

## STRANGE FACT

The Miami Dolphins sleep with a nightlight.

NIGHT: SHADOWS

# Shadowplay

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“Suppose we have in hand only fragments of accounts written on this city, which taken together cannot be regarded even as a history; suppose we succeed in collecting items alleged to be its remains from all over the world, including wigs, cheap watches, fake high fashion goods, and retouched landscape postcards; yet so long as we cannot find in the boundless ocean the island on which this city was once built, we cannot rule out the possibility that people systematically wove a web of deceit around it, created counterfeit documents, and forged a nonexistent past.”

—Dung Kai-Cheung<sup>1</sup>

At a busy intersection in Kowloon, Hong Kong, an unusual shop stages ephemeral retail acts. On any given day you can find a range of items—fake designer handbags, universal chargers, Dr. Dre headphones, life insurance—grey goods that pass through a parallel economy, casting those who peddle them in daily performance. In a city of hypervisibility, skyscrapers etch ever further into the horizon, their surfaces populated by LED screens projecting an impermeable image of a bright and optimistic future. Yet, in a space of such capital velocity—breeding large income gaps, hyper-dense living conditions, accelerated trade flows—it is the conditions of asymmetry and the ingenuities they engender that provide substance for thinking. What characterizes Hong Kong is less its stable physical forms or sovereign subjects, but rather the interstices where the movements and activities of each converge. As much as bodies and structures

are constituted by their physical attributes, and by the space they take up, so too are they defined by their traces and shadows.

Shadows are migrant entities. Inchoate and diffuse, they elude the reductive binaries of black and white, good versus evil, “inclusion” versus “exclusion,”<sup>2</sup> and therefore wage a challenge to apparent truths of visibility and legitimacy. Light and dark, in the case of the shadow, are not opposites, but rather operate at the threshold where they merge, which determines both the strength and proximity of the light source and the density of the matter onto which it is projected. Through this interaction the thing-like nature of the shadow is revealed, while setting into relief the matter which has cast it. In a relationship of mutual constituency, the shadow proves to be substantial while subtly undermining stability; wherever there is matter, its double both dramatizes and leaves clues. Thus the shadow’s contours can be used to trace the processes and errant beings that uphold dominant structures, and further scrutinize these foundations and relations.

In cities, for example, the shadow can encompass the many shades of migrancy. This may refer to migrant peoples, those without rights, disenfranchised urban citizens the world over, and spaces—not only those architectures facilitating a migrant population’s movements, but structures whose meanings shift according to circumstance. Often, the two work in tandem. But such conditions of deprivation are also those of filtering and differentiation. Hong Kong as a facilitator plays host to this entire spectrum: those subjects beneath bridges, along walkways, in mixed-use shops—these brief but constant moments are implicit in the landscape, and perhaps best traced through their movements.

Anticipating the return of Hong Kong to its alleged motherland in 1997, Ackbar Abbas noted a tendency among Hong Kongers to misrecognize and thereby overlook their own cultural tenets under a regime of hypervisibility. Images that presented themselves in architecture, cinema, and literature, he observed, depicted a prosperous city with a colonial past, with too-obvious signifiers reconciling historical complexities via their replacements or substitutes. “The more abstract the landscape, the more important the image becomes,” Abbas wrote, articulating the paradox of the emerging image as a concrete form of abstraction. Drawing on Paul Virilio’s observations of a sensory overload resulting from contemporary conditions of technological speed, Abbas questioned a landscape in which things became invisible despite their increasing definition. Problematizing the visual would entail embodying that which is invisible, inhabiting a “space of disappearance.” A spatial history of Hong Kong, according to Abbas, would evoke a city rather than claim to represent it.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the shadow might be seen lurking in those shifting spaces, but characterized less as a phenomena of disappearance than of persistence. Strategically located in the South China Sea, Hong Kong was cast in the image of the former empire, with an aim to exploit its free-port status. The unique position bred by this colonial history has led Abbas and others to describe it as a “para-site,” simultaneously autonomous and dependent. Since 1997, in its capacity as a Special Administrative Region (SAR), other places have cast themselves in its image, a spatial formula that allows goods to flow through its boundaries with frictionless ease. Rather than relying on mere evocation, and supposing that there exists some essential character to be revealed, tracing the shape of a city like Hong Kong might be a matter of returning to the material pathways of its flows and fissures. An architecture of migrancy is most precisely defined by movement—of goods, people, ideologies—and its investigation calls us to articulate

the politics of their passages. Following the shadow, night’s flippant little sister, is to cast a lingering glance on subjects otherwise left in darkness.

In the shadow economy, commodities flow with only vague regard to property tax and customs regulations. In Chinese, the term for these parallel goods, 水貨 (shui huò), which translates to “water goods,” allegedly refers to a tactic employed by traders in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region, where imports were suspended in an area of shallow water until other traders came to retrieve them. Through this they would avoid declaration and thereby evade the required taxes. But perhaps the term also refers to a condition of ceaseless ebbing. The storefront on Waterloo Road exemplifies the quotidian nature of “front shop, back factory,”<sup>4</sup> a mantra of globalization describing Hong Kong’s relationship to the wider PRD region. This area, consisting of eleven major cities (of which Hong Kong, Dongguan, Foshan, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou are the five largest) is one of the fastest growing urban economies in the world, comprised of manufacturing complexes, logistics hubs, and financial centres. The SAR of Hong Kong thus serves as a front end to the exploitation of the “the factory of the world,” renowned for its manufacturing capability. While many goods travel, for some the distance is a short border-crossing away. A continuous trickle of material surplus from the Pearl River Delta makes its way across the border at Lo Wu, and in Hong Kong becomes the daily deal on the street. At the shadow shop, a nightly delivery arrives, and shutters close to open again around midday. A new display, a sales recital: each day a new act. Despite participating in overall state aims or trade, commerce, and accumulation, this business scheme requires know-how and the keen ability to match future trends with price point, an entrepreneurial sleight of hand. The shop exists as a living organism: vendors share the space, changing hands every twenty-four hours, avoiding exorbitant overhead costs and skirting risk. Anticipating rain, one rushes an order of surplus umbrellas, while another hedges her bets on the growing popularity of

Korean beauty products (“whiter skin glows brighter, bringing you prosperity”), and through these entrepreneurial decisions, passersby witness the world through fleeting global trends. This retail blur is the image of the city: a typology in transition.

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Two steel-corseted towers lift the torso of the HSBC headquarters above ground. Below them, politicians, artists, students, musicians, farmers, and teachers form a provocative para-architecture of tents and tables. Assembled in the name of social and economic justice, the proponents of Occupy Central were certainly not the first to gather in this shade. Once, this privately owned space was deemed public, a promised domain meant to occlude the slow and insidious recession of common ground in the city. The movements of Occupy Central saw the chatting and picnicking of domestic workers mingle with fervent political discussion, an unusual convergence resulting from distinct provisions.<sup>5</sup> With its construction in the mid 1980s, the HSBC building was approved on the premise that it would respond to the need for public space, a design challenge that Foster & Partners honored by raising the building above ground, dedicating nearly the entire street level to the public.<sup>6</sup> Architecture, while providing space for the tidings of finance, also gained new ascribed meaning in its role as shelter for these political discussions, a conflict of appearances that bred corporate discomfort. After evicting the 79-day occupation, HSBC inaugurated a public exhibition program with the aim of showing the illustrious arc of Hong Kong’s financial sector and the key role HSBC has played within it—a display effectively blocking off the space from public use. Now, where there was once discussion, debate, art, and alternative agency among citizens, the exhibition acts as a stalling and sterilizing agent.

The temporal and spatial characteristics of migrant labour can be hard to trace, which is why a shadow method can be effective. The growing prevalence of informatized sovereignty signifies the loopholes the state

optimizes and embellishes. Shadow labour is in tenuous negotiation with the legal structures that frame its silhouette. Migrant domestic work—a typically direct, money-under-the-table point of entry into the labour market on arrival to a new country<sup>7</sup>—is one such example of a workforce in contention with its host country. Traditionally viewed as women’s work, domestic care has little worker protection. Certain forms of state intervention in the case of domestic work (despite being to supposedly protect workers) often characterize a fraught relationship between the state and this floating labour market. For Hong Kong, a city with one of the densest domestic worker populations in the world,<sup>8</sup> the analogy of light intensity and shadow is fitting: amongst other structural and legal problems with the domestic worker visa in Hong Kong,<sup>9</sup> the “two-week rule” is as fascinating as it is problematic. The rule requires foreign domestic workers to leave Hong Kong within two weeks of an employment contract’s termination. It affects a certain transparent compliance; an overstaying individual risks fines and imprisonment, amongst other sanctions,<sup>10</sup> while for many who overstay retreating to the shadows is preferable.

Bodies cast shadows. Corporations and governments, too, are no stranger to their presence—indeed, shadows are intrinsic to their functioning. Hong Kong is founded on the backs of shadow citizens, the criteria of sovereignty shifting according to convenience. While citizenship is a commodity for some, the reality for the visa-restricted figure of the migrant worker is one in which they must form their own modes and mechanisms in order to stay afloat. Seen as “derivative figures,”<sup>11</sup> the migrant is often positioned in contrast to the “stable denizen,” and such shadow citizens remain a regulatory challenge to the interests of nation-states and multinationals, for whom a transient labour force is necessary for their own statecraft. The requirements of citizenship thus run antithetical to the logic of capitalist accumulation, whereby commodities attain value via circulation. While goods are permitted to circulate freely,

bodies are subject to other measures despite their value as goods themselves. The human connectors, facilitators, and producers who lie beneath the smoothed, vector-drawn maps of commodity flows are highly subject to borders. Rules of entry follow the aperture created by constantly unpredictably shifting financial markets, but a migrant's existence in a host country certainly doesn't afford them the same rights as those who were born there. Preventing the flow of bodies denies the fact that people are dual in nature and bear commodity-like potential—that of labour power.<sup>12</sup> But bodies are also affective and porous: “We asked for workers. We got people instead.”<sup>13</sup> Occupying the spaces in-between are stateless, malleable bodies.

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Shadows are diffuse entities, filling in the gaps, giving shape to processes that go unseen and unregulated, and “adding oil” (ga yau!)<sup>14</sup> to an ill-functioning machine. The brighter the light and the denser the matter, the greater the degrees of penumbric glow. This translates, in other words, to further nuance: different shades of migrancy arise as capitalism's coping mechanism. The shadow proves a body's weight and substance, affirming the subject, even when it malfunctions. In cities too, the shadow is a constant. As the rural enters the urban, and as borders and identities are increasingly contested, shadows emerge to fill widening disparities.

In looking at the goods that circulate in a parallel economy, at the citizens whose role in the city remains deeply contested, an emerging architecture is characterized by movement and flow. Rather than seeking to cast light on these structures and assemblies toward the aims of legitimacy or formality, revelling in a shadow of doubt may prove to be a healthy exercise. The goal would be not to elevate the status of the centre over the periphery—since, as Abbas notes, to do so would reify the binary—but to tell a narrative tracing the various alternative points of contact between subjects and state. The image of the city as a cohesive whole is itself

imaginary. Shadowplay thus takes the “wigs, cheap watches, fake high fashion goods, and retouched landscape postcards” as fragmented evidence of the structure of these pervasive yet otherwise obscure passages.

## NOTES

1 Dung Kai-Cheung, Atlas, trans. Dung Kai-Cheung, Anders Hansson, and Bonnie S. MacDougall. New York: Columbia University Press, p.45.

2 Nicholas de Genova has instigated thorough discussion on how the “spectacle of migrancy” is a performative gesture of governmentality through which binaries of “inclusion” and “exclusion” are reified. See Nicholas de Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, The Obscene of Inclusion,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180–1198.

3 Ackbar Abbas articulates the evocation of Hong Kong through its architecture and filmic image in his monograph Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Hong Kong University Press, 1997).

4 Dan Steinbock argues for a vision of the Pearl River Delta as a new form of urban megalopolis, an “urban superpower” (three times the size of other urban areas such as Tokyo) based on its combination of manufacturing capability, trade distribution points, and financial centres. See Dan Steinbock, “Creating a Pearl River Delta Megapolis: The Growth Story of the Twenty-First Century,” New Geography, 18 February 2010, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/001420-creating-a-pearl-river-delta-megapolis-the-growth-story-21st-century>.

5 In her article “Occupy Central: The Migrant Workers in Democracy's Blind Spot,” Elaine Yu elucidates the general conditions under which foreign domestic workers live in Hong Kong, describing also how protesters of Occupy Central shared the public space beneath the HSBC Headquarters Building with domestic workers on a Sunday in 2012. Elaine Yu, “Occupy Central: The Migrant Workers in Democracy's Blind Spot,” Dissent, 2 July 2014, [https://](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/occupy-central-the-migrant-workers-in-democracys-blind-spot)

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6 Elaine W. Ho, “East Asia Multitude,” in Institutions for the Future, ed. Biljana Ciric and Sally Lai (Manchester: Chinese Arts Center, 2012).

7 Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Domestic: Immigrant Workers Cleaning & Caring in the Shadows of Affluence (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

8 Statistical data come from Lily Kuo, “How Hong Kong's ‘Maid Trade’ Is Making Life Worse for Domestic Workers throughout Asia,” Quartz, 19 February 2014, <http://qz.com/176354/how-hong-kong-maid-trade-is-making-life-worse-for-domestic-workers-throughout-asia>; and Paul Yip, “China Must Address the Social Cost of Hiring Domestic Helpers,” South China Morning Post, 3 February 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1419267/hong-kong-must-address-social-costs-hiring-domestic-helpers>.

9 Besides the two-week rule, a number of factors serve to further intensify the precarity of this shadow labour, and foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong are subject to systemic exploitation. The Philippines has exported labour to Hong Kong since the 1970s, when then-president Ferdinand Marcos updated the labour code to encourage labour export when the country was faced with a poor economy. In the forty years since, such migrancy to become the norm, and the Philippines has been accused of being one of the biggest human traffickers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Foreign domestic workers are ineligible to the right of abode, the ordinance that allows a foreigner to apply for permanent residence after living in Hong Kong for more than seven years.

Also, according to Amnesty International, the live-in requirement of domestic workers in Hong Kong makes them vulnerable to working long hours, as well as offering no escape from potential employer abuse; the infamous 2014 case of Indonesian worker Erwiana Sulistyaningsih is a prime example of such vulnerability.

10 In Born Out of Place (2014), Nicole Constable describes the desperate situation of foreign domestic workers when they become pregnant in Hong Kong—contract termination is a high probability if an employee becomes pregnant, since the all-encompassing capacity of a work role in which one is permanently on call for another's family and home leaves little room for bringing up a child. The nature of such a rule is that it creates a situation of two poles: comply and leave, or remain and live undercover—a fourteen-day clock ticks between ending work with an employer, and organizing travel back to one's home country while dealing with pregnancy is a very difficult task. Constable argues through fieldwork and case studies that the two-week rule only serves to complicate the matter, and increase the likelihood of individuals retreating further into the shadows to deal with their situation. See Nicole Constable, Born Out of Place (Hong Kong University Press, 2014).

11 In The Figure of the Migrant, Thomas Nail seeks a political theory for a subject that has taken on new meaning in the twenty-first century. Among other things, the book is a treatise for seeing the migrant as a central political figure of our time, too often discussed in contrast to the “stable denizen” or in relation to the state. See Thomas Nail, The Figure of the Migrant (Stanford University Press, 2015).

12 In Gareth Dale's article “A World without Borders,” on Europe's refugee crisis, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is quoted referring to refugees as “the price we pay for a globalized economy in which commodities—but not people—are permitted

to circulate freely. The idea of porous borders, of being inundated by foreigners, is immanent to global capitalism.” Gareth Dale, “A World without Borders,” Jacobin, 21 September 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/refugee-crisis-merkel-europe-germany>.

13 Max Frisch, observing with reference to Germany's temporary foreign worker program, quoted in Massimo Livi-Bacci, A Short History of Migration, trans. Carl Ipsen (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 116. See also Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Rachel Silvey, “Not One of the Family: The Tight Spaces of Migrant Domestic Workers,” Harvard Design Magazine 41 (2015).

14 加油 (ga yau, “add oil,” meaning “good luck”) was a frequent collective cry among the disenfranchised groups and protesters who gathered under the HSBC headquarters during the Occupy Central, and later again during the Umbrella Movement at Admiralty.