

Foreign Helpers: Domestic Labor and the Spatial Infrastructure of Hong Kong

Tomas Lorenzo

Associate Professor of Critical Media Practices, University of Colorado Boulder

tomas@laurenzo.net

ORCID: 0000-0002-3482-8389

Abstract

In 2015, Hong Kong employed more than three hundred thousand foreign domestic workers, almost all of them women, under a regime normally requiring residence in the employer's home. Their labor sustained households and professional life elsewhere in the city, while weekly rest often depended on leaving the workplace that was also home. This article examines *Foreign Helpers*, an interactive installation developed within the Architectural Association Visiting School in Hong Kong in 2015. Four projectors, four audio channels, and infrared tracking responded to a hand-held screen with which visitors searched through footage of the city while listening to migrant workers narrate their lives. Carrying, orienting, and activating the screen made looking depend on posture, proximity, and effort. Within this interactive component, documentary material was reassembled through movement among audiovisual fragments. The apparatus approached domestic labor as urban infrastructure by making the conditions of perception materially explicit, without establishing what visitors understood or equating their voluntary effort with the labor represented. The surviving student-edited documentary complicates that formal proposition through accounts of affection, dependency, family, and the spatial production of rest. The article follows this perceptual proposition into an archive in which equipment, code, and speech have persisted unequally, locating its limits in the work's authorship and preservation.

Keywords: interactive installation; domestic labor; Hong Kong; media infrastructure; visibility; migration; projection; practice-based research

Artwork documentation: <https://vimeo.com/175122340>

Project page: <https://laurenzo.net/projects/foreign-helpers>

The work of perceiving

Foreign Helpers was built from four projectors, four infrared cameras, four speakers, four computers, custom software, and one hand-held acrylic screen. Infrared light-emitting diodes fixed to the screen allowed each camera to locate it; a push-button gave the person carrying it an intentional input. Entering a station's field did not reveal an image by itself. The visitor had to bring the screen into the field, press the button, orient the surface, and keep it in relation to the projector while the corresponding audio channel played recorded speech from the interviews. The object therefore performed two technical roles simultaneously: it announced its position to the system and received the image produced in response.¹

Projection usually begins by settling the question of support. A wall is found, a screen is installed, the projector is aligned, and once the image appears the supporting surface is asked to disappear into its function. *Foreign Helpers* refused that convenience. The surface remained in

¹ Tomas Laurenzo, "Foreign Helpers," project documentation, accessed August 31, 2026, <https://laurenzo.net/projects/foreign-helpers>; Tomas Laurenzo, "Political New Media Artworks," in *Proceedings of the 24th International Symposium on Electronic Art, ISEA 2018* (Durban: Durban University of Technology, 2018), 118–22. The public project page describes four projectors, four independent audio channels, the hand-held tracked screen, and images paired with interviews.

the visitor's hands, visibly instrumented with acrylic, wiring, markers, and electronics. The projected city could not appear without a body willing to carry and frame it.



Figure 1. Foreign Helpers, installation view, Osage Hong Kong, 2015. A visitor carries the single tracked projection surface while recorded interview speech plays through the spatial audio system. © Tomas Lorenzo.

Kate Mondloch's account of screen-reliant installation is useful here because it treats the screen as an architectural and sculptural condition of spectatorship rather than as a neutral aperture. Lev Manovich's spatial montage likewise describes a moving-image logic in which relations are distributed across space rather than exhausted by temporal succession. Jeffrey Shaw's *The Legible City* had already made bodily navigation constitutive of an interactive image: a visitor pedals through a represented city while facing a stable screen. *Foreign Helpers*

reverses one part of that arrangement. The represented city remains distributed around the room while the visitor carries the surface on which it can become visible.²

The four stations divided the gallery into overlapping but distinct fields. The visitor's route selected among them; orientation determined whether projection could land on the screen; the button made activation explicit; the voices of the interviewed workers arrived from the speakers as the visual fragments appeared. Movement through the room therefore took on work ordinarily performed by editing. It made sequence out of walking, interruption, return, and the physical maintenance of a viewing position.

The surviving documentation preserves the topology of this composition more clearly than its station-by-station contents. The project page records four independent audio channels and images paired with interviews, yet neither the extant documentation nor my present memory permits a reliable reconstruction of which interview fragment and image occupied each station. The local relation is clear: a station coupled a bounded projection field to a particular set of audiovisual fragments; leaving that field broke the relation, and another station offered another fragment. The room could not be surveyed as a thematic map. It made discontinuity spatial, while recorded speech kept the search attached to narrated lives rather than allowing the city to become a mute visual puzzle. An adjacent screen also presented the students' short documentaries in a conventional screening arrangement. The demand to carry and align the

² Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 322–25; ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, “The Legible City,” accessed August 31, 2026, <https://zkm.de/en/artworks/the-legible-city>.

surface therefore belonged to the interactive component; it was not the exhibition's only route to the recorded material.³

The effort has an epistemic function: perception ceases to be given. The visitor produces the conditions under which a fragment can be seen and heard, while the completed image remains unavailable as a totality detached from that action. Interaction therefore makes looking depend upon a small but unavoidable expenditure of attention, posture, movement, and time. The political proposition of the work resides there. An infrastructure that normally recedes from attention is approached through an apparatus that refuses immediate visibility.

The apparatus, then, cannot tell us what visitors made of this demand. No reception study accompanied the exhibition, and the screen could also be handled playfully, mastered as an interface, or treated as a technical curiosity. What the work fixed was the material condition of access: the image could not appear automatically. Seeing required somebody to carry the surface, keep it within a station's field, press its button, and sustain an alignment; listening arrived through the localized fragments activated there. The apparatus made perception non-automatic and left the meaning of that effort unresolved in each encounter.

The subject of the installation was itself organized by forms of recession. I made the work while living and working in Hong Kong, where I encountered live-in migrant domestic labor as an ordinary component of the professional and expatriate milieu I inhabited. The arrangement was visible everywhere and, at the same time, easily absorbed into the category of

³ Lorenzo, "Foreign Helpers," project documentation. The public project page specifies four projectors, four independent audio channels, images paired with interviews, and four infrared-camera/speaker/projector stations. The surviving public documentation does not preserve a station-by-station content map.

how the city simply worked. The installation began from that contradiction: a form of labor can be socially ubiquitous and perceptually absent, not because nobody knows it exists, but because the capacities it produces are consumed elsewhere.

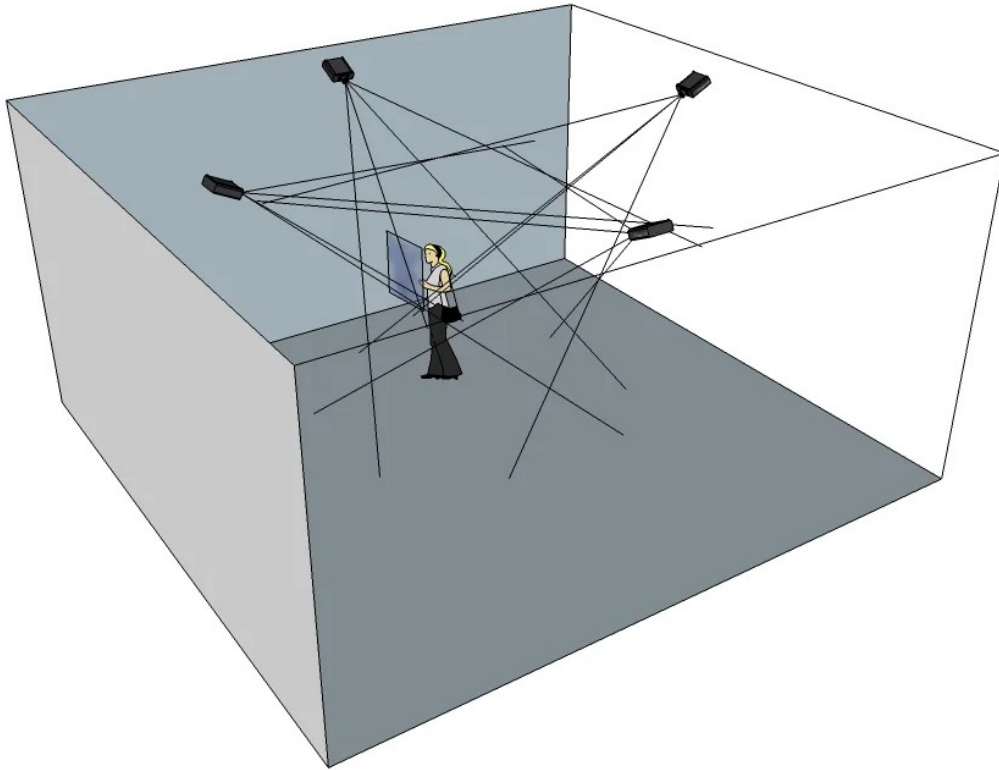


Figure 2. Foreign Helpers, installation schematic. Four projector-camera stations converge on the mobile tracked screen. Diagram © Tomas Laurenzo.

Domestic labor as spatial infrastructure

The title uses Hong Kong's official administrative language. In 2015 the year-end count of foreign domestic helpers was 340,380; 181,861 were from the Philippines and 150,239 from Indonesia, together 97.6 percent of the total. Sex-disaggregated figures for the same year record

335,088 women and 5,292 men.⁴ The governmental category does more than name an occupation. It gathers immigration status, employment, residence, gendered labor, and a specific contractual geography.

The word *helper* was already contested when the installation was made. In July 2015 the HK Helpers Campaign asked eighty-three foreign domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia whether they preferred *domestic worker* or *domestic helper*; sixty chose *worker*. Yet the same report recorded that several respondents who preferred *helper* associated the term with good treatment or with the intimacy of household work. Nearly all of those who explained that preference described positive experiences with employers.⁵ The disagreement is instructive because the administrative category and the affective language of family did not occupy separate worlds. They could reinforce, complicate, or contradict each other inside the same employment relation.

Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star describe classification as infrastructural when procedures and consequences gather around a category. Here the category is attached to a standard employment contract and to immigration conditions that require the worker to work and

⁴ Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, *Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics 2016* (Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department, 2016), table 2.12; Women's Commission, *Hong Kong Women in Figures 2017* (Hong Kong: Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017), table 1.4.

⁵ Scott Carpenter, "Is 'Domestic Helper' a Loaded Term?," *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 24, 2015, accessed August 31, 2026, <https://hongkongfp.com/2015/07/24/is-domestic-helper-a-loaded-term/>.

reside in the employer's residence.⁶ Paid reproductive labor, legal residence, and domestic intimacy are therefore arranged within the same interior. Patricia Cortés and Jessica Pan show that access to migrant domestic labor changes the labor-force participation of Hong Kong women, while Annie Chan describes live-in workers as deeply embedded in dual-earner middle-class households.⁷ The labor performed inside the apartment sustains activities that become visible elsewhere: professional work, childcare arrangements, schedules, consumption, and the reproduction of the household itself.

Here infrastructure names a relation of dependency in which one activity becomes possible because another has become reliable enough to recede. Bowker's infrastructural inversion reverses that recession and attends to what has been made background; Star and Ruhleder later describe infrastructure as relational, something that becomes infrastructure for somebody within a practice rather than a thing with a stable ontological category. Brian Larkin's account adds the political and aesthetic forms through which infrastructure organizes

⁶ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Hong Kong Immigration Department, "Standard Employment Contract and Terms of Employment for Helpers," explanatory note to clause 3, accessed August 31, 2026, <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/fdhcontractterms.html>.

⁷ Patricia Cortés and Jessica Pan, "Outsourcing Household Production: Foreign Domestic Workers and Native Labor Supply in Hong Kong," *Journal of Labor Economics* 31, no. 2 (2013): 327–71, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668675>; Hau Nung Annie Chan, "Live-in Foreign Domestic Workers and Their Impact on Hong Kong's Middle Class Families," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 26, no. 4 (2005): 509–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-005-7847-4>.

expectation.⁸ At household and city scales, the live-in regime joins labor, residence, care, mobility, and professional capacity into one spatial arrangement.

The live-in rule gives that arrangement a spatial consequence that becomes particularly clear on the weekly rest day. Research on Hong Kong's migrant domestic workers has long described the Sunday occupation and remaking of Central: footpaths, pedestrian bridges, church precincts, shopping areas, atria, and other public or quasi-public spaces become sites for food, conversation, exchange, rest, remittance work, and social life. Lisa Law reads these gatherings through sensory and domestic practices; Nicole Constable follows the social worlds assembled around them; Evelyn Kwok describes the temporary production of room-like territories; Henry Chan and Alan Latham extend this account to workday outings, when errands and care duties can also provide occasions for intimacy and sociality outside the employer's residence.⁹

⁸ Geoffrey C. Bowker, *Science on the Run: Information Management and Industrial Geophysics at Schlumberger, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, "Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces," *Information Systems Research* 7, no. 1 (1996): 111–34, <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.7.1.111>; Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327–43, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>.

⁹ Lisa Law, "Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong," *Ecumene* 8, no. 3 (2001): 264–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096746080100800302>; Lisa Law, "Defying Disappearance: Cosmopolitan Public Spaces in Hong Kong," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1625–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980220151691>; Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,



Figure 3. Foreign Helpers, receiving surface in use. The projected image appears on the carried screen while the surrounding projection apparatus remains visible. © Tomas Laurenzo.

The documentary locates one reason for these departures within the household. Its final movement asks whether the participants are allowed to remain in the employer's home on Sundays. Several say that they are. The difficulty is not permission but the practical suspension of care. One participant explains that if she remains near a baby she will have to care for him, so

2007); Evelyn Kwok, "Agency in Appropriation: The Informal Territory of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong," *IDEA Journal* 15, no. 1 (2015): 102–17,

<https://doi.org/10.37113/ideaj.vi0.57>; Henry Hin-yan Chan and Alan Latham, "Working and

Dwelling in a Global City: Going-Out, Public Worlds, and the Intimate Lives of Migrant

Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 15 (2022):

3524–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.2000854>.

she goes to a park or to Central, walks, and speaks with family in the Philippines. Another says that the children will ask their *jie jie* to play and that she leaves before they wake because, in her words, “you can’t refuse the kid.” A further participant jokes that staying home may return her to caring for the dogs.¹⁰

The rest day is consequently not secured by time alone. For these participants, leaving the residence helped transform contractual leave into lived rest. The same apartment could be workplace, legal residence, and a place described with genuine attachment; precisely because those roles overlap, public space could become the practical device by which work was interrupted. The live-in regime produces capacities within private interiors, while the attempt to stop producing those capacities helps reorganize public space once a week.

A city narrated through work

The five interviews displaced the political story with which I approached the project and made the city less simple. Several participants described employers and children through affection and family. The surviving edit preserves phrases with a directness that paraphrase can easily flatten: “just like sisters”; able to talk “about anything”; “because they call me family too”; being treated “as our family”; Hong Kong as a “second home”; Hong Kong as a place where one participant “found peace”; and, in the Sunday sequence, “you can’t refuse the kid.”¹¹

¹⁰ *Foreign Helpers / AAVS Hong Kong 2015*, documentary and production video, directed by Tomas Laurenzo, 9:54, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/175122340>, approximately 4:39–6:22.

Quotations follow the embedded English subtitles in the student edit.

¹¹ *Foreign Helpers / AAVS Hong Kong 2015*, approximately 0:09–6:22. The quoted phrases follow the embedded English subtitles and retain the wording of the surviving edit.

One participant recounts borrowing approximately HKD 30,000 when her mother became ill with cancer and later being told by her employers that she did not need to repay it because they considered her family. The account is emotionally generous and structurally difficult. The employer is at once householder, source of income, condition of residence, and creditor able to transform a debt into a gift. Neither the generosity nor the dependency disappears when the other is acknowledged. The same is true of the children: affection can be real, and that reality can be one of the reasons care exceeds the timetable assigned to labor.

The scholarship had already described this conjunction. Constable documented family idiom, intimacy, hierarchy, and employment in Hong Kong; Rhacel Salazar Parreñas situated migrant domestic work within transnational reproductive labor and contradictory forms of class mobility.¹² What the documentary changed was my own frame. In 2015 I began from the normalization of a severely asymmetric labor regime and had not read the relation closely enough to understand how affection might participate in its ordinary operation. The material preserved by the artwork made the partiality of my own political understanding visible.

That correction matters for the formal argument because the installation spatialized a narrated city. The voices coming through the four audio channels spoke of domestic interiors, children, parks, church, Central, safety, family, and peace. The screen turned the visual reconstruction of that city into a search, while sound prevented the fragments from becoming an abstract urban puzzle: each local image remained attached to speech whose affect and ambiguity exceeded the political judgment with which I had begun.

¹² Constable, *Maid to Order*; Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

In 2018 I described the installation as deconstructing and rebuilding Hong Kong “from (or with) the point of view” of the participating workers.¹³ The parenthesis has become more important to me than the sentence around it. *From* can imply a transparent passage from another person’s standpoint into an artwork, as if questions, recording, editing, code, and projection could disappear. *With* can overstate a shared authorship that the installation did not have. Linda Alcoff’s analysis of speaking for others is useful precisely because it refuses the fantasy that positional difficulty can be solved by silence, while Trinh T. Minh-ha’s “speaking nearby” describes a proximity that does not claim to become the other position.¹⁴

The preposition *from* remains accurate in a compositional sense. The participants’ narrated geography determined what the students filmed, what the documentary retained, what voices entered the spatial audio, and what material I used to construct the installation. The work transformed those accounts through editing, code, and projection, yet its Hong Kong cannot be separated from the speech that generated it. Authorship remained asymmetrical, and dependence on those accounts became part of the form.

A ten-day apparatus

The institutional conditions of that form were compressed. *Foreign Helpers* was developed during *Post-Industrial Landscapes 3.0*, an Architectural Association Visiting School held with the School of Creative Media at City University of Hong Kong from July 20 to 30,

¹³ Lorenzo, “Political New Media Artworks,” 118–22.

¹⁴ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter 1991–92): 5–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354221>; Nancy N. Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82–91, <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82>.

2015. The program described its aim as creating an “interface laboratory” between networks and the city; the surviving project video opens with the phrase “Tangible and Intangible infrastructures of the City.” The results were exhibited at Osage Hong Kong from July 30 to August 8, with the opening reception on July 30.¹⁵

I return to the work through a retrospective, practice-led analysis of an incomplete project archive. The public 9:54 video supplies direct evidence of the edited documentary and of three minutes of backstage production; the project page and earlier publications preserve contemporaneous descriptions; photographs and the surviving software establish parts of the apparatus; recollection supplies production facts that are no longer independently recoverable, and I identify them as such. I treat the student edit as the audiovisual object that survives, with its cuts and subtitle layer as part of the artifact. Its English subtitle layer presents an edited record of speech whose relation to the raw recordings can no longer be checked. The 2015 artwork and its surviving traces consequently enter the argument in different evidentiary registers.

The five participants met the student group during that ten-day period. My present recollection is of two interview sessions, although I no longer have a contemporaneous schedule that fixes both dates. Hong Kong-born students made the introductions through personal contacts; the interviews were conducted in English with students and me present. The students produced the English subtitle layer and had broad freedom to edit the short documentary; the

¹⁵ School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, “Post-Industrial Landscapes 3.0,” accessed August 31, 2026, <https://www.scm.cityu.edu.hk/events/49>; Osage Gallery, “Past Exhibitions,” accessed August 31, 2026, https://www.osagegallery.com/Exhibitions_past.html. The workshop ran July 20–30, 2015; the Osage exhibition ran July 30–August 8, 2015, with the opening reception on July 30.

surviving record does not let me separate transcription, correction, and editorial compression within that layer. I authored the installation from the interview material and the images made during the Visiting School; Samuel Swope supported the physical computing, Wesley Soo and Tobias Klein the organization, and the public video credits eight AAVS students.¹⁶

The Visiting School gave the project ten days. Its relationships were accordingly brief, purposive, and organized around making the work. The five participants consented to filming, audio recording, note-taking, public use, and public credit in the project, which was completed, exhibited, and documented within the institutional rhythm of the school. The relationship ended with that process: I retained no contact list and have had no contact with the participants since 2015. Eleven years later, the public documentary and the institutional record remain accessible while the encounter itself cannot be resumed.¹⁷

The temporal scale becomes clearer beside other work occurring in Hong Kong at the same moment. Para Site's Hong Kong Migrant Domestic Workers Project extended across a year and worked through grassroots organizations, research, and worker-oriented programming. KUNCI Cultural Studies Centre's *A Room of Their Own* organized six reading sessions with

¹⁶ *Foreign Helpers / AAVS Hong Kong 2015*, closing credits. The public video credits Samuel Swope for physical computing, Wesley Soo for organization, and AAVS students Annie Lai Ka Chan, Percibald Garcia, Yining Lui, Minka Stoyanova, Ethan Yumo Wang, Gigi Wong, Cathy Mei Yin Wong, and Emily Chau. Production-session count is author recollection; the surviving materials do not preserve a complete interview schedule.

¹⁷ The five participants consented in 2015 to filming, audio recording, note-taking, public use, and public credit within the project. They are credited in the surviving documentary. No new interviews were conducted for this article, and no unpublished raw interview material is used.

Indonesian migrant workers across Victoria Park, Para Site, a residency apartment, and a private home.¹⁸ A year-long project, a six-session reading group, and a ten-day Visiting School are different institutional machines: they produce different kinds of continuity, obligation, and form. *Foreign Helpers* concentrated its claim in an authored spatial documentary. The comparison makes duration part of the infrastructure of representation, because institutional time determines both what kind of artwork can be produced and what relationships can persist beyond it.

My own position also belonged to this apparatus. I was a Uruguayan man living in Hong Kong through academic employment, with institutional standing, housing, and professional autonomy unavailable within the foreign-domestic-helper regime. I was making work from a city I inhabited, but inhabiting the same city did not give me the participants' political position. In a 2021 interview I described a point of view as "foreign to me."¹⁹ The phrase remains accurate, although the present paper gives it a more material meaning: distance was organized through employment, housing, migration status, gender, and the institutions that made one form of mobility professionally productive while making another conditional on domestic service.

¹⁸ Para Site, "Hong Kong's Migrant Domestic Workers Project," July 21, 2015–July 21, 2016, accessed August 31, 2026, <https://www.para-site.art/programme/hong-kongs-migrant-domestic-workers-project/>; Para Site, "Hong Kong's Migrant Domestic Workers Project – A Room of Their Own," August 2, 2015–February 22, 2016, accessed August 31, 2026, <https://www.para-site.art/programme/hong-kongs-migrant-domestic-workers-project-a-room-of-their-own/>.

¹⁹ Tomas Laurenzo, Bruce D. Campbell, and Francesca Samsel, "Tomas Laurenzo: Pushing Back on Colonization," *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications* 41, no. 4 (2021): 118–24, 124.

What the apparatus could not show

The installation was designed to make mediation difficult to ignore. Its wires, infrared markers, screen, projectors, and tracking system remained visible, and the visitor had to maintain a relation among them. Eleven years later, however, the surviving archive shows that technical explication reached only part of the infrastructure through which the work existed.

Reconstructing the work in 2026 repeats one of its formal conditions. In the gallery no single position disclosed the city as a whole; in the archive no single object now discloses the work. I have the software without the unedited speech, the published edit without what it excluded, photographs without the full temporal event, and public credits without a continuing relationship to the participants. The continuity is distribution: *Foreign Helpers* existed as a relation assembled across bodies, media, equipment, and institutional space, and its afterlife is distributed across partial records that have to be traversed in turn.

The projectors, cameras, speakers, and computers belonged to City University and were returned. The hand-held screen remained in Hong Kong when I left; I do not know whether it still exists. The software remains in my archive. The edited documentary and production video survive online. I did not retain the raw interview recordings, and I no longer have them. This last loss is particularly consequential because the edited voices were part of the installation itself: they were its sound, selected and spatialized across the four stations. I can still inspect the code through which the apparatus operated, but I cannot return to the unedited speech from which that sound was made.

New-media preservation has long treated such dispersion as constitutive rather than exceptional. Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito describe media artworks as variable assemblages whose code, hardware, documentation, and institutional custody enter different regimes of

preservation. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's account of historical production similarly locates silence not only in what is said but in what is recorded, assembled, retrieved, and later made significant.²⁰ In a retrospective account of one's own work, these arguments acquire an additional complication: the artist is inside the preservation system, and my own storage practices helped determine what can now be known about *Foreign Helpers*.

Andrea Fraser's account of institutional critique is useful for the same reason: the institution is not a building outside the artist that critique can simply expose. It is reproduced through practices, professional roles, circulation, and value.²¹ The ten-day school, the university equipment, the gallery, the website, the Vimeo upload, my later publications, and my archive all participated in keeping *Foreign Helpers* legible as my artwork. The five participants remain present through the student-edited documentary and its public credits, but the encounter itself did not acquire the same continuity. The artwork's institutional life continued without them and, in my archive, cannot now return to them.

I use *uneven survival* for the differential persistence of a representational encounter as seen from inside its preservation system, where the artist's own practices of storage, attribution, publication, and reuse help determine what remains available. Borrowed equipment returned to its owner; the published video remained online; the software followed its author; the raw recordings did not survive. These events of custody and circulation produced an asymmetry in

²⁰ Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito, *Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

²¹ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 278–83, 332.

the surviving archive. What remains available for later scholarship is the authored and institutionally legible work, while the excess of the participants' speech over the edit can no longer be reconstructed.

The archival afterlife extends the installation's original proposition by changing the scale at which partial access operates. The carried screen made the image available only through a maintained position inside the gallery; the surviving records make the work available only through movement among materials with different custodians and different losses. The visible wires explain how the screen was tracked and how an image appeared. The archive reveals another infrastructure in which software, authorship, edited speech, and institutional memory acquired different durations.

Conclusion

Foreign Helpers began from a simple artistic problem: how to construct an encounter with a labor relation that is constitutive of everyday urban life precisely because so much of it occurs inside somebody else's home. The answer was spatial. The city was fragmented across four projection-and-sound stations, the interviews became the work's audio, and the screen that made the image visible had to be carried through the room. Looking acquired a deliberately slight but structurally necessary cost. The work made perception non-automatic; the duration and compulsion of domestic labor remained outside that operation.

The documentary prevents this operation from resolving into a clean allegory. The same accounts that describe a compulsory live-in regime also describe employers as family, Hong Kong as home, and children with affection; the same intimacy can make a rest day difficult to secure without leaving the apartment. The spatial infrastructure of domestic labor therefore

includes both the private residence in which work is organized and the public spaces through which its suspension becomes possible.

Returning to the work through what remains has made the limit of the original apparatus equally clear: the visible wires still explain how the image appeared, while the archive explains what they could never show—why the authored installation remained legible after the unedited speech had gone.

Bibliography

Alcoff, Linda. “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter 1991–92): 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354221>.

Bowker, Geoffrey C. *Science on the Run: Information Management and Industrial Geophysics at Schlumberger, 1920–1940*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leigh Star. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Carpenter, Scott. “Is ‘Domestic Helper’ a Loaded Term?” *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 24, 2015. Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://hongkongfp.com/2015/07/24/is-domestic-helper-a-loaded-term/>.

Chan, Hau Nung Annie. “Live-in Foreign Domestic Workers and Their Impact on Hong Kong’s Middle Class Families.” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 26, no. 4 (2005): 509–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-005-7847-4>.

Chan, Henry Hin-yan, and Alan Latham. “Working and Dwelling in a Global City: Going-Out, Public Worlds, and the Intimate Lives of Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 15 (2022): 3524–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.2000854>.

- Chen, Nancy N. “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82–91. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82>.
- Constable, Nicole. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*. 2nd ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007.
- Cortés, Patricia, and Jessica Pan. “Outsourcing Household Production: Foreign Domestic Workers and Native Labor Supply in Hong Kong.” *Journal of Labor Economics* 31, no. 2 (2013): 327–71. <https://doi.org/10.1086/668675>.
- Foreign Helpers / AAVS Hong Kong 2015*. Documentary and production video. Directed by Tomas Lorenzo. Hong Kong, 2015. 9:54. <https://vimeo.com/175122340>.
- Fraser, Andrea. “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique.” *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 278–83, 332.
- Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. *Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics 2016*. Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department, 2016.
- Hong Kong Immigration Department. “Standard Employment Contract and Terms of Employment for Helpers.” Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/fdhcontractterms.html>.
- Kwok, Evelyn. “Agency in Appropriation: The Informal Territory of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong.” *IDEA Journal* 15, no. 1 (2015): 102–17. <https://doi.org/10.37113/ideaj.vi0.57>.
- Larkin, Brian. “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327–43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>.
- Laurenzo, Tomas. “Foreign Helpers.” Project documentation. Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://laurenzo.net/projects/foreign-helpers>.

- . “Political New Media Artworks.” In *Proceedings of the 24th International Symposium on Electronic Art, ISEA 2018*, 118–22. Durban: Durban University of Technology, 2018.
- Laurenzo, Tomas, Bruce D. Campbell, and Francesca Samsel. “Tomas Laurenzo: Pushing Back on Colonization.” *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications* 41, no. 4 (2021): 118–24.
- Law, Lisa. “Defying Disappearance: Cosmopolitan Public Spaces in Hong Kong.” *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1625–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980220151691>.
- . “Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong.” *Ecumene* 8, no. 3 (2001): 264–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096746080100800302>.
- Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Mondloch, Kate. *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Osage Gallery. “Past Exhibitions.” Accessed August 31, 2026. https://www.osagegallery.com/Exhibitions_past.html.
- Para Site. “Hong Kong’s Migrant Domestic Workers Project.” July 21, 2015–July 21, 2016. Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://www.para-site.art/programme/hong-kongs-migrant-domestic-workers-project/>.
- . “Hong Kong’s Migrant Domestic Workers Project – A Room of Their Own.” August 2, 2015–February 22, 2016. Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://www.para-site.art/programme/hong-kongs-migrant-domestic-workers-project-a-room-of-their-own/>.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. 2nd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.

Rinehart, Richard, and Jon Ippolito. *Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory*.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. “Post-Industrial Landscapes 3.0.”
Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://www.scm.cityu.edu.hk/events/49>.

Star, Susan Leigh, and Karen Ruhleder. “Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and
Access for Large Information Spaces.” *Information Systems Research* 7, no. 1 (1996):
111–34. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.7.1.111>.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston:
Beacon Press, 1995.

Women’s Commission. *Hong Kong Women in Figures 2017*. Hong Kong: Government of the
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017.

ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. “The Legible City.” Accessed August 31, 2026.
<https://zkm.de/en/artworks/the-legible-city>.

Prior circulation and exhibition disclosure

Foreign Helpers was developed during *Post-Industrial Landscapes 3.0* and exhibited at Osage
Hong Kong in 2015. The installation was subsequently described in Tomas Laurenzo, “Political
New Media Artworks,” *Proceedings of ISEA 2018*, 118–22, and discussed in Tomas Laurenzo,
Bruce D. Campbell, and Francesca Samsel, “Tomas Laurenzo: Pushing Back on Colonization,”
IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications 41, no. 4 (2021): 118–24. The present article
develops the invited MAST argument through direct analysis of the installation, the surviving
documentary, and the work’s later archive.

Ethics and participant consent

The five interview participants consented in 2015 to filming, audio recording, note-taking, public use, and public credit within the project, and they were publicly credited in the surviving documentary. The encounter was bounded to the Visiting School and no new human-participant research was conducted for this article. I have not re-contacted the participants and no contact list remains in my archive. The article analyses and briefly quotes the publicly circulated student-edited documentary; it uses no unpublished raw interview material. The passage concerning a participant's mother's cancer and the HKD 30,000 loan reproduces information already included in that public edit and covered by the project's original consent to public use.

Image rights

Figures 1–3 are © Tomas Laurenzo and are reproduced by the author.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Generative AI disclosure

OpenAI ChatGPT was used for research assistance, bibliographic verification, drafting, redrafting, and editorial review. The author remains responsible for the argument, the sources and factual claims, and the final text.

Author biography

Tomas Laurenzo is an artist and computer scientist working across critical media art, interaction, artificial intelligence, and politics. He is Associate Professor of Critical Media Practices at the University of Colorado Boulder. His work spans interactive installations, generative systems, audiovisual performance, computational memory, and politically situated media artworks, and has been exhibited internationally at venues including Ars Electronica, SIGGRAPH Asia, ISEA,

NeurIPS, and CVPR. His current practice examines how technological systems shape visibility, memory, power, and the conditions under which political experience becomes perceptible. He previously taught at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong.