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WOVEN RELATIONALITIES:
THE MOST INVINCIBLY MADE IN
GREATER SOUTHERN CHINA

**“BECOMING FASHION”:
WEAVING SELF, BUSI-
NESS, STATE, WORLD**

This is how the world began. The primeval warp fluttering through the sky waits to be united with whatever will braid it, with whatever will cling to it by chance. This is the hidden core of the universe.

According to this legend, the cosmos is like a continuously expanding piece of fabric composed of the thousand crossings begotten by the passage of time. The legend also suggests that the past is the finished part of this boundless tapestry of the world, while the future is like a warp ready to gather in fortuitous events, adventures, and plots that will transform it into woven matter. It suggests that each of us has our own hair fluttering in the wind, a warp that through chance encounters will form the fabric of our singular destiny.

—Isabella Ducrot, *Text on Textile*



All images courtesy of NZIT's Sewing Coop

Just as repetitive manual work sparks a free flow of wandering thoughts, the metaphorical romanticizing of weaving has long been present in language and society—its nature as structure and becoming-structure rich enough to offer a full tapestry, so to speak, of ways of seeing and understanding the world. From the warp and weft as gender divide to the entire cosmic fabric of life—textile, clothing, fashion, and of course, this journal, are all examples the metaphor can be stretched to nearly any breadth or depth possible.

At the less romantic end of the scale, the labor-intensive activity that *produces* the weave is a global industry—one that artist-researcher Femke de Vries describes as “amputating the production reality of a garment, its cultural history, its relation to a body, its daily use, and the exploitation and waste that came about in its creation.”¹ Reading from my perspective here in Hong Kong—at the nipple of the factory of the world and as a self-proclaimed phantom limb of this industry—it seems fitting to reconsider the relationality which de Vries vouches for despite such violence.

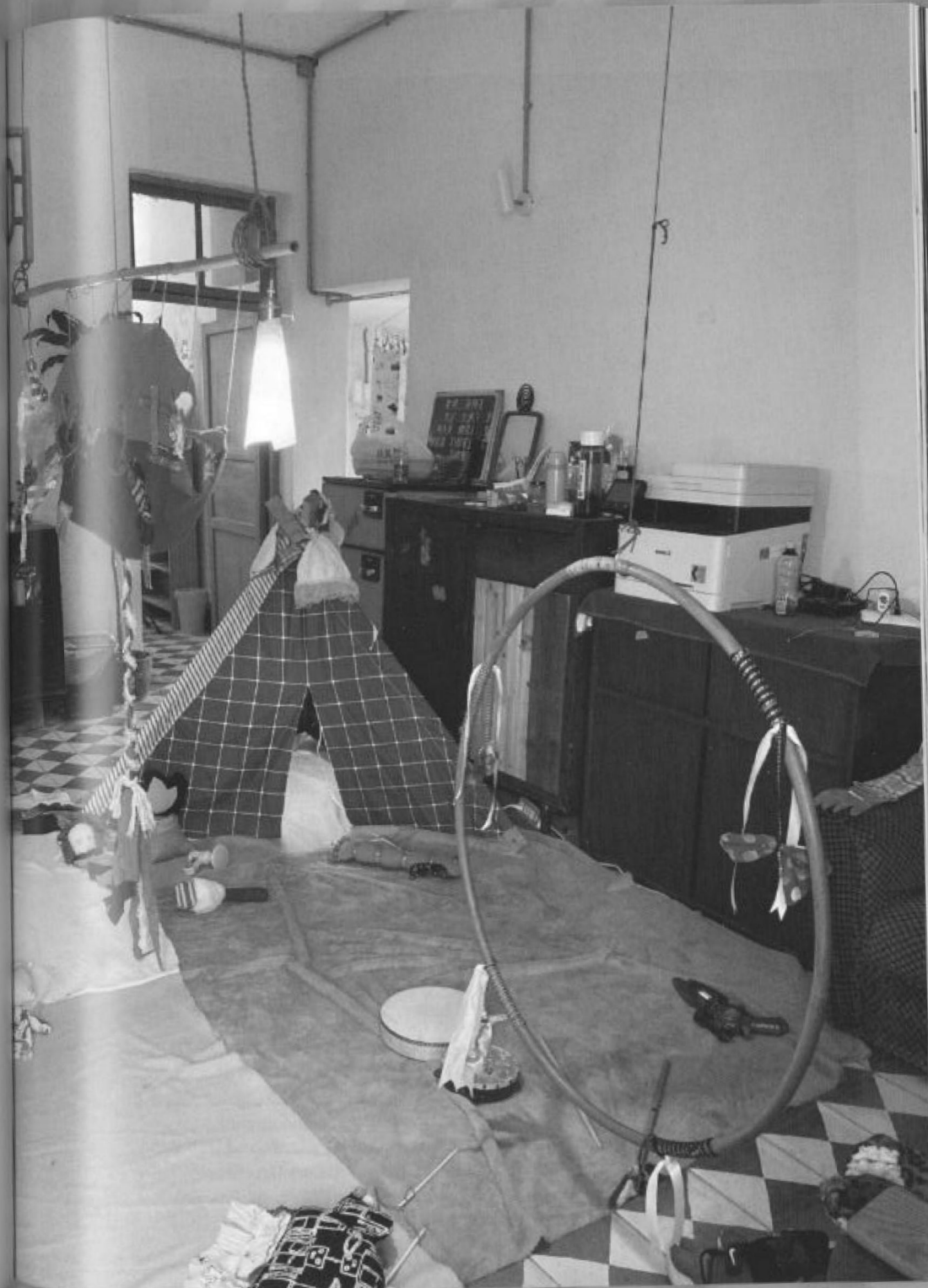
To begin textually, my poor descriptors of “massive” or even

1. Femke de Vries, “Fashion in the Desert of the Real,” *Viscose*, no. 2 (2021): 13–18.

“world-making” are not enough to compete with the impact of a combined sum of US\$ 215.6 billion for Hong Kong and mainland China exports of textiles and garments in one year alone.² The majority of the industry is concentrated in southern China for geoclimatic, political, and cultural reasons, and it occurs to me while reading a plethora of mostly boring literature from the realms of business, organization theory, and cultural history, that my own biography, spanning the course of a few generations and migrations, interweaves with the history of the southern Chinese garment industry—and that, crucially, both of these genealogies are not just southern Chinese stories, but stories of globalization.

People often describe me as a workaholic, and my excuse is to blame the nature/nurture symbiosis within—a combination of hardworking Chinese genes and a North American work

2. The figure reported by the World Bank initiative “World Integrated Trade Solution” for China’s 2019 exports of textiles and clothing is US\$ 212.57 billion, and Hong Kong is separately listed with a sum of \$3.05 billion. Taiwan is not included in the index of 238 countries. “Textiles and Clothing Imports by Country in US\$ Thousand 2019,” World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed July 10, 2021, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/WLD/Year/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/BY-COUNTRY/Product/50-63_TextCloth.





ethic that often finds me the lonely one left in the studio after hours. I am not sure if this union bears any comparative advantages like a free trade agreement, but let this self-indulgent confession set the stage for a "relationally" woven genealogy.

A "CHINESE PRODUCTIVITY TRIANGLE,"³ WE WORKAHOLICS

My father's side of the family is from Guangdong Province,³ more

3. See a thorough analysis of the divisions of labor presented by the trinity of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in Chen Xiangming, "The New Spatial Division of Labor and Commodity Chains in

specifically from the city of Shunde, best known for culinary exports which typify Chinese cuisine around the world. While they came from a line of fishermen, when my father moved to the United States, one of his longest-standing jobs was as restaurateur and cook for a small Chinese restaurant, meaning that my Chinese-American upbringing is also part of a well-known immigrant story—a stereotype of our particular intersections of race and class.

the Greater South China Economic Region," in *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*, ed. Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 165–86.



If we are to discuss the culture of southern China, it is crucial to include Hong Kong, Taiwan, parts of Southeast Asia, and even Chinese immigrant populations worldwide. Much like the movement of fashion trends, "cultural practices have far scantier respect for checkpoints and national boundaries, and actively destroy national boundaries even as they cross it."⁴ In making this statement, researchers Lawrence Liang, Prashant Iyengar, and Jiti Nichani aim to trace the

4. Lawrence Liang, Prashant Iyengar, and Jiti Nichani, *How Does an Asian Commons Mean* (Lalitpur: South Asia Partnership International, 2008).

movement of culture as a lens through which to understand the commons from an Asian perspective, and their examples range from the evolution of Jātaka poetry about Gautama Buddha to Filipino land irrigation practices, and the late 1990s pirating of DVDs—movements as relays of time, knowledge, and otherwise solidarity.

My mother's side of the family, from Fujian Province, was meant to become Taiwanese, but a botched escape plan during the war ended with us becoming Hongkongers.

In fact, the sphere of clothing manufacturing has also been so

transformed over the last decades that fashion researchers affirm that what is most influential about the industry is no longer the product but its logistics, timing, and information transfer.⁵ This returns fashion to its original sense—as a time-based, ever-evolving system of value and production, which, as with trends, is applicable to all forms of consumption. It is, therefore, no exaggeration when Pratt et al. conclude that “it may be argued that all industries are becoming fashion industries.”⁶

My practice, or what could be described as the tokens of my productivity in the world, is socioculturally determined, and the intense circulations of the fashion and apparel industry can only be portrayed as the confluence of politics, economy, and culture that both unites and implodes the dysfunctional family ties between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Mainland.

According to urban and global studies theorist Chen Xiangming,

5. Andy Pratt, Paola Borrione, Mariangela Lavanga, and Marianna D'ovidio.

“International Change and Technological Evolution in the Fashion Industry,” in *Essays and Research: International Biennial of Culture and Environmental Heritage*, ed. M. Agnoletti, A. Carandini, W. Santagata (Florence: Badecchi & Vivaldi, 2012), 363.

6. *Ibid.*, 360.

the rise of the concept of a Greater South China Economic Region (GSCER), or what has also been called the “Chinese Productivity Triangle,” can first be tied to China’s domestic economic reform and open development policies of the late 1970s. Deng Xiaoping’s very mainstream hip-hop mantra of the time, “To get rich is glorious,” called upon the coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong to serve as the first two laboratories for bringing in the money. Fujian’s eastern coast lies just across the strait from Taiwan, and the history of ties between the two, ranging from dialect to kinship and politics, made the “return home” of Taiwanese money in the 1980s a natural collaboration.⁷ Similarly, the shared culture and dialect of Guangdong and Hong Kong, combined with the many additional benefits gained from Hong Kong’s other identity as a neoliberal playground for the British, made for a very smooth transition for new business deals between Hong Kong and Cantonese cities such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Zhuhai.

7. Basic Chinese history lesson: Along with US-backed Chiang Kai-shek, many Kuomintang party members fled to Taiwan from 1949 with their defeat to the Communists during the Chinese Civil War.

My Fujianese grandmother on my mother's side could claim to be a participant of Hong Kong's golden era. She lived in Shanghai before coming to Hong Kong, and I wonder if she acquired her sewing skills there. Even today, many homes in the smaller cities and villages of southern China still possess sewing machines, and while not always capitalized upon, perhaps it lays a foundation for some things to be intuited—like growing up knowing the rhythmic sound of that machine. Our family did not have the money of the refugee industrialists, but this traditional skillset became, along with the free Christian boarding schools that my mother and her siblings attended, a resource that enabled our family to survive.

From the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong was already known for respected brands of toys, watches, plastics, and clothing. Garments and textiles became the core of its output, comprising the largest sector of the city’s manufacturing, as well as the largest and most developed textile industry in Asia.⁸ A

8. According to historian Ho Yiu-sang, the 20,000 cotton weaving machines and nearly 30,000 denim weaving machines humming in Hong Kong’s mills made the city the world’s biggest exporter of textiles in the 1970s and 1980s. See 何耀生 Ho Yiu-sang, *香港製造製造香港*

commodity chain analysis of the apparel industry is sequenced according to five primary steps: raw material supply, textile manufacturing, garment production, export/distribution, and finally marketing/retail.⁹ As a rocky, geographic blip on the map unsuitable for large-scale farming, Hong Kong’s supply of raw cotton was all imported. While there was some industrial production of textiles at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not until World War II and the civil war in China that masses of money, know-how, and technology began to flee the mainland, thus jump-starting the golden era of Hong Kong manufacturing.¹⁰ So yes, there was a time

[*Made in Hong Kong, Making Hong Kong*] (Hong Kong: Ming Pao Publications, 2009), 22–23.

9. Gary Gereffi, “The International Competitiveness of Asian Economies in the Apparel Commodity Chain” (paper presented at RETA 5875: International Competitiveness of Asian Economies: A Cross-country Study, February 2002), <https://www.adb.org/publications/international-competitiveness-asian-economies-apparel-commodity-chain>.

10. I have previously addressed this history in relation to the parallel development of Hong Kong’s printing industry, see further in: Elaine W. Ho and Beatrix Pang, “Getting Lighter, Still Labour-Intensive,” *Publication Studio Portable* (Hong Kong: Publication Studio Pearl River Delta and Publication Studio

when “Made in China” held a great deal more leverage than it does today. It was a Shanghai industrialist that rescued cotton spinning capacity in Hong Kong where it had previously failed, and most post-war garment factories were actually owned by businessmen from Guangdong.¹¹ Whereas Hong Kong apparel production emphasized the low to mid-range of consumer ready-to-wear, it was tailors from Shanghai and the Teochew area of eastern Guangdong who brought a niche of tailor-made, upmarket clothing and fine embroidery to the Fragrant Harbor. And thus, with this increasing density of expertise, localized production, and manufacturing capacity, Hong Kong’s competitiveness grew. The additional affordances of the city’s entrepôt status carried Hong Kong-made apparel first to the British colonies, then from the end of the 1950s into Europe and North America.

Rotterdam, 2019), 31–45.

11. “Textiles – Industry Focus” and “Garment – Industry Focus”, 香港記憶 Hong Kong Memory, accessed July 10, 2021, https://www.hkmemory.hk/MHK/collections/postwar_industries/manufacturing_industries/textiles/industry_focus/index.html and https://www.hkmemory.hk/MHK/collections/postwar_industries/manufacturing_industries/garment/industry_focus/index.html.

A few years after they fled to Hong Kong in the late 1940s, my grandfather died, and my grandmother was left alone to fend for five children. She supported them by working in various garment factories across the city over an approximately thirty-year period, following Hong Kong’s manufacturing and urban development from the 1950s and 1960s into then-new industrial districts such as Kwun Tong and San Po Kong. She started in the line assembly for glove manufacturing, later graduating to the position of a sample maker for ladies’ fashions.

The story that follows from here is a typical trajectory of late-stage capitalism and globalization—which, in postmodern terms, is to say a kind of neo-imperialism. The buyer-driven commodity chain plus rising production and labor costs have slowly pushed production further into the hinterland or to other countries, and massive retailers from the Global North such as Walmart and Nike have coerced their collaborating, outsourced manufacturers to accept low prices and conditions that would eventually not be possible in Hong Kong. With Deng’s reforms, a cheap labor gold rush shifted attention back to the mainland, and Hong Kong manufacturing began to disappear in the 1980s, just as we see it today being pushed further and

further from the major cities of China to wherever labor might still be exploited: Apple and Foxconn go to Zhengzhou; Nike goes to Cambodia; H&M goes to Vietnam.

Eventually, my grandmother went to the United States. Technically, her legal status meant that she was not supposed to work, but it was not difficult to find under-the-table jobs with small factories owned by other Chinese immigrants. Since she could not drive, the routine involved my mother helping to bring cut fabric home, and my grandmother would sew finished garments which were then brought back and paid for by the piece. This cottage-industry style of production was common back in Hong Kong, helpful both for factories who had too many orders to be managed in-house and mothers with domestic duties who could work while staying at home. I grew up intimately acquainted with the dull hum of her sewing machine and felt proud and astonished when we once strolled through a department store and my grandmother recognized her work hanging from a dress rack.

NZTT AND GUNG-HO RELATIONALITY

After this long-winded 101 through Hong Kong and southern Chinese history, as well as my own departure from the fashion industry, it

tickles me to return laterally by way of friendships with young artists based in Guangzhou. I have known the members of NZTT Sewing Co-op since before they were “The Most Invincible Female Troupe of the Cosmos” (a translation of their purposely hyperbolic moniker, NvZi TianTuan [女子天團]), and while I would not say we have been very close or had many opportunities for prolonged engagement, perhaps my encounters with them over time have played out like Guiliana Bruno’s unfolding historicities at the material surfaces of encounters—a transversal weaving of the personal and affective with the social and the spatial.¹²

Bruno is enamored with 1960s Hong Kong as stylized by Wong Kar Wai, of course. But NZTT’s aesthetic is more akin to a riot grrrl sneaking into the home economics teacher’s supply closet to read 1990s pop idol magazines. There is a certain romance at work here, as seen in the slogans which are embroidered, printed, and scrawled on some of their pieces: “Sewing all my desires together / Provoking new gaps”; “Manufactured by Women.” But without forgetting the “co-op”

12. See Guiliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).



origins of their name, textiles, clothing—and yes, romance—should be read here as both an aesthetic *and* a relational economy. To elaborate, perhaps some of that boring literature from sociology and organization theory could be helpful here.

In contrast to the number-crunching economic bias of social scientists at the time, a well-known body of research from the mid-1990s by management theorist Brian Uzzi focused on the fashion industry of New York as a case study for examining the embeddedness of social structure and interpersonal ties within market transactions.¹³ What is

13. See Brian Uzzi, "Social Structure and

significant about Uzzi's work is the qualitative analysis given to explain and enrich the social understandings of economic performance. Or, stated more simply, Uzzi knows the game of *guanxi*. Oversimplified in English as a form of networking, *guanxi* and the subjective movements of human interaction could be clarified here by way of organization theory as a structural factor to re-weigh the field of economics. It is no surprise then, that Uzzi's work inspired colleagues working in Asia; you could say that intimacy, *guanxi*-style, embeds bling

Competition in Interfirm Networks: The Paradox of Embeddedness," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 42, no.1 (1997): 35–67.

into our sociality rather than the other way around. Thus, in line with the changing "fashion" from Uzzian embeddedness towards the relational turn in economic sociology, art, and theory thereafter, in the early 2000s sociologists Chong Gao and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce embarked on fieldwork in Guangzhou, studying various levels of production within the garment factories and markets of the city. Their analysis of the common networks between relatives, friends, and hometown-fellows working together in the industry offered a Chinese perspective to explain that "the concepts of mutual aid among relatives and loyalty to kinsmen are intermingled with mutual support in the business world."¹⁴ *Guanxi*, baby.

Gao and Kuah-Pearce's observations of a relational economy with Chinese characteristics can be traced in the work of NZTT. Rather than the power and social climbing for which *guanxi* is notorious, however, here the concept of social support features literally—"Mutual help is seeing each other"—with the visual as a metaphor for the space created by cooperation and camaraderie. Though such poetic notions are buoyed by NZTT's romantic use

14. *Ibid.*, 30.

of lace, embroidered baby towels, and women's work, it's worth considering the very complex interweaving of their role in the precarious environment of Guangzhou's creative industry—between the social *and* the economic. In fact, I am much more keen to investigate the "hard cores of practice" to which NZTT allude in their self-introduction. Beyond the initial impression of colorful floral prints, jovial workshop gatherings, and a Hello Kitty hand puppet, where does the hard core manifest, and towards what does it point?

Like the overload of images of gathering people that typify relational aesthetics and socially engaged practice, what made art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's claims in the late 1990s and early 2000s so simultaneously inflammatory and appealing is both the illusory hope of a democratization of the institution and the affective reverberations of person-to-person relations. Scrolling through NZTT's work, the first glimpse of a buzzing workshop at a private museum in Beijing ("Boundary of Intimacy", April 2021) or a tea party at the art academy in Guangzhou ("Milk Tea Stall: Reunion Witch Soup", May 2021) beg for a similarly double-edged reading. But as a recent review of NZTT's work reads: "sewing is a

smaller unit with a very different stance”—a closer examination of the micro-scale reveals the delight of unexpected new meanings.¹⁵

*Chances for mistakes,
Fragmented time,
Trivial labor,
Auxiliary role,
The autonomy of body,
The subject of creation,
The discussion of violence,
Longing for pure love,
Despair for marriage,
Sew everything,
Sewing all my desires together*

— from *Transforming Boys and Girls Family Guide*, NZTT Sewing Co-op.

The above lyrics from NZTT's song and accompanying music video

15. This quote is actually a mistranslation from the original Chinese text, which, more simply, pointed out NZTT's status as a smaller unit within the community groupings of Soeng Joeng Toi (SJT), the project space where NZTT members initially came together in 2017, but as the next line quoted from the NZTT song reveals, "Chances for mistakes" can make for a lovely melody. See Xie Siyan (Yanzi), "Threads Adeptly Brandished by Loving Women: NZTT Sewing Co-op and its Innovative Practice," *Heichi*, May 27, 2021, <http://www.heichimagazine.org/en/articles/635/threads-adeptly-brandished-by-loving-women-nztt-sewing-co-op-and-its-innovative-practice>.

point to the frustrations of womanhood equally unraveled and mended by the processes of female labor. Relationality is complicated. So while Gao and Kuah-Pearce's research seems to echo a chicken-or-egg question of whether social relations precede or result from economic transaction, and Bourriaud's relational aesthetics has long failed as a mode of capitalist defiance,¹⁶ a subtle antagonism behind the visuals of NZTT's soft and fuzzy warmth does exist, bearing a greater potential for reassigning value and rethinking our relationships to the world and with one another.

NZTT questions the possibilities of cooperative production and the relations to the fruits of their labor. Without backgrounds in either music or fashion, they have somehow come together to produce clothing.

16. Another subtle mistranslation in the English version of Xie's essay occurs in the paragraph that mentions Bourriaud, insinuating that it is relational aesthetics "which deploys reimagined social relations and forms of organization to resist the powerlessness and alienation engendered by capitalism," a linkage with which I would highly disagree. The original Chinese version, however, juxtaposes capitalist resistance within the practice of SJT, not necessarily in direct relation to Bourriaud and relational aesthetics.

SEWING CO-OP
女子天团

缝纫机
开放日

每周
一日开放缝纫机，
什么时候结束都可以

缝什么都可以，
只要你愿意，
即使只缝一条线，
缝纫机交给你，
带你自己的物品，
来缝补来改造，
不精美不酷炫，
没关系，
只要对你有意义，
不会用缝纫机没关系，
我们一起学习，
一边缝一边聊心中的痕迹，
只想用缝纫机不聊意义，
当然可以。

每周
一日

一边缝一边聊

时间 6/21周日下午3点
什么时候结束都可以

地点 晓园北路上阳台

Manufactured by NZTT



objects, installations, and videos that appear equally in art institutions (for example, Guangdong Times Museum, 2017/2021; Beijing Gallery Weekend, 2020) or simply as encounters and things to share amongst friends (*Wedding Dresses*, 2018; *Birthday Party for Li Yu*, 2020). This blurring of the boundaries between gift, artwork, and commodity speaks to a contemporary, conflicted resistance to the engulfing conditions of capitalism in art and life today. However romantic their do-it-yourself-and-with-others aesthetic seems, a number of relational struggles recur in both NZTT's work and their ways of working: the awkwardness of talking with strangers about the pains of love ("Boundary of Intimacy" workshop, X Museum, March 2021), addressing single motherhood ("Sharing Session for the Single Mother Community", 2019), and internal conflicts. The latter has been especially demanding, leading one member, Two Moons (双月, or Miaozi), also a member of the parallel collective Chao Co-op, to leave NZTT in the spring of 2021. When I attended an online presentation given by NZTT not long after the split, I was touched by the women's willingness to address this difficulty in a public setting while at the

same time remaining sensitive to the nuances of changed relations. This admittance of a certain failure to care for Miaozi—their friend, collaborator, and a precarious single mother—to the extent that they had collectively imagined at an earlier stage of the project, demonstrates one of the more painful aspects of care work: knowing when to let go. As such, the sense of time, and what Maya Deren has called an inherently woman's time, is embedded within the dynamics and practice of NZTT, but without the didacticism or overbearing aspects of much activist or socially engaged art. Instead, the sewing circle simply becomes a place of shared time whose results neither fully reveal nor veil the process. Of the act of sewing itself, they say: "You can give it a lot of meaning, or it can be meaningless." Such contradictions may sound absurdist or abysmal, but when tied to the productivity of a female co-op, NZTT's position between a place of leisure and work is non-hierarchically and simultaneously social and economic, pointing to a self-circulating, artistic micro-ecology that is both vulnerable and muscular.

As an aside, the anachronistic term "gung-ho" as used in American English stems from

an adulteration of “working together” or “cooperative” in Chinese.¹⁷ This distillation of an affective spirit exemplifies the problem of misreading slogans and co-opting others’ stories as representatives of process and/or cultural and economic formations over time. This would be my primary critique of NZTT’s efforts, both to them as makers and to the audiences who try to read their work. To borrow from the work on cultural hegemony and antagonism by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, the potential of relationality lies in *incomplete* subjectivity,¹⁸ and the contradictions of “both the soft and hard cores of [NZTT’s] practice” are the most convincing when they open up fissures of meaning—to renegotiate, resist, and renege

17. Gung-ho is purportedly derived from the Chinese acronym 共和 *gong he*, a shortened version of 工業合作社 *gongye hezuoshe*, the industrial cooperatives that were first organized as a foreign and domestic, left and right-wing aligned movement during the Republican era. Literally, *gong he* means “work together,” and gung-ho was later infused by the US Marine Corps with the militaristic zealousness of a battle cry of solidarity having nothing to do with the organizational structure of cooperatives.

18. See Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

upon commodification. This is a chicken-or-egg contextualization of NZTT’s place in Guangzhou. Compared to China’s other first-tier cities like Shanghai and Beijing, Guangzhou still relies upon manufacturing capacity and manages to escape the socio-economic extremities induced by the real estate market and high living costs. It has hardly any comparable art market, making for another kind of environment for young people to nurture ways of living and working together.

THE WEAVE OF AMBIVALENT RELATIONS

Hong Kong—and Guangzhou, by way of these complex relationships—implies that the social, economic, and political gateway between China and the rest of the world is less of a clean seam and more a gray, ambivalent kinship.

My Hong Kong friends seem alienated by my friendships with those on the mainland. But with the gears of the 2020 National Security Law already churning, it is now more than ever the case that we should look to our aligned networks further north to learn the strategies which keep resistance possible. Let’s not even bother talking about independence anymore. In fact, the inevitability of our being part of the matrix

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does not need to deter from the need or choice to maneuver through its gaps, fissures, and alter-pathways.

While narrating the break-up with their former member, NZTT Sewing Co-op described the new configuration as a period of dormancy and review before relating to one another again in the future. This trajectory of growth and determination to not only affect those around them but to be affected and changed as well is the space of an ever-arriving subjectivity. As Uzzi hints in his research, to better understand the nature of relations between colleagues, businesses, and institutions is not a sieve for maximizing profits, but rather—and I will overlay my own ambitions openly here—for derailing the

system. It sounds antagonistic, or even “hardcore,” perhaps. But on a broader level, maybe it’s simply an economy of time and value. Something a bit like fashion, in fact.



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