

Conversation with
FREYA CHOU,
Para Site

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
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Freya Chou was Curator at
Para Site in Hong Kong from
2015 to 2019.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

FREYA CHOU

I am currently the Curator at Para Site. I joined the organization in 2015, at a time when the organization was expanding. We moved to a new site and we had a full-time position for a curator overseeing public and education programs. In the first year, I was specifically supervising all of the education and public programs, and in my current role I also curate exhibitions and produce publications. We were only seven people when I joined. It's a relatively small organization and everyone is basically multitasking.

TAUSIF NOOR

Fantastic. How many people work
at Para Site now?

FC

Eight. We will recruit new people, but we're still under ten.

TN

Wow.

FC

Yes, it's very small.

TN

Can we talk a little bit about Para
Site's history as one of Hong
Kong's first artist-run spaces and
maybe speak a little bit about
how Para Site was founded?

FC

Yes, we're one of the oldest artist-run spaces in Hong Kong. Para Site was founded in 1996 by seven local Hong Kong artists. It was a time when Hong Kong was facing a transition, so a local group of artists felt the need to have a platform to have their voices heard. It started quite organically; it's a very self-organized structure, and—I don't know if you've been to Hong Kong—but the spaces in Hong Kong are very, very small. There wasn't much government funding for the art spaces in the 1990s in Hong Kong, so it had to start in a very organic way. Para Site was in a cubicle space on the Western side of Hong Kong. The purpose of the space was to bring people together, through solo/group exhibitions and events series. To make a long story short, for 23 years Para Site kind of evolved and changed.

The turning point was in 2000 when the founding members felt that there was a need to reshape the structure. They invited an international curator in an open call to run the space. Tobias Berger, who is now Director at the Tai Kwun Centre for Arts and Heritage, was the first international Director at Para Site after the period run by local Hong Kong artists. When Tobias came on board, Para Site went from an artist-run space to a curator-run space. That meant there was more structure in the curatorial approaches and that's how we ended up with our current formation.

The current director, Cosmin Costinas, has been trying, not just program-wise, to bring more people from various walks of life to support Para Site. Through the years, we had connections that Cosmin had in Europe, so the programs that Para Site was doing were ambitious, even in our small space. We were doing large, thematic group exhibitions. Our focus was to produce strong curatorial statements rather than featuring high profile international artists, but the shows managed to travel to international cities. This really brought attention to the programs we were doing not just locally, but internationally. It was in 2015, as I mentioned earlier, that we moved from the cubicle space on the western side of Hong Kong to where we are now, which is in North Point, more on the eastern side near the industrial buildings. The space we have now is five times bigger than the previous space. We are able to do decent shows and feature artists in a better space with better resources. We have an education room which allows us to do public programs. At that time, we also launched the Workshop for Emerging Art Professionals, and then we also started our Open Call for Young Curators. So, by 2015, not only did we have a bigger space, but we also launched a series of education and public programs, which were dedicated to younger curators and to the community.

TN

Can you tell me a little bit about
Para Site's different locations?
You mentioned that one was

on the east side and the current space is in North Point. Do you find that you have different audiences? I've never been to Hong Kong, so I'm interested in whether you've found that your location has affected your audience or if people have been following you as you move?

FC

For 15 years we were on the western side of Hong Kong. It was a very beautiful place, with very important histories. That was the corner where Asia Art Archive was also located, and that was where the British army first landed. So, historically, it has an interesting and important position in the city. It's a mix of the old and new areas. When I joined Para Site, we had already moved to a bigger space. That previous location, where it had been for 15 years, is now where all the banks and blue-chip galleries are located. You can see how the environment has changed. Gentrification has a lot to do with it—you know artists are always on the frontlines of the backlash against gentrification. The rent became too high, and we couldn't sustain ourselves anymore. But in that time, on the western side, we were on the ground floor, so it was much, much easier to just walk in and see the space, even if it was much smaller.

We've now moved to the eastern side and we're in an industrial building on the 22nd floor, which is the highest floor. We have a bigger space, but there are no other art galleries in that area. On the western side, our neighbor was a hospital. In 2013, we did a very important exhibition, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, on the 2003 outbreak of SARS in Hong Kong and the fear associated with it. The hospital near us has an important history—it was where the outbreak of SARS occurred. And where we are now, there is a funeral house on the ground floor—the only funeral house on Hong Kong island. We kind of upgraded.

ALEX KLEIN

To a funeral home! I remember trying to find Para Site when I was in Hong Kong and I went back and forth and around the block a couple times before I found the building. I'm curious how that affects the way that people visit your space. I'm

assuming that you don't get random foot traffic and that you must be a destination-driven location?

FC

Exactly, and that was an anxiety that I had in the beginning. The first year my job was about doing public programs, so I needed to bring people to the 22nd floor to Para Site to see art. I thought, "How am I going to do that?" It was actually easy because by 2015, we had developed a profile with arts professionals. The tricky part was to try and reach a broader audience. For each program and each event, you have to make clear what the message is. Social media makes it easier to promote things, so you don't have to pass around leaflets on the street.

Our audience is very specific because our program is quite specific. Our audience needs to have basic knowledge of what contemporary art or society is about. In my first year, I contacted university professors, and encouraged them to bring their students or bring their classes to Para Site because we have a space and we can accommodate that. We just have to continue to contact people to invite them to see our shows. In 2015 we also launched a year-long program dedicated to domestic workers in Hong Kong. We did a year-long program in collaboration with non-profit organizations dedicated to domestic workers. We held a series of workshops every Sunday, because it's the only free day the domestic workers have. That was my mission: how am I going to bring people here to see art and work with organizations craving space to do their programs? For us, it was a win-win situation. Every Sunday you would see workshops with photography, workshops with writing, and we managed to get a small group of domestic workers to sign up for the program. It spread through word-of-mouth. It kind of just happened — they would tell their friends, and then we had more and more people coming to see the exhibition. Public programming really helps, if you do interesting programs and you have targeted audiences. Maybe once or twice you wouldn't see the results, but for a long run, we see unfamiliar faces at our programs. And sometimes we do very academic panel discussions on Thursday evenings, and we still have a semi-full house and we don't know who they are; they're just interested in the topic that we're discussing, and they come to the 22nd floor to join our programs. It's kind of amazing to see the long-term impact on various audiences.

AK

Because you brought up audience, who do you think of as your community? We often ask

people if their audience is the same thing as their community. You are obviously dealing with the local context in Hong Kong, but also an international art world.

FC

I think this is a bit mixed, because of how we do programs. We don't just cater to one group or audience. It's not just for international audiences or just for local audiences. It's easy to separate them language-wise, but we always try to do balanced programs with the languages. Some are mainly speaking English, some are in Cantonese. I think, in Hong Kong, it's important for this gesture to happen.

AK

Right, of course.

FC

And all of our publications, or things that you read, they're always bilingual, so that it's catering to different people. We always try to balance different events, so that if we do ten public programs per show, we try to have a diverse selection, so that we have a screening, a discussion, an artist's talk, or performance that is in line with the exhibition itself. We also have independent public programs that don't necessarily have to do with the exhibition that we're doing. And they have a bit more freedom. We've done one pop-up exhibition for domestic workers and that exhibition has actually had the most turn-out. We had over 100 people come to see that show on one Sunday.

AK

That's great.

FC

And those domestic workers bring their friends, and some of their employers come. And then we do an independent book fair. I think the benefit of doing public programs is that we have a lot of freedom, and they happen very fast, but you can try to target different audiences. I don't make assumptions about who the audience might be, and what kind of program I want to attract. Because actually, it surprises you sometimes. The other day, I gave a tour of our current show. I usually lead public tours in three languages: English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. And I would always assume that the Mandarin sessions would have the fewest people, but it turns out that at that session, we had over 50 people. So, it's this assumption you never make because Mandarin

is not the official language in Hong Kong.

AK

Right.

TN

It sounds like Para Site is filling a real need in Hong Kong, because all these people are coming for different purposes like exhibitions, or exhibition-related public programs, or other public programs. Can you tell me a little bit about the cultural ecology of Hong Kong? Where do you see yourself fitting within the context of these other institutions, especially now that there are new institutions being built, like M+. Are there other institutions that are similar to Para Site, or do you see yourself fulfilling that role of public dialogue?

FC

I think it's quite interesting to think about the cultural ecology in Hong Kong. I think that because of the booming economy, it makes people feel that it's complete in a way, especially now that our big institutions are opening. But I feel that it's actually still growing. I think with Para Site, because we inherited this very important history, having existed in Hong Kong for over 20 years, there's something that we carry on as a responsibility. This is a solid foundation; it can never change that Para Site is a Hong Kong-founded art space. So, taking advantage of Hong Kong is very important and it's always the mission of what we're doing.

If you look at the history of Para Site, it's a reflection of Hong Kong's history as well. Since the 1990s, people have been organizing grassroots initiatives in the Hong Kong art scene. And now, with the booming economy and the art market and all those institutions that are coming, Hong Kong has a lot of resources and people that are able to support the arts. That's how Para Site changed from an artist-run space to become a medium-sized institution, because people are pooling money to support the arts. So, we benefited from that. And I think that Para Site is quite unique in Hong Kong because we are still pretty small in a way, and we don't have the burden to fill audiences in a

large physical space. For instance, Tai Kwun recently opened, and they have to do a lot of programs because they are just so big.

TN

Right.

FC

They also play a different role in educating audiences because they have a much broader and more general audience. The closest relationship to a space like that is a shopping mall. How are you going to educate people to appreciate art in that space? Para Site doesn't have that kind of burden because, as I said earlier, our audiences are pretty specific. So, we can focus on what we are doing, and we have the knowledge of production, and an agenda for our programs. You can't really compare Para Site to M+ or Tai Kwun because we aren't on equal ground. We don't have that much manpower or the same kind of resources as they do.

AK

Right, but it sounds like it fills an important role within the cultural landscape of Hong Kong. I was really blown away by the resources that seemed to be pumping into the city with all of these blue-chip galleries and then Tai Kwun and the reopening of M+, and then the art fair that's been increasing its presence in the last couple years. It just seems like there's a lot of money when it comes to contemporary art, and it was interesting to conclude my visit to Hong Kong with you at Para Site because it felt like it was representing a different model that I hadn't experienced in the short time that I was there.

FC

Yes, it allows different voices to be heard. There are also a lot of non-profit art spaces in place already, so sometimes I don't know how exactly to position Para Site in terms of scale or programming. Program-wise, and with

the quality of the work we exhibit, it seems like we're equal to the size of a big museum or institution.

AK

Yes, because you do so much!

FC

I know, we're crazy. We really produce a lot. But, I mean, we're an institution with a staff of seven. We have to work extra hard to fundraise.

AK

That leads to two other questions while we're talking about ecology—who do you see as your peers in the city, and then who do you see as your peers institutionally in a broader sense? Who are you looking at both conceptually and logistically?

FC

If you look at the collaborators that we have, they are diverse. We can learn with people and work with people not just within one particular set. I think we look to SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin, and we kind of share the same type of programming, but structure-wise, it's very different. At SAVVY, everyone works part-time and just contributes their knowledge. There's a generosity in that group at SAVVY, which is different from how Para Site operates, but I think that it's different at every institution, even big museums and smaller spaces. We all have certain things in common so that we can join forces together. People join forces in Hong Kong. We collaborate with Asia Art Archive a lot; they don't have a space, but they contribute with their archival information, which is so important for anyone doing research.

AK

I'm glad you brought up Asia Art Archive because it feels like there's a conversation there.

TN

One thing that you touched on briefly and that I'd like to go back to is, how does funding work for Para Site? You mentioned that

part of it is fundraising, but I know that you also have a board. Do you also get government money?

FC

Our board is an advisory board, so they don't give money to us. But they help to bring connections and resources to us. So, we are 20% reliant on public funding that we apply for through government grants and other foundations, and 80% private. We have a patrons program and we have different tiers for how people support us. We have funding friends and associates. The private sector is such a huge section of our support, so we have an annual auction, which is very important for us annually. 50% of our funding comes from that one night.

TN

Wonderful.

FC

It's a big thing. And that's why we have two full-time staff working on that.

AK

Oh, wow.

FC

We really rely on people's donations. Because we aren't a commercial gallery, artists and galleries kindly donate their works to us for the annual auction.

TN

And, do you charge admission either for exhibitions or programming or anything?

FC

No, it's all free entry. Everything we do is free. So, all the money that we raise—we have basic operations funds for the facility, bills, and staff salaries—but all the other money goes to the programs. We pay quite decent artist's fees and writer's fees, production, etc. We do publications but really, most of the money we raise is for programs.

TN

That is incredible.

AK

That was literally our next question, about how you address the economics of working with artists, because labor, and how we value labor, are big questions for a lot of contemporary arts organizations. It's great to know that it's integral to your mission.

TN

I'd love to get a sense of what your exhibition and programming cycles are like at Para Site. Are there a set number of shows, or exhibitions, or programs that you do a year, or is that something that develops organically?

FC

No, it's very fixed. We have four shows per year. March to May is usually a large, major show, because it's at the same time as Art Basel Hong Kong, so we have more international people in town. Usually that's the show curated by Cosmin Costinas, our Director, or with a guest curator. So, that's usually the biggest show of the year, and then in the summer from June to August, is the Open Call for Young Curators, and that's one of the education components. And then two shows in the second half of the year, from September to November, and December to February. They are either curated by me, or another colleague, so the second half of the year is always the busiest. In October or November, we usually have our international conference in conjunction with the Workshops for Emerging Professionals, and our annual auction. So, sometimes it's crazy. The first half of the year it's Art Basel Hong Kong with one large group show, and then the second half of the year with two shows, followed by the international conference and workshops and an auction. Then, at the same time, we also try to publish books.

AK

I'm just so impressed with the amount that you're doing. It's something we are familiar with in these kinds of small spaces, but when you're passionate about what you do, you end up

doing a lot. So, I'm curious how you balance out questions of exhaustion or fatigue with the scale that you have because with only seven full-time people...

FC

I mean, I don't have an answer. I think in the art world this is just very normal and it's everywhere. It has to be this intensity. Maybe this is what the world is about. I also have this question, about the massive amount of art production. It's in the world, we cannot avoid it. How much effort do you need to fight against this kind of currency? I don't think we have that. People trust us and people are willing to sponsor us, not because we produce so much, but because the things that we produce are relevant. It's a chicken-egg situation. On top of what I was just saying, if every show needs to produce on average 10 public programs, this is also adding another layer. You feel the responsibility to give back and produce more.

AK

Where does the demand for the 10 public programs come from? Is that just an internal decision or does it have to do with your external funding structure?

FC

Both. When we start writing the grant, it's already set in numbers. The 10 programs don't all need to be so intense, it's just that there's a number. That's how people evaluate things; you need to give them a number.

AK

People put so much pressure on audience numbers and things like that because it feels like something concrete that you can communicate in the very abstract world that we are participating in. You're not alone in these feelings of exhaustion, and we're quite happy to talk about it, because it's something that comes up internationally with our colleagues across the field. How do we

sustain these positions where we all care so much about what we do, but how can we make it livable for ourselves? This stuff never ends when you leave the office. It's with you all the time.

TN

That being said, I'd love to think about how with the Workshop for Emerging Professionals and your other educational programs, you do have an emphasis on training or providing resources for the next generation. With your exhibitions, do you work mostly with emerging artists or new commissions? Is there a particular ethos to your exhibition organizing?

FC

In general, it's mainly thematic exhibitions, so we don't set criteria for the age limit of artists. Basically, most of the shows are thematic group shows, but the shows I've been doing mainly focus on solo artists. Usually these are mid-career or established artists that I work with. For the Young Curator's show, it kind of varies. For the Open Call, the curator usually invites an emerging artist, so it has a different dynamic.

AK

Not to be a downer, but I am curious if there are other frustrations or challenges that you face in your institution or as an institution?

FC

I'm always surprised by the lack of discourse. It's not enough for me. I think this has to do with the speediness of Hong Kong. I remember when I first started doing public programs, I was under the impression that audiences wouldn't commit to long periods of time for each program. Everybody is always rushing off somewhere else. It's not really the habit or the culture here, especially at that time four years ago. People would not indulge, or take the

time, for an artistic conversation or discussion.

TN

Right, right.

FC

I think in the beginning, people were coming to these art events because it was something new and it's not something that happens every day in their lives. In the beginning, this was something that was a frustration that I had because I felt like we could not prolong the discussion. But now I think things are changing. I think people are getting used to taking the time to ponder and discuss.

AK

Is there much of a conversation with the mainland or for instance, cities such as Shanghai, or does it feel very separate?

FC

There are a lot of Mandarin artists that we work with, and we're also going to work with the Rockbund Art Museum this year, actually, for a year-long collaboration. We have a lot of visiting artists, since we have an artist residency that people from different cities come for. The dialogue is definitely there among colleagues. What I was saying about the discussion earlier was for the general audiences.

AK

Right.

FC

The audiences don't have these habits to ask questions or stay longer to ponder that. Among colleagues, of course, that's always there.

TN

I was curious, do you know anything about how the name Para Site was decided? Was it decided among the initial group of artists that developed the space? Has it always been named Para Site?

FC

I think it was a myth, but I was told, and I don't know whether it was true, but you know, there's a very famous Hong Kong cultural theorist, Ackbar Abbas?

AK

Yes.

FC

Well, Ackbar Abbas told me that he's actually the one that came up with the name.

TN

Ah, that's fascinating.

FC

I think he was playing with the pun "parasite," so he told me that he came up with the name Para/Site, and he told one of our founding members, and then someone just took it on. We recently just deleted the slash.

TN

That's so interesting.

AK

There are so many different connotations to it, of course: a physical location or a parasitic, or alternative existence in the art world and the economy.

FC

It's very 1990s.

AK

It's very 1990s, it's totally true. Maybe you've already answered this, but do you own the floor that you're on or do you rent?

FC

No, we rent.

AK

The reason I ask is because,

like so many other colleagues we've been talking to who work in major metropolitan areas, the sheer cost of real estate in Hong Kong is astronomical these days. For example, we've spoken to our colleagues in San Francisco, a city where it's almost unsustainable for a small-scale independent contemporary arts organization to exist because of real estate, but we are also thinking about how artists are surviving within these dispensations. This also goes for cultural workers, because none of us make huge salaries. It must be very hard within that context.

FC

Of course; that's why we need to raise so much money. Just for a small operation it's so expensive, and it's so expensive to produce exhibitions. It's just insane, it's just crazy expensive. Without philanthropy — and I don't know if this works in New York or other cities — but here, I don't know if it would be possible. Hong Kong needs to have this culture of patrons and philanthropy to happen. Otherwise I don't think culture and art would have any shot because it's such an expensive city. That's why private money is so important. It's like a double-edged sword — it's a metropolitan city and that's great, but without the government money and private money, I don't know how we'd be able to exist.

TN

Right, and it's such a balance too because you know you want to work independently and not be beholden to anyone in particular. It's a give and take relationship.

FC

I think, even with the money coming in, Para Site still remains completely autonomous with regard to the programming that we're doing.

TN

That's great.

AK

Internally, how much autonomy do you have as a curator? How do you propose your projects? Are you just given a slot and you do what you want, or do you have to run it through a series of different checks and balances?

FC

That's one of the perks of working at Para Site. We have two senior staff positions — it's me and Cosmin. In comparison to other institutions, it's easier since it's so in line with our mission. And that's the way that Cosmin directs the space. He trusts his colleagues and we have a lot of freedom.

AK

It's really interesting to talk with you at this juncture in your time at Para Site, as you're getting ready to leave the institution; it's a wonderful moment to take stock of things. How long have you been at Para Site again?

FC

Four years.

AK

Thinking back, have there been any major shifts that you've observed in that time? Have things changed dramatically in that period, or is it pretty much the same organization that you stepped into?

FC

I think it's become more established. When I joined, we didn't know what to do, so we basically built it from scratch. With the curatorial workshop, we had never done that before, so we could just imagine what we thought the

program should be. A lot of things were very new at that time. I don't think there has been a dramatic change, but now I feel that it's more established.

AK

I know that you were working on a more historical survey when I met you a few months ago. I'm curious how much Para Site has invested in laying a groundwork for artistic production in Hong Kong and making a case for historical specificity in your support of emerging artists, and also bringing to light historical figures that are in your local scene.

FC

The show that I opened in December—I think this was the one that I was working on when you were visiting us—was a retrospective by a very influential artist Ellen Pau. Her last show in Hong Kong was in 1997. She was such a prominent figure and is very influential and important. She's also the founder of Videotage, another artist collective group. But her work has rarely been shown in Hong Kong. People know about her; they know that she's great, but very few people have seen her work. And there are very few archives of her work. Videotage is digitizing all the videos, and thank God they are doing that, but there is very little research about it. There was a catalogue published in 2003 that kind of gave a narrative concerning her practice, but it had been almost 15 years since then and no one had done anything. So, when we opened the show, people were so happy and said it was long overdue and Para Site was the right place to do it, because it's a venue with such a rich history of developing and shaping contemporary art in Hong Kong. I was very glad that Ellen agreed to be on board, since we've opened it, we've had really good reviews, and we finally got to see a body of Ellen's work. We spent a lot of time doing research, and there's a new commissioned text. Maybe it's not museum-standard, but it has a very significant gesture and positioning for the show.

TN

Amazing. We talked about the challenges, but what are you excited for in the future, both in your practice as a curator, but

also for Para Site?

AK

And since you have a few weeks left at the institution, we'd love to know where you're going next.

FC

I will be independent for a while. But I think I'm so in line with what Para Site is doing. Leaving is a very personal decision — it was just that I've been working in the art world for 15 years non-stop, and it was really just a personal decision to slow down and focus on research and working with individual artists. I'm always interested in working closely with artists. I've never been more assured and confident in the power of art. In such a chaotic world now, I think art is really that last thing that we can hold onto. It is the place where we can make differences.

I think that what Para Site is doing is very, very important because we have the insight and the vision to produce knowledge and write a history where people have a second thought, or can step outside their perspectives to think of things that they are doing. It's not just to work with art people, but to create different narratives. I think what Para Site is doing is very significant and will play a role in art history for sure. And for me personally, I've never been more assured than with the experience of curating from the previous years. I hope I will be able to make different impacts, probably not as loud as Para Site, but ones that are still tangible.
