

## Community art activism and social development in Hong Kong: ---A Case study of Woofer Ten

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### *Abstract*

With the further development of socio-cultural environment, Hong Kong government is putting more emphasis on the significances of community art developments, and the existence of Woofer Ten, are both playing an important role in the local community art development. This paper will specifically study in Woofer Ten (活化廳), a community art organization in Yau Ma Tei, by analysing the pros and cons of its existence, to evaluate how public and private partnerships get involved into the cultivation of local community art. Investigating the current situation of Woofer Ten in Hong Kong, we could see its existence is raising the awareness of cultural development, but it also generate a cause and effect relationship between the art organization and Gentrification (士紳化). Woofer Ten values its engagement and interaction with the local community, it is regard as an important driven force for the social changes in Hong Kong. At the same time, it plays a different role in cultural development because of the active willingness in engaging with the Hong Kong local community. For the criticism on Woofer Ten is namely in three dimensions: providing space to the overseas artists, purpose of the venue and the relationship between artists and community residences. In conclusion, Woofer Ten brings the possibility of further development of community arts in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, under current situation, the conflict between Woofer Ten and Hong Kong government still cause some limitations to their community art projects.

### *Keywords*

Woofer Ten, Gentrification, Community Art, Social changes, Culture development

### **Introduction**

Community art, which involves community engagement and deep rooted within cultural democracy (Inspireart,2017), it is often treated as social activities to encourage self-empowerment of a community. It's a collaboration process (Marsden,1996) which involves groups of artists and a community (Ontario Arts Council,1998) and sometimes being used as a tool to promote social inclusion (Peter,2013). Emphasizing on the importances of community arts development, which is a core work of Hong Kong Arts Development Council (ADC). ADC aims to stimulate citizens' interest in participating in the art activities and make arts more accessible to every citizen (HKADC,2017). Urban Renewal Authority (URA) also aims to "integrate arts and culture elements in urban renewal", provide funding and supports for art and cultural activities (URA,2017). The government also encourages the support from other public entity or private sector. For example, the "Social Inclusion Community Arts Project (SIP)" was initiated to help with the minority groups and new immigrants to fit into the local culture (HKAPA,2017). In the private sector, the Robert H.N.Ho Family Foundation provides grant to support local community-based arts and cultural projects (rhfamilyfoundation,2015).

This paper attempts to use Woofer Ten (活化廳) as an example, to insight into how a community arts project can influence and benefit to the local community and society.

### **General Situation of Woofer Ten**

Woofer Ten is a non-profit art organization funded by HKADC and located at an aging grass-root community and neighbourhood at Shanghai Street Art Space in Yaumatei. It is formed by a group of artists that is aiming to bring arts to the community. It operates like a community centre which serves as a platform to fill the gap between community and art (Woofer10,2017). Woofer Ten organizes art exhibitions, and offer the publics various activities including performances, workshops and guide tours etc (Woofer10,2017). It has four objectives:

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- Serve as an open platform to connect arts and community. Establish interaction between contemporary arts and the community to promote mutual development with simulative experiments;
- Provide positive impact to the local community through active discussion on the topic of arts and community;
- Improve the social awareness in the Hong Kong arts scene;
- Share the contemporary art with the community and to make arts more accessible to people.

According to one of the Woofers Ten founding members, Lee Chung-Fung (2013), who mentioned it was “not established around a single ideology but to serve as an open platform” and “with constantly changes and exploration”. It is important to point out that the cultural policy in Hong Kong, which is mainly developed to facilitate the economic growth with its vision to make Hong Kong become an “international cultural metropolis” (HAB,2017). Thus, the cultural development is often developed alongside with Hong Kong’s urban development. Especially there is an increasing trend of gentrification in community art (inmediahk,2013).

### **Gentrification**

Gentrification (士紳化) has appeared a lot in the Hong Kong’s media and often associated with “urban redevelopment and its impact on local culture and older neighbourhoods” (Grange & Pretorius,2016). Generally, gentrification means the process that transforms an older community, or a grassroots neighbourhood into a middle-class community, causing “rising cost of living and social exclusion of the original inhabitants” (Grange & Pretorius,2016). The gentrification in Hong Kong affected the cultural development as well, because many arts gallery or revenue are associated with the urban redevelopment. Therefore, the arts may lose its purpose when it is served more for the economic development. This shows us the importance of Woofers Ten because they are willing to engage with the community rather than to create a more affluent “gated community” (inmediahk,2013).

During an interview, Lee (2014) shared that they started Woofers Ten when they started to realize that Yau Ma Tei, the old district that was threatened by the redevelopment, can be used to discuss and redefine community arts (multitude,2014). The artists started to do projects, attempting to find another way to establish the relationship between arts and communities, as they felt that the Hong Kong government and estate developers often use arts or cultural development as a tool of gentrification. This provides Woofers Ten a different social role to play within such context, and it can be used as an independent and open platform to discuss social and cultural issues. It may even have been used as an instrument to voice out different opinion about gentrification in Hong Kong.

### **Community Art and Social Change**

It is mentioned that community arts could be a significant force for social change (Takechi,2011). Woofers Ten really values their engagement and interaction with the community. Lee mentioned there is a mutual influence in the community art events, as the artists would be influenced and changed by the local community because they are indeed living in the community. It provides a unique exemplary demonstration how arts can be interacted with the old community rather than being merely a tool to facilitate urban redevelopment. Instead, Woofers Ten is seen as a powerful platform to experiment with “neighbourhood activism” (Lee,2013). For example, the Youmatei Self-Rescue Project was initiated to help “reshape and reconnect broken community relations” (Lee,2013; Huang,2013).

### **Criticisms towards Woofers Ten**

However, there are also criticisms towards Woofers Ten. According to Lee, the founder himself, there are three major critiques (Lee,2016). The first critique is centred around the argument that whether Woofers Ten should provide space to overseas artists instead of just giving to those who need it. The second critique is about the purpose of whether the venue should be provided to Woofers Ten for art creation instead of using it as a forum to discuss problems and issues within the community. The third critique is that due to the mobility and short staying period of the artists compared to the community

residents, many questioned about the connection between artists and the community and some may even raise the problem of “neoliberal cultural imperialism”. Because of its “Art/Activist-in-Residence” project, Woofers Ten invites artists across Asia to stay at Yau Ma Tei for research or arts creation (Woofers Ten,2017). For example, it invited Misako Ichimura from Tokyo who is an artist concerned with the living condition of homeless people in Tokyo. People may question the importance of such issue and why Woofers Ten promote its awareness among the local community (Woofers Ten,2013).

It seems there is an inherent conflict or struggle of Woofers Ten due to the fact it was established with the government funding, yet it wants to bring more political or social awareness which the government may not want it to happen (Lee,2016). After 4 years since its establishment, Woofers Ten could not get funding from ADC in 2013 and artists were forced to move out (mingpao,2014). This is again showing the conflict of Woofers Ten with the government. Woofers Ten associated themselves with anti-gentrification, which end up leading to its failure to win government support. For example, it set up exhibition related to “Umbrella Movement” and even accused to be involved in the Mong Kok Occupation (Chen,2014). According to Mo (2013), what Woofers Ten’s impression to her is “always fighting”. With such characteristics, it is not difficult to understand why Woofers Ten is classified more towards social activist. The intention to fight against the long-established capitalism, rigid bureaucratic structure as well as the rapid gentrification has already set its destiny.

The community art is a long-term process because of the immense effort and time spending on the interaction and trust building with the residences. In addition, the very low return on investment and minimal economic benefits make ADC difficult to allocate resources to support the community arts (mingpao,2014). According to Newman et al (2001), social gains or benefits are often difficult to be measured and justified for community-based art projects. Therefore, ADC might be well-positioned to blame for Woofers Ten’s value proposition in terms of social values.

Another problem is the art itself, or the question whether community art is considered as art or not (Lee,2015). According to Lee (2015), it seems it is pointless to argue the issue from the artistic perspective as art is often appreciated to be subjective. Lee does not deny the fact that Woofers Ten is involved in social activism because he considers arts should not only involve the community but also the politics, and function as a tool rather than just being a form of art.

The core problem is rooted in the conflicting views of how community arts should work between ADC and Woofers Ten. Even though the government may attempt to create an art space for the community, the social and political involvement of Woofers Ten’s arts creation will not be supported, especially when it is viewed as a powerful symbol to against the government-led gentrification.

### Conclusion

The Woofers Ten has achieved certain breakthrough with their community engagement and arts experiments. It also brings the possibility of further development of community arts in Hong Kong. The artists have a great vision in setting up bridge between community, arts and social-political activities and to bring innovation and passion with their new ways of arts creation. Unfortunately, the conflict of Woofers Ten and Hong Kong government has caused the failure of this community art project. It is difficult to justify whose responsibility it is to the failure of Woofers Ten. However, without government support and funding, it is impossible for any art group to survive in Hong Kong. Thus, the development of community arts in the future should consider the multi-relationship between different subjects in society and try to maintain the cultural ecology in the community.

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