

THE MAGAZINE OF THE HONG KONG DESIGN INSTITUTE

SIGNED

ISSUE FIVE 2013

MATERIAL MAN

CHARLES KAISIN
ON BENDING
THE RULES



NEXT ACT
ROMEO
GIGLI ON
THE FUTURE
OF DESIGN

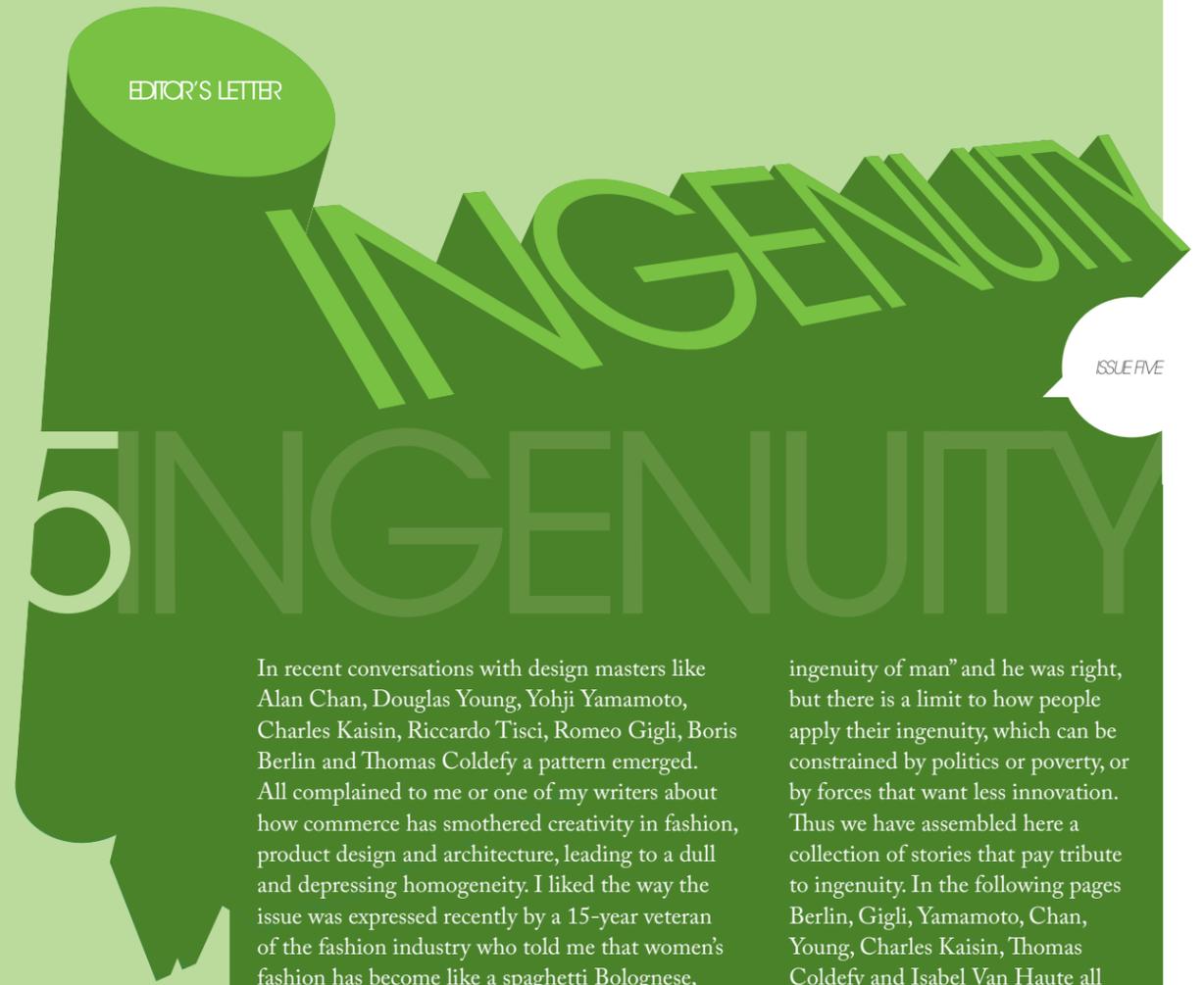
SPEAK EASY
HKDI'S DESIGN
DIALOGUE
FINDS ITS VOICE



«MUCH
INGENUITY
WITH A LITTLE
MONEY IS
VASTLY MORE
PROFITABLE
AND AMUSING
THAN MUCH
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WITHOUT
INGENUITY.»

ARNOLD BENNETT

EDITOR'S LETTER



ISSUE FIVE

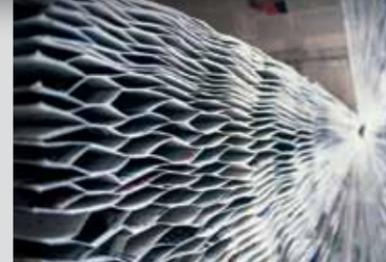
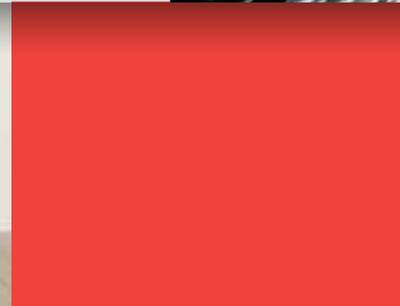
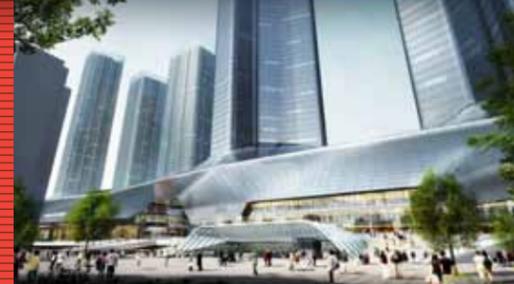
In recent conversations with design masters like Alan Chan, Douglas Young, Yohji Yamamoto, Charles Kaisin, Riccardo Tisci, Romeo Gigli, Boris Berlin and Thomas Coldefy a pattern emerged. All complained to me or one of my writers about how commerce has smothered creativity in fashion, product design and architecture, leading to a dull and depressing homogeneity. I liked the way the issue was expressed recently by a 15-year veteran of the fashion industry who told me that women's fashion has become like a spaghetti Bolognese, a mess of strands from multiple and random inspirations combined with a cloying mix of incoherent references. This was almost exactly the same complaint that was made by fashion giant Romeo Gigli, who is profiled on page 16. Thankfully, there was another common theme among all these designers, each of whom has changed the face of their industry. They all wanted to see design take a more radical path, with less concern for commercial success and with more commitment to diversity, sustainability and innovation. And that's why ingenuity is the theme for this fifth edition of SIGNED magazine. Ingenuity is the red blood of design, without it creativity becomes a sluggish stream of anaemic froth, dribbling through the veins of the design industry like weak tea. Winston Churchill once said, "There is no limit to the

ingenuity of man" and he was right, but there is a limit to how people apply their ingenuity, which can be constrained by politics or poverty, or by forces that want less innovation. Thus we have assembled here a collection of stories that pay tribute to ingenuity. In the following pages Berlin, Gigli, Yamamoto, Chan, Young, Charles Kaisin, Thomas Coldefy and Isabel Van Haute all talk about how ingenuity has fuelled their work, and the benefits it has produced. The American thinker Paul Romer has defined the space between a challenge and a solution as "the ingenuity gap". In design, this gap is usual the main obstacle to the success of any project. Ingenuity offers a way to see the world from a unique perspective and that's the best way to turn a challenge into a design solution that can change the way we live.

DANIEL JEFFREYS
Editor-In-Chief

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SIGNED
COVER IMAGE
A BAG DESIGNED BY
CHARLES KAISIN FOR
DELVAUX, THE BELGIAN
LUXURY LEATHER GOODS
COMPANY
PHOTOGRAPH
COURTESY OF CHARLES KAISIN

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STRAIGHT TALK

Over the last five months, some of Hong Kong's most accomplished designers have been engaged in a dialogue with the HKDI community and the public. DANIEL JEFFREYS and DAISY ZHONG asked a selection of the participants what the city needs to increase its standing as a global centre for design.

The *Design Dialogue: Hong Kong Culture 2013* series began on January 24th with a scintillating double bill. First Henry Steiner explained the intricacies of designing some of Hong Kong's iconic bank notes. And then Tina Liu drew deeply on her extraordinary experience to analyse the challenges of image design.

The series was organised by the HKDI's Professional Education and Engagement Centre (PEEC) at HKDI, led by Grace Kao. The goal of the ten seminars was to provide a unique window on the work and preoccupations of Hong Kong's designers, while giving the local community a chance to interact with the city's homegrown masters. All of the seminars that have taken place so far (the series concludes with two more sessions on May 31

and June 14 featuring Gary Chang and William Tang respectively) can still be revisited at the HKDI's website, where they provide a deep repository of design wisdom.

But with so many innovative designers engaged in the *Design Dialogue* project there was bound to be questions about what the Hong Kong creative community needs to be even more successful. And the design masters were not short of answers. On the day the dialogues began, seven of them gathered at HKDI to debate the future of the creative industries in Hong Kong, and many of the participants had grave concerns, with the role of Mainland China being a key issue.

"When I came here today my cabdriver told me he used to be a stuntman, but he had to change his job because so much of the film industry's work has moved north," said Liu. "The China market has more funds and resources."

Liu was concerned that the film industry's drift toward Beijing and Shanghai might be replicated on other parts of the creative spectrum.

"For design, the shrinking Hong Kong market might lead to decline, and design will follow the film industry to the north," she said. "But the market in the north is enormous and the opportunities also. I have faith in Hong Kong people and I believe that we have a role to play in the rise of China."



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
TINA LIU, LEE CHI
WING, KOYO
WILLIAM, (FROM LEFT)
LEE CHI WING, KOYO
WILLIAM AND TINA LIU



《WORKING IN HONG KONG IS A BLESSING BECAUSE IT'S STIMULATING, MULTICULTURAL AND ANARCHISTIC.》

"I think great work is not just the result of the artist or the designer, the patron is also very important," he said. "I don't think there are enough great patrons in Hong Kong. A possible patron would be the government, but they lack taste and have insufficient ability to take risks. I don't think Hong Kong lacks talent, I think it lacks patrons. We don't have enough of them."

Young said that his experiences in China had been better than those he had in Hong Kong, because he found the clients there to be open-minded.

"Design doesn't pay in Hong Kong," he said. "The most profitable companies in Hong Kong are not the most creative. In fact the more creative you are, the more money you are going to lose."

Steiner, who is known as the father of Hong Kong design, sympathised with Young's radical stance but was more optimistic about the future, in part because of the city's world-famous energy.

"Working in Hong Kong is a blessing because it's stimulating, multicultural and anarchistic and there is a lot of attitude, which encourages creativity," said Steiner. "The next generation of Hong Kong designers are more outspoken and have a strong sense of what Hong Kong is and can be. I think they will create positive changes."

For Steiner, it's not government or patrons who create great designers. Both can be helpful to the design

Liu also sees opportunities in the evolution of China, as its wealth class becomes more refined.

"The consumer culture in China involves an irrational worship of money and seeing money as taste and I hope that will change in the near future, I will be thrilled to see that happen and Hong Kong can benefit, but local designers have to be prepared for the much bigger scale in China – just because you can do a great job preparing one dish does not mean you can handle a banquet."

Graphic designer Michael Miller Yu, also identified issues in Hong Kong's relationship with China but he thought the city's government was a bigger issue, "The government are not giving enough opportunities to the design community," he said. Douglas Young, the founder of G.O.D, echoed his position. He issued a challenge to the government to use more young designers.

"The government is always telling us not to rely on it, but for some projects we need help," he said. "Take things like bus shelters that could easily be handled by design graduates, but these projects are not given to young graduates, they are lumped together and given to big companies and done in a really mediocre way."

Young cited the 17th century European Renaissance, when artists and designers had a rich well of support to draw from as an example that Hong Kong should follow.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP LEFT DOUGLAS YOUNG; HENRY STEINER AND MICHAEL MILLER YU; THE OPENING SESSION OF DESIGN DIALOGUE - HONG KONG CULTURE 2013; ALAN CHAN AND ROCCO YIM

process, but in the end it's about the individual's commitment.

"I want to warn people that they should not enter into design because they think it's going to be life changing," he said. "They should do so because they want to design, it's got to be in their DNA."

Artist, designer and brand consultant Alan Chan sees education as a key component to the future of Hong Kong's design community.

"In the field of product design Japan is the leader," he said. "I can see no Asian countries that can go beyond Japan's achievements in the next few decades. This is because aesthetic education in Japan starts from the beginning of a child's life. Hong Kong's education system prevents the sense of art from growing. The painting lessons are not useful, because they are superficial. I don't think Hong Kong can nurture the kind of graphic designers who can rival Japan's."

Chan praised one aspect of Hong Kong's design approach, and he shared this view with Yu. Both saw Hong Kong's design aesthetic as a unique mix of East and West with cosmopolitan and refined elements.

"I think the greatest bargaining power that Hong Kong designers have is their cosmopolitan mindset," said Chan.

For fashion designer and HKDI graduate Koyo William, Hong Kong designers also benefit from dealing with obstacles that are specific to this city.

《 I THINK THE GREATEST BARGAINING POWER THAT HONG KONG DESIGNERS HAVE IS THEIR COSMOPOLITAN MIND SET. 》

"I think design is unlimited and I find inspirations everywhere," he said. "But in Hong Kong we are constantly dealing with limitations, especially with space. We have to be ingenious to put so many things inside 100 or 200 square feet. Hong Kong designers can develop great expertise in designing for small spaces."

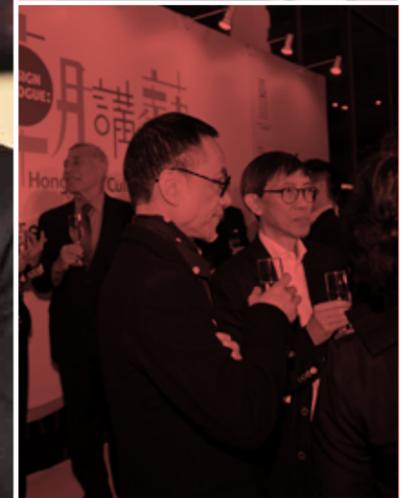
Industrial designer Lee Chi Wing took a complimentary view to Koyo, seeing Hong Kong as a place that rewards new ideas and diversification.

"Design is simple and human," he said. "It should enhance the possibilities and experience of daily life."

That was a view Lee shared with all the other six designers who joined this discussion. Although all seven saw obstacles, they could also see great opportunities.

"You don't need many people to start a revolution," said Young. "You only need several geniuses to spark something that becomes self-sustaining, and I think Hong Kong is ripe for that. Hong Kong has made its money and gone through its building process and its time to establish a design culture that puts the city on the world map. And it's really up to the next generation to steer us into that era."

Which is a last word that represents the best possible challenge to the city's young designers – be geniuses and change the world. Now that would be something worth talking about. ㊦



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: MICHAEL MILLER, YU, HENRY STEINER AND DOUGLAS YOUNG; MICHAEL MILLER, YU; ALAN CHAN, ROCCO YIM AND HENRY STEINER; THE OPENING CEREMONY OF DESIGN DIALOGUE - HONG KONG CULTURE 2013; HENRY STEINER

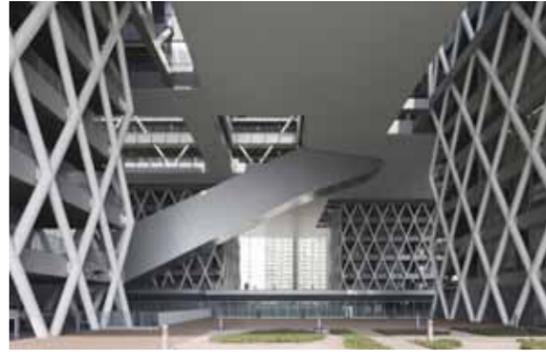


LEARNING CURVE

THOMAS COLDEFY and ISABEL VAN HAUTE designed the Hong Kong Design Institute. Two and a half years after it opened they reflect on what the building has taught them about sustainability in architecture.

On a chilly day in March Thomas Coldefy and Isabel Van Haute stood next to the basketball court at HKDI and looked across to the escalator that threads between the building's front towers, like a piece of modern kinetic sculpture. Nearby a team of workmen is raking stones and planting shrubs. Another construction team was tinkering with their tools near a walkway. Coldefy looked on like a father who has seen his child come home with a bandage on his knee.

"I am always concerned when I see crews working," he says. "I always want to know if they are



correcting some defect with the design, or struggling with some problem we didn't anticipate."

He needn't have worried. The crews were engaged in routine maintenance and prettification of a terrace garden, but that never stops the Design Principal (Coldefy) and Artistic Director (Van Haute) of Coldefy & Associés, Architectes Urbanistes (CAAU) from being anxious. They see the HKDI building as their child, one that can teach them much about the success of their groundbreaking ideas.

"We believe that architecture should be sustainable," he says. "But we have strong ideas about what that means." For Coldefy and Van Haute in all their recent projects, and especially the multiple award winning Hong Kong Design Institute, the question of sustainability comes down to flow, to creating a building that can evolve and provide a means for interaction with the people who use it, one that gives them a sense of being valued.

This is very apparent in the HKDI building. A dismal majority of buildings in Hong Kong are storage depots – monolithic depositories for people, offices or products. For a city that has some of the world's most expensive real estate, it also has the dreariest architecture. Outside of some honourable mentions like the I.M.Pei Bank of China Building or the Sir Norman Foster HSBC HQ, Hong Kong's architecture looks like it was made from scrap in a Guangdong factory, or from the packing boxes that once held the dazzling structures recently built in Beijing or Shanghai.

Coldefy and Van Haute's building stands in stark contrast to this. It is the only building in Hong Kong that was designed specifically for a creative use and its special status is underlined by the fact it does not have to share its space with an MTR station, shopping mall or cookie-cutter apartments.

« WE DECIDED TO TAKE PART IN THE COMPETITION BECAUSE WE FELT THE USE OF THE BUILDING... PROVIDED AN INTERESTING CANVASS FOR OUR "GREEN" IDEAS AND COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY. »

PREVIOUS PAGE: THOMAS COLDEFY AND ISABEL VAN HAUTE IN FRONT OF HKDI BUILDING
OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE: SKYTERRACE; SIDE VIEW OF THE ESCALATOR LINKING THE PIAZZA TO THE SKYTERRACE; SEAVIEW LIBRARY; SEA FRONT VIEW; OUTDOOR SWIMMING POOL; ART GALLERY; CONFERENCE HALL

The team that designed HKDI are a precocious duo. Coldefy graduated from the Ecole Speciale d'Architecture in 2002 and has only been practicing for just over a decade, yet he has been awarded several prestigious prizes already and with Van Haute he was named as one of the "40 under 40", by the European Centre for Architecture, Art Design and Urban Studies and the Chicago Athenaeum in 2010. Van Haute and Codefy's company, CAAU was awarded the HKDI project after a two-stage competition, in which 162 teams from 36 countries took part. The 42,000 square metre building was the first major facility built in Hong Kong by a French architect.

"We decided to take part in the competition because we felt the use of the building, as a design institute, and its site, surrounded by the MTR station plus residential blocks on three sides and the sea on the other, provided an interesting canvass for our "green" ideas and commitment to sustainability," says Coldefy.

The team at CAAU were surprised and honoured when their names appeared on the short list of five teams that was announced in August 2006. After they were proclaimed the winners in November they realise they had a project that could help them define the kind of architecture that would benefit communities like Hong Kong, where space is at a premium.

"We spent a lot of time looking at buildings in Hong Kong during that time," says Coldefy. "We could see that for many of them there was a conflict between all the different functions they had to perform. The

«THE "BLANK SHEET" HAS COME ALIVE. WHEN WE VISIT IT'S EXCITING TO SEE PEOPLE USING THE SPACES IN DIFFERENT WAYS FOR CREATIVE PROJECTS.»

HKDI project gave us the chance to make a different kind of statement.”

The CAAU team contrived to make the HKDI building what Coldefy calls a “metaphor” with the four towers supporting what he says is a “blank sheet” on which creativity is about to burst forth. With the four departments of HKDI occupying the towers, the “blank sheet” is also seen as a “field” in which the seeds of new design work can be sown.

“We wanted the structure to invite students and faculty to reflect on multiple and opposing situations,” says Van Haute. “The building speaks of introversion and extroversion, modesty and exhibition, exclusivity and wide accessibility, the micro and macro city, of classicism and experimentation.”

Coldefy came up with the idea that the base of the building should be a giant “urban lounge” where meetings and exchanges could take place, whilst taking advantage of internal and external green spaces. Two and a half years after the first students entered the building he is delighted with the way the structure is being used.

“We look for videos about HKDI activities on YouTube all the time,” he says. “We are always thrilled to see

how many things happen in the open spaces, everything from concerts to dance competitions to sculpture. And the “blank sheet” has come alive. When we visit it’s exciting to see people using the spaces in different ways for creative projects. And it’s really satisfying to see that the local community has come to see the building as a resource.”

Coldefy and Van Haute were especially happy when they saw videos of the 2012 Graduation shows, when the Design Boulevard, as their “urban lounge” has come to be known, took on the trappings of a fashion catwalk.

“This is exactly what we hoped the space would be used for,” says Coldefy. “Putting the Graduation shows on the boulevard brought the creativity of HKDI’s students out into the heart of the community. It was such a vibrant and appropriate use of the space.”

Creating the HKDI structure also tested CAAU’s green skills. The peripheral steel trellis structural system that CAAU used has reduced the number of columns and walls required, thus cutting the use of construction materials. The structure also channels natural breezes to the interior, to regulate temperature and reduce the amount of air conditioning that needs to be used in summer. The glass walls of the aerial platform promote the use of natural light, which further reduces energy consumption. In addition, the substantial area of indoor greenery partly offsets the carbon emissions that were caused by the building’s construction.

“I want my buildings to respond to the environment in which they are made, and we believe architects should do more to cut the impact that buildings have on our environmental resources,” says Coldefy.

In the wake of the critical acclaim that the HKDI building has won, CAAU has now opened an office in Hong Kong, which Coldefy sees as a city that can become a global leader in ecological design concepts that promote low-carbon living.

“The Chinese government is committed to promoting green design and raising the energy-efficiency standard of buildings,” he says. “I am expecting that more and more low-carbon and environmental-friendly buildings will appear in mainland China and Hong Kong and I look forward to contributing to the sustainable development of this region.”

Which means Coldefy and Van Haute are likely to be a regular presence at HKDI, where they will continue to check their “child” for bandages, making sure it matures into a bright young adult, valued by all its friends. ☺

OPPOSITE THE ESCALATOR AT THE ENTRANCE OF DESIGN BOULEVARD



GLOBAL WARMING

Italian fashion legend **ROMEO GIGLI** came to Hong Kong this spring to launch his latest collection at JOYCE and he spoke exclusively to SIGNED magazine's **DAISY ZHONG** about how the fashion world is in danger of losing its diversity.

Fashion has become less interesting, you can find the same work everywhere," says Romeo Gigli as he sits on a sofa at the Joyce boutique in Central. A 63-year-old blue-blooded Italian, he has an amiable disposition and a voice that's soft and lyrical, like the draped skirts that have become one of his signatures. "If you take the labels away you cannot tell the difference between collections."

Those who know Gigli's work will not be shocked to find that he has an iconoclastic point of view. Along with his autumn/winter 2013 collection for Joyce, which effortlessly mixes classic themes with edgy touches, Gigli brings a unique insight into the current state of fashion design after a nine-year hiatus from the industry.

As somebody who changed the face of fashion design in the 1980s and 90s, Romeo Gigli is in a good position to assess the state of creativity in the world of highly-paid couturiers. Gigli's asymmetrical necklines, gentle shoulders, cocoon coats, velvet dresses

and tulip skirts provided a refreshing contrast to the tired power suits of the late 1980s. Gigli's early work inspired designers such as Marc Jacobs and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and his fondness for fitted, skin-tight trousers eventually led to the popularity of leggings in the early 1990s. His models wore the lightest of make-up and flat shoes to provide a timely antidote to the heavy foundation of the Working Girl-eighties that often made women's faces look like a freshly ploughed field.

Gigli has some nostalgia for those days. "For over a decade, until the 1990s, visual fashion was in its heyday. In fashion shows from those days, it's easy to recognise one designer from another, with different collections, different kinds of styles. But now the fashion world is in a state of confusion."

ROMEO GIGLI AT A PHOTO SHOOT IN MILAN FOR HIS SPRING SUMMER 2013 COLLECTION



LEFT ANNA MARCONI BELOW MATTEO GIOLI
OPPOSITE RIGHT TANG SHUANG OPPOSITE BELOW
LELA SHIING WANG, ALL LOOKS FROM
THE ROMEO GIGLI SPRING SUMMER 2013
COLLECTION

His critique of contemporary fashion echoes that of Vivienne Westwood, another style icon, who attacked the idea of “disposable fashion” for making people all look the same and “never so ugly”. If Westwood is right in saying that twenty-tens are, so far, the worst years for style in generations, maybe that’s why so many great names of the past (Gigli, Elsa Schiaparelli, Christian Lacroix, and even Kanasi Yamamoto) are suddenly being reborn and rebooted with a mission to save fashion from a desperate dullness.

Gigli cites the influence of corporate money as a key factor in the decline of diversity. The relationship between art and commerce has always been fraught, but Gigli believes that these two now contradict each other more than ever, as designers “play safe” to satisfy a market that is either unsophisticated or conventional. “Money has far too much power in the fashion world. And it’s not helping creativity. That means we need to have innovative young

« WHEN YOU HAVE NO FREEDOM, YOU CANNOT DO WHAT YOU WANT, NOR CAN YOU BUILD SOMETHING DIFFERENT. »



designers around and design education has to focus on creativity just as much as it focuses on technique. But it’s difficult for young designers, because if you do what everybody wants, everything looks the same. That’s why it’s becoming more and more difficult for young people to enter the fashion design world. What’s important is that when you want to build something of your own, you have to work hard and develop your own style, and not do what already exists.”

Creativity has often manifested in unfashionable or upsetting ways. As early as the 15th century most painters in Europe were under the direct influence of the Catholic Church and obeyed their religious masters in return for patronage. But the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch stood out with his surrealistic renderings of hell that offered sinners no hope of redemption and made the Church exceedingly uncomfortable. It’s probably not a coincidence that the most radical painter of his era had a rich wife who freed him from the creative serfdom of church patronage.

Gigli believes that fashion needs more designers with Bosch’s freedom and fewer who depend on corporate money that almost ensures a loss of freedom to create, and a failure to catch the zeitgeist. “When you have no

freedom, you cannot do what you want, nor can you build something different. Whereas 20 years ago fashion was full of freedom, reverberating with what was happening in art, design, and architecture, now the freedom of fashion is much more limited. Nowadays fashion is just about a skirt, a shirt, and a pair of trousers.”

But despite his criticisms Gigli cannot turn his back on fashion, which has been a major source of spiritual power in life. Joyce Ma, the founder of Joyce, has been a long-term fan and supporter of Gigli and she has been instrumental in his return to fashion, in part by giving his creativity the oxygen of liberty. “Freedom is what is important to me,” said Gigli. “Joyce gave me that freedom.”

Gigli’s palette has always had a Byzantine majesty with rust, purple and teal giving his silhouettes a sensuous harmony that can turn some women from wallflower to orchid, the revelatory nature of his dresses drawing out sexuality and sophistication in equal measure. His latest work includes silver greys, dark greys, forest greens and fuchsia, complemented with touches of black and white. These tones result in clothes that are as distinctive as a Bosch painting but much more beautiful and more suggestive of heaven than hell - and none of them have been tempered to be more suitable for a commercial brand.

His past collections were famous for referencing everything from medieval bas reliefs to mosaics, Jimi Hendrix, Rastafarianism and waifs. Gigli’s new collection is also embedded with rich references to art and culture. “When I was sketching these clothes I started drawing from the opulence of 18th century European fashion. To get inspirations I redraw by hand all the antique brocades I had collected. Another inspiration is the tuxedo.”

As he was saying this he draped a forest green bubble cape with exquisite brocade around my shoulders. It felt like wearing cotton candy and looked like a bubble that had been blown from inside. With exquisite embroidery on the fabric it resembled extravagantly padded and puffed 18th century mantuas, but without a feeling of stiffness and limitation.

The reference to 18th century fashion also stirs memories of the stout, well-padded women of that era. Is that who the designer had in mind when he was crafting the silhouette of his dresses?

Gigli smiles and says he had Chinese women in mind. “I want to underline the soft, petite frames and the gentle demeanour of Oriental women. What I love about



« THE FASHION WORLD IS UNDER TOO MUCH CONTROL NOW, BECAUSE OF THE POWER OF MONEY. »



MAN THE JOYCE WINDOW IN CENTRAL HONG KONG, FEATURING THE ROMEO GIGLI COLLECTION BELOW ROMEO GIGLI AT A PHOTO SHOOT IN MILAN FOR HIS SPRING SUMMER 2013 COLLECTION

TRUE GRT

We find ourselves in an era where the chain store has become the temple for the majority of fashion consumers, and where the latest items and styles carried by celebrities define the mainstream trends. This is a generation where a desire for originality in fashion brands and their design has been replaced by fast fads and peer pressure (to follow said fast fads). At such a time we are refreshed, or alarmed, by a rare designer like Romeo Gigli, whose commitment to individuality and persistence in following a personal aesthetic is seen as deviant and revolutionary.

Even though he experienced violent financial ups and downs in his fashion business, the ever-present contradiction between commercial marketing strategy and expression of individuality has not been a lasting obstacle to Gigli's creativity. The resolution in his unique aesthetic view is vividly reflected in his designs, and these are what ultimately led him back to a new era of success. His insistence on originality and individuality, despite the rapidly changing fads, allowed him to persevere and eventually become recognised as an artist who doesn't waste his money or his name value in following the trends—he rather use his efforts to create them.

An emphasis on individuality and originality is a key aspect of the training approach at the Fashion and Image Design department of HKDI; the balance of practical and creative training exists to assist students in building their own sense of style, in opening their minds to broader visions of beauty, and in toning their ability to judge and reflect on the role of a professional artist in the fashion industry.

By Perry Wong, Hong Kong Design Institute, Department of Fashion and Image Design

Oriental women is the kindness, loveliness and subtleness in their approach, which European women are missing. When I was working on a design, I thought of the elegant movement of their arms. In the same way, I like to frame their face, neck and shoulder on my models."

For Gigli the principle of fashion design has been simple. "You need to understand what women need. They want to be beautiful. So you need to help them to be more beautiful. I don't like it when people say that fashion is killing the beauty of the women – fashion is not a joke. Fashion is to enhance the beauty of women."

Another piece of advice that Gigli repeatedly emphasises to young designers is that they must have their focus in the right place. "I am a professor in Milan teaching 20 design students from around the world. For young designers,

I tell them not to watch too many fashion shows or to get obsessed with fashion magazines. It's OK to know what's happening, but not just that – you need to build your own style and your own vision. And you need to study. You have to learn about art, architecture, movies and books. You need to open your mind and broaden your vision."

That was exactly what Gigli did prior to embarking on his design career. As the child of an antiquarian book dealer and a Contessa, Gigli's childhood was full of art and books.



He was privately educated until the age of nine, and at 18 he dropped out of university and for the next 10 years he wandered across Asia, South America, Africa and beyond, collecting everything that interested him. When urged to become a fashion designer after his outstanding fashion talent was revealed by a stint as a consultant in New York in 1977, he decided instead to study fashion for several years.

"I am a Calvinist: severe because you can only do what you know how to do," he said in an interview in Venice last year. Thus he studied fashion for several years before making his conspicuous debut in the fashion world. His first collection was carried at Joyce in 1985.

For Gigli, the way that "big money" now controls fashion has made it harder for young designers to make a difference. However, precisely because of this homogeneity Gigli believes that we are more than ever in need of a fresh approach to design, and Hong Kong could be the perfect place for a new generation of trend makers to emerge.

"Today's Hong Kong is like New York in the 1970s and 1980s, when the city was full of energy. Whereas New York no longer has that dynamic, nowadays I find it in Hong Kong." 

« TODAY'S HONG KONG IS LIKE NEW YORK IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, WHEN THE CITY WAS FULL OF ENERGY. »

WATER

Belgian designer **CHARLES KAISIN** works like a choreographer with a dancer, seeing endless possibilities of form and flow in a wide variety of materials, as he pushes the boundaries of what each one can achieve. *DAISY ZHONG reports.*

WASTES



Charles Kaisin picked up a utilitarian paper cup from the coffee shop on HKDI's Design Boulevard and moved his hands around it, like he was kneading pizza dough. His eyes and hands seemed to build an instant relationship with the materials used for the vessel's pressed paper and plastic lid. "Ultimately," he said, "the choice of an object is about identity. The colour and materials it's made of reveals what you are. In rural Africa, people wear different clothes

depending on their generation, their village and their history. All design objects say something about cultural heritage, and it's interesting to see the linkages between objects and social life".

The coffee cup in Kaisin's hands suddenly seemed to assume much more importance. It was as if it had become an exhibit: an indictment of industrial culture and the way it wastes materials. It reminded me of the way Kaisin introduced one of his signature works, *Recycling Glasses* in the notes for a recent exhibition. "The glass," he wrote, "is individualised each time it's used: the traces of the lips that were pressed against its rim vanish every time it's washed." In other words, the object and the user have a relationship that says as much about the person as it does about the objects they use.

ABOVE: EXTENDABLE
NEWSPAPER BENCH
FAR LEFT: CHARLES
KAISIN ON HKDI'S
DESIGN BOULEVARD,
MARCH 2013

As a designer and artist Kaisin is famous for exploiting the artistic potential of materials, which is why he often appears sentimentally attached to every object he creates. His work has been touched by his personality, by his heart, on every surface, inside and out. In the *Recycling Glasses* series translucent beakers of different sizes and diameters were created from used glass bottles through cutting, erosion and sanding, resulting in green, white, blue and brown tones that were the original colours of

«INGENUITY IS THE WAY THAT YOU ADAPT QUICKLY AND REARRANGE MATERIALS FOR NEW CREATIONS.»

RIGHT EXTENDABLE
NEWSPAPER BENCH
BELOW EXTENDABLE
PLASTIC BENCH



BELOW K-BENCH DISPLAYED
AT THE GRAND DUKE JEAN
MUSEUM OF ART



the recycled glass. The work is a transformational metaphor and standing in a row the tumblers seem almost musical, like the tranquil notes in Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Each one of them seems to tell a story about how Kaisin cared too much about the original materials they were made from to let them be thrown away.

Kaisin likes to use the metaphor that life is like the journey of a ball that rebounds from one cell to another on a grid, in which the cell represents an artistic discipline and the ball can "absorb and accumulate the experiences of that very journey". When this perspective is mixed with materials that have been individualised by their own history, like the coffee cup between his hands, the result is a cultural synthesis. Because Kaisin regards materials as the embodiment of culture, meaning and consciousness, he believes creating objects is akin

to creating an identity. This belief in material culture, the idea that artifacts epitomise our identity, or "being depends on having" – underlies Kaisin's philosophy of design and has resulted in an infatuation with exploring the endless possibilities of materials.

Kaisin's design journey began when he studied Architecture in the Institut Supérieur d' Architecture Saint-Luc in 1996 in Brussels, and then in 2000 he took part in an exchange programme with the Kyoto University of Art where he conducted research on new materials and "had a lot of cultural inputs".

In his early career Kaisin interacted with some of the most influential names in design. In 1997

he did two internships at French architect Jean Nouvel's studio in Paris, then worked with British sculpture artist Tony Cragg. After graduation from the Royal College of Art in 2001 he spent two years in Ron Arad's industrial design workshop, before establishing a design brand under his own name.

Although different in style, Kaisin's works show the influence of Ron Arad, particularly in terms of a daredevil curiosity about using materials in mischievous ways. "Ingenuity is the way that you adapt quickly to a lot of new information and rearrange materials for new creations," he says. In Kaisin's case this has led him to design pieces using a wide range of materials, including glassfibre, carbon, Kevlar, ceramics, paper, plastics and even chocolate. With each piece the forms that he created had an ingenious twist and a humanist perspective. For example, in cooperation with Royal Boch, the Belgian earthenware manufacturer, Kaisin created ceramic trays and plates that are reversible. The series is themed around "movement" and references the different stages of the legendary life of Gala, whose unique charm captivated and inspired many 20th century artists, including surrealist masters Paul Éluard, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí.

Another design that Kaisin created is a bag for Delvaux, the luxury Belgian leather goods company

«EVERYBODY ON EARTH IS A DESIGNER»



« IT'S IMPOTANT TO BE CREATIVE, BUT ALSO SOCIALLY AWARE ABOUT THE WAY PEOPLE MEET THEIR GOALS. »

that was recently acquired by Hong Kong-based Li & Fung. Named *Basket*, the extendable Delvaux bag remains totally flat when empty and open, due to the use of extremely supple leather. When closed, however, it develops an elegant, extended shape with a structured surface that creates a moire effect that resembles the alveoli of the lungs.

Material stretching is a theme explored in many of Kaisin's works. The K-bench, one of Kaisin's signature pieces, has a honeycomb structure that makes it flexible in length and tough. A limited edition of his K-bench, in opaline translucent blue, has been displayed at the Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art in Luxemburg since 2007, stretching and meandering in the lobby like a Water Dragon in Chinese mythology. Versatile by nature, the bench can also be made with recycled plastics or compressed newspapers.

Recycling is the other main theme of his work, and he rejoices when he is able to give an abandoned object a second life. "Nowadays we produce so many objects that every object has a short life cycle. This is true for every country, it's almost universal," he says, "Sustainability should be something that every one should be aware of and practice."

His commitment to sustainability has forced Kaisin to explore new uses for a wide range of everyday materials. For his *Newspaper Chair* he turned old newspapers into a material as strong as wood through a processes of gluing,



LEFT WOMEN HOLDING PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS FROM CHARLES KAISIN'S PINGOLINGO PROJECT BELOW BEAKERS FROM THE RECYCLING GLASSES SERIES



layering and compressing. And his *Recycling Containers* transformed the port-hole windows of washing-machines into glass bowls. In his signature Pingolingo project, he cut and randomly superimposed layers of used plastic shopping bags with their different logos and slogans and made new bags after pressing and heating. The result is a series of unique bags with different fragments of writing on each one that symbolises the "intermingling of today's cross-cultures" and gives back life to the "residues of consumption", something Kaisin believes is a fundamental obligation of any designer.

Sustainability being one of his goals, Kaisin firmly believes that designs should be value-embedded.

He thinks that what characterises a good design is that it contributes to improving human wellbeing. "Everybody on earth is a designer and can improve their lives in many situations. For example, when we talk about sustainability, as a manager of a company you can choose what material to use. It's all about the question of choice."

The idea that designers and creative professionals have a responsibility and are able to cause real change in the world through good design is shared by many design masters such as Victor Papanek, who says that designers have responsibilities to society in the choices they make in their design process. "I believe that as a designer, you can do a lot of things to influence the community through engagement in societal affairs," says Kaisin.

One of the "social responsibility" projects that Kaisin completed involved working with prisoners in Brussels to

create an installation named *Pneuma* for the bicentenary of the Brussels' Bar. A total of 10,000 origami pieces were hand-folded with the help of inmates from Saint-Gillis Prison and hung from the lobby ceiling at the city's Courthouse, forming a massive wave at the center of the space. Being consistent with Kaisin's recycling theme, the paper used to fold the origami came from books of old legal codes provided by the Bar.

The linkage between design and social life is the theme Kaisin wants to emphasise in a solo exhibition of his work, to be held in December in Hong Kong, named *Design in Motion*. "Design in Motion will explore the relationship between the object and us. I use references to literature and culture, to create a maximum of link. In *Design in Motion*, I show that it's important to be creative, but also very socially aware about the way people meet their goals in life. Creative works are part of our real life – political, economical, sociological – and all these factors are woven into the process of making and presenting an object." 

LET THE CHAIR SPEAK

BORIS BERLIN co-founded Komplot Design in 1987 with Poul Christiansen and in 2010 he joined with Aleksej Iskos to launch Iskos-Berlin Design. Together the two companies have focused on creating inspirational works that act as an antidote to the excessive noise of modern culture, expressing a “philosophy of silence” that Berlin explained to **SUMMER CAO**

It can be painful to be a designer, especially one like Boris Berlin who wears his heart on every surface he touches when he’s composing a new object. Berlin’s agony is focused on his disdain for uniformity, the process by which commercial pressure and the frenetic superficiality of modern life have stripped many designers of their will, leaving them powerless in the face of conformity. His answer is to seek for poetry in the materials he uses and make that serve the cause of originality.

“Designers and the companies that they work with are like salesmen in a market full of little booths,” says

Berlin, who was born “by chance” in the former Soviet Union but has lived and worked in Denmark for the last three decades. “They always want to see what is being sold in the neighbouring booths. If tomatoes sold very well, then they will come with tomatoes the next day. They always copy each other, and very few of them have unique visions. It leads to the situation that people more or less do the same stuff.”

For Berlin it’s surely not a coincidence that the two words “listen” and “silent” consist of exactly the same letters. Silence is an important part of listening, and without it effective communication is impossible. In our “highly productive” era when everybody seems to be churning out immense quantities of words, designs, and art, it sometimes feels like we are being drowned in a sea of irrelevant homogeneity.

Like Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*, and Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Berlin sees this process as dystopian and likely to increase the absence of meaning in modern design. His passionate response to those designers who pay more attention to showbiz and the gossip columns, rather than creativity



THIS PAGE NON IS A MONOBLOCK CHAIR, MOULDED IN PUR-RUBBER IN ONE SHOT OPPOSITE BELOW BORIS BERLIN (SEATED) WITH KOMPLOT CO-FOUNDER POUL CHRISTIANSEN

PICTURES ISKOS-BERLIN

MAIN AND OPPOSITE BELOW THE GUBI CHAIR RANGE IS DESIGNED TO BE USED IN A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS – FROM MEETING ROOMS TO CONFERENCE ROOMS, FROM CANTEENS AND CAFÉS TO RESTAURANTS – AND INCLUDES CHAIRS AND ARMCHAIRS, BAR CHAIRS AND LOUNGE CHAIRS WITH TUBULAR OR SOLID ROD FRAMES AND WITH WOODEN FRAMES



and functionality, has been to design a very unassuming chair called NON that fits unobtrusively into every surrounding, and whose structure is so simple it could be drawn by a five-year-old.

The sheer simplicity of the NON chair has elevated it to a work of art with a message that makes it the sibling of literature and a cousin to Huxley's great novel. Its purity is a warning against the corruption of creativity in design, executed with a mix of indignation and humour. Also embedded in NON is Berlin's hope that his design will act as an antidote to the poisoned cacophony ingested by modern society. To his delight, the world seems to have lowered its noise level in order to listen to what his silent object is trying to say.

Adding to NON's appeal as a work of art combined with a polemic is the chair's ingenious use of materials. It is a comfortable monoblock chair molded in PUR-rubber in one shot without any joints. Berlin explains how the choice of material has enhanced the chair's appearance and success, "There is a paradox in it – the silent normality of the shape combining the novel use of the material has created a strong and easily recordable identity."

The non-design and non-doing attitude constitute the first parts of the philosophy of silence practiced at Komplot and Iskos-Berlin Design. "NON is not even a designed chair, it is just an archetype for the chair. Yet it is monumental, a milestone," Berlin says. "If I am going to make a new design, I need a good excuse. Otherwise, I won't take up a new project."

After the success of the NON chair, Komplot designed another quiet and simple chair called GUBI I that used an innovative technique of molding a 3D veneer invented by German company Rehholz. GUBI I became the first industrial product based on this new technology – what Berlin would call a good excuse for him to make a new design.

GUBI I's edgy innovation lies in the use of 3D veneer that allows a significant double curvature of the shell. It makes possible a radical reduction in the amount of wood used in making the chair, which has a seat-shell thickness of just 5mm, compared to the normal 10mm or more. The new technology also enhances the 3-dimensional nature of the shell because it forces all the edges away from the sitter, making it comfortable to sit on. Moreover, GUBI I revealed another important aspect of his philosophy of silence – non-doing is only a start, and it has nothing to do with being indolent or passive. On the contrary, one should always experiment with new materials, and actively look for "excuses" to make a good

« IF I AM GOING TO MAKE A NEW DESIGN, I NEED A GOOD EXCUSE. »

design that could make the world sit up with awe and surprise. It also helps if the design uses few materials, making it more sustainable.

Berlin says, "I always spend a lot of time at the factories. I am always looking into the garbage bins, under the machines, because there are always strange and interesting pieces lying there. And the rejects from some products are so beautiful." It is this infatuation with materials that led Komplot to create GUBI II based on the use of a new material called PET felt that has become a key component to their designs, helping to further develop the philosophy of silence.

PET felt is a 100% recyclable material made from used water and soda bottles, thus GUBI II, for which the new material was



first employed in furniture is an eco-friendly chair because the seat and back are made entirely from PET felt instead of wood. Before long, Berlin discovered one of PET felt's stunning characteristics – it can be used as a construction material without help from any reinforcement.

“This discovery made me high. It is a dream to make a piece of mono-block furniture consisting only of textiles, in which the upholstery has become the self-supporting structure.” Berlin says, his voice tinged with the excitement of a man who has made a genuinely new discovery.

The Swedish prison authority was next to enter Berlin's story, and they came at the right moment, asking Komplot “to design a chair with a list of requirements consisting of ‘what has to be impossible’”. Being destined for the Swedish prisons it had to be

“impossible” for the chair “to be used as a weapon, impossible to produce noise by beating it against the wall, impossible to produce any weapon out of its material, impossible to hide anything in it”.

It was natural for Komplot to deploy PET felt as the perfect material to meet all the “impossibilities”, and immediately a sketch was created, based on which the famous NOBODY chair was made by the Hay manufacturing company, after the Swedish prison service changed its strategy and closed the project. The

BELOW THE MOULDING PROCESS OF THE NOBODY CHAIR



NOBODY CHAIRS



«IT IS PART OF THE EGO OF A DESIGNER TO MAKE MATERIALS BEHAVE AS HE WANTS THEM TO.»

manufacturing process is amazingly simple only needing, “the felt to be put in the press tool, then close the tool, cool it down, open the tool and trim the pressed item. That’s it.”

The NOBODY chair is a chair that has no body, consisting only of textile like a piece of cloth laid over a chair to cover it. It is light, stackable, sustainable, and Hay market the chair with the tongue-in-cheek phrase “Nobody is perfect”. However, on the way to perfection, Berlin spent a whole year finding ways to eradicate the wrinkles on the chair that were incurred during the thermo pressing process. And this yearlong process has triggered new thoughts regarding the ethics of design in a world where natural resources are often exploited to the point of total depletion.

Berlin's journey to make the NOBODY chair has led him to see the philosophy of silence as a stance that calls for designers to do less, and to leave their egos out of the process while treating materials and products with a harmonious and peaceful state of mind based on sympathy and tolerance. Berlin says this approach involves a “loss of control” and is something that allows materials to do more in deciding their destiny. “It is part of the ego of a designer to make

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE THE TUTU LAMP SHADE IS MADE SOLELY OUT OF POLYESTER FELT, PRODUCED FROM FIBER MADE LARGELY WITH RECYCLED PLASTIC BOTTLES. BELOW THE SPOOK CHAIR IS A MONOBLOCK PRODUCED IN A SINGLE PROCESS BY THERMO PRESSING THE POLYMER FIBRE - PET FELT MAT

MAIN THE "LOST CONTROL" EXHIBITION HELD LAST YEAR IN THE DANISH DESIGN CENTRE



materials behave as he wants them to, and things that don't are relentlessly rejected. And the history of design is nothing but an attempt to conquer the material world," Berlin says. "We only need to control as much as we need to satisfy the function of the object, and the material will do the rest and behave as it wants."

Berlin especially criticises the practice that rejects products with small imperfections such as a patch of discoloration in a piece of wooden furniture, or a little red thread in an otherwise perfect piece of black fabric. "What a terrible intolerance all of us have," he adds indignantly.

In light of this, Iskos-Berlin designed the Spook chair and TUTU lampshade using free molding, a technique that doesn't force the materials into shapes they don't want to assume. Spook is a monoblock club chair produced in one single process by thermo pressing the PET felt. Instead of fighting against the wrinkles created by the pressing process, designers accept the way the felt wants to behave. As a result, each chair is unique, because the folds never fall in the same way. Not only the wrinkles are forgiven, but also they reinforce the chair and allow for a reduction in the initial thickness of the felt. The TUTU lampshade's design has made the whole manufacturing process shorter and

simpler, because "you don't have to trim it after the pressing. Just press, and you are ready."

To spread the concept of "lost control", the Iskos-Berlin design company that Berlin co-founded has created an exhibition in Denmark last year based on the theme, aiming to alter people's way of thinking, "to change the perceptions rather than trying to change, improve or perfect the world around us. It demands a paradigm shift, a change of our aesthetic point of view."

Berlin's work is a stark reminder to designers that good design often has nothing to do with headlines but should be focused on a better and more humble use of the planet's resources. If more designers followed this path that would be a Brave New World indeed, one in which design and a sustainable future for the planet were both part of the same dance. 



A



VIEWS OF THE VANKE CRYSTAL CITY SPORTS CENTRE. THE CONCEPT WAS TO INTEGRATE THE PREVIOUS, EXISTING CONCRETE STRUCTURE INTO THE NEW BUILDING. OPPOSITE BELOW: FRANK YU

FRANK

Founded just ten years ago, Gravity has evolved into one of Hong Kong's most interesting and influential design and architecture partnerships. And yet the company was born in the most difficult circumstances. SUMMER CAO reports.

In 2003 SARS hit Hong Kong and the fragrant city took on the scent of disaster. It was the same year that Frank Yu and Claude Wong started The Gravity Partnership with six colleagues in a 30-square-metre office where “every desk was pushed together in a cramped space.” The small architectural practice was hard working and flexible, but more importantly it anchored itself to the safer shore of mainland China to ride out the harsh economic weather.

“The mainland was less influenced by SARS, so we were able to procure

a project,” says Yu, when he spoke to an audience at HKDI consisting of students and colleagues. “We then started to receive more jobs as our reputation increased.”

It is no surprise that Gravity survives and thrives, but it is a wonder that the company has expanded at such a fast pace.

“Ten years ago when I was 40, I was struggling with two things – whether to start a family or my own business. To end the excruciating inner struggle, I decided to try both.”

This double-dip decision has paid benefits. Ten years on Gravity



has more than 110 employees and Yu's company occupies a floor in Causeway Bay with windows overlooking the sea and a recreation room for chilling and meditation. Yu and his team is now sought after by influential real estate developers such as Sun Hung Kai, which has just commissioned Gravity to design the International Commerce Centre in Chengdu, a project that is to be the city's landmark and will cover 1.3 million square meters, making it three times larger than Kowloon's Elements. It will consist of four towers and a commercial complex. Meanwhile, Yu is happily married with three children and his wealth and philanthropy have put him on several lists of the rich and powerful. “Luck is a very important factor

TAK





« PRESERVATION AND REVIVAL OF A HISTORICAL BUILDING SHOULD NOT BE CONFINED BY THE PHYSICAL FORM »

for success; then it is talent and hard work,” Yu says putting on a matter-of-fact smile that reflects years of struggle that have been overcome, before he explained why his company has won plaudits for its dedication to innovation and non-

conventional design, all put at the service of society and the design profession.

“Architecture shouldn’t just be about trends and fashion because fashion will inevitably change,” says Yu. “Unlike a fashion or interior designer, an architect should think in decades or longer instead of in seasons or years.”

Yu pointed to pictures of his company’s first project - the Crystal City Sports Centre in Tianjin - as an example. “It is still in fashion, unlike - to be frank - some out-of-fashion projects that I have done four and five years ago when I mistakenly pursued the trend and fashion too keenly”.

The brief Yu was given for Crystal City by real estate developer Vanke was to “change a 3,600 square metre former old glass factory into a large commercial sports centre for the entire district and ideally just give it a new layer of paint outside, and make a fancy renovation inside in order to save budget”. At the same time the central people’s government began to promote cultural and spiritual elevation, and local governments responded by seeking to preserve old buildings, following Beijing’s preservation of its remaining Hutongs.

As a result of these two factors Vanke were pushing for the preservation of the glass factory’s antique appearance. However when Yu arrived in Tianjin he decided that the preservation of physical form wasn’t a good option for this project, because the glass factory was not an interesting building, architecturally speaking, with a torn, rusty roof and a utilitarian structure.

Yu proposed to tear down the roof and Vanke agreed. However, the walls were also found to be in a bad condition. In light of this, he suggested that everything should be torn down, except the concrete structure of the building. Yu decided to form a perimeter that both surrounds and connects to the new complex. As a result, the old concrete structure



and its history could be juxtaposed with the renewed modernity of the sports centre as expressed in the steel exterior construction.

“For me, preservation and revival of a historical building should not be confined by the physical form,” says Yu. “It is the memory that is important. The twenty per cent of the old building that remained is the most valuable part, and can be clearly seen from the outside. It no doubt evokes memories for many people. So the goal of preservation was achieved, plus the transformation of an otherwise unattractive and malfunctioning building.”

However, Yu’s proposal required 30 million RMB, three times Vanke’s budget. He explained to Vanke his definition of preservation, and the fringe benefits that his design would create for the community. He also suggested that the 20 million RMB extra construction cost could be treated as part of Vanke’s marketing budget, due to the beneficial effects the design would have and the gratitude it would generate in the community. His proposal was accepted and the project

RENDERINGS OF THE SHA PING BA RAILWAY HUB, CHONGQING, CHINA

« AN ARCHITECT SHOULD THINK IN DECADES OR LONGER INSTEAD OF IN SEASONS OR YEARS »

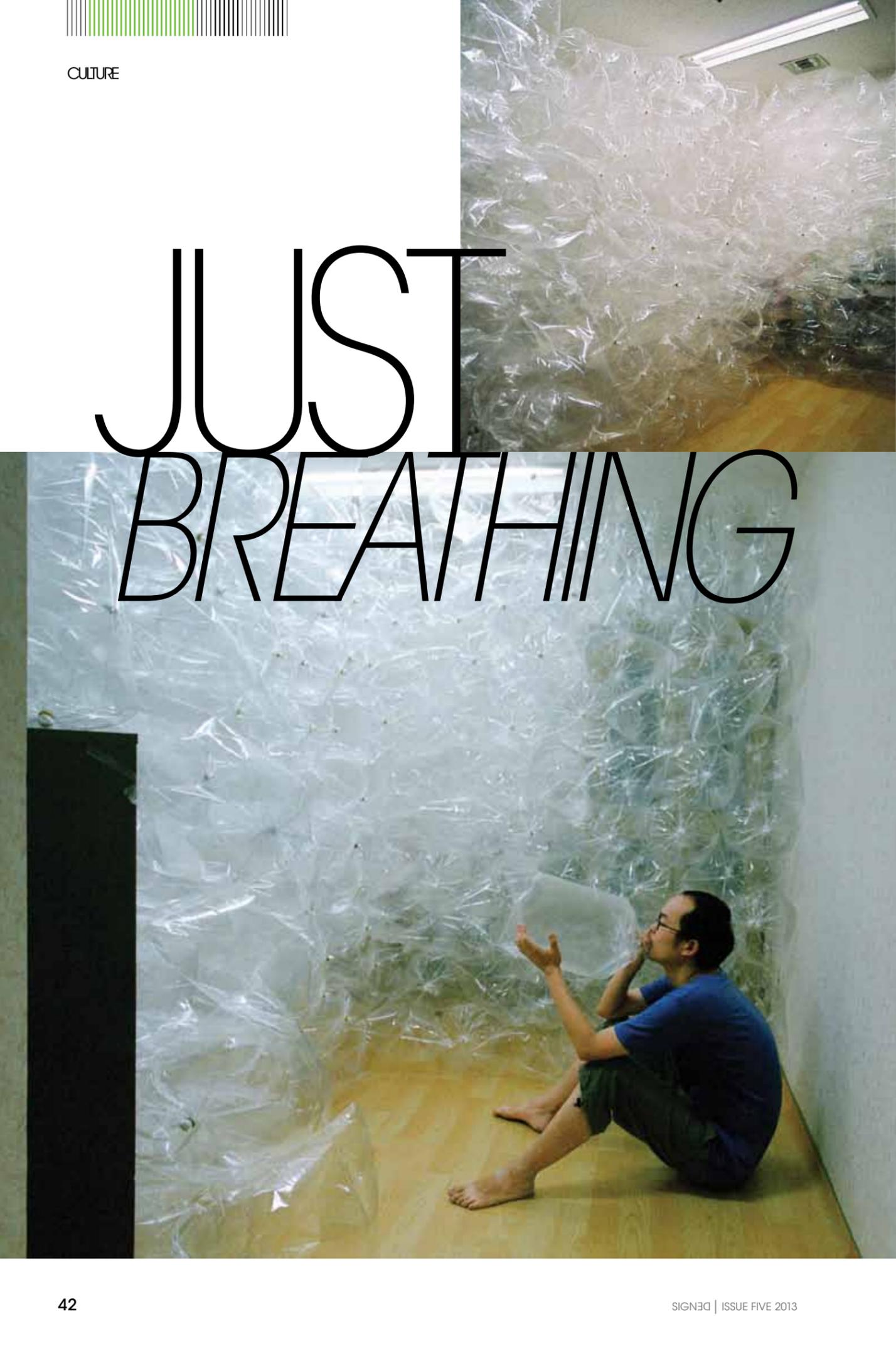
not only helped Gravity to establish its reputation but also brought in new business.

Having told his Tianjin story Yu sounded a note of caution about pushing clients too far away from their original brief.

“No matter how capable you are, you can be fired anytime,” he says. “And you can never beat your clients by arguing. Having stayed in the industry for 27 years, one of the most important things I have learned is to protect oneself. According to my experience, the opportunity to succeed by insisting on one’s opinion against the client’s is none.”

Having said that, Yu gave several pointers for dealing with clients, without which no design company can survive. “Drawings and renderings are important, the more detailed the better,” he says as he showed the presentation slides he used in bidding for the Sha Ping Ba Railway hub project in Chongqing. “Drawings are the most direct and efficient way to show your ideas. They increase the client’s belief in the project, because they are unlikely to be able to imagine the design based on words alone.”

Yu’s experience is an invaluable model for designers in all walks of life. A great design is only half the battle, a great story to go with it, told in words in pictures, is the other side of the coin. ☺



JUST BREATHING

Once in a while we might think something strange like “how long does it take to inhale all the air in my bedroom?” or “what would it feel like if I travelled with my eyes shut?” As *DAISY ZHONG* discovered, artist **PAK SHEUNG CHUEN** takes these eccentric ideas seriously and has drawn upon them to build an impressive reputation in the art world.

When the He Xiangnin Art Museum in Shenzhen held an opening ceremony in July last year for Pak Shueng Chuen’s solo exhibition it lacked the usual elements found in Asian gallery openings. There were no collectors, socialites, art critics, designer clothing or champagne. The artist himself, surrounded by many of his friends and fans, wore a crumpled short-sleeved shirt and carried a knapsack with a bottle of water in its side pocket.

And yet Pak is not an unknown – he was the only Hong Kong artist to exhibit at the 2009 53rd Venice Biennale and his works have been collected by Tate Modern in London. The style of the opening was a statement of Pak’s aesthetic. His works are as unpretentious as his appearance. At the Venice Biennale, Pak showed his installation *The Horizon Placed at Home*, which features 45 plastic bottles filled with seawater collected from Victoria Harbour. The collection points were established by drawing a horizontal line on a map of Victoria Harbour from east to west, which creates 45 intersections on the coastline. The idea came to Pak when he was “daydreaming” that he might one day live in a sea view apartment.

Another internationally renowned installation of Pak’s is called *Breathing in a House*, which shows

transparent plastic bags full of air that consume all the space in a room. The work was created in a rented apartment in Busan, Korea, where Pak collected the air he breathed into transparent plastic bags until the whole apartment was full. It took him 10 days. The idea came as Pak was lying on his bed “thinking of nothing, but I heard my own breathing, and I wondered, ‘How long does it take to breathe in all the air of this room?’”

For the past decade, 35-year-old Pak has pursued these seemingly trivial and eccentric ideas, but in the process he has revealed the uniqueness and potential of day-to-day reality. “The uniqueness of everyday life is often repressed by the imposing narratives of modernity,” he says. “I think many things in our living environment are more interesting than the exhibits in galleries. When your eyes are opened, daily objects also become art.”

On April 15, Pak came to the Experience Centre at HKDI campus and shared his perspective on art in a seminar titled *Self-Reflection/City Exploration*, in which he unveiled a cityscape that is full of “unfamiliar familiarities.”

Born in Fujian Province in 1977, Pak was educated in Hong Kong and has been based here since 1984. Yet his way of being seems out of sync with the restless metropolis. In contrast to Hong Kong’s making-every-second-count spirit, Pak is remarkably slow. He likes to stroll down a street full of vehicles and pedestrians as if it’s a footpath covered with maple leaves; or meditate upon the numbers on the information board in a bus station; or he likes to stand under a tall building to wait until all the residents turn off their lights; or he stands at an MTR exit to see if a friend might emerge unexpectedly. He is a master creator from scraps of inconsequentiality.

This patient and loving attitude towards life is the foundation upon which Pak has created work that establishes an intimate relationship between spirituality and daily trivial objects.

One of his key “materials” has been his own body.

《MANY THINGS
IN OUR LIVING
ENVIRONMENT
ARE MUCH MORE
INTERESTING THAN THE
EXHIBITS IN GALLERIES》

“The human body is the first point of access to the outside environment,” he says. “Your body and the surrounding environment have a curious yet precise corresponding relationship.” On the streets, Pak measured the width of zebra crossing with the width of his shoulders, and “I found that a typical zebra crossing in Hong Kong equals the shoulder widths of five men standing together.” Few would find this fact remarkable. For Pak it’s as artistically significant as the Mona Lisa’s smile.

In another project, he laid a piece of yellow cloth across Hennessy Road in Causeway Bay during the third July 1 protest in 2005. Cutting across the route, the cloth was there to record the footprints of the marchers. Two weeks later Pak brought the cloth to Beijing, tore it into tiny ribbons and tied the ribbons around the periphery of Tiananmen Square. “The work was a

PREVIOUS PAGE
BREATHING
IN A HOUSE,
INSTALLATION IN
AN APARTMENT IN
BUSAN, KOREA

BELOW AND
OPPOSITE LET THE
ARTIST GO HOME
WITH YOU! AT
THE 2010 TAIPEI
BIENNIAL

present for the Beijing government from the citizens of Hong Kong. My artwork was a witness to Hong Kong’s history,” says Pak.

Pak works in a variety of media including installations, photos, paintings or videos, but he also likes to work in real time, making an event into a work of art.

At the 2010 Taipei Biennial Pak sat on a chair with a banner that read “Let the artist go home with you!” During the 23 days of the exhibition he managed to get 19 visitors to take him home. “On the road, the audience takes an equal position with the artist,” he explained. “They act as a viewer and provide creative materials at the same time, while the artist plays a dual role as a creator and viewer as well. Thus, two people and four roles are revealed on the road.”

Pak believes that the motivation for all of his work is to make “a conscientious construction of my memory”. “Life is like a forward-moving axis from birth to death, and very often the driving force for us to go forward is because of some memorable moments in the past,” he says. “My works are to create such valuable moments, and when I look at them I feel happy.”

The ability to get delight from ordinariness has defined Pak’s life as an artist since his graduation from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2003. “I have been focused on doing things that I like,” he told his audience at HKDI. “My mother has always been worried about me not having a ‘serious’ job but I have never looked for a job or wanted to.”

But that’s not because his work has made him rich. Although the booming Chinese art market has elevated many artists into the wealth class, Pak’s work shows a disregard for commerce. That his works are often more like a performance they also cease to exist in the moment they are created.

This attitude has made Pak a darling of the critics. “Pak’s work marks a shift in Chinese contemporary art away from commodification and cynical detachment towards a more humanist, conscientious examination of



《AMBIGUITIES ARE WHERE EVERY CREATIVE
PROCESS BEGINS》

relevant social issues,” said Chris Dercon, the Director of Tate Modern, at the Contemporary Chinese Art Awards in 2012, at which Pak won the Best Artist Award. The jury’s comment also noted “Pak’s work is not for the market, not for the media, but for everyone who cares about discovery.”

A disengagement from money and power might have prevented Pak from being rich and chic but it has secured him the freedom to continue his exploration of unfashionable approaches to art. “[Pak’s] art is almost invisible, almost impossible to document, but manages to explore the human condition in all its complexities and with loving precision,” says Lars Nittve, the director of M+, the museum for visual culture that will soon rise in Hong Kong’s West Kowloon Cultural District.

Pak keeps a notebook with him wherever he goes and jots down everything he finds interesting, giving a daily record of things small that may one day become works of art. “When you actually take note of what are seemingly trivial actions, you will find that every time it gives you some kind of inspiration.”

His notebook not only contains words and phrases (for instance, “To whom does the voice ‘please hold the handrail’ in the MTR belong to?”), but also sketches that are primitive and surrealistic. “Ambiguities are where every creative process begins,” he says, “the articulation of this ambiguity is what the visual arts are about. And during the process of visualising these thoughts, one is also discovering him/herself.”

And that’s a view that should make every artist take a deep breath before they begin work on their next project. ☺





STANDARD BEARER

When the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers held one of their key meetings at HKDI for the first time in March they took another step in defining the way designers will entertain us in the future. DAISY ZHONG reports.

HKDI's state-of-the-art building is accustomed to seminars and workshops that focus on cutting edge contemporary design, but anybody who stumbled upon a classroom full of serious looking people last March might have been forgiven for thinking they had walked into a planning meeting for a bank or an insurance company. The group, mostly men in their 40s and 50s, were gathered around lap tops in the midst of coffee cups and sheets of paper and at first glance it looked like they were inspecting actuarial tables. As any good designer knows, appearances can be deceptive and a quick conversation revealed that the group was composed of people at the forefront of digital technology, doing work is helping to define the future of design.

From March 4-9 HKDI was the venue for the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) quarterly Standards Update meeting in Hong Kong, where the industry's experts and

professionals shared information about the industry's latest developments and technical trends.

The Oscar and Emmy Award-winning SMPTE is a professional membership organisation founded in 1916 in the US, and for nearly 100 years it has been the leader in developing more than 600 standards, recommended practices, and engineering guidelines for television production, filmmaking, digital cinema, audio recording, information technology, and medical imaging.

"SMPTE is among the top three most authoritative voices in setting standards in the motion picture and television industry," says Tony Ngai, the Chairman of SMPTE Hong Kong Section. "To have a unified standard is crucial for the movie and TV industry because it creates a common language through which different players in the industry can communicate and cooperate, facilitating communication and therefore business."

The Standard Update Meeting held at HKDI focused on Ultra High Definition (UHD, 4K and beyond) television and the High Efficiency Video Coding, the standard of which was released in January by the International Telecommunication Union, another key standards organization which is part of the United Nations.

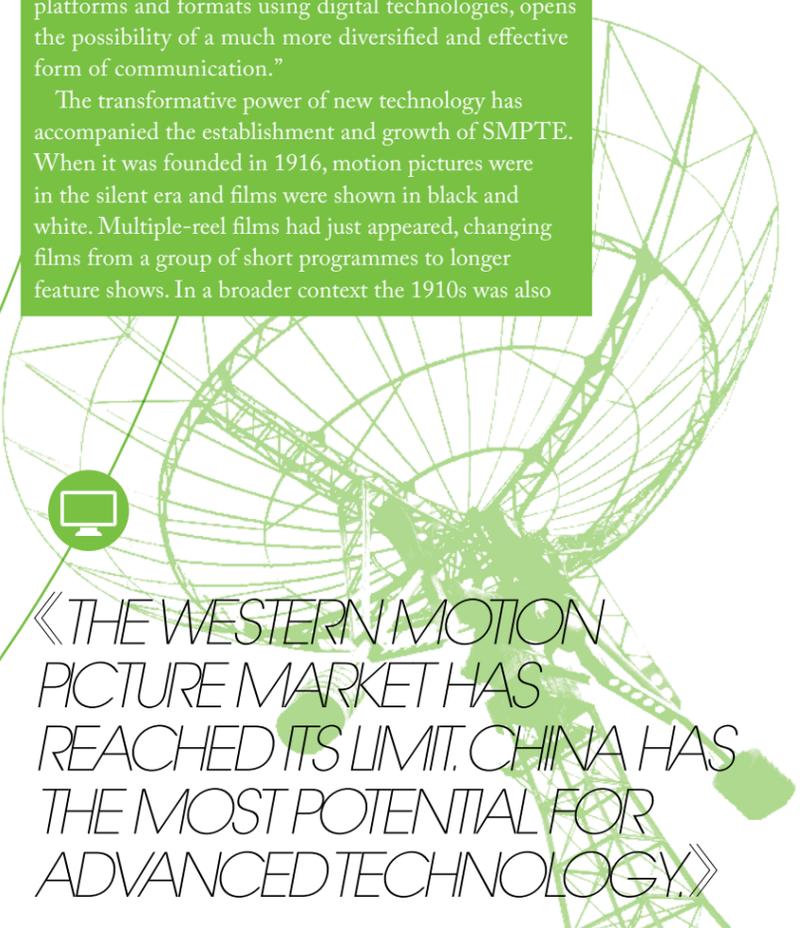
Ngai explained that UHD such as 4K, 8K or 16K involves much larger amounts of data and therefore has to depend on a more efficient compression and coding technology. And HEVC is the most advanced video compression standard. According to Ngai, the

latest standard of HEVC features an up to 50 percent encoding efficiency improvement compared to previous versions and can therefore support 8K UHD and resolutions up to 8192x4320 pixels.

Implementation of the new standard has already taken place. In April, the HEVC (H.265) coding scheme was used successfully for the first time by the European-based bandwidth provider SES in testing an end-to-end file transmission of UHD (4K) content via satellite. The test paved the way for further HEVC-based transmissions, notably at the upcoming World Cup tournament in Brazil next summer.

Ngai firmly believes in the revolutionary role of new technologies on creative storytelling. "Technologies are enhancing our innovative abilities and breaking through boundaries. For instance, 'transmedia', the technique of telling a single story through multiple platforms and formats using digital technologies, opens the possibility of a much more diversified and effective form of communication."

The transformative power of new technology has accompanied the establishment and growth of SMPTE. When it was founded in 1916, motion pictures were in the silent era and films were shown in black and white. Multiple-reel films had just appeared, changing films from a group of short programmes to longer feature shows. In a broader context the 1910s was also



«THE WESTERN MOTION PICTURE MARKET HAS REACHED ITS LIMIT. CHINA HAS THE MOST POTENTIAL FOR ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY.»



a turbulent decade that saw the rise of the US fueled by its industrial innovation – the first moving assembly line began in 1914 and in 1915, the one millionth Model T rolled off the assembly line, signaling a fundamental change in the lives of American workers. It was followed by the roaring twenties, when the movie and broadcasting industries skyrocketed, especially with technological breakthroughs like accurate synchronization and sufficient amplification of sound.

As motion pictures developed into one of the most important tools of communication and entertainment in the 20th century and beyond, SMPTE spread to 64 countries and regions with nearly 6,000 members. Its Hong Kong Section was formed in 1995, as the local TV and film industry experienced rapid growth, and the number of engineers and production people engaged in the TV field has grown substantially.

But up to now one important region is still missing in SMPTE's global map – Mainland China, whose increased power in many industries is increasingly reliant upon science and technological development. Ngai reveals that an important reason for SMPTE's decision to come to Hong Kong for the Standard Update meeting is due to the increasing significance of Mainland China. "The Western motion pictures market has already reached its limit but China is the market that has the most potential for advanced technology. SMPTE has been attempting to establish

«DESIGNERS NOT ONLY FIX BUGS BUT ALSO IDENTIFY THEM AND EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES THEY OFFER.»

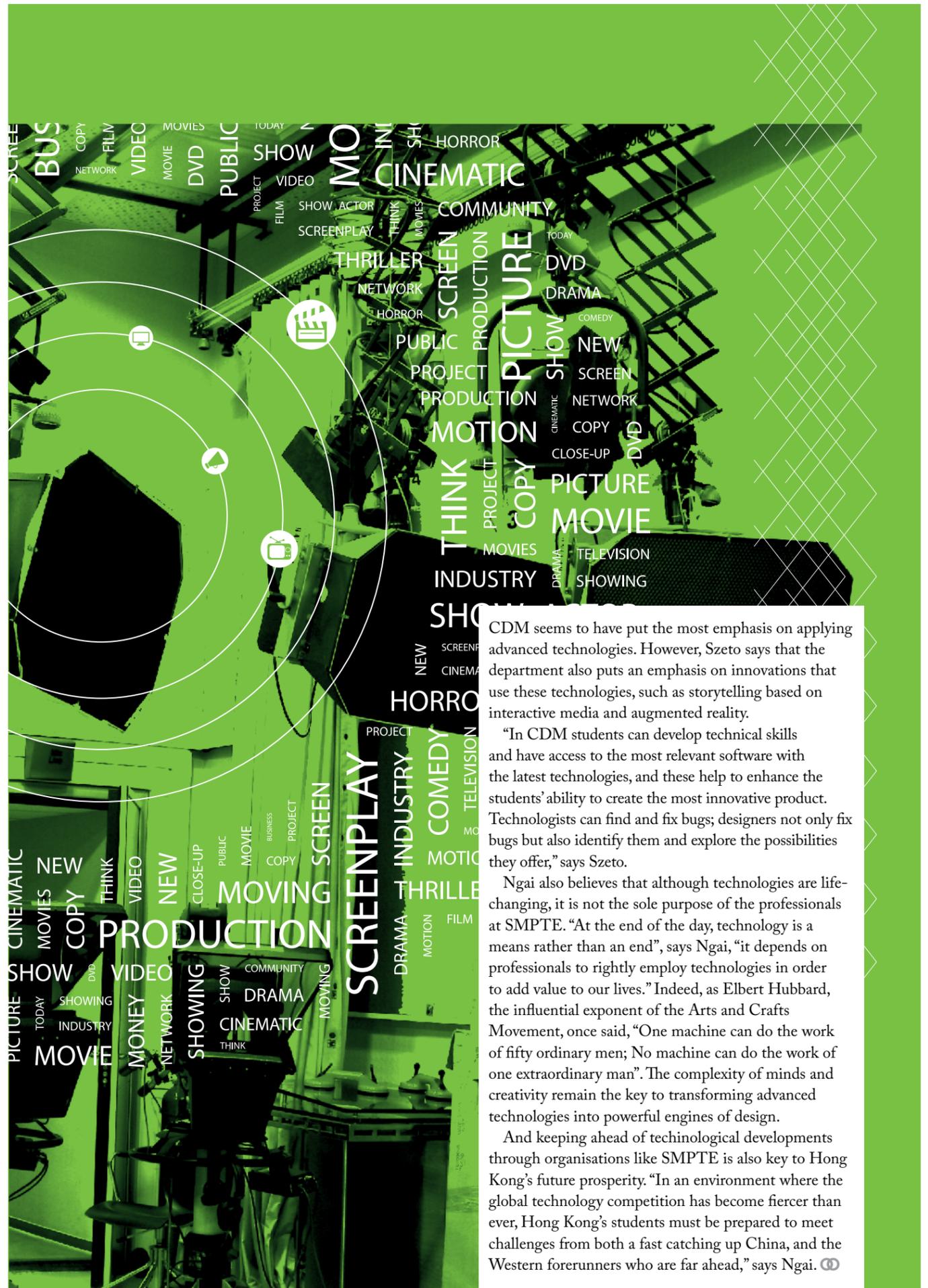
connections with the industry in mainland China and expand its networks there, and Hong Kong is the door step." Members from the SMPTE headquarters in the Hong Kong Section also made a visit to the Mainland recently to explore the possibility of establishing a Section there.

Precisely because of the transformative impact of technology, especially in story-telling, the HKDI's Department of Communication Design and Digital Media (CDM) of HKDI has been a pioneer in bringing advanced technologies to students through the department's close relationship with the leading players in the motion picture industry.

"One of the central functions of CDM is to build a strong connection between the movie and TV industry and our students to facilitate an exchange between them. We have close cooperation with institutions from the TV and film industries such as SMPTE," says Szeto King Fung, a CDM lecturer and the major consultant of the Student Chapter of SMPTE.

With SMPTE Hong Kong Section as its prime consultant, a HKDI-based SMPTE Student Chapter was established in 2007 and it expanded quickly from several dozen to over 290 student members by 2011. Its popularity is due to its provision of not only new information about advanced technology through all kinds of seminars, workshops, and industrial professionals sharing, but also the abundant industry attachment opportunities it offers. One of the SMPTE Student Chapter's ongoing projects in 2012-13 has been helping the Hong Kong Hockey Association to shoot their tournaments and produce videos of games. Other chances that are exclusively available for SMPTE Student Chapter members include job recruitment by the Jockey Club, TVB, ATV, Apply Daily, production houses and renowned film directors.

Among the four academic departments of HKDI,



CDM seems to have put the most emphasis on applying advanced technologies. However, Szeto says that the department also puts an emphasis on innovations that use these technologies, such as storytelling based on interactive media and augmented reality.

"In CDM students can develop technical skills and have access to the most relevant software with the latest technologies, and these help to enhance the students' ability to create the most innovative product. Technologists can find and fix bugs; designers not only fix bugs but also identify them and explore the possibilities they offer," says Szeto.

Ngai also believes that although technologies are life-changing, it is not the sole purpose of the professionals at SMPTE. "At the end of the day, technology is a means rather than an end", says Ngai, "it depends on professionals to rightly employ technologies in order to add value to our lives." Indeed, as Elbert Hubbard, the influential exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, once said, "One machine can do the work of fifty ordinary men; No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man". The complexity of minds and creativity remain the key to transforming advanced technologies into powerful engines of design.

And keeping ahead of technological developments through organisations like SMPTE is also key to Hong Kong's future prosperity. "In an environment where the global technology competition has become fiercer than ever, Hong Kong's students must be prepared to meet challenges from both a fast catching up China, and the Western forerunners who are far ahead," says Ngai. 

THE YS MAN

YOHJI YAMAMOTO is one of the most revered designers in fashion with a cult following in his native Japan and acolytes all over the world. When it came to launching YNOT, he turned to the HKDI's Fashion and Image Department for help. MEI TING CHEUNG reports.



I was thrilled when I heard that the HKDI was going to work with Yohji Yamamoto, Mixmind's Mao Ji Hong (the owner of Exception) and Stanley Wong to give branding and marketing advice on the launch of Y-Not. And I was delighted when I was invited to a workshop in May with the designer at a store on Star Street that the HKDI's Fashion and Image department had helped select and style.

At the start of the workshop the room was full of people sitting on the floor, eagerly anticipating the designer's arrival. It was like waiting for a play to start in the theatre. A group of people in black & white appeared, moving with calm determination, just like Japanese samurai going on a mission in a quiet and mysterious way. I knew this was Yohji's samurai team and he is the general: A very smart, talented general but one with a kind and low profile.

His samurai led him to his seat where he sat down and crossed his legs in a way that was quiet and elegant. I was surprised when Yohji began to speak. His voice is so soft and slow, like a girl whispering. It feels gentle and comfortable. While everyone was paying attention

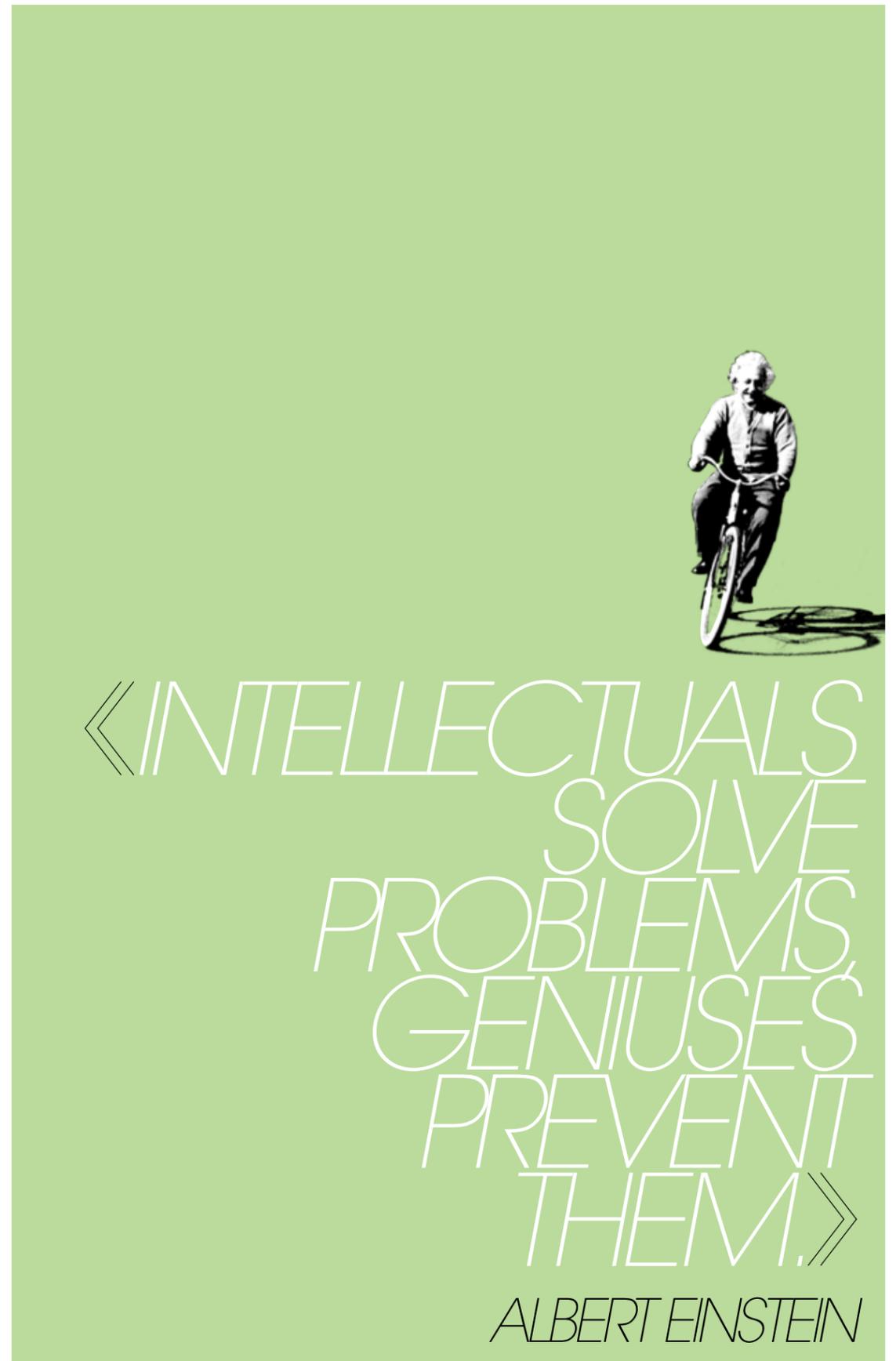
to the speech, somebody's phone began to ring and it broke the calm atmosphere. It turned out the phone belonged to Yohji. He took it out and checked and said, "It is my girlfriend". Everybody laughed. I realise that he has more than one talent – he is a subtle comedian as well as a great designer. The rest of the workshop rode smoothly on the back of his warm sense of humor.

An important aspect of the project between HKDI, Mr Yamamoto and Mixmind is that the designer will have a series of sessions with students. We have so much to learn from such a design master and it is a treasure for the HKDI community to have this opportunity. During the Q&A session on Star Street, students had a chance to ask about the secrets of success in the design industry. One student asked how to explain a design concept to people who seem like they don't understand. He said 'there is no need to tell them.' This student was confused and asked if that meant she didn't need to explain her work to her teachers in future. One of the guests at the event explained for her. "I understand Yohji's answer," she said. "There will always be somebody who doesn't understand our designs or even don't like them. However,

we shouldn't give up but keep moving forward and insist on our beliefs. People's opinion is subjective especially with regard to art and fashion and there will be someone who likes your work if you believe in it enough."

Throughout the session Yohji kept reminding us that the key to success as a designer is to be very hard working. He said if we need to be creative, we should go out and explore the world, not just sit in front of the computer all the time. He's right. Technology has become advanced and convenient but it has made people lazy and less sensitive because they lack the motivation to feel, touch and sense the beautiful things that are around us. The Internet's knowledge is limited, but knowledge in the universe is infinite. As Yohji said, if we want to be creative and have unlimited inspiration, the best way is to travel extensively, just as he has. I was so glad to have had the opportunity to attend this workshop and learn from Yohji Yamamoto, Japan's elegant king of noir. ☪

Cheung Mei Ting Ice is a third year HKDI Image Styling Student in the Fashion and Image Design Department.





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