

Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest (Tintin Wulia 2016)
Single-channel HD video, stereo, colour, 25'30"

Festival for the People
Philadelphia Contemporary, 13-28 October 2018



Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest (Tintin Wulia 2016). Still image. Image courtesy of the artist.

Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest (2016) is one of the outputs of the project *Trade/Trace/Transit* (since 2014), a mobile ethnography of cardboard waste and simultaneously a series of public art interventions into the trade route of cardboard waste in Hong Kong. This project is initially supported by the Australia Council for the Arts' New Work – Mid Career grant (2014-6).

“Waste paper is like a forest. Paper recycles itself, generation after generation,” a man once told Zhang Yin, possibly the richest self-made woman in the world according to Forbes magazine in 2006, who earns her wealth from recycling cardboard waste.

This film envisages the cardboard waste forest from within its leaves, revolving around the Filipino domestic workers at Central, Hong Kong. It poetically plays with the fractal notion in cycles and (re)generations by criss-crossing between the actual route in Hong Kong and an imagined circumstance in Mars.

The 6 short episodes of the film chronicle the artist's journey across the nodes by following the processes in the project that connect one node in the cardboard waste route to the next, accompanied by a first-person narrative by the artist. It interweaves stories told through field recordings, text, real and reimagined

interviews, images and composed verses to blur the identities of several subjects by their request. It premieres in the form of a 'proposal' in the art fair that is one of these nodes (Art Basel Hong Kong, 2016), described in Episode Four, when the filming was still ongoing.

About *Trade/Trace/Transit* (since 2014)

Cardboard boxes live long after they are disposed. In many places around the world including Hong Kong, they travel from hand to hand during this long life, changing shape and intersecting varied lives. Along routes in Hong Kong, they are sold by waste collectors via the recycling collection points to the port. Their lifetime reaches its end at paper mills in China.

Around Central, Hong Kong, this cardboard route is extraordinary. Filipino domestic workers gather in Central for their day off, and re-use the cardboard waste to build temporary 'houses'. In this decades-old tradition, I discovered how a complex informal economy is born. The monetary value of the cardboard waste is multiplied through covert, hand-to-hand transactions, where intricate trade and trade-offs between cardboard waste collectors, suppliers, distributors, consumers, the hawkers police and passersby take place.

Throughout this trade and trade-offs, the cyclical re-collecting and re-selling amplifies the social meaning of the "waste". The waste becomes inhabited by the lived experiences of the agents of its journey, who contribute their various circumstances. Artefacts of these lived experiences are then amassed and compressed at the recycling collection points. Every day of the week, they are trucked along the Hong Kong island's northern coastal area to the transit port, to be shipped to China.

Trade/Trace/Transit fuses public (art) interventions with urban mobile ethnography. Instead of following people, in this project I follow waste-cardboard (used cardboard boxes) – a thing – on the move. A typical waste-cardboard route spans from shops/homes, through to waste collectors, recycling agents, port handlers, and recycling factories, through which the waste-cardboard change shape. In

Trade/Trace/Transit, public interventions, with waste-cardboard as both medium and material, are held en route.

The project began around Hong Kong's Central station, where thousands of mostly-women Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) gather every weekend since early 2000s. Waste-cardboard is prominently used here as a building material for the OFW's single-use one-day 'houses'. Through extensive following and by designating waste-cardboard as a material for my work, I transformed into a stakeholder in the informal trade route.

As a stakeholder, I discovered that covert OFW groups have been hacking this route: to fulfil demands for 'houses' material and to supplement their low wage, certain W groups act as illicit middlemen (or rather middlewomen) between waste collectors, fellow OFW and recycling agents. This clever seizing of opportunity multiplies the nominal and social value of the waste-cardboard through weekly trade cycles. To make visible this intriguing act of everyday resistance with mitigated risks to the stealth actors, my interventions began as mural drawings on the walls of the OFW's 'houses'. These drawings function as markings, aiding the visibility of the waste-cardboard that changes shapes (but retain surface markings) en route, while at the same time telling the story of the route through images. When the waste-cardboard goes to the recycling agents and amassed into bales weighing hundreds of kilograms, my intervention latched on an everyday technique of the recycling agents to prepare their bales: the drawings became the surface markings of the bales.

Following the bales to the port, I realised that every single working day of the week, the recycling agents' truck passes by the venue of the highly visible Art Basel HK, but these two worlds never collided, as art

collectors and professionals parachute-in to the art fair. Working with partners, I latched onto Art Basel HK's high-visibility, showing the bales as an installation, a film about the contexts and processes, and organised a roundtable with representatives of stakeholders in the art fair. My partners for this initial stage were the Australia Council for the Arts, Osage Gallery, Art Basel HK and Asia Art Archive.

Similar to how the covert OFW groups have hacked into the route and created their own value system, the bales have now entered a different value system as an artwork. In the meanwhile, China has tightened their restrictions on waste import with their Green Fence policy, and the leader of the covert OFW middlewomen is currently recovering from a knee surgery. After 2 years of storage in HK, this year I managed to ship the bales to my representative gallery's storage in Brisbane, Australia. I am working on another film to reflect on the methodology, concepts and concerns of the project, mainly to explore the significance of these local nodes to the major actors of the global cardboard recycling industry, such as the self-made woman billionaire Zhang Yin's Forbes Global 2000 company.

<http://tintinwulia.com/tradetracetransit>