

Street Meditations: On Poetry, Street Photography and Everyday Life in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper is part of an ongoing auto-ethnographic project to do with writing poetry and taking photographs in Hong Kong. As a poet who is interested in the aesthetic potential of visual images, I am intrigued by what Michel de Certeau calls the “absent figure,” a figure often obscured by techniques and rationalities that govern the everyday life of the urban city that is Hong Kong (vi). If art is about the salvaging of meaning, then it is in league with everyday life, to the extent that artistic works become transgressive and predatory mediums. Poems and photographs are regarded here as forms that usurp the material spaces of Hong Kong. In this way, one is led to consider the possibilities of cultural production as a kind of furtive production wherein the everyday life of Hong Kong is made to speak.

Keywords

Autoethnography, creative writing, *flâneur*, Hong Kong, photography, urban life

This paper is part of an ongoing creative auto-ethnographic project to do with writing poetry and taking photographs in Hong Kong. I am experimenting with creative and academic writing, written and visual texts, both poetic and analytical, so as to explore the relationship between meaning making and everyday life in Hong Kong. As a poet who is interested in the aesthetic potential of urban visual images, I am intrigued by what Michel de Certeau calls the “absent figure,” a figure created by techniques and rationalities that govern the everyday life of the city (vi). For de Certeau, the absent figure is the product of quantification, of “computations and rationalities” that govern urban life (vi). This notion of the absent figure points to a social as well as an existential condition, a condition whereby something (or someone) has meaning only if it is expressed in terms of numbers. To give this a Marxist slant, the absent figure

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is alienated from his life through quantification, be it the size of a bank account, the worth of a residential property or a salary.

De Certeau's notion of the absent figure is especially applicable to Hong Kong, a city that continues to be self-evident as a particular geopolitical site of economic opportunities for global corporations, and it may be argued that capitalism, both local and global, is too often posited as a solution, however inadequate, to the anxieties attending to its political future. This has led Louise Ho to comment that "Hong Kong society has nurtured sensibilities for stocks and shares and property prices rather than sensibilities in abstractions and aesthetics" ("Hong Kong Writing" 173). One may argue that Hong Kong people are absent figures caught between the grids of economic rationalities and its particular historical situation. Ackbar Abbas has made the point that in Hong Kong the "sense of the temporary" is very strong (4). Since the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, everyday life is held in deferral to 1997, and since 1997, the everyday present is once again suspended and held in deference to the year 2046. Tiananmen in 1989 exacerbated the anxieties of many concerning Hong Kong's postcolonial future. Decisive historical junctures led to indecisive everyday moments, moments that many sought to escape through emigration in the years leading up to 1997. Hence, in her poem "Island," Ho writes of Hong Kong first as a "floating island" and later as a "city with a country/ An international city becoming national" (*Incense Tree* 109). The ambivalence and indecisive moments in the poem has to do with how it oscillates between anxiety and security concerning the status of Hong Kong as part of China. I am using a contrapuntal allusion here, adapting Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous notion of the "decisive moment" for my own use. While Cartier-Bresson's notion refers to how various elements in a street scene attain visual coherence, my notion points to a state of social impermanency and flux leading to anxiety on the part of its inhabitants.

Hong Kong is, to use Benedict Anderson's formulation, an "imagined community" of absent figures (6). Yet there is a possibility of retrieving everyday life from the social, physical and cultural spaces of Hong Kong. De Certeau has made the point that "[e]veryday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others" (xii; italics in original). Everyday life is transgressive, in that meaning has to be salvaged, on the sly, from in-between (and often indecisive) moments of the grand narratives of history and capitalism. Such is the given condition of aesthetic production in Hong Kong. If art is about the salvaging of meaning, then it is in league with everyday life, to the extent that artistic works become transgressive and predatory mediums.

In the series of meditations that follows, my own poems and photographs are regarded as forms usurping the material spaces of Hong Kong. In this way, one is led to consider the possibilities of cultural production as a kind of furtive production wherein everyday life in Hong Kong is made to speak:

No one sees the mental life of cities.

No one denies it is there.

It is darkness on the streets.

It is impulsive as pigeons.

I am a camera
hunting for metaphors. (Tay, *Mental Life of Cities 2*)

I. The Humdrum



There are many possibilities to the above scene. What led to that glance? That second look, from the woman to the man. A second thought: what is he doing? What is he looking for? Who is he? An indecisive moment where many things are possible. He seems to be working. But what is the nature of his work? The couple seems to be on a stroll. But why are they at leisure in this rather unprepossessing landscape? The point is not to answer these questions. There is no doubt that the answers might disappoint and return us to the humdrum.

Roland Barthes has made the point that there is “something tautological” about a “specific photograph” in that it “is never distinguished from its referent” (5). But a street photographer does not produce a specific photograph. A family portrait, a travel photograph of children set against a

recognisable tourist landscape, a photograph of a model holding a luxury handbag in a magazine, a photograph accompanying a newspaper report – these are specific photographs, tautological. A street photograph strains against tautology because it is deprived of its denotative quality. There is, in the end, no lexical “street.” The absent figures in the above photograph are made to enter a connotative space. What is being spoken here is another reality, a reality that is accumulating in the form of non-answers. It is a suspended moment rendered unreal, an accretion of silence. We are viewing a spreading void. But the figures are now present. They have been made significant.

But for the street photographer, the void dissipates too quickly and he is returned to the humdrum, perhaps reminded of an errand, a bill to be paid, or of the work that awaits him at his office.

II. The *Flâneur*

For there are many techniques and demands of living operating their effects on the street photographer: ranging from “a father,” “a consumer of camera products,” “a hobbyist with artistic pretensions,” “a husband entrusted with an errand.” The street photographer is necessarily furtive: he is not a properly socialised figure. He steals moments from everyday routines – fifteen minutes here, thirty minutes there, while waiting for his spouse to be done with her shopping, on his way home, on his way to the office. Street photography is not a proper profession; at best, it is something attached to a professional photography career. It is not surprising to find a professional photographer who looks upon his or her street photography as “personal work,” the implication of which is that it is otherwise not proper for him or her to do such work.

The street photographer, then, is akin to a poet in that there is likewise no proper social role ascribed to him or her. Who in Hong Kong is a poet? I know of English language poets who are teachers, who work in publishing, who work for non-profit companies, and in one case, who is a vintage car mechanic. How then does one accumulate and produce aesthetic experience as a poet, beyond what Walter Benjamin calls “the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses?” (110). What I find interesting is that to Benjamin’s *flâneur*, “the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon” (37).

What, then, may we learn from Benjamin’s *flâneur*?:

Sometimes I get tired of walking around.

Sometimes I think there is no use
stalking after nouns in this city,
where buildings are cut like glass.

Our houses take on conveniences
of pigeonholes, square as a blueprint.
There are no words on the pavement,
not even whispers of leaves –
our city planners took care of them.

Sometimes I get tired of walking around,
of shopping, of posters,
of cafes and blinking lights,
of streets leading me to a blind corner.

At dawn, when the people arise
and go about their business,
lamp-posts tremble and die,
repeating themselves like question marks. (Tay, *Remnants* 39)

In the above, even as the persona is lamenting the standardised and reified nature of urban life, the poem relies on these very same standardised and reified images to make its point. The street photograph shares the same condition, in that the commonplace is made to be more than itself.

III. The Apathetic

Even as he draws from these standardized and reified images, what frightens the street photographer is the apathy of the absent figures to their material environment. The sense impressions of the absent figure are hardened against the material surface of his or her environment. Everything is regarded as commonplace, looked over quickly and overlooked.

How may we read the following photograph except as a work of anxiety?



The above photograph is possible because of the framing which highlights the rectilinear grids out of an otherwise larger and unappealing urban landscape. Even as he salvages the rectilinear logic and arrangement of the colours from the scene with his frame, he could see that no one sees. Even as he looks at the photograph he remembers the questioning looks from those outside the frame. A street photograph for the one who took it is a reminder of the everyday experience of aesthetic production. There was a trash collector who looked at him suspiciously. Framing is an anxious, self-conscious and lonely act.

Yet the *flâneur* takes pleasure in moments exemplified above. He transforms the bodily movement of the absent figure into an aesthetic effect; the human figure is dark against the solidity of the background. Perhaps taking

a photograph such as the one above is also a defiant act. The apathetic figure in the above photograph is blurred, rendered transient and temporary in relation to the background. One cannot help but note the paradox: even though she completes the photograph, the anonymous absent figure is not supposed to be in the picture.

Another possibility: the figure on the photograph is the disavowed double of the one taking the photograph. The street photographer fears he is taking a portrait of himself. Why does one write? Why does one feel the need to take photographs? What is the cause of the aesthetic impulse? Hence, the following lines from Kate Rogers:

I am full of holes:
 Each orifice gapes its need: fill me.
 I am falling into the holes,
 trying to catch myself on the edge
 of disappearance. (*City of Stairs* 72)

Except for moments when they are writing or taking photographs, the poet and the photographer are themselves blurred and vague absent figures on the verge of fading.

IV. Tactics

Perhaps writing poetry and shooting street photographs are tactics forestalling those moments when one has to fade into the work of institutions, demand and supply of markets, maintaining of disciplines, systems of power and fields of technique. If poetry and street photography (and art in general) has a social role, it seems to be a role against forces larger than themselves. Yet is the aesthetic moment to be regarded simply as the small against the large, the marginal against the dominant, the frail against the powerful?

De Certeau has made much of the opposition between tactic and strategies. For him, “a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus,” one deployed by someone who has no proper place of practice, no proper institutional recognition, and who is in a weaker position (de Certeau 36-37; italics in original). A tactician does not accumulate: “What it wins it cannot keep” (de Certeau 37). In contrast, a strategy belongs to establishments, authorities, and “systems and totalizing discourses” (de Certeau 38). It is “organized by the postulation of power” (de Certeau 38). But surely one can be both a strategist and tactician at the same time:

Quietly, quietly,
 it is the other one
 who does not believe in work.

When I wish my colleagues good morning,
he sleeps soundlessly in my bed.

When I talk to clients,
he mumbles *why bother* in his dreams.

Quietly, quietly,
it is the other one,
the one who shares my name,
who does not belong.

His room, dusty and littered with laundry,
is not my room.

My room is tidy and objective.
I have tried many times to chase him out.

When I come home with my packet of dinner,
he wakes up, rubs his eyes
and snatches it from me.

He puts on my clothes, steals my money, and tells me
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.

When I go to bed hungry
he leaves the house with my keys
and prowls the night for poetry.

His streets are not my streets.
I am afraid to talk to him.

He pastes messages on my computer,
messages I could not understand.

Especially the one telling me to go with him
when the evening is spread out against the sky
like a patient etherised upon a table.

Mornings, just as I am waking up,
he opens the door and throws the keys at me.

Quietly, quietly,
when he tosses and turns in my bed,
I leave the house and go about my business.

(Tay, *A Lover's Soliloquy* 70-71)

The above poem exemplifies how the poet inevitably partakes in the pedestrian. One may say the same of the street photographer as well. The poet and street photographer know too well how they themselves are adept collaborators within a larger system. By virtue of their literacy skills and ownership of cameras with technical specifications adequate to their tasks, more often than not, they belong to a privileged class. The poet is educated, is an educator, is literate and cultivated, is recognisable within publishing, academic, cultural and institutional circuits of poetry reading, not to mention a literary tradition. The street photographer operates and identifies himself within a genre of photo-books spanning from Henri Cartier-Bresson to contemporary luminaries such as Stephen Shore, Tod Papageorge and Martin Parr. Tactics and strategies are not mutually opposed. Rather, individual and isolated tactics are made possible through the study of accumulated strategies.

V. Interiority

Tactics and accumulated strategies – do they give rise to aesthetic occasions? The pleasure of aesthetic experience, whether it is the act of writing or reading, whether it is the act of taking or viewing street photographs, is interior, unrecognisable to another, and there is no description or theoretical exposition that does justice to it.



Shigeo Gocho, an influential Japanese street photographer, has the following to say concerning how the experience of a photograph remains arrested between thought and language, between the external environment and internal apprehension:

Sometimes, in the background behind the varied surface of the everyday, the inexplicable shadow of human existence creeps in like a fog. This shadow gets trapped at the barrier between what is expressible through words and what is not, accumulating like an unanswered riddle in the hollow of spreading emptiness, as if it is becoming some sort of creature that continues to multiply within the opaque whirlpool that is the everyday. (52-53)

Is such an interiority possible within the whirlpool of everyday that is Hong Kong? Hong Kong is constructed out of massive structures in accordance to a rational urban planning that extracts maximum spatial efficiency. Given its high population density, Hong Kong people are highly disciplined, their bodies governed by regulatory laws of walking that pervade public horizontal spaces.

De Certeau writes optimistically of a kind of walking which “creates a mobile organicity in the environment”; for him, “[w]alking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (99). But is such a pleasurable and leisurely mobile organicity possible in Hong Kong? In the above scene, so ubiquitous to Hong Kong’s urban environment, walking cannot be anything else apart from being functional. Horizontal paths have been laid out for both pedestrians and drivers. There is no such thing as an unplanned horizon in the city. Likewise, there is a vertical spatial discipline at work which organises residential and commercial spaces into neat compartments. People are caught within a grid even as they are walking, eating, sleeping, working, waiting, talking, buying and selling.

The convergence between selves and the city is complete and total; just as walking is predetermined by city planners, the pathways of the mind are predetermined by capitalistic drives. In “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel argues that in the city, “those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within” are eradicated or at the very least, suppressed (413). The form of life that is possible in Hong Kong is mostly received from the exterior. This regimental exteriority organised by rationality and efficiency discipline the bodies and minds of the absent figures, to the extent that interiority is dissolved or at least, held hostage to the pedestrian concerns of making a living. Even as one feels the hollow of a spreading emptiness, there is no unanswered riddle.

VI. The Body at Labour

Capitalism has become an alibi for the unexamined life. What is at stake is technique and a confidence that only a body at labour is able to possess. The paint flakes on the back of the man in the following photograph is a sign of the dominion of labour over the physical body.



In the section on docile bodies in *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes of “the protected space of disciplinary monotony” (141). This space is distinguished from others so as to make concrete the work of discipline. He writes of “disciplinary space” that is “cellular” (Foucault 143). The lorry has

become that mobile cellular space with the human body as adjunct. As Foucault puts it, “[d]iscipline is... a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets” (215). Hence, it makes no sense to talk of self-discipline apart from a self that internalises the discipline enabled by agents, agendas and processes in collusion with the self.

It is tempting to aestheticize the above moment through the photograph. How may the above moment be rendered in the photograph as a work of critique? The photograph is silent, and perhaps this marks the limit of the photographer who wants to do more. On the other hand, there is, I admit, a sort of authorial arrogance that contrasts the work of the photographer, academic and poet with manual work. Is it possible to inhabit the space of what has been captured, for the photographed to look back at the photographer, for those written about to retort the writer? Is the author writing only to himself, the photographer taking pictures only of himself?

VII. The Fugitive Community

There is of course the possibility of a community within Hong Kong. One sees pockets of micro-communities brought together by mutual interests. One might argue for a fugitive space that is carved out of an otherwise public and commercial space. The community is like the table – provisional, makeshift, tentative. This is friendship outside a food stall. This is a space of concentration and familiarity.

At times, it seems like everything in Hong Kong is governed by the hegemony of property ownership. A business lives and dies by its lease with its landlord. Middle-class families are made peripatetic in search of more affordable leasing contracts for their flats, while the relatively less privileged are anchored down by routinized menial work and highly-subsidised public housing.



Perhaps the poet-photographer-academic is being stubbornly naïve, his discussion revolving around artistic production and social structures of Hong Kong. But in the end, one cannot help but pursue an art that is linked to the local community and informed by engagements with critical concepts. De Certeau's notion of everyday life is that for it to be meaningful, it has to be snatched from powerful grips of capitalism, grand ideological apparatuses and institutions that do not work in the interests of what it means to be human. One of the aims of this paper is to explore the kinds of knowledge that the reading and writing of poetry as well as the taking and viewing of street photographs can offer. In the end, there are no claims to grand visions. What emerges is a constellation of nodes: the humdrum, the *flâneur*, the apathetic, tactics, interiority, the labouring body and the possibility of a fugitive community; a resistance against closure, restless acts of seeing, reading, understanding, in the hope that an argument might be made that the lives of absent figures in Hong Kong bear examination.

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