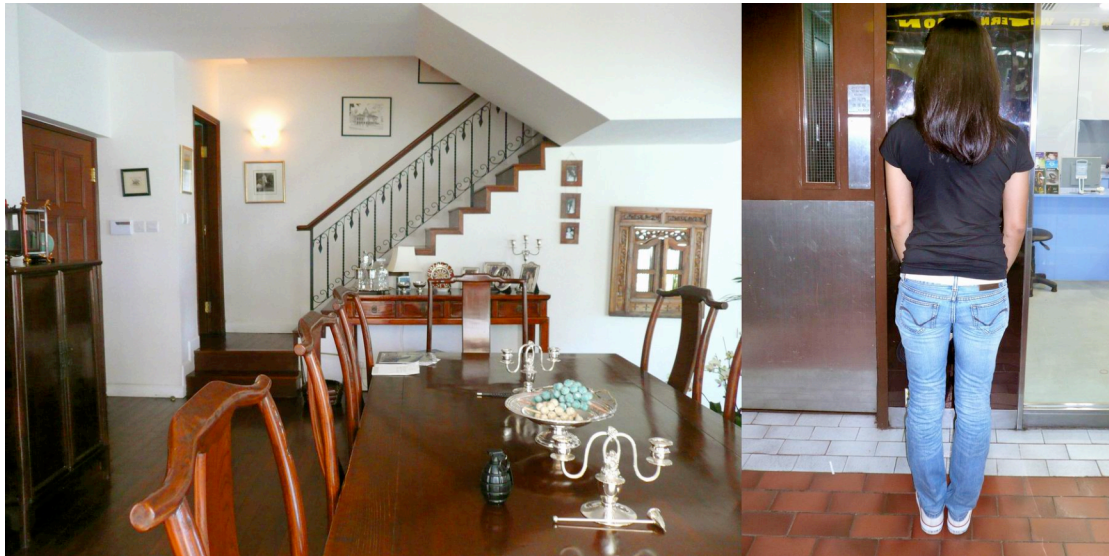# The space of appearance: how can contemporary art represent the politicization of space by domestic workers in Hong Kong, and what political relevance do such art practices have?

From 'Hong Kong Intervention', 2009 © Peng Yu and Sun Yuan (www.sunyuanpengyu.com)

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Foreword

In 2008 I moved to Hong Kong to work as an English teacher. The first Sunday I spent there, I was struck by a sudden transformation within public spaces. Quiet parks- usually occupied by elderly men and women practicing tai chi, and sheltered walkways- where city workers normally rushed by, were suddenly crowded with women. Singing, practicing dance routines, learning musical instruments, laying out picnics- there was a celebratory atmosphere throughout the city. At the centre of one of the main parks there was a large political demonstration - women carried placards and crowded around a stage, from which speakers addressed their audience.

At the time, I thought that it was perhaps an annual celebration or memorial, but I soon learned that this was a weekly phenomenon. Every Sunday, domestic workers, most of whom are female, have a day off work. 3.8% of the population of Hong Kong work as domestic helpers. Because many do not have a private space of their own, and as there are limited locations for individuals spend time recreationally free of charge, the workers congregate in public spaces, sometimes to discuss the negotiation of work conditions and wages.

During the following two years I lived in Hong Kong, my awareness of the lifestyles and politics of domestic workers grew, through daily contact with migrant workers who brought the children they cared for to the language school, and through friends- some of whom employed domestic workers, and some of whom had been domestic workers. I learned that unlike most other migrants to the city, who can apply to become a Hong Kong permanent resident after living there for seven years, migrant domestic workers are rarely classed as being 'ordinarily resident' in the city and cannot, on the whole, become residents. I discovered that it was not uncommon for domestic workers' living space to amount to a padded cupboard in the kitchen. It was acceptable for employers to fit cameras throughout their apartment, so that they could watch their employee from their office.

As time passed I realised that, for many people, the weekly gatherings and demonstrations were unremarkable- seen but ignored by passers-by. But I also began to notice that social and political concerns relating to domestic workers were being addressed by contemporary artists and creative arts groups. Art seemed to provide an alternative discursive platform for political exchange. I wanted to find out why this was the case, and whether these art practices had political agency.

Introduction

Context

In 2009 artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu exhibited the artwork 'Hong Kong Intervention' at the Osage Gallery in Hong Kong. The artists had given each of the 100 participants (all Filipino domestic workers) a plastic toy grenade and asked each participant to photograph the grenade somewhere within his or her employers' home. These images were shown alongside images of the participants with their back to the camera so that they could remain anonymous. The 'interventions' highlighted the social tensions within domestic politics and the interdependency of both the employer and employee. Although playful, the interventions drew attention to what the catalogue refers to as 'structure(s) of subversion' (Elliott; 2010) and instability within the social interaction between MDWs and their employers, and documented the working environments of domestic workers in Hong Kong.

These representations of MDWs in Hong Kong highlighted the need for nuanced and responsive engagement with the political concerns of MDWs. Commenting on the project, the artists highlight the importance of both theory and action within political practice. They state:

'We are interested in how to invade and occupy a community; what are the possible ways that are covert yet effective. The occupations do not have to be militaristic in nature, nor do they need to serve a higher purpose. However, they cannot solely rely upon the concept or a hypocritical self-fulfilment. The theoretical approach must be able to be turned into realistic practice, thus creating an alternate reality within the world. Therefore, in order for the project to happen in the most reasonable context, we must first understand the essential social connections and practical issues already given within the community. Although the artwork is merely a final product for the project, what we believe, however is that the idea behind would transcend itself to be a model that can be implemented by others, of what we call an 'intervention'.' (Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, catalogue text, 2010)

The idea of the exhibition having potential to transcend the walls of the gallery space and become a model for actions and 'interventions', is something that I want to explore in this essay. I want to explore how this artwork might have the potential to change public perceptions of the political issues that affect MDWs in Hong Kong.

Background

Ever since Plato established a separation between thinking and acting politically, and between living individually and as part of a community, there has been a perceived distance between philosophy and politics. (Arendt; 2005; 85) Speaking of the traditional attitude of philosophers towards politics, political theorist Hannah Arendt writes; 'our tradition of political philosophy, unhappily and fatefully, and from its very beginning, has deprived political affairs, that is, those activities concerning the common public realm that comes into being wherever men live together, of all dignity of their own.' (2005; 82) She believed that politics is often perceived as a 'means to an end' rather than an end in itself. What this can translate into, on a micro-political level, is a problematic lack of discourse and the reinforcement of generalisations that aim towards a 'greater good'; an aim that often fails to affectively address what are perceived as 'minority issues' that are of little concern within global, and predominantly economic, systems.

This essay will focus on the way in which the artwork 'Hong Kong Intervention' represents the political concerns of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Hong Kong, and explore the political relevance this representation might have. Although considering one contemporary artwork, it will suggest ways in which art practices in general might create, or expand, political discourses.

My choice to approach these concerns with reference to this particular micro-political phenomenon arises, not only from my personal experience of living near, and interacting with, MDWs but also from an awareness of the current academic approaches to the issues that relate to MDWs in Hong Kong, which often focus on specific political issues, but refrain from asking fundamental questions about the nature of political engagement.

Current academic studies address physical and mental health concerns, sexual discourses and ideas of spatial empowerment in relation to MDWs in Hong Kong. These studies are largely ethnographic, and aim at mapping and quantifying social trends and political discussions. But there seems to be a lack of critical evaluation of overall political approach to the issues at stake, and some of these ethnographic approaches risk reinforcing social differences. Although studies often acknowledge that more communication is needed, they do not explain clearly how this can be achieved, or what this might mean in terms of re-assessing our understanding of politics itself.

For example, Jasmine Susanna Tillu's recent essay 'Spatial Empowerment: The Appropriation of Public Spaces by Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong' explores the informal occupation of public spaces on a Sunday in terms of its potentiality for empowerment. It is a thorough

research project into the use of public space by MDWs, and she interviews over 40 migrant workers. She concludes the essay by saying: 'Clearly, city governments should take migrant worker populations very seriously and **develop a nuanced understanding** of their needs for space and community development.' (2011)

It is how to create a 'nuanced understanding' of the social distinctions and political dynamics that characterise the lives of MDWs, and what this might mean politically, that I want to address in this essay. For this reason, I have chosen to approach these political concerns using 'Hong Kong Intervention'. I want to explore how this artwork creates a platform for political engagement that allows for a 'nuanced understanding' of these particular issues.

Research Focus

To formulate an understanding of political engagement my main theoretical resource will be the writings of Hannah Arendt. Although her ideas, written largely in the political environment post-World War II from the perspective of Jewish Western woman, may initially seem to distance her from the subject matter at stake in this essay, I believe that Arendt's approach to political engagement has great potential value in terms of its ability to rethink and construct fresh political approaches. Many contemporary theorists investigate the political potential of art and aesthetics, for example thinkers such as Jaques Ranciere, Gerald Raunig and Claire Bishop all present important insights on current artistic and cultural practices and political concerns. However, I have decided to focus primarily on Arendt, because of the way in which she creates a critical distance from specific political phenomena, and re-thinks the core concept of political engagement. Arendt critically evaluates popular approaches to politics, and suggests that political engagement should be a 'praxis' rather than adherence to set values and ideologies.

I will focus on Arendt's concept of a 'space of appearance', as highlighted in her 1958 book 'The Human Condition'. The 'space of appearance' is a space, like the Greek *polis,* in which people gather together to speak and act politically. Arendt understands it as truly political space, because within it politics is understood as praxis and is not subject to prescribed ideologies. She defines it as 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.' (1958; 198) She says that 'the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action.' (1958; 199) I am interested in how spaces of appearance can be manifest through the visual language and actions within contemporary art practices. This essay will explore the idea of a 'contemporary space of appearance' with reference to the representations of MDWs in 'Hong Kong Intervention'.

Representing political ideas within a gallery creates a social space in which people can engage in political discourses and, by actively responding to such works, viewers can expand this political space. I want to explore way in which contemporary art practices can create alternative spaces that engage people collectively. I want to suggest that these art practices perpetuate and extend this kind of discursive political practice and open it up within a wider social context.

Overall Research Aims/ Objectives

As outlined, the overall aim of this research is to explore ways in which contemporary art can create a space of appearance. To situate these ideas within a contemporary political context, the essay will focus on representations of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong within 'Hong Kong Intervention'. I want to look the ways in which micro-political concerns around migration and precarity are addressed, and explore the possible global significance such a representation might have.

This research will expand on recent academic studies that have sought to map-out and directly address ideas of precarity and social exclusion in reference to MDWs in Hong Kong. The essay will critically consider the political significance of 'Hong Kong Intervention' as an example of how contemporary art practices can create new discursive spaces.

To facilitate this study, I will carry out an in-depth review of relevant literature and consider responses from online interviews with the artists.

To achieve my research aims, I have identified the following objectives:

- Identify the political significance of 'Hong Kong Intervention'.
- Consider the importance of creating a 'space of appearance' , in relation to the writings of Hannah Arendt, and look at how a contemporary space of appearance differs from the *polis*.
- Analyse the role of 'power' in maintaining the space of appearance, initially in reference to Arendt, but also drawing from the writings Ernesto Lacau regarding the creation of an 'internal antagonistic frontier'.
- Explore the concept of 'precarity' in relation to 'Hong Kong Intervention', with reference to Arendt's 1943 essay 'We Refugees' and Giorgio Agamben's response in 1994.
- Formulate an understanding of how an artwork can create a contemporary space of appearance.

Essay structure

The essay will initially sketch out what constitutes the 'space of appearance' and pinpoint concerns regarding the politicization of space by MDWs in Hong Kong, using the example of 'Hong Kong Intervention'. This section will explore the affectivity of, and mechanisms within, this exhibition. I will describe the way in which this space emerged and was perceived, by drawing on comments from the artists and the catalogue text for the exhibition. It will lay the foundations from which to develop an understanding of politics as 'praxis', and will address the first research objective.

Central to Arendt's understanding of politics as praxis, is her notion of 'the social'- unthinking mass society. In order to critically evaluate the idea of art providing a 'space of appearance', and particularly in relation to the social positioning of MDWs in Hong Kong, the second section of this essay will address the idea of 'the social', and will refer to Hanna Pitkin's 1998 book 'The attack of the blob; Hannah Arendt's concept of the Social'. Citing Pitkin, I will unpack Arendt's concept of the social and explain how some of the complexities inherent in the idea of 'society' are addressed in 'Hong Kong Intervention'. This section will focus on the second research aim.

To clearly understand the idea of political freedom, the third chapter will focus on the concept of 'power'. For Arendt, 'power' is different from 'strength', 'force' and 'violence'. Power is the ability for a group to act in concert, and she says 'power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence' (1958: 200). The idea of 'power' and how it might be manifest spatially is a key concept in 'Hong Kong Intervention'. This section of the essay will expand on Arendt's ideas, with reference to Ernesto Laclau's 2005 book 'On Populist Reason', which examines the way in which groups can act collectively. Laclau believes that populism is a *'way* of constructing the political' (2005: 11; my itallics). Key to this construction of affective political discourse is the need for an 'internal antagonistic frontier', which is required to sustain discourses and produce the power required to keep the space of appearance in existence. This section will explore his idea of the 'antagonistic moment' and address the third research objective.

In contrast to aspirations of solidarity, the fourth chapter will look at the current issues of temporality and precarity that underpin the political concerns of MDWs in Hong Kong. This section addresses the idea of precarity in reference to Arendt's short essay 'We Refugees' (1943) and Giorgio Agamben's response, 51 years later, with an essay of the same title. Agamben suggests that temporality and precarity are contemporary states of being. But I want to suggest that one does not have to continually be precarious to be oppositional within 'the social' and that

there are varying degrees of precarity. After outlining the main arguments, this section draws together a set of conclusions relating to the idea of precarity in 'Hong Kong Intervention', and therefore addresses the fourth research objective.

Finally, I will draw the chapters together and formulate an understanding of ways in which a contemporary space of appearance can be created and maintained, focusing on how contemporary art can be an affective space of appearance.

Value of this research

Within the current political and economic system of Hong Kong, it would be difficult to bring about changes, for example in matters such as residency policies, without disrupting the overall ecology of the city and creating huge problems for local people who currently live in poverty. That solutions be negotiated, discursive and truly democratic is key for the wellbeing of other marginal communities within the city.

Understanding artworks as politically significant 'vehicles of thought', and as tools for perpetuating spaces of appearance, expands spaces for political discourse and opens up further possibilities for social changes to be brought about from the bottom up.

Chapter 1- 'Hong Kong Intervention' as a space of appearance

In the introductory catalogue text for 'Hong Kong Intervention' curator David Elliott states that the artwork leads to 'reflections on the nature of power…how it is disposed, politically, economically and socially, both in China and throughout the world- and on what role, if any, art may play in channelling, challenging or deflating it. Here the act of representation becomes both a tool and a weapon.' (2010) This chapter will identify social and political concerns within 'Hong Kong Intervention', and outline the ways in which the artwork may be perceived as a political 'tool' or weapon. It will consider ways in which the piece can be understood as a space of appearance.

1.1 'Hong Kong Intervention'- social context

The title of the artwork situates each domestic worker a kind of 'intruder'. MDWs are required by law to live with their employer, but although the domestic settings are their home, they are 'outsiders' to the space. Hong Kong law stipulates that each 'helper'[1] be 'provided with suitable living accommodation with reasonable privacy' (2007; 'Quick Guide for the Employment of Domestic Helpers from Abroad'). This varies, according to the discretion of each employer, but it is not unusual for workers to sleep in public areas of the house, if they have a screen that provides 'privacy'. Many domestic workers share a bedroom with the child they care for.

A domestic worker occupies a position of trust; as part of a household they are responsible for preparing meals and often, caring for children. To draw attention to the possibility of an underlying resentment, a dormant aggression, highlights the potential vulnerability of employers and their children, who depend on MDWs for their private domestic needs. In exposing these domestic spaces within a gallery, the artwork not only highlights the subversive potential of MDWs, but also uncovers the illusion of privacy within this domestic arrangement.

At the same time as highlighting the political potential of MDWs, the artwork reveals the 'social mores' of the HK middle and upper classes (Elliott; 2010). In a gallery, the images generate a sense of voyeurism, situating the viewer as a spectator, but from the viewpoint of the domestic worker taking the photograph. The number of different interiors shown side-by-side triggers an impulse to compare the spaces and to deduce personal traits, taste and wealth.

After the initial exhibition at the Osage gallery in Hong Kong in 2009, 'Hong Kong Intervention' was exhibited in the 2010 Sydney Biennale, at LASALLE College of Art in Singapore and Tang Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2012, and in Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013. Its significance and

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[1] The HK government term for migrant domestic workers in English is 'domestic helper'

affectivity shifts depending on the social environment in which it is exhibited, and the piece develops and changes from being a 'local' project to one having global and economic significance.

Arendt says that 'the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.' (1958; 199) She understands the space of appearance as 'informal'. It is not part of an organised, pre-conditioned political framework. Sun Yuan speaks critically of 'harmonious society' in which knowledge is 'in sync with the government'. He says that 'commercialization and the participation of economics contribute to the realization of a harmonious society.' Peng Yu adds that in a 'harmonious society' 'people have to play by the rules and to strive for breakthrough in between [sic]. After some time, everybody ends up playing tricks' (interview with Xu Tan, date not recorded). 'Hong Kong Intervention' embodies this approach to society, because whilst it functions within wider social environment and plays to its rules, it creates conceptual 'breakthroughs' that allow for people to respond, through their speech and actions, to issues concerning the precarious social positions of MDWs in Hong Kong.

The artwork is playful rather than threatening, but by drawing attention to the possibility of a terroristic intervention, it creates a 'break' in the general perceptions of MDWs, and presents the potentially subversive strength of individual domestic workers. This strength, when represented collectively, increases the power behind the artwork. The collectivity within the piece is different from what the artists refer to as 'harmonious society'. In this context, collectivity occurs only when people come together in speech and action to address an issue together. Such interaction does not necessarily have to be harmonious, in fact, a lack of harmony demonstrates the openness of a discourse. A review of the exhibition in Meniscus magazine stated; 'That collective secrecy brought on a greater meaning when, after a two-year legal battle that included protests in main areas of town, it was ruled on Mar. 25 that domestic helpers – some of whom have lived in Hong Kong for decades – were ineligible to apply for permanent residency.' (Chan; 2013) By drawing attention to the realities of individuals unified by political aims, the artwork creates an alternative space from which to think about issues of residency and belonging.

Peng Yu said of 'Hong Kong Intervention'; 'When working on the project, we did not consider it a work of art. Rather than focusing on executing artistic techniques, I am more concerned about the role the project would play in society and the reality of the project, even though the project itself is artistic in its nature.' (2013; Hyperallergenic) The significance of the artwork can be found, not in an isolated aesthetic aspect of the work, but in the way that it functions socially. Initially in the collaborative nature of the piece, later in the way in which it was perceived by its

audience, and how it subsequently became representative of the political concerns of MDWs in a global context, within an international art fair.

1.2 'Hong Kong Intervention' as a 'disruptive' artwork

Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's portrayal of the domestic workers as intruders, and even playful 'terrorists', could be perceived as reinforcing prejudices against domestic workers and antagonising the social issues highlighted so far. How can such a provocative gesture have a political impact that supports MDWs?

Patrick D. Flores, Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines, wrote a short text on 'Hong Kong Intervention', which was published in the catalogue for the exhibition. He quotes Claire Bishop in 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents'; 'I would argue that shock, discomfort, or frustration- along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt, or sheer pleasure- are crucial to a work's aesthetic and political impact.' (2010; 247) 'Hong Kong Intervention' is bold and discomforting. Awareness of the risk involved in creating such a symbolic intrusion, and the sheer number of images and participants, displayed as they were from the ceiling to the ground in the gallery, increases the impact of the artwork.

On the LASALLE College of Art website, the artwork is described as 'a form of potential, albeit symbolic anxiety.' (2012) The phrase 'symbolic anxiety' is effective; it captures the sense that there is a distance between real anxiety and the idea of anxiety. This degree of separation is instrumental in enabling the viewer to think about, rather than draw back from the work. David Elliott, in his catalogue text, refers to 'its coquettish lightness' as 'just another way of thinking about the truth'(2010). The work is teasing, rather than confrontational, and therefore elicits a more mediated response from the viewer.

The artwork encourages the viewer to look at individual MDWs and to approach political concerns with an awareness of individual realities, rather than creating generalisations that justify current political policies. Each image captures a unique private space and records the aesthetic, and often humorous, choices individual domestic workers have taken in situating the plastic grenade. This intimacy and humour, the sense of looking at the scene through the eyes of the worker, situates the viewer as complicit in the intervention. The choice of placement becomes an engaging variable within the project.

1.3 Risk and precarity in 'Hong Kong Intervention'

'Wherever people gather together, [the space of appearance] is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.' (Arendt; 1958; 199)

The idea of creating 'potentiality' is the foundation of 'Hong Kong Intervention'. Peng Yu stated that they (the artists) wanted 'these mechanisms of art to become a platform of conspiracy for the Filipino domestic workers.' (2013, Hyperallergic) The aim of the project was to create the opportunity for a political discourse to unfold. The artists did not have a clear agenda, or offer political solutions. They opened up the opportunity for a space of appearance to emerge, and when people responded, they continued to extend this space into different galleries, exhibitions and countries.

But to initiate the creation of a space of appearance depends on an individual act of courage within a public space. Elliott states 'The true artists are the individual domestic servants who through their wit and aesthetic sense have composed a series of domestic still-lifes that reflect not only the lifestyles and social mores of the Hong Kong middle and upper classes but also highlight discrepancies of economic and social power.' (2010) In the artwork, each participant risked being identified. Identification could have lead to the termination of an employment contract, and if a MDW is unable to find work within two weeks, they are legally obliged to return to their country of origin. But this risk also generates greater awareness of the political realities of MDWs, which potentially creates a shift in social perceptions and perhaps, in the long run, a widespread shift could influence Hong Kong politics at a more legislative level.

Elliott speaks of 'the transformative power of aspiration in a world in a state of profound economic social change' (2010). This suggests that whilst precarity generates vulnerability, it also creates opportunities for aspirations to unfold and for social transformations to take place. Peng Yu, considering the general public and their perception of art, states; 'the minute they are given a safe explanation, they are deprived of the thinking process.'(2010) A work that lacks a 'safe explanation' or an easy solution, that is precarious and uncertain, elicits thoughtful engagement in the subject matter.

Chapter 2- Creating spaces of appearance within 'the social'

For the Greeks, the 'polis' was a 'space of appearance'. This public space depended on, and was defined by, its difference to 'the private realm'. Arendt says that' the space of appearance 'is secured whenever actors gather together for the purpose of discussing and deliberating about *matters of public concern*, and it disappears the moment these activities cease.' Therefore, the idea of 'a space of appearance' arose from clear differentiation between the two spaces; a person was either a master of necessity in the 'public' realm, or a slave to necessity in the 'private' realm. The polis, as a 'space of appearance' was affective and meaningful, because it could generate 'power', evident though people acting together in concert, which provided a sense of legitimacy through which social changes could be negotiated[2]. Arendt states; 'To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence.' (1958: 26) This was central to creating unity and accord between people living in the state[3]. She also says that 'power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence'- so we can see that the 'space of appearance' both depends on, and exists to perpetuate 'power'. Arendt explains that 'for us, appearance-something that appears in public and can be seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves-constitutes reality' (1958: 50) so the essential purpose of the 'space of appearance' is to provide a discursive space through which to characterise reality. The complexity begins when 'public' and 'private' space' can no longer be differentiated, and this is where Arendt's concept of the 'social' becomes relevant and problematic in terms of creating a space of appearance.

2.1 The significance of 'the social' in relation to 'the space of appearance'

'While we have become excellent in the laboring we perform in public, our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and private.' (Arendt; 1958: 49)

The idea that the social realm diminishes the capacity for public speech and action calls into question the possibility of a 'space of appearance'. For the Greeks, individuality took place in the realm of the public, a place in which people were free and interacted as equals. (Arendt: 1958: 41) Arendt reminds us that in the polis 'politics is never for the sake of life'. (1958: 37) In contrast, in the private realm (the realm of household and family) people were not equals and

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[2] The concept of power will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, but I would like to outline the basic concept here to explain the potential value of 'the space of appearance'
[3] however, for the Greeks, force and violence was acceptable when dealing with foreign affairs

each persons' role was driven by necessity. However, to enter into the public realm or 'space of appearance', one had to have their private life 'in order', that is to have 'mastered' the necessities of life, and to own a home'.[4] Arendt defines 'the social realm' as neither public or private, but a relatively new phenomenon that emerged as the traditional model of the family declined, and became absorbed into corresponding social groups (1958: 39). She states, 'society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest.' (1958: 39) It is this understanding of the social that complicates the emergence and affectivity of 'spaces of appearance'.

For Arendt, society or 'the social' becomes an all-encompassing realm in which 'behaviour' replaces 'action' and political speech no longer takes place in a space unaffected by concerns about the necessities of life. It is driven by mass society and results in 'rule by nobody' which can ultimately lead to cruelty and tyranny that nobody specifically is answerable to. (Arendt: 1958:40) The fundamental affects of perceiving society is a large family are twofold. First, Arendt states that 'society equalises under all circumstances' and she explains that this equalisation is the 'political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm' (1958, 41). However, as we have discussed, within the polis each person was 'equal', but to reach this status of interacting as an equal, one had to have achieved recognition for having a harmonious private life. When we bring the concept of 'the social' into the equation, we confront a different sense of equality- those in the public realm *and* those in the private realm are understood on equal terms. Within this equalising process differences and distinctions become 'private matters *for the individual*' (Arendt: 1958:41). Second, and following on from this, is that by casting the necessities of life into public discourse, which inevitably happens when society is equalised and negotiated within a 'family framework', the private realm is also dissolved (Arendt: 1958: 59); the emergence of 'the social' changes the idea of the household (which the Greeks understood as being an unequal space) and equalization becomes part of family discourse. What might be drawn from this social shift is the idea that an *individual* is a site for politicality, rather than interaction *between* individuals as a site for political engagement. But how might this impact the affectivity, and relevance of, a 'space of appearance'?

Returning to the opening quote- if action and speech are 'banished into the sphere of the intimate and private' they dissolve these concepts, because the very nature of speech and action is communicative and public. In a recent interview in 'Hyperallergic', Peng Yu said of 'Hong Kong Intervention'; 'I wanted to enter Hong Kong homes forcefully, allowing these *mechanisms of art to become a platform of conspiracy* for the Filipino domestic workers' (Hyperallergenic 2013), and he

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[4] for the Greeks this meant that the 'head of the household' was then able to enter into the polis. Women and slaves were never eligible for such a role, as they were considered to be part of the private realm- needed to perpetuate the family line and managing 'necessities'

relates this dynamic to the relationship between artists and institutions. It is significant that this 'platform of conspiracy' should take place within private homes and through individual and (at the time of occurrence) isolated gestures of subversion. It reasserts the concept of 'the private realm' through drawing attention to its absence; by creating 'interventions', the artwork shatters the illusion of private domestic space, particularly when images of such spaces appear in a public gallery space.

2.2 Unpacking 'the social'

Having described 'the social' as an all-encompassing phenomenon, a 'final stage' in social development in which 'society has devoured all strata of the nation and 'social behaviour' has become the standard for all regions of life' (Arendt: 1958: 45), there seems, on the surface, to be little hope for existence outside of 'society' as such. Arendt says that 'what makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them.' (1958; 52-53) Is it possible then, to regain such power and to re-establish a space of appearance? To answer this question, we need to address the possibility of deconstructing Arendt's concept of 'the social'. Hanna Pitkin explores and critiques the idea of 'the social' in her 1998 book 'The Attack of the Blob. Hannah Arendt's concept of the social'.

She begins the book by criticising the way that Arendt creates a perception of society as a distinct entity, by turning the adjective 'social' into a noun- 'the social'- rather than using the word 'society'[5]. Pitkin states: 'Arendt herself warned against the sort of mystification in which she nevertheless engaged- ascribing the results of human action to some abstract personified agency beyond human influence' (1998: 6) In emphasising the sheer force of social inclinations and trends, it is easy to interpret Arendt's concept of the social as a kind of superhuman entity. Pitkin opens the book by creating a kind of caricature of what she understands Arendt's 'social' to be; an extra-terrestrial 'blob' taking over the world. Such an exaggerated image could be misleading because, although Arendt often uses language that hints towards a personified 'social' entity'[6] she clearly understands it as a collectively formed phenomenon, and one that 'found its political form in the nationstate' (1958:26). Pitkin argues that 'by 'the social' Arendt means 'a collectivity of people who- for whatever reason- conduct themselves in such a way that they **cannot** control or even intentionally influence the large scale consequences of their activities.' Initially this may seem to be a valid critiscism, however, if we look at the concept of the social in the context of Arendt's writing and approach to politics as a whole, it is doubtful that she would

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[5] Pitkin states that this is something that Arendt does not do with the word 'political'.
[6] some active verbs she uses to describe what society 'does' are; 'demands', 'banishes', 'devours' and 'destroys'

carelessly have cast 'the social' in this unavoidable, dictatorial role. We might then alter just one word of Pitkin's analysis, and exchange 'cannot' for 'do not', so that the sentence would read 'a collectivity of people who- for whatever reason- conduct themselves in such a way that they **do not** control or even intentionally influence the large scale consequences of their activities.' To attribute an awareness of agency within the concept of the social, helps us avoid perceiving it as a specific and hybrid form that is 'beyond human influence'.

Arendt and Pitkin both essentially believe in the agency of people to choose to address and control, to a greater or lesser degree, the consequences of their activities. Infact, Pitkin acknowledges this difference when she herself adds 'do not' and writes in her conclusion that 'the social' should be understood as the 'absence of politics where politics belongs, a condition in which a collectivity of people- who for whatever reason- cannot *(or at any rate do not)* effectively take charge of overall resultants of what they are severally doing' (1998: 252; my itallics). These words clarify the underlying message of Arendt's concept of 'the social' and begin to move away form any characterisation that we might be tempted to project on to it. Pitkin goes on to say that the overall point 'is not so much whether Arendt saw the details of our institutional situation aright, or whether I do, but that we need to reconsider our institutional forms and structural conditions with a view to reducing the social and enlarging the possibilities for freedom.' (1998: 260)

Pitkin articulates different 'paths' <u>into</u> the 'problem of the social': 'the institutional path', accessing the social though large organisational structures and though interpersonal relationships and conduct; 'the characterological approach', which utilises personal relationships and the psychology of individuals; 'the ideological path', which uses concepts and frameworks of ideas to approach the social and finally, the 'Just do it!' approach, which embodies ones agency and sense of responsibility and requires thinking **as** an actor rather than just thinking about action. (1998: 253-284) Fundamentally, each of these approaches create a distance between oneself and 'society'. These 'pathways into the thicket of the social' (1998: 253) do not exist outside of 'the social', or circumvent it, they create spaces within it that perhaps allow for the emergence 'of politics where politics belongs' (1998: 252).

2.3 Art as a space of appearance

The following paragraphs will address each of these 'pathways' and, using the example of 'Hong Kong Intervention', suggest ways in which this artwork embodies these spaces, using them as 'spaces of appearance'.

First we have the institutional approach. For Arendt, 'the social' can be characterised by two models of organisational structures; free-market economy and bureaucracies. Alternatively, she defined a 'council system', an institutional model that can be understood as a power structure that is generated by 'the people' (1998: 12- Pitkin cites Arendt's On Revolution, p. 223). Pitkin extends this idea and stipulates that to achieve it 'such local bodies must be small and accessible to all who want to participate,' and they must also 'have something meaningful to do and must have or be able to acquire sufficient power to make a real difference in matters that affect participants lives.' (1998: 257-258)

For 'Hong Kong Intervention' to be politically affective, not only the participants (the MDWs that took part in the project) but also the audience within the gallery are required. In this way, an art exhibition is open to all who wish to participate, that is to engage with ideas presented through the artwork, although not everyone can be a part of the formation of the work. That the work has a meaningful purpose is evident in the statement of the artists, who clearly agree that their 'theoretical approach must be able to be turned into realistic practice, thus creating an alternate reality within the world.' (Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, catalogue text, 2010) To measure any resulting 'difference in matters that affect participants lives', is much harder to assess. However, one of the institutional outcomes of this is outlined by Sun Yuan in the interview in Hyperallergic. He comments: 'After this work entered the collection of the Singapore Art Museum, a large part of the proceeds were donated to Hong Kong aid agencies for foreign workers—in particular, the Mission for Migrant Workers, an organization committed to assisting migrant workers who are in distress, and the Bethune House, a temporary shelter for displaced and distressed domestic helpers of all nationalities. It was an ideal outcome.' (Hyperallergic; 2013) The issue of whether this outcome moves away from the initial intention of the project; to create institutional changes, or whether it expands the potential for institutional change will be addressed in more detail in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

Pitkin summarises this alternative approach to institutional and structural models by outlining the need to create 'institutions that facilitate creative initiatives from below' and that encourage 'widespread deliberation about public affairs that connects public policy to what really matters to people'(1998; 260). The idea of *deliberation,* as a characteristic within such institutions, is key to such frameworks becoming 'spaces of appearance'- spaces that allow speech and action to characterise reality.

Referring to the second approach, the characterological approach, Pitkin reminds us that 'the institution (of the social) *is* the conduct- the habitual, structured conduct of people 'in' it', and 'if a sufficient number of those in it share that deviancy, the institution will…already *be* changed'

(1998; 261). Such a deviancy, however, requires courage- a value highly regarded in the polis- and a realisation of one's agency that leads to having a sense of responsibility. For Arendt, this arises from a love of the world, of the people that make up the world. But Pitkin concludes that for such a personal approach to the world to be affective, it must somehow intersect with the institutional pathway that we have just discussed, and become part of a public discourse.

In terms of 'Hong Kong Intervention', the formation of the project, before it became formalised as an artwork, required courage on the part of individual MDWs enacting the interventions. Although essentially playful, the interventions and the disclosure (albeit veiled) of the workers themselves, risks their being recognised, as well as recognition of the interior spaces. The participants are essentially risking their job, and therefore their right to remain in Hong Kong (as stated in the foreword, employment is necessary for a MDW to reside in the city). But because there were so many interventions, the power and significance of the piece increases and the collective force of the work has a greater presence within the public space. However to achieve this collectivity required the structured oversight by the artists, and their negotiation with the Osage gallery.

Ideologies, as explored in this third approach, define our understanding of human affairs. One of Arendt's greatest concerns, following her coverage of the Eichmann trial, was that of 'thoughtlessness', a word that Pitkin understands as a 'misguided mode of thinking' rather than a complete absence of thought (1998:270). In contrast, direct interaction with others, through which we endeavour to understand their perspectives, leads to empathic sense of the complexities of their experiences. Arendt develops this sense into a political form, and advocates the importance of critical thinking. Without it, she believed that the world falls under ideological illusions. Pitkin describes these as 'deliberately imposed policies of unreality to which those who impose them eventually themselves fall victim', and that this idea is central to totalitarianism (1998:272). She then goes on to describe how she believes that ideological illusions have become a greater problem with the rise of the internet, television and video games.

Pitkin believes that 'virtual reality displaces the very possibility of reality' (1998: 273) and that we are increasingly living in a world that is not 'real'. However, I believe that virtual spaces *can* be spaces for ideological approaches to develop, but this depends on the approach to such spaces; they must function as interventions, passages and antagonisms. As highlighted at the start of this chapter, Arendt's concept of the space of appearance depends on the idea that 'something that appears in public and can be seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves constitutes reality.' (1958; 50)

The term 'virtual' is broadly defined as 'existing or resulting in essence or effect though not in actual fact, form or name.' (online dictionary) 'Hong Kong Intervention' is in a sense 'virtual'. The exhibition appears to 'irritate' social fears about domestic workers as 'intruders', and amplify the social concerns around vulnerability and the possibility of underlying resentment of the part of the MDW.   However, the fact that the grenades are plastic toy simulations, reframe the intrusions as *playful* challenges to the viewers. This intrusion is 'virtual' because it enacts the *idea* of a potentially violent intrusion; it acts antagonistically. Pitkin talks about the need for a 'reciprocal' relationship, she believes that the capacity to relate and interact with others in a balanced way is crucial for politics (1998:266). But to obtain the attention of others in the first place, a point from then which to develop ways of interacting and relating, often requires such a provocative gesture. But the fact that it is 'virtual' means that it is more likely to create a discourse, rather than a 'reaction'.

The fourth approach Pitkin outlines, 'just do it', requires 'thinking as an actor' and involves becoming part of a collective commitment, 'not one more rival explanation or policy prescription but more like an essential supplement to any and all of the other approaches (to the social), more about *how* they are to be employed than an alternative to them'. (1998:281; my itallics)

This idea was reflected by Peng Yu in a recent interview in Randian; he speaks of the thought-processes behind their artistic practice as a whole, saying that their work 'intervenes directly in reality' but that 'doesn't have a clear direction' (Peng Yu, 2013, Randian) 'Hong Kong Intervention' does not contain a 'policy prescription', rather, it asks the audience to think as actors. The artists 'consider all the participants as collaborators: not just Filipinos, but also the audience involved in the discussions.'(Art Radar Asia, 16-9-09) The audience members are participants in the artwork. And the artwork, rather than asserting a specific ideology, puts forward an active approach, a *way* of addressing the political concerns at stake in the piece.

Speaking of this fourth approach, Pitkin emphasises the need for each path into the social to be enacted and lived by people. She reminds us that, for Arendt, action is the activity that constitutes the world (1998: 283) but this cannot depend simply on isolated actions, it requires individuals to act as part of a group. Pitkin states that 'the problem of the social, however, is that people are power without having it.' (1998:292) If we understand that this can also be true of those creating pathways into the social, it can also be the beginning of a solution to the 'problem of the social'.

The collective response of both the maids and the audience define 'Hong Kong Intervention'

and create a powerful potential for social change. Initiating an active approach to the pathways into the social enables these pathways to be progressive spaces. This is manifest, not by individuals *having* power but by being part of a powerful social shift. In this instance such an active approach might be characterized by a change in approach of audience members towards the domestic worker they employ, an increase of solidarity between MDWs, by further ideological ways of communicating political ideas or by providing support for institutions that assist MDWs in crisis. Together, these active approaches have more power.

Chapter 3- Power, antagonism and the space of appearance

Arendt states that 'power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence' (1958: 200) This chapter will look at how power can perpetuate a potential space of appearance. The first section outlines how power relates to the space of appearance, with reference to Arendt. The second section looks at Laclau's writings on the construction of the political. This section considers the relationship between the 'people' and power, and explores the possibility that demands can be unified, even as difference continues to operate. The third section looks at Laclau's concept of a 'broken space' that allows antagonisms to maintain the radical openness of a space of appearance. It draws parallels between this space and Pitkin's 'pathways' into the social, and relates this to 'Hong Kong Intervention'.

3.1 Arendt: 'force', 'power' and the space of appearance

How does the concept of 'power' relate to 'the space of appearance'? In 'The Human Condition' Arendt understands power as what keeps the space of appearance in existence, and she states that power is always 'a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable and reliable entity like force or strength … [it] springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse' (1958: 200). Therefore it is closely connected to the concept of the space of appearance and depends on the ability of a group to act in concert and to generate of power through collectivity. In other words, the space of appearance is characterised by a 'mode' of collective engagement.

In 'The Crisis of the Republic' Arendt emphasises the difference between 'power' and 'violence'; 'The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.' (1972:141) She explains the idea of power as an 'end in itself', and compares this to the concept of 'peace', saying that just as we cannot answer the question 'What comes after peace?', we cannot understand power in finite terms. In contrast, she explains that violence is often justified by its ends (1972:150). It lacks the legitimacy that power requires, but can still be justifiable. She says that violence is 'more the weapon of reform than of revolution' (1972:176). 'Hong Kong Intervention' might be understood as a 'powerful' gesture rather than a 'violent' one; it functions collectively and depends on the communication of a past action in order to perpetuate further speech and action. The project itself had no violent potential, but by enacting and representing the social tensions at play for the participants, a 'power potential' is created that opens up a discursive space within the social environment of the artwork.

Sun Yuan stated in the catalogue for the exhibition, 'Although the artwork is merely a final product for the project, what we believe, however is that the idea behind would transcend itself to be a model that can be implemented by others, of what we call an 'intervention'.' (Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, catalogue text, 2010)   In its approach to the political dilemmas at stake, the project aims to encourage a shift in underlying attitudes towards MDWs rather than rectifying specific concerns or proposing a particular reformative approach.   Their aim was to create a model of interaction, rather than a clear-cut solution.   For the project to have power, it needed to sustain plurality and accommodate opposing responses to the exhibition, whilst providing the possibility for a unified response that acknowledges the MDWs as individuals with rights.

3.2 Laclau: power and the 'internal antagonistic frontier'

Ernesto Laclau's writings on political engagement also address the idea that power is a property of a collective, he understands 'populism' as an *approach* to politics rather a quantifiable movement.   In his 2005 book 'On Populist Reason', Laclau states 'Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political,' and, like Arendt, he understands the links between people as the ground from which a discursive identity might be created.   He defines three main preconditions of a populist movement.   First, 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power. Second, the emergence of the 'people' dependant on the 'equivalential articulation of demands' and third, the 'unification of these demands…into a stable system of signification'. (2005:74)

What does separating 'people' from power signify?   Following Arendt's reasoning, power 'springs up between men when they act together'(1958; 200), but Laclau refines this idea and writes of the necessity of an 'internal antagonistic frontier' (2005; 74) that perpetuates this continual need to establish and reestablish links between people.   This 'frontier' prevents the crystallization of 'the people' into a group that is simply 'against' something.   As Arendt states, power is essentially 'a power potential'.   It arises from the mode of collectivity, one that is discursive and shifting, rather than adhering to an ideology.   This antagonistic frontier means that 'power' is not something that is considered a natural byproduct of a collective, but is understood as something that is created by the political mode of communication between individuals that allows for the emergence of 'the people' through the 'equivilential articulation of demands'.[7]

Laclau speaks of 'equivalential bonds' and the importance of a 'discursive identity that serves as

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[7] For Laclau, the word 'demand' in the English language, is particularly appropriate because it is ambiguous- it can mean both a request and a claim. He says that within a 'demand' 'the transition from a request to a claim provides a defining feature of populism' (2005: 73)

the equivalential link' rather than representing democratic demands themselves as equivalent. (2005:93) Laclau says that 'difference continues to operate within equivalence, both as its ground and in a relation of tension with it.' In this context we might understand that 'the social', having absorbed both the public and the private realms does not allow for the articulation of demands, it assumes and dictates these demands (2005:73).

But how can the people retain this kind of dynamic political power, which requires difference in order to operate, whist simultaneously unifying their demands? Laclau states that the goal of populist movements is to create 'stable system of signification' (2005; 74). To create a system that generates, perpetuates and encourages the negotiation of demands, essentially allows for open political discourse to operate through stable and constant avenues. Such a system acts as a 'reliable' mechanism, that produces power. Within the space of appearance the signifying mechanisms of speech and action perform the space, but there must be conditions that make this possible. The space of appearance relies upon certain systems of signification; signs that can call people together, or identify a lack. However, its core purpose is not to foreground one rationale above another but to create an open space for political engagement. As such, this political mode is considered problematic, because it can often be perceived as vague and conflicting. Laclau aligns himself with Ranciere, and refers to 'the essential asymmetry at the root of popular action'. For Laclau, the contingency of difference operating within unification is key to creating a more nuanced and discursive political awareness.

Laclau understands populism as a political approach or methodology, but emphasises the importance of the existence of different demands at the heart of populism, and these are expressed through action and speech. These differences create 'internal frontiers', which are needed for a truly discursive identity. Similarly, the polis was a formal, structured space but its existence depended on vocalising and performing of asymmetries and differences.

A contemporary space of appearance is defined by 'antagonistic frontiers' and the need for 'asymmetry' at its root. Likewise art can become a site for an 'antagonistic frontier' if it creates a platform for oppositional forces and asks questions, rather than essentialising a situation or scenario through representation. At the same time, for it to be accessible, and for questions to be articulated and communicated, there will inevitably be an external frontier between this space and 'the social'. Familiar visual signs can be used to communicate with individuals who are part of the social.

In other words, in the current system, there must be a threshold between what we have defined as 'the social' (to paraphrase Pitkin, a collectivity of people who do not control, or intentionally

influence the large scale consequences of their activities) and a collectivity of people who consciously speak and act with the wider consequences of their actions as a central concern (1998; 252). 'Conscious' speech and action guides this mode of collectivity. But to maintain a collective 'power potential' there also must be formal means of representation and points of contact with the larger social system.

3.3 The 'antagonistic moment' and the space of appearance as a 'broken space'

Peng Yu summarises the political issues surrounding residency laws for MDWs saying 'Hong Kong society on one hand needs this type of low-cost labor, but at the same time it is felt that giving the Filipinos more benefits is not in the interest of local people.' (Hyperallergenic; 2013) The lack of 'benefits' for MDWs is of political significance not only for the workers, but for their employers. It is this deficiency that has provoked the political discourses explored in 'Hong Kong Intervention'. We might understand this lack of rights as a 'break' or 'chasm' in the current social system in Hong Kong. Laclau refers to this 'moment of the chasm' as an 'antagonistic moment'.

He says that populism requires the division of society into two camps; 'one presenting itself as a part which claims to be the whole' and 'the popular camp' that presupposes 'the construction of a global identity out of the equivalence of a plurality of social demands' (2005: 83). He describes the 'antagonistic moment' as a 'chasm' that allows us to understand this duality of society. However, the antagonistic moment 'eludes conceptual apprehension' (2005:84) Laclau uses an example of a 'conceptual hiatus' (2005; 84), which I will now adapt with relation to MDWs in Hong Kong. Whilst following Laclau's sequential logic, the example outlines a basic political discourse that underpins 'Hong Kong Intervention'.[8]

1) The promotion of labour export, to combat rising unemployment rates in Indonesia and the Philippines increases the number of migrant jobseekers in Hong Kong 2) The rising demand for jobs leads to lower cost workers 3) More people are able to employ domestic workers and MDWs become a significant part of the HK economy, but this depends on the low cost of their labour; 4) MDWs have no alternative but to resist the development of a social hierarchy by campaigning for improved working conditions and residency rights.

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[8] Laclau's sequence is '(1) In the world market , a growth for the demand for wheat pushes wheat prices up; (2) So wheat produces in country X have an incentive to increase production; (3) as a result, they start occupying new land , and to this end they have to dispossess traditional peasant communities; (4) so the peasants have no alternative but to resist this disposession, and so on.' (2005; 84)

This 'hiatus' illustrates an oppositional, or antagonistic, discourse. The first three stages demonstrate an objective sequence, but the final part of the sequence incorporates a link that appeals to a general logic or perception of human nature. Laclau says that this appeal 'adds to the sequence a link that the objective explanation is unable to provide.' (2005:84) He then explains that if a whole sequence of events could be reconstituted simply through conceptual, theoretical means, the antagonistic chasm could not be constitutive. In other words if the sequence was purely objective, the antagonistic 'chasm' would not have the power to give an organised existence, or a 'stable system of signification' to a discourse (2005:85). Therefore, for Laclau, constitutive antagonism, and the possibility of a 'radical frontier' requires a 'broken space'(2005:85) in which there is 'tension between difference and equivalence' (2005; 88). Returning to the above sequence, the first three stages relate to social flows or currents that prioritises an *overall* 'benefit' to those involved. The fourth stage intervenes with the mass response, and draws attention to individuals and groups caught up in the social current, but who oppose it. Their concerns appear to disrupt the flow of the society they are in, but in doing so, they reassert the need for that society to re-orient its logic.

Laclau outlines the 'dimensions of a broken space.' (2005: 85) and defines three conditions, that I will broadly outline: First, there must initially be a 'lack'; a 'gap' in 'the harmonious continuity of the social.' In 'Hong Kong Intervention' the lack of rights for MDWs is the political foundation for the piece. Second, the need for order becomes more important than the ontic order that produces it; Laclau describes the 'asymmetry between ontological function and its ontic fulfilment' (2005; 87). This is illustrated by the artists' intention to create a 'platform for conspiracy' (Hyperallergic, 2013) that has greater significance than the physical artwork. And third, there is a tension between difference and equivalence, which is at the heart of 'Hong Kong Intervention'; the piece antagonises the social tensions between the need for MDWs and the potential threat that collective action on the part of the MDWs might mean economically. Laclau says that 'democratic demands are, in their mutual relations, like Schopenhauer's porcupines'; they need to remain close to each other to keep warm during the cold weather but they harm each other if they come to close each other. Although desiring a mutual relationship, they are unable to achieve it without injuring the other. (2005; 85-89) These dimensions, although considered just briefly here, help us to appreciate the idiosyncratic nature of such a space, and its precarity will be considered in more depth in the next chapter.

To summarise, Arendt states that the space of appearance requires people to act and speak together, but Laclau develops this idea further and says that the *way* that people act and speak together is the key to creating a discursive identity. He says that there must be an 'internal

antagonistic frontier' that separates 'the people' from 'power' and allows difference to operate within equivalences. For this frontier to be antagonistic and able to affect the fundamental nature of the system it opposes, there must be an 'antagonistic moment', which evades 'conceptual realisation' by circumventing a perceived sequential logic that the opposing system assumes, or depends upon. This evasion allows the antagonistic moment to be 'constitutive' and able to form a radical frontier.

Laclau's description of the 'antagonistic moment' as a 'chasm' echoes Pitkin's imagery of 'pathways into the thicket of the social'. For Pitkin, politics emerges in the spaces within the social that are created by thoughtful engagement. She says that such engagement, whether it is through institutional, characterological or ideational means 'can have further, widening effects, enlarging the space for freedom' (1998: 283). Both Laclau and Pitkin outline the idea of creating fractures and 'clearing', or 'breaking' spaces within the wider social environment. We can therefore begin to understand that unlike the polis, which was a space 'outside' defined in contrast to private space, the contemporary space of appearance is a space 'within' that manifests itself as a kind of fissure within the social. Although this space occurs within the social, it appears as if created by an external force, a logic or approach independent from 'the social'. This external force makes inroads into the social, which offsets the borders between interior and exterior space and weakens the constancy of 'the social'.

The contemporary space of appearance borders political, social and cultural territories, but is not directly a part of these. The object of such a space is immanent in its existence, it does not aim at a specific outcome, although it can achieve institutional changes. The purpose of the space of appearance is to create a discursive space through the generation of 'power potential', and for this space to facilitate a 'stable system of signification' that allows for a discursive mode of political engagement to weaken 'the social' and increase the possibility of political change through 'bottom-up' politics.

Chapter 4- Precarity and the space of appearance

In 'The Origins of Totalitarianism', Arendt writes of people who have lost and cannot regain rights because of a new global political system ([1991] 1968; 296, 297). These individuals live in a state of precarity, unprotected by a nationstate. In her 2004 book, The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens', Seyla Benhabib refers to 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' and clarifies the differences between varying legal statuses of these individuals. She says;

'One becomes a *refugee* if one is persecuted, expelled and driven away from one's homeland; one becomes a *minority* if the political majority in the polity declares that certain groups do not belong to the supposedly "homogenous" people; one is a *stateless person* if the state whose protection has hitherto enjoyed withdraws such protection, as well as nullifying the papers it has granted; one is a *displaced person* if, having been once rendered a refugee, a minority or a stateless person, one cannot find another polity to recognize one as its member, and remains in a state of limbo, caught between territories, none of which desire one to be its resident.' (2004; 55)

Following this definition, MDWs in Hong Kong generally fall under the category of 'minority', and although not refugees, they share a similar sense of being 'in limbo', and lack political agency. Having left their nation of birth, MDWs have fewer rights in Hong Kong, and whilst obliged to live by HK law, they experience minimal protection from it and are subject to social distinctions because of their status. This chapter refers to 'We Refugees', Arendt's short essay written in 1943 and Giorgio Agamben's response in 1994. Although these texts refer primarily to the figure of the refugee, parallels can be drawn between this figure and minority communities such as MDWs. Both essays explore the the role of precarity in a political context, and this chapter expands on these texts to explain how precarity relates to the space of appearance. In sum, Agamben understands precarity a defining, and universal condition of contemporary consciousness. He believes that political engagement requires each citizen to acknowledge their precarity. However, this chapter suggests that his understanding conflicts with Arendt's portrayal of precarity.

In 2010, 'Hong Kong Intervention' was shown in the Sydney Biennale, which was entitled 'The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age'. Therefore the final section of this chapter draws together ideas of precarity with reference to 'Hong Kong Intervention'.

4.1 Arendt's 'We Refugees'; identity, public appearance and 'the vanguard'

'We actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while; since society has discovered discrimination as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed; since passports or birth certificates, and sometimes even income tax receipts, are no longer formal papers but matters of social distinction.' (1943; 118)

Arendt's article 'We Refugees', published in a jewish periodical *The Menorah Journal* in 1943, addresses the condition of the refugee, focussing particularly on Jewish immigrants. For Arendt, a refugee is characterised by a desire to resist assimilation and to retain a particular identity. Although paying 'a much higher price' to adjust to this lack of acceptance, refugees 'get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of Gentiles' and by preserving their identity, they represent 'the vanguard of their peoples' (1943:119)

Speaking of Jewish immigrants, Arendt says, 'The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles.' (1943; 115) This idea of identity- of finding out 'who we actually are'- is explored further by Arendt in later publications, and it is key to understanding the idea of 'appearance', and consequently the space of appearance. In 'The Human Condition' she explains that 'who' somebody is can be observed through their speech and actions and refers to 'unique personal identities'. 'What' somebody is can be summarised as 'his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide' (1958; 179). 'Who' a person is requires 'the revelatory quality of speech and action' and therefore depends on being with other people in the public realm. In Susan Bickford's essay 'The Paradox of Public Appearance', published in a collection entitled 'Feminist interpretations of Hannah Arendt', she writes of her 'judgements' that define 'who' she is; 'I express them in a context of plurality: my public appearance ("who" I am) depends on the attention paid by those differently located others with whom I share public space.' (1995; 322) Arendt explains that action without a 'who' lacks meaning; action must take place publically. At the same time 'who' someone is cannot be fully comprehended by that person themselves. Therefore, as discussed earlier with regard to the space of appearance, to act within the public realm and to disclose ones thoughts through speech and action, requires courage and a sense of risk, of not knowing exactly how you will appear to others. To be understood for 'who' you are requires freedom of expression, and Arendt believes that without it facts become hidden.

At the start of 'We Refugees', Arendt states; ' A refugee used to be a person driven to seek refuge because of some act committed or some political opinion held….With us ('Hitler-persecuted

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people') the meaning of the term "refugee" has changed. Now "refugees" are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by refugee committees.' (1943: 110)' Arendt draws attention to the way in which society no longer focuses on the figure of **a** refugee; an individual with an identity that arises from action and speech regarding a particular circumstance. Rather, the plural '**refugees**' is used, which identifies individuals collectively and in terms of 'what' they mean as a collective role in society. The functioning of the social depends on distinctions that rely on 'what', rather than 'who' people are.

 To clarify the difference between 'what' and 'who' a person is, we might consider 'what' to be identity as defined by society; having talents or shortcomings that are judged in relation to society as a whole, and 'who' as ones individual role within a collective; a role that is 'lived' and responds to facts, rather than 'playing out' roles and hiding facts. Arendt says that 'Very few individuals have the strength to conserve their own identity if their social, political and legal status is completely confused.' ([1943] 1994;116) To retain a specific identity, and to be understood for 'who' you are, requires strength and courage, because to assert this identity is to put oneself in a precarious position. For Arendt, to 'stand out' in society is to jeopardize 'the few chances even outlaws are given in a topsy-turvy world' ([1943] 1994; 119).

Arendt's description of refugees as 'the vanguard of their peoples' is a helpful metaphor. 'The vanguard' often refers to the 'foremost position in an army or fleet advancing into battle' (online dictionary). This role is characterised by a small group of soldiers who perform a role within a wider strategic and oppositional approach. Historically, the vanguard consisted of groups of men who each had different responsibilities; some carried messages calling for surrender, a body of workmen cleared any obstacles that would block the main army and harbingers sought lodgings for the army for the following night. The role of the vanguard was to facilitate a greater military movement, and to use whatever could be found within the territory it was invading that could be of benefit to their army. The vanguard is characterised by speech and action, it is the first point of contact between different, and usually oppositional forces. Like the refugee, this role is precarious; the speech and actions of the vanguard are hazardous, they can bring about immediate conflict or assent, but the affect of their actions is unpredictable. Broadly speaking, the other factions of the army move into a space that is prepared for them and that has been made less precarious in order to establish a 'safe haven' within enemy territory.

Returning to the space of appearance, to enter into this space requires a person to reveal 'who' they are through speech and actions. It requires a person to demonstrate courage, and like the vanguard, to use speech and action to advance and guide a discourse. To be part of the space of appearance requires a movement into the unforseeable, but as soon as this has been achieved,

and a reaction starts to unfold, the moment of precarity fades. It might give way to new uncertainties and hazards, but once the original intervention of a speech or action becomes part of a discourse, the nature of the initial gesture is no longer as precarious. Precarity is temporal. Using Arendt's metaphor, we might reason that precarity does not have to be entirely embodied as a way of living, but as a timely approach to a situation or conflict.

4.2 Agamben's 'We Refugees'; precarity and the 'permanent status of man'

Giorgio Agamben's responds to Arendt's essay with his 1994 essay also entitled 'We Refugees', Agamben looks closely at the figure of the refugee, and analyses their political significance. He says that the refugee exists outside of a homogenised nation-state system, but suggests that by representing the gap between birth and nation, the refugee finds 'political sense' in directly opposing the very concept of a nation (1994: point 7). Agamben suggests that we should 'reconstruct our political philosophy beginning with this unique figure' (1994: point 2), and therefore positions the 'refugee' as having radical political significance within a contemporary global context. He believes that political survival is only imaginable when 'the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is.' (1994, point 7)

 The nationstate, like 'the social', resists the idea of a person having an immanent permanent status. However, the refugee, in resisting assimilation into a dominant system, puts forward the idea of the human creature itself as permanent. Agamben refers to 'bare life' that becomes the 'terrestrial foundation' of the state's concerns (1994: point 4) He states;

'That there is no autonomous space within the political order of the nation-state for something like the pure man in himself is evident at least in the fact that, even the best of cases, the status of the refugee is always considered a temporary condition that should lead either to naturalization or to repatriation. A permanent status of man in himself is inconceivable for the law of the nation-state.' (1994; point 3)

Agamben problematises these circumstances throughout his essay. However, he does not address or outline what it might mean for society if the 'permanent status of man' *was* conceivable to the nationstate, or acknowledge what such a liberal society might realistically entail. He does not address the fact that many refugees and minorities seek to find security within the nationstate as well as retaining their identity. Although Arendt critiscises the desire to 'depend entirely upon social standards', and to be ready to 'pay any price' for acceptance ([1943] 1994; 119), she recognises that 'Man is a social animal and life is not easy for him when social ties

are cut off.' (([1943] 1994;116)   Her essay does not appeal to *all* citizens to consider themselves as refugees. Rather, by suggesting that refugees should be seen as 'the vanguard of their peoples', she proposes a shift from looking at 'what' refugees are, to 'who' they are. This leads to a more nuanced political stance. As 'the vanguard', refugees, minorities, stateless and displaced people advance political discourses further into society, and citizens, like the factions of the army that follow the vanguard, can expand and develop these discourses further within society. Although oppositional, they are less precarious than the vanguard, but they are still political actors.

However, Agamben concludes his essay by imagining a space: 'This space would not coincide with any homogeneous national territory, nor with their topographical sum, but would act on these territories, making holes in them and dividing them topologically like a Leiden jar or in a Moebius strip, where exterior and interior are indeterminate.' He believes that political survival also depends on existing in a society 'where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed' (1994; point 7)   What this suggests is a kind of expanded space of appearance, a space that is performed through speech and action and that arises when the 'spaces of states will have been perforated'.   Again, this idea of a rupture, perforation, or break, is essential for this kind of political engagement to occur, and Agamben recognises the need for such discursive spaces.

4.3 Precarity and 'Hong Kong Intervention'

The space of appearance is characterised by its unpredictability, based as it is on the uncertainty of a collective interaction, which as discussed earlier, requires an internal antagonistic frontier. If speech and action were predictable, courage would no longer be required to enter the space. As outlined in the previous chapter, to enter the space of appearance requires fearlessness. It must allow for an open, and therefore unpredictable discourse, and must contain an 'internal antagonistic frontier' that allows difference to operate. However, if, as Agamben states, political survival is guaranteed by each citizen learning to 'acknowledge the refugee that he himself is', it would mean that everyone should consider themselves to be part of 'the vanguard.'   Could this approach provide literal solutions to micro-political issues? And does everyone need to embody precarity to the same extent to be oppositional within the social?

Agamben agrees with Arendt's ideas on identity, saying that 'every time refugees no longer represent individual cases but rather a mass phenomenon, …[organizations are] absolutely incapable not only of resolving the problem but also simply of dealing with it adequately.' (1994; point 2)   However, by suggesting that the citizen, as a universal figure, should 'learn to

acknowledge the refugee that he himself is', Agamben again creates the sense of a mass phenomenon, albeit experienced individually. In referring to refugees as the 'vanguard' Arendt understands the refugee not as a universal figure, but as instrumental in their particularness. The vanguard performs a role within a wider strategic and oppositional approach, and this role depends on their role being specific and limited, and able to steer a larger force. If we look again at 'Hong Kong Intervention' we can see how this precarity plays out across time, and how it expands outwards from its original interventions.

Initially the project emerged as a series of performative events, away from the public eye, in which domestic workers performed 'interventions' (action) and documented these actions (here we might understand this representation as a form of 'speech' or 'visual language'). The documented actions became part of a collective action and statement, 'curated' by Peng Yu and Sun Yuan. When these initally appeared in the Osage Gallery, Hong Kong, the artwork generated a space in which people could actively engage with the artwork by visiting the gallery, discussing the issues at stake within the piece and considering wider, and perhaps personal implications that may have arisen from the exhibition.

'Hong Kong Intervention' was then shown in Singapore, where the public response generated financial aid for charities and shelters that support migrant domestic workers. Although a positive response, one could argue that responding to the debate by donating money to a charity might not actively generate an incentive for social change. Instead by applying such a solution to the issues at stake, the core concerns of the piece might be bypassed, because this reaction acknowledges the symptoms more directly than the cause. Sun Yuan acknowledged this, saying in a recent interveiw; 'Capitalist methods of donating through charitable means will not erase the guilt.' (Hyperallergenic; 2013) Nevertheless, the development of these independent charities and organisations, in turn creates greater awareness and perpetuates a sense of accountability. If the charities have opportunities to expand and develop, they are able to exert a stronger presence within society. By *publicly* responding to the negative affects that the current social system generate, and receiving increased support from other residents, these organisations continue to challenge accepted policies. Their actions and 'speech' (which might take the form of campaigns) have political relevance and become harder to ignore.

However, shortly after the Singapore exhibition, the piece featured in Art Basel Hong Kong 2013, where it was for sale. This again repositions the artwork. In becoming a part of an international art fair, and being given an economic value, the role of the domestic workers in the piece changes, and appears to reenact the very dynamic it was critiquing in the first place. The domestic workers have essentially become free labourers, used to produce a piece of profitable

art that no longer occupies a space outside of a socio-economic system, but actually becomes part of the system itself. The artwork loses the authority it initially had when its presence was 'external' and intrusive. When an artwork no longer has the weakening power and presence of a 'fissure' within a system, it has become absorbed into 'the social'.

'Hong Kong Intervention' enacts a mode of political engagement, and therefore manifests these different degrees of precarity. The first instance required courage on the part of the MDWs, who risk their job and ability to remain in Hong Kong, by taking part in the collective project. These participants might be understood as 'the vanguard' in this particular example. The exhibiting of the work in Singapore is the second instance. We might understand this exhibition as the second 'military' stage, and the response of the charitable organisations could be illustrated by movement of the an oppositional force into a space prepared for them. They are able to benefit from the initial stage, and use the artwork to generate further awareness of their organisation and to expand an oppositional force. Although requiring collective courage, they are less precarious; although these groups are not part of the greater system, they have a more established presence within it.

Although I agree with Agamben that institutions that try to represent marginal groups as a whole are 'incapable not only of resolving the problem but also simply of dealing with it adequately' (1994; point 2), I would argue that charitable institutions such as Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge, are instrumental in facilitating political discourses. By providing practical support for MDWs, they enable individuals to cope with physical and psychological challenges, and to gain strength that can enable some individuals to develop the confidence to face the precarity that comes with advancing a political discourse. These organisations may not resolve, or 'adequately' deal with problems, but even this perception of an ideal 'adequate' response, or a final resolution is problematic, because it echoes the concept of justifying any actions that lead a 'greater good', which characterises the social. Although not providing specific solutions to benefit everyone, these charitable organisations sustain the advancement of MDW concerns within Hong Kong politics.

Finally, the project is assimilated into the art fair as a profitable product, in which the participants become representative of 'what' they have performed rather than 'who' they are in performing the piece. At this point, the value of the artwork starts to become measured in broader social and economic terms. Its 'intrusive' presence has lessened, and its relationship with its audience changes. In this a larger 'global' setting, its audience is more detached from the political environment from which it emerged, and although still relevant, its antagonistic power is diffused. In the atmosphere of an art fair the aesthetics of the work are judged in relation to

other artworks that surround it, and it becomes an object with a specific economic worth. At this point, we might question the ability of the artwork to form a space of appearance. Although this is possible, it is less likely to happen. In the first exhibition in Hong Kong, the possibility of a MDW being recognized was greater and this sense of risk was a defining characteristic of the piece. In the more distant environment of the art fair, the artwork *represents* this initial gesture of courage, rather than actively being part of the gesture.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

In 1955 Arendt concluded her lecture course entitled 'The History of the Political' with a metaphor of a desert to describe mass humanity and 'the withering away of everything between us' (2005: 201). She likened contemporary society to a desert; a place in which 'no-thingness and no-bodyness threaten to destroy the world' (2005: 204) and this part of her lecture was later published in short epilogue in 'The Promise of Politics' (2005).

'The modern growth of worldlessness, the withering away of everything between us, can also be described as the spread of the desert.' (2005:201)   By living in such a space, we are conditioned by it and affected by it. Arendt says that if we adapt to the desert we 'lose the faculty of suffering and with it the virtue of endurance' (2005: 202) and cannot be an active being. Therefore failing to adapt to the conditions of modern life is what makes a person human.

However, Arendt speaks of 'oases' within the desert. Jerome Kohn, in the introduction to 'The Promise of Politics' summarises these spaces as 'life-giving oases of philosophy and art, of love and friendship' (2005: xxxi) Within these oases, links between people, and acknowledgement of *plural* human beings rather than a social mass subject to the 'blindness of bureaucratic machines' (Agamben: 1994: section 3), create an environment that enables survival within the desert, without becoming part of it.

The overall aim of this research was to explore ways in which contemporary art can have political relevance by creating 'oases' within society that perpetuate plurality and enable survival in the growing 'worldlessness' that Arendt speaks about. The following paragraphs will summarise the findings of this research. I will outline possible ways in which art can create a space of appearance and suggest how this research might be progressed.

Summaries and concluding thoughts

5.1 Research objective 1- The political significance of 'Hong Kong Intervention'

Chapter One presented 'Hong Kong Intervention' as such an 'oasis'. The artwork gathered a collective response from MDWs, who risked their jobs, and their right to remain in Hong Kong by taking part in the project. The presentation of the artwork in a gallery space, created a discursive platform from which to approach the social and political concerns of both the migrant

workers and Hong Kong residents. It allowed people to engage with these issues on a personal level, to understand complexities and to respond to nuances within the work. It generated links between individuals involved in the project and those viewing the work using visual language and it positioned the viewer as a potential actor within its political discourse. It therefore created a potential space of appearance.

5.2 Research objective 2- Creating a space of appearance in 'the social'

Arendt describes 'the oases' as 'fields of life which exist independently, or largely so, from political conditions', the political conditions she speaks of here are the general political climate, rather than the political discourses that characterise spaces of appearance. The crucial word in this statement is 'independently'; the oases must be separate from the desert. Chapter Two considered ways to create such 'independent' spaces can be created. It highlighted four approaches, or pathways, into the desert of 'the social'. It considered the need for a empathetic approach to others, but emphasised the importance of creating links with other people so that power can be generated through collective engagement. It considered the role of institutions as points of contact within society that can increase the possibility of advancing into 'the social'. And it described the way in which 'Hong Kong Intervention' created paths into the social environment in which it was exhibited, through 'institutional', 'characterological', 'ideological' and 'active' approaches.

5.3 Research objective 3- Power, antagonism and the space of appearance

The 'oases' are 'not places of relaxation but life giving sources that allow us to live in the desert without becoming reconciled to it' (2005, 203). As stated in Chapter Three, the space of appearance (an 'oasis') occurs as a break in 'the social'. It is this emergence of a space in its 'breaking' or 'appearing' that implies an externality. The force of this space as it forms, implies strength that is external to, and independent from, the desert. For this space to have agency, and for it to resist amalgamation into the desert, or 'the social', it must continue to have what Laclau calls an 'internal antagonistic frontier'. It must continue to have internal antagonisms and points of resistance that perpetuate open dialogues. Therefore, as Arendt states, it is not a place of escape or for relaxation. Oases, spaces of appearance, do not provide reconciliation, but provide a sense of plural existence, without which 'we would not know how to breathe' (2005, 202) Similarly, 'Hong Kong Intervention' aimed at providing a model of intervention; an example of a political mode that allows for difference to operate within equivalences.

5.4 Research objective 4- Precarity and the space of appearance

Arendt says that those who endure desert conditions and maintain their identity show 'the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being.' (2005: 202) This figure, like that of the refugee, lives a precarious life, sustained by the temporary sustenance of oases. This idea of temporality is key because to regard the oases as permanent 'escapes' from the desert, risks ruining them. Continued dependance on the oases means that more sand from the desert is carried into such spaces and they can become engulfed by the desert (2005; 203). Chapter Four looked at the precarity of those who create spaces of appearance, the instability of these oases, and considers the way in which precarity is manifest in 'Hong Kong Intervention'. Arendt's metaphor of 'the vanguard' led to the idea that there might be different degrees of precarity and that one does not have to be *continually* precarious to be oppositional. One cannot escape into the oases or exist entirely in spaces of appearance; but these space can be accessed in order to sustain an identity within society. Similarly, the vanguard, representative of refugees and marginal people, advances a political discourse in order to make space for additional oppositional groups and individuals to substantiate an identity. This advance is not necessarily continual, but is achieved through speech and actions that respond directly to the political environment of that moment. Permanent settlement leads to a lack of recognition of the need for human plurality, and automatically renders one part of the desert, or 'the social'.

5.5 Art as a 'tool'; recommending a possible method for creating spaces of appearance

I would like to conclude by outlining ways in which an artwork might generate and expand contemporary spaces of appearance.

1. By identifying 'a lack' and creating an interstice within a homogenised social system, an artwork can assert a sense of inter-subjectivity and accountability in relation to specific political concerns. It can acts as a 'tool' that is used to create a 'crack' in 'the social'.

2. An artwork can create a platform for the 'equivalential articulation of demands' (Laclau; 2005; 74) Within the articulation of these demands, antagonisms arise and become part of a collective discourse. The concerns of those who step forward and engage with the discussion also shape the discourse as a whole.

3. Within this collective discourse, a system of signification through speech and action can be established. Those within the 'space of appearance' can collectively form allegiances with

institutions, which can in turn expand spaces of appearance. The relationship between the 'vanguard' of individuals within the space of appearance and relevant institutions can further advance a political discourse by creating additional platforms from which to sustain and reposition 'marginal' communities.

4. These spaces are sustained, not by residing permanently within them, but by accessing and contributing to spaces of appearance as a response to specific issues and situations.

To create politically relevant artwork with these methods in mind recognises the advantage of using a 'stable system of signification' (Laclau; 2005; 85) that can enable and sustain a discursive mode of political engagement. In turn, providing spaces for people to speak and act politically creates networks and pathways that can enable more people to sustain thoughtful engagement within the desert of 'the social". By providing support for the 'virtue of endurance' (Arendt; 2005: 202), 'marginality' can be reframed as 'vanguardism', and can further advance political discourses.

5.6 Contribution to knowledge and further areas of enquiry

This research has developed Arendt's idea of a 'space of appearance' and outlined the complexities and possibilities that might be encountered in relation to creating a *contemporary* space of appearance. As highlighted in the essay, a contemporary space of appearance occurs and operates differently from the way in which the *polis* functioned. It suggests systems of representation that might act as mechanisms to produce potentially political spaces, and open new platforms for political engagement within contemporary society.

This research has focussed on one particular artwork in relation to Arendt, Laclau, Pitkin and Agamben. Whilst the essay does not refer to the entire spectrum of politically-driven art practices, it considers possible approaches that could be developed within contemporary art practices. It outlines mechanisms and systems that could be used within different socio-political contexts to produce spaces of appearance. A new area of enquiry might consider how such cultural tools function collectively; how these spaces might overlap, perpetuate, or even conflict with each other. Further research could map out the multitude of pathways within the social and investigate the political impact of possible intersections and collaborations.

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