

## Restructuring Indeterminacy in Christopher K. Ho's *CX889*

Article, Casey Wei



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### Abstract

Christopher K. Ho's *CX889* was a site-specific installation at Vancouver Art Gallery's Offsite space that ran from June to October 2022. Named after Cathay Pacific's Vancouver–Hong Kong flight, Ho's *CX889* sculpturally approximated Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport in the heart of Vancouver's financial and tourist district, its recognizable signifiers of the double arrival ramps and Bulova clock pieced together as an elegiac collective memory. This review situates the work temporally in relation to the past, present, and potential futures of Hong Kong since its return to China by the United Kingdom in 1997, as well as spatially, in the core of downtown Vancouver, on unceded Coast Salish land. Using formal and historical analysis, strategies for critical and creative engagement emerge through the act of writing, where the text becomes a container from which an interdisciplinary and intercultural collective agency may materialize.

**Keywords:** *CX889*, Hong Kong, Vancouver, public art, Kai Tak Airport.



Christopher K. Ho, *CX889*, 2022, installation, Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite, Vancouver, BC. Photo: Joe Kramm.

Recently completing its 4-month run at Vancouver Art Gallery's Offsite space is Hong Kong based artist Christopher K Ho's *CX889*, a sculptural approximation of Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport. The installation is stuck in time, around midnight Hong Kong Time, July 1, 1997, hovering between possession by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and the People's Republic of China. There is a lot to unpack here. Curated by Godfre Leung, *CX889* restages architectural signifiers of Kai Tak, pieced together here as an elegiac collective memory.

Named after Cathay Pacific's Vancouver–Hong Kong flight of the same name, central to the installation is a recreation of the airport's double arrival ramp. Before Kai Tak's closure in 1998 due to capacity issues, the arrival terminal was a site of reunion and of escape. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) progressed towards the Maoist era, many of China's wealthy business class fled to Hong Kong throughout the '50s, arriving in Kai Tak. Offsite, the double-ramp ostensibly leads to nowhere, emphasised above by two universal red 'no entry' signs. A cylindrical cement ashtray and lone luggage trolley sit to the left of the ramp, and a Bulova cube

clock—another distinctive Kai Tak icon—juts out from the back wall prominently to the right. Purely ornamental, the clock is cut in half on its diagonal axis so that its two faces meet to make a point. During the day, the significance of the clock is barely perceptible. At night, it is clear that the clock's faces are each a projected image from inside the cube, and mark slightly different times. On the left face, it is a couple of seconds before midnight; on the right, several seconds after. Warm fluorescent lights illuminate the installation to evoke a dreamlike temporality, inducing a cinematic affect through which personal memories may surface here in the present moment, 25 years after Hong Kong's return to China and its establishment as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) for an agreed upon term of 50 years.

One examines the installation standing at the perimeter of a peculiar collapse in time and space. That the installation appears to invite passersby to push the trolley, butt into the ashtray, and walk on the ramp is negated by Offsite's design: the rectangular floor plan itself gently slopes in a few inches at its perimeter, holding a shallow pool of water to keep the public from getting too close to the art. Even if one jumped across the four feet of water to reach the ramp (which I have witnessed), the payoff is anticlimactic. Ho plays off this strategic barrier by painting the ground with yellow 'keep off' traffic lines, along with the unfinished phrases “在比等候” (*waiting for*—) along the left edge, and “請” (*please*—) on the right, both printed backwards, a clever textual mise-abyme upon one's reflection mirrored back from the water. This distancing amplifies feelings of impossibility, nostalgia, and longing; in so few words CX889 tells us there is no going back to that earlier time when a significant percentage of the Hong Kong population thought of the handover optimistically. Some even believed the return could lead China towards its own democratic awakening.<sup>1</sup>

1997 is but one point on the long trajectory of Hong Kong's ever evolving geopolitical status. For centuries, the region has marked a boundary between the Chinese empire and the rest of the world; British colonial rule was founded on existing fishing and trading industries

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<sup>1</sup> Ho-fung Hung, *City on the Edge: Hong Kong Under Chinese Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 177–183.

established since the Song dynasty in the 11th century.<sup>2</sup> Sociologist Ho-Fung Hung argues that the political tug-of-war between China and Hong Kong since 1984's Sino-British Joint Declaration has been a "space of indeterminacy for human actions to shape outcomes."<sup>3</sup> Case in point, the period between China's 1989 Beijing massacre and 1997's handover saw a significant change in public opinion on being returned to China, and a major increase in emigration to Vancouver. Those with financial mobility left Hong Kong for fear of what might happen to their rights (and riches) once China took over, coinciding with Canada's Immigrant Investor Program (1986–1993) aimed at wooing foreign entrepreneurs with a net worth of at least \$500,000.<sup>4</sup> This policy change resulted in an influx of Hongkongers who preferred Vancouver over Toronto, worried that the latter's thick "layer of Anglo political control"<sup>5</sup> and old money networks would be more difficult to crack.

While Vancouver's existing Chinese community—who had firmly established themselves in Chinatown since first arriving in British Columbia in 1788 as carpenters and labourers<sup>6</sup>—were proud to offer services to incoming Chinese folks in need of social, language, and financial support, those arriving from Hong Kong in the '80s and '90s did not need such services, had their own networks, and established their own communities. Whatever tensions that arose between the old and the new Chinese had been activated first and foremost by racist or racialized concerns from Vancouverites about this new wave of affluent foreigners, as proliferated in the media.<sup>7</sup> That the old and new Chinese looked indistinguishable from each

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<sup>2</sup> Hung, 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

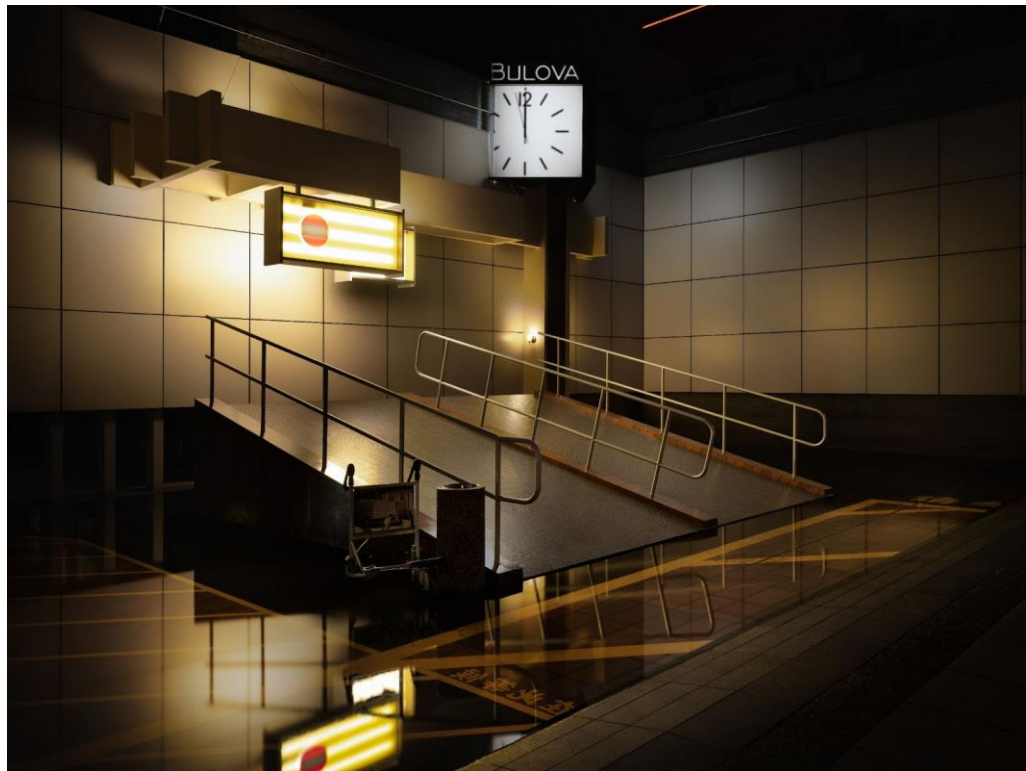
<sup>4</sup> Katharyne Mitchell, "Multiculturalism, or the United Colors of Capitalism?," *Antipode* 25, no. 4 (October 1993): 267.

<sup>5</sup> Sterling Seagrave, *Lords of the Rim : the Invisible Empire of the Overseas Chinese* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1995), 259.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Yu, "Refracting Pacific Canada: Seeing Our Uncommon Past," *BC Studies* 156-157 (Winter 2007): 5–10.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, 263.

other, save for what they wore and drove, contributed to an anxiety of identification in what Leung describes as a “sense of diaspora beyond the old ‘model minority’ narrative of immigration–settlement–assimilation.”<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, China’s takeover of Hong Kong loomed imminent, and immigration from Hong Kong to Vancouver continued. Between 1991 and 1996, the number of Hongkongers rose from 130,000 to 198,000, many travelling back and forth “with a foothold in two economies at different stages of the business cycle and the legal right to leave Hong Kong permanently if the political situation deteriorated.”<sup>9</sup> Without a doubt, such privilege of financial mobility informs how we may think about *CX889*’s placement within arguably the most affluent street of Vancouver’s city centre.



Ho, *CX889*.

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<sup>8</sup> Godfre Leung, *Offsite: Christopher K. Ho*, (Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Melanie Manion, *Corruption by Design Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 80.

For those who have never been to Kai Tak airport (like myself), the installation subtly points to the situatedness of Vancouver, of Offsite, and of Art as an institution. Upon discovering its title (written discreetly on the installation didactic), one can glean deeper into an ever-urgent crisis in which Vancouver plays a prominent role: that of the Hong Kong diaspora and its particular otherness within the hyphenated Canadian imaginary. It is an otherness that permeates globalised flows of capital, which is in itself inextricable to race relations. This fact is glaringly obvious as one stands on Georgia Street, viewing the work at the base of Shangri-La Hotel, in the heart of Vancouver's downtown financial district, on unceded Coast Salish land. How this resonates to someone Indigenous to the land, a settler who calls it home, a visitor, an immigrant, a refugee, or an 'outsider' is undoubtedly unique to each individual, but all will experience it within a world defined by colonial capitalism founded on resource extraction. Here, to be outside in open air is to be paradoxically inside. In a post-ironic serendipity, across the street from the Shangri-La Hotel is what used to be called Trump Tower, now renamed the Paradox Hotel—also a reminder of how quickly power can shift.

Since 1997, China's control over Hong Kong has been slowly but surely tightening through various infiltrative strategies such as repeated revisions to and reinterpretations of the Basic Law, political takeover of the Legislative Council, tourism and migration incentives for mainland Chinese, to name a few. With the CCP's long-game strategy to systematically erase Hong Kong's promised sovereignty under the 50-year 'One Country, Two Systems' agreement, those who can sadly continue to leave as conditions worsen. In recent memory, attempts at revolutionary awakening of the 2014 Occupy movement, the 2016 Fishball Uprising, and the 2019 democracy protests all have been quashed by 2020's National Security Law, effectively cutting short the agreed-upon SAR term until 2047. For better or worse, international policy changes and sanctions have also begun to erase Hong Kong's status as a tax haven gateway between China and the world market. Such protective measures continue the exodus of wealthy Hongkongers, but do little for the strong anti-mainland sentiment in Hong Kong advocating for localism, independence and self-determination in recent political parties like Civic Passion, Youngspiration, Demosistō,<sup>10</sup> and Hong Kong Indigenous,<sup>11</sup> to name a few.

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Carrico, *Two Systems, Two Countries: A Nationalist Guide to Hong Kong*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 74–85.

Over the years, CCP infiltration into the legislative process has made it impossible for the opposition to impact policy development. The draconian National Security Law was the most recent measure taken to silence resistance, as anything perceived to challenge the CCP is enough for the state to do what it will. International media and journalism outlets have relocated out of Hong Kong,<sup>12</sup> and scholars who have published books on the Hong Kong crisis blatantly state that they probably will never return again.<sup>13</sup> As an artist living in Hong Kong, it goes without saying that *CX889* was made (and curated) tactfully, though still not without risk. Purposefully near empty of signifiers, the space of Kai Tak is reimagined as a container for analysis—something which needs to be done also with discretion, strategy, and self-protection. The words of Felix González-Torres surface here, whose own 1991 clock work *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* resonate spiritually with *CX889* in a mutual desire to return to something no longer possible: “I want to be a spy.... to be the one who resembles something else. We have to restructure our strategies.”<sup>14</sup>

As the world continues to be pulled in extremes by a financialised technoscape driven but by one goal to amass profit without much concern for life on this planet, any view of what could be considered ‘outside’ can only be possible by restructuring our strategies, by building not necessarily *new* modes of resistance, but unexpected modes. I see it as a chain of linkages; call it what you will: a collage, a network, a relinking of seemingly disparate elements that have been dispersed far and wide as a tactic from the top down to alienate, automate, and atomize the collective. I see it as interdisciplinarity activated as infiltration, itself a long-game strategy through which one must *try* (and continue to try, as we can never be completely in two places at once) to move between the boundary which delineates an out vs. in, and thereby shifting where

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>12</sup> Hung, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Carrico, 8–10.

<sup>14</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, interview by Robert Storr, *Art Press* (January 1995): 24–32.

that boundary itself lies. Decentralised leadership, hacktivism, crowdfunding<sup>15</sup>—from these tactics employed by Hong Kong protesters over the last several years emerge a continuous and ever evolving strategy. May these linkages persist to manifest an intermittent, as-needed “space of indeterminacy.” Most evocatively, I think of the Hong Kong Way in protest of China’s 2019 extradition bill, which drew a chain of over 200,000 people. Or the Taiwanese 228 Hand-in-Hand Rally in 2004, a 2+ million person chain in protest of Chinese nuclear aggression. Or the Baltic Chain (which inspired both Taiwan and Hong Kong) in 1989, where 2+ million people held hands to protest for independence from the USSR. These human chains are formed to turn personal relationships, solidarities, and beliefs into a collectivity, a politics. *CX889* is one link in the chain. This text is another.

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## About the Author

**Casey Wei** is an interdisciplinary artist, musician, and writer based in Vancouver, BC, on the unceded homelands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. She is a PhD

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<sup>15</sup> Carrico, 160–161.



candidate in Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University, where her practice-based research in filmmaking, writing, and performance is informed by participatory activities such as editing, publishing, and programming. Recent works include the book *Tuning to Oblivion: an artist residency* (M:ST Performative Art, 2023), and the album *Stimuloso* (Mint Records, 2022) with her band, Kamikaze Nurse.