

**PERPETUAL
REBEL**

**KWOK
MANG-HO**

By Ysabelle Cheung





Wild-eyed and dragging a square of cotton quilt behind him,

Kwok Mang-Ho rustled out from the streets, making his way to a bare-bones sculpture in the middle of a sports ground on the outskirts of Hong Kong. The structure is minimal, clean, its metal lines resembling those of a tall pyramid. Crowds had gathered; the residents were out for the Tuen Mun Art Festival, and were anticipating an artwork by the organizer, Kwok himself.

In one fell swoop, Kwok threw the quilt onto the sculpture and lit it on fire. A tunnel of flames shot up. Watching as the air quickly became choked with thick, obsidian smoke, the attendants grew frightened. “1978, there was no avant-garde art before so they were scared,” Kwok said years later, in his characteristically truncated, almost poetic command of English. “You think the fire showing the energy established a very good future. The burning is energetic, turns into very positive energy. Some residents saw some good things. But most drive away then.”

Kwok’s experimental modes of practice have always been propelled by his innate attraction to the five primeval elements in Chinese philosophy: water, wood, fire, earth and metal. Water, at the time of his studies at Grantham College of Education, Chinese University, and then the University of Hong Kong, was already an important medium in his hometown due to its use in traditional painting. Artists in the New Ink Painting movement and Circle Art Group wielded ink and water to create new forms and move forward from the rigid conformities in both *shuimo* painting and historical divisions of Western and Chinese culture.

Even earlier, in primary school, Kwok had already begun experimenting with watercolor, applying it on paper with a butter knife and smudging the wash with his fingers, an act that was

immediately reprimanded by his elders. “My teacher said, “This boy doesn’t even know how to walk, and he starts to fly first!”” he recalled. Kwok was also drawn to water’s antithesis: fire. As a five-year-old, he would play with firecrackers on the streets of the city. One day, instead of throwing the firecracker as the lit fuse hissed and sparked, he tightened his grip on it. “Suddenly it exploded. I just fell. My ten fingers—bleeding,” he said. “That feeling. Later I was in a hospital. No fear, just experience.”

In fire, Kwok recognized an ineffable quality that embodies ephemerality—it blazes and then quickly dies, and yet ravages everything it grazes. The idea to burn quotidian objects had come to him one day in the ’70s, when he stumbled across a mass of charred, lumpen pipes and toys that had fallen victim to a recent warehouse fire. After unsuccessful inquiries into purchasing these ashen artifacts, which for the owners only signaled loss and damage, Kwok loaded his truck and headed to the open fields of Yuen Long, an area in the New Territories that would become the site of some of his most experimental work. There, he began burning objects and stacking them together to form totems that utilized the original structure of these items—often made of bamboo, or another element he had begun to experiment with at the time in large quantities: wood. In forcing uniformity in their color by burning them to a black char, Kwok rendered the objects unrecognizable. An example is *Burnt 1074* (1975), which in its subtle variations of ash and charcoal hints at the shapes of found cow bones, metal pipes, logs and toys, the functions of which have been reduced to pure sculpture. The work subsequently scooped an award in 1975 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, and is now situated, somewhat surreptitiously and without fanfare, at City Hall.

At the time, Kwok was teaching at the New Territories Heung Yee Kuk Yuen Long District Secondary School and Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the pupils of which were both his students and his peers in experimentation. For example, in a series titled “Live Body Sculpture,” which he initiated in the early 1970s, Kwok would stand in a public space wearing an artwork or design, often in collaboration with his students at Polytechnic. These public interventions, interrupting the flow of foot traffic on the street, meshed the human body with the unnatural forms of a crafted artwork, and were a direct critique of the formal sculptural processes of the time, a reactive sensibility also seen in his burnt object totems.

In 1975, he hosted the “Perpetuity Art Show,” a three-day event in which various guerilla happenings took place in and around the secondary school. *Space Fire Dragon*, one of the first instances of *hark bun lum* (literally translated as “guest arrival”)—a type of happening dreamed up by Kwok—consisted of kerosene-soaked balls of cotton, duvet and paper, strung on a line and lit on fire, mimicking the burning, incense-clustered spine of the dancing fire dragon in annual celebrations during the Mid-Autumn festival in Hong Kong. Like a spirit awakening in inky night, *Space Fire Dragon*, executed en plein air, signaled the actualization of elemental forces: space, as a formal medium, was at once celebrated by the uninhibited flames, and its gaseous properties by the accelerated, horizontal oxidation. Later, air was again central to a work executed in 1979 at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, as well as other locations along a tourist route, when Kwok inflated a cluster of plastic bags and photographed himself with the floating, diaphanous objects. The artist conceptualized this act as *gao doyl lum* (“plastic bag arrival”), in which the symbiotic relationship between two materials—the plastic captures air that in turn lifts the plastic—was further catalyzed by visitors who crowded around the impromptu performance.

These freestyle happenings augmented his relationship to perpetuity—which to Kwok not only illustrated an eternal state but also persistence despite chemical entropy—most notably at the Hong Kong Art Centre’s Pao Galleries in 1977, in an installation that featured cracked, raw eggs, with viscous mucus congealing

and rotting over the course of the monthlong show. (Eggs and their aviary carriers, it must be said, have a curious effect on Hong Kong and its artists: in 2007, Adrian Wong French-kissed a chicken at the height of a bird flu epidemic; and in 2015, Clara Cheung smashed 1,000 eggs on herself in a public and somewhat cathartic protest of then chief executive Leung Chun-ying’s policy address.) These almost primitive experimentations revealed careful studies of the elements, and in understanding their nature and their effect on material, Kwok began to formulate a spiritual understanding of how systems work: each property exists, and is generated and destroyed, because of the other.

The ’70s also birthed a series of lightbox works that are perhaps Kwok’s most academic, and which are in the collection of the forthcoming M+ museum of visual culture. Two were featured recently in the 2017 group exhibition at the museum’s pavilion, “The Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+,” curated by the museum’s Lesley Ma, who sought to narrate an open-minded dialogue around the medium. Zealous interpretations of ink painting included *Act of Quiet* (1976) and *Fire Painting, Butterfly* (1978) by Kwok. These lightbox “paintings” were created by burning sheets of paper and then layering them atop each other, creating an effect that resembles a pulverized paper lantern, suffused with a lambent light from within; the surfaces of these would be inked and finished with a topcoat of semi-glossy lacquer. The resulting image appears like a *shuimo* painting. *Act of Quiet*, in particular, strongly evokes abstract splashes of water, with layers that seem to shift and emit a silent, sealed ocean. The work directly relates to the Taoist adage “stillness in movement, movement in stillness,” a thought that has remained with Kwok to this day.

This and other creations are directly related to the teachings of Lui Shou-kwan, who pioneered the New Ink movement and was Kwok’s teacher from 1968 to 1973. Lui’s influence on Kwok, as well as on other painters of his generation—Irene Chou, Wucius Wong and Leung Kui-ting—was profound. After Lui passed away in 1975, Kwok carried precious tape recordings of these lessons with him across the globe and listened to them daily for almost a decade, his teacher’s philosophies plugged into both ears as he navigated the New York rush.



(Previous spread)
The artist and **FROG KING AND PERPETUITY**, 1977, installation with eggs, wood, ceramics dishes and mixed media, dimensions variable, at “Art Show: Hong Kong Arts Centre Inaugural Exhibition 1977.” Courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page)
LIVE BODY SCULPTURE, 1977, documentation of street performance with found objects and body, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

(This page)
SPACE FIRE DRAGON, 1975, documentation of performance at “Perpetuity Art Show,” Hong Kong, 1975. Courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

(This page)
ACT OF QUIET, 1976, ink lacquer and
burnt paper collage, 76 x 58 cm. Courtesy
the artist and M+, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page)
FROG CARNIVAL, 1983, ink on paper, 18 x 32 cm.
Courtesy the artist and 10 Chancery
Lane Gallery, Hong Kong



Undocumented immigration to the United States in the 1980s, as many peripatetics can attest, was much more common than it is now. Kwok was among the enclave of Chinese migrants whose disparate identities cultivated colorful prose or narratives on the radical Asian-American arts scene of the time. For example, US-born Martin Wong, who ran with Nuyorican poets and Lower East Side tag gangs, was known for his swagger, cowboy attire and distinguished mustache; and Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh for his ragged, extreme sensibilities, polished by successive one-year performances of being locked in a cage or tied to another person. Surprisingly, Kwok, at least initially, was the least public of these artists, and instead chose to observe and practice his art and happenings by blending into marginal areas, simultaneously protecting his undocumented status and commenting on the more pedestrian realities of being a minority in America.

He had originally moved to the city to study at the Art Student's League, but when his visa expired, he stayed on, working in a Chinese restaurant in SoHo, a typical role for immigrants. In between shifts, and with the consent of his employer, Kwok would draw on the walls of the establishment, and would add the names of passersby for a fee of five dollars, similar to how tourists might have their names written in Han characters by street calligraphers. "Some neighbors would say to me, 'Aiyah, why are you look like a beggar in our building corner, disturb the environment,'" Kwok recalled. But many folks marching through the rectilinear grids of lower Manhattan would pause and look over the diagrams of frog symbols, English letters and Chinese characters, which possessed shamanistic qualities—as in cryptic, prehistoric cave drawings—as well as the refined skills of the ink paintings he had pored over as a student under Lui Shou-kwan. These all possessed his newly created Frog King mark, similar to a seal, alerting watchers to his presence: two mountains atop the curved hull of a boat, signaling land, sea and the marriage of both in his work.

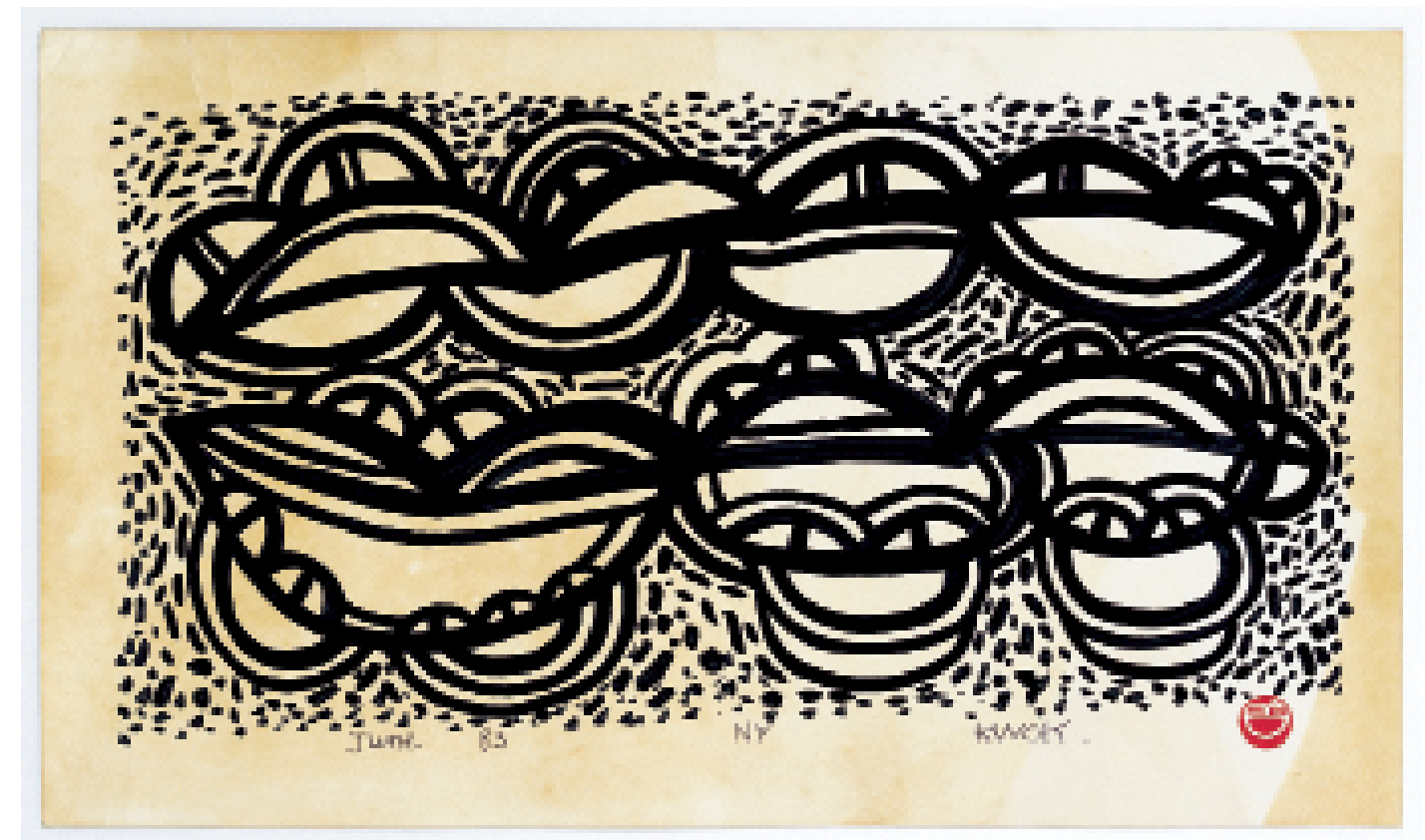
It was in these daily exercises, and within the clamor of the Lower East Side graffiti and street culture, that Kwok began to shift his practice, borrowing in turn the stenographic poetics of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the iconographic language in Keith Haring's subway pictures, as well as the social and political rhythms that hummed in both bodies of work. He still experimented with introspective performative happenings and objects, such as his roughly hewn, almost folk-like jewelry pieces of metal and precious stone; buttons formed from mini-collages, crafted with his second wife, Linda Pastorino; his installations created from string and flags; and in his documentation of found objects, such as plastic bags blanketed by snow in the New York chill. Yet it was his participatory projects that further developed his style of engagement, first seen in *hark bun lum*, which would soon metamorphize into *frog bun lum*, inviting others to his amphibious wonderland. He opened up a small exhibition space, Kwok Gallery, and initiated his iconic "Froggy Sunglasses Project" (1989–99), in which he snaps a photograph of a person wearing his designed frames. The simple act of putting on these sunglasses neutralizes the wearer, obscuring their most recognizable facial feature: the eyes. In Kwok's mind, or that of an early incarnation of Frog King, David Bowie could start to look similar to a Scottish tourist; Nam June Paik could resemble one of Kwok's friends from Hong Kong. All identities are leveled and equal, regardless of social or political standing. "We all look for some harmony in human life," Kwok said of the series.

In 1992, the New Museum exhibited "Calligraphy Shop," a reworked institutional version of Kwok's curbside performance outside the Chinese restaurant. One day, a visitor to the show introduced himself as the collector and art dealer Joseph D. Ferrara, who would become Kwok's most significant patron, ensuring the artist had the financial means to survive in the US. "He was like godfather figure to me," Kwok said, recalling that during the next six years, Ferrara purchased over 600 artworks. In particular, his

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patron was interested in his works on paper, sensing Kwok's desire to convert the earlier, more performative aspects of his work into two-dimensional forms. In a 1999 monograph, Ferrara wrote: "Many of the paintings are installations reduced to a flat surface. These works appear three-dimensional and multileveled. The streamers become brushstrokes. Plastic bags and balloons are transformed into dabs of paint . . . The depth achieved in some works certainly goes against the abstract expressionism canon of 'a flat painting for a flat surface.'" This rejection of what Clement Greenberg described as minimalists' acceptance of the limitations of painting has resulted in an ardent exploration of depth. This is most evident in Kwok's Dada-esque toilet-paper works, in which he paints on rolls of tissue, or dips them in ink, surpassing what the *shuimo* literati had for years sought to represent in their flat surfaces: real, tangible form.

Kwok's return to Hong Kong in 1995 was due to his mother's ill health. But the homecoming also consolidated these experimentations, culminating in the full-fledged formation of his Frog King identity. That same year, he participated in the first Gwangju Biennale, creating work in response to the somewhat generic theme of "Eastern Spirit and Ink Painting." Setting up a perimeter outside the Gwangju Municipal Folk Museum, he covered himself and the floors in porous paper and used a giant brush to paint on himself, against a backdrop of long, hanging paper streamers. Titling the performance *Ink Party*, Kwok's marriage of performance, ink painting and happening received critical acclaim, something that had not occurred before in Asia. Back in the '70s, although a small circle of his students and peers reveled in his work, he had been largely ostracized for his unusual practice. Similar actions had already been developed elsewhere, as in Japan with Gutai and in Europe and the US with Fluxus, but Kwok had remained, for a long time, an anomaly among an ocean of *shuimo* and modernist painters. This shift in attention in the '90s, ironically, led to academics and curators revisiting his earlier, radical years. As curator Tina Pang, who helmed the acquisitions of Kwok's work at M+ museum, stated: "Since the 1970s, Kwok's artistic practices are interventionist,



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performative and cumulative. He was one of the earliest artists working in this mode in Hong Kong and Beijing in the 1970s. This aspect of his practice is hard to represent through collection alone.”

It was also back in Hong Kong that Kwok wed his third and current wife, the South Korean artist Cho Hyun-jae, in the spring of 1997 with a “one hundred Hong Kong dollar silver ring,” as Cho remembered fondly. She continued: “This was the beginning of my destiny with Frog King Kwok.” Cho also grapples with the five elements and rituals in her own work, most significantly in her aptly titled “Fire and Water” performance and installation series (1990). In one performance, she tries to melt a block of ice with just the warmth of her body, which is wrapped in bandages, in an attempt to “wash away the anger and dirt inside me.” The bandages are then burned, and she asks a monk to shave her head. Together, Cho and Kwok forged a new path into experimentation with metal, resulting in a series of sculptures such as *Frogtopia Arch* (2016), two interlocking steel M-shaped arches studded with spheres, reflecting the nature around it and representing the eyes of the Frog King and Queen, and covered with graffiti-esque Kwok markings. Kwok’s new connection to South Korea also led to him lugging native woody debris back to his studios in Cattle Depot Artist Village, a slaughterhouse that has been converted into an artist compound, and later, Yuen Long, where he would slash the fibrous bark with axes or take a blowtorch to it, creating totems similar to his burnt sculptures of the ’70s.

In 2011, Kwok flew to Venice for “Frogtopia – Hongkornucopia,” a space overpopulated, like an earthly forest, with installations and works, as a presentation for Hong Kong’s participation in the



Biennale. Interestingly, the curator Benny Chia wrote of the show that it was “more of a reflection on anxieties related to space in overcrowded cities than the restorative properties of nature.” Yet in the same essay, he extolled Kwok’s factory-speed production, the mammoth collection of works that have *all* been shown, rejecting the typical artist’s process of curation. This endless compulsion to create seems at odds with an alleged anxiety of tight spaces: anyone who has visited Kwok’s studios, especially the one at Cattle Depot Artist Village, will see that he is placated by the stacks of papers, objects and photographs (there are also plastic bags crammed with memory cards) that have extensively documented a storied life. Perhaps the anxiety is not so much about urban space then, but about ensuring that every angle is observed, every tale told. Cho, his long-suffering roommate, tells another side to the story: “I think he has chaos in his unconscious mind . . . he is only able to do art, but he is not able to bear other responsibilities, like for family, or a child. When the stuff covers up all our space, then I have to look for another space for my own breathing. And then he follows me to the new space to make his nest, and it becomes a jungle again.”

Since his showing at the 54th Venice Biennale, it has been difficult to get away from the spectacle of Frog King. One can become distracted by all the dangling, multicolored ephemera, the cavalcade of seemingly endless, disposable papers and paintings that trail him, or the blond hairpiece that sits atop his head, as distinctive as Warhol’s mop, and which trembles as he dances and shouts in one of his performances. Perhaps Kwok is a severely misunderstood artist, in the sense that those who know him as



(Opposite page, left)
Photocopy of **FROG ON XEROX**, 1982, material and dimensions unknown. Courtesy the artist and to Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page, right)
INK PARTY, 1995, documentation of performance at Gwangju Biennale, 1995. Courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

(This page)
FROG BUN LUM, 1994, watercolor and ink on paper, 140 x 72 cm. Courtesy the artist and to Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.

Frog King the performer are unable to reconcile his identity and work as Kwok, and vice versa. Those who revere his celebrity-like, commercial facade might not understand that he has always been a marginal artist, and that the act of putting on Frog King’s costume was always intended to be “an integral aspect in shaping his own artistic identity, a public persona, as well as a tactic of creating myths around himself, without relegating the task of representation to institutional categorizations,” as curators Christina Li and Yung Ma pointed out in an essay for the 2012 Para Site exhibition “Taiping Tianguo, A History of Possible Encounters.” The costume of Frog King is also a fundamental evolution from his “Live Body Sculpture” series of happenings in the ’70s, and a three-dimensional, live-action rendering of his works on paper.

By 1997, Ferrara had already written of Kwok’s process: “The latest works are gaudy and garish in their wild use of color, but they have a Kwok genius. There are works, mostly black ink on rice paper, that have a darker side, but these have been relatively rare in the last few years.” What Ferrara might have picked up on was that there are traces of Kwok Mang-Ho in Frog King’s colorful performances and works, even if he was writing at a time before Frog King was fully formed. Within the most “gaudy” or “garish” actions, collages or paintings, inked haphazardly during a performance and thrown into a swimming pool or some other random location immediately after, there are elements of conceptual consideration—and a dash of forethought—derived from years of studying and rehashing linguistic forms and codes. Similarly, Frog King has always existed in Kwok: even during his early performances, as he torched quilts, smashed eggs and released plastic bags into politically sensitive areas, his creations were highly accessible, almost fun, and understood easily by his students in Yuen Long or tourists in the Forbidden City.

Kwok has many stories about frogs. There is one that recounts the artist at age six leaping into a boat, smuggling himself beneath the blankets, and then surfacing minutes later to realize what he had done; after jumping off the boat, he swam in the direction of a frog-shaped boulder, which provided dry refuge while his family searched for him. There is another that some have stated as the origin story of the Frog King, when, during his time in New York, he saw an amphibian dive into a pond of water from a great length away. Yet another alleged origin story details a childhood encounter with a frog, where he discovered he could easily communicate with it. But these are narratives too often spun by the press, adding to the spectacle of Frog King that declares him more as an object-figure than an artist.

Perhaps the most representational story about Kwok is the one of the bullfrog, a chance purchase one day in New York. He kept it as a pet and “a performance froggy,” describing the amphibian’s ecstatic, random hopping and twitching akin to the nascent impulses of a creative. After a while, he decided to release it into a lake upstate, but before that, he carried it to a shop in Little Italy where for a nominal fee he could photocopy its live, writhing body. A three-dimensional form flattened in an instant, and on the paper, warm from the machine’s heavy black ink, was a still life captured of something in perpetual motion. “Forever a performer,” Kwok said, smiling quietly at the memory—thinking perhaps not just of the frog, but also of himself. 🐸