26 Aug 2024 / by Tiffany Luk

Communicating Memory: Hong Kong in Venice

Pond of Never Enough (detail), installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice*. Commissioned by M+, 2024. Photo: © Ela Bialkowska, OKNO studio. Commissioned by M+, 2024

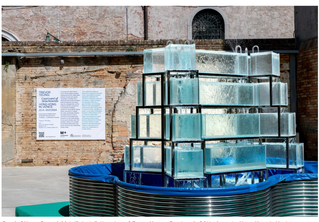
4 mins

Visual Art / M+ Exhibitions / Venice Biennale / Trevor Yeung / Article

How are lived experiences communicated in visual art? Trevor Yeung draws upon the rich communicative memory of Hong Kong to create an evocative exhibition for both Hong Kong and international audiences.

From the native flora and fauna incorporated in his installations to his attentive study of the systems that support life in his works, the visual language of Trevor Yeung's distinctive oeuvre is synonymous with Hong Kong. While the artist has exhibited internationally, *Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice*, the Hong Kong collateral event of the 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, is his largest presentation to date. Without the physical context of Hong Kong, Yeung's exhibition in Venice takes on new meaning for the international audience.

It would be hard to deny that Yeung's works draw from the communicative memory of life in Hong Kong. Communicative memory[1] refers to the informal traditions and everyday communications linking the present and recent past that exist outside of the formal and historical. Among the many examples of Hong Kong's communicative memory are a warm glass bottle of Vitasoy in the winter; the often stern service at a *cha chaan teng*; and the slow crescendo of the 'ding ding' as the tram arrives. Yeung's work, whether consciously or not, draws from this rich archive, imbuing it with his own lived experiences.

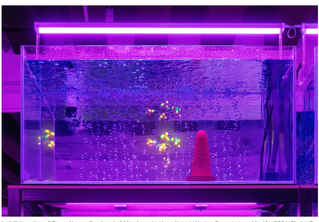


Pond of Never Enough (detail), installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice*. Commissioned by M+, 2024. Photo: © Ela Bialkowska, OKNO studio. Commissioned by M+, 2024

Upon entering the exhibition, one encounters *Pond of Never Enough* (2024), a fountain-like installation of stacked fish tanks with canal water flowing down into an empty fish-breeding pool. While this work was inspired by the artist's memories of his father's seafood restaurant, the rectangular glass tanks will be familiar to most Hong Kongers as they are ubiquitous in the place with one of the world's highest seafood consumption per capita. Further inside the exhibition space, *Gate of Instant Love* (2024), with its s-shaped hooks and bags of water meant to hold fish, is reminiscent of pet stores in Prince Edward—specifically the part of Tung Choi Street that is informally known as 'Goldfish Street'. *Cave of Avoidance (Not Yours)* (2024), an immersive installation with shelves of aquariums with meticulously crafted biomes lit with tubes of pink light, is another reference to the pet shops typical of the 1990s. Additionally, the various electrical adapter bases of *Night Mushroom Colon (Hong Kong in Venice)* (2024), are a familiar sight to most Hong Kongers. With a land area of only 1,104 square kilometres, Hong Kong is small; leaving its territorial confines typically requires a collection of travel adapters as even its closest neighbour, Mainland China, uses an electrical plug type different from Hong Kong.

Installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice*. Commissioned by M+, 2024. Photo: © Ela Bialkowska, OKNO studio. Commissioned by M+, 2024

For many Hong Kongers, the imagery from Yeung's works—restaurant fish tanks, Goldfish Street, international adapters—will evoke nostalgic memories of everyday life in the peninsular city. These sights are instantly recognisable to Hong Kongers as the informal, vernacular visual language that often goes unnoticed until it disappears or reappears outside of a familiar context. Would the works of *Courtyard* evoke the same sentiments in audiences without lived experiences in Hong Kong? Outside of the Hong Kong context, what would the exhibition look like? Would it look like a shop sold out of its main product?



Installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice*. Commissioned by M+, 2024. Photo: © Ela Bialkowska, OKNO studio. Commissioned by M+, 2024

Outside of Hong Kong, the glaringly vacant fish tanks, void of any form of life speak of a collective sense of loss reminiscent of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic seems like something strictly in the past, this collective years-long experience undeniably is a part of the global communicative memory. For example, the fish tanks may remind an international audience of the empty grocery stores during the peak of the pandemic. For others, it may recall the social isolation and distancing that was prevalent worldwide. Ultimately, the austerity and the palpable sense of *something* missing within the context of an artificial, human-made setting transcends the communicative memory of a specific locale and taps into the universal visual language of our times.

1. As defined by cultural theorist Jan Assmann:
   Communicative memory is non institutional. It is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation; it is not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations. (Assman, 111)
   Assman, Jan. "Communicative and Cultural Memory." Chapter. In Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, 109–18. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.

Tiffany Luk
Tiffany Luk is Editor, Digital Content, at M+.

More Stories
更多故事

Trevor Yeung: An Ecological Look at An Aquarium

Artist Trevor Yeung discusses how fisheeping influences his art practice and personal development, and introduces the artworks displayed in his exhibitio...

8 mins. Visual Art / Visual Culture / M+ Exhibitions / Video

From Hong Kong to Venice: A Conversation between Olivia Chow and Trevor Yeung

An informal conversation with the artist and curator of 'Trevor Yeung: Courtyard of Attachments, Hong Kong in Venice' on labour and care.

8 mins. Visual Art / Visual Culture / M+ Exhibitions / Article

Trevor Yeung: Hanging in Limbo

Trevor Yeung's mixed media works delve into human relations, artificial nature, and emotional scenarios.

7 mins. Visual Art / Visual Culture / Video

Stay in the know!
掌點最新消息！

- Be up to date on what's happening at M+ and WestK
- Discover new videos and articles from the M+ Magazine
- Choose what content you'd like to receive
- Opt out at any time

Subscribe