The King of Kowloon

The King of Kowloon is a postcolonial artist who works outside of the official power structure-- as such he can be defined as a subaltern. He works in a competing dialog with the government of Hong Kong due to the content, form and location of his writings. This contestation over space influences his work in many ways. In particular, The King of Kowloon, or Tseng Tso Choi as he is legally named, creates art that is transient. The themes of contested space and transience are prevalent in Hong Kong; The King’s art lies at the intersection of these two major discourses in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is a contested space. China ceded the land to Britain in the first Opium War and turned over even more land, including Kowloon, in the outcome of the second Opium War in 1860\(^1\). Although Hong Kong was just a small fishing village at the time, Britain’s newest colony had great potential. Since the area had a large port, and was close to Mainland China, the opium trade would be even easier. The port had few restrictions and allowed for goods, people, and ideas to pass in and out of the island\(^2\). Under British rule, Hong Kong was transformed from a village of a few thousand farmers and fishermen to a rapidly developing metropolis. A few hundred thousand merchants,

\(^1\) Convention of Peking. Signed October 18, 1860.
artisans, and laborers migrated to Hong Kong from the surrounding Guangdong Provinces. As a result, Hong Kong became a major economic power.

This space is also peculiar in that under the British crown children in Hong Kong learned English. When the British colonized Hong Kong, the culture that emerged was a hybridization of Chinese and British thought. The educational model used in Hong Kong elucidates this hybridity of cultures. Before becoming British, Children were taught the Confucian canon, painting, chess, and calligraphy in line with the Chinese model of education. The British added to this model and also taught Hong Kong students English; over time the importance of the canon was even minimized. Since rejoining Mainland China, Hong Kong became the very first Special Administrative Region of the Peoples Republic of China. This system of administration gives Hong Kong some degree of autonomy while still being under the domain of China while the state relies on China for help with foreign affairs and military defense.

The space of Hong Kong is contested in terms of temporality. Before 1960 immigration from the Mainland was unmitigated and those who worked in Hong Kong were often only working visitors and not residents. The British considered immigrants and migrant workers as belonging since they were the same and provided a viable workforce. However, when Mao’s revolution caused political, social, and economic upheaval in China there was too great an influx of immigrants grew too large for the city to accommodate all those who wanted to emigrate. At this point, the British government
began limiting the number of immigrants. Until these limits were put in place, workers would travel to Hong Kong only for economic opportunities and not as residents³.

These workers tended to leave their families in their home provinces and return after making money in Hong Kong. Therefore, the space is more traversed than occupied. The city was only a small village until the port was built—the economic foundation of Hong Kong is based on trade. The most significant building project in the history of Hong Kong is a sophisticated, modern airport. This land is more of a stepping-stone that one leaps upon while traveling. Moreover, the culture of Hong Kong reflects the transience of its occupants.

The King of Kowloon is an artist who exists at the intersection of transience and contested space. Contested spaces exist where identity and ownership are not definitive or legible. In Rose Marie San Juan’s Rome: A City out of Print legibility is seen as a key aspect of maintaining order in society. In Rome the Bandos were posted where citizens could see them as emblems of authority⁴. The King of Kowloon similarly “posts” messages to the public, but they have a very different effect. Instead of clarifying the proper roles for passers by, these writings complicate citizenship.

However, the King of Kowloon asserts a more definitive identity for himself by furthering the illegibility of the city by competing with the government. He claims that he is the rightful owner of Kowloon. The King writes calligraphy on the walls of buildings,

⁴ Rose Marie San Juan, Rome: A City out of Print (University of Minnesota Press, 2001)
which is similar to the way that the government communicates with the people. Besides participating in contested space, his work is also transient in nature. He writes calligraphy on walls and the government washes it away—this cycle has been repeated ever since he first began his work forty years ago. Therefore, work follows him around the city—he is always creating new works while the old are always being erased. These traces of work are defined in relation to himself; they are as expansive and limited as the artist.

The King of Kowloon’s art is both graffiti and calligraphy. It is graffiti in that he illegally marks public and private buildings with his writing. Similarly to most graffiti artists he marks his territory. “Graffiti Kings” is the nomenclature used to describe the major graffiti artists. Again Tseng Tso Choi is literally calling himself the king in his writings—it is not merely a rhetorical device. He is marking his turf as is common to graffiti, but he is literal about this demarcation. He writes that the land of Kowloon belonged to his ancestors and therefore it should now belong to him. Ancient conceptions of land ownership require that land be passed down through families so that the bones of ancestors that are buried in the land can be honored. The King of Kowloon asserts that he is the true owner of the Kowloon and he writes this on the wall. He participates in the discourse of contestation by asserting his ownership of the city itself. This graffiti is also transient in nature. Tseng TsoChoi doesn’t use spray paint, he uses ink and water. Most of his writing can be sprayed off with a high-pressure hose, unlike typical graffiti. He writes all over the city every day and his work never stays put. One work is washed away

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while another is created. It is a cycle of destruction and creation that participates in the transience of the city.

Tseng Tso Choi is no ordinary graffiti artist—he is also a calligrapher. His writing is visually appealing due to his use of asymmetry, variation in the size of characters, and his creative use of space in his art. He does not only write on blank walls, but also on doors, electrical and post boxes, and support posts. In one piece, he wrote on construction posts so that passer by would read different things when walking in different directions.

Calligraphy is an art that varies with the character of the artist and Tseng Tso Choi’s calligraphy participates in the discourse over contested space. Calligraphy is a traditional Chinese art that was encouraged under British colonization. Official government postings were presented in the calligraphic form—albeit on paper rather than a wall. The King of Kowloon participates in and obscures official government dialog by asserting his ownership of the city. His written message is a form of political protest and a call for the return of traditional values. His art is not only confrontational, but also temporal.

Calligraphy is a transient art. It is the very act of creation that is the climactic moment. The markings made with brush and ink is merely the traces of the initial art making process, not the entirety of the art itself; calligraphy is something of a performance art. It has been said that “the brush dances and the ink sings” or that it is
“music without sound”\textsuperscript{6}. The performative nature of writing calligraphy illegally in a public space makes the King of Kowloon more than just a visual artist. His art is also conceptual and transient artist--his art it moves about the city wherever he goes. For the amount of time and energy that Tseng Tso Choi has spent writing on the streets of Kowloon the city may as well belong to him. Even if the city no longer belongs to his family he still watches over the land of his ancestors. His art exists at the intersection of calligraphy and graffiti.