

Art & Culture

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The road less travelled
A 'night walker' checks the tram tracks for maintenance



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Ring-a-ding-ding

With the potential removal of trams looming overhead, Mia Ching meets the curator and photographers who explore its secrets in **Following Trams (04:06-01:07) and Two Depots**

Despite the recent proposal by retired town planner Sit Kwok-keung to take Hong Kong's trams off the busiest roads in Central, the 110-year-old vehicle remains a low-risk item among the city's numerous threatened icons. Not only was the proposal immediately met with fierce opposition online, the tram system has always enjoyed loyal support in many forms – from a dedicated museum (Hong Kong Tram Station) on the Peak, to a solid Facebook group ([fb.com/hktramfriends](https://www.facebook.com/hktramfriends)) with over 17,000 members. That's why when someone suggested curator and photographer Irene Flanhardt to curate a show about trams, she wasn't particularly tempted – the subject seemed too common to be of real interest.

Yet, it wasn't long before Flanhardt found herself setting up meetings with Hong Kong

Tramways and forming a group of 10 photographers with which to co-create an exhibition. Her quest began with a simple question: what have we overlooked in the vehicle we all claim to know so well? The subsequent five month journey did not disappoint either her or the photographers. To begin with, they were granted access to the tram depots on Whitty Street (for tram maintenance) and Sai Wan Ho (for tram parking), revealing some of the obscured sights usually tucked away from the public's view.

"We all love trams, but frankly, we didn't know a lot about them. Have you ever wondered how they install and remove advertisements on the tram bodies? Or how trams are maintained outside their service hours? Those were some of our discoveries! We were also shown the tram-chart, with all the existing tram numbers. Some numbers simply do

not exist due to their carrying bad luck or other reasons. Curiously, these numbers are not assigned to a regular route. Hence, it is virtually impossible to track a particular tram," reveals Flanhardt. *Time Out's*



Some numbers simply do not exist due to them carrying bad luck

photographer, Calvin Sit, who has always been intrigued by the tracks carved along Hong Kong Island, couldn't resist squeezing himself under a tram he saw in the depot for one of his shots. "The staff were concerned about my safety, but I went there twice more," he chuckles.

Sit also thought the experience was like 'travelling in a time machine', as eager staff shared the history, design and operational procedures of the century-old vehicle.

The photographers' newly found curiosity in trams provided the framework for the exhibition – the group were to document the trams at a one-hour-interval, from when the first tram departs, until the last tram pulls in. Photographers were each assigned one or several of the six tram routes to suit their differing schedules. The images were then titled with the time at which they were taken. With one key image from every hour, the final exhibition shows the gradation of colours and the range of activities along the iconic tracks.

Michelle Chan, responsible for shooting the last tram from Happy Valley arriving at Kennedy Town, witnessed a maintenance tram (called a 'night walker' by the staff) trying to tail a broken tram bogie to the depot. It turned out to be no easy task. "It was 1am and the last tram was approaching Kennedy Town, but everyone was still working. I kept on clicking. It was a moment that couldn't be missed," recalls Chan with excitement.

Wesley Chan, who was assigned to shoot the first tram of the day departing Kennedy Town, had a less eventful but more meditative experience. "In order to get the image right, I visited the stop several times. Each time I arrived at the stop a lot earlier than 5am to allow enough time to prepare and study prior to the actual shooting.

"On my first shooting, Kennedy Town felt extremely lonely. The streets were almost empty with no traffic and only a handful of people. When the first tram arrived, the passengers boarded and I started to shoot. I projected the image with a feeling of loneliness – nothing else but the tram and the street light. I like that photo.

"I went back another day and I perceived a very different atmosphere. This time, I stood by the tram stop waiting to meet the passengers to show up for the first tram. I began chit-chatting with them. Suddenly, I realized the moment was full of people and energy – something I missed during my last attempt."

In between the first and the last tram, shooting becomes tricky as options increase. Tracey van Geest chose to approach the stationary trams at the Whitty Street depot and came across two workers, whom she greeted good morning in her best Cantonese. In return, she was given the biggest smiles, which were captured in one of her favourite images.

Working at full steam, the group completed shooting ahead of schedule – something rather uncommon in the art world. Serendipitously, the trams landed on the front page (in mid-August) thanks to Sit Kwok-keung's suggestion to remove them from stretches of Admiralty and Central. Curator Flanhardt saw this as the perfect opportunity to present the exhibition. "Our intention is not political – we are not fighting for any existing parties. But I think our stance is clear in the images we present – we love the tram as Hong Kong citizens. Our exhibition serves as a platform for sharing a new depth of knowledge about the vehicle we all love."

Courtesy of the photographers' efforts, the trams have been preserved in image for time immemorial. Before we busy ourselves again by hopping on the trams to get to work or home or a bar, it's perhaps time to slow down and look at them properly – the same way the city comes into greater focus when viewed through the windows of the ding-ding. If we fail to do that, we risk losing sight of the biggest gift that the trams continue to give us – the luxury to interact with the city in which we live.

Following Trams (04:06-01:07) and Two Depots Flanhardt
Galerie und Atelier, until Dec 6;
fgua.com.hk.



Getting back on track
Maintenance workers push a broken tram bogie



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