

A COLLECTIVE CONVERSATION WITH ISAAC CHONG WAI

Isaac Chong Wai is an artist from Hong Kong. In 2016 he graduated from the MFA in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies at the Bauhaus University in Weimar. Nowadays he is based in Berlin. In his art practice he works with diverse media like live performance, installations, public art, video, photography and multimedia. A recurring theme in his work is the relationship between collectivity and individualism. He received several prizes and scholarships for his work, among which the Burger Collection “Artist Scholarship Program” in 2016. After being on show in other big cities around the world, his project *The Collective Individual Exercises* was part of the 2018 edition of SPRING Performing Arts Festival in Utrecht. The interview focuses on this project in particular, and the context(s) for making this work.

A Description career and activities

Your website states that you have a bachelor's degree in Visual Arts in Hong Kong and a master's degree in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies in Weimar. Could you tell us briefly what those courses entailed, particularly the master?

When I went to Weimar for my master's at Bauhaus University, we were really free in what we wanted to do. It was a course that attends both to theory and practice. During that time, I dealt with theories concerning the public sphere, and my focus was on performance. I would say that this training has had a major impact on me, on how I look at the public sphere. That is why all the performances of *The Collective Individual Exercises* take place in public space.

When you started the bachelor Visual Arts you didn't really have that interest yet? How did you eventually end up at this master program?

I think it all started with drawing. I started to draw very simply, with one pencil on the wall, to see how large one pencil can draw. So first I was mainly concerned with material. Then I slowly started making performances on my own, like drawing my own contours on the wall. At one point I thought, maybe I can do this with more people. Because there are so many people in Hong Kong, it is incredibly busy and you always see crowds as far as you can see. We are very close together, but actually there is so much detachment between people. You will never know who is next to you. So I invited more than ten people and we started to draw together in a performance.

How did your career develop after your master's degree? Could you perhaps name a moment that determined your career for you?

A work that I think really brought me further was a work I did in the Moscow Biennial for Young Art. I met a guy through a dating App: Grindr, when I asked him where he wanted to go, he said he wanted to go to Buchenwald - the concentration camp next to Weimar. So, then we had a date in a concentration camp. There I kissed him, and afterwards I said: people could not do this in the past. That was a moment where I started to work on the dialectics of the past and the future.

Would you say this date was part of an art project?

It wasn't planned as an artwork when I had the date. Not until 2014 when Moscow banned the gay propaganda for the next 100 years, I submitted a proposal for an artwork to the Biennial: a letter written by the guy I dated at Buchenwald. In this letter, he wrote about our date. I went to Moscow and gave a speech about it. In that speech I talked about paragraph 175 in Germany, its history and how things have changed (1). I think this project brought me to the projects that I do nowadays.

Can you briefly describe how your current project, *The Collective Individual Exercises*, came about?

I don't recognize it as such, but people regularly say that there is a kind of "communist touch" in my work. I did not grow up with a communist background - Hong Kong is very different from China in terms of the political situation and it is very capitalist.

I think I came to this project because of my background in Hong Kong, but also because of the idea of living in a collective. You do not live as an individual, you always live in a 'unit'. Everything you do is always related to your family, for example, you don't just live for yourself. But in the western world this is different. My background in being always in a collective and my current situation in a much more individualistic society - that somehow clashes. This clash was a main source of the inspiration. I think that we need to revise our ideas on collectivism and individualism nowadays. I can talk about this for a long time, I even wrote a paper about how I came to this project. So, this background and my studies led to this interest in public space, in the different spaces involved, related to the investigation of what it means to be in a group and how you can show yourself as an individual at the same time.

B *The Collective Individual Exercises****What does the concept of a "collective individual" mean according to you?***

I call the performances *The Collective Individual Exercises*, because when you look at the performance, you always see a large collective while looking for ways to find the individual within that collective. This is why I use those two words together: when we are a collective and do things together, we still have our individual spirit, character and content. The performance is clearly a collective work, but we also see the individual elements. There is always a tension between them. We fluctuate between the two.

This project is currently on display at the SPRING festival here in Utrecht. Why do you think your project fits so well within the frame of this festival?

For SPRING we are in an *Urban Heat* program that deals with art and activism in public space (2). *The Collective Individual Exercises* fit into this theme. This series of performances can go to many places in the world, it does not necessarily have to take place in the Netherlands. Different places offer different atmospheres, different reactions, different expectations and also different stories. To create a connection with the location, certain artistic choices have also been made. For example: why do we put this formation in this place within the park and not next to the garbage can in another park? Tomorrow we will do a walking exercise, precisely at a very busy location: de Stadhuisbrug. Therefore, certain choices have been made to match the space where the performance takes place. A specific exercise works well in a certain public

space. Ultimately, it is also about negotiating with space and finding out what are the limits of public space.

Why did you choose to have this performance take place in public space, and not in a theater?

This idea started for me with a simple question: where can we talk about our personal future in public? Public meetings are very political, I think. If you have a gathering of ten people in China, the police will come. You must first apply for a permit to be allowed to form a collective in public spaces. I always apply for a permit, but there are all sorts of things that the public space does not allow when it comes to forming a collective. A collective is usually seen as a threat.

What did you hope the performers and the audience would experience? What did you hope to achieve through the Exercises?

People have been inquiring into my expectations before. I cannot say that I do expect specific things. My expectation is more focused on whether people are going to be in the right place and whether they have the opportunity to feel free to speak about what they want in their future during the performance. And yet, when the audience comes in, or when a camera comes close, the things you talk about change completely. So you also recognize how the presence of the 'public' has the ability to change your personality within the public space. In the performances there is always a certain physical distance between the participants. On the one hand it is public and on the other also private, because everyone is talking, and nobody is really listening. If you can listen, you will mainly hear fragments. So, what do I expect from these works? I hope people have a good time.

You are originally a visual artist. Visual art often relies on working with objects, but in your projects, you often work with people. Where does this interest to make visual art with people come from?

I think I enjoy seeing things I that have not seen before. People do things I never thought of. It all started with how I wanted to connect with people through my work. I wanted to get closer, closer to strangers. That was the starting point, and gradually this interest grew. I made more and more work with people and through this I got to know more and more people. It is a kind of fascination: the body as a way to deal with the status quo. For example, doing things that we would normally never do and to create something new. So I would say that I was very interested in performance art and that led to the point that I keep working with people.

Would you say that performing a performance in a public space in some way always makes a political statement through the connection to the space in which it takes place?

Yes, I think that is unavoidable. Nothing is ever purely neutral and objective. When something takes place in the public space, it is always connected to what is permitted within that space, and what not. There are so many choices and decisions involved, and it can always be discussed within a political discourse, however, that is not always necessary. I also don't like how everything is made into something political, but it can always be placed within that discourse.

Do you notice a difference between the different countries and places where The Collective Individual Exercises has been performed? Do you, for example, notice a difference in the implementation or a difference in the responses?

I'd say yes. We have already performed the performance in Wuhan (China), Hong Kong and Gwangju (South Korea), among others. The difference is that people talk about other things. The public space is also very different. In South Korea, for example, it was very easy to find a politically sensitive place. The performance worked there because of the history, but in Hong Kong it didn't work at all. In Wuhan it was not legally possible to do the performance in public. The atmosphere is also different. I had the feeling here, in Utrecht, that the overall atmosphere was comparable to the atmosphere in Germany. In Hong Kong, people were much more concerned, and the artists talked about the future saying: "maybe I can't get that house", "maybe I get problems at work," etcetera. In South Korea, on the other hand, everyone was very energetic, they were shouting things like, "I'll be taller!" or "I'm going to be tired in five minutes!" They even sang the national anthem during the performance. I didn't ask for that. I think someone just started it and it spread to the whole group. I wasn't going to stop them, because this was one of those magical moments that sometimes appear in my work. During research, I discovered that the national anthem at that location was a signal for the army to be allowed to shoot at the protesters during the student protests in Gwangju in 1980. Nowadays it is possible to sing the national anthem there freely. I didn't expect it, but sometimes the performance and the history of the space coincide.

Is that also the beauty of people? Never knowing what comes out of them.

Yes, this is the heterogeneity of the collective, it will never be the same. It is the same choreography, the same structure, but it never becomes the same. You always get different stories and a different atmosphere. And the atmosphere of the room is contagious. Yesterday a man was shouting loudly, but within five minutes he calmed down, because most of the people around him wanted to stay very calm. This way, the atmosphere is contagious, and it is also how the collective effects the individual.

C Views on dramaturgy

In the biography on your website you say that your work is inspired by socialism and individualism, politics of time and space, borders, migration, war, militarism, racism, identity policy, LGBTQ, public space and human rights. What is the fascination for these different themes?

Nowadays we see so many images and ideas through social media, that we can lose overview. I have been influenced by thinking about history and my own relation to that history, without being present at the events myself. The way we remember history has also to do with public space, through which we can relive history. I am interested in how this works for individual people. I am also looking for ways in which art can have a relevance for different people and cultures. After the Second World War, people started talking about universal human rights, norms and values. I am interested in investigating how art can become a universal language, where art functions as a kind of ritual or means of communication. At the moment, I work a lot with identity: if we lose our identity, what can we still hold on to?

How do you use these themes in the work you make?

I always think about what the best medium is for working with a topic, and I also look at the material that fits best with a concept. When it comes to conceptualization, I often work with ambiguity. For example, I once made a boat using bars from a prison cell. The irony is that a boat made of such heavy material can never stay afloat. So, I look at the materiality that is best for the theme.

How do you use the public space to support these themes?

When I talk about the public space, I don't just mean physical space. I also mean the topics we are talking about as a community, such as in a public sphere. So, space is a broader concept than just physical space. I also do not think that I have used the public space to support my themes. It is more that I look at space as an object. Within that object I will look for peculiarities. To give an example: I might ask why a square is completely empty and not used despite it being incredibly large. At a certain square I had the simple question why nobody came together, while it is a large public space. By looking at the history I learned that the square was built by Hitler and this is why people didn't want to use it. Why don't we have monuments for bad events? Nowadays monuments are used as architectural sights. They are placed in the center of attention to remind the people of positive history. Looking at the performance I didn't want to bring people to the monument, but to use the people themselves as monuments, each with their own history. This is also reflected in this specific choreography. Each individual is given the space to stand for his own history, or to talk about his own vision of the future as in *The Collective Individual Exercises*. So, I don't use the public space to support my themes, but as a source of inspiration for the performances.

In a performance such as The Collective Individual Exercises you don't know what kind of audience is coming to watch. How do you address such an unknown audience?

In previous performances this was not really an issue since I knew what kind of audience would be attending. In public space you generally do not know who is coming to watch your performance. Now we are part of a theatre festival. Because of this, the majority of the spectators have an expectation of what they will see and know that there will be a performance. But there are also situations in which I present the show unexpectedly, as a sort of intervention. Then you have to deal with unexpected audiences who decide on the spot if they keep watching or not, which depends on specific contexts. Actually, you never know what your audience expects, or what they see and experience. That also makes the public space so interesting, because it is difficult to respond to various factors.

D Working in public space***When presenting The Collective Individual Exercises here in SPRING, this was the first time that you let the audience walk through the performance space, is that right?***

Yes, the artistic team of SPRING asked me if I thought the audience could walk into the show. I said, "yes, of course." There were a number of reasons why I didn't do this before. I have never forbidden the public to enter the show, I never forbid anyone to step into the performance field: after all, it is a public space. It is not that I have to install fences to keep people away from the performers. So, technically this was not the first time to *let* the audience in. Somehow

in a conversation with the artistic director of the festival it came forward that they would find it interesting if people were allowed to participate in the performance. That's why so many people walked into the show this time.

Did you get reactions from the audience here?

I can't really remember the faces of the hundred participants, but sometimes people come to tell me that they felt very much embraced by the show or were indignant - there are so many different emotions. Some were almost crying, they told me. Speaking of reactions from the audience, I don't really know that well, because I don't know if the people who came to me were audience or participants, apologies. But some people told me it was very interesting to walk from one place to another, because there was always something going to go to and to listen to different stories. Another reaction was that you can never hear all the stories at the same time.

Are there differences in the different performances that have to do with cultural or local history?

Sometimes, such as the layout or the use of a space. In the show with the talks about the future, the performers were two meters apart, but they were sometimes three meters apart for this. But that is more a visual matter: if there is a larger space, you can spread the performers more. And if it is smaller, they must be closer to one another.

The second Exercise took place at Domplein, near the Dom church. Why did you choose that location for the second Exercise, and Lucasbolwerk – the field in front of the City Theatre - for the first Exercise that involved talking about the future?

Among other things, it was a choice we made from the festival itself. The first Exercise, talking about the future, was also the opening of the festival, so it was also a practical consideration to perform that in front of the theatre. But we also made that choice in terms of content: there is an old ruin of a wall here, and we also found it interesting to talk about the future with the past next to you in the form of that wall. We chose Domplein for the second performance, because the choreography fits well with the church that lacks an architectural part. That complements each other well. So: we had different options and there are several reasons why we chose this. The minimalism of talking and listening works well in front of the theatre here, and the choreography works well in front of the Dom.

E Relation between education and practice

The Collective Individual Exercises is a type of performance we often talk about during our programme in theatre studies. Looking back on your education, in relation to your current work: was theatre discussed within your studies, and if so, how often?

Not really. Within my studies we never really learned about theatre and there were no courses that dealt with types of performance. In a way, we were free to do what we wanted to do, allowing us to do things that interested us. This is how I ended up with this. When it comes to theatre and performance, you are probably better at it than I am, and you know more about it. I know some plays, but I am not a theatre connoisseur.

Within our studies we focus primarily on performance and less on the arts. Do you think that we as theater studies students would benefit from learning more about visual arts?

I don't think so. Ultimately it depends on what you like. There are of course also different types of theatre and different types of festivals. Different artistic directors have different approaches and different things that they like. For me it is mainly that I do the things that I like to make, and I will continue to do so. Not everyone has to study visual arts. It is sometimes said that there are too many visual artists. There are also different modes of working if you compare theatre and the visual arts. Within the theatre it is a lot about collaboration and how you can make something together with many different departments. But visual artists mainly think about the visual image, such as a painter. They think about the composition of the entire work. The work and method are sometimes, or often, completely different. So during my studies we learned to work in a different way than in theatre studies.

Now that you make more performances yourself: would you like to collaborate more with people from the theatre field?

If it worked well in the right context to work with theatre makers, I would, but it is not necessary for me. It depends on whether the project suits me and my working style. For example, the performance *One sound of the future* wouldn't fit on the stage of a theatre. That wouldn't work for me at all. Of course, there are theatre performances that are not performed in a theatre venue or on a stage. Some performances work better indoors on a stage, and some performances work better outdoors in the public space. That always depends on the artist who created the performance.

Isaac Chong Wai in conversation with students in the BA course Dramaturgy & Scenography at Utrecht University.

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Students:

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Notes

1. Article 175 relates to a law installed by the Nazi regime during the Second World War, which prohibited homosexual relationships.

See <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/students/learning-materials-and-resources/homosexuals-victims-of-the-nazi-era/paragraph-175>.

2. The Urban Heat programme is a Creative Europe project initiated by FIT (Festivals in Transition), a network of about 12 European festivals, of which SPRING is one. Urban Heat aimed to facilitate work of talented artists at the crossroads of art and activism. Isaac Chong was one of the participating artists.