



# Urban hacking: the versatile forms of cultural resilience in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

The current understanding of urban resilience focuses on economic, environmental, and social responses. While the significance of art in enhancing social resistance has been acknowledged, the full potential of (un)authorised artistic and creative practices in initiating and strengthening the strategies of urban resilience is not yet recognised. Based on extensive fieldwork in 2012–2017, this paper delineates how urban hacking challenges the sociopolitical and spatio-aesthetic dynamics of the urban public space in Hong Kong as a form of cultural resilience that can contribute to a more holistic understanding of urban resilience. The diversity of urban hacking is indicated in an analysis of selected case studies of urban knitting and digital hacking that question the prevailing perceptions emphasising hacking as a method of illegal and arbitrary destruction. I posit that varied forms of urban hacking have a growing power to raise awareness of sociopolitical issues, enhance solidarity, and renegotiate space for new strategies and subjectivities aiming for more versatile co-authorship of the city.

**Keywords** Urban hacking · Urban resilience · Cultural resilience · Civic engagement · Co-authorship of the city · Artistic and creative practices

## Introduction

[W]hat makes a city sustainable is not its towers and high-tech network, but its inhabitants, who are anchored in its setting through memory and a sense of belonging. In case of a catastrophe, such as the recent economic recession, businesses and people flee the city if it has nothing to offer besides its superficial image (Radoine 2013, p. 258–259).

Discourses on urban resilience have gained interest during the past decade and the wealth of literature demonstrates the importance of multiscaled approaches extending disciplinary traditions yet resulting in under-defined frameworks. Challenges to conceptual clarity are underlined with a growing need for more nuanced articulations for the intricate dynamics of resilience. One of the most holistic definitions of urban resilience is “the ability of an urban system—and all its constituent socio-ecological and socio-technical networks

across temporal and spatial scales—to maintain or rapidly return to desired functions in the face of a disturbance, to adapt to change, and to quickly transform systems that limit current or future adaptive capacity” (Meerow et al. 2016, p. 39). However, this elucidation still seems to disregard the questions of *how* social cohesion, community building, and civic engagement, as essential factors of urban resilience, are also explicitly interrelated with culture—as a set of values, as a set of activities characterised by a degree of skill and autonomy, as a connective way of life embodied in everyday practices, and as strategic actions by individuals and communities.

Integration of culture into theories of resilience remains partial and requires more empirical research (Clarke and Mayer 2017). Efforts to expand the field beyond the disaster-centric approach have brought forward studies on social and cultural dynamics of resilience advocating, among other points, the importance of social memory and learning (Wilson 2012, pp. 79–110), cultural heritage (Radoine 2013, p. 258), and citizens’ critical role through active agency and self-organisation (Berkes and Ross 2013; Desouza and Flanery 2013; Clarke and Mayer 2017) along with youth civic engagement and action (Dolan 2012). Although approaches focusing on spatial practices for making “a resilient artistic career” (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm 2015), on economic

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renewal and transformation of cities of art (Lazzeretti 2012), or as self-sustaining structures of cultural economy (Pratt 2015) could be questioned to some extent because of their relatively limited approaches, these emerging studies contribute to the growing understanding of the intricate interdependence of culture, art, human agency, and urban resilience. More importantly, they indicate how such capabilities that demonstrate the significance of culture building towards urban resilience are not to be reserved for (in) tangible elements of the past.

Correspondingly, Yúdice (2003) advocates for the growing potential of expedient culture for various sociopolitical and economic aims, including but not limited to strengthening civil society, cultural rights, and cultural citizenship in an increasingly globalised world. At the same time, the social turn in contemporary art has emphasised the tendency for socially engaged art practices to strengthen civil society by making public space as a discursive site through collaborative practices (Kester 2011; Thompson 2012). This tendency is also evident in Hong Kong (Cheung 2015). Given that these three interrelated intellectual trajectories—the role of culture and citizens in resilience along with the increasing possibilities of culture and, in particular, socially engaged art—indicate how art and culture are inherent to emerging civil society formation, which in turn enhances social cohesion and self-organisation capabilities directly contributing to urban resilience, theoretical frameworks, which take into account emergent, (un)authorised artistic and creative practices as civic engagement in and beyond physical public space, can provide a more rounded understanding of urban resilience. The aim of this paper is to address this gap of knowledge by shifting the focus to human agency and urban hacking as multimethod spatial strategies for co-authoring the city by taking the urban public space as a point of departure in which to examine possibilities for alternative ways to construct social and cultural sustainability.

The growing interdependence of art and *resistance* as forms of civic engagement is most visible in social movements (Reed 2005; McCaughan 2012; Buser et al. 2013); yet, in order to examine the imminent power of (un)authorised artistic and creative practices as the strategies of urban *resilience*, it is necessary to draw together disparate strands of thinking on the relationships between art, creativity, social norms, and public policies. To challenge the existing paradigms that underestimate the potential of grassroots initiatives for societal change and to critically examine the possibilities of citizen-led spatial practices acknowledged as new forms of ‘do-it-yourself urbanism’ (Iveson 2013; Talen 2015; Douglas 2018), ‘guerrilla urbanism’ (Hou 2010), ‘tactical urbanism’ (Lydon 2012; Lydon and Garcia 2015; see also Mould 2014; Webb 2018), ‘cultural activism’ (Buser et al. 2013; Firat and Kuryel 2011), ‘art activism’ (Weibel 2015), and ‘urban hacking’ (Schneider and Friesinger 2010;

Gadringer 2010), I posit that the myriad forms of urban resilience are much more diversified than previously recognised. Despite the differences in the conceptual framework employed, these previous studies (un)consciously share in common the emphasis for a more socially just future and liveable urban environment initiated by citizens.

I define “urban hacking” as (un)authorised artistic and creative practices that aim to de/reconstruct the power structures and spatial politics of the urban public space, but that are also conditioned by the way in which they contribute to novel aesthetic and social values in the varied levels of the society in question. The diversified forms of urban hacking are not to be reduced to vandalism or political resistance. Rather, the growing power of urban hacking to raise awareness of sociopolitical issues is grounded on engagement with citizens in both the public space and the public sphere. By providing discursive sites to address the timely issues, urban hacking can enable citizens to re-envision their neighbourhood and city as a site of belonging and mutual caring that enhances the city’s capability to deal with economic, environmental, social, and institutional incidents. The main aim of this article is to demonstrate how (un)authorised artistic and creative practices, as one form of cultural production, can contribute to urban resilience by responding to both external and internal pressures regarding not only the spatial norms and strategies of public space but, more importantly, the development of local discourses and practices on the issues of citizenship, the co-authorship of space, and ‘publicness’ in Hong Kong’s geopolitically precarious position today.

## Methodology

The primary information, collected through ethnographic fieldwork of 9 months in Hong Kong between 2012 and 2017, derives from participant observations, visual documentation, and 112 semi-structured formal and informal interviews with artists, practitioners, activists, curators, researchers, residents, and tourists. From these abundant materials, the most relevant data are chosen for discussion.<sup>1</sup> As a core method of art research, formal analysis of the selected manifestations, their creation processes, intentions of practitioners and artists, and the reception by the immediate and broader audience form the basis of this study. Supporting resources include articles and opinion pieces published in local media, related materials shared online and in social media, and policy documents. Fieldwork

<sup>1</sup> Despite persistent efforts, some related stakeholders of the chosen case studies refused to be interviewed.



**Fig. 1** The map of Hong Kong with the major sites of digital hacking (the ICC tower) and urban knitting (Langham Place, Fashion Walk, Lek Yuen Bridge, and Pottinger Street) discussed in the article



periods varying from 1 week to 6 months in other cities in Asia, Europe, and South Africa build towards comparative insights.

The variety of urban hacking in terms of agencies, aims, and aesthetics in Hong Kong today is far too abundant to be discussed here in detail. Rather, the aim of this paper is to question the myopic focus on political subversion, vandalism, and anti-capitalist struggle associated with urban hacking and propose a more rounded examination of how the varied forms of urban hacking can provide new methods and strategies for emergent civic participation, especially in fostering long-term resilience through stronger social cohesion among citizens across neighbourhoods and social backgrounds. To challenge the prevailing readings of hacking as a method of *destruction* and shift the focus beyond the question of *illegality*, I focus here on digital hacking and urban knitting, both of which highlight an intricate engagement with the urban context: the varied needs, aspirations, and contingencies of the citizens to reconfigure the significance of the public space and the public sphere along with the construction of new subjectivities under the current geopolitical and socio-economic changes in Hong Kong.

The selected two case studies are key representatives of the diversity and novelty of urban hacking, and both have gained extensive attention in (social) media, providing illuminating insights to critically analyse their possibly positive and negative impacts: a long-term material process at multiple sites led by Esther Poon and the one-time conceptual



**Fig. 2** The map of Victoria Harbour to indicate how the sites of digital hacking (the ICC tower) and unauthorised urban knitting (on Tai Ping Shan Street, Ladder Street, and Pottinger Street) are focused on this historically important area, currently considered one of the major sites for branding Hong Kong and highly popular among international tourists



and immaterial intervention attributed to Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai (see Figs. 1 and 2). If the forms of manifestations, aesthetics, and agencies vary in these case studies, what they share in common are the concerns of citizenship and position of artistic and creative practices in a future Hong Kong along with the normative use of public space and sphere amidst shifting sociopolitical circumstances.

## From resistance to resilience by hacking the urban public space

To strengthen Hong Kong's status as a global city, the local think tank, Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre (2007), proposed that Hong Kong should aim to become a "creative metropolis" and "to establish creativity as a major force in transforming Hong Kong's cultural and socio-economic landscape". "Urban spaces" were suggested among "the five areas that require substantial improvement and social investment". While the recommendations were aimed at policy makers, in practice, urban hacking indicates citizens' perceptions on how the debates concerning the urban public space and its social and cultural significance should be more inclusive. If "urban vacant land may render visible the role of the neighbourhood resident as co-author of the spaces and places they inhabit and as empowered participants in urban development processes" (Németh and Langhorst 2014, p. 149), then, similarly, I argue that the gaps in planning and policy-making provide fertile ground for citizens to reclaim the co-authorship of the city both at tangible (physical space) and intangible (public sphere) levels.

Detailed discussion of the (im)material complexities of urban public spaces in the sociopolitical and transnational context of Hong Kong (Law 2002), their ambivalence and disappearance (Abbas 1997), along with their intricate taxonomy and management in relation to private developers (Lam and Tavecchia 2014)<sup>2</sup> is beyond the scope of this paper. Although the understanding of public space differs in many Asian cities when compared to Western traditions' perceptions of them as core sites of civic and democratic activities (Hou 2010, pp. 2–5), and the importance of urban public spaces for civic affirmation has been questioned (Amin 2006), the main premises here rely on understanding the urban public space as material space in a city that is accessible to all citizens and provides a site for a variety of social interactions that often extend beyond the physical to multidimensional formation of publicness (Young 2002;

Low 2006; Iveson 2007). Consequently, urban hacking contributes to the creation of what Hou (2010) defines as insurgent public spaces through collaborative actions by citizens to challenge the predominant status of state-controlled public space. Urban knitting and digital hacking, furthermore, indicate the growing interdependence of the public space with the digital public sphere in Hong Kong today, resonating with and extending what Castell (2012) calls "hybrid space" in relation to contemporary social movements.

Hong Kong is known for a chronic lack of space, whereas Hongkongers are appropriating space for their own needs through informal spatial strategies that include, among others, urban furniture and social sojourning. While performative Sunday gatherings of domestic workers are a well-studied phenomenon (Law 2002; Lai 2010), many other artistic and creative practices that aim to build social cohesion among diversified interest groups—such as informal gardening, open street initiatives, and street art—remain less acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> New forms of urban hacking that challenge the prevailing conceptualisation of the urban as a fixed and regulated space are unfolding around the world, advocating the importance of art, creativity, and aesthetics in reformulating not only the urban public space but also visions of it (e.g. Grierson and Sharp 2013). As Schneider and Friesinger (2010, p. 24) propose, the versatile strategies of urban hacking are not talking "about the public space but rather *through it, in it and with it*, through its disruption, interruption and opening (or: through disabling its mechanisms of closure). Thus, these strategies *consciously* recognise the active part they play in designing the public sphere, the part they—as a means of communication—always already (*unconsciously*) played". While they insightfully acknowledge how the physical public space has become an ever more dominant discursive site in which varied interest groups can voice their opinions through creative reconceptualisations, their emphasis on urban hacking as a (symbolic) but illegitimate and political form of resistance (*ibid.* pp. 25–26) fails to provide a feasible framework for a detailed analysis of the varied forms occurring on the streets. Gadringer's (2010, p. 35) understanding of urban hacking as a form of "the destruction of the urban and the rupture of the environment as well as its rules and systems" that enables novel perceptions to arise brings forward a slightly more inclusive attempt encompassing flash mobs, pillow fights, and urban gardening.

Even if I agree with Gadringer's claim regarding the empowering strength of deconstruction and distance, my comparative research in East Asian cities has resulted in a more nuanced conclusion. The emphasis on destructive elements of urban hacking does not necessarily apply to current

<sup>2</sup> The regulations and management of "public open space" (PoS) in Hong Kong is currently complicated by the growing amount of space managed by the private developers.

<sup>3</sup> For participatory art in Hong Kong, see Cheung (2015); for contemporary graffiti and street art, see Valjakka (2015, 2016).



realities formulating the scenes, aesthetics, and practices because of the disparate genealogies and contingencies of urban hacking in the past and today. Seldom do local citizens, artists, and practitioners intend to destroy even though politically critical messages are expressed, especially during social movements. Instead, the aim is in a simultaneous intricate interaction of both to *de-* and *re*construct the sociopolitical and spatio-aesthetic dimensions of the urban public space. While resistance has been the dominant concept in particular in political demonstrations, the emphasis is shifting onto the resilience brought about by insurgent and propositional advocacy for societal change in Hong Kong.

### Urban knitting as the softener of urban fabric

Urban knitting is an innovative method to engage with the city through questioning the (gendered) spatial power relations and dominating norms of urban aesthetics. For Madga Sayeg (2015), the acclaimed pioneer, the core element is the “idea of enhancing the ordinary, the mundane, even the ugly, and not taking away its identity or its functionality”. Sayeg’s passion to incorporate convivial elements to transform commonly shared visions of the urban public space has been well received worldwide, especially among women. Urban knitting is an act of attaching a handmade, usually knitted or crocheted, item into urban infrastructure and it has affective qualities to renegotiate city spaces (Price 2015; see also Moore and Prain 2009). During the twenty-first century, urban knitting has proliferated, especially in North America and Europe, yet stitching on and around urban infrastructure in East Asian cities has remained a rare and, often, passing practice.

Urban knitting was mediated through transcultural exchange to Hong Kong. In July 2012, Sayeg organised a workshop and an exhibition, “I Knit MK”, at Langham Place, a shopping mall along the highly commercial Nathan Road in Mong Kok. A local knitting enthusiast, Esther Poon, inspired by her participation in the event, continued by contributing to international collaborations and organising workshops in Hong Kong. Since spring 2013, Poon has been commissioned for large-scale outdoor interventions, extending from collaborations with other knitting enthusiasts at commercial sites, such as the Fashion Walk in Wan Chai, to a broader civic engagement (up to 1000 volunteers) to wrap up Lek Yuen Bridge at Sha Tin Park during the Jockey Club Community Arts Biennale 2015 (personal communication, 2014; Knott 2015). Regardless of the positive feedback received from these collaborations, Poon’s aspirations to appropriate urban aesthetics continue to include unauthorised pieces, too (Figs. 3 and 4).



Fig. 3 Esther Poon’s first unauthorised urban knitting along Hollywood Road, December 2013. Courtesy of Esther Poon



Fig. 4 Esther Poon’s unauthorised urban knitting in Tai Ping Shan Street, November 2014. Photograph by the author



**Fig. 5 and 6** Unauthorised urban knitting by Esther Poon and yarn bombing crew on Ladder Street, October 2017. Photograph by the author

**Fig. 7 and 8** Unauthorised urban knitting project by Esther Poon and yarn bombing crew for Halloween 2017 on Pottinger Street, October 2017. Photograph by the author



The personal and empowering affectiveness of the unauthorised interventions, as captured in Poon's poem (the Facebook page of Poon, 23 December 2013), builds towards an enhanced reciprocal relationship—her belonging to the city and the city belonging to her:

Going through ten days of 'crocheting the city,'  
made me to understand Hong Kong again,  
A city where I have lived for decades,  
A 'home' that I had once forgotten,  
[I] began to feel that I belong to this city,  
but, in fact, this 'home' never abandoned me!  
[I] began to receive the warmth of 'home.'  
You must raise your head and go out to take the first  
step,  
to persist and adhere to your beliefs,  
to pursue and live up to your own dreams in a sensible  
way,

[and] there is no dream that won't come true!<sup>4</sup>

These lines indicate the altered subjectivity in relation to re-envisioning the city as a site for co-authorship, enabled by the act of civic engagement not only challenging the urban aesthetics but also reconfiguring the possibilities to redesign the urban infrastructure as a platform for creativity. To share this positive reclaiming experience, Poon started teaching yarn bombing in June 2014, and her crew quickly grew to have around 40 female members from varied professional and social backgrounds, living across Hong Kong and ranging in age from 25 to 70. Without asking for permissions, the crew has annually made interventions, usually for seasonal celebrations, focusing on the Sheung Wan and Central areas, which are already internationally celebrated for their (un)authorised artistic and creative practices and art galleries

<sup>4</sup> Translation by the author, published with the consent of Poon.



(see Figs. 5 and 6). The accessibility and visibility of these sites, especially among local and international tourists, further enhances their allure for the crew, rendering Pottinger Street as one of their regular sites. To celebrate Halloween in 2017, 14 active members designed spiders, ghosts, and other related decorations attached to the hand railing (Figs. 7 and 8), gaining positive media coverage and feedback from local residents and both local and international tourists alike.

Based on orally conducted surveys during and after the creation of five urban knitting interventions with passers-by and people living or working in the vicinity of the engaged sites in the consecutive years 2014–2017, it can be summarised that the clear majority of respondents have positive perceptions of urban knitting as enlivening the urban public space. In particular, practitioners involved in other forms of urban creativity, such as street art and contemporary graffiti, express their appreciation for urban knitting's ability to engage with the urban public space and broader audience bringing about aspirations of more public and representational space. Brightening up the atmosphere and interconnectedness are not the only benefits mentioned, though—some elderly people are delighted by the warmth of the material, especially on hand railings during chilly weather. The crew members confirm that they have mainly received positive feedback during their activities, even from police officers (Poon, personal communication, 2017; six crew members, personal communication, 2017) and one of them recalls: “In 2016, a guy stopped while passing by when we were setting up yarn bombing in Central before Christmas. Then he said ‘Thank you for doing this.’ I felt like I was an Angel at that moment!”

While the affirmative reception among a broader audience is premised upon the apolitical content and aesthetics of urban knitting, the fragmentary and contradictory claims of rights to the city are also brought forward by these practices. The few critical comments received by the crew vary from concerns of them wasting their time on frivolous activities while they should be doing something useful to the possible unhygienic features along with from making the handrail slippery in inclement weather to personal dislike of patterns and colours used. Occasionally, the appropriation of public space for personalised use draws disapproving remarks from elderly residents that resonate with common perception of the urban public space being owned and controlled by city authorities (Hou 2010, p. 4). Yet, it is exactly this discursive value becoming into being, initiated by the unauthorised civic engagement, and positioned in the realms of tolerance of illegality that has the potential to inspire citizens to reconsider their perceptions about and for public space and whether it should be reserved only for commercial activities.

Urban knitting enacts itself as a new form of sociality and provokes active subjectivity based on volunteerism, community building, and postmaterialist values. Besides a chance

of beautification and contribution to the community, crew members emphasise the effects of urban knitting as a transformer of social behaviour for the practitioners and residents alike because “yarn bombing can be a kind of release for us, no matter if it is just for a few seconds” from the stressful life that most Hongkongers are suffering from (a crew member, personal communication, 2017). Strengthening mutual solidarity despite the disparate backgrounds is also regarded as an important element in their practice, since “Yarn bombing can create our team spirit on every event” (personal communication, 2017). On a more personal level, the notions of freedom, ability to engage, and the interrelatedness with the urban environment were considered to be key reasons for the motivation (Poon, personal communication, 2017; six crew members, personal communication, 2017).

Knitting is advocated as feminist activism (Pentney 2008), and it can question the existing perceptions of women's agency, but since the “meaning of knitting is context-specific” and feminist inclinations are limited (Kelly 2014), it should not be understood as a representation of any single ideology. Rather, urban knitting as a lived socially constructed experience has broader transforming potential, visible also in Hong Kong. While women usually take the responsibilities of knitting and stitching, their male friends and family members are, nonetheless, recruited for assistance, even sewing together the knitted pieces. Consequently, although the female gender aspect is unusually strong in urban knitting in an otherwise male-dominated scene of contemporary graffiti and street art in East Asia, the causal effects of urban knitting for fostering social relations and co-authorship of the city are not necessarily limited to gender perspectives or feminist practices. In regards to enabling dialogic relationships, urban knitting resembles participatory art in Hong Kong resonating “with a growing desire for civic participation and recognition of diversity in social climate” (Cheung 2015, p. 12).

The clearly positive media coverage for urban knitting during the past years along with support in social media has surely paved the way for the popularity of Poon's projects. An ambiguous approach, which combines commissioned collaborations and unauthorised events along with apolitical yet compelling aesthetics of interventions that often resonate with seasonal festive atmosphere, creates more feasible circumstances to continue the practice especially amidst tensions in the post-Umbrella Movement context. The unauthorised and bottom-up approach advocated by Poon's yarn bombing crew both challenges and complements the policy recommendations to invigorate urban spaces made by the Bauhinia Foundation (2007). This kind of encounter between the urban public space and forms of street art to enhance alluring city image is acknowledged by a representative of the Hong Kong Tourism Board (personal communication, 2016), who affirmed



how even a single mural as a popular selfie spot can have a strong positive impact when aiming for a more diversified image of the city.

Instead of merely celebrating urban knitting as a selfie background, social media has recently gained more influential power to strengthen civic engagement. In late 2017, through an event agent, Fashion Walk commissioned Le Belle Epoque, another knitting workshop, to create Christmas decorations which were set up without any objections from the related governmental departments. Even though 90% of the publicity and feedback was positive, the Highway Department nonetheless ordered the installation to be removed after only a few days, apparently because of some public complaints. This threat of removal quickly gathered support especially through social media. On Le Belle Epoque's Facebook site alone over 2000 people indicated their concerns with some of them further contacting the government hotline to defend the installation. Consequently, the department rescinded its decision (related party, personal communication, 2018; Le Belle Epoque, personal communication, 2018; the Facebook page of Le Belle Epoque 2018).

These efforts to sustain this particular knitted work can be contextualised and interpreted in the light of previous positive public responses to other (un)authorised interventions to signify how the legal–illegal binary is not the defining evaluation criteria of urban knitting. More importantly, these concerns voiced by the public reveal how urban knitting is becoming appreciated to some extent by a portion of citizens who are willing to take civic action to oppose a governmental decision—an advocacy which they think is relevant for more inclusive co-authorship of the city. In the context of growing civic engagement and its interrelation with artistic and creative practices providing discursive sites for the significance of the urban public space, defending this intervention demonstrates how urban knitting enables not only direct participants but also the broader public to gradually gain new perceptions on spatial reconfigurations related to social norms, public policies, and city image making, which in turn leads to a cumulative affective shift for individuals to care about the physical space of their everyday lives and express it through the public sphere (social media) and social networks, contributing towards urban resilience.

If we accept Radoine's (2013) suggestion that personal experiences, including memories and sense of belonging, can enhance urban sustainability, yet extend it beyond heritage as a “resilient culturally dynamic impetus” to include contemporary forms of cultural production, such as urban knitting—which according to Price (2015), can “transform social and material relations” in an urban environment—Poon and knitting enthusiasts' re-envisioning of interrelations in and for the urban public space in Hong Kong through discursiveness and collaboration have the potential to enhance community resilience (across the city) and urban

neighbourhood resilience (especially with participatory projects, such as the one in Shatin).

## Digital hacking of the urban public space in Hong Kong

A recent form of urban hacking that clearly challenges the assumptions of material destruction and illegality is the hacking of and by digital media that has a prominent role in defining urban aesthetics. Aspirations to reinvent contemporary graffiti and street art include experimentation with projections, holograms, and laser tagging, all of which have been used in Hong Kong, to avoid accusations of vandalism. While “old-school” billboards have provided a fruitful locus of subversive messages, remote-controlled digital screens push the challenge to a whole new level. Altering messages by status quo and transnational corporations is commonly perceived as “cultural jamming” (DeLaure and Fink 2017), but if the hijacking is done in (online) media on one's own original work, an alternative reading and contextualisation is needed.

Since its unveiling in 2010, the International Commerce Centre (ICC), the highest skyscraper in Hong Kong, has displayed light and music shows on its facades. Such visual agency affirms Yiu's (2011) insights that the growing presence of financial power and creative industries has prompted, in particular, the waterfront of West Kowloon, the surrounding area of the ICC tower, to anticipate “future culture-led growth” and to indicate the creation of “a global urban image”. The ICC tower not only provided an exhibition site for Art Basel in 2014, but it is also where *Open Sky Gallery*, the long-term collaboration between City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media and the ICC, was launched. The two main aims of the project, along with *Open Sky Campus*, were to “enrich the urban environment of the city and transform the facades into an international gallery” (Maurice Benayoun, personal communication, 2016). While the mere physical presence of the tower and its facades inevitably altered the spatio-aesthetic dimensions of the city, it also became an essential discursive site in spring 2016 during the heated debates on the freedom of expression and co-authorship of the city amidst Hong Kong's precarious geopolitical situation.

The ICC tower was selected as one of the sites for *Human Vibrations*, the fifth Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition. One of the featured media artworks, titled *Our 60-second friendship begins now* (Figs. 9 and 10), was created by Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai. The work consists of six animations all referring to counting. According to the original statement, the primary intertextual reference derives from Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai's (b. 1958) film *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and “the artwork







**Fig. 9** Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai, *Our 60-second friendship begins now*, 2016. Courtesy of the artists



**Fig. 10** Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai, *Our 60-second friendship begins now*, 2016. Courtesy of the artists

invites viewers to celebrate the memorable cinematic moment” as well as “encourages people to have impromptu interactions with each other” (Sampson Wong, personal communication, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Coincidentally, the opening of the exhibition on 18 May 2016, took place during the Hong Kong visit of Chinese state leader, Zhang Dejiang. Even before but especially throughout the visit, high-level security measures not only severely interrupted the daily routines but were also believed to prevent Zhang from encountering any anti-China sentiments. Annoyed by the circumstances, Sampson Wong (personal communication, 2016) was compelled to consider how he could “hijack” their own work to make a statement.

The media artworks for *Human Vibrations* were displayed during the opening reception of *Open Sky Gallery ISEA2016*, together with all the 28 nominated works on 17

May, (Benayoun, personal communication, 2016). Right after this first display, the title of Wong’s and Lam’s work was changed to *Countdown Machine* and a new artistic statement clarified that each night, for 1 min, the artwork would display a digital clock counting down towards 1 July 2047.<sup>6</sup> The conceptual transformation of the “hijacked” artwork referred to another Wong Kar-wai film, *2046* (2004), which is filled with the metaphoric use of the number but also represents the last year of the “one country, two systems” policy. However, the “clock” on the ICC display continued to count down *the same minute* and showed *the same series of numbers* every evening—without any change in the display. The new statement and title did *not* alter the design of the work, merely its contextualisation through a modified interpretation. It was only on the related website (Add Oil Team 2016), that the time *was*—and still *is*—ticking.

The tactics labelled as “hijacking” by Wong remind us of Eco’s (1986, p. 143) call for “semiological guerrilla warfare”, which shifts the control of the message and its interpretations to the audience. The hijacking and modification of elements are also part of the “anti-spectacular tactics” developed by the Situationist International, which defamiliarises “the spectacle’s already estranged images in order to bring about unexpected re-appearances” (Stracey 2014, p. 7). *Détournement*-motivated resistance to and subversion of the interrelated hegemony of media, politics, and consumer culture is usually known as “culture jamming” (DeLaure and Fink 2017), although the genealogies of the diversified practices are more versatile.

As Sampson Wong’s immaterial intervention demonstrated, the dominant perceptions of culture jamming become especially questionable in East Asian cities where new forms of urban hacking are emerging. First, although the ICC can be regarded as an epitome of commercialisation of the urban public space, the facades were *not* used for advertising. Targeting them does not have the same semiotic context and impact as hijacking and subverting the existing commercial messages of billboards, although reconfiguring such a highly commercial structure as the ICC tower for political discourse emphasises the message: the interrelations of mainland Chinese wealth and power in Hong Kong. Second, the geopolitical relations of the site are inevitable because it is physically linked to the West Kowloon station, the terminal station of the much-debated Express Rail Link that connects Hong Kong with the Chinese mainland. Even though the *Countdown Machine* is a political criticism directed at the precarious position of Hong Kong and the growing mainlandisation of urban public space in Hong Kong, the artists did not hijack and subvert any official message or sign, but their own artwork. While doing so, they strengthened the question

<sup>5</sup> Original statement provided by the artists to author.

<sup>6</sup> Statement and a short video available online; Add Oil Team (2016).



of time passing towards 2047, already brought forward by Wong Kar-wai in his film, by repositioning it to spatio-aesthetics dynamics of the urban public space. Thirdly, if we pay closer attention to the practicalities of the tactics, the meaning of the work was not actually “hijacked” but, rather, “hacked” by the virtual addition online.

Although not to be considered as participatory art, the recontextualisation of the work and its exclusion on 23 May 2016 directly contributes to the growing civic society discourses in Hong Kong, since it launched intense public debate on censorship, civic engagement, and artists’ rights and responsibilities. While some hailed the artists’ wittiness, the majority of the art community seemed to feel that Wong and Lam had crossed the line by using the celebrational display of 28 works for self-promotional purposes only. Art critic Oscar Ho expressed the concern of how artistic rights are more than about individual intentions. The moral responsibility to and respect for other stakeholders are essential cornerstones of artistic professionalism. Even though subverting the original meaning of their own work was *not illegal*, it shattered the wholeness of the exhibition and was considered inattentive to the other participants. From the curator’s perspective, the unprofessional behaviour, rather than the content of the work, was the primary reason to withdraw the work. For her, it was not an act of censorship, but a professional sanction (Caroline Ha Thuc, personal communication, 2016). Analysed from the broader perspective of the art community, the reframing of the work as civic activism with political implications also put the shared artistic freedom at risk, as Ho (2016) maintains: “If an isolated case causes a termination of the sponsorship of the venue, it would be extremely unfair to other artists, including those who are unwilling to talk about politics. We have to protect all kinds of freedom of expression, including the right to talk, and not talk, about politics”. Ho’s statement was unfortunately somewhat prescient as the *Open Sky Project* was, indeed, cancelled later that year (Benayoun, personal communication, 2016).

While Ho’s perceptions might sound supportive of the institutional stance regarding artistic expression, they echo Harvey’s (2009) understanding of Lefebvre’s often-reiterated “right to the city” with an emphasis on the collective power for social change as a “right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2009, p. 315). Even in cases of civil disobedience, Harvey’s defence for collaborative actions for reshaping the city is inevitably valid: to gain long-term social change requires collaboration in terms of civic engagement. Nonetheless, the importance of individuals cannot be forgotten because as Clarke and Mayer (2017, p. 131) advocate, it is the “individuals who must adapt to changing circumstances to effectively contribute to community resilience—not solely the institutions themselves”. Despite its unimagined consequences to the exhibition

projects, the impact of digital hacking as a form of civic engagement building towards cultural resilience lies in its immateriality and the ability to provoke public discussions as well as raise social awareness of the dominating spatial policies.

By de/reconstructing the meaning of their work, Wong formulated a rupture between the real site and digital sphere that revealed how the privately owned ICC tower dominates the spatio-aesthetic dimensions in the city front. To further understand the significance of this intervention and its contribution to the notion of urban resilience, it must be mirrored against the use of the same screen to welcome Xi Jinping for the 20th Anniversary celebrations of the transfer of sovereignty to China in July 2017 (Mingpao 2017). “Privatized public space”, as Zukin (2010, p. 128) elaborates, “tends to reinforce social inequality” while “state control can make it [public space] more repressive, more narrowly ideological, and not representative at all” (*ibid*, p. 158). In 2016, urban hacking demonstrated how ICC as the most visible site in urban public space in Hong Kong cannot be used to express sociopolitical concerns and the political message displayed a year later strengthened this argument: in resonance with the geopolitical circumstances, the screen renders into further non-representativeness of diversity of public opinions.

If social resilience as a conceptual space is essential for understanding how human systems respond to and recover from external and internal disturbances, in particular at the level of community resilience and ‘at the intersection between *economic, social, and environmental capital*’ yet ‘acknowledging key resilience drivers linked to economic, sociopolitical, psychological, and moral issues’ along with ‘importance of power relations’ (Wilson 2012, p. 2), then could it be argued that cultural resilience through artistic and creative practices, as indicated by urban knitting and digital hacking, can also contribute to these essential issues faced by urban communities (such as cultural practitioners and artists) especially during ideological transitions and changing power relations?

## Conclusions: urban hacking as civic engagement for more inclusive resilience

The simultaneously private yet shared intentions of urban knitting and digital hacking in relation to the urban public space and spatio-aesthetic dimensions underline questions on what kind of (cultural) rights to the city should be advocated and by whom. In this regard, they echo Talen’s (2015) insights that although DIY urbanism in the US draws strength from “right to the city” discourses, its origins are embedded in nineteenth-century civic engagement. In the context of Hong Kong, the growing incapability of the



government to resolve tensions has led civil society to seek new methods to formulate state–society relations beyond the conventional model of citizenship (Ku 2012). This tendency has become ever more prominent in the post-Umbrella Movement context in which, similar to other social movements that fail to reach their goal, participants continue their pursuits through new strategies (cf. Cai 2017, p. 153). While political resistance continues to be one form of civil activism, the overall emphasis is shifting onto cultural and social resilience through civic engagement brought about by insurgent and propositional advocacy for societal change in Hong Kong through varied, and also apolitical, discursive sites and activities. These opportunities to re-envision the city by diversified communities, not limited to specific spatial urban neighbourhoods, build towards more nuanced modalities of urban resilience.

As the two case studies indicate, urban hacking by combining strategies in both the urban public space and the public sphere is one of these new methods of civic engagement to reclaim the co-authorship of the city. Simultaneously, they demonstrate intricate interrelations with the digital public sphere which resonate with and extend the significance of Castell's (2012) perceptions of the "hybrid space" in advocating social change. The multilayered processes, taking further conceptual metalevels in terms of digital hacking, extend the impact of the practices beyond the immediate participants or audience. Urban hacking exposes contradictions and questions social norms through intricate employment of "publicness" both at tangible and intangible levels. Consequently, it contributes to the significance of insurgent public spaces as sites enabling alternative identities, meanings, and relationships to thrive (Hou 2010).

The heated discussions following digital hacking succeeded in highlighting the growing precariousness of the urban public space in Hong Kong and contributed to robust debates regarding co-authorship of the city. In parallel, Esther Poon's bottom-up, long-term engagement to challenge spatial (gendered) power structures and aesthetic norms opens up new ways for participants and citizens alike to envision their everyday environment. While the tactics of these two cases differ, they both manage to alter people's perceptions of the dominating circumstances and, to some extent, bringing about public awareness regarding what is happening to the urban public space, for whom and why it is constructed, and whether citizens can have any authority over it. Because the strategies of urban hacking are not limited to talking "about public space but rather *through it, in it and with it*" (Schneider and Friesinger 2010, p. 24), by emphasising the socio-cultural values of discursiveness, they provide possibilities for people to connect with the city and with each other, strengthening reciprocal relationship based on belonging. The positive impact that these practices can accumulate include solidarity extending beyond

the peer group, shared co-authorship of urban environment, and awareness of postmaterialist values. By creating physical and discursive (in)tangible sites to interact with other citizens for shared aims, urban hacking in its varied forms can strengthen the commitment to care about the urban living environment and, consequently, be considered as one form of cultural resilience that further contributes to urban resilience.

Intricate cognitive, emotional, sociopolitical, and economic reasons underlying personal notions of one's belonging to or alienation from a city are not reducible to memories, traditions, and heritage. Rather, as the two case studies indicate, place attachment and caring about the city can also be facilitated by novel forms of urban hacking that, through (un)authorised strategies and intricate use of the digital public sphere, reclaim the co-authorship of the urban public space and enable new (political) subject. By de- and reconstructing the usual aesthetics, patterns, and rhythms in the urban environment, urban hacking challenges spatial structures and policies. The positions taken and effects caused by urban hacking have become ever more complex, raising awareness of geopolitical, socio-ecological, and cultural transformations that threaten the future liveability in the city in question and through these characteristics it can contribute to urban resilience.

Some strategies are more successful in their engagement while others may have unexpected and unwanted consequences. I share Douglas' (2018) concerns that more balanced studies with the critical analysis of positive and negative impacts would facilitate the recognition of the emergent challenges, unequal positions, and cumulative effects of these novel practices in the urban public space. Furthermore, as Finn (2014) aptly maintains more inclusive collaboration by city authorities to find ways to mitigate the negative effects and engage with these projects to strengthen their possibilities for positive social change might be a feasible way to proceed. To achieve these goals, better understanding of the capability of urban hacking to enhance civic engagement and co-authorship of the city which contributes to urban resilience, along with its sociopolitical and cultural contexts, becomes ever more evident.

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