Figure 1. Artist D D E D makes a mockery of an independent venue's closure. It reads: "Stop! Drop your microphones!"

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YOU HAVE PRESSURE, I HAVE PRESSURE

Hacking, Art & Activism in Hong Kong

Sometimes when two things seem similar enough, we are tempted to say they are the same. Often they may be similar, but rarely are they the same. This is the case with artists and hackers. Hackers are not artists, and artists are not hackers. Except when they are. Nevertheless it's interesting to consider the question, especially in a setting like Hong Kong, where practices of all sorts are pushed up against each other on a daily basis. When I was asked to write about art, hacking and activism in Hong Kong, I thought first of the *Hong Kong Blondes*, who we'd been discussing in my "Hacktivism" class. The Blondes, with glam leader Blondie Wong, were among the first politically-motivated "hackers", working with the *Cult of the Dead Cow* (CDC) group in the US to smuggle dissidents out of China after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Though the CDC were never averse to hyperbole, one member said that the Blondes, who operated in and around Hong Kong, had "the capacity to snap the backbone of the Chinese end of the Net." (Hesseldahl 1998). My second thought, in sharp contrast, was of Art Basel, the art fair that, in 2013, chose Hong Kong as its second location, and has been critiqued as, among other things, an "orgy of capitalist excess" (Salmon 2014). Hong Kong isn't a surprising choice for such events when you consider the largely untapped Chinese art market, and the vast amounts of money flowing through the city on a daily basis. It was, after all, rated, for the 23rd year in a row, the city with the "world's freest economy". And so the art fair is perhaps best recognized as a reflection of this, and with it, the city's shameful Gini coefficient, which recently hit a 46-year high. Hong Kong also has the highest rents on the planet, a condition that leaches into every aspect of creative life in the city. Music venues close (or are shut down) as fast as they can open, artists can't afford work spaces, galleries are unable to show non-commercial art, and one can hardly read a book in a café without being asked to make way for the next customer. And while government officials are happy to trumpet their support for the "creative industries", they appear to have little idea what this might practically mean. Consider a recent statement by Chief Executive, Carrie Lam: "My policy address also promises to promote the creative industry in Hong Kong. Fashion design is an important part of the creative industry that means the most to women". She continues: "If I paid more attention to my appearance, people might think that the proficiency of design industry isn't too bad in a city with such a chief executive." Enough said? Well, you might think, the last five years have been rather turbulent for Hong Kong, so perhaps leaders can be forgiven for focusing attention elsewhere (though perhaps not

for the blatant sexism). After all, we've had the Dock Workers' strike of 2013 (Siu 2013), Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement, Edward Snowden's visit, China's ("alleged") abduction of local booksellers, and lots more.

Hong Kong is under threat, to be sure: from income inequality and lack of space, from lack of clean air and affordable healthy food, and from China's ever-strengthening grip. As a common saying here goes, "你有壓力，我有壓力", or, "You have pressure, I have pressure". And pressure can be antithetical to creativity; whether in the arts, tech. or business, creators need the freedom to experiment and, more often than not, to fail. Instilling the idea that failure can be productive falls, of course, on educators like myself. We need to teach students it is okay—in fact necessary—to experiment and take risks. And we need to provide them with safe environments where they can do this. As one Umbrella Movement organizer said, "If you want to defeat Darth Vader, you had better train some Jedi" (Piscatella 2017). Universities have long served this role, but in Hong Kong, university is often too late. We can't expect kids trained in a rigid behaviourist tradition of rote memorization and exam cramming, to suddenly blossom into creatives at university. And we certainly shouldn't expect this when daily life is so full of uncertainty. Research on creativity makes this clear:

> *Threatening situations, in which people fear negative outcomes or failure, evoke avoidance motivation. Avoidance motivation, in turn, evokes a focused, systematic and effortful way of information processing that has often been linked to reduced creativity. This harmful effect of avoidance motivation on creativity can be problematic in financially turbulent times when people fear for their jobs and financial security.*

Things like affordable living and working space, decent wages, pensions, medical care, and other elements of the so-called 'safety net' are desperately needed by creatives, and we need to make them available in Hong Kong if there is any chance the creative industries will flourish here (we have nearly *two trillion dollars* in fiscal reserves after all).

No matter how many Art Basels and M+ museums we import, this won't change the fact that the vast majority of students cannot imagine being artists, given the economic, social, and political conditions they face each day; the collective "pressure".

The world seemed simpler when I was a student in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the millennium, though perhaps this is only in retrospect. To make ends meet—which amounted to only a few hundred $US per month—I worked at a used bookshop during the day, and played in several mediocre bands at night. I also wrote a fair amount of code, and I had time to work on side projects that caught my attention. In one such project, I rewrote a big chunk of the code for Mozilla—what would soon become Firefox—to create a prototype browser that protected users from online surveillance. This was soon after the younger Bush was narrowly elected president, and the US re-committed itself to the barbarity of global neoliberalism. For myself and other students in Seattle, following the successful protests against the World Trade Organization—the so-called 'Battle of Seattle'—there had been a renewed belief in protest and the potential for creative political change. But all this was shattered after the election, and we threw ourselves into varieties of distraction, some healthier than others. But the

Figure 2. Shielding from the tear gas at the Umbrella Revolution, Hong Kong, 2014

Figure 3. The crowd being pepper-sprayed during the WTO Protests, Seattle, 1999.

larger trajectory of the Mozilla work; of hacking technology for proactive change, turned out to be an avenue I would pursue into the future. Of course if you'd told me that fifteen years later the early forms of surveillance capitalism I was coding against would be the dominant economic model for the web, with profits from the very largest companies based almost entirely on their exploitation of this model, I wouldn't have believed it. Then again, if you'd told me who the US President would be at the time, I might have laughed aloud.

> **"Hackers are free people, just like artists who wake up in the morning in a good mood and start painting."[1]**

Few of us are laughing now, as we hover on the brink of nuclear annihilation in another pissing contest between world "leaders" (Dreazen 2018). In the 2000 US election, it was Republican interference, together with faulty ballots and "hanging chad" inspections, that left us with George W. Bush (Gumbel 2016), arguably the worst president in modern US history (think the invasion of Iraq for "Weapons of Mass Destruction", the bungling of the Hurricane Katrina recovery, the 9/11 attacks and the so-called 'Patriot Act', and the Stock Market Crash of 2008; the list goes on). In 2016 it was Russia's manipulation of behavioural targeting services (primarily Facebook) that left the US (and the world) with a similar, though far more dangerous result (Activities 2017). It is a tribute, perhaps, to the power of language that Putin's inane quotation above served as his defence against these charges. In lieu of a denial, he grants, via analogy, a special agency to 'hackers', one that is usually reserved for artists. In essence he says that, just as we don't hold artists to the usual standards of logic and routine, we should treat hackers (apparently even those working for the Russian government) with a similar freedom. If we leave his logic aside, it tells us, at very least, that the link between hackers and artists is now well-established in the zeitgeist.

Indeed it seems rarely a week goes by these days without some mention

1 Vladimir Putin, St. Petersburg International Economic Forum via RFE/RL, June 2017

Figure 5 (Opposite). *Advertising Positions, 2017*. A recent work by the author in which participants are skinned in the advertisements they are targeted with while browsing the web over the course of several months.

of art together with hacking in the media. As one headline put it, "art, hacking and activism are coinciding" (Corcoran 2013). How to explain this coincidence? Hackers and artists both engage in “making”, of course, whether tangible objects or otherwise; but then again, so do chefs and architects, ice cream and weapons makers. Both art and hacking require significant degrees of expertise, acquired through years of often solitary practice, and both have (and have always) engaged with the technologies of their time. If we go back to the Latin root of the word art, we find *ars* or *artis* meaning "skill", while the corresponding Greek word is *τέχνη*, often translated as *techne*, the root of both "technology" and "technique". And artists, like hackers, have always used current technology in new and unexpected ways in order to make their work. Perhaps less apparent is how both practices are necessarily experimental; neither the artist nor the hacker need know exactly what they are aiming for when they begin. Unlike design or engineering, there is rarely a clearly defined problem to be solved. It is only through making, through practice, that the hacker/artist’s true concerns become apparent. Further, as Heather Corcoran writes, "Artists and hackers have always been natural allies. Many in both camps share a belief that technology should be interrogated, intervened in, or examined.” Both art and hacking, when done right, call into question the status quo. They force us to re-examine the very nature of our realities (and our technologies) and to consider alternatives. It is this critical attitude toward the current state of things—an awareness of what we might call the contingent nature of reality—that may mark artists and hackers most distinctly; the ability to resist the sense that because things are a certain way, they must necessarily be this way. This is what allows both artists and hackers to imagine novel alternatives to current circumstances, and to envision new artifacts to bring them about.

Here I am reminded of a strain of art practice known as “institutional critique”, which began in the late 1960s, and set out to challenge the art world itself. While such critique—of museums, galleries, patrons—was not new (think of Duchamp, the Futurists, or any number of others), the movement was important in that it attempted to systematically expose the assumptions and contradictions within the very substrate on which it existed; it used art as a means to critique art[2]. And here we can see a precursor to what has become a sort of standard strategy for the current generation of hacker/artists; the use of technology to question our use of technology. Can we imagine a new form of institutional critique in which the critic is the hacker/artist, and the institutions are those of neoliberal techno-services? The scale and complexity of these technical, economic, and social systems are daunting for sure, yet this may, paradoxically, be just what leaves them vulnerable to creative intervention.

The hacker excels at finding hidden degrees of freedom in just such complex systems. And, unlike in the art world, it is not just a tiny elite that engages with these institutional systems on a daily basis, but instead nearly all of us, all of the time.

As Gilles Deleuze suggests, “there's no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.” So what might such new weapons look like in Hong Kong? I'm not sure, but I know it isn’t more Art Basels. Perhaps instead we should look to the few local, community-oriented creative spaces one can still find in the city; spaces like “Hidden Agenda”, shut down repeatedly by government bureaucrats (Cheung 2017), Café +Kubrick, the Hong Kong Reader, or even Dim Sum Labs, Hong Kong’s first hackerspace.

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2 In the process, however, institutional critique uncovered many of its own internal contradictions: how, for example, could artists who were already art-historical institutions themselves attempt to critique the mechanisms of the art world? Perhaps more problematic was the fact that by attempting to critique the rarefied and abstruse paradigms of the art world, the movement made itself incomprehensible to all but those within the art world itself. As one scholar put it, the questions raised by institutional critique were “questions which only interested those who had anything to do with art.” (Baumgärtel 1998). For further discussion of institutional critique, see Fraser, 2005.

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84

Daniel C. Howe
From *Advertising Positions, 2017*
88

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About the Author:

Daniel C. Howe (https://rednoise.org/daniel/) is an artist, hacker, and educator whose work addresses the impact of new technologies on human values such as diversity, privacy and freedom. He has been an open-source advocate and contributor to dozens of socially-engaged software projects for over two decades. His outputs include installations, software interventions, algorithmically-generated text and sound, and tools for artists. He lives in Hong Kong and teaches at the School of Creative Media.