Seeking Roland Barthes' Neutral: The Art of Sharon Lee Cheuk-wun and Lau Wai[1]

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Abstract

This article addresses the relation between the political environment during and immediately after the 2019 pro-democracy movement and two Hong Kong artists' situated responses and experiences. As the movement forges its strength in the name of unity of citizenship provisionally formed, it risks failing to recognize artists' lateral engagement with it. The movement demands that participants forgo specificities of identity as it prioritizes a unified citizenship antagonistic to the ruling power. Artists face the dilemma of having the capacity to contribute to the movement by creative and non-antagonistic means, but not having the discursive space to actualize this capacity. This article proposes that Charles Taylor's politics of recognition is productive for understanding such contentions. It raises the question of whether forfeiting differences that constitute the value of particular cultural groups is a price the sustainability of democratic values can pay for. The works of Sharon Lee Cheuk-wun and Lau Wai demonstrate that a creative space for experimenting with what ruling power is and what it does to citizens, is as important as a space for contesting against it. Their works can be interpreted as associating with Roland Barthes' figure of the Neutral, at once a figure of experimental thought (heuristic device), a dwelling for playfulness (linguistic device), and an open, atopic space without location or ownership for multiple modes of engagement with meaning-making processes (an ethics).

Introduction: Out Of Sight/Site, Out Of Mind?

A little over a year ago, I co-moderated a public forum with artists as panelists speaking about their relation to the 2019 pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong (hereafter the 2019 movement). After the forum, I became aware that a member of the audience—a scholar, activist, and artist—worried if this kind of forum signaled the end of the movement because attention was turned to art. I found myself troubled by the fact that the comment was made not in the forum itself, but afterwards. Did the commentator find the question not admissible to the public at the time? In marking a "turn," was he implying the movement had not heeded art? For me, the urgency is not so much in marking temporal and spatial beginnings and ends, but to ask what kinds of attention political activism and art compel. If discussions about the relation between art and political activism were over-determined by locating and identifying the political agency of artists and their work, to the point where political agency might be regarded as an accomplishment for art, much of artistic creativity that does not share the form of political activism might be lost to history.

In this article I examine two works made during the 2019 movement by Hong Kong-based artists Sharon Lee Cheuk-wun and Lau Wai. In the ways both works are concerned with self-realization during the times of political and social volatilities, the politics of recognition could illuminate artists' experiences of recognition and misrecognition that took place on both the intimate and social planes (Taylor). However, the politics of recognition and its critique are inadequate for understanding the artists' situated responses. The artists work laterally in relation to the movement. Their works do not follow the movement to serve it, but they move with it and let it affect their experience of being and belonging. From the perspective of political activism and its urgency, artists who work from the studio may be seen as politically neutral in the narrow sense of not

committing to a stance that defines and defends the activism. However, I propose, from the artists' perspectives, that their realities conjure Roland Barthes' concept of the Neutral in form and content. Barthes' Neutral is a thing, a series of figures, an intensity, a language between conflictual and non-conflictual discourses. It is generously open for supplementation. It offers a way of thinking alternatively the relation between art and the politics art is immersed in.

The Artists and Their Contexts

Sharon Lee Cheuk-wun and Lau Wai are among the twenty artists I have interviewed since November 2019. My goal is to find out how these artists understand the activisms and how they regard themselves in relation to them. The activisms imposed competing demands onto artists: both practical (regarding the question of how to act) and moral (regarding the question of what is the right thing to do). One recurring motif in the interviews is the artists' moral dilemma over whether to join street protests or stay in their studio to make art. Both have moral benefits: the former means joining the protests on the streets in the hope of strengthening its size and persuasive power; the latter means space and time for reflecting on the artist's own needs—a mixture of habits of knowing, perceiving, feeling, acting, and self-understanding. Both are rightful vocations: of shared citizenship and of artistic expression. Artists confront the desire and fear to be together—to be in the "socially integrative power of protests" (Bauman 118) and in their imminent and often violent dispersal by state implements. They also confront the desire and fear of being alone—to preserve time for oneself away from a people in the formation. One prominent dilemma for the artist, as she responds to the movement, is to choose between the relevance of the meaning of being an artist alone and being an artist together with others. The artist's potential choice and value preference may conflict with that which the movement demands its participants.

In the following, I focus on how Sharon Lee Cheuk-wun's *The Crack of Dawn* (2020) and Lau Wai's *I am invincible...on the screen / False motion tracking* (2019–2020) direct our attention to two under-discussed affective aspects of the movement, namely, experiences of an estranged and solitary self, suspended between recognition and misrecognition, and of ruptured time as a-synchronicity. I propose that their artistic languages are not that which political discourse could adequately capture.

Sharon Lee Cheuk-wun's *The Crack of Dawn* (2020) is a site-specific photographic installation presented in three iterations. In the artist statement, Lee speaks of her absence from the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the subsequent feeling of exclusion from her peers who participated in the movement. The 2019 movement triggered her memories and she found herself thinking more about the relation between the "I" and the "We" (Lee, Interview). In *The Crack of Dawn*, she speaks not *about* the Umbrella Movement, but makes space for speaking *with* herself and *with* others in it. It transforms exclusion into engagement.

The first iteration was presented in April 2020, around one year after the start of the 2019 movement, at a shop window gallery on a side street in Yaumatei, Kowloon. Eight images were shown in a grid structure of nine, with one seemingly absent image. The ninth "missing piece" was installed at a newsstand five minutes' walk away. The images were dark in tone and lighting. Their content was barely discernible at first glance. Shown behind glass panes, the images reflected the conditions on the streets, taking on a fleeting textual and tactile quality.

The original source of these images was Google Map. The artist added a pin on Harcourt Road, a main site of the Umbrella Movement. For her, the images retrieved from Google Map constituted "secondary memory" (Lee, Interview). She chose three main sites of state authority around which people gathered, set up tents and the "Democracy Forum"—an open-air space for citizen's free

sharing of ideas. The sites were the People's Liberation Army building in Central, the Legislative Council in Central, and the Central Government Offices in Admiralty (Lee, Interview). "The images are detailed: I could see what people were drinking, what's been written on the ground with white chalk, how people named a particular corner in the protest, etc. That made a huge impact on me" (Lee, Interview). Using an analogue camera, Lee took photographs of the Google Map images she displayed on a computer screen.

Her choice of images was also based on how much and how intensely the photographs carried pixelized glitches from the Google Map images. Before she developed the prints, she created textures on the film by using sticky tapes, a cutter, glass or plastic to make irregular marks on it. She would switch on the light in the dark room at irregular instants to achieve the effect of solarization. The process was repeated fifty-four times to obtain six images and nine prints from each image. For Lee, light became "a device to diminish and eliminate" (Lee, Interview). The resulting prints carried both digital and analogue imprints composed of textures of abrasion and glitches from the source.

The gesture of repetition was crucial: "The more I repeated developing the same image, the less I saw in it" (Lee, Interview). The transposition of images from the digital realm to the analogue realm involving not only clicking on the shutter but detailed and varying hand gestures became her way of questioning the stillness of an image—stillness as sterility abandoned in the Internet commons on the one hand and the stillness as promising an authoritative and stable reality on the other: "Repetition is a tactic for seeing, recollecting, and forgetting" (Lee, Interview).

With the same images, she presented the second iteration two months later. One framed image was installed in each of the six newsstands on Nathan Road, a protest-frequented main road in Kowloon during the 2019 movement and also an occupied area during the Umbrella Movement. The exhibition became more

extensively engaged with the conditions of and circumstances on the streets. It also acquired a temporal dimension in that a visitor could begin at any newsstand and take her own time visiting the installations. To view all works one had to follow the route of the protests, through traces of bent fences or half-mended pavements and traffic lights as relics of the recent past. While the work was open to the public and in public space, her goal was more self-directed: for exploring the relation between her changing self with the activisms of the movements.

In the third and last iteration, with the new title *Same River Twice* (2020), Lee composed the images from *The Crack of Dawn* into six tracks of moving images. The exhibition site was Google Map. She uploaded the works there so that they became part of the pool of images and moving images that Google Map circulates in the commons. In so doing, she dwells in the tension between undermining her authorship while at the same time actualizing her capacity to create an intimate and significant relationship between her absence from the Umbrella Movement and the Umbrella Movement itself. If memory of oneself is created by oneself as much as by the Other, in the sense described by Leonidas Donskis that it "comes to us from somewhere else and protects us" (qtd in Bauman 126), Lee confronts the lost cause of sharing memories as a shelter with others. Her gesture of returning the Google images to their source, in the new ways of being they are, extended the reach of art in making meaning of the Umbrella Movement and the 2019 movement: she created materials for a secondary audience, complicated the digital commons, questioned how open digital archives were partial historical memories, and transformed them into a site for direct action. All these—the absence, presence, distribution, and dissipation of her artist's self—constitute her version of reality.

Artist Lau Wai's *I am invincible…on the screen / False motion tracking* (2019–2020) consists of two videos. It was presented in the form of an installation in a gallery in

Hong Kong during the pandemic and it was never displayed to the public. The gallery organized public online viewing sessions with the artists introducing the works, and my following discussion will focus on the videos. Residing in New York City as a full-time graduate student of fine arts in most of 2019, Lau responded to such questions as "How should I position myself?" and "How might I proceed?" during the movement. They recalled following the movement on social media live feeds and remembered being in a constant state of anxiety. The work was not originally made as a response to the movement, but in hindsight, Lau said they realized it contained much of their emotions that were triggered by the movement (Lau, Interview).

One video was a montage of characters from eleven Hollywood films and TV series produced from the late 1930s to the late 1980s. They chose Asian actors or actors playing the role of Asian characters and took a still picture of each. They then used a mobile application with a synthetic media technology commonly known as "deepfake" to modify the content of existing footage and images. Deepfake placed point-marks onto the face of the human figure in the image, "recognizing" the face by breaking it down into parts (forehead, eyebrows, eye, nose, cheeks, mouth, chin, and so on). Lau then recorded their voice with a line they scripted for each character; in other words, their voice and the facial expressions that came with it replaced the characters'. In so doing, they literally put words into the characters' mouths. All the lines the characters were made to voice were no more than a few seconds, except for the one where the artist staged a character in the film *Blade Runner* (1982). The line was the most elaborate in the work: "Oh God, where am I now? God I was trying to kill them all. Shit? And now, shall I kill them or shall I rescue them. Ah shit, I am so confused" (Lau, Artist Website). As a whole, the video presented a plot in which each character questioned his/her own position and responded to a call from an unknown place by an unknown person/entity for changing their positions. For instance, the artist voiced

the line "Now I am tired of being Susie Wong. I am with you, Master" with footage from the film *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). The title of the work "I am invincible...on the screen" came from a line mouthed by a male character dressed in a ceremonial outfit, exalted by a pair of golden dragons carved out of his chair, from the film *The Brides of Fu Manchu* (1966). The act of speaking on the part of the characters was effortful, the mouthing visibly mechanized, on the verge of breaking.

In the process of having the characters mouth Lau's words, Lau had to manage the temporal delays and facial movement mismatches. To synchronize their vocal and facial movements with the characters', they had to take and retake the images repetitively. They described this as a tedious process and never perfectly precise. There were often a split second's delay between the voice and the mouth and facial movements. They discovered an aspect of irony in the process: "I have this new character to make something new, but I found myself having to fall back to the 'original,'" Lau recalled (Lau, Interview). In the second video, simultaneously presented alongside the first, the artist staged a pre–computer generated imagery (pre-CGI) body in a green background commonly used in motion picture production for chroma-keying. They wore a tight suit attached with multiple motion tracking data points, only that they were fake and did not function to track their motion. Together, the videos gave the false impression that the artist's pre-CGI body made the actors' performance possible.

One critical pathway into Lau's work would be to ask how stereotypes of "Asian-ness" in American movies are questioned and negotiated. How this participates in the history of self-appropriation as a component in identity politics, which has been widely discussed in scholarship, would be beyond the scope of this article. I am more interested in the way the work addresses conditions that constitute misrecognition and participates in making those conditions to deliberately confuse Lau's selfhood. A-synchronicity is one of these technological conditions. For Lau, "synchronization" is a technological fantasy. By

implicating themself in the transposition from a physical body in the studio into a digital, computer-mediated object, with a "gap" always already in between, they sustain the doubt in being "not-Them," making a figure out of their body that had no name, with an open identity. The "self" they fabricated from their own body becomes a conceptual form that abstains them from identifiers established in socio–political discourse. They free themself from the process of recognition as self-realization while remaining deeply immersed in the parameters of deepfake: to become recognizable is no longer a pathway to undo injustice. It is to become always partly unrecognizable. The process of recognition is incomplete and will never be.

As both the maker and the made, at once enabled and challenged by technological abstraction and dysfunction, the work presents not a conflictual relation with power, nor does it seek power. Instead, Lau tells a cautionary tale. "This may be the way we are in the future," they said, the danger that the technologies could be used by power to liquidate the meaning of a person's speech and gestures, and to render the plausibility of the truth of a person questionable (Lau, Interview). In this light, the work troubles the status of authenticity and its centrality in understanding self-identity. Placing their performative self in between narratives of power and the possibility of control and losing it, their work offers an interpretation of a life at once synchronous and asynchronous with the movement: synchronous for being a simultaneously present reality with the movement, but asynchronous for shifting attention to recognition demanded by the movement for itself to a questioning of what participating in a politics of recognition may entail, and its limits.

Lee's and Lau's works show an awareness of their projection of themselves onto the world, and their needs for other kinds of projection, at a distance and laterally. They share an acute sensitivity to two consequences of the discrepancy between their realities and the activisms conditioning their lives. First, solitude. Relative to the solidarity of protestors in the movement, their works

evoke experiences of solitude, the necessity to grapple alone with larger forces they are subjected to. Solitude could arguably be a common sentiment in the movement, as it integrated and disintegrated on site at increasing speed. Solitude, however, has not led the artists to shrink themselves from the movement; they responded. Second, a-synchronicity. In the movement, the protestors' actions put routine production time to a halt; for instance, dismantling steel fences on the streets so that they could no longer control movement of bodies, or making traffic lights dysfunctional as markers of public time. The movement constituted its own time that displaced procedures of time-keeping in public space. While working separately and approaching different manifestations of the movement, both Lee's and Lau's works coincidentally address a-synchronicity as a sentiment of the movement, enabling questions of the timeliness of recognition, and what prepares for it in time. Both artists' works invite people to think of the movement as not only a matter between power and counterpower, but a complex and plural discursive space that affords multiple processes of meaning-making in different times yet to entirely unfold.

In the following section, I discuss three ways artists tend to relate to the movement—the "I and we," between "me and you," and between "I and not-I," which the politics of recognition and its repercussions are partly but inadequately articulated. I will then bring in Barthes' Neutral as a heuristic device to sustain the thinking on the relation of art and activism. The Neutral suspends political discourse in that it is first and foremost a way of thinking—not participating in political discourse, but is concerned and reflective about it. While the Neutral is coined originally in Barthes' lectures to question the rigidity of academic discourse and the language it is constrained in, he opens it up to become an "atopic" space (Barthes, *Simply* 103) exempted from ownership, location, and meaning (Barthes, *Simply* 92). The Neutral is capable of extending what political discourse leaves under-discussed because, first, it interrupts language as

ideology; second, it performs "inflections" that aim at the suspension of "conflictual types of discourse" and draw from a corpus that is not exhaustive, from literary and philosophical texts to gestures, behavior and conduct coded by society (Barthes, *Neutral* 211); and third, it shares the formal structure of the two art works in troubling how art and politics are understood. As such, it allows for multiple modes of engagement with meaning-making processes, hence, an "ethical investigation into how to live" (Barthes, *Simply* 122).

Recognition on a Micro Scale

While the 2019 movement presents a public character of drawing a clear line between an "us" (from the inside) and a "them" (on the outside), on the individual level, artists experienced particular contentions in their self–other and self–self relation constituted by the movement. I propose that three relations could be abstracted: between "I and we," between "me and you," and between "I and not-I."

By "I and we," I mean the artist in relation to the protestors as a micro-public in the movement. As evident in its publicity, the activists defined the movement as belonging to "Hongkongers" in order to establish unity and solidarity. The meaning and use of the term varied: it might be coined as a deliberate polemic against what was regarded by the movement as its enmity. It might also be used to articulate shared residence, experience, and citizenship. While the term referred to a collective identity, there had been room for individuation. In some of the protests, the participants' professional identities were emphasized, be it financial analysts, designers, teachers, or others. If one aspect of the movement concerned the "neoliberal financialization of the urban space" (Li 94), refusing wage-work and turning away from the routine workplace (even when provisionally) was protest in itself in the form of putting to a halt production that served the established status quo. For the artist, however, there is no workplace, wage, or

lunchtime (designated and compartmentalized time of day) to refuse. The artist's mode of life is different from the wage-worker's. While the wage-worker sacrifices her wage and risks her work contract by departing from her work-time to participate in protest-time (which is the measure of her contribution to the movement), it seems the artist has no concomitant sacrifice to make, or, her sacrifice cannot be put in these more commonly understood terms. With no work contract binding the artist, no scheduled work time restricting her the same way they do the wage-worker, the value of the artist in terms of both her work and her involvement in the movement is under-represented. The citizenship that the movement unites for emphasizing the common, universal value of freedom leaves limited room for considering the equal validity of the artist's situated experience.

Without equal access to the economic, social, and symbolic resources in the public sphere, the artist's work (their ways of thinking, skill sets, modes of social engagement, and professional aspirations) does not receive the concomitant recognition, formalization, and therefore legitimation that other citizens' practices do. Their relevance and contribution to public well-being is sidelined. When there is little chance for the artist to become socially present with the others from whom their recognition partly depends, the relation between "I" and "we" is in tension.

This is also closely related to the relation between "me and you," highlighting an intimacy between the artist and the figure of the individual activist in the movement. It is in the inter-subjectivity of "me" and "you," i.e. both "me" and "you" making reciprocal recognition of each other, that both "me" and "you" could be constituted and contribute to a sense of belonging in one's rightful place in the movement. However, if the artist makes space for the activist, this reciprocated space is not enacted by the latter.

One way to contextualize the artist's experience of these relations is with Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition." The "I and we" relates to questions of equal

recognition at play on the social plane, while the "me and you" relates to questions of self-realization at play on the "intimate plane" (Taylor 36–37). Taylor devotes his thoughts more to the former in which the public sphere is a broad notion relative to the "intimate" as private, in relation to intimate, loving relations. For the artist, negotiations for self-realization in these two realms of life present variations and tensions. As a realm for self-realization, the lines separating the two planes in the artist's experience of the movement are not so distinct. On the one hand, the artist accords:

> moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures toward outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance toward myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice. (Taylor 30)

On the other hand, this ideal to be connected with oneself is always already constituted by the other. In the artists' situated experiences, the movement consisted of both "significant others" and a micro-public from whom they sought respect and recognition. I say they are their "significant others" because the movement presents such intimate terms as "hand and feet" (*sau2 zuk1* 手足) to refer to the brotherly and sisterly relations between those supporting the movement. It was also common to see caring and loving gestures of sharing supplies like water, saline solution, masks, and so on within and around the protest sites. The movement was also a mini-public, in the sense that it was not society that was a whole structuring mechanism of recognition, but the movement itself activating alternative and specific ways of recognition as it unfolded. For the artists, the process of "self-discovery and self-affirmation" (ibid. 36) through the movement was not duly recognized. While the artists resisted turning their need into an issue of "power and counterpower" (ibid. 70), they were still caught in the

unavailability of social resources from the movement to establish authenticity of self—for instance, Lee's absence from the Umbrella Movement, and her artistic reality requiring more than protesting on the streets in the 2019 movement to actualize. Lau's reflection on selfhood also troubles the notion of authenticity as the ground on which a "self" stands.

Kwami Anthony Appiah finds the reliance of the politics of recognition on "authenticity" troubling. He points out, with the example of recognition of gay *and* black identities that it is not enough that one is recognized *as black* in the language or conditions established by the "white": with expectations on the "proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made" (Appiah 162). When given the two worlds of "the closet" and "the world of gay liberation," one would like not to have to choose, but rather, have other options. The over-determining narratives from without could become another tyranny (ibid. 162–63). Appiah argues that in seeking recognition, one uses what's available to express oneself: "[N]either the picture in which there is just an authentic nugget of selfhood, the core that is distinctively me, waiting to be dug out, nor the notion that I can simply make up any self I choose, should tempt us" (ibid. 155). Related to the issue of authenticity is language, a core material of dialogue: "Dialogue shapes the identity I develop as I grow up but the very material out of which I form it is provided, in part by my society, by what Taylor calls its language in 'a broad sense'" (ibid. 154). For Appiah, this constitutes monologism. The challenge is then to develop an account of recognition as "neither essentialist nor monological" (ibid. 156).

Responding to the self-realization model in Taylor's politics of recognition, Nancy Fraser also argues that both redistribution and recognition are needed in understanding injustices (Fraser 2). While for Taylor, recognition is a matter of self-realization, for Fraser, it is an issue of justice in that distribution is equally important as recognition when it comes to the politics of

identity. In Fraser's model, it not so much that "self" that needs to be realized in particular ways; it is rather what conditions are available to her to make the self:

> It is unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interaction simply as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value in whose construction they have not equally participated and which disparage their distinctive characteristics or the distinctive characteristics assigned to them. (Fraser 3)

Misrecognition is morally wrong not because someone cannot achieve a particular conception of self, but because "it denies some individuals and groups the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction" (Fraser 3). In creating new political realities, the movement was not as sensitive to the plurality of values and meanings artistic realities needed as it could have been.

This insensitivity extended into the third and final relation the artist experiences: the "I" and "not-I." In the artist's situated experience, in the way that artists interpret life, the "not-I" is always already in excess of the structure of dichotomies. It allows for uncertainties, accidents, and surprises, which they may respond by hesitation for reflection. The "not-I" does not aim for a destination as in the "I" as the accomplishment, but aims at sustaining the "not-I" as the process of exploration in the impermanence of internal and external conditions. This "not-I" cannot be reduced to an external, socially and politically recognizable "them." Sustaining the "not-I" is vital to artistic activities. It is in this relation that I find Barthes' notion of the Neutral relevant to understanding Lee's and Lau's realities. As a heuristic device, the Neutral opens up horizons that can free their works from the way the political discursive space of the movement overdetermines it. The Neutral has a "function like a sort of transformation device, a redistribution mechanism"

(Barthes, *Simply* 86), to be supplemented infinitely by its learners.

Let Barthes' Neutral Be

Barthes' idea of the Neutral offers a mode of access to the artists' situated experiences for, first, being what it is (as desire) and for being what it is not (as not a system), and second, for what it does and un-does (suspending conflictual and non-conflictual discourses and the line drawn between them). Barthes, the "artist–professor" (xxv), proposes that "the desire for Neutral is desire for":

> —first, suspension (*epoché*) of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorisms, puttings on notice, the will-to-possess.
> —then, by way of deepening, refusal of pure discourse of opposition. Suspension of narcissism: no longer to be afraid of images (*imago*): to dissolve one's own image, a wish that borders on the negative mystical discourse, or Zen or Tao). (*Neutral* 12–13)

I do not think it is ultimately mysticism that Barthes is getting at or that he has fairly described "Zen or Tao," but in referring to such discourses, he opens up possibilities of thinking the individual self as not self-possessed, but "empty," always already inter-connected with everything else in the natural and human world. It is never isolated. The emphasis is on their co-extensiveness.

While the Neutral comes from Barthes' desire to intervene in academic discourse and teaching itself, he leaves the "orders" it could suspend open. The works of Lee and Lau can be regarded as supplementing the Neutral by assaying the plurality of meaning in the encounter of art and politics. They configure the Neutral that simultaneously engages with and questions the politics of recognition, while remaining, as Barthes says, "sensitive to the struggles of angry forces," enabling "a horizon, a direction" that "outplays" and "baffles the

paradigm" (ibid. 6). If, according to Barthes, art is always the "refined practice of difference" (30), the urgency is in understanding how its difference compels different discourses.

As desire, the Neutral is not "systematic." A "system" can be understood in multiple ways: as a theory of thinking in a logical structure aiming for internal consistency, or as a socially manifested function closed up by its designated purpose. This is not what the Neutral is:

> "The Neutral" isn't a systematic disengagement or a withdrawal. It's trying to find new—and somewhat original—modes of engagement: a fragmented engagement, a discontinuous engagement, an unexpected engagement, an oscillating engagement. (Barthes, *Simply* 116)

The Neutral is situated in a configuration of elements that provisionally confuses what has been established. In the art of Lee and Lau, engagement with the movement is beyond one single mode determined by political discourse.

The second correspondence between the form of the Neutral and Lee's and Lau's art lies in the way the Neutral moves in language. In his list of "preliminaries" of the Neutral (*Neutral* xxix), Barthes recognizes both the "conflictual types of discourse" and those "relating to states and behaviors that suspend conflict" (ibid. 211). However, he has not presented them as a simple division of two sections. Though textually linear as a list, they are conceptually moving between each other. They attest to the proposition that the Neutral is not a system, and not to be engaged with as monologism. It is rather to be engaged with as "successive strokes, various references, [...] and free digressions," so it "constitutes a strong, active value" (ibid.). I would like to emphasize that "strokes," "references," and "digressions" are all movements. They are constituted in the fluidity of figures, tropes, and gestures, between personal narratives and

those circulated in historical and cultural discourses. So too do Lee and Lau aim not for completion and closure, but in moving through fragmentation of meanings, keeping plurality of meanings possible. The Neutral is active in their artistic gestures.

Despite such movements, Barthes configures the Neutral to be simultaneously and paradoxically caught in language. Barthes speaks of "weariness" of the conversation in society in which he finds himself "excluded as an individual (unless I make myself another chatterbox!)" (*Neutral* 18). But weariness could present other meanings: it is "an intensity" (ibid.). To regain control in a conversation, he employs the means of listening to it at "another level, to receive it as a novelistic object, a linguistic spectacle, with an artistic self-distancing" (ibid.). Weariness is neither positive nor negative. It is the fact that could arise in a type of conversation that aims only for communicating what is already known or familiar. Artists like Lee and Lau are conjuring different types of conversations: the incongruity between their artistic languages and those regulating established social realities becomes a potential for engaging with the "not-I": difference without a name. In this light, Barthes' Neutral presents an ethics that is shared by the artists':

> how to bring peace to the imaginary qua demonic, how to cajole it, discipline it, tell it what it is supposed to do or say? The painful problem isn't social, ideological, moral responsibility; it's the responsibility of one's own imaginary, which one has to carry: on which depends the vital thing we used to call happiness: which makes it a specifically ethical problem. (*Neutral* 105–06)

What would substitute that which used to be called happiness? Insofar as it is dependent on one's imaginary, it seems Barthes is leaving us with the responsibility to figure it out on our own. I find it crucial that he distinguishes the ethics of the Neutral from "moral

responsibility." The former emphasizes changing contexts; the latter, on rules and principles. In the Neutral, ethics is the discourse of the "'non-choice,' or of the 'lateral' choice: discourse of the other of choice, the other of conflict, of paradigm" (*Neutral* 8). "Not choosing" does not free one from ethics; it does make possible tarrying that allows reflection without utility determined by established systems. In the "free manner" that he looks for his "own style of being present to the struggles of [his] time" (ibid.), Barthes is not acting on moral principles as *a priori* rules, but on the concrete and singular questions of "by what name is 'happiness,' and for whom." The Neutral demands of each person and manifests in each situation in different ways. Does this mean anything goes, as in an extreme, dogmatic, even sterile type of moral relativism? I would say far from it. I see him as trusting the capacity of individuals to think our own thoughts, always already intertwined in multiple layers of rationality and desire, competing and collaborating at the same time.

Conclusion

I devote this article to articulating artists' situated experiences in relation to the 2019 movement in Hong Kong. I have shown how Lee's and Lau's works are concerned responses to the movement while troubling overly simplistic understanding of the relation between art and politics. Barthes' Neutral could serve as a heuristic device that describes what the artists commit their works to. It offers the chance to think with the continuity and mutual dependence of plural modes of thought and engagement. Its distance from conflictual discourses also sustains space for envisioning change.

To recognize its own fragility and perishable quality is a practice of ethics (Barthes, *Neutral* 175). Just as other visionaries, the artists respond to what the movement is yet to be, not just what it has been and what it is. Compulsions are multiple; choices are also available as to which ones to prioritize. If Hannah Arendt is right that

thinking is "never itself" (61), for not being directed to answers the way knowing does, preserving the plurality of thinking remains a vital pathway to the equality of freedom. How many more such narratives there are that individuate the movement, challenging its monologism and preserving its plurality, is beyond the scope of this article. As Barthes the artist–professor desires, the Neutral is to be supplemented.

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