Floor 26 of Ho King Commercial Centre in Yau Ma Tei, the elevator stops.
At the end of the corridor, the sound of a heavy metal band, detuned screams buffered by the cracked plywood door of a tiny music studio. Outdated factory buildings in Kwun Tong, industrial architecture gradually surrounded by new commercial and residential complexes; their precarious wait for urban renewal has offered an opportunity for young musicians to establish music studios, classrooms, or improvised bedrooms where music and teenage discoveries mingle with the noise of machinery. A rusty anonymous intercom partially hidden by some plastic ivies. Past the door, a narrow metallic staircase, source of random encounters and only access point to a one-off experience; hundreds of people—local and foreigners—gathered in a tiny dark room, a miscellany of sweat, smoke, voices, and distant music.
The hidden networks formed by musicians scattered in unexpected venues around Hong Kong provide a sonic collage that reformulates some of the city's social peripheries from within. Through emergent sub-cultures, young artists deploy a wide range of tactics to counter the commodification and politicization of creativity, and the speculation over space in order to achieve new opportunities in a "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption." In his work on everyday life, which focuses on the resistance of (extra)ordinary people to structures of power, Michel de Certeau makes reference to the idea of "silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality." The main actors of this essay, despite feeding on and actively participating in Hong Kong's consumerism dynamics by taking references from social media, e-commerce, or shopping malls, produce "wandering lines"—or wandering sounds—with their own (syn)tactics through their artistic practices. Notably, in Hong Kong's reductionist bureaucratic system, with a strong predominance of statistics and evaluation focused on "classifying, calculating and putting into tables," these artistic rituals and reinterpretations of the city's culture often remain overlooked or hidden to the system.

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HIDDEN MUSIC SCENES: GOVERNMENTALITY AND CONTESTATION IN POSTCOLONIAL HONG KONG

Diego Caro

Intro

Floor 26 of Ho King Commercial Centre, the elevator stops. At the end of the corridor, the sounds of a heavy metal band, detuned screams buffered by the cracked plywood door of a tiny music studio. When the door opens, a loud guitar riff makes the walls tremble while a young shopkeeper smokes indifferently in the fire staircase. Built in the 1980s, this building, located in Yau Ma Tei area, was known for its origins of being the site of illegal sale of pornographic VCDs by Hong Kongese triads. Currently, it hosts an accidental blend of commercial and leisure premises, cheap hostels, and apartments.

Outdated factory buildings in Kwun Tong, San Po Kong, and Kwai Hing, industrial architecture gradually surrounded by newly built commercial and residential complexes, condemned to a postponed demolition by land speculation. Its precarious wait for urban renewal has offered an opportunity for young musicians to establish music studios, classrooms, or improvised bedrooms where music and teenage discoveries mingle with the noise of hoists and repetitive machinery. In Kwun Tong, Hidden Agenda—what would become the most well-known independent live music venue in Hong Kong—emerged in 2009 as an underground music venue, providing space for an alternative to Cantopop mainstream.[1] Chased by government officials from venue to venue, this organization has become a symbol of the resistance of independent music culture against governmentality over art expression. In January 2018 it re-opened in its fifth location under the name This Town Needs (TTN), this time in Yau Tong area.[2, 3]

Such hidden networks, formed by musicians and scattered in unexpected venues around Hong Kong, provide a sonic collage that reformulates some of the city's peripheries from within.[4] These networks, or scenes, are not limited to their spatial aspects within Hong Kong's

[1] Cantopop is a contraction of Cantonese pop music.

[2] The name This Town Needs refers to the British rock band This Town Needs Guns, who were arrested while performing at Hidden Agenda in 2017 (Lord, 2018).

[3] In February 2020, while this essay was being revised, TTN closed its doors for good with a last farewell gig.

[4] This essay is accompanied by a playlist, a sort of subjacent soundtrack of these hidden music scenes. Links for each song can be found in the "Soundtrack" list at the end of this essay.

geography, but involve a whole array of alternative activities, social connections, and artistic initiatives that are decoded throughout this text. Through emergent sub-cultures, young artists deploy a wide range of tactics to counter the commodification and politization of creativity, as well as the speculation over space, in order to achieve new opportunities in a "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption."[5] In his work on everyday life, which focuses on the resistance of (extra)ordinary people to structures of power, Michel de Certeau (1984) makes reference to the idea of "silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality."[6] The main actors of this essay, despite feeding on and actively participating in Hong Kong's consumerism dynamics by taking references from social media, e-commerce, or shopping malls, produce "wandering lines"—or wandering sounds—with their own (syn)tactics through their artistic practices. Notably, in Hong Kong's reductionist bureaucratic system, with a strong predominance of statistics and evaluation focused on "classifying, calculating and putting into tables," these artistic rituals and reinterpretations of the city's culture often remain overlooked or *hidden* to the system (*Ibidem*).

The present analysis of these non-mainstream musical interventions in space, focusing on Hong Kong's alternative/indie rock music scene, unveils deeply rooted issues in the city in the following order: past and present debates on culture and art in Hong Kong as a global financial hub; the "post-1980 generation's" means of expressing its latent discontent in a special administrative region with an uncertain future;[7] and the continuities and discontinuities of Hong Kong's colonial past via (a not always sophisticated) governmentality and its contestations. The essay ends with a glimpse of the embodiment of Hong Kong's periphery through lights and sounds, and a brief conclusion/encore.

Creating art in a global financial hub

Market dynamics in Hong Kong in the past four decades have given way to spatial paradoxes where what might appear as opposite realms, like those of indie rock music and banking, are tightly interconnected. The relocation of Hong Kong's manufacturing

[5] "Bureaucratic Society of Controlled Consumption" is the second chapter of Henri Lefebvre's book *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, in which he studies the spatial and temporal implications of modernity, where obscure systems aim at "systematizing thought and structuralizing action," consolidating dynamics of production and consumption (Lefebvre, 1984, pp. 68–109).

[6] De Certeau makes use of the idea of "wandering lines" to refer to those unforeseeable trajectories and actions made by consumers of the functionalized city that "respond to interests and desires neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop" (Certeau, 1984, p. xviii).

[7] The term "post-1980 generation" (Hong Kong) gained popularity during the 2010s in association with a particular political and national consciousness. Their discourse is marked by issues of national sovereignty, urban heritage, and democracy. An important reference is the sociologist Lui Tai Lok, especially his booklet *Four generations of Hong Kong people* (2007).

enterprises to Mainland China in the 1980s provoked the abandonment of many industrial buildings; the metropolis shifted from being a manufacturing hub in the post–World War II period to a financial center, giving way to new scales and modes of consumption.[8] High-rise towers owned by big corporations loomed along the Central Harbourfront in the north of Hong Kong Island, site of the first British settlements and symbol of the city's international status. Hong Kong was presented as the Asian city of the future, a new economy with a new look, new markets and trends, that shaped one of the most prominent real estate markets of the world. Being part of a key node of international networks where global creative markets are a priority asset, what are the means through which Hong Kong's underground culture can flourish, challenging the marriage of convenience between art and finance?[9]

[Track 1. *One O'Clock* by Chochukmo]

Starting mainly in the early 1990s, the increase of empty industrial buildings in Hong Kong gave way to a reclamation of these spaces by different art groups.[10] The resulting dynamics led to the establishment of different peripheral clusters of artists in areas like: Chai Wan (located at the east end of Hong Kong Island), with spaces like Asia One Tower, headquarters of Asia One publishing company and art exhibition space, and other galleries and studios; Fo Tan (located in ShaTin, New Territories), mainly focused on visual arts and site of the open studio festival Fotanian; and Wong Chuk Hang (Southern District of Hong Kong Island), with art galleries and organizations such as Hong Kong Free Press, and whose value has increased noticeably since the completion of the South Island MTR line in 2016 that connects the area with the booming business hub Admiralty. Kwun Tong positioned itself as the main hub for musicians, and recent fieldwork shows the emergence of another cluster of musicians in Kwai Hing.[11] These artistic spaces, without the spatial restrictions and regulations of areas like Hong Kong's Soho, are versatile and adaptable, often generating opportunities

[8] On the evolution of Hong Kong's spaces of consumption, see Mathews and Lui, 2001.

[9] The lack of governmental support for emergent small-scale artists versus grand official projects that serve global markets linked to real estate is a hotly debated issue in Hong Kong. The West Kowloon Cultural District project, for example, has been the most controversial case in recent years and is paradigmatic of the role that Hong Kong's upper echelons are trying to play in the realm of international art and culture exhibitions, but also in creative innovative industries related to advertising, digital technology and entertainment, film, and television.

[10] By 2009 there were approximately 1.07 million square meters of under-utilized or vacant industrial buildings in Hong Kong (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, 2009). According to a survey carried out in 2010 by Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the majority of artists using these industrial buildings belonged to a young generation (47% aged between 25 and 39), and music and visual arts were the major types of art practiced (around 37.5% each). Most recent data indicate a changing trend toward marketing and advertising sectors (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2018).

[11] The same survey by the Hong Kong Planning Department, "Business Establishments in Kowloon East 2018," indicates that there are around 1,358 art establishments in Kwun Tong district, among which 85.7% are in industrial buildings. Unofficial estimates suggest, however, that these figures could be higher due to a large number of art studios that are not registered as such.

for multidisciplinary collaborations. An example is Osage Gallery, currently located in Kwon Tong after relocating in 2007 from the Soho area, where visual arts, music, performances, and film are combined, debates are hosted, and cultural and artistic awareness is promoted through Osage Art Foundation.

The buildings in which these networks thrive, however, live in a precarious state of latency, ambiguously regulated by the government and waiting for property developers to target them, either for renovation or for demolition. In recent years, industrial buildings like these have become the main asset for real estate investment backed by the Revitalizing Industrial Building (RIB) Scheme 2009-2010 presented by the Hong Kong SAR Government. The consequences of these projects have manifested in a great increase of rental prices for these spaces—between 200% and 300%—that artists cannot afford.[12]

A central theme in this cultural crossroads is the unbalanced battle over space in the city. A great percentage of the struggles of the Hong Kongese people are deeply rooted in spatial inequality and inaccessibility—be it in the form of housing, public spaces, or cultural venues. The Hong Kong SAR Government is both landowner and lawmaker over a territory with a complex geography, which often leads to controversial relations between the administration and large real estate corporations. These dynamics, inherited from the colonial era, have continued and intensified in recent years, partly fueled by the influx of Mainland Chinese capital in real estate, the privatization of public spaces, and the promotion of mega-projects such as the West Kowloon Cultural District, all of which contribute to increasing tensions in an already distressed context. Diverse protests during the past two decades have been triggered by new urban developments (like the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link in 2009-10) or in defense of urban heritage (such as the Star Ferry Pier in Edinburgh's Place and Queen's Pier, in 2006 and 2007 respectively).

The unprecedented demonstrations that have taken place in Hong Kong since the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill protests and, perhaps more visibly, the movement Occupy Central in 2014, can be seen as blunt illustrations of the ongoing battles over public space between young demonstrators and the government (represented by the police) in Hong Kong's main streets, institutional buildings, and university complexes.[13, 14] During the

[12] More than 77% of the revitalized spaces are currently used as offices (see Chan, Cheung & Wong, 2015, pp. 184–90).

[13] The 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement was a response to the proposal for an extradition bill that was considered by many as a direct attack to the independence of Hong Kong's legal system by the People's Republic of China through Carrie Lam's administration; violence escalated as a response to the brutality in the handling of the confrontations by the police, who became a key motor and target of the movement.

[14] To better understand some of these contemporary phenomena in a global context see Harvey, 2012.

2019 Anti-ELAB demonstrations, the protesters made five demands—"not one less"—that, loaded with emotion and anger, clearly denoted the following political and cultural motivations: the 2019 Extradition Bill proposal, distrust in Chief Executive Carrie Lam's government and police force, negative perception of China as a backward antidemocratic nation, and the pursuit of universal democratic values.[15] Despite the absence of a demand that explicitly addresses economic and spatial concerns, it has been suggested that the discontent evident at these protests was also rooted in such components, related as they are to future uncertainties regarding housing accessibility and the scarcity of possibilities in a highly competitive job market (both of which dramatically impede young people's economic independence).[16, 17]

Hidden (music) generation: school uniforms and black worn out T-shirts

Young local musicians in dark clothes, highly trained from a very early age under the competitive pressures of Hong Kong's education system; a sort of silent punk culture, they represent a mix of discipline, laconic virtuosity, and repressed discontent. The difficulties suffered by the art fields in Hong Kong can be explained to some degree as a result of the education system's prioritization of market-oriented "practical" careers to the detriment of Art and Humanities; this trend, initiated during the British occupation, has continued after the Hong Kong Handover. From 1997, nonetheless, there has been a clear political attempt to promote Chinese culture in schools and all aspects of life—an attempt to define or consolidate an "imposed" identity—that has provoked a reaction among the post-1980s generation (who grew up listening to popular Cantopop hits). This reaction, or awakening, expresses a sense of rejection and the will to search for their own original identity.

The (until recently) "hidden" talents, those that have learned and practiced music in scattered peripheries surrounded by the boisterous rhythm of the metropolis—are representative of the dissatisfaction of the post-1980s generation. Children of a sinking middle class, rooted in Hong Kong, they have emerged as a political force, becoming visible and expressing their frustration in the streets (Siu, 2011, pp. 129–159). Most of these young musicians, despite forming a heterogeneous group, share similar characteristics: they live with their parents or in small shared apartments; one of their main concerns is that they do not see any

[15] The five demands were in this order: Full withdrawal of the extradition bill; a commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality; retracting the classification of protesters as "rioters"; amnesty for arrested protesters; and dual universal suffrage, meaning for both the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive.
[16] Researchers from the Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI) at NUS led by Tan Khee Giap presented the findings of their study on the economic factors behind the massive protests in Hong Kong at the 2019 Asia Economic Forum.
[17] A 2015 survey from the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong indicated housing inaccessibility as one of the key factors of young Hong Kongese' discontent.

possibility of accessing Hong Kong's property market; they feel like there is no future for them in a city with an expiration date (2047);[18] and social media is their common means of interaction.[19] They are mostly students, boys and girls working flexible hours as delivery runners, waiters and waitresses, shopkeepers, music teachers, or, alternatively, new professionals with university degrees working long hours but whose salaries hardly cover their rent. These young people played an important role on the front line of protests, and have formed a dynamic network of artists, gestated in the spaces made possible by industrial buildings.

Fig. 1
Images of the corridor leading to Kai's studio and the interior of the studio, located in San Po Kong area of New Kowloon, Hong Kong (photos: Diego Caro, October 2019).

[Track 2. *Protocol* 332 by VIRT]

For many of these youngsters, sharing a cheap rehearsal room with their bandmates in an industrial or commercial building is the only way to have their own space outside their parent's home or school. It is not unusual that those who rent these places occasionally stay overnight, and sometimes even live there (even though it is considered illegal and, in some cases, dangerous due to the poor conditions of the premises). Some of those whom I interviewed affirmed that they rented their first band room at a very young age, starting from 16 years old. Such is the case of Kai.[20]

Kai is a 30-year-old percussion teacher and session drummer in jazz clubs of Hong Kong's central business district. He currently shares a 630-square-foot studio space with two other local musicians for a total rent fee of 1,150 USD per month in an industrial building of San Po Kong area in New Kowloon (Fig. 1).[21] The building is accessed through a cul-de-sac street that, at the time of the interview, is completely blocked by different cars and trucks loading and unloading goods. The concierge observes us curiously while I take some pictures of the shabby mailboxes of the building lobby. A freight elevator brings us to a long corridor of damaged walls and ceilings guarded by CCTV cameras—in some parts of the ceiling, the steel reinforcement of the concrete beams has been exposed. According to Kai, there are two more music studios in the building, as well as a photography

[18] According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed on 19 December 1984, the United Kingdom Government would return Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China with effect from July 1, 1997. For a period of 50 years after that date, Hong Kong's previous capitalist system was to remain unchanged, following the principle "One country, two systems" that dictated a certain degree of independence with respect to the PRC political system.

[19] The findings presented in this text are drawn from a series of interviews carried out with different musicians and other stakeholders of Hong Kong's music scene (15 interviewees) between the months of May and September 2019. While those interviewed during my fieldwork ranged from age 18 to 60, I focus here on only those belonging to the post-1980s generation.

[20] The pseudonym "Kai" has been used to protect this participant's identity.

[21] This building, the name of which is omitted to keep the privacy of our interviewee, was completed in 1968 and has a total surface of 350,000 square feet (approximately), distributed in 12 floors.

and big drama studio, and a Muay Thai gym. These activities coexist with small storage spaces and mechanical repair workshops.[22]

Once we enter Kai's studio, a feeling of coziness contrasts with the industrial character of the building. He points out the importance of having a room outside his parent's home where he can "chill out, watch TV, work on his computer and, very importantly, store countless instruments and collectible toys." The first reason for him to choose this building was the price and the relative freedom he has when it comes to noisy activities. He had his first studio at the age of 16 with a group of 9 friends that played together in a band located in Wong Chuk Hang area.[23] Soon after that, he started teaching drumming in different studios scattered in industrial buildings around Kwun Tong area.

Emily (28 years old, lawyer) is the lead singer and guitarist of So It Goes and vocalist of the band Foster Studio. She mentions that So It Goes used to rehearse in music rooms located in

[22] Other artists located in different buildings have received noise complaints from neighbors. In some cases, landlords have refused to rent premises to musicians. During my research, several artists have refused to talk as they consider that it might compromise their careers. The regulations on industrial buildings are considered by artists as strong and severely enforced ("Regulation of use of industrial buildings," LCQ18, November 11, 2015).

[23] Wong Chuk Hang area, located in the south of Hong Kong Island, has been revitalized through the opening of different coworking spaces, art galleries, and restaurants.

composite buildings of the buzzing areas of Mong Kok or Yau Ma Tei, where the booking costs range between 8 and 25 USD per hour for a packed rehearsal space (between 90 to 200 square feet) with acceptable equipment. These conditions made working on new songs very challenging.[24] She acknowledges, however, the advantages of having their own space to create music without time constraints or the need of carrying instruments in a crowded subway during rush hour. Now, the dynamics with her bands are generally based on "remote rehearsals"; each member records their parts separately and works on songs from their respective residences. They practice together in an industrial space owned by a relative to prepare for their performances, but the long commuting times to the premises, together with their demanding job schedules, do not allow them to meet frequently. This form of rehearsal is common among Hong Kong bands.

Fig. 2
The former Sense 99 during its farewell party in Wellington Street (photos: Diego Caro, June 2019).

[Track 3. *Houston* by Foster Studio]
"Message from Mission Control Center: home is beautiful when it's far away"

Another option for young creatives are youth centers such as the Warehouse. The Warehouse is an organization that offers "a variety of activities including music, graffiti art, dance, drama, social activities, adventure-based education and sports to youngsters between the ages of 13 and 25."[25] There are also university music clubs like Hong Kong University Student Union Music Club. However, some youngsters find youth centers quite institutionalized, politized, or under religious influence, which makes industrial or small commercial premises much more appealing for them.

Creative tactics in a global (post)colony: governmentality and its contestations

A rusty anonymous intercom partially hidden by some plastic ivies. Past the door, a narrow metallic staircase, source of random encounters and only access point to a one-off experience; hundreds of people—local and foreigners—gathered in a tiny dark room, a miscellany of sweat, smoke, voices, and distant music. On June 14, 2019, Hong Kong's music scene payed tribute to Sense 99, one of the most unique live music venues in Hong Kong Island, with a farewell party that featured performances by Le Groupe Electrogène

[24] Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei, known as some of the busiest districts in the world, are two adjacent areas of Hong Kong characterized by hectic retail, restaurants, and entertainment activities.
[25] The Warehouse Teenage Club (Warehouse) is a charitable non-profit organization founded in 1992 by professor Frank White of Hong Kong University, housed in what was once Aberdeen Police Station—a grade II historic building (defined by Hong Kong's Antiques and Monuments Office as "Buildings of special merit; efforts should be made to selectively preserve"). Professor White "observed [that] many [of] Hong Kong's youngsters lacked a purpose in life and space to develop healthy hobbies and loitered in the streets after school" (Hong Kong Volunteer, 2013).

Fanfare Club (unclassifiable brass ensemble) and Shumking Mansion (funky disco synth-pop) with the participation of artists like the lead singer of After After Party in some of their songs. What had been Sense 99, located on the second and third floors of a colonial-era building at 99 Wellington Street, was moving elsewhere in SOHO area due to a rental increase. "We won't fundraise, don't want to give in to real estate developers," stated the owner as a response to some initiatives presented to cover the rental increase (quoted in Grundy, 2019).[26] This live venue/bar was distributed in two floors of no more than 500 square feet: the first one with a lounge offering alcoholic drinks for a reasonable price, an upright piano, sofas, and a cozy environment; the second floor, dark, with graffiti and bizarre decoration, housed some very worn out music equipment that diverse musicians—most often very talented, but sometimes just random drunk beginners—would play while blending with a mixed audience. This second floor offered a small terrace where customers would go and smoke (Fig. 2).

[Track 4. *I Am Late* by After After Party]

[26] After the high pressures from the property by an excessive rental increase that provoked the closing of Sense 99, the two floors occupied by the live venue were taken over by a barber shop located at the ground floor of the building.

The constant negotiations over place and its narratives, such as we see with Sense 99, are representative of Hong Kong's particular dilemmas when positioning itself as an Asian "worlding city" (Roy & Ong, 2011; Bradser, 2017). Caught up in a Gordian knot created by the pressures of Mainland China influence and Western democracies, Hong Kong's international position—as well as its internal socio-political "equilibrium"—are being challenged.[27] Notions of identity in the city underlie confronting ideas and opinions about absence—particularly, absence of a historic urban legacy—as well as the increasing presence of administrative and spatial strategies that follow Mainland Chinese models. In this respect, a re-definition of post-colonial Hong Kong (and therefore of the national identity of the Hong Kongese people) is subject to the continuities of a land monopoly intensified after 1997, urban policies designed to favor and sustain this monopoly, and the government's strategies on culture (mostly predominated by economic factors before and after the Hong Kong Handover).[28]

Nowadays, China is both a land of business opportunities as well as a catalyst for the anxieties and vulnerabilities of Hong Kong (Siu, 2011). The mainstream music scene of the city is paradigmatic of this situation; whereas in the 1980s Hong Kong's Cantopop was an international benchmark, characterized by its hybrid character and quality of production, in recent years it has experienced a decline—coinciding with the Handover in 1997—as Mandopop, its Mandarin counterpart, has risen in favor (Chu & Leung, 2013). Presently, most of the renowned Cantopop stars rely on the Mainland Chinese market for their success (though there are exceptions, like Denise Ho).[29] Such dependency puts them in a delicate situation when it comes to political positioning—similar to the conflicts of interest experienced by some of Hong Kong's tycoons—and conditions their music and lyrics, especially in the ongoing social unrest of Hong Kong.

A claustrophobic relationship with Mainland China is particularly felt among the post-1980s generation, who do not relate to a Chinese past and who, in some cases, idealize the colonial era. These sentiments have reinforced the Hong Kongese localist movement in recent years (Wong, 2017). In addition to the lack of spaces to perform or listen to live music in the city, the majority of musicians I interviewed emphasized the lack of mobility outside Hong Kong due to the geographical isolation determined by Mainland China and "the sea." Interviewees considered China as a hostile or "forbidden" place to

[27] Merriam Webster defines the Gordian knot as "a problem insoluble in its own terms."
[28] For more about land policies in Hong Kong see Cuthbert & Mckinnell, 1997, pp. 295–311. For more on culture in Hong Kong see Cartier, 2008, pp. 59–83.
[29] Denise Ho is a singer, actress, and a pro-democracy and human rights activist in Hong Kong. She was one of the five activists testifying at the United States' Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) in Washington, DC, in September 2019.

perform, as many of their lyrics are subjected to censorship there, and playing in China can be seen negatively by other local artists and fans due to emotionally charged political tensions. Thus, progressing as a musician within the Cantonese music scene is difficult due to socio-political and economic obstacles, and entering the English-speaking market, dominated by the Anglo-Saxon world, is another arduous challenge. Moreover, touring outside Hong Kong is often an expensive luxury that underground bands cannot afford.

[Track 5 -彌敦道的一晚 *good trip* by My Little Airport]

Underground artists in Hong Kong, conversely, "no longer care about it"—"it" being the current political situation—as their "songs already got red flagged in China," as Lam Ah P (frontman of My Little Airport) declared in a recent interview (Wu, 2020). This attitude is liberating when it comes to writing about political and social issues, or to exploring different musical styles, but also indicates a feeling of hopelessness and frustration, as several artists expressed during fieldwork conversations after the disruption in all spheres of life provoked by the Anti-ELAB protests. In addition to further frustration and disillusionment, these clashes—that resulted in the closing of different establishments as well as traffic and public transport disruptions—led to the cancellation of numerous concerts and other musical projects such as album recordings, intensifying the music sector's precariousness.

Whereas the isolation experienced by these underground artists is a burden in many ways, it also strengthens the local music community, the production of a social space, and a sense of belonging. Ideas of globalization, mobility, and rapid urbanization in the context of Hong Kong are contested on different, everyday scales according to a varied range of societal aspirations (that is, not everyone has the "tools" to respond in such extraordinary ways as these artists). The lack of spaces for rehearsing or performing live music has given way to diverse creative spatial appropriations: ephemeral music venues; spontaneous decoration; informal markets for used musical instruments, equipment, or records (via both the Internet and through local shops like White Noise Records); art installations; paintings and political messages on toilet walls and staircases; posters and stickers distributed around the city; a massive amount of audiovisual web content; and, most importantly, a whole new generation of "do it yourself" music productions in these hidden music scenes with a very particular "Hong Kong sound," as the music producer and critic Yuen Chi-chung commented during an interview.[30]

These kinds of informal "tactics" have, out of necessity, become common spatial practices

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[30] From my conversation with Yuen Chi-chung on January 20, 2020, I would describe this "Hong Kong sound" as a miscellany of moods and alternative styles, with a "do it yourself touch" in terms of audio and production that often results in unorthodox styles and songs.

Fig. 3
Access and interior of Hidden Agenda: This Town Needs at Ocean One in Yau Tong during a concert of the Japanese band Envy (photos: Diego Caro, February 2019).

by lower and middle classes, counteracting the imposed rhythms of "bureaucratic" Hong Kong. Some authors have referred to these practices, as well as to their effects on the urban space of Hong Kong, as "neutral equilibrium" in which different stakeholders' tactics eventually get to work together (Wai & Zhu, 2016). However, these struggles—especially in underground cultural venues—have become unequivocally political in some cases; such is the example of the above-mentioned Hidden Agenda, or of Sai Coeng.[31] In June 2019, the hitherto latent reappropriation of everyday spaces in Hong Kong exploded, becoming vigorously explicit in the city streets. The massive Anti-ELAB demonstrations provoked the proliferation of countless artistic expressions—especially posters—denouncing the government position toward citizen's demands. It also led to fundraising gigs and events promoted by musicians and different organizations; the movement even has its own anthem, "Glory to Hong Kong." During the farewell gig of This Town Needs on February 27, 2020, pro-democracy slogans coming from the audience could be heard in between songs; the same kind of slogans could be heard in other anonymous underground venues that were a part of this study, together with political chants. During some performances artists even took to burning a fake Chinese flag.

[Track 6. *Loosefuck* by David Boring]

On artistic and political levels, it is also relevant for this study to observe how venues like TTN or MOM Live House—together with organizations such as the Void Noize—have collaborated in a twofold exchange between international and local artists.[32] On the one hand, they have provided Hong Kongese bands the opportunity to open acts for renowned international musicians, becoming part of an international network of selected artists and providing visibility to these hidden music scenes. On the other hand, they have managed to spread the Anti-ELAB movement ideas beyond Hong Kong through famous foreign bands. Paradoxically, the ambition of TTN to book good international acts became infeasible in the volatile music scene of Hong Kong due, in part, to the negative effects of the protests in the normal functioning of the city and in its economy. Though they struggled to remain open, they were finally forced to close their doors by the

[31] The Sai Coeng Facebook page, another important underground venue, states the following about its name: "Sai Coeng (細場) is the pronunciation of 'a small place' in Cantonese. Aside from describing a physically small area, this name symbolizes our wish for all the possibilities and creativity unlimited by our limited space and resources."

[32] The Void Noize is a local collective for the promotion of concerts and presents its purpose via Facebook as: "To be born in the generation with information overload, young adults have their own thoughts and attitude on independent music, fashion, visual arts and culture. They would try their best to create their own voice to survive in this hectic society. Giving up being mainstream, not to care too much about being rich or being famous, they act for their passion with no regrets. There's only one thing they need, the need to express themselves in this world with nothingness."

Covid-19 crisis (*Time Out Hong Kong*, 2020). TTN had an area of 18,000 square feet and a maximum capacity of 400 persons, being one of the biggest "non-mainstream" event spaces in the city, including a fully licensed bar with a very basic drinks menu (Fig. 3).

The embodiment through sounds and lights

Wong Kar-wai's cinematographic style has often been characterized as featuring a predominance of atmosphere and mood over the more narrative aspects of film.[33] The embodiment of Hong Kong through underground music follows a similar pattern, the city's countless narratives generating a series of intermingling moods, a mix of discontent and muffled excitement, of colors and grays—much like the eclectic exchanges of diverse genres that results from the proximity and imperfect separation between rehearsal rooms in some music studios in the city. Thus, the ambiguous portrayal of the latent feeling of young Hong Kongese is often rendered in the sound, lyrics, music videos, album covers, and aesthetics of local bands.

[Track 7. *Stardust* by So It Goes]

[33] Won Kar-wai is a renowned Chinese film director, screenwriter, and producer based in Hong Kong. His movies offer a very particular vision of Hong Kong's cityscape drawing a collage of moods, unique characters, and music.

The post-1980 generation relates to the city's urban landscape in their attempts to somehow (re)construct a deserted identity; Hong Kong's suffocating congestion, hyperstimulation, and control is their common ground.[34] Emily (the lead singer and guitarist of So It Goes and vocalist of Foster Studio) refers to the constraints of space, the surrounding concrete cubes, the pressures of real life, and the cost of living as inspiration for the song "Stardust," released by So It Goes in 2017. People are invisible during the daytime and become real at night, in the secret and stimulating places where music is performed.[35] She describes the idea of evading reality through musical spaces and remembers the band's most memorable performance at MOM Live House.

Fig. 4
Access and interior of MOM Live House during Thud's performance located at Seven Seas Shopping Centre in North Point (photos: Diego Caro, October 2019).

MOM is located in the lower ground of Seven Seas Shopping Centre. This venue is fairly big for Hong Kong standards, offering a 4,800-square-foot space with good quality music equipment and a bar that serves a very limited drinks menu characterized by cheap cans of beer. During the day, it transforms into a standard restaurant that offers set daily food menus for office workers. The route to MOM, through tiny closed shops, where an infinitude of colorful objects repose after a long day of sales, resembles some sort of initiation rite to Hong Kong's underground music. Before entering MOM, the queue is the origin of casual conversations around an orange metallic cube that turns black, green, or purple in the inside, where the combination of sounds and lights acts as a social condenser via the affective power of music (Fig. 4).

On the night of October 3, 2019, in the middle of a week when the city's protests reached maximum intensity, Kim, the always introverted singer of Thud, all dressed in black, read a short text in English at the end of their concert.[36] Standing behind her synths she asked herself with subdued despair: "who would have imagined this would happen in Hong Kong, at least so soon?" Her tears were shared by all those present in the room.

[Track 8. *Prime of Pride* by Thud]

Encore

Hong Kong has gained fame during the past years as a "cultural desert," most likely because the economy overshadows any other aspects of the city (Cartier, 2008). I would like to refer to it here, though, as a "deserted culture." This deserted culture has been—and

[34] The need for urban symbols has given way in recent years to a new interest in heritage conservation (see Siu, 2011).
[35] As some of the lyrics of "Stardust" go: "In our world we can do what feels right, but in the real one we stay out of sight" (Chak, 2017).
[36] Thud (named Lucid Express from 2021) is a Hong Kongese band formed in 2015 with a very distinct dream pop/shoegaze sound. The band members are Kim (vocals and synths), Andy (guitar), Sky (guitar), and the brothers Samuel (bass) and Wai (drums).

is constantly being—reconstructed through everyday practices and moments of illumination via organic, leaderless, and multidirectional phenomena built up within a sort of digital and spatial rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The new creative tactics used in this reconstruction have given way to, among other effects, a change in the government's methods to control the population, which have shifted toward more repressive and less subtle forms of governmentality (as can be clearly observed in the evolution of responses applied in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and in the Anti-ELAB protests of 2019). Young artists' hidden networks, fermented in peripheral spaces, have become more fluid and effective in regard to their social, political, and cultural impact and influence. I imagine a compilation of Hong Kongese underground music as the soundtrack to the phenomena: a new generation of Hongkongers with a self-referential identity, restrained and inspired by the city's density and geographical pressures, heterogeneous yet consistent and enduring under a sea of black t-shirts—an original blend of musical styles and voices that will influence the future rhythms of Hong Kong.

Soundtrack

Chochukmo, "One O'Clock." Released in October 2013 in Hong Kong as part of the album *A Tragedy Your Majesty*, produced by Jason Choi@People Mountain People Sea and published by Factory Pink. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtu9AG-pA4k

VIRT, "Protocol 332." Single released in 2019 in Hong Kong. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPxowEgtmbA

Foster Studio, "Houston." Single released in August 2017 in Hong Kong, produced by Foster Studio. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB-svtM7l1I

After After Party, "I Am Late." Single released in 2018 in Hong Kong. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yWozNN-GNs

My Little Airport, "彌敦道的一晚 good trip." Released in 2018 in Hong Kong as part of the album 你說之後會找我. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=453u20nMAwM

David Boring, "Loosefuck." Released in March 2017 as part of the album *Unnatural Objects and Their Humans*, produced by David Boring. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgKAFHP0pJQ

So It Goes, "Stardust." Single released in August 2017 in Hong Kong, produced by Chiwai Chan and Emily Hui. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG3XtIKZ5xY

Thud, "Prime of Pride." single released in 2016 in Hong Kong. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhzG2Hpbdjk

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