

How To Make Space

Jennifer Davis & Su-Ying Lee

Exhibition Proposal submitted to Apexart's Franchise Program February 28, 2015

Given the widespread expectation that women yield, rather than take up, space (physically, verbally and intellectually) the exhibition ***How to Make Space*** positions the temporary architectures of Hong Kong's migrant domestic workers (MDWs) as a set of tactics employed to make spaces of female agency and self-determination.

How to Make Space will take place in Hong Kong where, motivated by the availability of employment, over 300,000 women have migrated, predominantly from south Asian countries to work as domestic helpers. Far away from home, local laws and culture have a marginalizing and isolating effect. Legally required to live with their employers, private and individual space for MDWs is virtually non-existent in densely populated Hong Kong. In addition to such restrictive conditions, one in four MDWs reports being mistreated at the hands of their employers. Despite this adversity, a phenomenon of self-organization is realized on Sundays when the women can be seen congregating en masse across the public spaces of the city, building temporary colonies from found materials. Ad hoc structures built of cardboard, string and tarps carve out spaces where this community can mutually care for each other during their one day off work. The provisional rooms become sites for communal activities including meals, socializing, worship and grooming. This is a striking expression of agency exercised by women who live within a context that frequently withholds it. Their camaraderie enables them to tactically maneuver the spatial constraints of Hong Kong and cope with the systemic cultural and political forces weighing on them.

We've selected three artists whose practices relate self-organization, space and place through feminist methods:

Celine Condorelli, an artist and theorist trained in architecture, positions friendship as a fundamental support structure. Her book *The Company She Keeps* begins with an inquiry into the negation, through omission, of productive friendships between women in modern philosophy. Condorelli's book is a discourse on what can be achieved by befriending not only people but also ideas, objects, and causes. For her, the process of choosing one's allies and engaging in a common project has an emancipatory dimension.

Stephanie Comilang is a Filipino-Canadian artist who has embarked on a research project in Hong Kong specific to Filipina MDWs. Her project will be developed around her direct experiences with employment agents, advocacy groups and the women who contribute to Hong Kong's landscapes of temporary architecture.

Devora Neumark, for whom community art practice is both subject and methodology, examines how dislocated individuals make home anew. The repetition of stylized narratives about 'home' can construct strong intracultural alliances but also contribute to the cycles of violence caused when the settling of one population has domicidal effects impacting another.

The exhibition generates visibility and discourse about timely global matters of migration, labour and the occupation of public space. Foundational to *How to Make Space* are the voices of women (MDWs, artists, curators and audience among others) as they articulate urgent concerns alongside strategies and solutions.