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# Streaming and the Online Hong Kong Underground Conversations with Two Hong Kong Improvised Music Actors

François Mouillot

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Article abstract

This essay takes the form of a patchwork of conversations with Hong Kong-based organizers and improvisers Dennis 'Sin:Ned' Wong and Steve 'Nerve' Hui to address the differences in conditions and implications of livestreaming for improvising musicians/'noisicians' in the Hong Kong experimental music scene. Questions that formed the basis for discussion in these conversations include: How does online gigging in the era of the Covid pandemic extend pre-existing activities of the Hong Kong improvised music communities? What are the social, aesthetic, and operational impact of the digital 'platforming' on their musical activities? What is the potential for these online tools to generate deep-rooted and longer-lasting connections either between musicians, and/or musicians and audiences/other scene actors?

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## **Streaming and the Online Hong Kong Underground: Conversations with Two Hong Kong Improvised Music Actors**

**François Mouillot**

The experimental and improvised music scene in Hong Kong is a peculiar one. Hong Kong is a global metropolis of over seven million, with economic and cultural ties to China and the broader East Asian region as well as to many “Western” countries, and one might expect to find an eclectic and active scene in the city. Yet, to many observers, an improvised music scene in Hong Kong barely exists, relegated as it is to the furthest margins of a local musical landscape overwhelmingly dominated by the vernacular form of popular music commonly referred to as “Cantopop,” which to this day remains (in spite of its commonly proclaimed decline since the late 1990s) the primary music genre to which a sense of a “distinct” Hong Kong identity is often attached. Improvised music in Hong Kong is almost invisible and inaudible. For local musical improvisers, issues related to Cantopop’s hegemony are compounded by difficulties faced by small-scale performance venues (de Seta), such as high rents, stringent licencing policies, and lack of public and private subsidies. In spite of these problems, a “fractured underground”—prominently featuring various free improvised music practices—has continued to exist and develop since the 1980s (Charrieras and Mouillot).

A few months into the current global health crisis, it had become clear that the Hong Kong experimental music scene had been affected in unexpected ways by COVID-19. The remainder of this piece presents short reflections by two of the city’s most active event organizers and musicians from the fractured and contrasted spheres of variously defined experimental and/or underground music: Dennis “Sin:Ned” Wong and Steve “Nerve” Hui. I conversed with them separately in the summer of 2020 about the musical and organizational implications of the current crisis on their activities and the potential future of their practices in Hong Kong. Wong is a self-taught multi-instrumentalist engaging primarily with abstract noise experimentation, while Hui is a classically trained musician/performer whose improvisations are inspired by the long tail of underground techno music as much as by electro-acoustic experiments. For both, in the contexts of their respective practices, and in the music they curate in their concert series and performance spaces, “free improvisation” is a key *modus operandi*.

In addition to continuing his own musical practice, Nerve curates and organizes events at Twenty Alpha, one of Hong Kong’s only venues dedicated to experimental music. Twenty Alpha focuses largely, but not exclusively, on electronic music. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Nerve has performed in several global livestreamed collaborative experimental electronic concerts, including early initiatives such as the 02022020 project (conceived before the start of the pandemic) organized by local artist Lam Lai (“UTC+12”). Twenty Alpha has hosted online events during the pandemic such as a performance of Hong Kong artists co-curated by the London, U.K. space IKLEKTIK (“Twenty Alpha”). It has also been used as a streaming centre for (occasionally ticketed) remote shows that people can experience through the venue’s large screen and professional sound system.

Although Nerve emphasizes that the pandemic-related increase in online performance has brought him more concert invitations and enabled him to connect to artists and institutions globally, he also points to “streaming fatigue” and the limitations imposed by the medium on his practice:

There is more and more livestreaming, and to a degree I think it is too much. I mean,

like, on weekends if you open Facebook, you can watch unlimited performances [of experimental electronic music]. There's a kind of numbness watching all this, it's not that attractive anymore. And also, by definition, looking at a screen as an audience, it's totally different from being [in person] in a concert. As a performer, it's different too, especially for improvised music. Usually, when I perform, the first thing I interact with is my instruments. But at the same time, I always interact with the space. Whatever you are playing—electronic or acoustic—you respond to the space, the size of the space or the space itself. If you play electronic music, you respond to the speaker, and the speaker is related to the space as well. And then, of course, if in a live concert, you respond to the audience. Even if you don't look at them, you're playing to them [ . . . ] So with livestreaming, it's all different, and a lot of things are missing. Everything “3D” became “2D”; it's hard to be attractive anymore. Even if everyone is doing it in different ways, there's always the same visual focus on hands, face, etc.

To Hui, the ways in which audiences engage with improvised music online point to the necessity for artists to develop new improvising approaches:

I think a new aesthetic needs to be developed. For example, when I play a concert offline, the sound level is important. Whether it is extremely loud or extremely quiet, it is always important. Sometimes you play around the contrast, sometimes you play on the sensation of a louder sound, or the psychological thing of being very quiet. But you cannot control this through streaming. You don't know what kind of speaker or headphones the audience is using. So, you have no control at all on the sound level or quality. And also, because it's online, I think many people won't be watching from the beginning to the end. They can jump to any point of the performance, or they can finish the performance at any point as well. So as a performer, if you think of a structure, it's just not possible. [It makes me think]: even if I perform 30 minutes, can I do something that would also be valid and interesting when people jump to any point and can leave at any time? Livestreaming seems more similar to the experience of an exhibition: people go to this room, and they want to spend just five minutes in that room, and then they're gone. I think watching streaming is similar. It's also a fact [that] when I think about structure, because I have a composition background, my sense of structure is quite traditional. I mean, like, creat[ing] climax. For livestreaming, it does not make sense.

In many ways, difficulties establishing connections between audiences and performers is a common trope in the Hong Kong underground. For the past fifteen years, Dennis Wong has run several regular concert series—“Noise to Signal,” “Kill Jazz,” and “Subliminal Lounge”—that have become fixtures in the city's alternative music scene. The particularity of these events is that they have not been associated with specific venues. Rather, their settings have shifted as the result of the precarity of venues, which are subject to prohibitively high rents—an issue familiar to many in the Hong Kong underground. This precarity precludes small cultural spaces from promoting activities with little commercial potential and leaves event organizers like Wong to rely on the good will of friends or supporters to help set up events in sometimes unlikely spaces, including repurposed industrial spaces or staircases, schools, and former shops. The general lack of stable venues supporting leftfield musics, combined with the often uncompromising nature of the music they create, has meant that local audiences have been consistently very small for Hong Kong improvisers.

Yet these musicians have continued to organize shows in concert spaces during the pandemic. Due to social gathering restrictions (between March 2020 and the time at which I am writing in November 2020, such restrictions have fluctuated between maximums of two to six people most

of the time), these events have primarily been for the purpose of online streaming. The resulting increased reliance on online platforms—such as YouTube, Facebook, as well as a recently launched government webpage promoting the work of some Hong Kong experimental musicians and composers, including Hui (“E(ar)-Storm”)—has potentially alleviated at least some Hong Kong improvisers’ struggles to create a scene where performers and audiences connect, as indicated by Nerve, above. When I asked Wong whether performing online had remedied some of these issues, however, he replied:

I think Hong Kong has been relatively slow [in embracing livestreaming] compared to other places, including Mainland China. But I think that the pandemic gives us a chance to end something—sharp, immediately—which I think Hong Kong really needs. Of course, there are many hardships for so many people—no shows, no income—but then we can change. Because we have nothing left, we really have to think about what to do. I think things will be changing a lot in the future, how we do things. Not just practically—how to organize concerts—but at least personally, it forces me to think: “What is art?” If we don’t have what we had in the past and we cannot make art, then what is art? What is the purpose of art? I can see that that is something that we will be redefining from the very fundamental level. What will be different is hard to say now, but quite simply for me, I will try to re-think performance. In the past, I thought that live face-to-face performances were very important. I put a lot of time into doing live shows. I didn’t leave any time for releasing projects and CDs because I thought that [live performance] is the beginning. In our type of music, improvisation—as “pure” as it can be (at least that’s my vision of what I do)—it’s obviously important to have a live audience but, since we cannot have face-to-face gatherings in venues at all at this point in Hong Kong, is it the only way to do it? These questions need to be asked, especially in Hong Kong.

When I asked Wong about what *his* own free improvised art might look like in a (post)-pandemic Hong Kong, he responded:

Personally, I may even try not to do any live performance at all with an audience. Or [I’ll do it] in some other ways, maybe streaming only, or something subscription-based, or project-oriented, since it is so difficult in Hong Kong to have a space anyway. Venues always come and go, they have to worry about the operations, the expenses, and then you don’t have enough audience. Even if you don’t care about money, still, it’s so embarrassing: you have an out-of-town guest performer, you have good musicians, good music, BUT . . . you have only one or two audience members. And always the question is, “should we start when there’s no audience?”

Why not take this chance to end all this? [Prior to the pandemic] I could not find the way to get away from all those practical problems. Who cares? If there is no audience, why not do it entirely differently? We normally don’t consider doing this because we are in a capitalist, consumerist system. Why not just get away? That’s why I am considering shifting. In Hong Kong, it makes a lot of sense.

If experimental improvised music in Hong Kong has primarily existed in fragmented and relatively isolated moments and spaces throughout most of its history, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has presented these two actors with unprecedented challenges and opportunities to embrace their isolation and fragmentation and push them into further territories of aesthetic and organizational experimentation. From my own perspective as a participant and witness to the evolution of free improvised music activities in Hong Kong over the past five years, the opening up of the scene to potentially wider opportunities—for international collaborations and,

ultimately, recognition—by way of digital performance has been an exciting prospect. In light of both the limited number of shows organized in this way, and the sense that these events are still perceived as a “tie over” until more face-to-face concerts resume, it is still too soon to say whether the current pandemic will have offered Hong Kong free improvisers a lasting chance at wider visibility and audibility.

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