

to be in Alan Bogana's light

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Formations in the sky – the way a friend describes clouds.

Without them, dawn wouldn't have occurred to us as light. On any one day, light comes through as a nebulous. On a different day, it drapes by the clouds' arches. On a day with a clear blue sky, we take for granted that light is safe and sound as our companion for life.

That time by the name of morning – it is not clear when it begins, when it ends. Morning light – how fast it changes from a pale yellow, to a pink, and a burning orange, and then, everything else... This is how it is in the summer where I live. From there, from here where I write, I began connecting with Alan Bogana. His morning, my early evening. The light outside must have changed a million times as we remained in our screen-bound mode of existence. He told me in one meeting about Claude Monet's altered vision. Monet was in a different light.

Light inspires Alan – not direct, sharp rays, but light that makes shades and shadows. He is interested in various aspects of light, how human bodies react to it, its reflection, refraction, be it from nature or artificial. He is interested in representing light.

In our conversations, we spoke of Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* and Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*. Bees and fireflies came through, too. I told Alan my fascination with the ghostly landscapes in some of his past works like *CASE 03D-P1–Diamond Mountain Drift* (2013). The bonfires he sees in Geneva on Swiss National Day, the fireworks we sometimes have in Hong Kong, all these, we shared. In hindsight, I think we exchanged sensibilities which his art inspires, some of which I have become more aware of in my life.

Say, the summer rain in relation to light.

Windows on public buses in Hong Kong are generously open to sceneries they pass. At night, one sees through the window the farthest layer of light – public housing estates up to forty storeys high. Households are grids in a spectrum of yellow and white – fluorescent, LEDs...unlikely to be burning candles, though small candle-shaped bulbs giving a red light keep deities on shrines divine. On the streets, flush light on the ceiling of elevated walkways keeps the paths clear. Traffic lights, sirens of emergency vehicles, an occasional lantern-and-torch-decorated bicycle...all reflected on asphalt dampened by rain. So too do canals become canvases of light.

To be on the upper floor of a double-decker bus when it pours is a true summer delight. In such a pour, rain dropping on the window panes can only glide frantically backwards. Facades of light on high-rises—mostly advertisements or propaganda of sorts—became patches of water colour spilt from action painting, dissipating the force of coercive visual regimes.

I live in a place called Plover Cove in the North Eastern part of Hong Kong. It is no less urbanized, but there is less disturbance of the kinds of light I just described. Still, on a calm night when the air is stale after intermittent days of heavy and light rain, I see the reflection of residential and industrial buildings on the surface of the sea – vertical

strokes brushing down in orange and yellow, flickering.

In our first meeting, Alan read a passage from J.D. Bernal's *The World, the Flesh & the Devil* (1929). I am particularly drawn to these lines:

"Finally, consciousness itself may end or vanish in a humanity that has become completely etherealized, losing the close-knit organism, becoming masses of atoms in space communicating by radiation, and ultimately perhaps resolving itself entirely into light. That may be an end or a beginning, but from here it is out of sight."

I connect this with what I see in Alan's portfolio. His practice straddles the atom and the universe. He touches and lets himself be touched by the strength and the waning of light. There is no drama in the tension he discerns. It is with hospitality that he embraces that which shows the impoverishment of words.

Alan has seen light being enslaved to serve spectacles. He responds by giving it its due, returning it to its multiplicity and mutability. He resists turning light into objects. This is only possible, I propose, because of his sensitivity of the world as nature has it.

"[S]tars whatever their astronomical significance, are perceived not as objects but as points of light, and sunsets as the momentary glow of the sky as the sun vanishes beneath the horizon. Nor are clouds objects. Each is rather an incoherent vaporous tumescence that swells and is carried along in the currents of the medium." (Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, 2011: 117)

A power of perception that marks the artist.

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I say all of the above with qualms. What do I know, after having met Alan for no more than ten hours in clock time? I have never visited him in person in his studio. I have never experienced his work in situ. I share the unease Alan told me he has, about making claims on how life might be like in Hong Kong, what light in all of its shape might mean. He has never visited Hong Kong. I told him in brevity that it didn't occur to me he was trying to represent "Hong Kong". I would like to expand on what I meant, in the form of two responses – one short, one long.

The short one goes like this. There is a speechless character in Hayao Miyazaki's animation film *Spirited Away* (2001) – a street lamp that hops along as Chihiro journeys into a far-off place to find the right person to undo a curse. The street lamp does nothing but hops with its light on. It has its own rhythm – the companionship it perceives Chihiro to need. The light lends itself a little to her anterior, so she could focus. It is around her, but is it not also within her, this light co-extensive of her vision of the world to come? I think of Alan interpreting life through light, to reach its other horizon. By this I don't mean darkness but rather, silence.

As for the longer response, a detour, I hope it shows why I am grateful for having Alan welcome and receive this feeble voice by the name of "Hong Kong" – how it is now from the limited position I see – from oceans apart. Here goes.

The work of mourning has a limit. Those who have left and planning to leave have differ-

ent reasons to. Some are forced to. Others are able to because they have the means to. I am puzzled by media messages about “brain drain” – the loss of talents that had happened around 1984 when the Joint Declaration for the future of Hong Kong between London and Beijing was concluded without the voices of the people of Hong Kong, and around 1997 as the sovereignty of Hong Kong changed, and again, now. When I think of those taking an image of Hong Kong and myself being a fellow HongKonger with them on their way out, I wonder for how long this image might last – this image carrying memories of the past, lived differently compared to the lives lived by those staying, despite. When would this image become a souvenir and a token of nostalgia? When the “emigrant” becomes a status, lines are drawn between who and what state of affairs, better tell “the” Hong Kong story. But which Hong Kong? Is there only one story to tell? Is there such as thing as the end of a story? What do these lines do when they keep being reproduced?

If two million people had been on the streets, and 100,000 of them had reportedly left, there are still 1.9 million staying. Diasporic communities evolve just as resident communities do. For some, to stay is to be in permanent exile in a home now estranged. If exile is a state of mind and a state of one self in relation to the world, those who have left and those who stay might well be sharing common grounds. One difference, though, might be that the latter keeps trying to transform unfreedom into not only liveable, but flourishing and dignified lives. Is freedom secure anywhere, at all times? I think this is a question more complex than the law can answer. I cannot accept the mourning of a loss of the idea of Hong Kong as something that had been, because it is still alive, and many are keeping it alive, here and elsewhere. The question is how. This is an unending question if the purpose of being-with remains intact.

It is in this sentimentality that I grateful for being able to connect with an artist who does not stop doubting what entitlements he has to say anything about Hong Kong. He is not looking for something familiar with complacency. He is not measuring his object of interest with a readymade ruler. He refuses to hastily name what he sees and insists on transforming them into a shareable horizon. He is alert to the limits of his position, how partial and fragmented it is. He is not here to correct, but to understand. He doesn't give up on keeping imagination akin to reason.

I propose we can and must narrativize about others as full, whole beings by keeping up certain conditions: we can commit ourselves to the openness of narratives, the intensity of the what John Dewey calls the artistic-aesthetic experience that is made and preserved by both the artist and those touched by art, and the vision of long-term and continuous engagement.

When Maxine Greene says artists are always “in quest of wider landscapes, wider visions of what makes sense, what ought to be,” she cites the following poem by Mark Strand, which qualifies how insisting on “what ought to be” does not have to be coercive. It is rather a yearning.

Keep Things Whole

In a field
I am the absence
of field.

This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.
When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

I am not sure if there is a boundary to the whole, and whether there is such a thing. But where we had been was quite a dwelling.

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