



**Sowing the Virtual:
How Art Can Re-assemble the Urban Sphere
in Guangzhou, China**

A thesis presented by

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**Sowing the Virtual:
How Art Can Re-assemble the Urban Sphere in Guangzhou, China**

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Acknowledgement

Where is my home? I was born in Conghua in the north of Guangzhou. I have been living, studying and working in the Pearl River Delta for most of my life. However, the rich and fast-changing, fragmented but intricate geographies of the place have only added to my interest in the idea of home and brought me to the fascinating discussion of urban space. The writing of this thesis is a part of academic training, but it also offers me a chance to sort through the attachment and distance, peace and unrest I have with the urban and to share my encounters along the way.

Among the many encounters and surprises, I am glad to meet the team of Times Museum in Guangzhou. It shows me art's potential in interrogating urban issues and making space for vulnerability, and *The Invisible Hand* project it developed with Omer Fast has inspired me to initiate this research. During the unforgettable journey in the MA Arts & Society program, I am especially thankful to our teacher and my supervisor Dr. Rick Dolphijn. Through the Lives of Deltas program and our thesis meetings, I am introduced to brilliant theories and praxes that urge me to think with conflicts and the in-betweens. When I was anxiously rummaging in a pile of leaves that fall from a tree of transient thoughts, he has been helping me to stay focused and find the kallima. I want to thank Dr. Toine Minnaert as well, for being the second reader of this piece of thought experiment. To my teachers and learning peers, it's a pleasure to have this journey with you.

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deeds that creativity is thinking and making in one, and that one is invincible with an optimistic attitude to trials and errors. Thanks to everybody and everything in my life that makes me become who I am today. All in all, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family for having the best wishes for their child, allowing her to be different and standing by her side unconditionally. You make home a start of something new.

To the next chapter of life!

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Abstract

How can art sow a seed of change in the world we live? This thesis aims to contribute to the discussion from a spatial-temporal perspective and produce situated knowledge by zooming into the urbanist art practice in Guangzhou, China. Embarking on Israeli artist Omer Fast's *The Invisible Hand*, a multimedia experience in 3DVR commissioned by Guangdong Times Museum in 2018, it thinks with an unfolding space-making project and explores how it creates circuits with Guangzhou's urban transformation. It draws upon Gilles Deleuze's understanding of virtuality, looking at Fast's work as a crystal image and thus exploring art's potential in re-assembling the urban sphere. Deleuze thinks of reality as the entwinement between the actual and the virtual, and time as the intrinsic property of space, the philosophy of which has been echoed in contemporary theories of cinema and architecture and arts and society at large. In the light of Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, Arie Graafland and Deborah Hauptmann, and Donna Haraway, I present a performative analysis of *The Invisible Hand*'s configuration of the actual and virtual, in which the economic reform, urban expansion, pursuit of happiness, gentrification and identity reconstruction that take place in Guangzhou are weaved into the visitor's experience of reality. In the same process, it asks for attention to media technologies and urban infrastructures, raising the urgency of approaching the urban through its multiplicities. In the examination of its coalescence with the urban sphere and its deconstructive and germinating potential, I consider that the work opens up a dialogue of identity, public space, and the role of art in the urban. In the end, I propose a reciprocal relationship between art and the city.

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Introduction

During the first half of 2018, I was commuting almost daily on the Guangzhou Metro Line 2 between work and home. I was living in the city centre near the Dongshankou station at Line 1 then, and here is my daily routine: I took Line 1 from Dongshankou, transferred to Line 2 two stops away at Gongyuanqian—one of the busiest parts of the city, and after ten stops, I get off at Huangbian—almost the north end of the line in the suburb—to do my internship in an art museum. Line 1 was put into use in 1997, and Line 2 in 2002. Two decades later, the city has 16 metro lines and 206 stations spread across the area, with a total length of more than 621 km ('Guangzhou Metro' 2022). For the city of Paris, the number is less than 230 km ('Paris Metro' 2022).



Figure 1 The Gongyuanqian station

Let's continue with the story of Line 2. It is a line that runs across the city from the north to the south and overlaps the city's former central axis. If you go in the opposite direction from Gongyuanqian, you first pass through Haizhu Square by the north bank

of the Pearl River, which belongs to the older historical part of Guangzhou. Going beyond this station, you will enter the Haizhu District by the south bank. It was an old industrial area for lower working class and farmers, but has been rising as an animated area for commerce and entertainment during the past few decades. Around 9 km away to the bank's east is the soaring Canton tower. Built for the 2010 Asian Games, it becomes Guangzhou's new landmark and creates the city's new central axis with the Zhujiang New Town CBD. Going south by the line, you enter the Panyu District. Known for its water towns, it is also where the government allocates the Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Centre (HEMC) in 2003. On the Xiaoguwei island in the middle of the Pearl River, HEMC accommodates more than ten university campuses, and 200 thousand students are living on the island. Finally, you arrive at the Guangzhou South Railway Station at almost the southern end of the city. From there, you can not only travel to other neighbouring cities that are put into the development scheme of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao-Greater Bay Area (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau 2018), but also to the rest of the whole country by high-speed trains.



Figure 2 People waiting for their trains at Guangzhou South Railway Station

As for the north end of Line 2, it is connected to Line 14, which opens from the end of 2018. It takes you to towns even norther and ends at Conghua, the northermost district of the city that is famous for lychees, hot springs, and natural sceneries. I came from that region and my grandparents still grow their lychee trees in the countryside. When you

came out of the destination stop called Dongfeng, you are greeted by muddy lanes that pass through rice fields, fish ponds, and farmers' houses with cattle, contrasting sharply with the shiny silver tunnel beneath where you stand. What will the tunnel bring to this place? What would become of the rice fields in a year when I travel back to Guangzhou? A tourist centre, or maybe a shopping plaza?



Figure 3 Dongfeng metro station

Despite the complex geographies above ground, Line 2 and its extensions underground bring you on a smooth trip across the city. While you don't see the towers and squares, rivers and islands on your ride, metros and emerging infrastructures summon a transformation, agglomerating the myriad spaces and temporalities into a future megacity. However, do these changes happen without any discomfort, or are they pushed back from our experience? How do these rapid changes participate in creating new identities, and how does art come in to navigate us to the edge of our niches? To open up the discussion, I look at *The Invisible Hand*, a multimedia work by Israeli artist Omer Fast. It is commissioned by Guangdong Times Museum in Huangbian, Guangzhou, the art museum where I was interning in 2018.

At almost the north end of Line 2 on the urban-rural fringe, Huangbian is one of the many places that are sensitive to the influence of urbanization and precarious under



Figure 4 *Guangdong Times Museum* by Iwan Baan. Taken in 2009, the picture shows the farmland of Huangbian in the front and the Times Rose Garden complex in the back where the Guangdong Times Museum is located.

the change of administration policies. Unlike Zhujiang New Town or Gongyuan Qian which are considered the highlights or the centres, it is rather at the periphery of most people's attention. In the past two decades, the landscape of Huangbian has been transformed from vegetable fields to factories, from an urban village inhabited by migrant workers to high-rises for the middle-class. Getting out of the metro station at Huangbian and going across a street of jamming traffic, you arrive at the foot of a residential building. It is also the entrance of Guangdong Times Museum, as the place is embedded in the residence's architecture. On the 19th floor of the building, Omer Fast's *The Invisible Hand* is shown along with his three other works in his solo exhibition, overlooking at the Huangbian Village neighbourhood from above. While the artist comes from a totally different cultural background and has never been to the city before, he is expected to respond to the transformation of the area and the role of the art museum. The result is a VR film. Adapted from a Jewish fable, it tells the story of a family in the urban village who accidentally make a trade-off with a ghost, and

thus have their fates changed. A combination of storytelling, 3D VR technology and theatrical *mise-en-scene*, the work starts with a story of Huangbian, weaves in the physical environments of the museum and its surroundings, but at the same time, derives the visitors from the midst of an immersive reality.



Figure 5 Stage photo of *The Invisible Hand*

As Fast questions our urbanity and incepts the doubt in a spatial experience, I am using Gilles Deleuze's understanding of the virtual (Deleuze 1968) to unfold the dramaturgy he develops with the urban sphere, and to investigate to what ends this work leads the discussion to. Deleuze proposes a two-fold understanding of reality, which consists of the actual and the virtual. Neither depends on the mind to exist, and the real concerns the two aspects simultaneously. In this philosophy, the understanding of the real is entwined with the notion of time. According to Deleuze, the being of the present is always in circuit with a past and affected by it; nonetheless, the present diverts from its trace and affects a new present, and thus opens space for the future. Distinct from space in a physical and geometrical sense, Deleuze thinks of space with the temporal and relational axes. It sheds light on how urban space can be reimagined, and allowing me

to turn my embodied experience of Fast's work into an exploration of art's capability of embracing the complexities of the urban sphere.

Regarding how art embarks on such a genesis of the real, Deleuze proposes the idea of crystal-image in *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Deleuze 1985). A crystal-image is an actual-virtual synthesis. The actual image, which is at the extension of the crystal, "formed large circuits, and entered into communication with what could appear as recollection-images, dream-images and world-images." Here, Deleuze is saying that the actual activates memories, dreams and outlooks of the world as a way of evoking the virtual. In the same process, it "finds its true genetic element when the actual optical image crystallizes with its own virtual image, on the small internal circuit. This is a crystal-image, which gives us the key, or rather the 'heart', of opsigns and their compositions." Deleuze sees the movement of the actual-virtual circuit as a crystalizing process, as perceptions are connected to memories, the present co-opted by the past, and what seems to be appearance or end becomes interface that we can get through. Deleuze also compares the crystal to a seed that sows its environment: "[...]the seed is on the one hand the virtual image which crystallize an environment which is at present amorphous; but on the other hand the latter must have a structure which is virtually crystallizable, in relation to which the seed now plays the role of actual image." (Deleuze 1985, 74) Being virtual and actual at the same time, the potential of the seed is in a reciprocal relationship with that of its environment. Inspired by the crystal's composition, I will examine how Fast's work makes use of the urban environment as the interface and how he transport us to an actual-virtual journey. On the way to the heart of this crystal, I will also explore to what extent it sows its environment. By presenting my arguments and analysis, I want to contribute to the discussion on art as emergence from its circumstances but also as a differentiating force. Hereby I ask my research question:

Through Gilles Deleuze's understanding of the virtual, how does Omer Fast's *The Invisible Hand* unfold as a space-making practice (crystal-image) and a re-assembly of the urban sphere of Guangzhou, China?

This question will be explored by the following sub-questions:

- 1) How does Deleuze's definition of the virtual and the crystal-image understand space and its intrinsic relation with time?**
- 2) How can Omer Fast's *The Invisible Hand* be performed as an actual-virtual circuit or a crystal-image?**
- 3) What kind of conversation does *The Invisible Hand* open up, and to what extent does it sow the seed into its environment?**

Chapter 1 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

1. Understanding time and reality through virtuality

1.1 The virtual as opposed to the possible

Through the experience of travelling across the city in expansion, two kinds of futures appear in my mind. When thinking about what would become of that rice field or fish pond, I can't help imagining its transformation into a place with shopping centres and housing units, as the metro beneath my feet has been outlining. On the other hand, I try to resist such thoughts. Why is it necessary for a village to become part of a metropolis instead of having its own sustainable way? As existing modern cities provide all kinds of possibilities for the future of the "less developed" areas, the potential from within these geographies remains seldom explored. Both assumptions above seem to be explorations of new realities, but it would be false to ignore the inequality behind them, which presumes the modern way as superior on the evolution ladder. There is no coincidence that *The Invisible Hand* by Omer Fast involves these different imaginaries, which is worth closer examination in our discussion of urban space. I take into account Deleuze's definition of virtuality, and first of all, the distinction he makes between the virtual and the possible, as it echoes the different kinds of future genesis that I become aware of in my quest. To begin with, Deleuze puts it that the meaning of the virtual and the possible should not be confounded, and he makes definitions of the two terms in *Difference and Repetition* as follows,

"The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a 'realisation'. By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualization." (Deleuze 1968, 211)

By saying so, the author defines that virtuality is fully real while indicating that there is an untruthful aspect of possibility. The definition concerns a few aspects. Firstly, he describes the virtual as an “Idea”, and “it is on the basis of its reality that existence is produced, in accordance with a time and a space immanent in the Idea” (Deleuze 1968, 211). This “Idea” does not precede existence but is characteristic of an “indifferent milieu” (Deleuze 1968) of space and time. For instance, no government plans the existence of a slum or an urban village, but it does exist. It comes into being under influence of various factors, i.e., migration to the city, affordable living expenses for grassroots in the region, trust and friendship, natural resources to appropriate, local businesses, administration issues, customs and traditions people share...Every aspect contributes to its existence, but none of these factors could say a final word of what it is and what it would become. It is an “Idea” configured among the various flows of force, and the name “slum” serves only as a quick reference but not a determination. What makes this “Idea” real is that it doesn’t rely on one single identity to come into being.

Contrary to the virtual is the possible, which depends on a thinking subject or human consciousness to exist. The possible comes from a “concept”, a law that “conceive[s] of existence as a brute eruption, a pure act or leap” (Deleuze 1968, 211), a projection that summons facts to support its legitimacy. All the substances added to this “concept” later as its realization will become a representation of mental image instead of an expression of genuine existence. Urban facilities such as the metro network are concrete existence, and it is fully possible for a metro line to appear in the countryside, but all these can also confer an image of the city on what is not. There are infrastructures and architectures that outline the possibility of a new urban agglomeration, but from time to time, the virtual misfits this identity, and receives denial in return. The already existing potential that is different from the modern imagination are often interrupted and overshadowed.

When it comes to the issue of creativity or of the emergence of something new, Deleuze thinks that true novelty emerges from the virtual because it “designates a pure multiplicity [...] which radically exclude the identical as a prior condition” (Deleuze 1968, 211). Possibilities, with identity as a prerequisite, are pre-determined by a certain mode or master plan that is after all an extension of mind, or “an image of the real” (Deleuze 1968, 212). The real “is supposed to resemble the possible” in return, so that a pair of facing mirrors are set up to trap reality in endless reflections. “The actualisation of the virtual, on the contrary, always takes place by difference, divergence or differentiation. Actualisation breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle [...] For a potential or virtual object, to be actualised is to create divergent lines which correspond to - without resembling - a virtual multiplicity.” (Deleuze 1968, 212) If art bears the expectation of creativity, in a Deleuzian thinking, its practice should touch upon the virtual; and for this sake, it is after all the art of embracing difference and multiplicities.

In this sense, my exploration of the urban sphere is also an attempt to work with multiplicities. It concerns how *The Invisible Hand* sees the virtual in its circumstances, and what kind of device it develops to make an intervention. The analysis requires the identification of the actual and the virtual, the integral relationship between which comes as follows, with time as their intrinsic property.

1.2 The virtual and actual in non-chronological time

Earlier we explore Deleuze’s definition of virtuality and see the virtual and the possible as opposed to each other. While the virtual face of reality is non-subordinate to or loose from a given identity, the possible is considered a resemblance of the real and conformity to the subject, which is thus diverted from reality. As Deleuze considers

virtuality the condition of the genesis of the real, and the genesis as the virtual being actualized, he further explains the real as the virtual and the actual and their relations.

According to Deleuze, the virtual does not oppose the actual as is the relation between the virtual and the possible. They are the two sides of reality. While the actual is proximate in space and time, the virtual dives deeper. The relation between the virtual and the actual concerns the relation between the past and the present. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze refers to Henri Bergson in understanding this twins of the real:

“Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents the two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and recollection on the other . . .”
(Deleuze 1985, 79)

In this statement, Bergson understands the experience of the present as remembering while perceiving, which Deleuze borrows in his philosophy. While Deleuze relates the actual to the present, he also puts it that the virtual neither precedes nor breaks away from the actual but composites with the actual in a different way. When we perceive the immediate environment, for example, Omer Fast’s solo exhibition at Guangdong Times Museum, what makes it more than a display of the artist’s portfolio is that visitors are constantly provided with threads that remind them of the space outside the white cube. For instance, the exhibition entrance resembles an apartment floor, evokes the fact that the museum is based in a residential building. For another instance, watching a film performed by all Chinese actors but with an exotic story frame, one may start to think about who is the artist and what has brought him here. The apartments in the building and the place where the artist is from belongs to the virtual as well as to the past, but the exhibition can transport the visitors to these timeplaces. The past is not remote from the present but the two are connected in one moment. With this actual-virtual feedback

loop, we recognize or reflect upon our situation. The process also depends on what among the virtual comes to our awareness when we perceive the actual.

This definition of the real understands time as non-chronological since the virtual and the actual coexist in one moment. The present passes and soon becomes the past, but this does not undermine their relatedness. Time, if understood as a new present succeeding but nonchalant to the present, or one organic reality overlaying on another, will be discontinuous (Deleuze 1985, 80). In this sense, the next second will have nothing to do with the present one, and what has passed will be insignificant to the new present. It shares the same defect of the possible, since it falsely recognizes the future as an invention that negotiates present as a price. In fact, it is a “concept” from the mind, which depends on the one dominating power that illustrates it. The present or the past would be encapsulated on their own by this illustration, and time would be frozen.

In his proposition of non-chronological time, Deleuze puts forward a different coherence between the past and the present. (Deleuze 1985, 80) On the one hand, the present always entails a circuit with its own past, just as the actual has a corresponding virtual image. On the other hand, this specific past was the actualization of a deeper past in virtuality or the whole existence of the universe. The deeper or nearer virtual, finding its way to the actual through the circuits wide or narrow, crystallizes with the actual in the production of reality. As this reality passes, it is preserved as the virtual, whose existence is to be further evoked. Deleuze describes this movement of non-chronological time as “split[ing] at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we see in the crystal” (Deleuze 1985, 81). The idea of the crystal-image will be elaborated later with more details.

1.3 Perception and memory as the actualization of the virtual

To open the discussion of the crystal-image, I need to expand a little on the actualization of the virtual, which can be effectuated as perception and memory. They are not only important in Deleuze's theory but fundamental to interpret Fast's artistic language. As we discussed earlier, the virtual does not depend on one's mind to exist. In Bergson's words, virtuality is the "pure recollection" (Deleuze 1985, 79) ; and in Deleuze's, the "pure past" (Deleuze 1968). While *The Invisible Hand* works on a dramaturgy that is relatable to our urban experience or to the past, this past have been curated to present an image of local history, and thus, it casts a gaze on its surroundings, including a place called Huangbian, its residents and its neighbours. But the life of the place exist not in our gaze. There are so much more about the people, the community, the land or even the geological history of the place that's not included in this one work. All of these, which belong to the virtual or the pure past, can come into play with the actual and effectuate a new present that differs from what we have already seen from the artwork. In other words, when we look at these threads or traces, we only become conscious of certain aspects of the urban sphere. When the artwork turns our eyes to the metropolitan way of life, it intervenes in our perception and memory, which is no less important than its engagement with actual existence. Furthermore, perception and memory is not beyond Deleuze's understanding of the virtual and the actual. He interprets "consciousness" as a mode of actualization of the virtual:

"if we ask where consciousness is going to look for these recollection-images and these dream-images or this reverie that it evokes, according to its states, we are led back to pure virtual images of which the latter are only modes or degrees of actualization. Just as we perceive things in the place where they are, and have to place ourselves among things in order to perceive them, we go to look for recollection in the place where it is, we have to place ourselves with a leap into the past in general, into these purely virtual images which have been constantly preserved through time." (Deleuze 1985, 80)

On the one hand, this framework asks for situating mental activities on the basis of the pure past and as a way of effectuating the virtual. Identity or “consciousness” comes into play as one of the many kinds of thresholds that capture travelling multiplicities from the pure past. Again, it requires an ontological understanding of existence as heterogeneous. On the other hand, it offers a perspective to look at art as an objective of engaging with the public, be it a reminder of the given possibilities in the everyday life, or empowerment of the individuals in manifesting their own creativities. In art’s socially engaged practices, there is no denying of the importance of identities, memories and embodied experience. Regarding the way it is comprehended by virtuality, the spatial intervention of art in *The Invisible Hand* is at the same time a perceptual intervention. However, it intervenes not only by creating themed façades that impose given facts but by devising pathways that penetrate the façades towards the open virtual. In the following part, I’m exploring how the virtual-actual frame of time can be adopted to the research on such artistic practices.

2. Studying the crystal-image

2.1 Art as crystallization

New technologies do not only change the means of production but also alter the way reality is perceived. Walter Benjamin elaborates on such a paradigm shift caused by the emergence of film and its mass consumption in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, seeing the role of the camera as intermediating between the viewer and the object and shattering the aura of the object into fragmented representations. Referring to the movements of the camera and the juxtapositions of images, he notices that “an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man”, which “reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.” (Benjamin 1969) While Benjamin criticizes film’s representative and reproductive nature that negotiates authenticity, Deleuze finds resonance in the “new

formations of the subject” of art to his philosophy. The audience’s leaping from one “environment” to another when confronted with moving images could be thought of as estrangement by Benjamin, but in *Cinema 2*, Deleuze compares it to a crystal-image, with which he performs analyses on films by Orson Welles, Max Ophüls, Jean Renoir, Federico Fellini, etc., showing how art achieves in meaning-making and storytelling through the time-space compost.

A crystal-image is an actual-virtual synthesis. The actual image, which is at the extension of the crystal, “formed large circuits, and entered into communication with what could appear as recollection-images, dream-images and world-images” (Deleuze 1985, 69). Here, Deleuze is saying that the actual activates memories, dreams and outlooks of the world as a way of evoking the virtual. In the same process, it “finds its true genetic element when the actual optical image crystallizes with its own virtual image, on the small internal circuit. This is a crystal-image, which gives us the key, or rather the ‘heart’, of opsigns and their compositions” (Deleuze 1985, 69). Deleuze sees the movement of the actual-virtual circuit as a crystalizing process, as perceptions are connected to memories, the present co-opted by the past, and what seems to be appearance or end becomes interface that we can get through. Deleuze also compares the crystal to a seed that sows its environment: “[...]the seed is on the one hand the virtual image which crystallize an environment which is at present amorphous; but on the other hand the latter must have a structure which is virtually crystallizable, in relation to which the seed now plays the role of actual image” (Deleuze 1985, 74). Being virtual and actual at the same time, the potential of the seed is in a reciprocal relationship with that of its environment.

2.2 Interfacing media technologies

On the one hand, to approach *The Invisible Hand* as a crystal-image is to analyse Fast’s

manipulation of media technologies. The VR film, which also gives the name of the exhibition, calls for attention not only to cinematic technologies in a general sense but also to an expanding territory of cinema and its composition with scenography, architecture and the art of curation. Therefore, my observation on the technological part is two-fold:

Following the script and the moving images in the VR content, I will first apply the actual-virtual frame in reading the film's movement and interpreting its intentions. A film, apart from capturing 24 stills per second of the same horse's motions in the air and by rolling out these frames in successive order to show a horse running, can generate a different kind of movement, for example, a *montage* that creates meaning from the clash of two heterogeneous elements. Analogous to how an actual-virtual circuit works, cinema can create a sense of realness and mobilize the subject by juxtaposing the present and the past, perceptions and recollections. In this light, it is able to provide a non-chronological view of time, through which the audience travels in a universe where time ramifies and multiplicities cross their paths.

Secondly but of equal importance, I will focus on the framing technology of the exhibition, which is closely-knit with the artist's cinematic languages and works to blur the boundary between the art space and real life. In a study that connects cinematic technologies with architectural theory, Arie Graafland and Deborah Hauptmann sees affinity between architecture and film-making in generating movements. (Graafland and Hauptmann 2008) Considering the juxtaposition of clashing elements in film as "mobile section + temporal plane" and the practice of "spatializing time", they seek to transfer "[t]he compositional unity between the framework of the film image and the object" in cinema to architectural experimentation. As the authors say, the production of film is an implication with architecture. From scenario to logistics, from lighting to camera position, architecture is also scenography that frames the shooting in advance.

Referring to Wolfgang Iser's idea about post-modern architecture, Graafland and Hauptmann notes that "all architecture is about the quality of editing", which performs a syntactic function. The works by architect James Stirling, for example, are considered re-assembling given forms into "a succession of events". The "syntax" can also appear in a hyper immersive way, depending on how it would like to realign the different times and spaces, as is the case of the film *Russian Ark* (Sokurov 2002). In the film, the story unfolds throughout one single take following the narrator in a detour in the Hermitage, and the movement of the in the mechanism of the palace space co-script the narratives in the mechanism of the palace space. Yet, the authors still ask: is the architectural procedure "about rhythmical successions of elements, surface foldings, or is it also about deconstructivist clashes inside grids?" The authors' insight helps me in elaborating the intertextuality between Fast's work and its surrounding environments, and I will make further discussion on the work's deconstructive potential.

2.3 Navigating through multiplicities

On the other hand, to study the crystal-image is to unfold the virtual, the actual and even the possible of the urban sphere. At the beginning of the chapter, I have introduced these aspect of the real and non-real as defined by Deleuze, and I goes on to present the virtual and the actual as central elements to facilitate the discussion of Fast's work in the next chapter. In the meantime, even though I borrow the virtual and the possible to locate my research question, and even though they oppose each other by definition—one is real and the other not, art does not exclude them. It brings them together since they are part of the multiplicities. The purpose is not to condemn the construction of traffic lines as untruthful or to pay tributes to the righteousness of the grassroots. Nor is it to split the status quo into two halves, one of the possible and the other of the virtual, as they are implicated.

In the research of Fast's work which draws in a megacity and an urban village, a public art museum and a real-estate company, a local culture and a foreign identity, I look for a mindset that is put by Donna Haraway as entwining myself "in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings"(Haraway 2016, 1); as "passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them" (Haraway 2016, 3); and as staying with lots of troubles. Fast's work take place in a context where the possible is becoming the actual and the concrete. If there is a chance of change, it relies on what truth the work speaks of, and whether it sows the virtual that is outside the concern of the possible back into the actual so that the master's house can be transformed. Moreover, the possible that is under realization comes into the configuration of the virtual—it has real impact on what the place we live can be. Back and forth between the realization of the possible and the actualization of the virtual is where urban developments and social changes unfold.

While Deleuze warns of the danger of confusing the virtual and the possible (Deleuze 1968, 211), the circumstances created by *The Invisible Hand* is hybridity of the expression of the virtual and the conception of the possible. Spontaneous aggregates and hierarchical orders produce the current situation of urban space, and this is the virtuality I understand of the city in a bigger picture. What's important here is to rethink the myth of development, and to what extent it repeats the same past or generates new actuality. Instead of searching for alternative urban space or the negation of the existing mode of space production, here are my guidelines: I look for those of the virtual but am also aware the possible. I place formulas along becomings; the relational and performative along the essentialist.

Chapter 2 Analysis: *The Invisible Hand* by Omer Fast

Introduction

Imagine you are watching a VR film, in which the home of a Chinese middle-class family is shown. Roaming in their apartment, its neighbouring urban village, and the many other parts of the city, you explore a story of how the family has a mythical encounter that leads to their rise from the grassroots.

Taking off the VR goggles, you are faced with a white room, an empty sun-lit room where you were watching the film. Through the window glass, you recognize that the

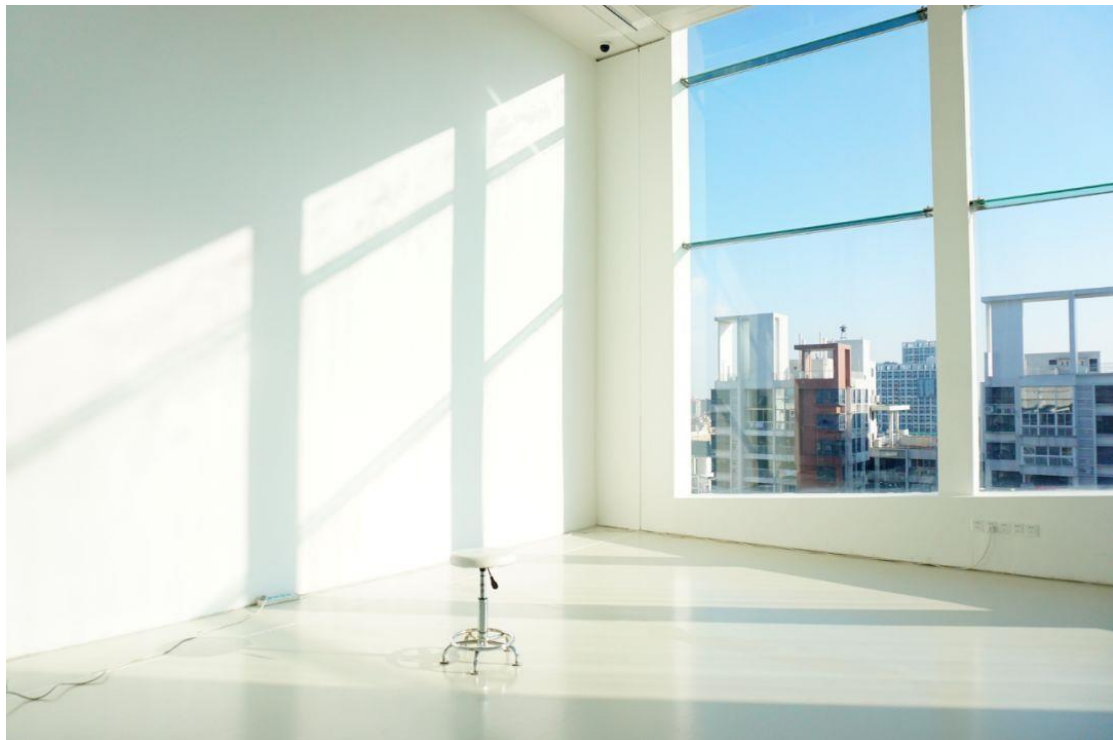


Figure 6 The room that shows *The Invisible Hand*

buildings, traffic and constructions outside belong to that neighbourhood you have just explored in the film. Almost at the same time, you remember you have entered this room through an apartment door that is located in a residential building, with red couplets on its two sides, and some plants and groceries casually placed near the



Figure 7 Entrance of *The Invisible Hand* exhibition

doorstep. But this is not an apartment. You actually came into an art museum, one that is built in the residential complex, and one that fakes itself again into the home of a Chinese family in suburban Guangzhou, for the purpose of showing this film. By this moment, everything seems so cheesy: a film which surrounds you with the scenes of the physical space where you actually are, rendered in a 3D VR effect that your eyes couldn't really fully adjust to; an art museum that appears as a middle-class apartment; an urban foresight awaiting for completion... This is Omer Fast's work *The Invisible Hand* in Guangdong Times Museum, in which the real and the surreal merge together to temporarily suspend people's common sense. Some visitors arrive at the entrance with lost faces. They turn around and leave without much hesitation, since the place looks like anything but an art exhibition they have expected.

The staged situation plays with the visitor's perception and memory in a way that can be interpreted by Deleuze's understanding of the real as performative of the actual and the virtual. A visitor's experience concerns the two faces of reality that take place simultaneously. For example: When she is confronted with the actual, which is the

immediate environment of the apartment floor, her recognition of the situation is at the same time implicated with quite a few factors that are not on site. Referring to the past to figure out what brings her to the scene, the memory or the virtual-image of an art



Figure 8 *Guangdong Times Museum* by Iwan Baan

museum may come into scope. She tries to comprehend their connection. More virtual-images surge. If she sees the museum as so different from an apartment, she may think she has been on the wrong floor of the building and leave. She may try the door if she has more expectations of the experience the art museum would provide. But this is only the start. This moment of doubt is soon preserved to fuse the visitor's response to the VR film, and in my point of view, the artwork aims to configure this doubt into a larger context. As the work's title indicates, *The Invisible Hand* alludes to Adam Smith's thinking in *The Wealth of Nations* of the free market's automatic operation by supply and demand. I propose that the work, rather than investigating an economic concept and phenomenon, demands reflections on the freedom offered by a new capitalistic way of life (Smith 1776). In this process, it invites the visitor to situate her reflection in multiple aspects of the urban sphere. In the following analysis, I re-arrange these

aspects into three entangled dimensions. They are:

1. Huangbian under the artist's gaze;
2. Art as a self-perpetuated loop;
3. The art museum and the urban village: a symmetry.

With Deleuze's thinking of the virtual and the crystal image, the following parts will be a performative analysis on how *The Invisible Hand* choreographs the abovementioned three dimensions of the virtual into the actual showcase experience, and how it keeps raising doubt on these multiple constructs.

1. Huangbian's past and present, under the artist's gaze

When asked why he uses Virtual Reality as the medium of his new commission for Guangdong Times Museum, the artist Omer Fast says that when he had his first visit to the Huangbian neighbourhood and the Times Rose Garden residential complex, he came up with the idea of presenting his exhibition in the homes of Huangbian residents and leaving the museum space empty. Since he was not able to do so for practical reasons, he turns to the VR technology, which allows him to bring the neighbourhood into the museum space. While the work touches upon various issues, it is first of all the artist's experience of the Huangbian neighbourhood in Guangzhou, and his response to such an experience. In the immersive audio-visual environment that VR provides, a visitor finds herself transported to the world outside the museum but also where the museum is located. In this part, I focus on what the film tells about the Huangbian neighbourhood, mainly through the script, the actual viewing experience, and my observation of the place.

Putting on the goggles, the visitor starts her exploration. There is a young girl in sight, standing still in the middle of an empty living room, and starts telling the story of her family, “My father was once a child like me. He was an only child, the bright star in his parents’ lives, which were otherwise very dark and difficult”. Following immediately is a shot in the dark and narrow alleys of an urban village, where the same girl is standing and continues her lines, “They lived in an urban village like this one. They made integrated circuits for toys that fly and light up. Slums like this were created when fields were swallowed by the city.” Another shot follows, this time a dizzying view of Guangzhou’s CBD from high above, with the girl speaking, “Later on, even this land became precious. People were driven out and glass towers were built.” (Fast 2018)



Figure 9 Screenshot from the footage taken in Guangzhou's CBD

The opening is a glimpse of Huangbian's history. It was once a rural area with villagers living on their lands. Since the end of the last century, Guangzhou has become a hub of manufacturing industries, and small factories started to gather in Huangbian. Migrant workers came and sought places to live in the area, which become what we see in the film as the crowded self-built houses in the village, blocking daylight and leaving dark and narrow passages for people to cross through. Real estate developers came as well, building up commodity housing towers that target the middle-class market, including the Times Rose Garden where Fast's exhibition is shown. Not so long before the exhibition, Guangzhou had just



Figure 10 The view I see from Times Museum's office at the end of 2017.

announced a plan to make Huangbian a City of Design, which means that those factories, self-built houses and local small businesses would make way for design-related companies, R&D centres, and industrial design offices (Zhang 2022). In the film, the two contrasting sides of Guangzhou are placed in sequence: the limpid image of a futuristic landscape and the opaque image of a slum; one the display of economic power and the other the shabby living and working conditions in the b-roll of such prosperity.

As the story goes on, one gets to know that the girl's father, in his childhood, found a ring in the forest and next to it a finger poking from the ground. He puts the ring on the finger, and since then, his family has been offered great sums of money on a regular basis from anonymity. But when the boy grows up and marries his love since youth, it

turned out that he had already engaged himself with a ghost in that encounter in the forest. The ghost, who asks for the young man's commitment at his wedding but is declined, casts a spell on the young couple's family for not being able to lie for the rest of their lives, dooming their marginalization in society. The artist adapts this story from a Jewish fable, but the 12-minute-30-second film is shot in Guangzhou and especially in Huangbian—the neighbourhood where the art museum is located, including an apartment in the Times Rose Garden residential complex, the café and office space of the museum in the same building, the urban village a few blocks away, a forest in a more remote suburb, and some views of the city's CBD. The film's settings evoke an uncanny *déjà-vu*, which comes from the combination of the strange and the familiar, the promise of a hyperreal environment and a suspicious narrative.

One can account for such a distance to cultural (mis)appropriations. The framework of the story, which originates from one of the Jewish fairy tales written in Hebrew, carries the artist's cultural background but is totally alien to its local context. Some visitors share that it reminds them of Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*. Although all footage is taken in Guangzhou, the adaptation does not bother itself too much with local knowledge or in-depth study of the place. In an interview with the artist about this work, he talks about his artistic strategies and commits that “in a way, I bring my baggage to a particular place. I have my histories and my interests, and my work is very often a quick response. I open my baggage to a particular place and see how it works.” As for the fable, “it has nothing to do with the Times company, with the Rose Garden Complex, with Guangzhou or with China”. (Pan and Fast 2018) In other words, the original story is taken as an instrument to capture the artist's experience of a new place as an outsider, another pair of “goggles” for the audience to put on. Even if the VR camera has replicated the physical environment in full detail, a sense of being out of place haunts the visitor. This disorientation only heightens when the actors speak their lines in Mandarin while Cantonese is actually the common language in the city and in the

neighbourhoods, and when the ghost, played by a man, shows up in the appearance of a female role in Kunqu Opera, which does not belong to the local culture, either. These (mis)appropriations keep reminding the visitor of such a gap in the cinematic representation.

Merging this strangeness into the plot development and scenarios, Fast further presents a point of view on Huangbian's history. "The invisible hand", as both an economic law and a ghost, guides the visitor there.

Guangzhou is one of the first Chinese cities that embraces a market economy and opens up to world trade since the country's economic reform in the 1970s. Its transformation, often framed as successful and pioneering, is, with little doubt, driven by an "invisible hand". Nevertheless, this classic law in economics morphs into a supernatural force that plays with the fate of the family in the film and that twists the visitor's understanding. The metaphorical "hand" asks for our attention.

According to the story, the mechanism of a free market has succeeded in transforming the city into a modern one and bringing fortune to a family. However, this mechanism is incepted by accident. In the story, the boy found the ring, but he believed that the ring should belong to the finger and put it back. The great sums of money in front of the family's door appear as a reward for the boy's innocence and good moral, but it actually costs the prize of his marriage. The ghostly side of "the invisible hand" reveals. Once this secret engagement is exposed, which the family refuses to acknowledge, the ghost, instead of taking the money back, deprives the family's ability to hide their most trivial private thoughts once they start to talk. This leads to a moral judgement of what consists of their fortune: the lies, the "bedrock of friendships and families"(Fast 2018, 22). None of those little white lies is allowed to exist when the family members try to speak, which causes absurdity from time to time, and disintegrates the cover of their happy lives. For

instance, in an apartment scene, the couple starts on each other at a dining table (Fast 2018, 23):

Father: “The food is bland and predictable. So is everything you ever say. I’ve always hated your cooking.”

Mother: “Go ahead, leave. You never finish what you start. That’s why I never enjoyed having sex with you.”

By this moment, the promise and the spell of “the invisible hand” come into one. An accusation is made, of the complicity between the capitalistic system and a “parenthood” that mobilizes societal connections and activities. The seemingly neutral economic law turns out to be part of an arranged marriage that does not ask for agreement beforehand.



Figure 11 Still of the wedding scene from *The Invisible Hand*

This may be true in the case of Huangbian’s encounter, but the artist does not bother to make further explanations. A fable remains a fable; the distance is kept. Huangbian is in the room. Not only in the VR headset, but also right outside the window. It is where the show is on. However, it is not there yet.

2. Art as a self-perpetuated loop

Previously, I talk about how Fast's film sets the stage for connecting to the context of the Huangbian neighbourhood, while those itineraries to that reality are also hindered by the work itself. However, this seems like the estrangement method that Fast usually adopts. He wants to "suck them (the visitors) into the story" but in the meantime "to push them away" (Pan and Fast 2018), an experience that is also present in his three other works in the exhibition, namely *August*, *Continuity*, and *5000 Feet Is the Best*. In this part, I argue that the sense of distance created in the film cannot be treated as solely the result of an outsider's gaze. On the contrary, this distance is present in a divided public sphere. I also argue that this dividedness is presented through a series of vicious circles.

2.1 The enclosed Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality is one of the rings in the chain. It sets the hype and the frame of *The Invisible Hand*. The term refers to a computer-generated environment that promises a rich audio-visual experience. It is also an entrepreneurial buzzword that envisions a free space full of opportunities and even a decentralized online society. In 2018, the blockbuster *Ready Player One* by Steven Spielberg was on screen in China, firing up the audience's interest in VR. To promote the exhibition, Times Museum did not forget to fuse the imagination of *The Invisible Hand*'s VR production by comparing it to a *Ready-Player-One* experience on social media. While this immersive technology is more like a tool to absorb the audience in an other-worldly setting, it turns out that *The Invisible Hand* points the spotlight to the technology itself.

Accompanied by the uncanny settings, a visitor enters the story from a third-person perspective. In most scenarios, she assumes no roles that belong to the story but remains a silent and invisible witness on the spot. For instance, in the scene in which the little

boy discovers the ring and the finger of the ghost in the forest, even though a visitor is placed on a spot close to the ring on the ground, it is not guaranteed that she could see it. The voice of the little girl narrator comes to guide her attention, and luckily she would notice a ring on the ground and watch the little boy protagonist coming to the fore and picking it up. In another scene at the doorstep of the boy's family in the dark alley of the urban village, she would see from the side that the father discovers a large sum of money when he opens the door, and then calls the mother. The visitor watches the actors act around her, and is disturbed by either the stiff or the over-exaggerating expressions and body movements of the roles. The actual VR experience is rather chaotic: the view is panoramic and a bit crooked, surrounding the spectator from every angle. It plays in a less satisfying resolution, and from time to time, the spectator feels the weight of the VR goggles. Most actors in the film do not have professional acting backgrounds. It makes it more like an episode from a carelessly-made soap opera, especially when it is compared with Fast's three other works with good manipulation of cinematic devices and picture details. The "architecture" within the VR environment is very unstable.

The artist expresses his struggles with VR in the production. The special VR camera agitates him as it takes footage in a totally different way. The camera looks like an octopus with a big head globe, with its 24 camera units capturing moving images in all directions. It also looks like the real centre of the production team, since when the camera rolls, the actors need to act around it, and the rest of the crew should hide from its 360-degree inspection. Fast describes it as "an instrument of torture", "a panopticon", and working with it is "a fucking nightmare" (Pan and Fast 2018), not because he himself had to hide during the shooting, but because he can no longer use cinematic devices such as montages, close-ups and the switches between different depths of field to tell the story. In order to connect the different shots and guide the spectator's attention without annoying them too much, Fast needs to create the role of the little-girl narrator,

who, in the story, is the daughter of the boy, and makes hints to the spectators about where to look in the right moments. What could have been explained by simply juxtaposing two images now consumes more efforts. When the museum introduces the



Figure 12 Stills from the footage in the forest

work to the visitors, the view-finding process is sometimes mentioned as a liberating side of VR, for it requires the spectator to pay attention, explore, and gain a neutral perspective. However, this happens exactly because the artist shouts “Look here!” from the other side of the screen. There is nowhere else to look at except the designated places. After all, these moving images within the goggles are arranged linearly. Each footage shot is a compartmented space. From the further past to the nearer past, they are aligned one after another under the little girl’s narration.

Towards the end of the film, the visitor meets again the gaze of the little girl who speaks her last line to the camera, with her parents on the side. She says, “It’s not always easy to live with my parents. But they tell me knowing the truth will make me a stronger and better person.” After saying so, she joins the meal with her parents who have just had a quarrel. If both the visitor and the girl narrator have kept a distance from what has been happening in the story, and if the narrator has been guiding the visitor through her family’s encounter, this time, the girl enters that world in the final scene and induces the perplexed visitor into coming back to her own reality. However, everything changes once the visitor puts off her goggles, as she is greeted by another artificial environment.

2.2 The enclosed exhibition

At first sight, Times Museum’s exhibition hall is a white cube. On the white walls and ceilings of the oblong space, windows of different shapes take in sunlight from every direction. However, for the display of Fast’s four cinematic works, the space is made into multiple dark chambers insulated by acoustic barriers. All windows are blocked except for the entrance space that resembles an apartment floor and the room that shows *The Invisible Hand*. Pulling open a different “apartment door” at the entrance, the visitor is led to a different work.

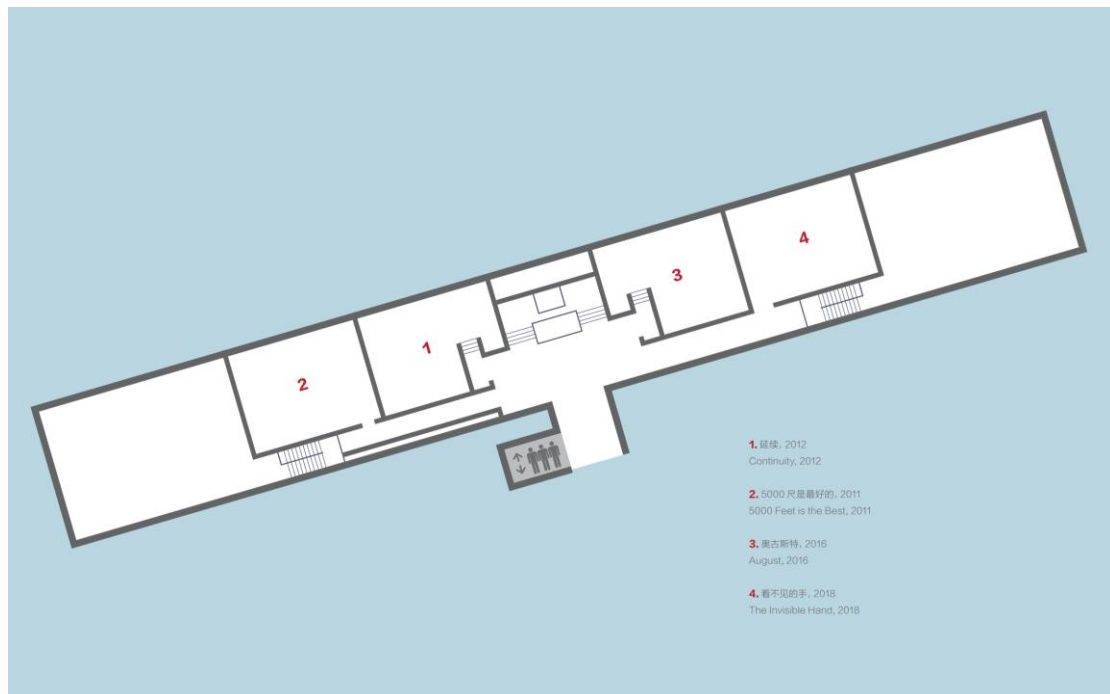


Figure 13 Floorplan of the exhibition

Entering from the first door to the left, the visitor passes through something like a hotel corridor and arrives at *5000 Feet is the Best* (Fast 2011), a re-enactment of the artist’s interviewing with a former U.S. Predator drone operator in a hotel room in Las Vegas. As the pilot sits and speaks in the dim light of the room, flashbacks go to a firing mission he carried out. A headache stops his account and the pictures are switched back to the hotel room. The visitor watches the pilot get out of the room for a break to the hotel corridor, which is in the same fashion as where she has just passed through. When the

pilot opens another room door to enter the same room and join the same conversation with the interviewer, he tells another story. As the structure repeats, the pilot tells another two accounts about crimes in and around Las Vegas. The visitor does not know where the film starts and ends, as they are three parallel stories told in identical procedures and kept in identical suites. Every time the visitor sees the pilot has a headache, she hears an accompanying shrill beep in the background. After that, she sees everything starting over again as if previous memories have been emptied. The loop structure is characteristic of Fast's works. Variations are kept in formatted spaces; individuals are encapsulated by modern technologies. The pilot performs missions by remotely operating the drone above the battlefield. People go to Las Vegas to entertain and stay behind one of those doors in the endless hotel corridor. The visitor goes back to the same apartment floor and enters another nightmarish work through another door —

In *Continuity*, the German middle-class couple drives to the same place to pick up their son who has just come back from the war in Afghanistan, but each time it is a different young man. Like *5000 Feet Is the Best*, it adopts a loop structure which shows no trace of a beginning or an end. (Fast 2012) *August* is a stereoscopic film in 3D based on the work and life of the German photographer August Sander. As a renowned portrait photographer of the 20th century, Sander aspires to create “portraits which render their subjects with absolute truth” and “create a mirror of the times” (Pierce 2022). In his late life, the nearly blind photographer roams in his house during the night, and is haunted by ghostly figures from the past, including a Nazi officer. The officer says to August, “The appendix is a strange organ. No discernible purpose or use. Living off the system. Just like a parasite. Don't you agree? For the most part, it's harmless. But as you know, it can occasionally inflame and endanger the whole organism. In a perfect society, we'd cut them all out before they can act up. Progress through science. That's what my superiors say. At least publicly... Imbeciles...” (Fast 2016)

To get from *August* to *The Invisible Hand*, the visitor needs to pass through another corridor, this time in the waiting area of a Chinese hospital. In cool air conditioning and the smell of disinfectant, many other visitors are queuing for their turns to see the VR film in the next room. Awkwardness mixed with excitement looms up in the narrow space. On the one hand, the small crowd of strangers—each with a ticket that grants the order of their entrance to the room—seem immersed in their own world, checking their phones or looking in the air, and occasionally adjusting their sitting or standing positions. On the other hand, the scenario has conspired a role-playing game with the



Figure 14 Visitors waiting in the corridor to see *The Invisible Hand*

visitors. Some make photos of themselves posturing with the setting, and I couldn't help fancying a surgery room behind the door and a doctor coming out to announce the sentence of one of us. In the mood for a ghost-storytelling circle, each visitor secretly invents their own script and looking forward to the call of their number. Behind the hospital door, the VR film keeps playing in the headsets, in which the little girl narrator's voice haunts, "My father picked up the ring and stood up. A long moment

passed. Clouds crawled past. The forest was watching. We spend our lives dreading these moments, but my father knew his had come” (Fast 2018, 17).

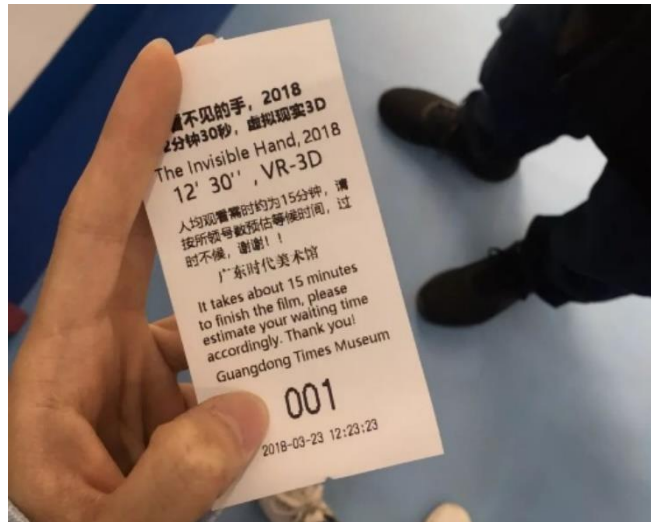


Figure 15 Each visitor queues with a ticket

Now that Fast realizes he cannot deal with the VR footage in the good old ways of film making, he and the curator Nikita Yingqian Cai come to launch a montage of the virtual and the actual beyond screen in the exhibition experience. This montage does not only configure *The Invisible Hand* with his other three works but sends the visitors down a rabbit hole. While the shifting settings in the exhibition space ruptures the visitor’s memory, these space capsules locate the looping pictures on screen as launch pads, and thus constantly brings theatricality to the present; vice versa. The visitor enters a room where a story is shown in multiple avatars, but once she exits the room, she becomes part of the script. And when she unboxes a new story in another chamber, either a line from the previous one surges to the spot, or the current situation is propped or seized by something behind the door. Wherever the visitor goes, there is an invisible company. When the play button is hit, the exhibition unfolds as an automation with one chamber enclosing another and all the noises absorbed into the acoustic barriers. Asked Jean Renoir, however, “Where then, does theatre finish and life begin?” (Deleuze 1985, 86) While juxtaposing the urban village’s decline with the removal of an appendix, how could the production of the films and the exhibition escape the artist’s suitcase and create a dialogue? Can we come out of the rabbit hole?

2.3 The enclosed circulation of art

At the beginning of this part, I want to wind the clock back to when *The Invisible Hand* is still under conceptualization. I have little knowledge of how the artist directs his other works in Germany or in the US, but in the shooting of *The Invisible Hand*, except for inviting Stefan Ciupek—whose works in films include Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* and *127 Hours*—as the cinematographer, he works with a team with all Chinese, including the curator and producer Nikita Yingqian Cai, the actors and the performance agency, the shooting crew, the VR technicians and the staff of Times Museum. Neither Fast nor Ciupek has previous experience living or working in mainland China, let alone speaking Mandarin or Cantonese, but a smooth working pace is developed among the team during the fully-scheduled five days. In the e-mails between the artist and the curator, which are published in the exhibition brochure, one finds clues of how they reach consensus in developing the exhibition experience. During the time of their first few correspondence, Fast’s exhibition in New York’s Chinatown transforms the façade of James Cohen Gallery into a shabby Chinese shop. The move to represent the past of the place as not yet gentrified by the gallery receives racist accusations by a group of local activists. *The New York Times* comments on that exhibition as a “misfire”, for the “ethical indeterminacy” that he embraces in his works is understood as “nasty condescension” by the protestors (Cotter 2017). Looking back, this chapter is not unlike one of those accusations. When Cai asks for Fast’s idea about art’s social engagement from this event, the artist, apart from talking about identity, raises the issue of appearance and essence. As a response to both Cai and the protestors, he says,

“I’m not surprised there’ve been critical reactions. I completely understand people’s need to talk or push back. But I am surprised and hurt by the vitriol and name-calling. We all have unseemly baggage, racist and otherwise, that needs to be sorted through. We all overstep bounds and must shine a light on our darker hypocrisies. For good and

for bad, artists do this in public. A group of protestors hanged a large poster outside the show, which accuses the gallery of representing ‘a non-US and non-New York artist.’ I expect this sort of characterization from right-wing trolls carrying tiki-torches and howling for walls to be built. I don’t expect it from left-wing activists in lower Manhattan.”

“This doesn’t mean that displacement and gentrification are not happening, nor that I’m magically free from prejudiced thinking. I’m truly sorry that some persons find the installation insensitive or offensive. A work of art about identity issues today must represent them warts and all, in their complexity and in their contradictions, pitting essence against appearance. For what it’s worth, I think this work does. I’ve asked the gallery not to take down the protestors’ posters. I disagree with their statements about me and my work but I think they’re important to consider. This doesn’t emancipate me from taking responsibility but it enriches my understanding of how people and art interact.” (Fast and Cai 2018)

Throughout these e-mail exchanges, the reader gains a better picture of the artist. As a Jewish who came to New York from Israel at a young age, he is frustrated that the nuance he intends to preserve in dealing with identity issues receives accusations instead of understandings. Knowing his “baggage” well when approaching Times Museum’s commission, he wonders to what extent art can transcend identity politics or the so-called localness. As he briefly explains his instructions to the shooting team on site and leaves the team figuring out the solutions in a foreign language he does not speak, he seems at ease with retreating a bit from the business and being a quiet observer. Seeing this happen during the shooting, I am curious how he sorts through the misunderstanding he gets from New York, and how the script of *The Invisible Hand* could come alive. However, I remain quite confused when I watch the final production through the headset in the museum office before the exhibition goes public.

It turns out that most Chinese visitors cannot see the VR film in full length. A few days after the vernissage, the museum was asked to replace the original film for an edited version in order to pass censorship. The reason concerned: ghost no longer exists in China after the founding of the People's Republic.

When the exhibition is launched, the museum releases a video that interviews the artist and introduces the exhibition to the audience. It is not until I watch the clip again for



Figure 16 Screenshot from the interview with Omer Fast

this research that I rethink the way Fast introduces himself. Sitting in the glass room of the museum with a bird's view of Huangbian in the background, Fast speaks to the camera,

“My name is Omer Fast, and I'm an artist.”

When asked if he is a director, he denies, “No. I study art, and I show my works in galleries, museums and art institutions. In either of these contexts, this is not a kind of career...” When I assume he is relating the title of “director” to careerism, he continues,

“I make movies for galleries and museums. They are specially made for that.”

“The stories [...] don’t have a beginning or end or they run in a circle. They are made for these kinds of spaces when the audience comes in at any time and leaves at any time. And I like that. I like working with this system and this economy. And that’s why I call myself as an artist.” (Pan and Fast 2018)

After that, the protagonist Omer Fast goes on to explain how his work is a quick response to a set of circumstances; and on and on. Does he foresee that when he tells a joke, the hiding and then the disappearance of the punchline makes the joke go live?

3. The art museum and the urban village: a symmetry

3.1 Detour in *Times*

Compared to what he does for the James Cohen Gallery, I consider Fast’s expression in *The Invisible Hand* rather introversive. In an essay where Cai writes about what brings to such a collaboration between Times Museum and Omer Fast, she mentions that the artist holds a retreating attitude for this project at the very beginning. According to Cai, while Fast hopes that his work could enter the social context, the Chinatown incident makes him hesitant of re-interpreting a foreign culture. In return, she suggest creating a new script to revisit the past and reclaim agency. When the impression of art is constantly bound with gentrification and suspended from a conflicted society, she initiates this collaboration to ask what art can do and what Times Museum can do. (Cai 2018) As a result, the final production is also a detour in the museum’s space and history.

In 2003, in collaboration with Guangdong Museum of Art (hereafter referred to as GDMoA), Times Property (nowadays Times China) launched the GDMoA Times Branch in the Times Rose Garden. The branch was based in the estate’s sales centre.

Zhao Qie, the marketing director of Times Property at that time and now the executive director of Guangdong Times Museum, does not avoid talking about the launch of Times Branch for the developer's marketing purposes. At the beginning of the millennium, art, as a symbol of a better life or even a bourgeois lifestyle, becomes the panacea to property sales and endorses the developer's reputation. (Zhao 2019)

However, Times Property did not make the branch become Guangdong Times Museum by itself. During the 2005 Guangzhou Triennial organized by GDMoA, curator Hou Hanru invited the renowned architect Rem Koolhaas to propose a space design for art experimentations in the Pearl River Delta. At that time, Koolhaas and his team had just published a research on the accelerated urbanization of the Pearl River Delta (Chang et al. 2001). In this design, he proposed a re-assemblage of the Times Branch, an art museum distributed on different floors of the Times Rose Garden: a free walk-in space for cultural activities facing the street on the ground floor; the museum's office on the 14th floor converted from three apartments; the main exhibition hall on the 19th floor at the top; a storage space in the basement. A separate elevator from the original building is made to connect these different parts of the art museum. Before making this design, the architect sees the former residential buildings as inward-looking and free from the chaos of an urban-rural fringe (He 2017). In my opinion, the proposal attempts to disrupt the enclosed order of the complex and leaves to art the role of cracking open a new public space. However, architectural intervention is not a once-and-for-all recipe. During the realization of the architectural project, the former Times Branch also underwent a transformation. By the time the space was open to the public in 2010, the Times Museum not only became independent from the state-run GDMoA, but had registered as a private non-enterprise unit (Zhao 2019). Times Property still funds the museum's operation, but it no longer has decision rights on the museum's curatorial programs and artistic initiatives. It was considered an audacious move, which did not rely solely on capital but on the devotion of local art societies and a lot of creativities.

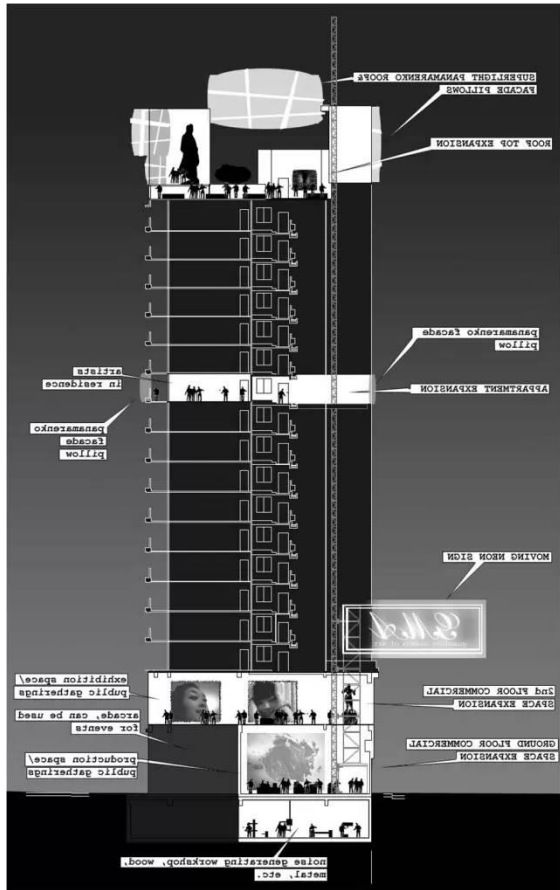


Figure 17 Architectural rendering of Times Museum by Koolhaas

General Scheme of Times Museum, Guangzhou 时代美术馆结构总览

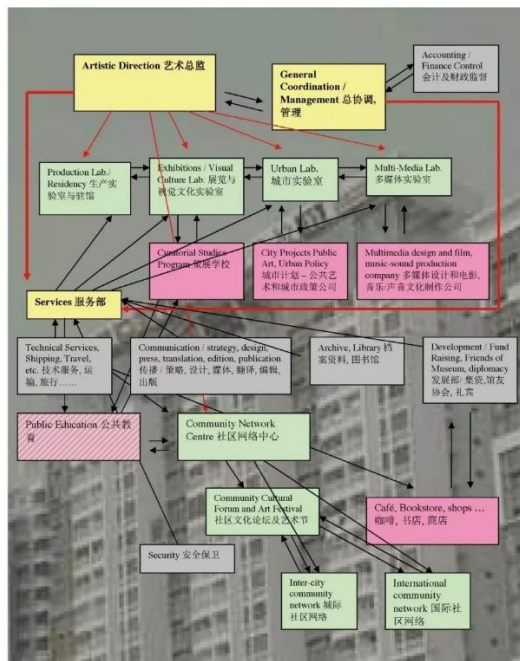


Figure 18 The organizational scheme of Times Museum

When I analyse Fast's work as a making of crystal-image, I cannot neglect the becoming of the Times Museum as a crystallizing process, since it has already brought in so many heterogeneous elements in its spatial practice. Looking at its past, you see the GDMoA chief director Wang Huangsheng with a happy smile at the opening ceremony of the GDMoA Times Branch (plus Times Rose Garden sales centre) with curator Hou Hanru. And in the next scene, Koolhaas, the man who has just won the design competition of the infamous CCTV Headquarters in Beijing, is walking across the vegetable fields at the foot of the Complex. (Zhao 2012) While in 2018 you can hear hustle-bustles coming to the museum office on the 14th floor from the shops and restaurants across the street, that experience no longer exists by the time I write this paragraph. The City of Design replaces the shops, houses and factories, and the museum has halted its exhibition programs due to lack of funding. Under strict Covid regulations for the third year, the real estate industry in China has been in a hard time and companies cut their financial supports to art. Nevertheless, the museum's team has been seeking new ways to continue their artistic explorations and their commitments to the urban.

As I say, Times Museum does not become what it is under one single force but at the intersection of state reform, art, capital, etc., and many more to come. Its resilience or precarity is at the same time a reflection of the changing urban public space. Even though this sustaining mode is now under challenge, all the practices do not make openness an empty word. However, *The Invisible Hand* reminds us that this openness is achieved within a borderline. In an unprecedented and theatrical way, the censorship it receives hunts a ghost at the spot. Art has its self-referential crisis, but it is a crisis of public space as well. If urban life becomes not so different from dwelling in a generic apartment, can art come out of the exhibition space?

3.2 Where is Huangbian?

As is discussed earlier, Huangbian used to be a village. It has been an urban-rural fringe and an urban village for a while, and the apartment homes for the middle class and white collar workers. In the future, it could become a hub for creative industries, in the name of the City of Design. In *The Invisible Hand*, Fast represents the place as a



Figure 19 Rendering images of the City of Design

dystopia in a half-documentary and half-fictional touch, and nests it in one enclosed structure after another. In the discussion of art's role in the public, we are now looking at what *The Invisible Hand* has to do with Huangbian, or what perspective it brings for us to see the place.

On the one hand, the identity-making of Huangbian is full of ruptures. Its leap from a village to a possible design hub is entangled with migration and relocation of rural and urban inhabitants; with the realization of an urban hyperlink; with the dis-assembly of the pasts of the many. It takes not only space but time for the fragmented identities to re-assemble, but Huangbian, one of the many places in China under urban developments, is loaded with the hopes of tomorrow while left with scarce time to grow and mutate from within. Regarding this ambivalence in identity, urban administration is accused of imposing parenthood and art is accused of representing it as poverty porn. *The Invisible Hand* reveals such a tension but an open dialogue is yet to come.

On the other hand, be it in Las Vegas or Huangbian, Germany or the US, modern environments condition freedom in ways that are not so different. Unwrapping a layer of motherland and then a layer of comfortable home, a layer of multimedia immersiveness and then a layer of information cocoon, do these appearances speak for who we are, or do we share a more or less generic way of life? I could be at the wrong end of the stick when I doubt Fast's legitimacy in engaging with such a "local" issue, since the story of Huangbian is made by the many people with diverse backgrounds coming from near and far in this country, each of whom shares a bit of their own past to make what Huangbian is. There is no longer any pure cultural insider or outsider in this story. The alarm I ring to Fast's foreignness makes me reflect on my fluidity or rigidity in perceiving a new local identity.

By revisiting the past of Times Museum and of Huangbian, *The Invisible Hand* cannot answer the question of what Times Museum can do for Huangbian. After all, it is a false question and any answer to it would be disastrous, because it presumes the museum as the condescending saviour and Huangbian the patient on the surgery platform. In fact, neither the museum nor Huangbian, neither art nor any other places in the world are free from their troubles and crises. The museum and the urban village are two expressions of an urban reality, and *The Invisible Hand* is an entry for us to pick up art's response-ability in the becoming of a new public.

Epilogue: Germination

In 1939, Le Corbusier draws a diagram in his draft called *Musée à croissance illimitée* or the Museum of Unlimited Growth. In this conceptualization, a visitor starts her visit from the “true hall of honor” that display the “masterpieces” in the middle of the museum, and stroll along the whirling galleries, which forms a square spiral and at the same time, a less obvious “swastika”. More galleries can be added to extend the spiral, so that the museum can expand endlessly. (Corbusier 1939) Does Le Corbusier design a seed that can transform its environment? Does *The Invisible Hand* develop such a

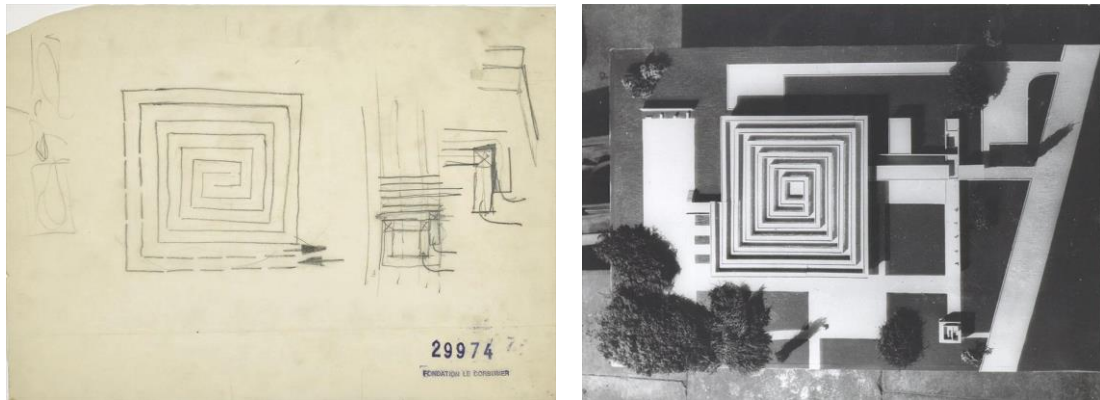


Figure 20 Musée à croissance illimitée, Not located, 1939

similar composition? Yes and no. To support my argument and draw a conclusion to my thesis, I will first go through how Deleuze’s understanding of the virtual and the crystal image lays the foundation of my analysis, and then provide my answers.

In this thesis, I build my theoretical framework upon Deleuze’s concept of the virtual and the actual-virtual synthesis or the crystal-image. Deleuze proposes a two-fold understanding of reality, which is the actual and the virtual. Despite their different degrees of proximity to a fleeting now, they are part and parcel of the real, exists simultaneously, and cannot be separated from each other. By measuring the configuration of the actual and the virtual, Deleuze introduces the temporal factors. The actual concerns the present, which is closer in time; the virtual dives deeper into the

past, but its existence is just as valid as an object out of sight. While the actual and the virtual describe different aspects of the real, they appear as a circuit in reality. Every moment of the here and now is not an insulated space. Deleuze illustrates a non-linear causality between the past and the present by explaining the circuit between the virtual and the actual, which is as follows:

Firstly, every actual image has a corresponding virtual image, the two of which shape together the present as it is. Secondly, this virtual image, while having its own coordinate in time or in the past, is also corresponded with a deeper past. The joint circuits create innumerable winding paths between the present and the past, the actual and the virtual. If we trace these paths to their origins, they are not conformed to one identity but are absolute multiplicities. Deleuze's performance of the real conceives time as a continuum. Different from a chronological order, the past is preserved in the present. As for the present that passes, it continues to be affective and may find its way to the future. In this continuum, spaces from different temporalities are brought together.

The art of intervening in reality by configuring the actual and the virtual is identified by Deleuze as making the crystal-image. I am especially interested in the potential of crystal-image as a seed that crystalizes its environment. To take *The Invisible Hand* as a space-making practice, I see the work as a hub, a re-assemblage of space that engages myriad virtual images with the actual ones. This also means that the work opens a portal for the visitors to travels through the many dimensions of the changing city. In this process, I touch upon how Benjamin and Deleuze think of cinema as an art of re-worlding in their respective ways. I also look at Graafland and Hauptmann's interdisciplinary research on the affinity between cinema and architecture, which paves way for my analysis on *The Invisible Hand's* composition that evokes intertextuality between moving images and the work's situated environments. I adopt Haraway's relational thinking throughout my account of *The Invisible Hand*, positioning the work

within an urban agglomeration and among the various identities, histories and spaces it is attached to. I entwine my personal experience as well, including my internship during the work's production and exhibition, and a *dérive* of Guangzhou on metro.

To what extent is *The Invisible Hand* a seed that sows its environment? Throughout my investigation, it turns out that the work is a seed with multiple appearances but without a kernel. However, I do take *The Invisible Hand* VR film as an entry to the midst of the work, one that is like the entrance Le Corbusier puts in the middle of his square spiral. Within the VR headset's field of vision, the visitor's actual encounter is a short film on curved screen. This, at the same time, is a virtual space transplanted from the Huangbian neighbourhood and contracted by a Jewish story. With such a piece in the "hall of honor", the work develops its façades and galleries that encloses its entry but also itinerates to a sequence of circumstances, extending its arm to a real-life condition. But before the visitor is led on this path, she is confronted with a myth of urban growth, in which the young protagonist's self-pursuit is secretly traded with a wedlock with an "invisible hand".

As I note earlier, the visitor is led on a path to different degrees of enclosure. In the same process, different degrees of the virtual is actualized in the visitor's experience. The first one is the technological impact of VR on our cognition to the film and the issue of Huangbian. I put it that the artist applies the unstable architecture of VR to shake the immersiveness and credibility of his own film. It raises the visitor's awareness of the manipulation of media technologies and extends the myth in his story to the visitor's travelling experience in his exhibition.

The second joint of the path is the frame of the exhibition. There, I bring into discussion Omer Fast's artistic language, his biography and the scheme he develops with curator Cai Yingqian in this project. To compile these different perspectives, I devise a visiting

route that connects *The Invisible Hand* to Fast's three other works on display. This also includes the transitioning passages that link the different exhibition rooms and mimic the environments in Fast's film or the residential building that the exhibition is located at. In this block, The physical environments of the exhibition and the virtual spaces in Fast's cinematic installations are put in coalescence, drawing the visitor to a world penetrated by neoliberalism—an alienated and generic way of urban life without transcendence.

The third joint is the drama when Fast's hidden performance meets the unprecedented censorship received by *The Invisible Hand*. In this block, I continue the discussion on art's dilemma of becoming self-perpetuated, regarding the work's failure in getting out of the art museum or art's circulation in its own niche. Afterwards, we are at the edge of this seed, well-developed in construction but frozen in time. What is the point to build a museum that expands endlessly, if it is not up for germination?

I situate this doubt in a larger context. Now, it dwells at the intersection of two axes: a vertical one that concerns the history of Times Museum, and a horizontal one that goes through the identity of Huangbian. By doing so, I retreat from the *The Invisible Hand* to see how it is attached to an on-going spatial experimentation by Times Museum. In the meantime, I do so to see how it is attached to the ever-changing landscape of Guangzhou under urbanization, characterized in Huangbian as one of those urban-rural fringes. By this time, the issue of identity arises, but it has been sowed at the start of this journey. The identity of the artist and the museum, the urban village and the city—come into play in the crystallization process. As an Israeli Jewish migrant to New York at a young age, Fast could find his own identity a zone of conflict. In *The Invisible Hand*, he makes an attempt to transmit this sensibility to engaging with a culture that is new to him. The result—hastily summed up as a documentary-fairy tale hybrid—heightens the tension and brings the core of the work in ambivalence at the first place.

The identity of Times Museum is another hybrid. It was born coincidentally in a collaboration between real estate and art when the Pearl River Delta had just come into being. While it has a prospect for the experimental and the public, it is very much implicated in the gentrification of its neighbourhood. So is the identity of Huangbian, Guangzhou, the Greater Bay, ..., etc.

What kind of identity do we honour in the middle of the square spiral? Do we want our world to be subsumed to and transformed by this identity? However, *The Invisible Hand* does not put a heroic statue or a pure breed in this hall, and the work is neither an attempt to honour a certain object nor art itself. If we insist on putting it that way, we would be disappointed at the artificial seed we get: an empty core sewed in deceptive appearances. Or, what we truly want to honour is a clean slate, hygienic and free from any foreign contamination. But this does not free us from troubles. The Soviet joke comes alive today when students carrying sheets of white paper on the street to protest against the abuse of Covid regulations and journalist censorship but are accused of instigating colour revolution (大公文匯全媒體 2022). Maintaining this moral slate only ossifies our living environment and turn it into a desert.

However, *The Invisible Hand* does suggest a way of sowing the virtual. It has almost the same structure as The Museum of Unlimited Growth, but it functions the other way round. Instead of counting on the role of museum to transform reality, I propose a reversal of Le Corbusier's spiral: what about to sow the urban and the public in the arts and to reimagine what a museum is? Let us not remain too comfortable in the chambers, galleries and tunnels that make the present an endless waiting area and dream about the future as the way out. By removing those protective layers, we can grow stronger. There is nothing philanthropic in *The Invisible Hand* project, but embarking on the work, I look forward to a museum which allows itself to be reterritorialized by multiplicities. It asks for a more fluid understanding of the art and the city, both of which are hybrids

of the agglomerating urban sphere, and each of which develops a symbiotic relationship with the other.

Source of Images

Figure 1 广州地铁. (2020, June 5). 亲爱的站长，带你打卡广州地铁最早的换乘站。

广州地铁. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xlpSgvGF5cdB9vRKgi4gTA>

Figure 2 凤凰网广东综合. (2019, May 6). 日均到发 67.2 万人次 广州南站客流再创新高. 凤凰网广东. http://gd.ifeng.com/a/20190506/7420355_0.shtml

Figure 3 Wikipedia. (n.d.). 东风站 (广州). Wikipedia. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from

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Figure 4 & 8 时代美术馆. (2020). 广东时代美术馆：关于我们. 时代美术馆.

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Figure 5 Guangdong Times Museum. (2018, March 23). *Omer Fast: The Invisible Hand*. E-Flux Announcement.

Figure 6, 14 & 15: 时代美术馆. (2018, March 23). 看不见的手，看得见的剧透. 时代美术馆. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xmq-AmY7xtKLhQeJf8wfNg>

Figure 7 Cai, Y. (2018, July). 现实主义的幽灵与不合时宜的目击者——奥马尔·法斯特在时代美术馆. 艺术世界.

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Figure 9 杨北辰. (2018, May 9). 世界重新令人着迷. 广东时代美术馆.

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Figure 10 The view I see from Times Museum's office at the end of 2017, (October 7, 2017).

Figure 11 & 12 Fast, O. (2018). *The Invisible Hand*. Gb Agency.

<https://gbagency.fr/artists/omer-fast>

Figure 13 Fast, O., Cai, Y., & Yang, B. (2018). *Omer Fast: The Invisible Hand* (Y. Cai, Ed.). Guangdong Times Museum.

Figure 16 Pan, S., & Fast, O. (2018). *Omer Fast interview about the shooting of "The Invisible Hand."* Guangdong Times Museum. <https://fb.watch/hac1ra3wtC/>

Figure 17 Zhao, Q. (2015, November 5). 资助美术馆是一种公益行为. 广东时代美术馆. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NmJQ8kO3siC9yE8sE_iq0Q

Figure 18 Zhao, Q. (2012, March). 从广东美术馆时代分馆到时代美术馆.

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Figure 19 白云城投集团. (n.d.). 设计之都. 白云城投集团. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from <http://www.gzbyct.com/CityOfDesign>

Figure 20 Musée à croissance illimitée, (1939).

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