

SAILING WITHIN HONG KONG'S OUTLYING ISLANDS:

The 2nd Inter-Island Festival, Hong Kong, November 2023

[Received March 11th 2024; accepted March 20th 2024 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.220]

Myriem Alnet

Marine Connections Laboratory, Hong Kong <alnet.myriem@gmail.com>

Otto Heim

University of Hong Kong <oheim@hku.hk>

Introduction

The Inter-Island Festival is an art and lifestyle festival dedicated to Hong Kong's outer islands of Cheung Chau, Peng Chau, Lantau's Mui Wo and Chi Ma Wan, the inter-island sea in-between these islands, and the inter-island ferry connecting them (Figure 1). The festival locations are part of Hong Kong's Islands District, which stands out among Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's eighteen districts as the largest in terms of area but smallest in terms of population. The district's population accounts for just 2.5% of the region's total but is the youngest and fastest growing of all districts. It mostly consists of small communities, composed of indigenous residents as well as significantly larger proportions of ethnic minorities than the rest of Hong Kong (Figure. 2). The diversity of the Island district is well-captured by the four Festival locations: a very urban Cheung Chau (20,000+ inhabitants), a tiny Peng Chau, a spread-out Mui Wo, and very 'rural' Chi Ma Wan. Highlighting this diversity of communities, their histories and concerns, as well as the variety of environments on the four locations linked by the inter-island ferry, is one of the main objectives of the Inter-Island Festival. It also hopes to foster connections and exchange between these islands with a down-to-earth, accessible, and playful approach.

The first Inter-Island Festival was held from March 26 to 28, 2021 and the second edition took place two years later, on the four weekends of November 2023. Although only in its second iteration, the Festival already evolved significantly between 2021 and 2023 and four major changes can be highlighted. First, the Festival took place over four weekends (instead of one for the first edition), since a month-long event was deemed to allow better integration of activities within the daily lives of islanders. Second, the 2023 edition adopted the theme of the 'inter-island sea' to invite collaborators to explore through their own and varied angles the myriad of relationships residents weave with the sea that is at the core of the inter-island space. Third, this Festival aimed at generating and making visible knowledge about the territory. The project featured five six-month long research projects led by teams of researchers paired with creative talents on the islands. Fourth, the Festival also aimed to promote islanders' gaze, allowing the reappropriation of the territory by residents, the acknowledgement of local narratives as valid and self-defining, and the diversity of islandness.

Alnet & Heim: Sailing within Hong Kong's outlying islands

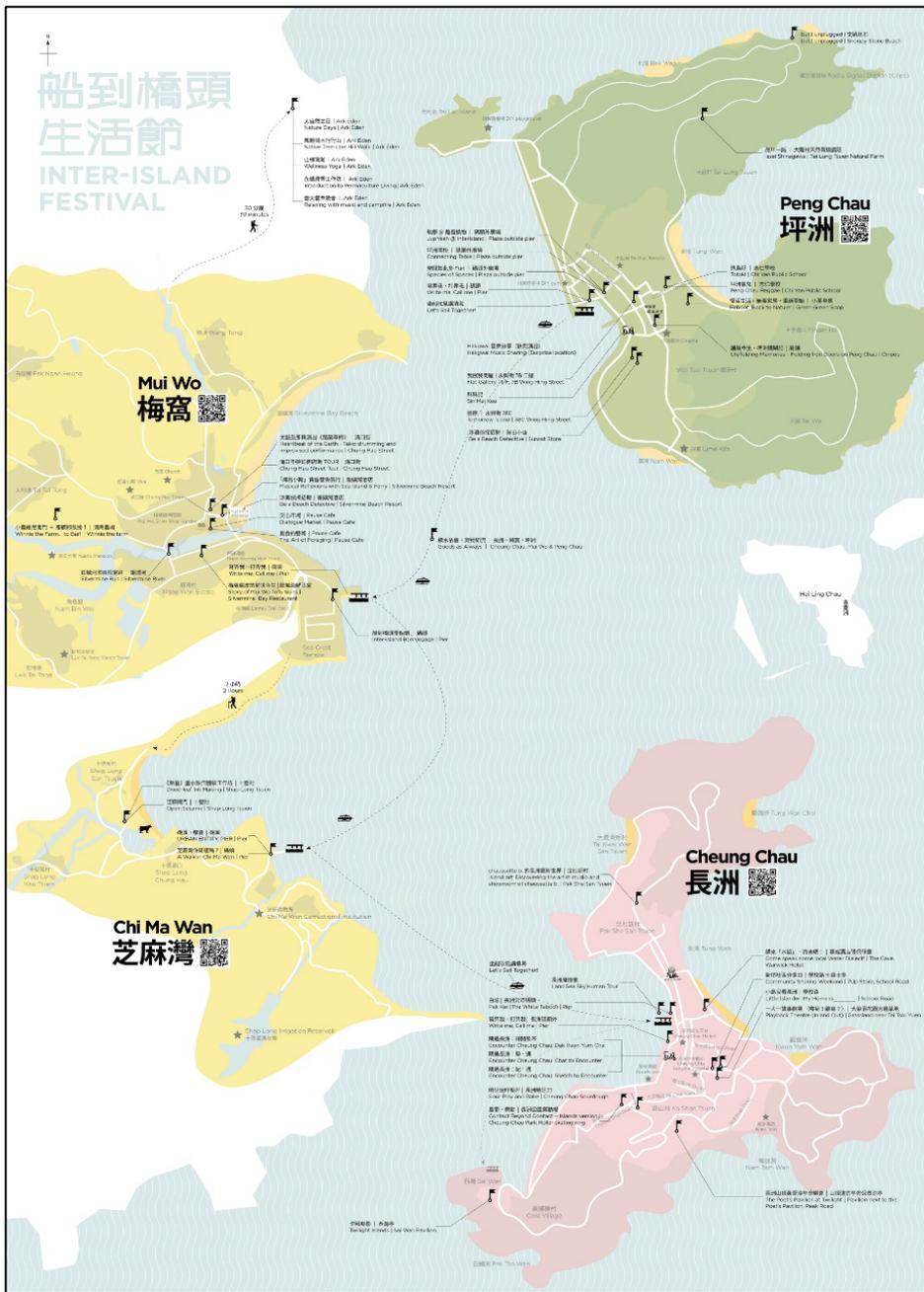


Figure 1 - Ethnic composition of population in Hong Kong (2021 census)
 Source: Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR.

Population (Excluding Foreign Domestic Helpers)				
Year	2021			
Region - Hong Kong Island/ Kowloon/ New Territories	Hong Kong Island	Kowloon	New Territories	Islands District
Ethnicity	%	%	%	%
Chinese	92.08	96.06	96.63	81.65
Filipino	0.71	0.32	0.30	2.39
Indonesian	0.16	0.14	0.11	0.30
Indian	0.89	0.66	0.38	3.32
Nepalese	0.27	0.69	0.31	0.54
Pakistani	0.21	0.37	0.37	0.80
Other South Asian	0.04	0.09	0.05	0.22
Thai	0.20	0.19	0.13	0.34
Japanese	0.35	0.17	0.07	0.39
Korean	0.35	0.09	0.08	0.61
Other Asian	0.21	0.19	0.10	0.47
White	2.73	0.25	0.68	6.16
Others	1.80	0.76	0.82	2.81
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Figure 2 - Ethnic composition of population in Hong Kong (2021 census)
Source: Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR.

Concept, approach, and realisation

The concept of the Inter-Island Festival was theme-based, research-led, and community-oriented. Strongly influenced by concepts and ideas developed in the academic field of island studies, and aware of the discrepancy between their relevance and recognition in Hong Kong, the organisers decided to subtly anchor the Festival's second edition in this legacy of knowledge. For example, the overall theme of 'the inter-island sea' was intended to highlight the importance of neighbourliness and mobility in the lives of islanders and to draw attention to the aquapelagic environment of Hong Kong's outer islands. The theme gave rise to six sub-themes, five of which—anthropocene islands, nonhuman neighbours, coastal sensorialities, island microhistories, and floating lives—emerged from commissioned research. Meanwhile, a separate sub-theme, *kaifong* feel (from the Cantonese 街坊, a colloquial term referring to neighbours and neighbourhood), was reserved for activities that did not explicitly engage the 'inter-island sea' thematic but were self-initiated by island residents and contributed to showing the diversity of lives on the islands.

Generating and making visible knowledge about the inter-island territory was an explicit aim of the 2023 Festival and to achieve it, the organisers designed a category of projects internally referred to as 'feature projects' that paired academics/researchers with artists living on the islands. Each team had five to six months to develop a research-based project that would inform island residents about some lesser-known characteristics of their environment. The organisers secured five teams that worked on different topics:

- Tommy Hui (Science Unit, Lingnan University), Fok Chun-wing (landscape architect, Peng Chau resident) and Joanne Chan (architect, Mui Wo resident) studied the rocky-shore ecosystems of Peng Chau, Mui Wo and Chi Ma Wan and developed the exhibition 'Situating Circatidal' presented at the Peng Chau Cinema, and the 'Rocky Shore tour' on Peng Chau (sub-theme: Floating Lives).

Alnet & Heim: Sailing within Hong Kong's outlying islands

- Roger Lee (Science Unit, Lingnan University), Ching Yee (Science Unit, Lingnan University), Lantau Shanto Studio (artists-ceramist studio, Mui Wo residents), Yiwoo (bamboo craftsman, Peng Chau resident) experimented making houses for bees and presented the installations 'Island Bee & Bee' on Peng Chau and Mui Wo, and the tour & workshop 'Island Bee & Bee: Follow Bee!' in both locations too (sub-theme: Nonhuman Neighbours).
- Brian Wong (Liber Research Community) and Preston Hartwick (photographer, designer, Cheung Chau resident) worked on artificial islands and their representations and developed the exhibition 'AI (Artificial Islands)' and the workshop 'Navigating Utopia' on Cheung Chau (sub-theme: Anthropocene Islands).
- Otto Heim (School of English, HKU, Mui Wo resident) and musicians Celestial 天上 (Peter Millward, Lantau resident) and The Gong Strikes One (Discovery Bay residents) created and presented music composed and performed in response to the islands' soundscape with the performances 'Rhythms of the inter-island' in Peng Chau and Mui Wo. In Mui Wo, the soundscape was composed of interactive sound installations created by HKU students in an experiential learning project (sub-theme: Coastal Sensorialities).
- Island Studies Network (HK), led by Leung-Po Shan, connected with local actors and community groups to understand the relationship between islands. The exhibition 'A Tango with Kaito' and the sharing 'Conversation: Island Life and Ferry' resulted from this deep-research work (sub-theme: Island Microhistories).

Beside these 'feature projects', other projects of smaller scale were selected through an open call or invited by the organisers. Many involved research, although on a smaller scale due to the limited time and financial support, such as:

- 'Sound Translator - Cheung Chau' by So Wai-lam (Exhibition, Cheung Chau).
- 'Take a seat: Yau Fu' by Right Noise (Event, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau).
- 'Utopia Above the Water' by Lorraine Li & Flora Yiu (Exhibition & event, Cheung Chau).
- 'Stray in Chi Ma Wan' by Miko Yeung (Tour, Chi Ma Wan).
- 'Mui Wo Time Portal' by Kanu Fung, Deer Lok, Sonic Lee & Mary Jan (Exhibition, Mui Wo).
- 'My path to Peng Chau Cinema' by Jiming Lu (Exhibition & tour, Peng Chau).

Finally, the organisers also invited some collaborators to share their existing research as they touch closely to the island lives, such as 'Together in Time: Cheung Chau Theatre Collective Archive' by Jason Gu (Workshop & screening, Cheung Chau) and 'The Seaward Journey—Tracing Family Roots & Stories' by Miriam Lee (Sharing, Inter-island).

The festival's community-oriented approach informed its inside-out communication strategy, which is relatively new in the arts and cultural world. This strategy aimed at anchoring the festival within the daily lives of island residents and finding inspiration from ordinary landscapes. The festival hired a PR agency that engaged early-on in extensive research about the islands to develop an adapted communication strategy. As the first target audience were island residents, the organisers opted for a visual identity that was predominantly photographic, based on real-life characters and situations and searched out and asked local actors to be the subject of the posters, such as young fisherman Ah-Po and

his father in Cheung Chau; Jean the cattle-caretaker and some buffaloes in Chi Ma Wan; in Mui Wo, local shop-owners Travis and Gala; in Peng Chau, farmer Shinagawa-san and kids Lou and Ayumi. Later, this approach was extended to invite residents and shop owners to visit a roving photo booth set up in Cheung Chau, Mui Wo, and Peng Chau one month before the festival. The mobile photo booth, consisting of a simple local tricycle covered with specially made festival was very popular and the photos taken were, with locals' permission, banners, was very popular and the photos taken were, with locals' permission, used for promotion and included in an exhibition during the Festival.



Figure 3a – Photo shoot for the Festival in Cheung Chau (on Ah-Po's boat with his father and crew).

Figure 3b – Festival poster.

Unlike the first Inter-Island Festival, the 2023 Festival gathered a much wider range of island residents, not limiting itself to younger or newly-moved people, but also 'locals'—people who have lived on the islands for several generations. This success can be attributed to two main reasons: first, the organisers contacted the local community representatives early enough; second, the Festival highlighted projects that aimed at carrying research about the local culture and/or connecting with the neighbours. The engagement of local community representatives disclosed different dynamics in the four island locations. In Peng Chau and Chi Ma Wan, meetings with the local rural committees helped secure substantial support for Festival venues and events. In Cheung Chau, given its larger population with diverging views, the organisers preferred not to see the festival aligned with the interests of any one group. Still, the outreach to local communities helped the recognition and promotion of the festival among locals, as conveyed in much informal feedback.



Figure 4 – photo booth in Mui Wo.



Figure 5 – Photo booth posters exhibition in Mui Yo.

Given the research-led programme, it was important to translate the projects' findings into entertaining and enjoyable experiences. In other words, it was important to find a soft way to promote the accumulated knowledge about the islands. The organisers decided to define sub-themes to categorise the activities, and subtly introduce concepts and ideas that are key to understanding the islands and their communities. The five categories were:

- **Anthropocene islands:** the islands are prime locations for thinking the Anthropocene. From man-made islands to plastic washed ashore on our beaches, the projects in this category offered specific case studies to let residents and visitors pause and think about how far we need our environment to change to fit our desires.
- **Nonhuman neighbours:** On the islands, many pockets of respite from development offer space for other species to exist peacefully. With pollinators, buffaloes, dogs, plants,

corals, the projects in this category explored how kinship with other species can uplift our lives and pave the way for new ways of being.

- **Coastal sensorialities:** Taking sounds and movement as their departure point, these projects reminded residents and visitors of the unique sensorial experiences of islands and how, in the absence of urban noise, we adopt quieter rhythms and shape pleasant living spaces.
- **Island microhistories:** Because islands are framed as 'margins' of development, residents' lives have long been anecdotes in history. With projects in this category, the festival let islanders talk about their families and places, disclosing a mosaic of island identities and cultures.
- **Floating lives:** These projects invited residents and visitors to pay attention to the communities of the inter-island area who, living on the sea or by its side, have developed rich ways of being adapted to the ebbs and flows of the water.

Interestingly, although the sub-themes were only displayed on the Festival website, post-Festival feedback (collected through online questionnaires) was rather positive about them. 'Island Microhistories' turned out to be the most popular, as respondents particularly appreciated having the opportunity to learn about the islands' history from the locals' perspectives.

In keeping with its anchoring in local communities, promotion of the festival prioritised local modes and media including word of mouth, local Facebook community groups, posters posted in the streets on the islands, trailer video diffused at local restaurants/shops and on the ferries, and banners and light boards displayed at the ferry piers.



Figure 5 – The Inter-Island Festival posters could be spread throughout Cheung Chau thanks to the support of local stores.

While tourists were not the Festival's main target group, the organisers still intended to change the prevailing perception of the islands as 'exotic' to experiencing them as 'living' places, especially since Hong Kong's outlying islands became popular tourist destinations among urban residents during the pandemic. The goal here was to foster outsiders' awareness of the uniqueness of the island life, create opportunities for them to hear islanders' own way of telling their stories, and to attest to the richness of the local cultural life. Feedback received and observations by participants indeed suggest that many visitors were drawn to the Festival by the opportunity to encounter a different way of life just a ferry ride away.

Eventually, the festival took place on the four weekends of November 2023 and was composed of seventy-five activities, including seven installations, eight exhibitions, fourteen tours, fifteen workshops, eight sharings, five performances and three music performances, five screenings, two open houses, and eight uncategorised events. Forty activities were invited and thirty-five were selected from the Open Call. The activities were organised by eighty-eight collaborators, of whom fifty-five live in the inter-island region and one quarter had participated in the first Inter-Island Festival in 2021. Collaborators worked either in teams (forty activities) or individually (thirty-five activities). The included neighbours, artists, local spaces and organisations, performers, academics, musicians, architects, researchers, designers, filmmakers, poets, a photographer, a farmer, and a PR company. The activities were fairly evenly distributed around the inter-island territory, with twenty-three in Peng Chau, twenty-six in Mui Wo, twenty in Cheung Chau, four in Chi Ma Wan, and three on the inter-island ferry. In total, seven activities were carried on the ferry, on two locations or started in one place and ended in another, inviting participants on a ferry ride. Ferries are the normal transport system for young participants raised on the islands. The 'blue-boat' (inter-island ferry) is however different as it brought them to the sceneries of other islands, familiar yet very different. Participants were initiated into the poetics of the space with poetry reading on the ferry.



Figure 6a – Inter-Island / 'Treasure Hunt' / Dr Eduardo F. Freyre, May Ling Chan, Winnie the Farm



Figure 6b – Inter-Island / Poems on the ferry / Yam Gong & Chow Yik-lam

The festival gained media attention that recognised its significance and drew attention to the characteristics of island life. For example, *The South China Morning Post* ran an article on the festival on 9 November 2023 and an episode of the YouTube channel *Mill Milk* followed a couple of activities to show the daily interactions of islanders with their environment.¹ The video had 86,000 views as of February 2024.

Impact and lessons

Intended to make visible often overlooked parts of Hong Kong's identity that are deeply rooted in its geographic (coastal) location and history, the Inter-Island Festival also disclosed a web of creativity invested in this aspect of local culture, attracting responses from a wide

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WftwodMPI7g&t=121s>

spectrum of creative industries, including artists, performers, musicians, architects, designers, filmmakers, poets, and photographers. As a platform, the Inter-Island Festival encouraged island residents and participants to explore the art and culture communities and offered a singular opportunity to celebrate the identity and culture of the four island locations together, showcasing connections between vernacular and academic forms of art and culture.

Interestingly, one of the successes of this second edition of the festival was its capacity to tap into apparently forgotten local resources. By using abandoned spaces, ruins, or proposing to think about the place of ruins in cities, a few projects offered island residents an opportunity to reconsider abandoned spaces and island history. For example, 'Together in Time: Cheung Chau Theatre Collective Archive' introduced the importance of a participatory approach when it comes to renovating old buildings. With a short film and models of the abandoned Cheung Chau theatre, Jason Gu Jiacheng showed that buildings are more than bleached blocks of rocks. They carry a history of their own, made by the people who were involved in their making and operation, and kept alive in the feelings and attachments that residents maintain with them over time. It therefore becomes understandable that when private corporations revamp buildings that formerly hosted public life in a completely secretive manner, it only creates discontent and frustration amongst local people, who feel they are only passive witnesses of their islands' transformation. The case of the Cheung Chau Cinema highlights this complex issue: while the building itself has been left abandoned, it has been surrounded by construction fences that make it inaccessible (for safety reasons). Meanwhile, a brand-new set of buildings has been erected next door and developed as an entertainment complex, also called 'Cheung Chau Cinema', trying to transform the original cinema identity into a profitable brand. To locals, this marketing approach seems inappropriate as it attempts to appropriate an historic landmark for commercial purposes, without giving back anything to the community. With his work 'Together in Time,' Jason Gu Jiacheng gave locals a voice, and a space for their ideas to emerge. What do you think the cinema should become, he asked participants, and they replied: a museum, a creative space, a cultural space, a cinema again, a community kitchen.



Figures 7a & 7b – Cheung Chau / Together in Time (Cheung Chau Theatre Collective Archive/ Jason Gu Jiacheng.

Other works touching on ruins also showed their value, like the very popular tour 'Urbex on Cheung Chau' led by Johnny Li and Eric Liu. The fascination exerted by ruins and their mysteries in a city of constant 'development' and 'urban renewal' makes people think deeper about the value of abandoned buildings, which are more abundant in the islands: vacant,

they become ghostly carriers of history, a past that in the islands is sometimes heroic, sometimes sad, and now becomes part of the natural environment that is easily overlooked, like the wildlife that makes its home in it.

Similarly, on Peng Chau, the temporary re-opening of the Peng Chau Cinema, closed since the 1980s, was a significant event for locals. It opened a portal to the past of the island, a space for memories to re-emerge and be enacted before one's steps as the public entered the building that had barely received any renovation. This experience also revealed to the organisers that venues are more than 'logistical matters,' they have a huge influence in local the reception and anchoring of the event, and as such, must be seen from a proper 'curatorial' angle.

The Festival also demonstrated that the urban-rural relationship—in this case, urban-island—is not binary but complementary. Island life in Hong Kong can also be recognised as a form of urban living—especially when we talk of islands such as Cheung Chau or Peng Chau with a respective population of 22,000 and 6,000 in very small territories. These 'urban' typologies differ from the traditional approach as they acknowledge the importance of cultural inheritance, natural conservation, sustainability and comfortable environment. Part of the Festival's mission was to show that other parts of Hong Kong can learn from the outer islands, and some activities emphasised the island life as a vantage point to reflect upon the taken-for-granted development of the city. These reflections were especially evident in two projects:

- 'AI (Artificial Islands)' and the accompanying workshop 'Navigating Utopia' by Preston Hartwick and Brian Wong (Liber Research Community), a project using government blueprints of the Kau Yi Chau Reclamation Project and AI image generator to create delusional images of artificial islands.
- 'A Tango with Kaito—a love triangle between kaito, island and humans' by Island Studies Network, a history of the shrinking network of ferries connecting the outer islands, illuminating how this very network affects the topology of the outer islands.

Another major impact of the Festival was its contribution to building and strengthening relationships amongst islanders. Activities organisers, volunteers, participants, and island residents all emphasised they appreciated the possibility to meet new neighbours and learn more about their lives. Most notably, conversations sprouted around the modalities of attachment to the territories and involvement within the communities—from simple neighbours' relationships to deeper and less visible networks of mutual aid. In fact, despite the large geographical scale of the event, each activity had a limited number of participants that created a hospitable, intimate atmosphere to foster new bonds or strengthen old ones. For many collaborators who live on the islands, it was a first opportunity to contribute and enrich the culture of the islands with their (creative) skills, knowledge, and experiences. Noticeably, Joanne Chan (architect, Mui Wo), Fok Chun-wing (landscape architect, Peng Chau), Preston Hartwick (photographer, Cheung Chau), Otto Heim (academic, Mui Wo), Peter Millward (musician, Tong Fuk, Lantau), Lantau Shanto Studio (artist, Mui Wo), YIWOOO (bamboo crafts studio, Peng Chau) contributed to very innovative and important research. Many of these collaborators were not only involved in their own activities but also joined and attended other collaborators' activities, showing a strong attachment to the place and a willingness to learn more about and engage with other residents of the islands.

The relational nature of island life is in fact unique and central for many island residents. Smaller territories, bordered by natural limits, can only accommodate a limited number of people who, day after day, cross paths, meet, recognise each other, open discussions, weave new threads with others. Parallel routines (in part dictated by ferry timetables) and converging hobbies allow residents to meet others and open to other ways of being, of thinking. People unconsciously diverge from a comforting self-centredness to a curious identification with neighbours. Links thicken and draw on our horizons an invisible but tangible fabric that covers our territories and extend over the seas to other islands. But we also pay more attention to what happens outside of us: we listen to birds and learn to identify (and sometimes mimic) them, observe clouds and forecast rain, feel the vibrations of the ferry approaching and rush to the pier, smell Spring's arrival. Our senses open, and with them new relationships to others burgeon.

For many participants, whether collaborators, organisers or visitors, the Festival was an event that allowed them to experience the islands as living communities. They talked with neighbours with different views and backgrounds and found common interests. Furthermore, they encountered bees, buffaloes and chitons that normally seem so far away and realised that they, too, are our neighbours. Accepting to be part of this living world is accepting to be in relationship with others and taking care of these relationships. Through its far-flung, grassroots, and imaginative purview, the festival enacted what philosopher Baptiste Morizot calls a 'politics of interdependence' (*Ways of Being Alive*, 2019) by opening our sensibility to our environment and reconnecting us to the many threads that anchor us within our surrounding ecosystems. As such, the 2nd Inter-Island Festival also contributed to a burgeoning island awareness in Hong Kong, building on recent events such as the exhibition 'Lamma Mia' on Lamma Island in 2021/22, the WMA exhibition 'Island(ed)' in 2022, the exhibitions 'Here and There: Re-imagining Hong Kong Landscapes' and 'Phantom Island' (2022), and the launch of the Island Studies Network (HK) in 2023. These and other community-oriented initiatives and cultural projects inspired by Hong Kong's island ecology contribute to renewing popular imagination of Hong Kong identity and offer important examples of the distinct perspective that Hong Kong can bring to the emerging spatial imaginary of the Greater Bay Area.

REFERENCE:

Morizot, B. (2022). *Ways of being alive*. Polity Press, 2022.