environment surrounding the artists, the perception of the artwork changed as well. This emphasizes the subjectivity of the individual experiences and how these contributed to the creation of one individual's reality (Clarke, *et al.,* 2021; Vigneron, 2018). By following such a design, the epistemology of this qualitative research is for the most part interpretative, explaining participants' experiences and behaviours through empirical data (Clarke, *et al.,* 2021).

Based on what was mentioned above, life story interviews supplemented by serial interviews were conducted, recognising that the topic of identity includes layers of ambiguity that are not always fully disclosed or clearly stated during a first meeting. Moreover, as suggested by Read (2018), because I am no expert in the topic chosen for the research, nor have I ever had the opportunity to deal with it previously, using the combination of these two techniques allowed me to refine and adapt my questions

along the way. Thus, it is argued that this research adopts a constructionist life story interview approach, rather than that of a naturalistic life story interview. The life storytelling is situated and responds to the meaning-making of the interviewee's surroundings. The main body of data was collected through the life story interviews conducted during a first meeting with the participants. This type of interview had the goal of documenting the "inner experience of individuals, and how they interpret, understand and define the world around them" (Faraday and Plummer, 1970: 776 in Clarke 2021). To reach such a goal, unstructured questions were adopted as they favoured the participants' free association of thoughts, while also offering a good insight into their way of articulating their thoughts and feelings (Huang, 2018). This first session of questions was then supplemented, when needed, by semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, in an attempt of investigating more in-depth specific issues that were brought up during the first meeting, or to touch upon key issues that had not been addressed previously.

Finally, before and during the interviewing process, non-participant observation was also carried out. Observing and visiting Hong Kong galleries and independent studios offered an interesting insight into details and the artistic framework, which contributed to better understanding and contextualising the participant's answers.

4.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The interview data for this study were collected from early February 2023 to the end of March 2023. Observation on field was fundamental in the process of individuating and selecting the study's participants. This was mostly conducted in the areas that were notably recognized as the districts with the highest concentration of artistic activity in Hong Kong, such as Hollywood Road and Soho area in Hong Kong island, and Sham Shui Po, among others, in the Hong Kong peninsula. Visiting galleries and participating in openings and art events represented the most adequate gateway to artists' contacts and information, while also offering a suitable environment for the first real approach to the artists when they were present on the spot. While doing so, a technique that Bryman defines as purposive sampling was also put into practice (Clarke, *et al.*, 2021): the participants selected (n=9) for the study were all young and emergent artists between 24 and 35 years old who specialised in visual arts, a discipline that includes painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, crafts, filmmaking and video making. Among them, one gallerist was also included in the sample. His involvement in the logistical and organizational aspects of the artistic environment offered more in-depth insight into the effect that the events preceding

2020 had on the galleries and exhibition processes. The choice of visual art as a distinctive category was justified by the fact that, as stated by Vigneron (2018), this discipline is the most relevant to analyse, since it can present changes in its production and visuality in a more obvious way compared to other forms of art, such as the performative one. Finally, although there was no direct intention in paying specific attention to other aspects such as gender and ethnicity, these were taken into consideration during the analysis process.

In the table here displayed, a summary of the interviewees' key information is provided. Each piece of information was selected based on its relevance to the research context, as these will provide a deeper and clearer understanding of the respondent's answers. These, in particular, will aid in the interpretation of interviewees constructed social identity and its reflection on their artworks.

Table1. *Interviewee Profile*

Name	Sex	Age	Main Language	Self-identified Ethnicity	Art Practice	Place of Birth	Place of Higher-Education
Respondent 1	M	30	Cantonese	Hong Kong and Fujian ethnicity (not Chinese)	Visual Arts - painting	Hong Kong	London
Respondent 2	M	28	English	Indian, born and raised in Hong Kong	Gallerist Curator	Hong Kong	United States
Respondent 3	F	28	Cantonese	Hongkonger	Visual Arts - critical kinetic installation, biomaterial-based sculpture, video, performance	Hong Kong	Hong Kong
Respondent 4	F	31	Cantonese	Hongkonger (cannot relate to any other group)	Visual Arts - painting, drawing, mixed-media, writing Curator	Hong Kong	Taiwan
Respondent 5	M	25	Cantonese	Hongkonger-Chinese	Visual Arts - painting, mixed media	Hong Kong	Hong Kong
Respondent 6	M	25	Cantonese	Hongkonger	Visual Arts - installation, photography, graphics art, new media	Hong Kong	Hong Kong
Respondent 7	M	25	Cantonese	Asian -Hongkonger (not Chinese)	Visual Arts - photography, video making	Hong Kong	Hong Kong

Respondent 8	F	29	English	Indian artist from Hong Kong (Indian component slightly stronger)	Visual Arts - painting	Hong Kong	United States
Respondent 9	F	35	Cantonese	Asian-Hongkonger	Visual Arts - documentary	Mainland China	Hong Kong

As far as the interviewing process is concerned, all participants were asked the same questions outlined in the interview guide,[14] and they were all conducted in English. The questions were for the most part focused on participants' experiences as artists in Hong Kong, including aspects such as finding a place for exhibiting their pieces, finding funding to finance their works, dealing with the critique, and finally successfully reaching their audience in the way they expected. The observation of their works became also a very important factor in the collection of the data, as it offered the possibility of confronting the artists' narrative with their visual representation of it.

The data is analysed through inductive and deductive reasoning (Clarke, 2021). The interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times in the process of identifying common patterns and key sentences for the scope of the research question. These were then grouped and divided into four main categories: 1. The changes experienced in their art practice in terms of visuality and focus; 2. Changes in funding and exhibition possibilities; 3. The gender perspective and the effect it might have had in their practice; 4. The identity issue.

4.3 Risks and Limitations

Several limitations need to be mentioned concerning this study. First of all, the most pressuring issue that needs to be addressed is the political risk. As Jennifer Ngo (2022) mentioned when talking about her documentary, following the 2019 protests' harsh repression and the implementation of the NSL in 2020, the willingness of participants to talk has changed. The fear of not being free anymore to express their thoughts and the potential repercussions for expressing something that may not be considered politically tolerated could have disincentivized some artists to participate in the study, explaining thus the difficulties experienced in finding the respondents needed (Vice, 2022). This factor might have also been aggravated by my position as an outsider with a Western background and who have never experienced

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[14] See Annex I.

in first person such political events; a condition that might have hindered participants' trust and openness (Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018). Despite this, it needs to be noted that those who decided to take part in the research, showed no apparent restraint in their way of exploring the questions that were being asked.

Furthermore, due to the limited time available and the dimension of the sample taken into consideration, there is no ambition of presenting a research that can represent the whole art circle of Hong Kong's population. With this said, the results' validity was not affected by this aspect, as the respondents' answers still offer an in-depth insight into how people experienced that period, setting this way the basis for further research. One final limitation that needs to be mentioned is the language barrier. Most interviewees showed no major issues in communicating in English, however, in some cases, difficulties in expressing clearly some concepts were met. For this reason, it needs to be taken into account that in some cases, specific words or sentences might have conveyed different meanings or emphasis compared to the ones that the participants were truly trying to communicate.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Risk Control

Considering Hong Kong's most recent events and the relative stability of the area, efforts were made to ensure the safety of both the study's participants as well as myself as a researcher: the general instructions offered by the Swedish Research Council were followed. This means that a policy of complete transparency was prioritized with those subjects who decided to take part in the study. All interviewees were informed beforehand about the purpose of the research and of the interviews; their role in the research was clearly stated, as well as their possibility of freely deciding whether to participate in the project or not. The participants, once they agreed to be interviewed, were also given the possibility to end their collaboration in case, following a second risk evaluation, they decided that their contribution to the study would have been too dangerous. Furthermore, when possible, oral consent was prioritized over a written one, as it would have reduced the political risks for the interviewee (Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018; Swedish Research Council, 2017). Participants were also informed of the recording method used for the data collection and the way in which data were going to be treated. The protection of digital recordings, typed notes and transcripts was ensured through a data encryption tool. Finally, no compensation was offered to them.

As far as the personal identity of the interviewees is concerned, the possibility of being anonymized was presented as a guarantee. Most participants expressed a desire not to have their identities concealed in the thesis while also allowing permission for images of their works to be included as visual references. However, an attentive analysis of respondents' answers was made, keeping in mind the central government's strict censorship and also considering the fact that, while some information may not be interpreted as sensitive from my "outsider" point of view, they may still be considered "subversive information" by the authorities. As a result, due to the sensitive nature of the information disclosed during the interviews, the decision was made to anonymize all respondents in order to protect the informants' security. This choice meant that no personal information could be released in this thesis. Though not using their visual work might undermine the recognition of their important artwork, this research prioritises the security of research informants. This was deemed important in order to reduce the risk that respondents might otherwise be exposed to, especially considering the present political situation in Hong Kong.

5. FINDINGS

In this chapter, the main findings analyse how the socio-political changes that re-shaped Hong Kong's reality in recent years have influenced both the identity perception of the interviewees and their art practices. In the analysis part, attention will be placed on the visual, thematical and contextual changes. These will be analysed in the key of Storytelling, complemented by Foucault's interpretation of *parrhesia*, in order to shed light on the new visuality and narrative presented in the artists' art pieces. Finally, in the last subchapter, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory will be used to investigate the new Hong Kong identity emerged in recent years.

5.1 Changes in Visuality

With the emergence of post-materialistic values and social movements, changes in artistic production became evident. The circumstances created by the societal uproars, and the government's response to them, pushed artists to reinvent their styles and their strategies in order to convey messages that were mostly related to the subjectivity and the complexity of Hong Kong's socio-political situation, as mentioned in Cartier (2008) and Ives (2021)'s researches.

What emerges from the existing literature is that over the years, Hong Kong's art has developed a subtler way of expressing personal references and personal experiences by trying to find ways of escaping a condition of self-censorship. As in the case of the artist Bouie Choi, presented by Ives (2021), the artists who decided to participate in the present research declared having adopted, forced by the socio-political changes and by the implementation of the NSL, a subtler and less direct way of expressing themselves.

> *We started to think about how to express ourselves, especially for some feelings regarding society in more of a tricky way, more abstract and trickier. Artists can be limited by social limitations but at the same time, they can play with some grey areas.*
>
> *Respondent 3*

Some artists would rely on techniques such as blurriness, coarseness and abstraction. Respondent 9 is an example of an artist who, in her most recent documentary, shifted from using more direct imagery to incorporating shaky and blurry images when portraying events related to social movements, while also moving the visual focus to the bodily emotions of the film's subjects. The idea behind this choice was to convey the emotional essence of those years without directly addressing the societal uproars.

> *I would like the audience to connect the images to the social movement, that is why I used shorts of when I was in the protests but they are still very subtle or the images are shaky.*
>
> *Respondent 9*

Other artists started producing works in which a subtler symbolism was preferred. This was the case of Respondent 7, in whose work a more stark and obvious change in visuality in the post-2020s can be recognised. This Respondent started to develop his practice as a photojournalist during the protests in 2019. During that period, the artist mentioned the especially straightforward character of his photographs, as the intention was mostly to document the struggles and the frustration that he, in the first person, was experiencing due to what was happening in Hong Kong.

His first photobook was characterised by a strong contrast of black and white aimed at conveying in a more "poetic way", to use his words, his thoughts regarding the flow of the whole democratic movement.

My photobook I would say is immature because there are a lot of symbols that only people who studied photography or understand photography can understand. […] I was just doing art for my own sake. I was not representing anyone and I was not really thinking about social issues.

<div align="right">*Respondent 7*</div>

The artist remarked on the introspective character of this work, hinting at the non-disruptive narrative behind it. However, the photos shown in the book left very little to the interpretation of the audience or of the authorities, as clear and distinct images of the movement were exhibited. The more direct form of expression could be justified by the fact that, in the protest years, there was still no strict restriction on expression possibilities. On the contrary, that type of art was actually welcomed.

Following 2020, however, the desire to talk about the relations between China and Hong Kong and the impossibility of explicitly touching upon political subjects unleashed the artist's creativity, as it was the case also for Respondent 9. Despite the narrative being still focused on the socio-political aspect and power dynamics that dictate Hong Kong's society, a clear change in symbolism is presented.

Colours, along with the subjects of the paintings, become a key element in conveying the underlying political narrative that remains still not as stark or clearly stated, despite the figurative character of the work.

There are a lot of ritual elements. […] It looks like I am giving myself a 'blowjob' but that is not actually the case. The person kneeling is also holding a needle which could suggest the sewing of my puberty. Another symbol is the glove placed on the pubis.

<div align="right">*Respondent 7*</div>

The symbolism in his work is versatile and gives more room for different interpretations according to the "social circle" the spectators belong to, while also leaving space for the trivialization of the work as no real reference to subversive elements was presented. In this composition, it is also noteworthy the proposal of a faceless self-portrait which, despite presenting a different reasoning behind the choice of such a technique, echoes the study on Zines conducted by Tong (2022) and artist Cheung 51 faceless silhouette (South China Morning Post, 2022).

faceless self-portrait became like my signature mark. I want people to focus more on the composition and the narrative behind it.

<div align="right">*Respondent 7*</div>

The storytelling here becomes evident: like other interviewees, Respondent 7 started from his personal perspective to create symbols in his work that would manage to convey his view of the world. The personal dimension in this symbology is evident in the choice of including pantyhose representing the rich side of society, in contrast to those who are nakedly representing the "slaves" or the poor social classes. While this could allude to his personal life, as the artist comes from a grassroots family that experienced economic hardships, such details could also hint at the reality of Hong Kong people being forced to work to exhaustion to be able to earn a living, as mentioned multiple times during the interviews. This topic seemed to be an underpinning concern for most of the respondents.

I would say that the building would not be the subject in my work. [...] We built up Hong Kong actually, from my Grandpa to my father, who built up the districts. Don't we deserve a place, a respectful place in Hong Kong? It just feels like we are like the light reflecting, floating on the water.

<div align="right">*Respondent 1*</div>

As presented by Anna Arendt (in Stone-Mediatore, 2003), despite the personal narrative of this work elaborated from the author's personal experience and interest, which are greatly shaped by the author's socio-political environment, the audience could still resonate with the artists' works. According to what was stated by Respondent 7, in his case, using faceless figures as a mere driving factor of the narration, managed to create a conversation that could be universalized to different social circles and the hardship they face in the socio-political context of Hong Kong.

The audience found it so connected and synchronized because to them it was more like a Chinese family context: parents not letting kids masturbate; for me is more like sewing or making a chastity vow to my puberty. But the LGBTQ+ community recognized also the presence of a male body in which they found resonance for their community even though it was not my intention.

<div align="right">*Respondent 7*</div>

Other artists, such as Respondent 6, had to make similar adjustments in their art production, substituting more sensitive and violent images, mostly depicting the brutality of the 2019 protests, with more blended and subtle compositions in the post-2020s.

Respondent 5, similarly to Respondent 7, also adopted a style that partially went against the trend described by the existing literature. Instead of pursuing a more abstract form of art, he decided to engage with multiple and diverse techniques and forms of representation, in an attempt to find the one that would correctly convey his own feeling of resignation for Hong Kong's current situation. Such a condition still allowed him to pursue a subtle narrative in the subjects depicted in his works: with these being strictly related to his personal interaction with them, the hidden meaning behind what the paintings' elements represent to him remains something that is unspoken and that can consequently be easily trivialized.

This subtle form of expression can be observed to varying degrees in works of art. While initially described in the existing literature as a response to the limited freedom of expression, it seems to have been adopted and internalized by young artists in Hong Kong, who are now using these techniques even when not dealing with potentially sensitive or controversial subjects.

> *Some people may go to develop forms of expression that are more abstract, they just don't directly respond to social issues, they make things subtler. The intention might also not be about political topics. […] You can see that they put some hints in some works to let you relate [their work] to social issues but it is not that obvious.*
>
> *Respondent 6*

5.2 Changes in Focus

Despite the general trend mentioned in the chapter just above, another commonality that was recognised among the interviewees was a change in focus rather than in visuality. This was especially true among those participants who were not touching upon the protest period itself.

Artists such as Respondent 3 and Respondent 4, mentioned how the socio-political changes had little to no impact on the visuality of their works, as those were "mild" and subtler to begin with: Respondent 4, for example, remarked how the movements and techniques needed to create each of her pieces are

occasionally even more important to the narrative process than the visuality itself. Instead, the socio-political changes influenced these two artists in the scope of their narratives and the attention that they were placing on the Hong Kong community.

> *In my previous work, I also focused on collectiveness and systems but is in a not very specific context. It was not too aggressively political, it was quite mild also. Even though after those years, it made me look into more details in those kinds of work. I became more sensitive towards those kinds of systems or the feeling of something very intangible and so more connected to Hong Kong.*
>
> *Respondent 3*

Here the attention of the artist shifted from a more general perspective to a local one, consequently showing an enhanced attachment to Hong Kong. Similar was the case of Respondent 1 who declared that:

> *The changes in Hong Kong inspired me to do works that relate to Hong Kong. I think this is more meaningful than my previous work. My previous works were just featuring the modern era and small pieces of modern time.*
>
> *Respondent 1*

In such regard, Respondent 4 further elaborated on this and demonstrated how a bigger sense of community attachment is fostered by the artists in the post-2020s. Respondent 4 especially presented her work as a form of therapeutical setting in which, through the creation of a conversational space, the audience can elaborate on their personal grieves and traumatic experiences by reasoning with the work they are looking at.

> *There is not much difference between my art now and before. The difference is the higher attention to the communal sentiment. I want to find a common ground between me and others, and not only focus on myself. After the movement [...] there is the desire of giving a moment to people to enjoy the artwork and to have some "me-time" [...] My work is not directly about social or political issues, but rather the expression of people's minds in the current social situation, thus highlighting the distortion in society.*
>
> *Respondent 4*

5.3 Future Perspectives

In terms of the general artistic environment in Hong Kong, artists mentioned increased pressure from the authorities. They also noted that they would not be surprised if increased surveillance from Hong Kong authorities had to happen in the following years, supporting this way the argument put forth by researchers regarding Beijing's repression of any subversive art piece in the aftermath of 2019.

> *I would not be surprised if the law gets stronger here or if the influence of China gets stronger here.*
>
> *Respondent 8*

However, when asked about their opinion on the future perspective for art in Hong Kong, none of the interviewees showed a degree of fear or worrisome that would have prevented them from conducting their practice locally. On the contrary, they all expressed confidence in the capacity of Hong Kong's artists to continue finding ways to express themselves. This confidence could be attributed to the potential for art to be trivialized, especially paintings and installations, which could dissuade authorities from implementing overly strict measures of repression.

> *So far, I feel most of the artists can continue their work. [...] I don't think the government will really interfere with art society, I don't think they are afraid of us. As long as artists in Hong Kong do not do something that will threaten their power, everything should be okay.*
>
> *Respondent 1*

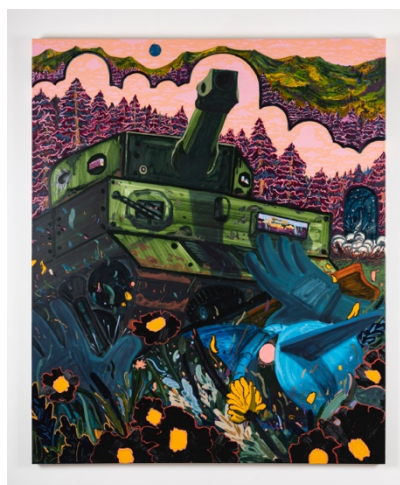In relation to this, interesting was the case presented in Figure 1

Figure 1. Ticko Liu, "They Shall Not Pass", 2023. Surrealistic painting inspired by model tanks on the artist's desk. (Courtesy of Gallery Exit and the Artist)

Despite the painting not having intentional political connotations, according to the artists' statement, the clear and strong visual representation of a tank passing over a man, as suggested by the gloves, would presuppose an immediate act of censorship enacted by the NSL advocates, as in the collective imaginary the association of this painting to the famous "Tank Man" photograph taken during the Tiananmen massacre is immediate. Despite this, this work was still exhibited in Hong Kong's Gallery Exit in 2023 with apparently no repercussions, which contrasts with what the existing literature suggests.

The same positive attention was not reserved for the authors of the works presented in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 3. Chinese characters for the word "fredoom". This were spread all over the city of Hong Kong. Photo: Kyle Lam/HKFP
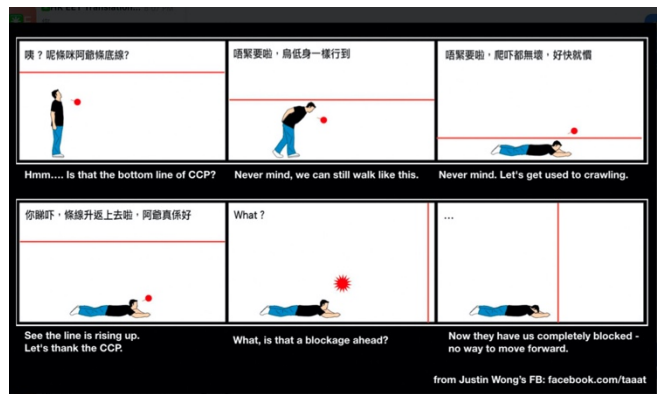
Figure 2. Justin Wong, Satirical Cartoon. the picture shows the CCP control line getting tighter. This work belongs to a series of cartoons that satirize the Chinese Communist Party and the local Communist Party authorities. Source: The Epoch Times, https://www.theepochtimes.com/political-cartoonist-forced-to-leave-hong-kong-after-his-work-attracted-police-attention_4963475.html?welcomeuser=1

Because of the separatist messages and satirical nature of their works, the authors were respectively detained and peer pressured into leaving Hong Kong. From this, it could be inferred that the NSL is a more serious constraint on works that lack the potential of multiple interpretations, such as those that rely heavily on language.

Finally, Respondent 7, mentioned the capacity of Hong Kong artists to take advantage of the current limitation brought by the NSL, to investigate new forms of expression and new ways of storytelling, in order to keep addressing societal issues, while also giving resonance to the whole Hong Kong community.

If they [artists] really want to do stuff about society, they will find a way to do it and will explore the way of doing it. I think art practice might also be changing: it will become more from a personal perspective.

<div align="right">

Respondent 7

</div>

This assumption was supported by the works of other research participants, who, despite attempting to reach a larger audience, stressed the introspective nature of their art. This aspect is consistent with the principles of Storytelling and Truth-telling, as artists use introspection to evade censorship restrictions by placing greater emphasis on their personal narrative and emotions (Besley, 2013; Pajimans, 2019). It still should be noted that while presenting a very experienced-based visualisation of events, the narrative does not remain limited to something that only the storytellers could recognise themselves in. Rather, the personal emotions visualised in their art serve as a fundamental driving force behind the narrative while encouraging an open discussion with the public.

5.3.1 Development of an Underground Scene and "Grey Areas"

Some respondents mentioned the possibilities of further development of the underground art scene which, as Respondent 8 mentioned, "will keep commenting on the time". Respondent 6 in such regard, referred to the possibility of galleries to not officially be registered as such, in order to create a safer environment for artists' exhibitions while evading censorship and tighter surveillance on the work shown.

Some galleries didn't register as such, they registered as "art shops" saying that every piece is merchandised, this way they kind of dodged that limitation.

<div align="right">

Respondent 6

</div>

Such a strategy also opens up the possibility of hosting private events with trustworthy audiences, enabling artists to express themselves more freely without fear of persecution. These events and private screenings become especially beneficial for filmmakers and new media artists, who seem to have been among the most affected by the implementation of the NSL.

I made an agreement with the gallery. If they have some trustworthy guests, I kept the original copy of my work in case they were interested in a private screening.

<div align="right">

Respondent 6

</div>

5.4 Funding and Exhibitions

The changes registered in funding and exhibition are also an important aspect that needs to be investigated as they play a crucial role in supporting and promoting artists' work, while also offering them a "stage" where to present their narration and showcase their work to an audience. In the existing research on this field, emerged how funding availability and exhibition space for local production have always been limited both during and post-the colonial periods. After the implementation of the NSL and the outbreak of the Pandemic, these two components became even less accessible.

5.4.1 Exhibitions

When talking about exhibitions, Respondent 2 affirmed that

> *Gallerist assumes the responsibility of being custodians of culture and the way she performs so they have to be mindful of what is being put out to the world as it will have an impact on whoever is exposed to it. So, it is something that needs to be done well with consciousness as well as a lot of reasoning behind it.*
>
> *Respondent 2*

Despite this sentence being said while talking about a more generalized role assumed by gallerists, it takes a very different connotation when dropped into the context of post-2020s Hong Kong. In a situation of uncertainty and unclear guidelines on what piece of art could be exhibited or not, the responsibilities of galleries became even more pressing, as now multiple and more dangerous incognitos need to be considered when selecting which artists to represent and works to exhibit, causing galleries to become less daring. This change in attitude was remarked on also by one of the respondents.

> *In 2019-2020 before the National Security Law, I saw a lot of shows that were quite direct to the protests. [...] galleries seemed to be more than happy to display those types of work because it seemed to be everyone's goal.*
>
> *Respondent 6*

The growing desire to support the social movement and to support Hong Kong's independence discourse that emerged in 2019, failed at the moment when the NSL was implemented. This caused a partial resignation on the galleries' part, which replaced their recklessness with higher attention and control in the exhibition process. This was a change in attitude that became evident on multiple levels, but that was especially perceived by those artists who, as mentioned in the subchapter above, specialised in new media and video making. Some artists mentioned the limitations of going through the government-led department of "movie rating", which has the power to censor works if too political or too violent, while in other art practices such as the documentary, a complete lack of support for public screening possibilities was remarked.

Hong Kong has never supported documentaries but after 2019, because documentary is a very direct way of showing problems, many documentary-related events closed: Hong Kong International Documentary Festival and Hong Kong Independent Film Festival closed. [...] People are starting to send their work to the UK because they cannot show it in Hong Kong. The main audience you want to communicate with is the Hong Kong locals but now it is hard. [...] Many people are disappointed about the censorship law and they just don't want to try anymore.

Respondent 9

5.4.2 Funding

The more limited stages for exhibition inevitably affected also the possibility for emerging artists to receive funding. The majority of the participants mentioned not receiving regular funding from the government or not having even tried to directly apply to it as, due to the nature of their work, they were sure to receive a rejection. In this regard, the importance of knowing what words to use when writing a proposal was underlined.

Only one respondent declared to rely on foreign funding; while these may grant higher freedom of topic and materials in the art practices, their support still cannot be given for granted as:

Investments in art are very difficult because art is very subjective, it is based on one emotion as well as returns are not as exclusive as they are in other industries. So, investors are more sceptical

of something so subjective such as art. I don't think it is impossible but we need to establish further in order for people to get us seriously.

<div align="right">*Respondent 2*</div>

Funding through exhibition spaces seemed to be more accessible. One interviewee mentioned that it is the gallery that actually receives the funding that will be then used to cover the artists' expenses; in this situation, there is the possibility for the government-led institution, which is allocated to the cultural department, of not exactly knowing what is the narrative and the idea behind the pieces exhibited. Respondent 7 offered testimony of this process when talking about his exhibition in the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre "Lumenvisum":

For my solo exhibition, I received around 5000HKD for production and another 5000HKD for the artist's fee but I had to pay extra money because the funds were not enough to cover the whole exhibition.

<div align="right">*Respondent 7*</div>

This quotation helps to shed light on the limitation of funding available for visual arts, echoing Chan's (2021) study. This aspect further enhanced the limitation of the art practice in Hong Kong in terms of career: being an artist in Hong Kong does not come with low costs as to the expenses for materials, the ever-rising rent for their studios, and the renting of exhibition halls, among others, need to be added.

5.4.3 Pandemic Influence

It is worth mentioning also the Pandemic as a factor that influenced the changes in the artistic environment. Following the lockdown of 2020, the attention placed on the local art scene increased. As Respondent 2 mentioned, due to the impossibility of reaching the international scene and inviting international artists to exhibit at Hong Kong's art events, higher emphasis has been placed on local artists.

Because of Covid, and how close Hong Kong was during Covid, a lot more galleries and collectors have put more emphasis on local artists, which I think is a great positive change. Before, historically, Hong Kong would import a lot of artists and a lot of the galleries were big

international galleries and so were showing some of the biggest things and artists in contemporary art.

<div align="right">*Respondent 2*</div>

This testimony helps to show the impact of the pandemic on the development of Hong Kong's local art scene. From the data collected and the observation on the field, however, the role that the Pandemic played became evident, both on the negative and the positive sides. On the one hand, it offered the opportunity for the emergence of a higher number of independent and artist-led galleries, providing local artists with a bigger stage that pushed their visibility towards better opportunities for recognition and, consequently, bigger chances of affirming themselves as artists, as in the case of Respondent 8:

The pandemic [...] probably helped me in terms of career goals because the fairs were focusing more on local art because they were still there and still had to put the fairs on, so more artists probably got discovered in Hong Kong in the last three years or so.

<div align="right">*Respondent 8*</div>

This observation creates a new layer of understanding of market orientation presented by the existing literature on the topic, as it suggests the development of two parallel and independent market realities: one that is mostly locally oriented, and that is concerned with the valorisation of locally produced art, mostly dominated by smaller galleries; on the other hand, there is the still flourishing auction market that is mostly projected in the international reality, through events such as Art Basel and Art Central, and that see as protagonist the bigger and more established galleries.

Nevertheless, despite Richards and Pacella (2022) researched that the pre-existing precarious condition of creative workers has not been further impacted by the pandemic, as it was already unstable to begin with; the data collected indicate that, for certain forms of art that require onsite production and higher mobility, such as documentaries, the pandemic and the development of such a dual market did not have as much of a beneficial effect.

The pandemic affected me in the income aspect: I lost many jobs and was forced to do part-time jobs, it became time-consuming in a way that hit my creation.

<div align="right">*Respondent 9*</div>

Finally, another aspect that might be categorized as negative from a local perspective is the increased influence of mainland China authorities in the management of Hong Kong life during that period. This was a more entrenched presence that might have been perceived as threatening the freedom of expression in what appears to be a generalised increasingly restrictive environment.

I felt like many others that during Covid here, China's influence and actual personnel were coming to Hong Kong more and more. [...] People are getting fined more and arrested more so "don't break the rules", but what the rules are about art and messaging I do not know.

Respondent 8

5.4.4 Market Influence

In terms of the market, the data collected verified the tendency indicated in prior studies, according to which, following the social movements, artists detached themselves from a market-oriented mentality. Interviewees mentioned the hope for their works to be sold but, at the same time, they did not hint at the possibility of letting the market dictate the visuality or the subjects of their work.

In a commercial market, my work is not mainstream. people expect to have certain illustrations or paintings for their homes. They are looking for something beautiful. In that sense, my paintings are not beautiful. They are not depicting imaginary spaces.

Respondent 5

Artists seemed to be mostly concerned about the function of art as a therapy instrument for both self-healing and community healing, confirming also the maintenance of a more socially oriented and socially engaged type of art. However, this market disinterest might be also explained by the fact that all the interviewees, except one, see their role as artists as a secondary profession that does not represent their first source of income. They all self-finance and sustain their practice through their employment in other activities.

Among the interviewees, Respondent 8 seemed to be the only one who was able to maintain herself thanks to her practice. She was also the only interviewee to declare that her time and the choice of work were dictated by the market demand. However, even in her case, the market orientation is not as strong as one would expect as she quotes:

I wish money were not an impediment. I would like to do more experiments but time is money and also knowing what sells kind of dictates how I spend my time but I don't want this to be fuelling me.

Respondent 8

5.5 Gender

During the fieldwork, it was observed that among the artists contacted, male artists were keener on participating in the research and were also the ones who were more directly focusing on the socio-political sphere of Hong Kong while being more outspoken on the political narrative present in their works. Female artists, on the other hand, were more hesitant to reach back once contacted; and some of those who agreed on conducting an interview talked about works that were subtler in their nature or not directly concerned with the political changes in Hong Kong.

5.5.1 Women's Representation

The difference in attitude shown by the respondents could be explained by an art scene where male artists seem to occupy a position of greater power and visibility (Chung, 2018). As Lai (2020) suggests, in the visual arts "72 per cent of the graduates from publicly funded creative undergraduate programs between 2001 and 2015 were female. However, from 677 solo exhibitions held in 24 major commercial galleries there, between 2008 and 2017, only 146 (21.9 per cent) were by female artists. Considering the fact that not all of these shows featured local artists, the number of Hong Kong female artists showing gallery spaces in their own city is even lower." (Studio Berlin III, 2018 in Lai, 2020).

This could entail that women have to go through bigger struggles to prove themselves on the field and become well-established artists. Considering that, as stated by Respondent 2, "reputation in the art world

is hard to build and very easy to lose", it would be understandable why women preferred not to expose themselves too much or to touch upon topics that might hinder their career development.

Despite this, however, when the respondents were asked their opinion on this issue, none of them mentioned having ever experienced discrimination or particular difficulties in the development of their practice due to their gender. Respondent 8 remarked on a recent improvement in the art industry:

> *I am grateful for the time period we are in now, people don't want to be that company anymore, they look for more diversity now and not only in terms of gender.*
>
> *Respondent 8*

While Respondent 9 even affirmed actually feeling in some cases privileged in her work thanks to her gender.

> *In the documentary industry being a woman gives you more opportunities to get to know people. In residency programs, they seem to be more welcoming of women rather than men so I feel privileged. However, in free-lance and money wise I feel disadvantages because people seem to like to hire more men.*
>
> *Respondent 9*

The issue of gender discrimination seems to be relegated more to the sphere of free-lancing and private clients, rather than in the artistic industry itself.

5.5.2 Topic Explored in the Art Pieces

It was observed also how among some female interviewees, the topics explored in their art pieces were not directly political, rather they focused on a more culturally oriented form of art while also showing a more emotional form of expression compared to the male component of the interviewees. Men, on the other hand, seemed to be more daring and vocal about the topic chosen for their work. Respondent 8 hypothesized that the reason behind this could be "an entitlement inherited by men more than by women"

This gender distinction in terms of topic and way of expression could be explained in terms of context: Hong Kong society, like many others, is still imprinted on a patriarchal system where men historically have always occupied a more up-fronted and active role in directly commenting on political issues, presenting also a "masculine" form art that is more "though" and direct; women, instead, filled a more peaceful position within the society and, as a consequence, their art was expected to be "feminine", meaning more emotional and passive (Korsmeyer, 2004).

Traces of this way of thinking could be recognised in the works of Respondents 3 and 4, where a softer and more delicate way of expression was adopted and the political nuances hidden in the narrative were not as evident as in other artists' works. However, Respondents 8 and 9 broke out from this stereotype of "Feminine art", as they adopted respectively a more powerful and bold way of expression in dealing with socio-political topics. Despite the gender categorisation has the potential to influence the visual choices of the artists, the present observation only aims at setting the ground for more focused and more in-depth research due to the limitation in space and scope of this thesis.

5.6 Identity

In the chapter dedicated to the literature review, an initial insight into the history of the development of Hong Kong's identity and its rocky relationship with mainland China was provided. From scholars' research, it emerged how the social movements pushed the emergence of a stronger identity and political awakening and a sense of communitarianism that was also reflected in the local art scene of Hong Kong.

5.6.1 Hong Kong Artist's Label

These scholars' findings resonate also among the interviewees selected for this study: the majority of them demonstrated pride in wearing the label of "Hongkonger", being this not necessarily related to their role as artists. Some of them, when asked if they labelled themselves as Hong Kong artists, commented on proving uncertain feelings towards that label, as the implication of that would be too big in terms of career expectations and commitment to the art practice.

> *I am interested in doing art but I feel like my passion for art is not equal to others in recent days: I am not really sure if I am an artist or someone who happens to know how to do some art.*

Despite having trouble recognising themselves as artists, the majority of them still hinted at a fundamental place attachment and understanding of the community that Hong Kong artists need to have in order to be labelled as such, a sentiment that was extended also their art practice when asked if they were considering moving abroad.

> *You have to live in Hong Kong if you want to be a Hong Kong artist [...] When you leave your hometown, you leave the earth to euthanize your art piece.*
>
> *Respondent 5*

> *I am scared that by going away, my attention, my focus, and all my motives will not be focused anymore on Hong Kong. [...] There will be too big of a distance between me and Hong Kong that will stop me from doing very local stuff. [...] If I move to other places I will not be so close to the matter itself and to the emotions that Hong Kong people would be feeling.*
>
> *Respondent 6*

These two respondents' answers underline the importance of staying in Hong Kong in order to understand, correctly report and, record the city's events, as well as preserve the collective memory. As Respondent 3 mentioned during her interview, this is perceived as the only way to "[...] let people not forget those existing stories and history".

5.6.2 Value of Place Attachment

The previous responses also offered an insight into how Hong Kong people's sense of identity can be traced back to the attachment to the place in which they were born and raised, and that, despite the socio-political changes and the trend of migration that arose in the post-2020s, they still consider as Home.

> *Even people who went abroad in those years, they don't consider staying there for a long time [...], especially after those years, people have a strong belief that their home is in Hong Kong [...] I am proud to take both labels, as I am 'Hong Konger' and 'Hong Kong artist', I have always taken them for granted as I am literally from Hong Kong.*

This label I am happy to put on myself. [...] I was born here, resided here, I am exposed to local Hong Kong culture, I eat food here, I speak Cantonese and I write traditional Chinese. I have a deep connection with the culture and people here so I call it home [...] it has become an instinct.

Respondent 6

The answers just quoted above also underline another aspect of place attachment: the instinctiveness underpinning the label of Hongkongers. This can remark the complexity involved in the concept of identity, hinting in some cases to the difficulties in understanding and defining identity labels, also for the individual who identifies with them. Being this perceived as natural, has never been questioned.

Within this context, it is noteworthy to consider how some interviewees' place attachment reflected itself in their ethnic self-identification. As outlined in Table 1, some participants identified as "Asian" but explicitly excluded the Chinese component. The majority of interviewees even presented the "Hongkonger" identity as an ethnicity on its own. Eight out of nine respondents appeared not willing to associate themselves with the broader category of "Chinese", indicating a strong and resolute rejection and animosity towards mainland China, not only in political terms, but also culturally: in multiple cases, they tended to emphasize the uniqueness of Hongkong culture, refraining from making any comparison to that of mainland China.

5.6.3 Value of Cantonese Language

Respondent 6's answer, mentioned in the previous subchapter, brings up another point that has been largely investigated by scholars, which is the exaltation of Hong Kong's unique culture and key features as defining elements of local identity (Kam,2020). In this regard the majority of interviewees, when defining such a label, remarked on the importance of the Cantonese language. This aspect emerged also among the exhibitions visited, where the works of art presented, if enriched by words, usually used the Cantonese language.

Respondent 6 during the interview expressed the fear of forgetting his language if he had to move abroad, placing on such aspect the emphasis of being the gateway to Hong Kong reality.

You can call yourself a Hongkonger but that means that you have to act like one [...] Hongkonger is more like a state of mind rather than a birthplace or a passport [...] Learning Cantonese is hard, but at the same time why not making the effort to at least learn it a little bit, you know different things that might actually allow you to connect with the culture at large in our city.

Respondent 2

Everything that I am doing I cannot say is for Hong Kong but is based on Hong Kong context [...] I was born in Hong Kong, I learnt from Hong Kong, I see things from a very Hongkongese perspective even though I cannot really define that.

Respondent 7

Interesting to see is also how in some cases, the Cantonese language became a more important defining element of an individual's "Hongkongness" compared to the place attachment. In the case of Respondent 8 this hierarchy of factors got reflected also in her art practice, which ended up being more closely tied to her Indian identity rather than to the Hong Kong's one, going against the pattern observed among the other interviewees.

Hong Kong is home for me, I don't have another one but sometimes when I say I am from Hong Kong, a local person from Hong Kong might challenge me and say I don't speak Cantonese. So, I am in the weird position of being from Hong Kong but having people who are also from Hong Kong who might not see me as from Hong Kong.

Respondent 8

5.6.4 Protests as Identity-Shaping Factor

Respondent 8 also remarked on the socio-political movement's effect on shaping the identitarian understanding of the community. While talking about the importance of the Cantonese language, she brought to the attention how the recent protests did indeed enhance and consolidate the emergence of local identity in opposition to an antagonised national identity.

This issue came up a lot during the protest time as there was a lot of backlash against expats or non-Hong Kong local people or Hong Kong locals' selves who were maybe not joining the protests.

<div align="right">*Respondent 8*</div>

Some respondents remarked on the feeling of their cultural identity being forcibly replaced, such as Respondent 6:

I didn't have this label before the protest, but after that, I felt like the mission of protecting my own language. [...] Before I didn't really care. After the protests, I felt like the language I speak and the food I eat is slowly changing and being replaced by a different culture.

<div align="right">*Respondent 6*</div>

While others mentioned the refund feeling of companionship among those who experienced those traumatic events, a condition that again brought a stronger sense of attachment and belonging to Hong Kong.

After the National Security Law, I feel people are more solid in trying to find their identity and the identity of Hong Kong that we love and need. [...] People are trying to get the momentum of the Hong Kong we know [...] In the post-2020s I wouldn't say the attachment to Hong Kong changed but consolidated and became clearer to be verbally presented.

<div align="right">*Respondent 7*</div>

It is the first city I have an attachment to because of the Umbrella Movement and the 2016 movement. I feel connected to the city and labelling myself as a Hong Kong artist means a lot to me.

<div align="right">*Respondent 9*</div>

Such feelings also validate Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, proving the argumentation proposed in the literature review chapter, according to which the implementation of the NSL simply propelled feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness among the population in Hong Kong, corroborating the

localist sentiment and generating a bigger rejection of the community incorporation within the national discourse pushed forward by mainland China.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The existing literature on the topic suggests that, following the failure of the 2019 social movements, the Hong Kong socio-political scene experienced stricter control and increased pressure from the government's authorities. Pernin (2022), in particular, draws attention to the heightened censorship enacted in the months following the implementation of the National Security Law and the surge in the number of arrests made. It could be inferred that these actions might have created an environment of fear and lack of expression that inevitably caused a dampening effect on artistic production and the development of the artistic environment. Artists became more cautious about what they could create, seeking to understand the limits of acceptable forms of expression by paying attention to arrests made in the wake of the law's implementation. This cautious approach may have also hindered the beneficial impact of Foucault's practice of truth-telling, mentioned by Paijmans (2019), in helping the population overcome the trauma of the post-protest era, as for artists it became more difficult to critique the authorities and document that period. The cases of Professor Justin Wong and the alleged author of the "freedom" graffiti, presented in the finding section, further support these assumptions as both of them showcased that the danger of persecution for acts of subversion is still a constant risk in post-2020s Hong Kong.

Therefore, it could be understood that the NSL had far-reaching consequences that expanded beyond the immediate political realm, and impacted the social and artistic landscape of Hong Kong profoundly. However, this impact was not as negative in all of its aspects. Multiple studies (see Cartier, 2008; Charrieras, *et al,* 2018; Poposki and Leung, 2002) emphasised the government's efforts in developing the cultural sector. Interestingly, this research reveals that the two main driving factors of such development were actually the Pandemic and, paradoxically, the NSL itself. The first one forced the art sector to pay more attention and offer more visibility to local talents; the second one, which is widely seen as violating the right to freedom of expression, in this case, has resulted in the rise of independent galleries. These, driven by the desire to provide a platform for local artists' expression, contributed to the creation of "grey areas" or "underground activities", such as private events, that escaped the NSL's censorship. This underlines the creative process that emerged from the restrictions and that was not limited only to the

gallerists, but also touched the artistic production self, proving that no permanent slowing down of artists' work was generated.

At the end of 2019, researchers documented a shift from slogans and satirical graffiti or Zines to a form of art that predilected visual abstraction and blurriness, from the artists' part. While not understanding clearly the limitations brought by the NSL, these techniques allowed them to address the community's feelings of distress and frustration with the Hong Kong political situation. Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* was used here to understand how the adoption of a more introspective look in the form of art allowed storytellers, in this case artists, to still walk down the path of frankness, while also finding a way of limiting the risks that come with that choice (Pajimans, 2019). What emerged from the data collected is that the young artists, by entering an artistic scene that is already heavily limited in the way of expression, internalised this subtle way of production. They developed it in a way that pieces of art, despite not being necessarily visually abstract or blurry, as presented in the existing literature, were subtler in their nature: non-direct symbolisms were used and the usage of language or sentences reduced, as this would have hindered the possibility of multiple interpretations of the art pieces. This internalisation was also compelled by obvious funding and exhibition restrictions: the inability to receive funds to support their practice or have their works exhibited, thereby reducing their visibility on the art scene, forced them to adopt a subtler mode of expression. Nevertheless, despite the constant uncertainty in art production, artists demonstrated to still be able to conduct their work, while also navigating fearlessly and with increased confidence in the new artistic environment.

What was especially interesting to observe was that the socio-political changes in Hong Kong and the restriction that followed, instead of disincentivising artists to pursue sensitive topics related to societal and political issues, seemed to have had the opposite effect of pushing artists to pay more attention and become more sensitive to Hong Kong's community struggles. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, this unexpected trend can be explained by the previously mentioned antagonization of mainland China which, through the introduction of a Law aimed at controlling Hong Kong's internal affairs, enhanced the sense of communitarianism and belonging of Hong Kong community to its "ingroup". This was also evident in the respondents' explicit refusal to self-identify as ethnic Han Chinese. The fear of seeing the place of belonging and the distinctive elements of Hong Kong being threatened prompted the conceptualisation of a new Hong Kong identity in art pieces that aimed to create a distinction between local identity and national identity. This was evident in Respondent 7's

work, where the idea of mainland China was presented as a "ruler" over Hong Kong, or in Respondent's 6 use of cultural references that mostly only Hong Kong's people would be able to grasp. The new clearer and defined local identity, invigorated by the social movement, contributed to the enhancement of a newly established civic engagement that encouraged and pushed artists and, more broadly, the local community, to look for suitable ways to preserve the collective memory of Hong Kong's history and values.

7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to highlight how the socio-political changes, that occurred in Hong Kong prior to 2020, influenced Hong Kong's artists in their way of expressing their local identity through their works. To answer such a question, emphasis was especially placed on how the shifts in the socio and political realms also resulted in a transformation of the art scene itself, as this would have shed light on the newly found challenges that contributed to the development of new visualities and the conceptualisation of a new "Hong Kong identity" in the art pieces.

According to the study conducted, the societal upheavals and the enactment of the NSL did generate long-lasting changes in Hong Kong's artistic environment, limiting both the possibilities of expression, the availability of funding, and the presence of public exhibition spaces subject to higher governmental censorship and control. Hong Kong's local artists were able to find motivation in such constraints to seek new forms of expression, unleashing greater creativity to find alternative ways of expressing a local identity, primarily focused on the attachment and "brotherhood" fostered in Hong Kong's community. More specifically, the data collected revealed how subtleness, blurriness and abstraction have become the most widespread and normalized forms of expression among visual arts. Nevertheless, artists' expression styles are constantly evolving, as the boundaries of what can and cannot be created are still being explored. For example, despite the assumption that it might be too direct as a form of representation, figurativeness was maintained and supplemented by symbolisms that could be easily trivialized by the authorities, partially escaping the risk of censorship. The symbols employed are mostly inspired by Hong Kong's cultural values and intended for a local audience, introducing aspects in the composition that would encourage and maintain an open conversation on a local identity that would have, otherwise, risked slowly fading away.

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Appendix: Life Story Interview Guide

1. Would you like to start by introducing yourself and telling me about your upbringing?

    a. name

    b. age

    c. birthplace

    d. upbringing

    e. education

    f. why did you decide to become an artist?

2. Could you please talk to me a little bit about your work?

    a.   Context:

        i.   When was the work created?

        ii.   What was the context?

        iii. What do you want your audience to understand?

        iv.   Where does it exhibit?

        v.   How did people respond to it?

        vi.   Do you receive funds?

    b. Visuality:

        i.   Colour (if it matters)

        ii.   Symbolism

        iii. Significant elements in the paintings

        iv.   What are the stories behind it and what story is it narrating

3. How do the changes in Hong Kong's socio-political context influence/change your work?

    a. Were there changes in the funding?

    b. Were there changes in the exhibition process or locations?

    c. Were there changes in the topic you are interested in?

d. Were there changes in your target audience, who do you want to talk to through your art?

e. What message do you want your audience to understand?

f. What is the future of Hong Kong's local artists?

g. What is an ideal working environment and what is your ideal work?

4. How do you label yourself as an artist? What does the label 'Hong Kong artist' mean to you?

a. Do you work with other artists in Hong Kong?

b. Do you have an organizational community?

c. What kind of artists' groups do you belong to or closely interact with?

d. What does this group do?

e. Where do they exhibit?

f. Were there changes in terms of exhibition topics, funding, audience