

**Everything is Relevant**

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## **TEXT/CONTEXT**

### **Writings by Canadian Artists**

Text/Context: Writings by Canadian Artists was established in 2019. Privileged as compelling primary sources that illuminate artistic practice, artists' writings also strongly resist categorization and traditional narrative forms. This series publishes collections of essays, statements, articles, lectures, and other written interventions by Canadian artists, collating published and unpublished texts that are otherwise scattered, hard to find, or not easily accessible to readers. In bringing together artists' written works, Text/Context explores the interrelations of what and how artists write, as well as where they publish, to the rest of their practice. Books in the series illuminate an artist's relationship not only to her/his/their own work, but to their peers and to broader social, economic, cultural, and political questions. Text/Context is edited by Geoffrey Robert Little.

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# Everything is Relevant

Writings on Art and Life  
1991–2018

Ken Lum

Concordia University Press  
Montreal

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For Paloma, Linus, and Linnea  
Of Linus, Linnea, and Paloma  
To Linnea, Paloma, and Linus





Ken Lum, *Photo-Mirrors*, 1997



Kelly Wood, *Garbage Bag*, 1997. Installation view, 6: *New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, 1998



Théodore Géricault, *Study of a Model*, 1818–19



Théodore Géricault, first sketch for *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819



Still from *Death in Venice*, directed by Luchino Visconti and starring Dirk Bogarde, 1971



General Idea, *FILE Magazine* (featuring the 1968–1984 *FILE* Retrospective), vol. 6, nos. 1–2 (1984)



André Malraux, *Imaginary Museum*, 1947



Sharjah exhibition spaces, designed by Mona El Mousfy and Sharmeen Syed, 2005



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Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, at Witte de With, Rotterdam, 1990–present



Confederation Caravan, 1967



The St. Louis riverfront after land clearance for Gateway Arch National Park, 1942



Pazyryk Carpet, preserved inside a glacier for 2,500 years, fifth century BCE



Karyn Olivier, *The Battle Is Joined*, Philadelphia, 2017



376 Punjabis, mostly Sikhs, aboard the *Komagata Maru* in Vancouver harbour, refused entry to Canada, 1914



Construction of the *Goddess of Democracy* in Tiananmen Square, 1989



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# Acknowledgements

Ken Lum

The writings in this book developed out of my belief that the importance of art lies in its relationship to the world as we live it. One of my interests as an artist and teacher is how institutions today frame art in ways that ignore or subjugate the question of difference. This question is one that has propelled me as an artist since I first began making art in the late 1970s. I have also been interested in the ways that art is defined and circulated in different places in the world.

These interests are why I have committed so much of my time to working on projects abroad that expand on what constitutes artists and their production. This has meant following a career that encompasses not only art making but also art teaching, art writing, art publishing, and art curating. The collection of texts contained within this book represent the many ways I have tried to expand my knowledge of art and its intersection with social, political, and economic realities specific to the histories of a given place. I have found the task of gaining such knowledge essential to my own approach to understanding art.

I first want to thank my late and beloved mother, Jane Lum, who instilled in me the best of whom I could be. I also want to thank Okwui Enwezor, Chen Zhen, Hubert Damisch, Pearl Gould, Grita Insam, Robert Linsley, and Philip Nelson. These dear friends are no longer alive but they opened my eyes to looking at the world around me in new and important ways. They believed in me and I am forever grateful to them for this. I also want to thank Paul Farber of *Monument Lab*, with whom I have had countless thoughtful exchanges.

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# Preface

Ken Lum

I have wanted to be an artist for as long as I can recall, even though the world of art museums was something I would discover only in adulthood. As a child, I enjoyed drawing and creating make-believe scenes. My model was the comic book—especially of the superhero variety—and, to this day, my drawings are inspired by this style. I was often unwell as a child and drawing was a source of comfort while being cared for by my grandparents at home. Sometimes my grandfather would return from nearby Chinatown with sheets of blank newsprint, used to wrap meats, for me to draw on. Occasionally I would get into trouble for drawing rather than doing Chinese homework. My mother had been a schoolteacher in China and wanted my brother and me to know Chinese; throughout her life she never knew more than a few English words. I felt a lot of expectations as a young child. There were also a lot of disruptions. We were evicted twice and had to move suddenly but we always stayed within the same small area of Strathcona in Vancouver, a heavily multi-ethnic and working-class neighbourhood just east of Chinatown. Making the rent was always a big worry. My family relied on me to translate instructions on packaging in spite of the fact that I could barely read, having entered directly into the first grade with nary a word of English. I did not do well in school initially and nearly failed grade one. If not for a kindly teacher who argued on my behalf with my homeroom teacher, I would not have been allowed to continue on to grade two. I did not fully understand what was going on, but I remember being quite scared about my family's reaction to me being failed.

When I turned eight, my family moved to a house further east. The move felt like a new beginning. One of our neighbours was Pearl Gould. She was a cousin of the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. She was a retired schoolteacher and her husband, Jack, was a retired longshoreman. My mother worked in a factory until very late most days so Pearl offered to

take in my brother and me after we walked home from school. She would feed us Lipton soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. I still recall being in awe after my first taste of cream of mushroom soup. In addition to feeding us, Pearl would teach us a variety of subjects, including English, history, and mathematics. Under her tutelage, I felt as though I was learning the ropes of the dominant world. After nearly a year of Pearl's after-school lessons, my final two quarters of grades went from Cs to As. I remember how eager I was to run from school to Pearl's home to show her my grades. My brother's grades improved markedly as well. She gave us both long hugs.

In high school, I was asked to design the yearbook covers and banners for events such as "Gladiator Days." I took art class from grades eight to nine but stopped when the art teacher admonished me for making what he called "weird" images. He strongly urged me to follow the example of another student who was creating inexpressive and tame images. I found his advice confusing because he was the first art teacher to introduce me to the world of contemporary art—namely pop art—and I was grateful to him for that. I remember being excited by the giant objects of Claes Oldenburg and the enlarged comic-book-style paintings of Roy Lichtenstein. Yet my teacher had very strong ideas about what art was and would criticize me harshly for not following his instructions to the letter. One of his assignments was to make a watercolour painting in the style of Lichtenstein. He taught us how to enlarge a comic book cell by pencilling in a grid on a larger sheet of paper. While others in the class started their Lichtenstein-inspired painting from actual comic books, I chose instead to work from a traumatic photograph in the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper and convert it into the comic-book style. The photograph showed a car-bombing victim in shredded clothing standing next to what remained of a car. My teacher thought this was a completely inappropriate image for artistic treatment. He told me not to take grade ten art, which was, at the time, an elective course that required his approval. As much as I wanted to continue taking art, I had no choice but to accede to the art teacher's opinion. I was sorely disappointed. In hindsight, I can see how my disallowance was based on the art teacher's sense that I had to be put in my place, punishment for my implicit belief—something that I could sense even as a student—that the power of art lies in its disruptive potential.

A school counsellor had me take an aptitude test to determine which elective to take and then suggested, based on the test results, that I take woodworking. I felt lost and a little frightened that an expert in career counselling would recommend woodworking as a viable future path for me. I had already sampled woodworking in grade eight and was terrible

at it. True to form, my year in the carpentry shop proved disastrous. The woodshop instructor kindly helped me finish every project. He advised me to take an extra science course since I did reasonably well in biology and chemistry. I decided to do just that and completed high school without any illusions of art—as I inchoately defined it then—being part of my life.

Next came university and a course load comprising mainly of classes in mathematics and sciences. By my second year, a day did not go by in which I did not don a white lab coat and attach a Texas Instruments calculator to the belt of my pants. I did decently enough in all my courses, but I had to really work at it. I struggled in all of my science courses to do reasonably well, while my colleagues seemed to just breeze through chemistry equations.

In my third year, I felt increasingly depressed. I never sought help for my feelings, but I could not sleep and I would experience frequent breakdowns. It was not uncommon for me to while away my nights driving around the city or sitting in a twenty-four-hour Denny's restaurant until the sun came up. My grade point average plummeted and I barely passed several courses. One of my chemistry professors called me to his office after I flunked a fairly easy exam. He understood why I might have not done well on several problems on the test, but he noticed that I was failing even the early steps of algebra, which he knew I had already mastered. He told me that he could not in good conscience fail me because he believed I was better than the scores showed. I ended with one grade above pass.

That summer, after the completion of my third year of undergraduate study, I landed a job as a lab assistant in a research station of the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture. Once again, I spent my days in a white lab coat, with a calculator on my belt and a baseball cap emblazoned with the logo of an insecticide company. During this time, I also got a part-time job designing announcement posters for the Vancouver Public Library. And I worked, on occasion, under the guidance of a former neighbour who was a sign painter. I liked to keep busy, if only to avoid falling back into a funk. I especially enjoyed the assignments from the library to design posters for events such as children's puppet shows. I enjoyed, too, the moment when jobs came in to make large paper banners announcing things such as "The Monarch Furniture Semi-annual Sale."

I was happy to find what felt to be a good balance between my activities at the agricultural research station and my "artistic" work. I just did not think anything outside of a life in a laboratory was possible for me. The pay and benefits provided a sense of security. I knew my

weaknesses in science, but I also knew my one strength: I was able to think unconventionally. One biological control experiment devised by my lab superior went exceptionally well. As a result, my picture graced the cover of the British Columbia news section of the *Vancouver Sun*, the city's largest daily broadsheet. With the lab where I worked as backdrop, I held in my hands a pile of dead fly pupae, which I was asked by the *Sun* photographer to gaze downward at. At some point afterward, my boss, Dr. Costello, took me aside and said to me that if I continued to work hard and study toward a PhD, the lab he headed could be mine in about ten years.

Rather than feel reassured by Dr. Costello's message of encouragement, I felt an immediate sense of confusion and fear about what I really wanted to do. I was deeply afraid of the idea of spending my life working in a laboratory. I found life there isolating. I felt something missing in the rest of my life as well. I wanted to experience more of the world. It was clear to me that a drastic change of course was needed.

In my junior year, I enrolled in an evening art class offered by Simon Fraser University. I was curious about what such a class would entail. I suspected that I might enjoy it. The professors and students I met in art were completely different from what I was used to. Many of the students were older and possessed a lot of firsthand knowledge about many aspects of the world. There was a notable fluidity in terms of what was appropriate and inappropriate conversation in class. I felt an incredible excitement. But I also felt deeply anxious about disappointing my professors in science, especially the one who was counting on me to pursue graduate study under him.

By my final year as an undergraduate, I could not read enough about art. I could not read enough about everything else, too, because it seemed to me that artistic knowledge touched on many other bodies of knowledge. I would spend my evenings in the university library reading as many books about art as I could. I volunteered to write art reviews for the student newspaper. I soon discovered that the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) had a library with limited public hours, and I would plant myself at a table there as often as possible. At the time in the city, there were very few, if any, venues that showed the latest contemporary art. So it was through absorbing the latest *Artforum* and the like that I kept informed about developments in art, which I was still trying to make a map of in my head. The VAG library was also where I met the remarkable Marianna Schmidt. She was an artist who was well into her seventies (she passed away in 2005). Together we would pore over all the latest art magazines and catalogues that came into the library. We had amazing conversations. I discovered that she was a retired hospital lab technician

who had decided to pursue art later in life. She told me that she had always wanted to be an artist but circumstances did not allow for it until her retirement. I identified with her. She told me that I had no choice but to make the full leap into art. She noted that the art world was starting to be much more open to artists of colour like me. She told me her life story. She had lost her entire family to war and lived in European refugee camps for many years before finally being able to immigrate to Vancouver. She claimed that her imagination and love of making art sustained her in the most difficult times of her life. She told me that she saw a bit of herself in me. I cannot adequately convey how touched I was to hear this. I felt compelled to immerse myself more fully into art.

It was at this time that I started to write as a way of putting my thoughts into words. I kept multiple notebooks and pens on hand to make notes, which would often end up looking like Joseph Beuys blackboard drawings. Writing helped me to map out what I was learning. At that time, there was a prominent way of thinking in the art world about the indispensable function of text as a disruptor of aesthetic pleasure. Text was considered political and real while representational systems were deemed distorting and suspect. Text, it was assumed, challenged the foundations of representation, foundations that generate so much of the world's coherence. For politically engaged artists, the presence of text in a work of art signaled a refusal to submit to the pleasure principle of art. It was a way to move toward political agency. My image/text works owe something to this belief, as this was the climate in which I emerged as an artist. But I was never entirely comfortable with this view. I learned from my sign-painting days that text—especially in its graphic form—is imbued with its own aesthetic capacity. I am interested in the pictorial qualities of text as much as I am in the textuality of pictures. In my work, I use text not to negate images—even though I recognize that the presence of one component can destabilize the other—instead, I see text as having the power to complicate the aesthetic experience.

The practice of writing has provided me with a kind of reprieve from my tendency to turn inward. I have sought out projects that have brought me to West Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East, and then written about my experiences as a way to reinvigorate my love of art and the self. I hope the writings in this book offer the reader some sense of what I mean.

# Introduction

## Ken Lum Loves to Write: Twenty-Seven Years of Essays, Reviews, and Critical Texts

Kitty Scott



This book is a collection of Ken Lum's writings from 1991 to 2018, highlighting his singular voice and perspective. Lum emerged out of Vancouver and New York in the early 1980s and went on to participate in the rise of a globalized contemporary art world from the 1990s onward. As an artist, he bridges the space between post-minimalist sculpture and post-conceptual photography, addressing the tensions of everyday life in so-called postindustrial societies. With his public art, photography, painting, and sculpture, Lum articulates what Nigerian curator and critic Okwui Enwezor—in one of the best overviews of Lum's work—characterized as the “complex social questions of class, race, ethnicity, identity, indigeneity, migration and difference.”<sup>1</sup> Pieced together, his multifaceted career creates a picture of an artist whose approach is highly adaptable within the field of art: a youthful Lum works as a gallery director, and later as a professor, critic, journal editor, and curator. Lum, it seems, is not content with merely being a successful Canadian artist; instead, he wants to extend his practice beyond the confines of making art and occupy almost every available role in the contemporary art world. Lum's ability to write clearly and concisely is one of the enabling factors here; over time he publishes as an art historian, critic, curator, and diarist. Lum's voice is very much that of an intellectual artist informed by a generous curiosity and a finely honed intelligence, buoyed up by a good education and life experience.

During the 1980s and '90s, artists in Lum's circle, such as Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall, were actively writing about Vancouver artists as well as international figures. By publishing both nationally and internationally, they called attention to themselves and made their work as artists and writers known to a larger, much broader community. At the same time, writing and language were fundamental components of Lum's conceptual art. His early *Language Paintings* (1987) position fonts and graphics in a highly expressive but nonsensical way; the *Portrait-Repeated Text* series (1993) contains poem-like phrases that appear to be spoken by the individuals portrayed; the *Four French Deaths in Western Canada* series (2002) uses the form of the obituary to explain, with dry humour, the passing of four people; while his series of sign works, such as *Shopkeeper* (2001) and *Strip Mall* (2009), resembles commercial signage. In this context, it is odd to read Lum recounting his thoughts after an editor tells him that he is among a group of “artists who write.” He speculates in some depth on this statement in relation to his primary identity as an artist:

What exactly does this mean, “artists who write”? Are such artists considered less of an artist because they write; writing being something that falls outside of a normal artist's range and interest? Are artists who write something more? Artists either with the

1 Okwui Enwezor, “Social Mirrors: On the Dialectic of the Abstract and Figural in Ken Lum's Work,” in *Ken Lum*, ed. Grant Arnold (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011), 62.

2 Ken Lum, “The London Art Diaries,” this volume, 74–75.

3 During the first half of the twentieth century, Canada strictly regulated the flow of Chinese immigrants using a head tax. In 1903, the head tax was raised from \$100 to \$500 in order to deter Chinese people from entering Canada. Discriminatory and racist legislation and policies continued until 1947 and adversely affected many Chinese-Canadian families.

4 Ken Lum, quoted in Robin Laurence, “Ken Lum Straddles the Great Divide,” *Georgia Strait*, 2 February 2011.

supplement of intelligence (good), or of scholarship (good and/or bad), or of academicism (bad)? What does it mean to categorize artists into those who write and those who do not write? Are those who write usually the theorizers for truer artists who theorize though their work only? Is one more tempted to criticize an artist’s work because he or she writes, especially if the perception exists that this is a chasm between what the artist makes as art and what the artist writes?<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the pieces in this collection, we find Lum repeatedly seeking out the “marginal” and “peripheral” parts of the contemporary art world in which he matured. He has personal experience, as Canada is often overshadowed by its far bigger neighbour to the south. Artists living in Vancouver in the mid-to-late 1980s considered themselves even more invisible as they were neither working out of Toronto, perceived to be the nation’s financial and geographic centre, nor out of Montreal, an equally powerful cultural magnet. While many artists have emerged from Canada and gone on to careers of international renown, the country still has a relatively small footprint in the international art world. Lum, it could be argued, owes some of his success to his ability to shapeshift and take on new roles in places far beyond Canada’s borders. By constantly changing his vantage point, his writings open up new perspectives and bring his readers along on journeys of discovery of artists working beyond the art world’s so-called “centres,” in countries such as Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, and Senegal. In doing so, Lum has found himself at the crux of many important global events.

Lum’s beginnings are humble. His story is that of a first-generation Canadian of Chinese descent, born in 1956 in the working-class Strathcona neighbourhood of East Vancouver. His grandfather, Lum Nin, came to the city as a teen in 1908 from a village in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Like many Chinese immigrants, he found work as a labourer on the Canadian Pacific Railway, and it took him over forty years to bring his wife and children to Vancouver.<sup>3</sup> Lum’s family members held varied and precarious employment; at times, his grandparents picked fruit in Cloverdale and his mother worked in a sweatshop for a period. It was his mother who ensured that Lum learned some Cantonese—many of the Chinese who came to Vancouver at that time emigrated from Guangdong and spoke the language. The family was impoverished and experienced repeated evictions. As in many immigrant families, Lum’s mother very much wanted him to succeed, so much so that as a child, Lum told his mother, in front of her friends, “I am going to take you out of poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

Being a good and dutiful son, he initially studied science at Simon Fraser University. In 1978, he took a night class in studio art (taught by Jeff Wall), fulfilling a desire that had been present since childhood to study art. While initially somewhat shocked by contemporary art, he was eventually drawn in:

There is something about conceptual art that was really open to a person like me, a person of colour. It espouses a democratic ideal with an emphasis on ideas. To me at the time, conceptual art was sort of like punk music. Anyone could become a punk musician. Conceptual art is open to any interested participant. The art world began to attract all sorts of constituencies, different races, and sexual orientations. SFU facilitated that. I was my own trope, a working-class Asian.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1980s, Lum moved to New York to pursue a graduate degree. He immersed himself in the city's art scene and studied nineteenth-century art at New York University with the American art historian Robert Rosenblum. He had to leave the program when his mother developed leukemia. Lum returned to Vancouver in 1982 and began working as director of the Or Gallery, an artist-run centre, the following year. In 1983, he enrolled in the MFA program at the University of British Columbia. Simultaneously, his art career took off. In the spring of 1982 he exhibited at White Columns in New York, and later that year he had a solo exhibition of his furniture-based sculpture at Artists Space. In 1985, Lum was included in an exhibition curated by artist and teacher Ian Wallace at 49th Parallel, a New York gallery created by the Canadian government to promote the nation's artists, where he exhibited his work alongside that of Rodney Graham and his former professor Jeff Wall. This solidified his identification with post-conceptual photography and a generation of Vancouver artists who went on to successful and diverse careers. For Lum, the 1980s marked his entry into the emerging mainstream of critical contemporary practice.

In a conversation published in *Flash Art* in the early 1980s, a young Ken Lum talks with Thomas Lawson, a Scottish artist and writer living in America associated with the Pictures Generation. Lum comes across as an articulate and spirited art world insider, well versed in the critical language of the moment and highly knowledgeable about the contemporary scene.<sup>6</sup> He argues against the Pictures Generation artists and their use of appropriation, calling instead for an art of critique that brings forward a position on class. Where Lawson is interested in pleasure and references the seductive effect of the "juicy canvases" of 1980s

5 Lum, quoted in Beverly Cramp, "The Making of a Conceptual Artist," *AQ Magazine*, September 2011.

6 Thomas Lawson and Ken Lum, *Flash Art*, June 1984, 54–55.

neo-expressionism, Lum is focused on history and an expanded notion of realism that includes not only the tradition of Goya and Daumier, but also, counterintuitively, American artists Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg. Lawson turns his attention to Lum's concern with social relations and the work of Rauschenberg and Donald Judd, as seen in his early furniture sculptures (a picture of one of them, *Partially Buried Sofa*, 1984, accompanies the dialogue). Lum expounds on the importance of the traditions of minimalism and conceptualism with respect to his thinking, but posits that, in contrast, his work is political in that he wants to bring to the fore the implicit subject matter of these styles by publicly scrutinizing the notion of the private. He calls out artists Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, and Lawrence Weiner, and asks that they return to their "jobs as practitioners of social meaning," while lauding artist Dan Graham for his examination of architecture, television, design, rock music, and youth cultures within his art practice. And yet, even as he displayed this fluency in the languages of critical postmodernism, Lum was confronting the aporias—particularly those around class and race—of these discourses. There is a story, which he has recounted a number of times, of the moment in 1986 when his grandmother, who spoke no English, found her way to his exhibition opening at Nature Morte in the East Village. Lum was mortified and felt exposed: his private self—his family, class, and race—was visible for all to see. However, his embarrassment was tempered by his profound empathy with her: "My grandmother had lived through so many difficulties. She had witnessed the murder of her younger sister at the hands of Japanese soldiers. She had left her homeland and lived in a tiny, cockroach-infested, one-bedroom apartment with several family members in the Lower East Side."<sup>7</sup> That empathy with the experiences of those whose stories have often been excluded from dominant cultural narratives has formed a leitmotif not only in Lum's artwork, but in his writings as well.

The first piece of writing in this collection, "Carnegie Library Project," takes the form of a letter and a numbered list with the heading "Partial List of Submitted Books." Both are components of an artwork Lum made for the Carnegie International in 1991. His inclusion in this exhibition was an early marker of international success, and indeed, the second half of the 1980s were very active for Lum, as he moved from his furniture sculptures to significant text-based series such as the *Language Paintings* (1987) and the *Portrait-Logo* series (1989), which explored issues of identity and belonging in a multicultural society. By the end of the decade, he was also teaching in the department of art history, visual art, and theory at the University of British Columbia. "Carnegie Library Project" is an invitation to participate in the creation of Lum's work

for the Carnegie International; in it, he asks the head librarian of the National Library of Swaziland to send him a book of poetry from his collection that he will then disseminate in one of the eighteen branches of Pittsburgh's library system. Lum also contacted individuals and libraries in a number of cities around the world, with responses coming in from Auckland, New Zealand; Brasília, Brazil; Fort-de-France, Martinique; Helsinki, Finland; Osaka, Japan; and Rabat, Morocco, to name just a few. With this "global library" project, Lum intended to build on Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy and facilitate "the subversion of illiteracy, bolster the rights of all to freedom of information movement," and foster the "increased wealth of the (world) community."<sup>8</sup> The accompanying list itemizes the submitted books and various details associated with them. Lum made a series of related "Poem Paintings," whose texts he sourced from the submitted books. This project betrayed the global aspirations of his approach as well as his deep-seated interest in language, which was already evident in his work from the later 1980s.

The next decade was a prolific one for Lum. He produced significant bodies of work, including the *Portrait-Repeated Text Series* (1994), the *Photo-Mirrors* (1997), and his *Shopkeeper Series* (2001). At the same time, he was invited to participate in a number of significant exhibitions like the Biennale of Sydney (1995) and the Bienal de São Paulo (1997). Between 1995 and 1997, Lum was a visiting professor at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he would be exposed to a notably international cohort of colleagues. He became close to important, internationally active curators like the Chinese-born Hou Hanru and the Swiss Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and to many expatriate Chinese artists resident in the city.

In these years, Lum's writing often takes the form of travel diaries, as seen in "Seven Moments in the Life of a Chinese Canadian Artist" (1997). This text was commissioned for the catalogue accompanying the travelling exhibition *Cities on the Move*, one of the most important large-scale exhibitions of the late 1990s. Curated by Hou and Obrist, the show explored contemporary East Asian art and the notion of Asian hyper-modernity. Lum's text is a series of short, numbered vignettes delivered with clarity and, largely, in the first person. Each one begins with a geographic location and gives the reader insight into what it means to be a visible minority within the contemporary art world. In France, a fellow artist, who knows his work and is meeting him for the first time, smiles and says he did not know Lum was Asian. In Oxford, he talks with a critic who assumes that only artists of colour deal with identity issues. In Paris, he reads a review in the *Herald Tribune* that focuses on an installation by Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz composed of a series

8 Ken Lum, "Carnegie Library Project," this volume, 3.

9 Ken Lum, *Seven Moments in the Life of a Chinese Canadian Artist*, this volume, 19.

of laughing Chinese men; Lum thinks the accompanying photograph offensive and is equally appalled by the critic's admiration of the work's "inscrutability." While visiting a northern Canadian community with an Indigenous artist friend, he reports on racial tensions between whites and First Nations, and the fact that the two groups eat at different cafes, both staffed by Chinese people. While teaching at an art school in Martinique, a Caribbean island inhabited by a very diverse population, Lum often eats local chicken or fish dishes with rice; over time, he learns that men from South China and the Indian subcontinent were brought to Martinique as labourers and introduced their culinary traditions. In the final scene, Lum is in Montreal in the company of several Chinese artists who are talking in Cantonese; he is embarrassed to join in, given his poor language skills. Still, he understands the conversation. Someone says it is great to have so many Chinese artists at the table, while another remarks, "well, Ken Lum cannot even read Chinese."<sup>9</sup> One imagines that these experiences were revelatory. Lum shares them so that his readers might also witness the racism he experienced, but also to understand the complexity embedded in language acquisition, immigration, and the movement of large populations. If Lum was no doubt angry and humiliated at times, he must have been equally humoured, especially by the irony in the final situation he described. These scenarios find their echo in his *Portrait-Repeated Text Series*, begun in 1994—such as *Hello. How are you?*—which addresses the same themes of identity and difference developed here, as well as focusing on subjects of immigration and inequality.

The new discursive spaces opened up by the Internet soon provided Lum with a platform to continue exploring these issues, and from 1999 to 2000 he wrote a year-long artist travelogue for the online publication *LondonArt* titled "The London Art Diaries." In them, he shares a broad range of information in a very informal manner as he travels to and from Vancouver. Always a fantastic observer of contemporary life, the artist's reflections are filtered through the double lens of race and class. Lum returns to these troubling and traumatic subjects over and over again as he repeatedly experiences difficult social situations. In Paris, Lum struggles to come to terms with his current experiences, which fall consistently short of his expectations. His belief that Paris represents the apex of culture, with an ideal city government and wonderful citizens, is constantly being challenged, and he ends up disappointed and unable to find much sustenance in the French art world. He wants to love daily life there, yet recalls his uncomfortable interactions with the French, who have difficulty seeing beyond their own presuppositions. He comes to

his own conclusions: “I am not saying these people I meet intended to insult me. It is just that the idea of hybridized identities is still a strange concept here for many people.”<sup>10</sup>

Always fascinated by the changing patterns of immigration, Lum describes how recent wealthy and educated Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong are changing the face of Canada, particularly in cities like Toronto and Vancouver. He cites the example of art patron Annie Wong and her Annie Wong Art Foundation, and her Vancouver gallery, Art Beatus. Lum is impressed by her philanthropy, “dedicated to the furtherance of contemporary Chinese art throughout the world,”<sup>11</sup> and cites her support for major Chinese artists Xu Bing and Chen Zhen, who had left China and settled in New York and Paris, respectively. As he was writing this text, there was a tidal wave of international interest in Chinese art. In a groundbreaking gesture, the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann included a large number of Chinese artists in his 1999 Venice Biennale presentation; names such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Zhang Huan, Huang Yong Ping, and Chen Zhen dominated the reviews. Simultaneously, many of these figures were travelling through Vancouver. While major Vancouver-based artists such as Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace were turning away from Canada, looking instead toward cultural institutions in the United States, Britain, and Europe for future success, internationally renowned Chinese artists were changing this orientation. Their journeys from Berlin, New York, Paris, and various cities in China to Vancouver marked the Canadian city as a new stop on the network of a globalized, international art world. In this novel and shifting context, Lum grapples with the complex formation of identity and, more specifically, with what it means to be a Chinese artist working in the global art world. He asks, “what exactly is Chinese about Chinese art, especially in the contemporary context?” and “among Chinese artists, who is more and who is less Chinese?”<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his writing in the late 1990s, Lum is often troubled by the trope of referring to artists who travel and work around the globe as “nomads.” In the “Diaries,” he states, “travelling has become a matter of course to the contemporary artist in much the same way as a medieval minstrel travelled, in vagabond fashion, and always with the purpose to foment the imagination, economic and otherwise, of the various locals.”<sup>13</sup> In a highly critical mode, Lum asks what the artists are learning as they move about in the newly globalized art world. This question becomes the ultimate subject for much of his diaristic writing. In this context, he muses on the power of the Internet in relation to international communications and the corporate implications of the global.

10 Ken Lum, “The London Art Diaries,” this volume, 61–62.

11 *Ibid.*, 67.

12 *Ibid.*, 67.

13 *Ibid.*, 84.

14 Ibid., 86.

15 Ken Lum, "Encountering Chen Zhen," this volume, 166.

He reminds his readers that artists have a critical role to play at this time and that it is important to stay attuned to the inequalities to which this new system gives rise.<sup>14</sup>

In another diary post from the spring of 2000, he writes of his fear of going to teach at the China National Art Academy in Hangzhou, even as he affirms the importance of travelling and having an expanded perspective. Lum returns to the subject of the Chinese diaspora again during a visit to Tokyo. He claims that it is rare to see advanced contemporary art being made by Japanese artists, but he enjoys the technological futurism he experiences there and compares Japan to São Paulo in the 1950s, an era with a comparable boom. Tokyo's French cafes are another topic—he notes their abundance and gives an account of visiting one with artist Huang Yong Ping. Even though they are both ethnically Chinese, Lum tells us they speak in French as it is the only language they share in common. While Lum's posts were popular, *LondonArt* began to change. As the publication became more involved in selling art online, writers' columns were moved further back on the site. These changes eventually led Lum to resign.

The personal, even autobiographical tone developed in these online postings has had a deep impact on Lum's writing, even within more traditional formats such as the exhibition catalogue. His critical essay on Chen Zhen's work, "Encountering Chen Zhen," written for a posthumous 2007 retrospective at the Kunsthalle Wien, is conceived from the position of a fellow Chinese artist deeply committed to a global perspective that is developed and defined in relationship to others. Lum explains that he met Chen while teaching in Paris and experiencing a period of deep disillusionment with the art world. Early in the essay, Lum discusses how the art world was reorienting itself toward places previously considered "marginal," such as Africa, Central America, and East Asia, during the process of globalization. As he walks to Chen's apartment in Paris's Chinatown, he sees other Chinese Parisians and intuits this meeting will be self-revelatory. Lum writes fluently about Chen's work, describing its themes of homelessness, dislocation and mobility, and eternal time, as well as states of liminality and strategies of supplementation. But he refuses to see Chen's art as being dictated by his identity as a Chinese artist, stating: "Artists today are increasingly called upon to represent particular ethnic communities of which they may be a part. One of the potential problems with this is the reification of essentialized ethnic identities that contradict the increasing levels of transnational privilege and mobility that many artists working today enjoy."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the text Lum quotes Chinese philosophers such as Laozi, Confucius, and Shen Dao, and refers to



Buddhist thought to better understand the tenets of Chen's work. In the context of the essay, he looks back to the contemporary art world's fashion of comparing the artist to the nomad and realizes that Chen has a more dynamic way of articulating his own position in the world, which includes phrases such as "acts of passage and the laws of the immigrant."<sup>16</sup> The conversation continues and the artists talk about what it means to be Chinese, but born and raised outside China. This prompts a deeper understanding of what it means to be part of the Chinese diaspora. As Lum states: "It is important to consider the ways in which Chen modulated the terms of migration and ethnicity without reducing them to reified terms. Rather, his modulation is highly situational and relational, and allows for an examination of social identity in multitudinous layers. Much of Chen's art is an expression of how ethnicity is a contingent rather than closed concept."<sup>17</sup> Further into the dialogue, Chen talks in detail about the migrant experience. Lum recalls Chen's words: "He said that migration imparts a violence that goes beyond the ideological inscription of social othering and stigmatization. He said that it has the ability to penetrate deeply into the recesses of the individual's physical body, to the cellular level of mnemonic registration."<sup>18</sup> Although Chen is sick at the time of the visit, Lum himself departs feeling stronger than when he arrived. The visit reminded him "of the need to always form and express new connections in terms of one's art, especially in terms of the ways in which one inhabits the world."<sup>19</sup> In this essay Lum is his fullest self, at once a geographer, critic, art historian, artist, and friend.

Yet by the mid-1990s, Lum was extremely disillusioned with the art world, which, as he saw it, was becoming more corporate and turning toward business and entertainment. He was having difficulty in continuing to believe in art and thought carefully about his options. "I had a choice: I could either stop being an artist or I could enlarge my frame of understanding of art by looking away from what I was accustomed to. I began to embrace an increasingly philosophical view of artistic purpose, one inscribed more in terms of the artist's life and less in terms of the art world's view of an artist."<sup>20</sup> During this time, he took a leave from the University of British Columbia and travelled extensively. Broadening his experience, he taught in Paris and travelled to Dakar "to deepen his understanding of how art could be defined differently." He also worked as a project manager for Okwui Enwezor's *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994* (2002). This important survey exhibition was the first to examine decolonization in African art and history and the project of constructing new cultural identities.<sup>21</sup> He also looked to China, conceiving the exhibition that would become *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945* (2004). Alongside these preoccupations, Lum

16 Ibid., 168.

17 Ibid., 172.

18 Ibid., 173.

19 Ibid., 174–75.

20 Ken Lum, "Something's Missing," this volume, 159.

21 *The Short Century* opened at Munich's Villa Stuck in 2001, and travelled to Berlin, New York, and Chicago.

22 Ken Lum, quoted in Richard Rhodes, "Ken Lum's Outsider Art," *Globe and Mail*, 12 May 2001, 3.

23 Ken Lum, "On Board *The Raft of the Medusa*," this volume, 40.

actively made a choice to learn more about the art world beyond the West. He was the co-founder and founding editor of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, the first English-language journal dedicated to contemporary Asian art and culture, launched in 2002 and still active. He also initiated a symposium at the seventh Havana Biennial (2000) and co-curated the seventh Sharjah Biennial (2005). At this time, Lum expanded his repertoire with respect of the geographic reach of the art world and began to understand art as a necessity.

Lum speaks about this period of international travel as he explains how he began to write an essay on Théodore Géricault's famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, first exhibited at the Salon of 1819, "It was my way of negotiating the edges of the then art world. I worked as a consultant for a project on African art, which entailed extensive research at various archives, including one in Dakar, Senegal. This led to a paper on under-commented-upon aspects of Géricault's work, the idea of multiple sexual and racial identities in his *Raft of the Medusa*."<sup>22</sup> In this text, Lum highlights the blind spots of modernity and modern art history by exploring race and slavery and how the painting upset the power relations of the time. As he explains: "The painting is an expression of Géricault's reflection on the profound precariousness of traditional conceptions of race and sexuality at the dawn of the modern industrial age. He understood that to think historically about slavery was to grapple with a profound ambiguity, that slavery continued to thrive in a period marked by profound opposition."<sup>23</sup> Art history has continued to be of interest to Lum, as evidenced in his essay "Aesthetic Education in Republican China: A Convergence of Ideals," concerning China's troubled relationship to modernism during the pre-Communist period, published in the catalogue that accompanied *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945*.

While Lum was constantly on the move to far-flung locales in the late 1990s, he was also thinking deeply about what it means to be a post-war Canadian artist and how cultural politics evolved in such a young country. Published toward the end of that decade, "Canadian Cultural Policy: A Problem of Metaphysics" explains how government policy has positioned culture both inside the country and in relation to the United States. Lum discusses formative moments such as the creation of the 1949 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (more commonly known as the Massey Commission); the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts (1957); Expo 67 (1967); and the passage of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1971). Alongside these, he speaks of the influence of public intellectuals such as political economist Harold Innis, literature and communications scholar Marshall McLuhan, and urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs.

The essay continues by touching on various distinguishing points of recent Canadian art history. Lum includes the still-evolving network of noncommercial artist-run centres active across Canada; the early internationalism of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; and the significance of the Canada Council's support for Canadian artists. In this section of the essay, Lum weaves together discussions of the creation of Image Bank, a Vancouver-based collaborative, postal-based exchange system between artists, and the three-person artist collective General Idea, two radical practices that were nurtured by this system. In his words, "there was a particular look or at least approach to Canadian art predicated on the idea of aesthetic dissemination, technical literacy, and social concerns, primarily issues of identity through space and time."<sup>24</sup> Lum ends the article with a number of questions, wondering how Canadian culture will thrive given that "global multiculturalism has become a global marketplace of culture, perpetuated constantly by Hollywood, Disney, and McDonald's,"<sup>25</sup> and then asks that we look upon our artists as individual creators first rather than understand them as representatives of a regional culture. Here Lum critiques the bureaucratic process for selecting an artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale and suggests that jurors place too much emphasis on geography when making their choices.

Cultural life in Canada and the position of Canadian artists has always been of interest to Lum and, since he moved to Philadelphia—where he has been chair of the fine arts department at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design since 2016—he has, ironically, been asked more than ever before to comment on Canada. In "Living in America," Lum shares a number of anecdotes, articulating what it means for him to have left Canada. He admits that he appreciates the country more now. He posits that in Canada, "the idea of art as social critique is pronounced, in part because that is what is expected of art."<sup>26</sup> In another vignette set during the opening of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, he writes of running into another Canadian artist who has looked repeatedly to Canada but has received little acknowledgement. Instead, the artist in question is warmly received in New York and, like Lum, included in this prestigious exhibition. Yet Lum concludes the text with the affirmation, "I still believe in art." He continues: "It is through art that I am constantly challenged to understand the world and my place within it, even if that place is one that I am not entirely at home in."<sup>27</sup>

Throughout his career, Lum has worked on both sides of the artist-curator divide, engaging actively in exhibition making as curator, project manager, and writer. His work as co-curator on the 2005 Sharjah Biennial was notably generative for him, leading directly to a number

24 Ken Lum, "Canadian Cultural Policy," this volume, 54.

25 *Ibid.*, 56.

26 Ken Lum, "Living in America," this volume, 252.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Ken Lum, "Unfolding Identities," this volume, 140.

29 Ibid., 143

30 Ken Lum, "Surprising Sharjah," this volume, 129.

of different texts. Perhaps the most rigorous of them is "Unfolding Identities," his essay for the Sharjah catalogue. Here he once again delves deeply into the subject of nomadology, reviewing the way various theoreticians think of nomadic movements. In a Western context, the artist has become highly mobile in an ever-shrinking world. Lum looks closely at this model and notes its ambiguous potential for resistance and criticality. He states: "Nomadology as a tool to theorise the multiple means by which travelling individuals negotiate and renegotiate subject positions in the context of codifications of family and community groups, gender, skin colour, economic and social class, and nation states is useful, but problematic in terms of the often devastating psychological and physical damage borne by these same individuals during the very process of negotiating subject positions."<sup>28</sup> Lum then shifts his focus and examines the subject from the perspective of the Arab world, the world beyond the so-called West, a culture "rooted in actual Nomads and Bedouins." While he notes the sociocultural problems of the region, Lum is interested in the possibilities for an art that is free from the stifling effects of cultural institutions, explaining that, "in Sharjah, as in other sites of the so-called periphery, art can rediscover its collective impulse" and be empowered "as a practice of critical reflection and longing."<sup>29</sup> "Surprising Sharjah," a diaristic account of his days as a co-curator in the months leading up to the biennial, is rather less academic. He relates what it was like to travel in the region, how he negotiated working simultaneously as an artist and curator, and muses on everyday life in Sharjah and the working conditions of the biennial. Writing from the perspective of the exhibition maker, he finds artists' attitudes somewhat tiresome and feels some sympathy for curators: "I realized how much crap a curator has to endure from artists."<sup>30</sup>

Lum has often written on his own work, and the occasion to look back at his exhibition at Witte de With in Rotterdam provides a strong example. One of Lum's greatest works, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, was produced as a billboard on the institution's exterior for its inaugural exhibition in 1990. When the work was removed at the conclusion of the show, the gallery staff heard from a distressed public who very much wanted *Melly* back out in public. Lum writes:

One caller reasoned that every city needs a monument to the problem of hating one's job. Since then, Melly Shum has become much more than a marker for the people of Rotterdam: she exists as a dynamic symbol of the relationship between the Witte de With and the world at large ... Flickr and Facebook pages have been created in honour of Melly Shum and her persona has even been adopted by a

Tweeter who regularly tweets about hating his own job. While I may have created *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, the public has been activating the work far beyond my initial intentions. This is largely due to the Witte de With and its mandate to extend contemporary art beyond its walls.<sup>31</sup>

This interest in temporary and permanent public art extends over the course of Lum's career. In addition to *Melly Shum*, representative projects include *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White* (2000); *There is no place like home* (2000); *Mirror Maze with 12 Signs of Depression* (2002–11); *Pi* (2005–06); *Monument to East Vancouver* (2010); *From Shangri-La to Shangri-La* (2010); *Semi-Public: Vancouver Especially (A Vancouver Special scaled to its property value in 1973, then...)* (2015); and *Peace Through Valour* (2016). Public art is a subject that Lum the writer and curator returns to again and again, and since 2016 he has co-curated a public art project, *Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia*. Relatively early in his career, Lum realized he had the ability to speak to a public with his art, beyond the confines of the art museum. His essay accompanying this recent curatorial project questions the status of the monument today, as much commemorative sculpture is highly contested and in crisis, especially in the United States.

Two texts from the early 2000s offer something like a summary of Lum's thoughts concerning art making in the present. In "Something's Missing" (2006)—whose title is borrowed from a famous line in Bertolt Brecht's and Kurt Weill's opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*—we recognize how revelatory a decade of journeying has been for Lum, and we sense his recovery of a belief in art following the "crisis" of the mid-1990s. While recounting his international travels, he shares how his thinking has changed. Being an artist "means to be in a constant search for meaning."<sup>32</sup> He finishes by insisting that "art should be about life, and draw from it sustenance and relevance. The purpose of art should be to offer a space for pause and reflection."<sup>33</sup> Three years later, Lum's contribution to the book *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, which takes the form of a letter to the editor Steven Henry Madoff, brings together his experiences as a teacher, artist, and traveller. He writes from the position of someone who truly believes in teaching, but has "mixed feelings" about art schools themselves. He wonders what kind of attention is being paid to life knowledges that are grounded in the body. He asks: "What does it mean to be in someone else's place? How is it even possible to express something of the pain and suffering or happiness and joy of someone else?"<sup>34</sup> Lum's teaching experiences outside North America have given him the opportunity to "expand and deepen"

31 Ken Lum, "Melly Shum Hates Her Job but Not the Witte de With," this volume, 199.

32 Ken Lum, "Something's Missing," this volume, 159.

33 Ibid., 163.

34 Ken Lum, "Dear Steven," this volume, 180.

35 Ibid., 183.

36 Ken Lum, "Something's Missing," this volume, 162.

37 Ken Lum, "Dear Steven," this volume, 187.

his understanding of the possibilities of art. At a time when Lum was unhappy at the University of British Columbia, he taught at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Here he found a way to collaborate with the *École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy*, a school located in a large immigrant community on the city's suburban edge. In 1997, he took a post in Martinique and realized that the students had little knowledge of the social and historical conditions of the island, as well as a limited, colonial comprehension of art history; all of them dreamed of travelling to Paris. For Lum, this period of teaching cemented the purpose of art school, which, he explained, should "raise the consciousness of one's place in the world and produce expressions at the borders of what can and can't be said in any given social and historical context."<sup>35</sup> While teaching in China, Lum held classes after hours as the environment was less formal; there, students "understood their position as political beings and were learning to imbue their art with a transgressive authority." Over time, Lum learned that the artist's role "is to give expression to his or her experiences in a continuous act of self-definition."<sup>36</sup>

As the writings in this collection make evident, Ken Lum has made extraordinary contributions to the field of contemporary art. His ability to find meaning throughout his career and his willingness to constantly reinvent himself, while always sharing via the written word the knowledge gained from his wide range of experiences, have made him an extremely important figure. For those trying to find their way through the events and global landscapes that make up the current contemporary art world, Lum provides a series of guideposts in the form of highly readable essays that seek to make the political tensions in these sites legible. Whether he is writing on art, artists, art education, art history, biennales, cultural policy, curating, exhibitions, or public art, Lum projects a unique perspective. Writing is everything to Lum. He is an artist who loves to write. He proves that "art is about making everything in the world relevant."<sup>37</sup>

1991-2000



# Carnegie Library Project

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no. 29, 1991



08/27/91 21:07

Z 604 685 1435

P. 02

Vusie L. Hlatshwayo  
Head Librarian  
National Library of Swaziland  
P.O. Box 1461  
Mbabane, Swaziland

Dear Vusie L. Hlatshwayo,

I am writing to ask for your assistance. I am a artist invited to participate in this year's Carnegie International, an important art exhibition held every third year in Pittsburgh, The United States.

*PA*  
The exhibition is founded by Andrew Carnegie, who was one of the richest persons on earth at the turn of this century. Carnegie was both a ruthless and ruthless individual. After his passing, perhaps his most enduring philanthropic endeavor was the founding of some 2811 free public libraries around the world. In fact, well over eighty percent of his fortune would eventually go for the building of libraries, universities and scientific research institutions. He equated his patronage with moral duty, and wrote: "the millionaire is intrusted for the time being with a great part of the increased wealth of the community, because he can administer it for the community far better than it could or would have done for itself."

~~Interestingly, Carnegie dispersed so much of his wealth that he was forced to abandon this self-serving position. From this abandonment, Carnegie would establish the basis for the modern philanthropic foundation to which most of us are familiar.~~

I would like to develop my project as a correlative to some of the historical conditions of the Carnegie International. By expanding upon the relationship between libraries and philanthropy, I hope to suggest a new global library system which could also function as a kind of "super" philanthropic foundation. I hope to suggest a foundation which could facilitate the subversion of illiteracy, bolster the rights of all to freedom of information and freedom of movement. The foundation would also facilitate "the increased wealth of the (world) community" to such a degree that want itself might be eliminated.

Here is my proposal:

There are eighteen branches to the Carnegie public library system in Pittsburgh. I am writing to as many librarians and other persons from as many countries from around the world as possible. I am requesting in every correspondence that a poetry book, either an anthology of national poems or one by a poet of national stature in the country I am contacting, be mailed to me. I would prefer the books to be in bilingual text with English as the second language. Barring this possibilities, the books should be in the language of origin. The poetry book must be either from or be a copy of an identical book which exists within the collection of a public

08/27/91 21:08

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P. 03

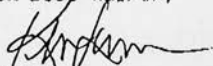
library in the country of correspondence. In addition to the book, I would need to know the call number, and the name and place of the library.

I require a minimum of eighteen books from eighteen countries. Upon receiving all the books, I would then donate these books for distribution to the various Pittsburgh library branches. The donated books would be adorned with a special tag indicating they form part of a work of art of mine called "Library Project". On the outside jacket, the books would bear two call numbers, one given by the Pittsburgh library system and the other citing the call number, and the name and place of a second library from another country in the world in which the book is part of a collection or originated from. I would gladly recompense for any expenses incurred in support of this project.

The second part to the project would consist of a number of large Poem Paintings, banner-like paintings of poems selected from among the books received. These paintings would be displayed in a foyer of the Carnegie Institute complex adjoining both the Carnegie main library and the Carnegie Museum of Art tying in the different reference points of the work, library, museum, city of Pittsburgh, the world.

Logistically, this is quite a complex work to realize because so much is dependent upon the goodwill of people I may likely never meet. I would be most appreciative of your assistance. I would also appreciate any names of persons whom I might be able to contact concerning this project.

With Best Wishes,



Ken Lum  
2045 Nelson St., #1402  
Vancouver, B.C.  
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### Partial List of Submitted Books

1. A book by Aimé Césaire, Bibliotheque Schoelcher, Fort-de-France, Fort-de-France-Cedex, **Martinique**. Call number 841-2 CES.
2. Book sent by David Bellman: *Dafydd Ap Gwilym: A Selection of Poems*, Rachel Bromwich, trans. Gomer Press, 1982. Caernarfon Library, Caernarfon, Gwynedd, **Wales**. Call number 891.6613.
3. Book sent by Silvia Bertoni Reis, Information Officer, Canadian Embassy, Brasilia, **Brasil**. *Gramática Expositiva do Cháo* by Manuel de Barros, Brazilian National Library. Call number 85.200.0068-1.
4. A book sent by Martin Bergmann, **Czechoslovakia**, *Já se tam vrátim*, by Frantisek Halas, National Library Klementinum. Call number 54J21315.
5. A book sent by Nordanstad-Skarstedt: *Kalevala*, Helsingin Kaupunginkirjasto (Helsinki National Library) **Finland**. Call number N9517173881.
6. A book arranged to be sent by Ivo Mesquita, titled *Alberto Alexandre Martins Poemas from Brazil*, √, São Paulo Biblioteca Mario de Andrade, Rua da Consolação 94, 01302 São Paulo, Brazil telephone (0055-11) 239 0396.
7. A book sent by Anthony Bond, **Australia**, √, *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse, Chosen by Les. A. Muray*, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. Call number 821.008/46.
8. A book from **Yugoslavia**, sent by Matjaz Gruden, Svetceva 1, 61 000 Ljubljana-Yugoslavia tel: 38 0 61 222 600. *Grodje Celjski* by Ifigenija Simonovic and Jana Vizjak, in collection of National University Library of Ljubljana (Slovenia). See under poetry.
9. Books sent by Naida Lablack, Cultural Affairs Officer, Canadian Embassy, 13 Jaâfar-as-Sadik, P.O. Box 709, Rabat-Agdal, **Morocco**. *Les Hommes Naissent Ego* and *Chemins Vers Dieu*, both of Bibliotheque Generale et Archives in Rabat. Call numbers respectively: B4003 and B37610.

10. Book sent by Vusie L. Hlatshwayo, Librarian, National Library of Swaziland. P.O. Box 1461 Mbabane, **Swaziland**: *Takitsi* by N.D. Ntiwane, G.N. Mamba, P.N. Dlamini.
11. Suggested by Judith Shotten, 12 Mewvo Hamaavak, Jerusalem, **Israel** 97877, *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself from 1965–1988*. Edited by Stanley Bernshaw, T. Carnu, Eyra Spicandler, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1989, National Library at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, call number H 108 S89 B 3165; 11 *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, edited by T. Carni, Penguin Books, 1981, H18 S81 B2106; or *Modern Hebrew Poetry*, edited by Ruth Finer Mintz, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968, call number H 108 70 A. 1630.
12. Book sent by Léonard Beauline, Second Secretary, Canadian Embassy, Apartado Aéreo 53531 Bogotá, **Colombia**, *Poesía y Poetas Colombianos* by Fernando Charry Lara, in collection of Biblioteca Nacional Bogotá. Call number Ficha 811:44 CH 17 M edit. 1985.
13. Nepalese Poem book, sent by Canadian Cooperation Office, P.O. Box 4574, Lazimpat, Kathmandu, **Nepal**. Ref. No. N895,511 P0389t. Accession No. 73002.
14. Book sent from D.S. Proudfoot, Second Secretary, Canadian High Commission, P.O. Box 30481 Nairobi, **Kenya**: *Poems From East Africa*, edited by David Cook and David Rubadiri (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1971); Macmillan Memorial Library (Nairobi) class number AR 821 C00 or accession number 723680.
15. Books sent by National Library of the **Philippines**, P.O. Box 2926, Manila, *The Philippines: Philippine Poetry in English 1928–1950; Versus: Philippine Protest Poetry, 1963–1986*; Antolohiya Ng Mga Piling Magwaging Akda.
16. Book sent from **Korean** Publishers Association: *Great English-Korean Poems*.
17. Book sent from Lewis Portelli, Department of Information, Auberge de Castille, Valetta, **Malta**, tel: 224901 or 225231 Fax: 227170, *Ilbma Mkissra* written by Peter Serracino Inglott. National Library in Valletta, Malta. Call number 313953.

18. Randy Spencer sent book from **Japan**, Randy's address is Suita-Shi Minami Suita, 1-15-12 Hatada Mansion 303, Osaka, Japan ¥564, *Wise Writing of Haiku Poets*, edited by Fujimoto Ichiro, Osaka Furitsu Nakanoshimo Toshokan Library. Call number: Cultural Science Department, Poetry 224, call number 226/1175.
19. Sangster's Book Stores **Jamaica**: sends Louise Bennett's *Selected Poems* and *Jamaica Labrish*; *Jamaica Labrish* is in the collection of The Kingston and St. Andrew Parish Library, of collection The Kingston and St. Andrew Parish Library, of 2 Tom Redcam Drive, Kingston 5. The call number is R. 823.
20. Book sent by Alan McEldowny, Director of South Pacific Books Ltd., Box 3533 Auckland, **New Zealand**, *Pacific Voices*, an anthology of Maori and Pacific Writing, selected by Bernard Gadd, University of the South Pacific Library. See poetry.
21. I. Dassyne, and B.R. Goordyal of the University of Mauritius Library, Reduit, **Mauritius**, tel: 230-541041 or fax 230-549642 sent *Lobraz Lavi* (soley fenea) by Dev Virahsawny, the University of Mauritius Library, Mauritania Collection. Call number Maur PQ 3989.V516 1981.
22. Orde Levinson sends *Ndilapa Nkosi*, by Orde, Esdorff Library, Windhoek (probable name change to National Library of Namibia), call number 910024A, Akihiko Morishita, Suganodai 3-15-1-1408 Suma, Kobe, 654-01 Japan. Sent poem book from **Japan**.
23. *Poetry India: New Voices*, **India** International Centre Library, New Delhi, call number 823 (Ind)Kau-PN, sent by H.K. Kaul, Librarian Indian International Centre, 40 Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi-110 003.
24. Sent by Rubin Mass, P.O.B. 990, **Jerusalem** 91009, *Israel Stories about the Middle Sea and Other Poems* by Isaac Imber, National Library at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Call number S91B1626. *Poems*, Anna Margolin, S2-85A2711.
25. *Line Cuts, Posthumous poems of four young Israelis*, selected by Alex Zehavi, call number 81B 1984. *Selected Poems*, Natan Alterman, call number 78A 3156. *Selected Poems*, Ch. N. Bialik, call number 81A 3042. *Poems of Jerusalem*, by Yehuda Amichai, call number 588A 1592.

# Homes

Published in *Viennese Story*,  
curated by Jérôme Sans  
Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1993

The irony of converting a building whose function remains articulated in its very design into an entirely different use can have a certain appeal. There is a degree of enjoyable challenge in trying to remember when such and such a building served this or that function. But the constant flux of the city causes a strange fooling, it is a feeling of living in limbo, of always being in a state between remembering and not remembering, of being familiar and unfamiliar.

As confusing as all this can be when one takes a walk through the heart of a city, the affects of disruptions in commercial spaces seems nothing more than a series of distractions when considered beside the dynamics of the home. After all, a home can be created out of just about anything. A home can be staked out anywhere. Home can mean a shack built from refuse. Home can be the space under a viaduct or bridge. Home can be a back alley loading bay. So it is true what has been said that home is what you make of it. Perhaps that is why people resist “eviction,” even from under a bridge. It is their home.

I once read a story about so-called “mole” people living in the soot and darkness of an abandoned New York City subway station. Apparently, several dozen people lived here, including children. In one printed picture, the camera flash revealed a little library and I wondered how it was possible to read in such darkness. In another image children’s toys were strewn about on the obviously derelict subway platform. Beside the bookstand there was furniture, two sofas, an end table, and even a small coffee table, all arranged in a perfect “L” as one would arrange a living room to invite guests in for tea. I marvelled at this improbable attempt to carve out a “normal” living room environment under such harsh conditions.

Spaces are interchangeable, particularly living spaces. Because of poverty and all kinds of reasons, people live anywhere and everywhere by converting whatever spaces seen reasonable enough to become a home. But the strange feelings I spoke about earlier concerning the changing functions of commercial and civic buildings are not felt here in the case of “home” conversions. As I walk through the city, I see



Ken Lum, *Sculpture for living room/public lounge*, 1978

potential homes in every lurking space. Businesses come and go, that is the nature of businesses. Bank buildings may turn into hair salons or a restaurant can turn into another restaurant but, always, they can become homes.

Looking at the picture of the furniture in the abandoned subway tunnel seems anything but strange. Perhaps, it is the misery of the living conditions that renders the strangeness into something else. Perhaps, I start to think about my own advantages, too self-absorbed to think anything strange about living deep underground. I do not fully know. Whatever the reasons, the feeling I have is not one of strangeness but of familiarity. When I saw that picture, I remembered that a home is a home is a home, no matter that it is a miserable and hellish dark place. There really is no place like home. Home is for private thoughts. This is my home, my space, please don't trespass. Would you like to come in for tea? What are you coming home?

I now think that I have been understanding a basic problem of modern life completely backward. It is not the strangeness or the defamiliarization or the not quite remembering what is the problem. (Well, it is a problem, but it is a different kind of problem to my deeper concern here.) The real problem is not the feeling of strangeness; that is not it at all. No, the real problem has more to do with the feeling of familiarity, especially the kind which has become innate and inbred. This problem has something to do with our idea of home. Or perhaps I should say that the problem is not even so much about the idea of home as it is about the ideal of home, which is rooted in an ideology of the home. I think that is what I try to talk about with my furniture sculptures.



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# Soft Landing

Published in *On Board*  
Vienna: Ritter, 1995



Ken Lum, *Cushion dinghy*, 1987

I'm interested in moments and what is real, the little daily eruptions that seem to run counter to the way things "ought" to be. I think it is hard to get at the real without getting at the heart of human feelings, sufferings, desires, and so on. Even then, it is hard because it is all too difficult to express feelings or even to recognize feelings for what they are. There are all kinds of models that tell us how we are supposed to feel, how we are supposed to demonstrate our feelings. But everything is so cushioned. We are all falling from a great height, but we dream of a great big bed or a sofa with soft pillows. The problem is the cushion.

# The Difference Between Art and Fact

Formalism teaches us to consider every visible aspect of art as significant. Social history teaches us that a consideration into context and an analysis of the historical environment of a work of art can provide insights into the underlying factors contributing to meaning. We have all become as capable as fine surgeons in terms of our ability to diagnose art from inside and out. And like the fine surgeon, all that we see and think becomes readily available data filed in some conceptually limitless file cabinet.

Even those moments in the artistic process that seem so highly personal can often be a formulation mediated by market constructions of artistic genius. This is often what is meant by the “decisive moment” of photography. It is defined and categorized as a moment of intense critical cognition so crucial to the artistic defence of photographic practice. Such moments, seemingly so filled with the artist’s subjectivity, his exercise and creativity are often calculated and highly mediated moments. They are mediated by language and the familiar examples of the “great” decisive moments of the great photographers. The decisive moment of Garry Winogrand can be seen to be of a different order from the decisive moment of, say, Dorothea Lange or Elliott Erwitt. This difference is discernible and measurable. We can speak of different kinds of “decisive moments.” They can be isolated and compared, from one type to another. Despite the decisiveness of such creative moments, much of this has become familiar language and can be stored and retrieved according to the order of archival knowledge.

By this I mean that the way in which a society is configured, through its institutions, ideals, and laws, is paralleled in the way its own archives are structured. The camera’s importance is in providing the technical means for a society to image itself according to how it sees itself. Deriving from the Platonic tradition, an archive imparts a sense of impartiality and objectivity. Archival photographs persuade us of their “truthfulness” and, more important, their completeness in representing the truth. Material really is seen as measurable, definable, and operating within rules, some which may not have even been yet discovered. The photographic document functions to affirm human experiences as just so many elements in a grand universal machine. Even given these considerations, the more important concern for me is not whether one sees the rational ordering structure of the archive as a problem but whether or not one can position one’s work so that it accesses into the viewer’s own feelings and opinions, providing the viewer with his or her own opportunities to respond. Knowing facts is one thing but to feel and to think seriously is another. A work that moves or stirs contains a content that cannot be archived into some category.

This function of photography, as purveyor of truth, continues to this day, most dramatically, in my view, in the form of tabloid television which has converted real experiences into a kind of television version of *cinéma vérité*. Photographic representation has, as Louis Marin put it, appropriated “the space of the real according to the order of knowledge.” Photography continues to play a central role in embodying the laws and ideals of the modern state. It continues to define through imagery the spatial and psychological limits of the public sphere.

I use photography in my work but I want to do so with a reverse purpose from what I have outlined. I recognize photography’s agency in revealing so-called facts about the world but I also believe that it is almost impossible to think about any real fact about the world that is true. I take the view that not everything can be analyzed using facts and rules. Human actions can never be fully modelled on any theory, such as a theory of social behaviour or what have you. They can never be completely modelled on any “strategies,” on what Michel de Certeau calls “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an environment” and upon which “political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed.” We can systematically study people and their environments but it is an illusion to think in terms of theories and laws.

To this end, my photographs are complemented by text because all the facts about the world contain words. Facts cannot exist without words. But words can often belie facts in that they can have different meanings and interpretations. Words are also used in my work to augment the experience of the photographs. In doing so, the text, which can take the form of both monologue and dialogue, underlines the insufficiency of the photograph to capture real experience. I also hope that the text creates a picture of its own, related to but distinctly different from the given picture. Conversely, I want the picture to generate a text related to but distinctly different from the given text. In this sense, each work represents a kind of double image, one generated by photography and the other by text.

What I am trying to do with my work is to express moments in everyday life that break the continuity of ritualized life and the conversion of experience into fact. I want to depict those moments in life when feelings cannot be isomorphically expressed in clear-sounding language. Such moments are often fleeting, and we more often than not pay them no mind, but they can be intensely emotional and provide for feelings of autonomy from circumstances.

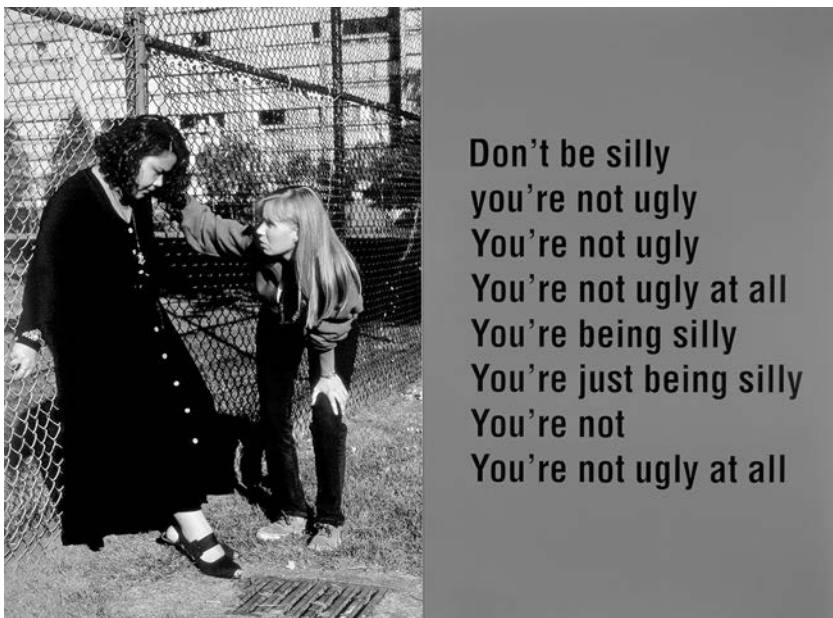
Moreover, the natural world is capricious and we are frequently the victims of its whims. Even so, I believe there exists free will even in the most oppressive conditions, even if it is merely to think about alternative conditions or a way to turn a disadvantage into an advantage, however temporary. I believe humans have capacities and abilities that in themselves can never be based on theory, can never be turned into rules or converted into facts. For example, what is the theory of a weary body? What is the theory of a person who sheds tears when in anger? What is the theory of consolation or regret? What is the theory of a human face?

My pictures are modern pictures in that they depict persons who are inheritors of the contradictory and too often pernicious effects of modernity. The contemporaneity they find themselves in is often oppressive and the characters have to struggle against it, often feebly. The incertitude of modern life penetrates through to the deepest recesses of the individual, challenging historical and cultural typologies that shape identity and the relationship between identities.

In *Don't Be Silly, You're Not Ugly*, a work from 1993, two women are engaged in the everyday practice of conversation. A Caucasian woman tries to assure her Asian friend that she is not unattractive. Her assurances are as much for her own self-assurance as they are for her insecure friend. She knows that her assurance must endure the opposition of societal definitions and valuations. For example, there is a hierarchy of feminine beauty types with white beauty at the top. She senses an upsurging of the underlying order of the world. She senses even the essential forms of decorum and social behaviour which wills her to remain calm, logical, and patient. At the same time, she is exasperated and knows not what to say. She is at a loss for words, so she begins to repeat herself and her speech turns into a kind of mantra that becomes increasingly dis-entangled from the laws of language. The Asian woman looks downcast and frozen, her entire body leaning hard against the fencing.

The camera documents this moment of profound incertitude but cannot reveal its rules and facts. Both the women occupy a radically indeterminate moment and place. In a sense, they become so absorbed into this moment that they become temporarily exiled from the world. All accepted notions of the world are temporarily thrown into disorder and they have become persons without fixed identity, free even from representation. In this regard, as a possible scenario in the world, they escape even my own attempts to depict such a scenario.

The words her friend conveys to her pass through her like a Gregorian chant. She exists in an indeterminate moment, paradoxically full of feelings but bereft of things to say. The dialogue aspects of the



Ken Lum, *Don't Be Silly, You're Not Ugly*, 1993

text draw the viewer into a structure of unfixed visual connotations, sharing in the profound complexity of human emotions, thoughts, actions, and gestures. The lines in the text of this picture repeat to the point of losing their intended meaning. They become so many sounds and in their inadequacy to represent the fullness of the experiences they are meant to signify, they leave many gaps, which the viewer's own experiences can fill in for or simply share. It is here that the viewer's free will can enter into the work. As opposed to the decisive moment of street photographers, my work attempts to construct the idea of a decisive moment. My pictures acknowledge their own insufficiency in that they cannot fully represent the feelings of the depicted characters.

The idea for these pictures crystallized for me one evening in a hotel room in Cologne, Germany. I was watching a German version of a well-known American tabloid television show. I saw an image of a murder scene which was followed by an interview with an excited young boy holding his bicycle. The boy was American and his voice was badly dubbed into German. He kept one arm pointed in the direction of the murder scene, which he obviously was a witness to. I don't know how to speak German but he kept saying the same thing over and over again. The dubbed German words kept repeating but not always exactly

the same. Some time later, I realized that the boy barely moved except for the same motioning of his head and hand. It was as though I was looking at a still image, a photograph. The repeating sounds put me into a kind of temporary trance as I fixed my eyes on the image of the boy. Momentarily I lost my sense of where I was, replaced by a strange experience of duration. I am trying to reproduce this quality in my own pictures, give them a sense of hold that causes the viewer to experience my works durationally.

The “archival” canon insists on configuring the world according to coherent classifications, defining historical unfolding as prose and parable rather than by epiphany and instability. What I am trying to do is to create something the opposite, to express through practice something inexpressible in theory and to say something about the difference between art and fact.



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# Seven Moments in the Life of a Chinese Canadian Artist

Published in *Cities on the Move*,  
eds. Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist  
Vienna: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997

Seven moments in the life of a chinese canadian artist

by Ken Lum

1) Cahors, France. Following the opening of an exhibition, I was invited to dinner in this southern French city famous for its ancient bridge and robust red wines. At the restaurant I met for the first time some of the other, mostly European artists in the exhibition. As introductions were being made, one artist, all smiles and looking surprised, exclaimed to me: "Why I did not know you were asian. Your work looks like it could have been made by a non-oriental."

2) Oxford, England. I am discussing my work with an English art critic who has some problems with the fact that I stage my pictures, rather than simply go the route of documentation. His problem has something to do with the difference between constructed realism and what he believes to be a "truer" realism which would favor standard Brechtian devices. Towards the end of our meeting, he says to me: "It is a shame because I understand why you so often deal with identity and language issues, you being chinese and all."

3) Paris, France. Living in Paris, I would occasionally pick up an International Herald Tribune, mostly to find out the American view of things happening in Europe. This time there appeared a large article about the Spanish artist Juan Munoz and a large sculptural installation he did involving realistic sculptures of identically, laughing chinese men. There was a photograph of the work and I must add that I felt offended by the photograph, the effect of which seem premised on a classic racial stereotype. In all seriousness and

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without the slightest hint of irony, the writer of this article ended his commentary on this work by Munoz by admiring the work's "inscrutability".

4) Vancouver, Canada. This is a story recounted to me by several friends. There is a protest rally on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery, the city's major contemporary art venue. An artists' coalition is demanding that the exhibition programming reflect more minority voices, particularly visible minority artists. The curator bravely (or foolishly) confronted the gathering and cited then recent exhibitions by Stan Douglas, an African-Caribbean-Canadian artist, and myself. Although I was embarrassed to hear that I was used as an example in such a context, what was recounted to me next shocked me.. Several voices from the gathering shouted that they no longer considered Stan Douglas and myself artists of colour.

5) Fort St. James, Canada. A close friend and I are travelling to this northern community in British Columbia to visit one of Canada's outstanding artists, who is also native. To reach Fort St. James, we had to fly two hours north from Vancouver to Prince George. From there, we rented a car and drove another two hours. Fort St. James is a tiny village and it seemed clear that there existed some palpable tension between the native and white populations. As we head off for late lunch, we find out that here are only two cafes, (really burger joints) in the village. They sit directly opposite of one another on each side of the main street. Lawrence points us to the one on the left, the one full of native teenagers hanging about the entry. He says the cafe cross the street is for the whites. The server comes to take our orders. She is chinese. A bit later, I notice a chinese man in the kitchen and he is looking at me. At that moment,

I look out the window and scan across the street at the cafe opposite. Lawrence says to me that that one is run by another chinese family.

6) Fort de France, Martinique. I am teaching at the l'Ecole d'Art Plastique. The makeup of the island's population is extraordinary rich and touching. Nearly everyone is a mixture of black, white, brown, yellow and red. I felt very much at home in Martinique although the forty degree weather took some getting used to. For lunch, I go with students and teachers to the local canteen. Everyone orders either fish or chicken but the accompaniment in every case was white rice. In fact, everyone eats white rice in Martinique as part of the regular diet. Later that day, I find myself in the school library and I come across a book about the many men from south china and the indian subcontinent that were brought into Martinique in the last century to toil as coolie workers.

7) Montreal, Canada. I am in the company of several chinese artists, which is a rare experience for me. I simply do not know many chinese artists. My speaking knowledge of Cantonese is so poor that I dare not even attempt to use it. I do understand it somewhat when I hear it. During the course of dinner, I hear someone say in cantonese how great it is to have so many chinese artists on one table. One of the artists, not knowing that I could understand what he was saying, replies in effect: "Well, Ken Lum cannot even read chinese."

# 6: New Vancouver Modern

Not only has art within modernism been rife with contradiction, it has been propelled by it. Calls for a new beginning in art have frequently been issued in unison with calls for the death of art. By rejecting representational modes predicated on realism, non-objective, or abstract, art aimed for a deeper realism. Arguments in support of the autonomy of art have always been countered by arguments for the conflation of art and life. And on and on it goes.

Until, that is, the contradictory nature of modernism itself became institutionalized within the frameworks of art-historical research, art-school teaching, and curatorial practice. Until, also, the point has been reached when each and every characteristic of modernism has become so familiar its very operation reveals at every instance an even bigger contradiction, that of the complete integration of modernist iconoclasm within the iconographism of the art-institutional system.

Pop art understood well this predicament of art by ironizing modernism's ideals with modernism's fate, which it saw as inevitably tied to the logic of industry and the museums. Conceptualism attempted to disengage art from institutional dependency by problematizing the status of the art object. In so doing, it hoped to propel art in a new and socially relevant direction free from the contamination of both the marketplace and traditional definitions. While never entirely succeeding in its goals, conceptualism did radically expand the Duchampian paradigm of questioning all modes of aesthetic experience and production.

As a result, what has often been referred to as the crisis in art became fundamentally attached to yet another contradiction, one in which further dialectical synthesis may prove impossible and in which the institutionalization of art is sealed in advance, no matter the radicality of the aesthetic experience. From today's vantage point, every succeeding exhibition of conceptualist art resounds ever more loudly with the smug echo of pop art irony.

The contracted lessons of pop art and conceptualism very much informs *6: New Vancouver Modern*, an exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, of works by Geoffrey Farmer, Myfanwy MacLeod, Damian Moppett, Steven Shearer, Ron Terada, and Kelly Wood. Put another way, the art appears conceptual but behaves like pop art. Its conceptualist appearance evokes a social and political reading, but its pop art interiority demands that this reading be placed in quotation marks and ironized.

The use of quotation is a hallmark of such politically engaged artists as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Hans Haacke. In their work, quotation performs a reflexive critique of the exemplary art or genre on which their work is modelled. In the case of *6: New Vancouver Modern*, the model

is essentially conceptualism, the last remaining avant-garde art movement of the 1960s to which a critical debunking of its social and political ambitions has yet to be fully exercised.

As a consequence, this exhibition frustrates our expectations by mocking any and all lingering moral and social aspirations for art. The point of the exhibition is not some directed search for real meaning in the conventional and denotative sense, despite its many signals in such a direction. Rather, real meaning is constructed and offered more for effect. By deliberately not providing what we are inclined to demand of this art, we become frustrated in our need to have our demands addressed. More significantly, these demands are thrown back in our faces at every instance of viewing. The works seem to be saying to the viewer: “Why do you come to us with so many demands?” Or: “Why do you have such needs which are clearly sanctioned by traditional expectations?”

This refusal to provide its audience with any intelligent converse and to reply largely in blank non sequiturs does not mean the works are unintelligent. True, the works are morally pathetic, but this attitude is not limited to these artists; it concords with the sensibilities of many of the most interesting new artists working in America and Britain. The inadequacy of, or loss of, faith in traditional responses is also manifest in the reception of so-called “abject art” and “Brit Pack art.” In stretching the Duchampian paradigm to its limits, this new generation of artists has cited as a problem the lack of any criterion for making artistic judgments which is not already preconceived as a guideline.

This brings us to another question. Past a certain point, how proper is it to discuss exemplary models of art as critically effective at all? Thus, quotation is everywhere in this exhibition and not necessarily as homage. Ron Terada’s text paintings recall the text paintings of Edward Ruscha, but they lack the older artist’s acerbic wit and morally agitational intentions. In lieu of *Those of Us Who Have Double Parked* by Ruscha, for example, Terada paints answers from the *Jeopardy* game show. What Terada offers, quite literally, are trivial answers which can only be responded to in the form of questions. Terada’s conversion of the format of a hugely popular television show into an inquiry of the philosophical framework of art is a recurrent theme in this exhibition. Of course, this was also a theme of conceptualism, but unlike its antecedent, the works in this exhibition for the most part refuse to nod to a social arena beyond that of the television room or the basement workshop.

Kelly Wood’s large photographs of filled garbage bags at least extend the social terrain to the property line of the home. These works have more in common with César’s giant bronzes of his thumb than with any



Kelly Wood, *Garbage Bag*, 1997. Installation view, 6; *New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, 1998

Bataille-like exegesis of excess. Theoretical references to Bataille or Deleuze are but decoys to a commentary on art's absolute loss of inspirational power or social relevance. The circulation of cynicism, so profoundly prevalent in contemporary art practice, is not only all that remains but all that remains true. It is what motivates Wood's equation of high art with garbage. What is heartening, is Wood's obstreperous commitment of so much technical and formal attention to such a cynical equation.

Artistic closure is firmly at the heart of the exhibition's narrative and exceedingly so in the case of Geoffrey Farmer, whose work was prominently featured in the exhibition space. His video installation, *Wormhole*, was festooned with coloured lights and scaffolding, props that can function as ably on a movie set or in a discotheque. Quotation is activated once again by the apparent parodying of such science-fiction films as *The Thing* (the original version) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* and is but a deflection from a deeper exposition of the video and installation works of Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham. *Wormhole* unfolds in an empty, after-hours Belkin Art Gallery much

as isolation and the disorientation of time were key themes of Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* or Graham's *Video Time Delay* installations. Above all, the socially indulgent juvenilia of the 1960s conceptualists has been counterpointed by Farmer's fully realized, yet exiguous, brand of self-indulgent infantilism.

Myfanwy MacLeod's *Propaganda for War* recalls Marcel Duchamp's seminal Readymade work, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, but the linguistic and experiential witticism of Duchamp's work is replaced by a severe bonk to the head, à la Saturday-morning cartoon. In contrast to Duchamp's snow shovel, MacLeod's shovel is as damaged as the head it hit. Also, that there continues to be a fierce debate about Duchamp, a war of words if you will, is not lost on MacLeod.

What is at once interesting and disturbing is the glibness of her suggestion of artistic closure on the very person most responsible for thrusting art into its present predicament. Glibness is evident not only



as a reflection of historical regard but in the insistent stylization and the technical sure-handedness of the works on view. In part, this is a consequence of the proliferation of the art school, of which every artist in this exhibition is an alumnus, and from which learning about art has become an increasingly glib process.

Steven Shearer's silk-screened paintings quote Andy Warhol's blending of social critique to ironic form but are realized without tolerance for the imperfections and screen-printing alignment faults that gave Warhol's paintings such an air of technical indifference. Moreover, the iconic resonance of an Elvis Presley or Liz Taylor is displaced in favour of minor and largely forgotten teen music idols of the 1970s. Shearer's paintings articulate two somewhat incongruent points. First, they are fully realized works of art, technically perfect. Second, they are profoundly unambitious in comparison to the exemplary models they quote.

Monumentalism and the cult of the hero, as embodied by the architect in Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* and by 1950s and '60s *Life* feature stories of the genius-builder, comprise the subject of Damian Moppett's photographs. The architectural models, depicted in the modest context of a home office or domestic workshop, are ambiguities of utopian aspiration and dystopian realization. It is interesting to note that Moppett's caustically titled pictures are the only works in the exhibition which are not socially and politically abject, in the sense that they unabashedly encourage a speculation of the world at large. Their retention of a utopian dimension made them seem lost in the exhibition, but perhaps for the right reasons. Moppett also presented two cartoonish science-fiction dioramas that truly were abject. The inclusion of these two works reveals, perhaps, something of the nature of the curatorial requirement made of each artist in this show.

A lack of interpretative complexity and profundity is often an attribute of farce and comedic theatre—and it has been an irritant to those who demand of art something more substantial. Rather than moral and social substance, what we are offered in this exhibition are highly effective artistic vehicles from historically knowing and technically savvy artists. The lack of intrinsic and demonstrable meaning is really of only secondary importance to the unflinching technical precision that went into the making of the art; indeed, it is what gives the art its surreptitious meaning. What we see in the 6: *New Vancouver Modern* may irritate viewers to no end but that, undoubtedly, is part of the point. In today's world, beauty, emotional appeal, and utopian desire are ideals that harm.

# The Ambivalent Gaze of Thomas Ruff

During the politically traumatic yet economically prosperous period of the 1920s, a debate ensued in Germany about the role art should play in social affairs. The debate was only in part about the potential of art for political agency. It was mostly about defining the correct proximity of art to reality. As an aesthetic counterpoint to the angst of expressionism, and its preoccupation with the individual's responses to modern life, New Objectivity artists such as Otto Dix and August Sander proposed an art based on relative truths.

This debate carried a particular poignancy in the aftermath of Germany's armistice in 1918. As it turned out, the 1920s were also for Germany an antebellum society to an infinitely more terrible inferno.

The almost operatic teeter-totter between reason and sensibility, sobriety, and national self-absorption continues to be the central dialectic of German art. During the 1980s, at the height of Germany's immense influence on international contemporary art, neo-expressionism arrived to form one pole to the other pole of Düsseldorf School photography.

Graduated from the atelier of the noted artist/teacher team of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Ruff (b. West Germany, 1958) emerged at the apogee of neo-expressionism, in other words, at the starting moment of its decline. Ruff has since the mid-1980s developed a body of work that is structured rather like an archive of the most prevalent forms of photographic classification. These include standard portraiture, scientific images, surveillance pictures, photojournalism, and architectural photography.

Ruff's most celebrated channel of work is his monumentally scaled, view-camera-generated portraits of the artist's own generation of Germans. These pictures are monumental yet devoid of heroism and symbolic advocacy. In what has become a standard interpretation, Ruff's portraits are often read as homage to the moral burden that weighs down on the shoulders of Germany's youth despite their experiential distance from the horrors of a half century ago. Like a true archivist, Ruff does not say whether this is fair or not, it simply is so.

But there is perhaps another meaning to Ruff's pictures of utterly inert gazes, a meaning that may be difficult to speak. Among many of Germany's neighbours, among Jews and other targets of Nazi terror, there remains a persistent fear that the dream of the Thousand Year Reich remains, however dim, a burning ember formerly glowing amid the ruins of war—and now flickering faintly within the foundations of reconstruction. Ruff's portraits of glaciated gazes are an artistic address

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to this fear. They are images of absolute arrestment; they are faces that his camera has put into eternal hibernation from the continuing drama of historical unfolding.

# Dak'Art 98, The Dakar Biennale

There are no necessary links between the cosmopolitanism of Western art discourse and the practical participation of non-Western art epistemologies. This is not because the worldly aspirations of Western art discourse represent little more than empty rhetoric but because its language was never meant to be aimed beyond the imagination of the Western ego. Many have criticized modern art's primitivist impulses and the appropriation of African objects and motifs by artists such as Picasso, and rightly so—yet these tendencies can also be understood as logical and inevitable within the egocentric development of Western art's self-conception. In Claude Lévi-Strauss's "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955), chthonian beings—emanating from the netherworld beneath the terra (i.e., creatures from the earth)—are monsters that have to be destroyed because of their differences from Western cosmology. In Levi-Strauss's reading of Oedipus, these creatures are a metonymy for the violence of Western discourse toward all other discourses that refuse to deny humanity's earthly origins. Over and over again, the development of Western art is predicated on claiming non-Western art forms for itself.

Perhaps this has changed somewhat, as anxieties in the West about the virtue of its own thought no longer produces only indifference (or something worse) to the welfare of the Other but also produces the recognition of greater cultural interdependence. Still, a visit to Dakar, Senegal, on the occasion of Dak'Art—one of only two biennials of contemporary art in Africa, and the largest and most important—is a reminder of the multiplicity of modernities in the world, not just a singular one. In this instance, it is a modernity that expresses the continuing struggle to break free from Senegal's neo-colonial relationship with France. Taking in Dak'Art underlined, to my mind at least, the utterly oppressive role that the West continues to play in much of the non-Western world today.

Dak'Art was officially opened by the Senegalese President Abdou Diouf in a theatre that has seen a lot of wear and tear since the halcyon days of the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègre of 1966 for which it was built. Rather than Duke Ellington, James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, Josephine Baker, and other luminaries from the world's African diaspora, Dak'Art 96's opening ceremonies included an audience of officials from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, UNESCO, various curators of "African Art," mostly from America, and the men and women who make up Senegal's international ambassadorial corporates. Other than notable exceptions like the curator from London's excellent Institute of Contemporary Art and the independent American curator Mary Jane Jacob, there were very few of the Western art world

personages one would encounter at the opening of events such as Documenta or the Venice Biennale.

This would not necessarily be a bad thing, as the world is in dire need of alternative models for not only art but art systems, but Dak'Art's political influence is remote, weak, and a highly contained one. What was on view consisted almost entirely of paintings, invariably scaled for the easel. To be fair, this is in large part a reflection of the real economy, very poor and politically unstable, in which West African artists must work. Mere canvas and paints are expensive, nevermind the luxury of computers and video equipment for elaborate video art installations. A look at the content of the paintings, however, was another matter. There was very little in the way of political content, at least in the manner in which it is familiar in the West. Ironically, at least to me, the most politically engaging art to be found at Dak'Art was by diasporic artists such as Carrie Mae Weems. Also interesting were artists from South Africa like Willie Bester, for whom an entirely different set of circumstances affects their works.

Paintings tended to be historical homages to l'École de Dakar, the post-World War II art movement that was brought up in conversation by many of the artists with whom I spoke. Dialogues about art were generally closeted to this single French art movement which corresponded, not coincidentally, with the completion of West Africa's decolonization process. The École de Dakar, a group of painters who exhibited in the 1966 Festival, is now regarded as Senegal's most important declaration of artistic autonomy. That this *école* was never really an *école*, but named as such by André Malraux as he toured the festival, is just one more irony that one encounters in Dakar.

Perhaps I am showing my chauvinism, in demanding of the art that I saw a political concern that could not possibly be there in the way that I would recognize. I was told by an artist from Togo that I would have to fully discard all of my Western conceptions about art in order to begin the process of understanding his work. Only then would I start to see the political vitality of his paintings, which were, by and large, abstract to my eyes. Another artist mentioned to me that the conflation of art and life is a reality in Africa, not some theoretical carrot as it is often considered in the West. Perhaps they are right.

The reality I experienced at Dak'Art was a biennale that seemed rather purposeless, aside from dredging up the utopian ghosts of 1966. Yet, for all my criticism, which undoubtedly must reveal my prejudices, I did come away from Senegal with a deeper understanding of art, something which I seldom experience in the world of Chelsea galleries. I departed Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport thinking about

Dak'Art's potential as a politically and culturally significant voice in a world where the presence of contemporary art is becoming more pervasive. The potential is overwhelmingly there but the question of whether it can ever be realized is another matter entirely.



# On Board *The Raft of the Medusa*

1 Walter Friedländer, *David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 100.

*Towards the centre a rising, mounting movement begins. Here some of the shipwrecked (among them an Arab), have awakened from their apathy, and with lifted hands push excitedly towards the horizon, where the rescue ship appears. Then the single stream of the composition broadens out towards the sides, like the short arms of the Latin cross, through [sic] all the movement still points forward, and the central axis moves straight on to its triumphant summit, the slim, nude back of the Negro. Mounted on a barrel and supported by his comrades, waving a white cloth into the air, he is the final peak of a pyramid of moving and excited bodies.<sup>1</sup>*

—WALTER FRIEDLÄNDER, *David to Delacroix* (1952)

Friedländer's description of the composition of Théodore Géricault's famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, is rendered in a manner that suggests a kind of longing filled with sexual licence. His notation of an Arab, a Moor to be precise, and a black African is remarkably axiomatic, their racial difference subsumed within the relative benignness of descriptive analysis. Friedländer recognizes the subsumption as a pattern of erotic containment until the eye is directed to the painting's irruptive point—the handsome back of a young black man.

In Géricault's painting, everyone is literally on the same boat with hardly a shred of clothing to distinguish officer from seaman and slave from slave trader. Although the depicted scene is a tragic one, the grouping of bodies on the raft can be read unitarily as a community.

The raft functions as a platform of interspersed sexual and racial codes, metonymically split from the false decorousness and rigidly stratified constitution of French society of the period. More particularly, the composition of the human pyramid aboard the raft is meant to mirror the social composition of France's apparatus of empire, built to a large extent as it was on the backs of male African slaves.

Despite its apparent form as history painting, the viewing public for *The Raft of the Medusa* at the Salon of



Théodore Géricault, first sketch for *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819

1819 understood in great detail that the painting was essentially social commentary. The source material for Géricault's great work was a widely disseminated book jointly authored by Alexandre Corréard and B. Henri Savigny, the surgeon on the *Medusa*.<sup>2</sup> Based on eyewitness accounts of the 1816 disaster, the book, which was first published in 1817, transformed this particular tragedy at sea, a then common occurrence, into a nationwide *scandale célèbre* that challenged the return to rule of the Bourbon monarchy.

The Salon public was familiar with the events surrounding the *Medusa* as outlined in the book. They knew that the ship had foundered at sea off the Atlantic coast of Africa in part because of the incompetence of an inexperienced captain undeserving of his position but for his aristocratic birth. They knew that the *Medusa* was but a single link in their nation's extensive slave operations within which Arab Moors and French were instrumental in brokering new supplies of slaves. They would have discerned no irony in seeing Blacks represented aboard a frigate departed from France and headed for Senegal's Cap Vert, the infamous peninsula from which millions of slaves embarked for the Americas. The presence of the African had by Géricault's time become a not uncommon sight in France as the process of colonization increasingly effected, however unintentionally, a closer proximity of the races.

The resonance in Géricault's masterpiece owes considerably to its performance as a liminal picture. The image is of a moment between the aftermath of a disaster wrought by scandalous social conditions and the impending return to the same social conditions. The depicted scene is situated within an interregnum of deculturation far from the insistent and invariant structure of the then current world of European society. The hierarchy of differences that was inscribed prior to departure from Rochefort, France also existed, of course, aboard the frigate in terms of its segregated sleeping quarters and the quality and allotment of food that was given according to the varying degrees of birthright, status, and rank. This social classification was enforced right up until the moment of the shipwreck. The published narratives on the tragedy all charge there were insufficient lifeboats aboard. A state official, a new French governor of Senegal, his wife, and two daughters took two of the lifeboats, one for themselves and another for their trunks. As noted by Maureen Ryan, those left on the raft, about one hundred and fifty, were mostly workers and lower-ranked officers.<sup>3</sup> Their weapons had been removed from them amid mutinous episodes against the bourgeois passengers and officers. There were a few higher-ranked officers, including the original co-authors of the shipwreck narrative, the engineer Corréard and the ship's surgeon Savigny, who insisted on going on the

2 Michel Régis, *Géricault* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1992), 136.

3 Maureen Ryan, "Liberal Ironies, Colonial Narratives, and the Rhetoric of Art," in *Théodore Géricault: The Alien Body: Tradition in Chaos* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1997), 18–51.

4 Robert J.C. Young, *Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 6–19.

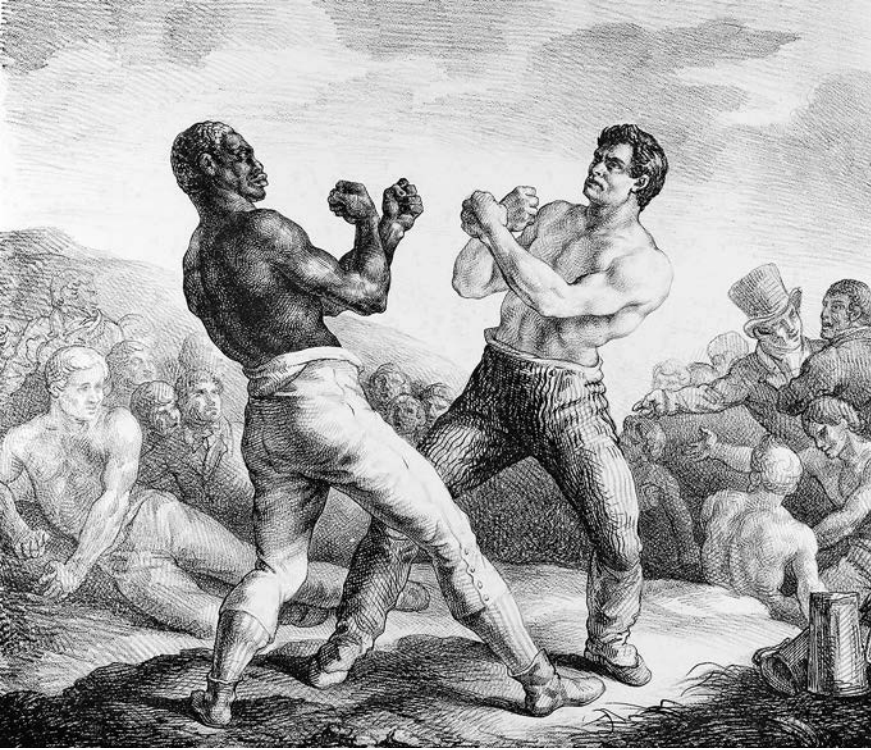
raft with the work crew. But it is important to note here that upon being rescued and in a Senegal hospital, Corréard complained bitterly that he as a gentleman was given the same treatment and food as were given his enlisted or lower-ranked colleagues.

The *Medusa* painting is an image that upsets power relations because it articulated modern ideas of multiple social roles but it could only do so on the largely imaginary and deculturated setting of Géricault's canvas. The drama at sea, in faraway African waters and on a primitive platform, provided the artist with a *tabula rasa* for his ideas of transforming racial and sexual consciousness; ideas that Géricault recognized would be difficult to express except as a conjuncture of communion and crisis. It is well documented by Anglas de Praviel, the royalist who submitted a conservative account of the events on the *Medusa*, that difference did exist aboard the raft despite the ensuing chaos. The point is constituting a political transgression in art, a risk he understood to exist in his *Medusa* work. In a feeble move to mitigate the political efficacy of his monumental work, Géricault entered his painting into the Salon with the simple title *Le Naufrage* (or *The Shipwreck*) without reference at all to the narrative whence it derived.

The knowledge that the Salon public possessed about the *Medusa* narrative shaped their expectations about *Le Naufrage*, which would later be renamed with its present title.

Conversely, Géricault understood as well the common terrain on which he and the public could meet. The important artistic problem for Géricault was how to negotiate a meeting of mutuality without ceding his art to mere illustration of historical fact. His solution was to highlight the salience of race and male sexuality in the raft narrative by dislodging both terms from their normative and socially fixed meanings. Throughout his career, Géricault insisted on the prominence of both discursive terms in the configuration of modernity.

The rationalization for a full realization of human freedom for slaves was consistently compromised by the faith invested in the guidance provided by positivistic thought and the empirical sciences that in Géricault's time made many racist claims on the person of the slave. A common view among Europeans held that the black body was a savage body, descended from a tribe of cannibals. Homologies between racist science and the slave trade were widely accepted because the equation of blacks with cannibalism, for example, offered the convenience of one more racial justification for slavery.<sup>4</sup> Both Géricault and the Salon public were familiar with the accounts of cannibalism that had taken place on the raft, measures taken out of desperation to survive. But in the artist's *Medusa* painting, cannibalism is not essentialized as a property intrinsic



Théodore Géricault, *Boxeurs (The Boxers)*, 1818

to the black person. Rather, it is something generalized to both the white body and black body. The artist seems to be saying that in a diseased situation anyone can become a cannibal.

Set against French contemporary ethos of the period, the raft operates as a notational model in which social identities are damaged and less than whole for want of a non-repressed accommodation of sexual and racial differences within culture. In this context, it is interesting to cite the many paintings and lithographs Géricault produced involving injured soldiers, one-legged men, and disembodied human parts. Equally significant are his many eloquent images of black men often depicted in equal terms to white men, of which lithographs such as *Le marechal-ferrant anglais* and *Boxeurs* are good examples. *Tête de negresse* and *Tête de noir* are portraiture full of compassion and almost shocking in their straightforward treatment of persons who could have been considered as less than full citizens in a racially and status conscious Bourbon society. For Géricault, the repressed modes of race and sex



Théodore Géricault, *Study of a Model*, 1818–19

represented the structuring principle for becoming undamaged and for the possible emergence of a new and wholesome subjectivity.

*The Raft of the Medusa* did not conform neatly to contemporary perceptions about alterity; what it more accurately conformed to were contemporary facts about alterity not yet understood. The discourse of colonization meant the increasing inscription of the Other within the space of the same. Géricault's *Medusa* functioned as a signpost of multiracial hybridity, one that effected what Homi Bhabha has described as the unfixing of the authority of colonial discourse by the voice of the Other.<sup>5</sup> As such, *The Raft of the Medusa* operates in what bell hooks refers to as a counter-hegemonic cultural production.<sup>6</sup> The painting is an expression of Géricault's reflection on the profound precariousness of traditional conceptions of race and sexuality at the dawn of the modern industrial age. He understood that to think historically about slavery was to grapple with a profound ambiguity, that slavery continued to thrive in a period marked by profound opposition.

This led Géricault to draw upon the subconscious force of the image of the black African in order to challenge its basis. His challenge came at a time when debates about the slave trade coincided with what Heinrich Heine has called the new revolutionary force of money. Norbert Elias has pointed out that "the reproduction of capital is tied to the reproduction of slaves, and thus directly or indirectly to the success of military campaigns."<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that international finance entered into the modern era after the French debacle at Waterloo in 1815, merely a year before the *Medusa* tragedy, when there was a decisive shift in influence from nation-states to financial institutions such as the House of Rothschild and Baring Brothers.

The penetration of European money into Africa, Asia, and the Americas spurred new entrepreneurial agencies of European colonialism that established a global division of labour of unprecedented exploitative power. Despite its language of indignity, opposition to slavery was often in practice an argument for a new form of indentured labour. The work of slaves would be recast in new terms, as agricultural labourers legally and economically bonded to France, free only to the extent of the slave wages offered.<sup>8</sup>

In an environment of such moral ambiguity, most art historical treatments of *The Raft of the Medusa* have concentrated on the allegorical functioning of the painting; its image of despair and degeneracy is interpreted as Géricault's criticism of the social body. The sub-theme of slavery is read dually as either an expression

5 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (spring 1984): 125–33.

6 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 173–84.

7 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 305.

8 James Walwin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992): 301–16.

of liberal sentiment against the enslavement of the bourgeoisie by the aristocratic values of the restored Bourbon order or as a caution against enslavement by the emerging factory economy. In fact there has been surprisingly little analysis in terms of the painting's other functioning as a radical expression of racial and sexual permutability within modernity.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Géricault's rendering of the human pyramid aboard the raft as an inter-affiliated mass of *ad eundem* identities prompted many contemporary critics to describe the painting as illegible. The artist was faulted for not abiding by the conventional exigencies of history painting and especially for failing to meet the demand of literal lucidity. Rather than following the classical law of an overall planarity, of precisely distributed objects and figures, Géricault offered an interlocked structure of interchangeable and multiple identities. As a result, public and critic alike were often confused by what they saw. At the 1819 Salon, there was barely a mention, if at all, of the black figure at the all-important apex of the raft's human triangle. Aside from social art historical and psychoanalytic treatments, such as those advanced by Maureen Ryan,<sup>10</sup> there has been little in the way of post-structural analysis of the discourse of multiple racial and masculine sexual identities, a discourse that resonates so abundantly within the *Medusa* painting. A singular exception is Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby's psychoanalytic treatment of the subject of cannibalism on the raft.<sup>11</sup>

The black body is often allegorized in art as an object of desire. According to Frantz Fanon, this is so because as the Other of whiteness, the black body has been culturally and historically constructed as a phobic object, sexually and morally deviant from the white.<sup>12</sup> In his *Medusa* painting, Géricault problematized contemporary views of the black person by not only inverting his actual social position to that of the potentially heroic position of saviour, but also by amalgamating him into a multiracial organic paradigm. Moreover, as Ryan and others have noted: "Where the published story of the shipwreck disaster noted one black African on the raft, Géricault multiplies this number to three in the history painting."<sup>13</sup> Géricault may have increased the number of Africans to further consolidate their pictorial presence as an integrational gesture. By doing so, he ensured that no single person, including the young black man at the top of the pyramid, could be construed as exceptional to the projection of the whole. What was important to Géricault was the idea that difference and individuation do not threaten the whole, but may even advance it. By recognizing the ramifications of this in his now famous painting, Géricault also understood well the attendant risks involved.

9 Ryan, "Liberal Ironies."

10 Ibid.

11 Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "The Effects of Hunger: Cannibalism and Other Intimacies of Empire," Géricault, History and Trauma International Conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, October 1997.

12 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967), 165–90.

13 Ryan, "Liberal Ironies."

# Untitled

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I've always had the same wish whenever I visit Venice. I would like to experience it the way Dirk Bogarde did at the opening of Visconti's *Death in Venice*, the film based on Thomas Mann's great novella.<sup>1</sup> Bogarde is on a boat and entering Venice from the seaside. The atmosphere is grey and sanguine. The voyage is languorous, but then Venice opens up and



Still from *Death in Venice*, directed by Luchino Visconti and starring Dirk Bogarde, 1971

its beauty and fragility only makes the heaviness of the mood all that more saturating. Like all dreams, the end is an idea; it is the passage that is real. Also like all dreams, nightmares and regrets lurk behind every turn. As we all know, dreams can collapse into nightmares very readily. In fact, they are interlinked.

In my dream of Venice, I arrive from the sea and the day is cold and layered in fog. I cannot see Venice, but I know it is impending. I can sense it in my bones. It is very easy to slip into a kind of aphasia, a kind of deep trance. The noise of the small motor, the splash of the sea, would lull me very easily. During these moments, I see people running and screaming in fear. I also see slaves tucked into cramped quarters on their way to the Americas. I see old and young struggling to escape to a less violent place; many of them do not make it. I see the horror of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, another story of a boat trip. I think that *Death in Venice* is not so separable from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in many ways.

Every so often, the sound of seagulls and the smell of the sea's brine would re-alert me to Venice. And I would be lulled again, only this time by thoughts of its impossible beauty and perfection. It is what gives the world hope and, as in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, it would be a splendid place to die.

1 Mann's novella *Death in Venice* was first published in German in 1912. Luchino Visconti's film of the same name was released in 1971. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* appeared serially in 1899 and in book form in 1902. *The Wings of the Dove*, by Henry James, was published in 1902.

# Canadian Cultural Policy

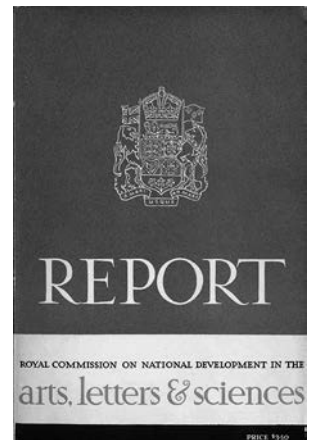
A Problem of  
Metaphysics

A quip from former Canadian prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874–1950) contends that too much geography rather than too little history afflicts Canada. Add to this the racial and ethnic diversity of the Canadian population and the problem of how to forge and project Canadian culture becomes especially difficult. But this is a problem rooted in paradox because the multi-cultural composition of Canada’s population was to a significant degree a consequence of its social engineering of culture that began in full force immediately after the Second World War and then developed in two principal stages.

The first stage was marked by the establishment of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, better known as the Massey Commission, in 1949. Massey was a two-year inquiry that had as its purpose the setting of Canadian cultural policy, including the principles of governance of communications, film, television, and arts agencies. It was instrumental in the establishment of many of Canada’s now sacrosanct institutions including the National Library (Library and Archives Canada as of 2004), and the Canada Council for the Arts. While the Commission’s report was liberally sprinkled with praise for Canada’s “variety and richness of Canadian life” that “promises a healthy resistance to the standardization which is so great a peril to modern civilization,” it was in fact a document of the intellectual anxieties of Canada’s ruling anglophone elite worried about the ascending signs of regional discontent which they believed themselves historically designated to resolve.<sup>1</sup> Despite the constituting, albeit racially problematic, principle of Canada as a nation founded by two peoples, the English and the French, the Canadian federation has traditionally been a compact between the centre and the regions. The centre is represented by the ruling anglophone elite of Ontario along with a number of appointed Québécois aides-de-camp, and the regions would comprise the rest of Canada including Quebec. The task of the commission as it defined it was a difficult one: how to construct an identity for a nation that was comprised of isolated regions of diverse histories and to which the threat of American influences was always present.

The second stage was represented by the formal adoption in 1971 of the Multiculturalism Policy and its attendant Canadian Multiculturalism Act. The federal multiculturalism program formalized support for the idea of Canadian identity as constituted in its diversity of culture, an idea that was only implicit in Massey. Multicultural diversity was designed to be the basis of the

1 The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, Chapter II: The Forces of Geography, Government of Canada 1949–1951, Section II.



Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949–51

2 Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *The Essential Trudeau* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 146. The full passage is: “Uniformity is neither desirable nor possible in a country the size of Canada. We should not even be able to agree upon the kind of Canadian to choose as a model, let alone persuade most people to emulate it. There are surely few policies potentially more disastrous for Canada than to tell all Canadians that they must be alike. There is no such thing as a model or ideal Canadian. What could be more absurd than the concept of an ‘all Canadian’ boy or girl? A society that emphasises uniformity is one which creates intolerance and hate. A society which eulogises the average citizen is one which breeds mediocrity. What the world should be seeking, and what we in Canada must continue to cherish, are not concepts of uniformity but human values: compassion, love, and understanding.”

cultural pillar of Canada’s foreign and domestic policy. In many ways, its logic is the inverse of Massey. The aim of Massey was about building institutions that would unify a compartmentalized nation and about underlining Canada’s historical roots in Europe, primarily Britain and France, as a means to deflect Canadians from the pernicious influences of American culture. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is about fostering and servicing Canada’s compartmentalization by diluting the primacy of Canada’s English and French roots as a means to reflect a more congenial and less materialistic version of American culture. That Canadian society has become over time increasingly like American society was made profusely clear during the 1992 George Bush versus Bill Clinton US presidential campaign. When then-president Bush made a plea to Americans for a kinder, gentler America, political wags in both the United States and Canada were quick to reply that Canada is that kinder, gentler America.

Multiculturalism came to parallel Canada’s multilateralist voice on the international stage of politics; the former would strengthen the legitimacy of the latter. Hand in hand, a multicultural domestic policy and a multilateral international policy would ensure Canadian influence through a wide spectrum of forums such as the United Nations, the Arctic Council, NATO, La Francophonie, the British Commonwealth, and various Asia-Pacific organizations. Canada would be the primary *habitus* of the enlightened, democratic state, a respected and credible mediator between entities of power and entities on the margins. Multiculturalism would represent the triumph of the discourse of the citizen and demonstrate to the world the true cosmopolitanism of Canada. Domestically, it represented a political accommodation of the old anglophone elite to an emerging francophone elite. Conveniently, the country would continue to be led and administered by the perspectives of the old anglophone elite. After all, multiculturalism was their idea!

Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919–2000) aggressively promoted the idea of a national culture constituted by its cultural pluralism. He argued that: “Uniformity is neither desirable nor possible in a country the size of Canada. We should not even be able to agree upon the kind of Canadian to choose as a model, let alone persuade most people to emulate it.”<sup>2</sup> To those who argue that multiculturalism is a dangerous recipe for a fractiously decentralized state, Trudeau’s response was to make a virtue of the paradox. In 1970, at the annual meeting of the Canadian Press, Trudeau argued: “Canada has often been called a mosaic, but I prefer the image of a tapestry, with its many threads and colours, its beautiful shapes, its intricate subtlety. If you go behind a

tapestry, all you see is a mass of complicated knots. We have tied ourselves in knots, you might say. Too many Canadians only look at the tapestry of Canada that way. But if they would see it as others do, they would see what a beautiful, harmonious thing it really is.”<sup>3</sup>

By no means were debates about multiculturalism solely a Canadian concern. According to the late French social philosopher Michel de Certeau (1925–1986), the idea of giving voice to minority cultures was a salient feature of the events of May 1968. Certeau believed in the “exemplary value” of the immigrant to the French state. In language with striking parallels to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, he wrote in his seminal book, *The Capture of Speech*: “By becoming more open and more tolerant with regard to immigrants, we would also learn how to relativize our codes of conduct, our way of understanding ‘high culture,’ and this would allow us to confer on anonymous inventions the arts of practical creation and everyday culture, and on what is made by practitioners of everyday life their own cultural role.”<sup>4</sup> Certeau also argued for public assistance and regional endowments to minority and regional cultures, again in language similar to official policy in Canada.

Canadian intellectuals, beginning in the post–Second World War administration of Louis St. Laurent (1882–1973) and continuing through to that of Pierre Trudeau, theorized that Canada’s own cultural landscape would develop to resemble what inevitably the global cultural landscape would become. As such, Canada would occupy the high ground of the world’s future. What is more is that multiculturalism would have the political advantage of an idea born out of difference with the United States. In lieu of America’s melting pot, Canada advanced the image of the Canadian mosaic. Rather than a culture rooted in individual sameness, Canada’s society would be rooted in consensus from difference. Or at least that was the idea. What Canada did not anticipate was a world in which nations would redefine their particular cultural and foreign interests in fundamental ways. It did not anticipate a world in which private actors would become such a threat to public functions, nor did it anticipate the resurgence of the United States in monopolizing the world’s foreign policy. Lastly, Canada did not anticipate that its agenda of multiculturalism would be resisted by the turns of history itself, as concerns about demographic balance deepened rather than abated.

The critical socio-historical period during which the contemporary discourse of Canadian culture was produced spans from the 1950s through to the beginning of the 1970s. Undoubtedly, there were many formative events in the history of Canadian culture predating this period that can be cited; for example, the founding of Canada’s first public

3 Ibid., 177.

4 Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 135. Much of Certeau’s book is an analysis of the events of May 1968 with the central perspective that the events represented a collective demand for personal emancipations extending to previously unheard or unrecognized voices, a development that would lead to what he hoped would be a new culture in France.

5 For a historical accounting of Canadian anti-Americanism, see Jack Lawrence Granatstein, *Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996).

6 The European Community was a forerunner of the European Union.

7 Foreign Publisher Advertising Services Act, Hansard, Parliament of Canada, no. 140, 22 October 1998.

radio broadcaster in 1932. But the twenty years of the 1950s and 1960s represented two decades in which an unprecedented number of cultural propositions passed into legislation with the mandate of fostering, promoting, and defending Canadian cultural production and services. During this period, the federal government passed the recommendations of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, the Broadcasting Act, the Canada Council Act, the recommendations of the Report of the Royal Commission on Book Publishing, the Canadian Film Development Corporation Act, and the Telesat Canada Act, which established a Crown corporation to exclusively provide satellite communications services to Canadians.

Canada has the ambiguous fortune of sharing its border with the United States of America, the world's largest producer of cultural commodities. The high standard of living enjoyed by most Canadians is a consequence of Canada's vassal economic relationship with its southern neighbour. In matters of culture, Canada cannot make decisions without looking over its shoulder, as Canadians are ever conscious of the imperatives of their geopolitical location. In the immortal words of former Social Credit leader Robert Thompson (1914–1997), “the Americans are our best friends—whether we like it or not.”<sup>5</sup>

To American eyes, cultural sovereignty is little more than another thorny issue in the litigious world of economic and trade negotiations. The degree to which cultural issues are entangled with trade issues that in turn spill into questions of national sovereignty can be illustrated with a recent ruling by the World Trade Organization against the European Community<sup>6</sup> in favour of the United States on the matter of bananas. Americans cited the victory as it sought punitive actions against Canada for its legislation against “split-run” magazines that siphon off advertising revenue from smaller Canadian publications by satellite printing twice an issue of, say, *Time* magazine to accommodate advertisements from Canadian sources. Canada objects to split-run magazines because they undermine the viability of Canada's publications industry while catering almost exclusively to American or foreign editorial content.<sup>7</sup>

Canadian cultural policy, from its inception, was guided by many elements of the Old Left's criticism of America's society of unfettered capitalism. Canada has always been socially democratic in its organization of its capitalist economy. Canadian intellectuals have traditionally worked in concert with the national government to formulate an intermediary position for Canada between left and right ideologies, First and Third worlds. As a contiguous neighbour of the United States, it was necessary for Canada to define its liberalism deftly, with an incomplete

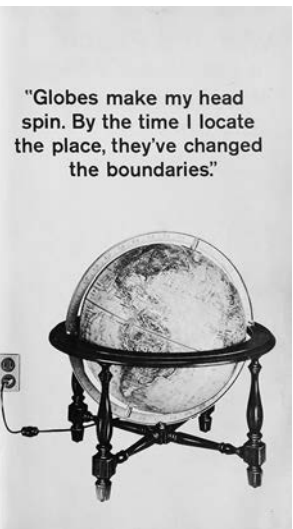
character. It was an ascending view that by the late 1960s, conventional left/right divisions and definitions had been displaced by the idea of global conquest by one or the other superpower. This was a political view shared by many countries including communist ones, the most important being China, a country Canada formally recognized during the Trudeau administration to the consternation of the United States and well in advance of the same decision later adopted by many Western nations. The formulation for Canadian cultural policy, therefore, both in its domestic and external uses, had to be a metaphorical formulation without direct reference to specific political resolution or commitment.

Under these paradoxical conditions, in which the level of general wealth to Canadians is assured by its highly interlocked economy with the United States but at the expense of the deep moral compromise to Canada's cultural integrity, Canada devised to constitute itself heterogeneously. Such a metaphysical response to the moral hankering of nationalism owed much to the spryly articulated ideas of Canadian thinkers such as Harold Innis (1894–1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980). During the two decades immediately following the Second World War, Innis and McLuhan propelled Canada to a leadership role in transportation and communications theory. Both were intellectually indebted to the liberal-pragmatist perspectives of John Dewey, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim. In the case of McLuhan, there was never a glint of despair nor foreboding in his views about Canada's place in a technologically revolutionizing world, at least, not until the end of the 1960s, when the project of developing a new cultural infrastructure was fully in place.<sup>8</sup>

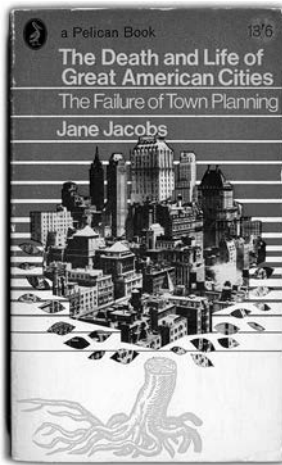
McLuhan's thoughts about a future Global Village of electronically rendered synchronic relations and the degree to which reality is shaped by the effects of media have proven brilliantly prescient. While cautious about the possible danger posed by changing technologies, McLuhan was generally positive in his outlook of its applications. He said in 1961 that, "the compressional, implosive nature of the new electric technology is retrogressing Western Man back from the open plateaus of literate values and into the heart of tribal darkness, into what Joseph Conrad termed 'the Africa within.'"<sup>9</sup> Such an idea was taken as a directive by Canadian policy-makers to ensure that Canada maintained a position of mediation between an increasingly communications-based modernity that signalled the advent of what has come to be known as globalization and fundamentalist reactions which could lead to the return

8 Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1989), 219. Marchand here discusses McLuhan's thinking that television may not "cool" people down but may exacerbate social tensions by its tendency to imbue images with iconic significance.

9 Marshall McLuhan, *The Essential McLuhan*, ed. E. McLuhan and F. Zingrone (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1995), 258. This quote is from McLuhan's famous 1961 interview in *Playboy* magazine in which he discusses many of the social issues afflicting Western society including racism, US politics, changing sexual mores, social unrest, and violence.



Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, 1968



Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961

of ultra-nationalist sentiments. Presaging such a role for Canada and the implementation of multiculturalism as a policy of state, McLuhan said: “Individual talents and perspectives don’t have to shrivel within a retribalized society; they merely interact within a group consciousness that has the potential for releasing far more creativity than the old atomized culture. Literate man is alienated, impoverished man; retribalized man can lead a far richer and more fulfilling life—not the life of a mindless drone but of the participant in a seamless web of interdependence and harmony.”<sup>10</sup> Also in 1961, McLuhan predicted during an address to the Humanities Association of Canada that the arts and sciences in Canada would experience an era of unprecedented accomplishment. Many Canadians, including the burgeoning numbers of separatist nationalists in Quebec, shared McLuhan’s optimism, albeit with different objectives in mind.<sup>11</sup>

That same year saw the publication of Jane Jacobs’s (1916–2006) seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, one of the most influential books in the history of urban studies.<sup>12</sup> Her indictment of the failure of urban life in America, which she attributed to a general moral failure in American society as a whole, was a case lesson for Canadians who by and large lived in far safer and cleaner cities. Many of the problems confronting the United States seemed to elude Canada. While the razing of the Pruitt–Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, the poster child of America’s failed housing projects, evoked the twin scourges of poverty and racism, Canada showed off Habitat at Expo 67, Moshe Safdie’s (b. 1938) innovative and supposedly inexpensive housing solution for the world.<sup>13</sup> McLuhan’s gibe that “Canada is a Third-World country” seemed a small price to pay in exchange for a sense of smug superiority over Canada’s superpower neighbour. Canadians felt prideful of their country and of their prime minister, Lester B. Pearson (1897–1972), who had won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his role in mediating the end of the Suez Crisis. The Pearson achievement was taught to Canadian schoolchildren as an example of the manner in which Canada would seek self-definition, through support for multilateralism in its outward voice and multiculturalism in its domestic voice.

The apogee of Canadian self-confidence came in 1967 in Montreal during Expo 67 with its utopian theme of “Man and His World.” In the centenary year of Canada’s founding, a world-class exposition took place that projected a remarkable range of ideas on improving the future of humanity through the use of new and emerging electronic advances. The spirit of McLuhan, Innis,

10 Ibid, 259.

11 Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan*, 159.

12 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

13 For an exclusively semi-otic analysis of the controversy surrounding the Pruitt–Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, see Charles Jencks’s 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 5th edition (New York: Rizzoli, 1987). Jencks argues that the failure of Pruitt–Igoe is owed to a problem of non-identity between the poor inhabitants of the project and the erudite architects. Elizabeth Birmingham, Lee Rainwater, and others have criticized Jencks arguing that structural racism was a central issue for its failure. For more, see Birmingham’s excellent text





Expo 67, *Man and His World*, Montreal, 1967



Exterior view of the Canada Pavilion with RCMP officer on guard, Expo 67, Montreal

Glenn Gould (1932–1982), Safdie, and Pearson permeated the fair, not to mention Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) (the National Film Board of Canada had produced six films based on his ideas about the history of urbanity), and Alvin Toffler (1928–2016). By 1967, McLuhan was in monthly consultations with Pierre Trudeau, then an important member of Pearson’s cabinet.<sup>14</sup> The optimism of the centennial celebrations carried over into 1968 with the election of the youthful and worldly Trudeau, while the conclusion of the “summer of love” of 1967 in the United States ushered in one of the most violently radicalized and apocalyptic years in American history. It became a Canadian cliché of 1968 to mention the stories of Canadians watching American cities burn from the comforts of their homes just across the border. That same year, Jane Jacobs would herself make the move to Canada, settling in Toronto, a city she has consistently praised for its urban fabric. To Canadians, the future could not seem brighter. This applied to Quebec as well, where the future seemed assured despite often divisive and vigorous debates among that province’s intelligentsia about how best to fulfill Quebec’s rendezvous with destiny.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Canada today, passenger train travel was still important in 1967, and many Canadians travelled by rail to the Montreal exposition. For those who could not visit the fair, the fair would come to them. An important adjunct to Expo 67 was several so-called Confederation Trains that traversed the nation in every direction that the cross-continental

“Reframing the Ruins: Pruitt-Igoe, Structural Racism, and African American Rhetoric as a Space for Cultural Critique,” *Positions*, no. 2 (1998).

14 Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan*, 196.

15 See Pierre Berton’s *1967: Canada’s Turning Point* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1997) for a discussion of Quebec nationalist sentiments erupting during the controversial visit of French president Charles De Gaulle to Expo 67 and his exhortation of “Vive le Québec libre!” Equally agitational was the publication of Pierre Vallières’s manuscript *White Niggers of America*. Vallières’s text was another clarion cry for the separation of Quebec from Canada. It garnered significant sympathy from independence groups the world over, including many voices from non-aligned countries.

16 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

17 Tom Henighan, *The Presumption of Culture* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1996), 10-11, 63, 120-21.

railway tracks would lead them. The bridging of the Canadian expanse by train is an important symbol of almost mythic dimension in the narrative of Canada. The Confederation Trains, redolent in mythic connotations of Canadiana, were in essence an updated version of the agitprop trains of the early Soviet period. Symbolically, they presaged the establishment of a nationwide network of art collectivities emanating from the centre and extending to the farthest margins. They also issued the hope of a future released from regional tensions, including regional nationalism, through a horizontally syndicated state that could respond to all parts of the country and all minority groups within it in non-hierarchical and non-conforming ways.

The operating framework for art in Canada was developed, in part, as a critique of the American art system. At precisely the time when the infrastructure for Canada's publicly funded artists' gallery networks was near completion in the early 1970s, there was much concurrent debate about the collapse of art in a social environment which blamed modernist concepts and rationalizations for the many failings in America's urban life. In art, the early 1970s heralded the arrival of high modernism's point of *reductio ad absurdum*. Conceptual art's iconoclastic, aesthetic politics was as much a critical response to the mounting phenomenon of globalization and its pressures to disperse previously concentrated cultural discourses as it was a symbol of what Jean-François Lyotard has called "universal finality."<sup>16</sup>

The idea of the end of art or, at least, of the old system of art, appealed to those Canadians who saw this as an historical occasion for Canada to advance a better model, one in which Canadian art and culture could be appreciated through domestically developed criteria. Paradoxically, the Canadian model could serve as an example to the world. Certain nationalists of Canada have expressed the hope that within such an indigenously produced model, aesthetic formalism would cease to be of significant interest to Canadian artists, citing it as an asocial characteristic endemic to contemporary American art. In language that unwittingly echoes the justification for socialist realism, Canadian writer Tom Henighan (b. 1934) has argued that art-for-art's-sake movements would be of less importance in the absence of a flagrantly materialist environment and a powerful elite of private patrons. Canada's art system would encourage the development of aesthetic heterogeneity and cultural diversity. Canadian art would escape the contradictions of foreign-developed ideas of high culture and the "social corruption of capitalism."<sup>17</sup>

In 1969, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax emerged as the most important art education institution in Canada with a reputation that transcended into the international art arena. Its

program was deeply supportive of conceptual art, and the school kept a residency studio in New York City.<sup>18</sup> In terms of national identity, it was a time of supreme self-confidence among Canadian artists who were generally open to those features of the new American and European art that could proffer lessons for Canadian art. On the other side of the country that same year, Image Bank was founded in Vancouver. Again, its development was a response to an American model, namely Ray Johnson's (1927–1995) New York Correspondence School.<sup>19</sup> Again, Canadian artists would take from American art what useful lessons it offered for Canadian art. It is important to be reminded here just how late the idea of modern and contemporary art was in arriving and establishing a modicum of national consciousness in Canada. Prior to the 1950s, artistic modernity in Canada still meant an attachment to landscape painting and other traditional cultural norms of art.

Image Bank borrowed its title from a statement by Claude Lévi-Strauss: “The decision that everything must be taken account of facilitates the creation of an image bank.”<sup>20</sup> Its spirit consistent with André Malraux's concept of a museum without walls, albeit without Malraux's standard-bearer framing of high culture, Image Bank sought to extend art through the postal and other communications systems such as the Telex. It stated the goals in almost Baudrillardian terms sans the double meanings: “As artists we are information, resource, image banks concerned with data covering the spectrum from cultural awareness to professional knowledge, understanding the overall image into potential has enabled us to develop formats which allow maximum involvement while remaining impartial to the specific kinds of information in process, creating a valid information economy.”<sup>21</sup>

What is noteworthy here is the parallelism between national artistic development and national economic policy, a conflation that has never met with much concern among Canadian artists, all too eager to accept government largesse without critical reflection on its possible constraints on artistic independence. The American artist Vito Acconci (1940–2017) has written that “the electronic age redefines public as a composite of privates.” Acconci worried about the dystopian side of the promise of communications, the image, and the spectacle. He worried about the electronic age taking control out of individual hands and placing it “in the will of the other, whether that other is called God or Magic or The Corporation or The Government.”<sup>22</sup> In Canada, the conventional view among most artists, with regard to the question of art and culture, is that the government is good.

And why not? Canadian artists knew a good thing when they saw it. Since the first artist-run centre opened in Toronto in 1971, the network of artist-run centres has expanded to nearly every part of the country.

18 AA Bronson, *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Toronto: The Power Plant Gallery for Contemporary Art, 1987), 42. Noted visitors to NSCAD included Joseph Kosuth, Michael Asher, Dan Graham, Jan Dibbets, John Baldessari, Jackie Winsor, and others.

19 *Ibid.*, 41.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172–73.

Almost entirely assisted by public funds, these venues, from their inception, would highlight multimedia art, performance, installation art, some feminist and racially based art, and other art with a socially critical point of view. Many were endowed with the most advanced video and computing equipment of the time. Canadian artists would be drawn to these centres in lieu of private galleries, which were few in number and generally conservative in what they exhibited.

As such, there was a particular look or at least approach to Canadian art predicated on the idea of aesthetic dissemination, technical literacy, and social concerns, primarily issues of identity through space and time. Somewhat ironically, as the New York and European art world loses some of its drawing power due to dissemination of contemporary interest in the rest of the world, it still retains its influence through more horizontally conceived syndication of its structure. This contradiction, somewhat Canadian in character, has resulted in irony. International art now looks very much like Canadian art has looked since the 1970s and '80s, adopting many of the formal strategies long developed and employed by Canadian artists.

In a perfect cradle-to-coffin scenario, a Canadian artist in 1980 could conceivably receive a financial grant from the government to produce work, which could then be shown in an artist-run space from which the artist would receive an exhibition fee and perhaps a residency stipend. The artist could get to the place of exhibition with assistance from a travel grant. Afterward, the artist could make a submission to the Canada Council Art Bank to purchase the exhibited art. A jury comprised of other artists, each representative of a region in Canada, would make a decision about the purchase. If, at some future time, the artist wanted to repurchase work sold to the Art Bank, he or she needed only to pay the original purchase price plus a supplementary charge for storage, maintenance, and administration for the period that the work was kept in the Art Bank. The important point is that at every stage of the hypothetical but highly possible scenario, Canadian artists are the ones to don the hats of the curator, the critic, and the collector. In the name of a non-hierarchical system of artistic measurement, Canadian artists would be evaluated first and foremost by Canadian artists, peer groups in effect, without the need to rely on expert opinions from non-artists. An adverse effect of all this, intended or otherwise, has been a concomitant weakness in terms of the quality, size, and dedication of Canada's corps of curators and art critics. To wit, the complete absence of any book that critically and theoretically addresses in a historically comprehensive manner developments in Canadian art over the last thirty years. Dennis Reid's (b. 1943) *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* of 1973 is the last

useful book to comprehensively examine an important component of Canadian art, that of painting. It does not cover developments in Canadian painting beyond 1965.

No one has understood the condition of contemporary art in Canada more than General Idea. If good art must lend understanding to the life and times of the environment from which it emerged, then General Idea are perhaps the most important Canadian artists of the multicultural era. The art of General Idea has been a consistent expression of all the best and worst characteristics of Canadian artistic culture, including its bureaucratic proclivities. With the utmost in self-conscious aplomb and grant-writing skills, the art activities of General Idea have mirrored the logic of the Canadian cultural infrastructure in all its branches from publications to art-production centre. Bureaucracy loves nothing better than to see its own image extended, even if the terms of the extension include mockery.

Fittingly, for all its attributes, General Idea always remained but a conception, an invented cultural corporation that in many ways does not exist and never did exist. The same might be said of Toronto, Canada's de facto art centre. Speaking in praise of the artistic culture in his home base of Toronto, AA Bronson (b. 1946), a member of General Idea, stated: "As for Toronto's diversity, it is clear that Toronto has no specific regional characteristics. It is rather a mosaic of regional characteristics from other parts of the country, here thrust into discontinuous disarray. Toronto is the only Canadian city in which the art scene is continually fracturing, and thrives by that fracturing."<sup>23</sup> Bronson's malapropism is a testament to what Canadian historian Jack Granatstein (b. 1939) has quoted from Gad Horowitz (b. 1936): "Multiculturalism is the masochistic celebration of Canadian nothingness."<sup>24</sup> In deference to Trinh T. Minh-ha's (b. 1952) notion of "the Centre is a Margin,"<sup>25</sup> Canada's artistic centre is neither a centre nor a margin; it is but a centrifuge, a study for specialists in chaos theory.

Today, Canadian culture is beleaguered, and everything from multiculturalism to foreign aid to public support for cultural institutions such as the venerable Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is up for dismantling, reduced to skeletal frames by funding cuts. Worse is the bankruptcy of ideas regarding a retort and a new *raison d'être* that could provide discursive weight to countering the attacks and not merely defending from them. Defenders of the old status quo err in the belief that the re-establishment of firmer levels of funding would solve all woes. For example, the temporary reprieve



General Idea, *FILE Magazine* (featuring the 1968–1984 *FILE* Retrospective), vol. 6, nos. 1–2 (1984)

23 Bronson, *From Sea to Shining Sea*, 12.

24 J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 1998), 108.

25 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "No Master Territories," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 215–18.

26 See Tony Manera's *A Dream Betrayed: The Battle for the CBC* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1996) for a measure of the incapacity of many of Canada's cultural mandarins to respond effectively to downsizing pressures. Manera is a former head of the CBC. Also see Tom Henighan's *The Presumption of Culture* for an analysis of Donna Scott's "indifferent" and "ineffectual" response to threats to the Art Bank. Scott was head of the Canada Council Art Bank.

27 Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 50–52.

from funding cuts to institutions such as the Canada Council has not meant that the ideological wars against such institutions have gone away.<sup>26</sup> Global multiculturalism has become a global marketplace of culture, perpetuated constantly by Hollywood, Disney, and McDonald's, and despite good intentions, it is a development Canada cannot stand against alone.

Why this is happening has much to do with the logic of capitalist developments and the collapse of a credible left voice in the world scene. But perhaps it also has something to do with the contradictions in Canadian cultural policy, contradictions that can no longer withstand the weight of the realpolitik of globalization. The numerous official acts and legislation involved in the development and defence of Canadian cultural services were intended as a bulwark against what Canadians perceived as the dangerous mass appeal and marketing prowess of American perspectives. The majority of Canadians saw support for federally assisted cultural entities as indispensable services that assured the protection of their cultural interests. Even more impressive is the fact that there has not been a single Canadian artist of consequence in the last thirty years who has not benefitted significantly from Canadian government financial assistance in one manner or another—not a single one. Of course, on the other hand, this is also a measure of the degree of insinuation by the government into cultural affairs.

In a world in which cultural issues are increasingly arbitrated under the rules of the World Trade Organization or economic pacts such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada's insistence on the right to exert sovereignty over cultural matters is now viewed with ascendant objection by laissez-faire economists as a line in the sand against global free trade. In addition, by revoking the hegemonic assumptions of Canada's two founding nations document, that is, as a country founded by the English and the French, multiculturalism was intuitively counter-discursive. Multiculturalism as a national policy is inherently hostile to the idea of *nation* while paradoxically it sponsors an idea of essential differences between cultural groups. Frantz Fanon has written extensively about the dialectical linkage between nation and culture, that the absence of the former necessarily leads to the emaciation of the latter.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Canadian cultural actions have become increasingly defensive and paralyzed, philosophically confused about how best to escape the textual trap set by not only the discourses inscribed in the GATT, the WTO, and other economic contracts, but by its own historical and rhetorical contradictions.

Que faire? In 1965, in the midst of rising Canadian triumphalism regarding Canada's cultural and intellectual identity, John Porter

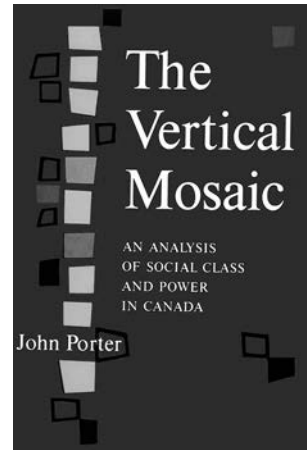
(1921–1979) published his seminal book, *The Vertical Mosaic*.<sup>28</sup> Porter's book was a sweeping and highly detailed analysis of social and economic inequality in Canada; it has since become the primer for subsequent Canadian sociological studies. As implied by the book's title, Canada's official rhetoric of a cultural mosaic masks the pernicious degree to which Canadian society is vertically conceived and administered, from the top down. As a somewhat inverted but analogous comparison, the organizational functioning of Canadian art and culture appears non-hierarchical and horizontally efficacious, but what is masked is the protean and assimilative character of its Officialdom.

Lawrence Meir Friedman (b. 1930) has decried the rootless and atomized character of American life as a "horizontal society" *in extremis*.<sup>29</sup> The anomie of contemporary American life is linked to a visual culture dominated by the corporate ethos, a connection that Friedman repeatedly points out but is unable to blame. As Canadian society evolves to resemble the greater social detachment of American society, Canadian art and culture continues to define, on behalf of the state, the old rhetoric of an increasingly phlegmatic and false Canadian polity.<sup>30</sup>

Given what I have called the metaphysical nature of cultural identity in Canada, any final answer to the problem must include change in the way that cultural identity has been posed and responded to philosophically. In practical terms, certain questions need to be addressed. Is it possible, for example, to recognize artists who happen to come from particular regions—with regional situations which have added to an understanding of their art—as artists first, rather than the syndication of artist and region? Is it possible to have a selection process—for, say, the Venice Biennale—not be perceived as a contest of regional redress? Is it possible to see that the present system of definition and structure fails to address the reality of younger Canadian artists by perpetuating a reality of Canadian culture that no longer exists? Many more questions can and need to be asked. To every question, there can only be a singular response, one and the same—yes.

## 2011 Addendum

I should think that at this point in time in the context of a globalized contemporary art scene the question of defining art as an outcome of national character is outdated. It was always a problematic question to begin with since any answer would have been



John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic*, 1965

28 John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965).

29 Lawrence Meir Friedman, *The Horizontal Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

30 For an interesting analysis of the co-optation of Canadian culture by administration, see Krzysztof Wodiczko's presentation of 14 June 1983 to a Toronto art audience and later published in the April/May 1994 issue of *Parallogramme*, the official journal of Canada's alternative gallery network.

31 Arthur Erickson expressed this sentiment in public lectures and presentations. This quote appeared in an article in the *Globe and Mail* on 10 June 1997.

a function of a nation's sense of officialdom. Lawren Harris's programmatic edict that the natural landscape of Canada constitutes what is peculiar to Canadian art elides the many disjunctures and contestations that vexed Canadian national identity at the beginning of the twentieth century. The question is doubly problematic because it implies the conflation of culture with national identity. This invariably leads to notions of "shared values" or "common social purpose." Such terms become the province of those vested with the power and influence to define a national identity. Far from being inclusive terms, they provide a justification for the othering of those who do not conform.

Marshall McLuhan saw the lack of an identity as a distinctively Canadian attribute. He declared that, "Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity." The Canadian architect Arthur Erickson argued that Canada's lack of national identity would "prove to be our strength in the next century as the world moves toward a humanity-wide consciousness." He suggests that by having "no history of cultural or political hegemony—almost no history at all to hinder us—we are welcomed over all other nations. We are more open to, curious about, and perceptive of other cultures."<sup>31</sup> Of course, such an innocence can only be presumed when there is no acknowledgement of the long history of First Nations presence in what is now Canada.

As I have tried to argue, the lack of a strong identity as an attribute could not be resolved within the political framework and historical constitution of Canada. Ironically, much contemporary art, including by leading Canadian artists, is asserting just this viewpoint of McLuhan and Erickson, producing art in the context of increasingly complex, globalized, and nationalist contingencies.



# The London Art Diaries

## June 1999

I am on the train from Wrocław to Warsaw. Earlier, a desperate looking man fled down the passageway of my car in an attempt to dodge the ticket enforcers. He was carrying a small bundle, much like the one Charlie Chaplin's tramp character carried in *City Lights*. At the end of the movie, Charlie's character jumps off the train and rolls down a muddy slope. The man's attempt was a rather exciting, and also depressing, start to an eastward journey. Being in Poland is like also being in a Jerzy Skolimowski movie, where the loss of innocence, the uncertainty of any moral compass, and the need to make sense of the wreckage of a suffocating Communist order still defines the Polish social landscape.

In Warsaw, I took in my friend Pawel Polit's Polish conceptual art show, *Conceptual Reflection in Polish Art—Experiences of Discourse: 1965–1975*, at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle. Pawel's show reveals the lie in the supposed unidirectional nature of American artistic ideas that is fed to art students in the West. The idea that American conceptualism spread its tentacles outward to the recesses of the world, to places such as 1960s and '70s Poland, is patently false and more than a little paternalistic given what one discovers in this fine exhibition. If anything, Polish conceptualism points out the limitations of American conceptualism with its resolutely political regard. This could not have been any other way, given the harsh and often absurd conditions that Polish artists had to work in.

What is interesting is how much ado was given to the fact that Americans showed in the Polish gallery Foksal, when in reality the engagement of Americans by Polish artists was a political move to disguise Polish conceptualism's bile behind a screen of American universalism and nothingness. This required a great degree of deftness on the part of the Poles. For the Americans, all too happy to oblige, their reward was the inverse, a rubbing-off of political content that in their own work was at best ambiguously regarded. In the end, the American association with Eastern Bloc conceptualism tended to politicize the regard of American art, whether American art was inherently interested in this question or not. For Polish artists, the association with American artists permitted its political content to be allegorized as apolitical. After all, imagine how troubling it must have been for a Polish cultural bureaucrat to attack conceptualism for its political specificity.

After a tour of this exhibition, I walked about Warsaw, a city I last visited nearly a decade ago. Most people are for capitalism, a Polish taxi driver told me. It is difficult to argue with the excitement of development that is occurring everywhere in Warsaw. Still, outside my hotel, in

the two days I stayed in Warsaw, I witnessed two rather loud and boisterous protests: one from farmers and another by doctors, one protesting unemployment and the other protesting underemployment. I know what *Businessweek* would say about this—the usual refrain about feeling pain before gain—but to see the protests is to understand a little bit that change in Poland is an especially difficult process.

### June 1999

I now find myself in Paris, a city that is full of street life but oddly enough one that also seems ossified. Large billboards with pictures of Jean Moulin and (*le maréchal*) Leclerc that scream out “Ceux qui ont dit non!” remind this visitor that the particularly French obsession with nationhood remains a hot topic at the turn of the millennium. Tradition. Tradition. Tradition. I suppose it is one of the main reasons why so many people visit France. In a constantly and rapidly changing world, France’s exhortation of tradition, however inauthentic or transformed its face may be, continues to resonate in the hearts of people used to perpetual displacement. For that matter, it is probably the same reason people visit Disneyland. After all, even the world of the future is an orderly and naturally evolved place, with lots of fun rides for the family.

I used to live in Paris and I missed it terribly when I moved back to Canada. I was nervous about returning here for the first time since I departed a year ago. As it turns out, what I missed must have been certain ephemeral thoughts I had about my life at the time—dreams, if you will. It had little to do with Paris itself. Walking through Paris is like walking through New York or many other cities I have lived in: it is entirely familiar to me. I never left it but I don’t miss it, just as I don’t miss New York either. I think this is healthy.

### 6 July 1999

Still in Paris under tempestuous skies and the usual tempestuous French character. I was in an elevator and an elderly woman looked at me as she put her finger on a button. I mistakenly thought she was tacitly asking me what floor I wanted, so I replied with a request. She then turned to me and said: “Monsieur, vous êtes obliger d’engager le bouton après moi!” Alas.

On another matter, after a week here of seeing friends and meeting people, I can count at least four occasions when the subject of my apparent ethnicity has been raised, as though I was not aware of the fact I possess slanty eyes and yellow skin. I am not saying these people I meet

intended to insult me. It is just that the idea of hybridized identities is still a strange concept here for many people.

Yesterday, I visited Glass Box, a gallery in the very hip Oberkampf area of Paris, recently opened by a group of young artists, several of them ex-students of mine from the École des Beaux-Arts. Glass Box is being beckoned by larger forces such as the Fondation Cartier and Département de l'ARC (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris). It is such a modest little space but something unprecedented in Paris. Already, I feel its uniqueness being subsumed within the syndicated logic of the French cultural order. I really have little hope for contemporary art in France. Perhaps it is something France simply does not need.

One thing France does need is an accounting of where all the money slated for education goes. Certainly it is not going to ensuring that its university students work in well-equipped offices and teaching environments. My friend from Uganda is desperately trying to finish his doctoral thesis (which in France requires about five hundred pages of type, about twice what is required in America and Canada) but without the benefit of a computer. At the Sorbonne, there is a room of about six computers dedicated to its many graduate students. Always, there is a large queue in front of this room. No wonder there are student protests here. No wonder something like six education ministers have been sacked in the last ten years. According to *Le Monde*, the number of foreign students in France has dropped over the last ten years from thirteen percent to just over eight percent. Does such news sound alarming to the French government? I don't know, but it does stress to me the increasing irrelevance of French presence in the world. Of course, that is why people like to visit here as tourists, precisely because it is irrelevant, a big ruin of modernity, but they are without the melancholia Benjamin felt about Paris. Well, the melancholia is there, if one chooses to feel such feelings, but why would one want to do that?

Vancouver artists walk among the many audiences of the international art world. Dan Graham, who is always good for a sharp and intelligent aphorism, said that Canadian comics do well in Hollywood because they out-American the Americans. He also said that Vancouver artists in particular were already postmodern before the idea of the postmodern even came into vogue. He believed this because Vancouver is remote from the art centres and ideas about art, architecture, and indeed anything about the world, are received as a pastiche of information delivered by art magazines rather than through firsthand experience. Vancouver artists are already internally international. By reaching out into the world, they hope to discover something of the local in themselves.

8 July 1999

This is my final entry from Paris, at least for some time; I leave for Canada tomorrow.

I have a lot of thoughts about the situation of art in France today, cultivated over many years of visits to this magnificent country. “La crise de l’art contemporain” has an aggravated meaning in France and no one seems to understand why, except to provide the familiar and useless refrain that nothing happens in art in France or that France cannot get over its *École de Paris* days. While this is to a degree not incorrect, it is not very useful for understanding the state of paralysis that characterizes the French art scene today.

Of course, the criticisms of the problems of hyper-syndication from the top downward is a major problem. As someone who taught at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, I understand this well. A change in government necessarily means a change in the director of the *École*. Where else among the leading Western nations but France does this happen, could this happen? And of course, Paris is sorely in need of a few more art schools, especially “à la marge de” Paris, in the suburbs, in the *quartiers* less privileged than the 6th Arrondissement. For a city of over seven million, it is incredible to think that there is but one art school. If one is picky, one would say two, because there is another at the end of the westernmost point of the RER suburban train line, in Cergy-Pontoise, but the point is that no one cares about anything except the *École* in Paris. By the way, I have visited the school in Cergy. It is located in what is known as a *ville nouvelle*. The entire town was developed with an axis to Paris. Bereft of parks as it is, the planners of the town built a huge walkway—one is tempted to say runway—comparable in scale to the gardens of Versailles. It leads to a grand staircase that goes nowhere except to provide a belvedere to Paris, which on a clear day is visible in the distance. The situation of art in France is a reflection of all of these problems, not to mention the corruption of the ruling class and the relative passivity of a nation beholden to culture with a capital “C.” While corruption is pandemic in other countries as well, there is a degree of tolerance here that is truly breathtaking, in part because there are so many laws that make it a violation to openly challenge positions of power, under the threat of what punishment I am not exactly sure. Everyone knows it and everyone whispers plaintively under their breath, but nothing changes much.

So the problems facing the state of France also express themselves on the level of contemporary art. But there is also a theoretical problem as well, which is seldom discussed. The French love of, shall we say, “the

lightness of being” is a concern that is disfavoured by a central definition of art that elevates and overestimates the importance of heavy topics and nihilism. But the problems of everyday life, which are becoming a non-theme theme of many an art exhibition, has always been an area that has long concerned the French—not in the direction of meaningless MTV-ism as is frequently the case with non-French art, but in terms of the questions regarding private anxieties, especially when in the midst of public encounters. Is this not an important dialectic? And in the age of the Internet, is this not a central dialectic? This imbalance in the art world’s and art history’s historical regard for what is and what is not meaningful has very much been a problem in France, particularly in the face of continuing preoccupations with, say, German *Sturm und Drang*, or in the case of Düsseldorf photography, Sanderesque clinical melancholia. Thus Christian Boltanski’s early works, his visits to the zoo, his clowning around, are generally less appreciated than his Holocaust-referencing works. I don’t mean to say that his early works are as good, but the disregard of these works is symptomatic of the point I am trying to make.

This lightness of being works well in French cinema, from Truffaut to Éric Rohmer. But in art, a much smaller world, French artists are often left to try to mimic American and other art. Of course, they fail because it looks pathetically inauthentic. French society can be cruel but it also prides itself on its refinement compared to other societies.

So now I leave Paris with one last thought. What must it have been like to actually walk the streets of Paris in the last part of the previous century? It must have been a good mess with construction and destruction everywhere. All the terms by which we understand modern art issue from Paris. However, according to how contemporary art is unfolding, the French capacity to express themselves only in terms of the idea of humanity is, sadly, an outmoded path.

### 17 July 1999

Back in Vancouver, a city that—due to poor planning and mediocre architecture—is visually discordant and especially so against the magnificence of the natural surroundings. Nothing seems anchored here, not even a tall building. First of all, much of the city rests on a flood plain, a river delta. Secondly, there is always the warning of earthquakes. Thirdly, and most pernicious of all, it is no holds barred when it comes to property rights. As a result, there is very little harmony in the look of the city, except perhaps for the visuality provided by cheap-looking surfaces.

Oddly, I think this has a lot to do with why there is such a vibrant artistic community here. Not just in the visual arts, but literature as well—basically any solitary practice has tended to do well here. After all, this is the last of the Wild West, the end of the road. No one can say that about California anymore. Nor can that be said of Seattle, where Microsoft, Starbucks coffee, and Amazon represent Seattle's utter and complete acculturation into the Wall Street mainstream.

By contrast, the Vancouver economy is a pittance and still very dependent on the capital of raw materials such as lumber, mining, gas exploration, and fishing. The local papers regularly cite the emergence of a Silicon Valley north, but that has yet to express itself in terms of the city's self-image. Artists tend to work in isolation here and far away from the important centres of art. Nobody seems all that satisfied about being here but the fact is that Vancouver is such a great laboratory for making art. This may be because Vancouver is the great non-city city, or the great every-city city. It is why Hollywood spends nearly a billion dollars a year here in motion picture and television productions. Vancouver can stand in for anywhere and everywhere. It is also able to represent the impending Asian century, so it stands for the future too. Whenever I am in Europe, or anywhere other than Vancouver for that matter, I can always switch on the local television and see images of my home city, usually in disguise as some big American city.

Similarly, the art from this city can stand in for big American art or big European art with a North American look. It is why photography and video have done so well here; it is a natural form for the generic city. With the Internet, cellular telephones, and satellite technology, Joseph Kosuth's pronouncement some thirty years ago of developing an art of "international locals"—a concept-based network of artists making art rooted in their respective localities but in dialogue with other artists all over the world. Vancouver is a city that has always looked like an idea of an "international local."

Dan Graham saw in Vancouver a city where history was collapsed synchronically to arbitrary historical references. He said that Vancouver looked like a city spliced from architectural magazine photographs. From this perspective, Vancouver's entry into the international art scene seemed like a natural development. Graham's point was that Vancouver was like a middle-sized branch plant or subsidiary city, where decisions are made at head offices elsewhere, and thus looked very much the product of international influences and circumstances. The city was already internationalized, despite its relative unsophistication. Sophistication then arrived in the form of artists who reflected for the first time on

their own city, and so the move to the international stage became self-evident. The language of Vancouver art was to a large degree already international merely from its internal development.

This is the reason why the large influx of relatively wealthy Hong Kong Chinese these past few years has been met with only the most modest of problems. The city is a generic city and whoever moves in can acclimatize rather quickly. I read in the Canadian edition of *Time* magazine that Vancouver-reared artist Jessica Stockholder was recently appointed Head of Sculpture at Yale University. Phaidon Press has books out on Jeff Wall and Stan Douglas. Rodney Graham's recent show at the Kunsthalle Wien was a resounding success. Any number of younger Vancouver artists are also doing well. Nathalie Melikian will have a solo exhibition of her hilarious and very smart videos at the Gothenburg Museum of Art. Bully for all of them. A few years ago, I read a spoof story about Canadian success stories in America. The article was titled "The Canadian Among Us," and it spoke of the insidious takeover of the United States by nefarious Canadians who could pass undetected as Americans.

### 21 July 1999

Starting about fifteen years ago, spurred by the impending repatriation of Hong Kong to China, large numbers of mostly wealthy and highly educated Hong Kong Chinese began a wave of immigration into Vancouver and Toronto in Canada, and Sydney and Brisbane in Australia. The tide of immigration crested shortly after Hong Kong officially re-entered China's fold. Vancouver, especially, was transformed, from a sleepy hollow on the Pacific to what some have termed the first Asian city in North America.

While at first, and still to a large extent, immigration into Canada was a matter of passport convenience, permitting newly deputized Canadian citizens to continue to reside and operate their businesses in Hong Kong, many recent immigrants are now making a significant imprint on the Vancouver cultural landscape.

The latest such news involves the one-million-dollar construction of a Chinese pagoda from an as-yet-unnamed donor to be built on the edge of Vancouver's Chinatown. The pagoda, an exact replica of a pagoda from the donor's home village in China, will stand over thirty metres in height; already, I can see the Vancouver tourist board salivating. The wealthy Chan family has also donated a new recital hall to the city, and Victor Shaw, the nephew of the late Hong Kong movie mogul Run Run Shaw, is in discussions with a local university to donate his collection



of Chinese ceramics and paintings. This would certainly involve a new museum to be built to house the collection.

The most interesting benefactor of them all is Annie Wong. Her eponymous Art Foundation is dedicated to the furtherance of contemporary Chinese art throughout the world. The recent consolidation of interest in contemporary Chinese artists from Xu Bing to Chen Zhen is a testament to the support for these artists by the Annie Wong Art Foundation. An artist in her own right, who studied traditional techniques in Chinese painting with one of China's master watercolourists, Wong has also started, in addition to the foundation, the Art Beatus Gallery. As a result, most of the best known contemporary Chinese artists now exhibit and pass through Vancouver in a regular procession. While the essentialism of defining Chinese art remains problematic in my view, the Foundation does recognize the contradictions of its purpose. Such contradictions include such basic questions as what exactly is Chinese about Chinese art, especially in the contemporary context? Among Chinese artists, who is more and who is less Chinese? Many of the best-known Chinese contemporary artists reside in Paris. The painter Yan Pei-Ming now shows at Durand-Dessert in Paris and Jean Bernier in Athens, and was also recently exhibited under the rubric of *Les Peintures Françaises* in Paris's hallowed Panthéon. In Yan Pei-Ming's case, he is as French—having lived over twenty years in France—if not more so, as Chinese.

Having visited China a number of times now, I have seen firsthand the important role the Annie Wong Art Foundation plays in China. The Foundation was an important sponsor of the last Shanghai Biennale and will sponsor the next edition as well. It also gave support to many of the Chinese artists exhibited in Harald Szeemann's grand show at the Arsenale in the current Venice Biennale. It seems every Chinese artist in China knows about Madame Wong's Foundation. As impressive as that may sound, the reality is the contemporary art scene in China is miniscule—but it is expanding quickly. As CEOs from the West scramble on top of each other to beat a path to the beckoning promises of China's markets, the Annie Wong Art Foundation finds itself at the beginning of a newly and vastly developing world of contemporary art in China.

#### 4 August 1999

I have been a week in Italy, in the tiny village of Serre di Rapolano, an hour's drive east of Siena. Improbably, in this sleepy hollow of a provincial village, there can be found one of Italy's most dynamic art institutions, the Civic Center for Contemporary Art, La Grancia. As

directed by Mario and Dora Pieroni, the Civic Center La Grancia is not really a museum but a kind of laboratory for the critical discussion and production of art. What is interesting is how so much seems possible for contemporary art here. In a way, perhaps unlike the French situation, there is no anxiety here about living in the past. There is not much interest in contemporary art here in Serre, but the mayor and many other people I have met here love the idea that they have their own little modern museum.

For several days now, a group of artists from diverse backgrounds, from as far away as Havana and Jerusalem, have gathered here to discuss “classic” questions about art. These questions include: “What is the role of art?” “Is spirituality important for art?” “How does art relate to quality of life?” As one participant said, it is extremely refreshing to hear these questions again. Indeed, in this village so near to the Renaissance perfection of Pienza, it has thus far been a wonderful experience to spend time discussing these important questions, questions that for many may seem too rooted in the past, or simply nostalgic.

Mario Merz, the senior artist at this conference, talked at length about humankind’s fear of nature; that it is the individual’s “crash” with the social environment that art must deal with. Mario Pieroni keeps telling me about the importance of artists, that artists need to go out there and recognize anew the need to change society, even to revolutionize it. Besides the intensive learning, it has been so much fun to hear artists speak so passionately about the importance of art being socially engaged. It makes me wonder why there are not more such conferences.

While all of this is made more pleasurable by the late afternoon possibilities of driving to Arezzo or Assisi or any number of wonderful places that dot the Tuscan and Umbrian landscapes, it also underlines a time in the past when artists were not afraid to speak about spirituality in the same breath as art. Neither were artists afraid to speak about utopia. In a world of increasingly popular consumerism, it is important for artists to sit back and ask again many of the basic questions about what art is and why be an artist.

Further south in Tuscany, in the village of San Casciano dei Bagni, Cornelia Lauf, a former curator at the Guggenheim in New York, is directing the Camera Oscura, a modest one-room gallery and project space located just off the village piazza. Camera Oscura shows cater to both art and a non-art audiences and under Lauf’s direction, it does so with the utmost in intelligence. For example, there have been exhibitions of Duchampian photographs and ecological presentations of varieties of grasses. The programming is not predictable but always fascinating. It

is so affecting to walk through this most beautiful of tiny villages and encounter an art show of such intellectual sharpness.

Both Lauf in San Casciano and the Pieronis in Serre are skeptical of the art world and both have long histories in it. In Mario Pieroni's case, he ran Rome's most influential private gallery of the 1960s and '70s, representing most of the Arte Povera artists. Both have created spaces that are laboratories as much as refuges. Both do their work in these isolated villages not to seek shelter from the world but to have the conditions necessary for developing new ways of thinking about the discourses of display and organization in art. Both also recognize the importance of reaching out from their villages to the rest of the world.

### 12 August 1999

I write from Parma, Italy. Parma, as in the cheese. Parma ham and Acqua di Parma. Parma, as in a very large presence of African-Italians. This came as a pleasant surprise to me as Italian-African relations, especially the attitudes of some of the former toward the latter, are not always the most amicable. In the streets, in the cafes, one invariably encountered Africans. It made me so curious as to how so many ended up in Parma. I suppose the answer would not be dissimilar from why Galveston, Texas, has such a large Vietnamese population or why the northern French city of Valenciennes has a large Arab population. There's nothing unexpected about finding large numbers of Arab North Africans in Marseille or Toulouse, but why Valenciennes? And why Parma? Increasingly, one finds the most unlikely communities settled in equally unexpected parts of the world. But history teaches us that this is nothing new. When Marco Polo visited southern China, he noted the presence of large numbers of Africans, Persians, and Jews. And one can also cite the many Spaniards who had set up encampments on the west coast of Canada as early as the seventeenth century. That the Spanish were on the Pacific side of Canada nearly three hundred years ago should be no more surprising than the fact of an African community in today's Parma.

From my hotel in Parma, I look up news from my home city of Vancouver. A cargo ship has been captured near the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the northern coast of British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> The ship dropped off over a hundred illegal Chinese immigrants from Fujian province. There is a photo of many of them perched on the beautiful rocks of a tiny, desolate island, soaking wet from having swam ashore. Apparently, it is the third such ship caught in as many weeks. I keep thinking what it must have been like to leave port from the hot climes of Fuji and to now

1 The traditional home of the Haida First Nation, the Queen Charlotte Islands were officially re-named Haida Gwaii in 2010. The name had been in local use since the 1970s.

be sitting on rocks among seals and bald eagles on a Canadian island. Perhaps they will be deported back. In a way, they are similar to the Africans of Parma. They were and are ready to adapt to any situation, any set of conditions. How many of us so-called moderns in the art world can say that?

## 2 September 1999

Some thoughts on photojournalism:

I have been in Vancouver since returning from Italy three weeks ago. In two weeks time, the World Press Photography convention will be staged in this city. Representatives from Magnum, Agence France Presse, UPI, and other agencies will be in attendance.

But what is “World Press Photography” except these institutions through which a certain type of photographic practice expresses its effects? What is “World Press Photography” beyond this syndicated, conglomerated, triple-worded title? While photojournalism undoubtedly has its own protocol connected to larger discourses about photography and media in general, is there a theory to the institution of photojournalism beyond basic ideas about “the power of the image” or “making sense of the confusing world”?

Art has followed the Hegelian view that the direct cognition of truth and deeper understandings of the world need not be discernible only in images. Photography is cursed by its ubiquity and ease of use. As such, photography’s advantages alter the purpose of art to an inherently conceptual process, not limited to what can be gleaned from looking in a mirror or out a window. I use the word “curse” here because the disentanglement of art from the mirror has also meant the loss of possibilities for the production of a subject through representation. My point is not that there is anything inherently superior about representative modes—only that they have become the proprietary purview, to use a prime example, of photojournalists. The problem with this is that as aesthetically determined as, say, the whole genre of photojournalism is, the practitioners and institutions that are more responsible for producing the stuff have always been doggedly anti-theoretical about what they do.

And while there are now lots of artists showing photographs in the world of art, even straight looking photographs, much of this is founded on cultural pessimism to the point of political disengagement and social withdrawal—even when the photographic work is potentially riven with political charge. What is the difference between the work of a non-artworld photographer whose work appears in *Aperture* magazine and a photograph by say, Thomas Struth? Undoubtedly, Struth’s pictures

must satisfy, in order for them to be read as art, a larger project of conceptualization premised on a replay of straight photography's generic vocabulary from portraiture to flowers. Oddly, the work is also about the impossibility of reclaiming lost territory in photographic practice for art. In this sense, Struth's pictures look to me rather nostalgic and conservative, albeit gussied up as historical loss (which it is). Ironically, this is what makes Struth's "conservatism" so interesting, as the conservatism is part of the content that the viewer must attend to.

This loss can be felt in terms of art's ceding of significant ground in subject production to the world of straight photographers and photojournalists, as well as in terms of a dissipation of the power of the image in a world of visual overload. It is a loss felt in a highly technologized world where photojournalists operate at the heart of its image system. At the very least, photography in art distinguishes itself from photojournalism by its willingness to submit to theoretical analysis, as tepid as such analysis may often be. It does so because contemporary art practice does not depend primarily on an identification of the viewer with a humanist image as a universal subject, in contradistinction to photojournalism. If anything, contemporary art has become a kind of resisting ground to universalizing vocabularies. But in resisting too much, there have been enormous costs for art.

Hegel wrote: "The basic principle of all slavery is that man is not yet conscious of his freedom, and consequently sinks to the level of a mere object or worthless article."<sup>1</sup> This is the problem I feel with photojournalism: its lack of self-consciousness—especially theorized self-consciousness. Art suffers from another problem altogether: the development of consciousness in art was meant to guarantee a real and genuine kind of universality but has guaranteed very little other than an increasing detachment from actual political and economic events—in other words, the very ground of photojournalism.

#### 4 October 1999

I write from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Saskatoon is the largest city (not quite 200,000 inhabitants) in the incredibly flat, wheat belt province of Saskatchewan, Canada. As I write, wheat harvest season is in full swing and there is a report every hour on the progress of the harvest.

It is my first occasion in Saskatchewan, a province that is the progenitor of many of Canada's sacrosanct political institutions, such as universal healthcare and the welfare system. It is a land steeped in great Canadian figures, from novelist W.O. Mitchell to former ice hockey great Gordie Howe.

1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 183.

Given its attachment to agriculture and relative paucity of inhabitants, it is easy to misunderstand Saskatchewan as relatively unsophisticated, especially in terms of art and so-called high culture. While it is true that the Bolshoi is unlikely to make a regular stop here and the art museum is small, it is false to replay the old equation of big cities equalling big culture and small cities picking up the cues of the big cities at a later date. I think that was true in the 1960s and '70s, when colour field painting was finished in New York but would continue to have an extended life in the vast hinterlands. Painters like Larry Zox, Dan Christianson, and Larry Poons did very well in a city like Vancouver well after their careers started to ebb in New York. I don't think it works that way anymore and that is all for the better in my view. Nowadays, finding out about art is easy no matter where one lives. Interest in contemporary art is extremely high everywhere, and places like Saskatoon no longer care to the same degree as they once might have about what the bigger places think about them. In fact, there is a campaign in many smaller cities in North America that extols the virtues of smallness. Ironically, for small places such as Saskatoon, they now experience unprecedented population growth as people move there from everywhere, including big cities.

So here I have challenging discussions about contemporary developments in art, the point of art, what the future holds in store for art—all with people who know a lot about art, but who live in Saskatoon. The people here are not deferential to big-city culture. They know it and would love to see it, but they are not disengaged from it as they develop a regional nomenclature of art.

When I was in Dakar, Senegal, in Africa, artists there surprised me by how much they knew about New York and London, even though most of them had never visited either city. They too were engaged with developments in contemporary art issuing out from the big centres. They too understood the issues at a profound level. They too could give a fig if the big centres ignored them. I think this is a new development as the world of art becomes increasingly disseminated.

Harvest season means people in Saskatoon can talk about art in the same breath as gauging the progress of the wheat fields. In bigger cities, we in the art world are often at a loss to talk about anything other than art.

## **2 November 1999**

For a Canadian not from Toronto, writing about Toronto can be a precarious endeavour. By far Canada's largest city, long ago surpassing

Montreal's population and national significance, Toronto is a great paradox. Though well-planned, blessed with superb public transit and road networks, with remarkably low rates of crime for a city of such scale, and endowed with splendid neighbourhoods and the most diverse of ethnic makeup, Toronto remains a deeply insecure place, especially where culture is concerned.

Perhaps the obligation of not only hoisting but defining the flag of Canadian culture and identity is a bit wearying. Like the perennially cursed debate in France about what constitutes French identity and why there are no good contemporary French artists (which is not true, by the way), Toronto is a city that proclaims cultural leadership in Canada but all the while asking, "We are a world-class city, aren't we?" (It is a world-class city, by the way.)

A few years ago, when radio broadcasting licenses opened up for review in the Toronto area, a submission for a dance music station was rejected in favour of a second classical music station. Never mind that Toronto has a very large Caribbean and African population, one that has saved the city from its longstanding tedium and cultural inertia. Of course there were charges about the racism of the government mandarins in charge of granting radio licenses and of course race must have a part to do with it. It is yet another example of that dull historical reflex that certain ruling Canadians have to prove to themselves that theirs is a sophisticated nation, knowledgeable about opera and classical music. And, of course, this is all very patronizing, not to mention stupid and provincial.

Given this attitude, which seems pandemic in this city, is it any surprise to see interesting young artists constantly failing to develop onto the national and/or international stage? There is irony here too. The streets of Toronto are undoubtedly the most dynamic in the country. Dig a little deeper and one finds the most diverse and splendid writers, filmmakers, dancers, and software geeks, but in visual art, the heavy yoke of "Canadian art" seems to collapse many a local neck.

Yesterday, two French public art curators spoke to a select audience of twenty artists and curators at a downtown meeting room. I found out about this by chance and declined to attend. I won't comment on the seeming elitism of such an event. Certainly, there is money here to bring in speakers and there is a deep hunger to want to know and be connected with international contemporary art. So why is it that a Contemporary Art Society is only being founded now, and with the modest aim of an inaugural membership of thirty?

I like being in this city but I feel like an estranged being from another art world, which is even odder, given my Canadian status.

Tonight an important local curator gives a talk on the work of Douglas Gordon. This is no reflection whatsoever of my views on the work of Gordon, but I am not giving up the season tipoff of the National Basketball Association at the city's downtown arena. The Boston Celtics play the Toronto Raptors.

### **7 December 1999**

I write from Hong Kong, a city traditionally committed only to the power of money. There is much serious discussion about the need to facilitate local visual artists with places to exhibit, including a museum or institute of contemporary art. This change of heart is spurred, ironically, by the recent approval by the administrative government for a new Hong Kong Disneyland. I suppose the high/low dialectic must be in operation because everyone I spoke to here cited the need for a new contemporary art centre as a kind of counterbalance to the Disney news. Perhaps the economic slump that has hit this city so hard has also played a part.

The bohemian art precinct of Oil Street is Hong Kong's first true visual art district, replete with galleries and artists' studios. But everything in Hong Kong follows the law of development (as in real estate development) and Oil Street will soon be razed and redeveloped now that it has become so chic. In the past, that would have been that. But now there is serious momentum for the conversion of the old Kai Tak Airport, located in the centre of Kowloon, into a contemporary art museum.

Being here has also permitted me to practice my Cantonese, so badly has it deteriorated over the years from lack of use. I do feel very Cantonese when I am here, but is it possible for me to admit this without sounding like an essentialist? There are lots of moments here when I remember and re-experience things that I was once familiar with. Such moments are quintessentially poststructuralist; they are non-recoverable and spark only a strange kind of desire. They are perfect feelings for the end of the millennium.

### **14 December 1999**

I recently received an invitation to write for a certain art magazine. In the letter that I received, I was noted as being in a group of "artists who write." More accurately, I assume that the magazine meant to say "artists who can write." Or am I wrong to make such an assumption? What exactly does this mean, "artists who write"? Are such artists considered less of an artist because they write; writing being something that falls



outside of a normal artist's range and interest? Are artists who write something more? Artists with either the supplement of intelligence (good), or of scholarship (good and/or bad), or of academicism (bad)? What does it mean to categorize artists into those who write and those who do not write? Are those who write usually the theorizers for truer artists who theorize through their work only? Is one more tempted to criticize an artist's work because he or she writes, especially if the perception exists that there is a chasm between what the artist makes as art and what the artist writes?

Okay, I'm an artist who writes, but at least I am not an artist who paints! Happy Y2K everybody!

### 17 December 1999

One week I am in Hong Kong in the midst of balmy weather, the next week I am in Winnipeg freezing my toes off as the temperature hits 24 degrees below zero (and, by the way, that is the high for the day).

At the last turn of the century, Winnipeg was known as Canada's second city, the Canadian Chicago. The city's largely intact district of late nineteenth-century warehouses and office buildings are testament to its former economic prowess. There is not a more beautiful aggregate of Chicago School and Beaux-Arts buildings west of Montreal; it is simply stunning. And, it must be added, a little sad. The downtown is largely depopulated at night, due in part to suburban sprawl and super-cheap detached housing prices, but in larger part due to a lack of collective vision about what to do with downtown. For the two days I have been here, the editorial pages have printed articles about the pernicious bickering over how best to revitalize the downtown core. I say, why not give it to the artists? Let them take over the empty buildings and see what happens after a year. Better that than to leave them indefinitely fallow.

I must say that it is very nice to be here after Hong Kong. There is a quaint little Chinatown here and trips to Hong Kong are advertised all over the front walls of the two Chinese travel agencies that I passed. I bet there are a few ex-Winnipeggers in Hong Kong also hoping to return home for Christmas. The world is a small place and I am thankful that being an artist affords one the vantage of point of seeing all the disparate dots that can be connected. Hong Kong/Winnipeg. Why not? Makes as much sense as London/Paris or New York/Berlin.

### 16 January 2000

Some very well-known American artists passed through town to give presentations in front of the local art school audiences. The talks

followed the conventional course except for one comment by one of the artists. When someone posed the question about the artist's use of objects and signifiers from popular culture, particularly underclass culture, the reply was simply: "I hate the idea that there is an underclass." It is true that in today's First World, especially with all the slumming going on, it may be difficult sometimes to tell whether there even exists a ruling class or underclass. Moreover, there is a certain fluidity between the two classes that defies the hypostatic conditions that characterized, say, French society under Louis XIV. Nowadays, taste and the places where one hangs out are certainly suspect markers of class. So it is understandably tempting for a famous artist to proclaim the uselessness of even thinking in terms of a class structure (never mind the socialist connotations that this would involve). The *tabula rasa* that is the basis of the logic behind the exhibition space also extends to artists' backgrounds. Save biography for the art historian (and even among them, there is a big debate about such an approach). In the art world, all artists are supposed to be equal. You know, like the Christian song: "Red and yellow, black and white / They're all precious in His sight." Never mind that such a mythic and blanket egalitarianism goes against both the grain of historical and present-day facts.

I always thought a book on the sociology of the art world was long overdue, one that would deal with it in a comprehensive sense, the way that Bourdieu, Appadurai, or Mattelart might approach it. But then, what is the point? Everybody knows that there are rules in the art world, including rules about what not to believe in, even when what we are not supposed to believe in overflows with truth and facticity.

### 3 February 2000

I'm doing a bit of early spring cleaning; very early, as it is not even spring yet. One of the benefits of tidying up is rediscovering things such as Siegfried Kracauer's great collection of essays, published in English as *The Mass Ornament*. Sitting down and rereading this important compilation of his texts, I am struck by the freshness of Kracauer's thoughts, which were mostly written in the 1930s and '40s. His thoughts on the notion of community as an idea rooted in Protestantism's "concrete myths" of the experience of community, rather than on any physical sense of collectivity, is extremely prescient in this age where the word "community" is tossed about liberally as a counter-argument to the idea of the pure experiences of an individual. In Canada, I hear this caveat all the time—"but what about the community?" Or, "I think we have to think about the community." Kracauer calls this use of community

somewhat related to a new type of messianism. I won't go further here but do permit me to meander.

I received an art catalogue registry by e-mail and noticed an exhibition catalogue called *Tallinn-Moscow*. It is a document of the art that developed between the Baltic capital and Russia within the compression of the Soviet Union. Obviously, it could not have been an easy relationship, especially for the Estonians, and especially during the post-Second World War period before liberation from the yoke of Russia. But it is exactly in such cases that I think the richest lessons are to be offered to artists and art historians. I have written about it before: connections that go beyond the standard New York/Paris or Berlin/Moscow foldings, to places such as Vancouver/Hong Kong, Shanghai/Beijing, Nairobi/London, etc. One can even go further, but I think there is a certain limit placed by the exigencies of historical weight as well; some tiny hamlet to some middle-sized city may not be so interesting in the broader sense.

The point is that there is so much work that can be done to research the art and culture of our age without regurgitating the same old airline or passenger ship connections. Only then can we further the process of what Kracauer would call desubstantiation. Only then would culture and art be more fully realized. But, of course, that would risk genuine transformation in the way that we think about and know art.

### 11 March 2000

One of the great pleasures about teaching art is the many students that pass under a teacher's tutelage. After ten years, I suppose I have reached a milestone of sorts, not only in terms of teaching but the number of ex-students that I have managed to keep in communication with. Today, I received an email from Alexander, a German student in my class at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, who subsequently lived in Shanghai a number of years before returning to the City of Lights. He just became a father. The mother is a Chinese woman he met while in China. Yesterday, I received an email from another student residing in Martinique. I had better stop here for fear of becoming too sentimental about having taught so many students.

Next week, I head off to Japan, to the CCA Kitakyushu. The last time I was in Japan was 1984 and that first experience there is still very vivid in my mind. It was the first time I had gone to another part of the world not circumscribed by European or American terms. As such, I remember my trip as an immersion into expanded perspectives about the world. Since then, it has continued to expand, to South America, Mexico, Africa, and mostly China. One would think that being an artist means always

having one's mental horizons continually broadened but that is not necessarily the case. One can function quite well within the brackets of the American-European art world, never suspecting how bracketed such a functioning actually is. Worse, one can easily, without being aware, glide into a universalizing of the perspectives of American-European art understanding, simply assuming that "one size fits all" for art.

I think that being an artist is rather like the life of the protagonist in W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge*. It is a constant search for meaning. Being an artist does not simply mean constantly trying to produce meaning. Without the two halves—the search and the production—all that remains are art objects without feelings. That is how I would characterize a lot of the art being produced today. So many young people want to be artists (read: my own students). They are all privileged to have this choice of becoming an artist. Most art schools today are very well equipped, replete with technicians and all manner of production help. The result is often incredibly well produced art, lots of finish, even many implied ideas. What is often missing is not so much technical finish as intellectual and emotional finish. Next entry from Japan.

### 13 March 2000

Still here in Vancouver and tonight I had the pleasure of dinner with Boris Groys, Rodney Graham, and Robert Linsley. Is there a more informed (or hip) art writer out there? The evening went like a breeze and the conversations were equally breezy. According to Boris, this is the way it should be when it comes to art. We talked about music, a bit about the life of Picasso, the films of Ernst Lubitsch, the significance of the expression "gone fishing." In other words, everything to do with art and nothing about art itself. Robert Linsley mentioned how teaching should become more like "edutainment" and Boris mentioned how entertainment value was something Lacan understood extremely well in his videotaped lectures.

Later, Boris mentioned an odd fact he recently read about: "restaurant critic" is the number-four sought-after glamour job in the world, after "movie star," but before "rock star." Rodney Graham suggested that I should try a sly tact and begin to introduce culinary commentary into my *London Art* entries. He said that if I was patient enough, I could end up strictly with a restaurant review column within the parameters of an Internet art magazine site. Boris thought this a good idea because what is important is being coolly above art, and just writing about art simply does not pass muster in terms of coolness. He surmised that dining in

the best restaurants is a collective dream and that is what is important about being a restaurant critic—stoking the flames of a dream.

Afterward, I fell into the usual stock conversation themes I have with Rodney: the greatness of Rock Hudson, especially in *Man's Favorite Sport?*; my defense of *Maude*, a Norman Lear television series from the 1970s; rock-and-roll band names; and bizarre dreams.

I'm somewhat inebriated as I write this so excuse my lack of a point here. . . . Oh yes, I mentioned to Boris how one of my students said how he would be pleased with "three good years" (in the art world). Boris replied that, "yes, art is becoming like sport, something young artists today understand well."

We then talked a bit about China, and particularly the differences with Russia as far as art systems go. Boris mentioned how all the best Russian artists emerge apart from the art schools. In China, it is very much from art school that any artist of consequence on the international stage emerges. There are many reasons for this and we discussed the reasons why, interspersed with wisecracks, and a commentary about the Charlie Chaplin eating-a-boot scene in *The Gold Rush*.

Afterward we talked about branding and the so-called new dot-com economy. Robert and I both recently read the same book, *No Logo*, by Naomi Klein—a book about the brand economy. Robert mentioned how she wrote about Nike and Microsoft and other obvious branding machines but missed out on the bizarre Japanese brand of Hello Kitty.

All of this yakety-yak took place over a nice dinner in one of Vancouver's nicer restaurants, Tangerine. For food I would give it four stars (out of five); for ambience, also four stars. Service also merited four stars. A very good restaurant indeed. On this night, I would give the conversation an unqualified five stars.

### 18 March 2000

My jaw never ceases to drop, looking out from an airplane window as it approaches a large Asian city. There is no relief from urban development as building after building is passed from a great distance while heading toward the final arrival site. Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* only touches the terrible beauty of this incredibly crowded part of the world.

After landing in Tokyo, I fly off to Fukuoka in the south of Japan. Exiting the airport, one could easily confuse the immediately surroundings for a typical downtown elsewhere. There are huge flashing signs everywhere. They form an impression equal to Piccadilly in London—and again, I was only at the airport.

From Fukuoka, it is a cab ride of another hour to the seaside city of Kitakyushu. I have been invited here by the Center for Contemporary Art, one of Japan's most dynamic institutions of contemporary art. The CCA, run by the tireless twosome of Nobuo Nakamura and Akiko Miyake, is difficult to explain—it is part school, part culture centre, part art gallery, and part publication house. To my mind, the Banff Centre high up in the Canadian Rockies performs a similar set of functions. The CCA is a kind of laboratory for art in the very best sense; it remains more laboratory than museum.

Today there was a talk by Hou Hanru, the noted Chinese/French curator, and the next curator of the Shanghai Biennale. He spoke at length about the complexities of donning and doffing national identities—particularly Chinese identities in many Chinese artists' strategies for negotiating prickly art world paths.

Also here is Hans-Ulrich Obrist, another curator who is radically reinventing and, in my view, resuscitating, the increasingly predictable and moribund practice of curatorship. Say what you will about him, but Obrist is one dynamic and sharp-witted character.

The CCA started about three years ago in this unlikely place as a means of developing a local presence for contemporary art. Today, it is one of the best-known art centres in the world, certainly in Asia. Its catalogues are distributed throughout the world and the artists it has invited for one-month projects are at the leading edge of contemporary art. Take the present artist-in-residence Simryn Gill, a Malaysian artist of Indian descent now residing in Australia. She has produced a very beautiful and absurdly funny installation from bits and pieces of industrial material and litter (found along roadways) placed on tiny toy wheels—a meta-highway in the CCA gallery. It is an acerbic commentary on the problem and necessity of development in Asia. There are very few courageous art centres in the world. The CCA Kitakyushu is one of the few. Next stop: Tokyo.

## **20 March 2000**

*Dateline: Tokyo*

Please excuse the mixing of metaphors but my ears are ringing from the din of visual overstimulation. Tokyo is an immense and magnificently modern city that anyone who is interested in the future of the world should visit. Impossibly clean, safe, and orderly, it is a city with the surface scale of London but with an infrastructure that must surely be one of the most impressive in the world.

Last night, I went to Electronic City, purportedly the world's biggest *quartier* of electronic goods. All I can say is it is crazy there. Huge Day-Glo banners festoon all the buildings. Pretty young women in bizarre coloured coats bark out sales pitches. Besides the usual panoply of electronic goods such as CD players, stereos, etc., there is also a large section dedicated to electronic toilets, a product very much in demand with the hygiene-obsessed Japanese. Along the curbside there are dozens of samples of so-called warm seat toilets, some of which talk to you in Japanese. I have no idea what a toilet could possibly need to say.

By coincidence, I met the French cultural attaché and was led to an exhibition of in-situ video presentations sponsored by an art collective called Akihabara TV. Akihabara refers to the official precinct name of Electronic City. Dotted throughout Electronic City are video screens that show video art. I basically reasoned that this is what one should expect in Japan—amazing images. Knowing these installations as art only add to their impressiveness.

Akihabara TV illustrates the importance of Japanese art collectives. Without them, there would be very few, if any, opportunities for young Japanese artists to develop and exhibit their work. The city is prohibitively expensive and studio space is next to impossible. There are very few art galleries interested in advanced contemporary art so it is not at all easy to be an artist here. Art is a foreign concept still to most Japanese. Besides that, art has to compete with an environment full of creative innovations in design, architecture, advertising, and simply strange-looking, non-art installations and objects.

Afterward, I went to Shibuya, an amazing *quartier* that looks like a more spiffy version of a scene from *Blade Runner*. In Shibuya, where the streets teem with hip-looking Japanese youth, gigantic video screens compete with one another wherever there is an opening to look up. What is incredible is that the resolution is sharp and instead of a cacophony, one is able to hear the respective sound system of each giant video screen clearly.

I am lucky in that I have experienced places like Shibuya before, notably in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and other Asian cities. One can be very easily distracted into forgetting that all of the visual stimuli are essentially advertising, and advertising is a precarious entity, not something that has the weight of permanence. As I walked through Shibuya, I thought how São Paulo in the late 1950s must have felt like Japan today. Nowadays, São Paulo looks largely like a city that went boom and bust (which is basically what happened). I could easily imagine much of Tokyo turning into what São Paulo became. The consumption boom of

the postwar period in Japan is at a critical juncture today. Everything could easily go poof and the gigantic video screens would then appear as huge black forms that darken rather than brighten the sides of buildings.

This morning I had breakfast in one of the countless numbers of French-style cafes that dot this country. The croissants I had were the equal to the best in Paris. I went there with Huang Yong Ping, a Parisian of Chinese descent. As I do not speak Mandarin and Huang knows neither Cantonese nor English, we spoke French to one another. At the table next to us, a Japanese woman was in Spanish conversation with a Spanish businessman. At another table nearby, an elderly Japanese man in traditional Japanese garb reading a Japanese newspaper looked at me and smiled. He seemed to be saying to me: this is as it should be. This is very normal. This will be the normality that we will all come to know. I certainly hope so.

#### **24 March 2000**

*Dateline: Vancouver*

When I was a university student in New York way back in the early 1980s, I lived in a roach-infested one-bedroom flat in a nasty part of Brooklyn. Before sleep, I often listened to troubled voices on the radio. Back then, unlike today, talk radio premised on the call-ins of hapless souls was only in its beginning stage.

I would lie there in the dark, the noise of the street wafting through my bedroom window, as I listened to people pleading, people crying, and people in peril. The point I am trying to make here is that sounds can inflect one's deep experiences of a place. New York is a city full of visual activity, so much so that it can often seem a collision of blurred visions. As is the case for most people, my own particular experiences of New York were based first and foremost on what my eyes had registered, but the darkness of night, saturated with the sounds of radio voices, modulated, bracketed, and further defined my visual memories of New York. So is the case for me with Japan. Now that I am back in the relatively banal environment of Canada, the sounds of the trip recurring in my head are triggering memories of my experiences there.

The closing of stores in Japan is accompanied by sad-sounding electronic music, and I do not think I know of any sadder music than sad music from Japan. The music made me feel so sad as to make me want to leave the store—instead of compelling me to stay until the last possible minute of shopping time, as the way such announcements of impending store closings work in the West. It also made me feel a strange alienation, as the music was invariably artificial rather than orchestral-sounding.



At any given time, there always seemed to be a voice or voices projected on some public address system. These, too, would be mostly pre-recorded and projected in a clipped cadence, as though someone had spoken a thousand words into an audio recorder and some computer merely rearranged any set of suitable word combinations for whatever message needed to be aired.

I think most people can recall the sounds that R2-D2, the squat robot, made in the movie *Star Wars*. In Japan, one hears all kinds of similar-sounding electronically produced blips, whirls, buzzes, clacks, pings, and bops. Collectively, they engender a profound sense of a world wrapped in electrical achievements. Even in Kitakyushu, a small and more traditional-looking city in southern Japan, one hears an endless stream of odd and strangely pleasing sounds. They registered in my mind Japan's powerful embrace of an electronic modernity. Within such a modernity, nature becomes very circumscribed by culture.

On the day of departure, in the waiting lounges of Tokyo's Narita Airport, seating in front of the giant television screens was limited. On view were "soothing" images of marigolds swaying in a gentle wind. One then saw the marigolds in a field with a mountain as the backdrop. After a few seconds, the camera would zoom in again and there would be more footage of another marigold swaying gently in the breeze. Of course, there would be lute-like music to accompany the floral images. The music was electronically produced, naturally enough.

### 1 April 2000

*Dateline: Vancouver*

I write this in response to a catalogue piece I read today in which several well-known artists "celebrated" the mutability of developed and developing world cities.

The refrain that Paris can now be found in Singapore and Calcutta in Kansas City has reached a crescendo, to the point at which the view of the forest has been lost to the trees. Parallel to this en masse singing is the ascendancy of a new world economy based on a public electronically defined as a composite of privates—the innumerable email addresses, Internet sites, and satellite television channels that have, for the first time in history, created a truly global communications-based modernity.

Developments in the art world have corresponded with developments in the new globalized economy. As interest in contemporary art becomes increasingly disseminated to all corners of the world, exhibitions and art projects pop up in an endless possibility of locales, from the Himalayas to the desert lands of Mali. Through it all, the artist's

valise is never fully unpacked, as the exigency of one travel destination after another beckons. Travelling has become a matter of course to the contemporary artist in much the same way as a medieval minstrel travelled, in vagabond fashion, and always with the purpose to foment the imagination, economic and otherwise, of the various locals.

But what, invariably, is being discovered in all this travelling? Is it to learn that the world is all the same and yet locally different? Or is it to find out that even local differences in one part of the world have the ring of sameness to local differences in another? Perhaps it is to learn that one can plug into the same Internet from an Inuit village high up in the Canadian Arctic as from the Cook Islands in the South Pacific? Or perhaps it is to discover something mundane yet somehow meaningful, like that it is possible to order a beer from a McDonald's counter in Munich whereas American outlets are dry. Or perhaps it is to find that the Sri Lankan community clustered about Paris's Gare de l'Est serves as authentic Sri Lankan cuisine as in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. Or perhaps it is that that even if Sri Lankan cuisine in Paris is not as authentic, it is nonetheless interesting to muse about the inflection of French tastes in a newly hybridized French-Sri Lankan cuisine. Or perhaps it is to know firsthand that the world travels to you as much as you travel in the world. Or perhaps it is that diversity in the world is tied to the resolute oneness of the world.

All of these discoveries about the world, considered in their constituent parts, are true. But they are also qualities aggressively promoted by a world increasingly dominated by the corporate ethos. It would be wrong to suggest that this is automatically a bad thing. To know that the fate of others is linked to our own is a good thing. The proliferation of McDonald's throughout the world can be a comforting fact to the weary traveller suffering from culture shock, especially to those with small children. While it is true that there is little respite nowadays from the incursions of Coca-Cola or Mickey Mouse into our travel experiences, such incursions also offer the promise of oneness, whether or not we happen to like Coca-Cola, Mickey Mouse, or, for that matter, the whole of capitalism. The important point is that such developments exploit the same underlying truth about the world as when the Apollo space missions first relayed back images of a round, blue orb called Earth.

So now it has become a consensus that, deep down, we are one and the same. I may like crime films and you may not but, essentially, we are one and the same—especially in an age when English is the *de facto* Esperanto. Again, this is a good thing—the promise of oneness—even if the price to be paid is sameness. It is in part the search for new and different worlds from which to draw meaning that have induced artists to travel so widely. In this great age of worldwide tourism, many a person

can play the role of Heinrich Schliemann and uncover the magnificence of Paris and Rome all by themselves. So the artist travels farther, a mere half-step ahead of the crowds in coaches. However, even in travelling farther, the world as one and the same envelops the artist's mission, and the search for the lyrical in a faraway place gains ironic distance. After a day of in situ art production with the aid of a Sherpa in Nepal, the uniqueness of the day's experience is gathered and collected within the familiar environment of a Hilton Hotel, complete with BBC or CNN. Of course, the new Shanghai Art Museum looks much like any other contemporary art museum with its clean white walls and rectangular spaces. Expectations in art have also become one and the same. There are good art schools all over the world and excellent young artists can be found everywhere. There are now so many artists in the world, so many of them technically good, historically savvy, art-world-wise, and most of them know all this from art school. This is also a good thing. After all, artists are relatively benign creatures, despite their propensity toward petulance and the over-inflation of their value in the world. With apologies to Mao Zedong, why not let a hundred artists bloom? Who can argue that it is not a good thing?

From thinking about the environment to corporate profits, from the immediate address of a refugee crisis to that of artistic concerns, globalization is a phenomenon that embraces the entire world, and why should it behoove anyone not to embrace it in return? Does it matter that much of the logic of globalization is spurred by a predominantly occidental world's brand of corporatism? For example, Boeing is betting the future of its aviation company on midsize airplanes, ceding the development of a super-jumbo plane capable of seating one thousand passengers to its archrival Airbus. Boeing reasons that as so-called "open skies" deregulation continues apace, people will opt to travel more and more in direct paths from point A to point B, rather than via a hub such as Heathrow or Narita before transferring and continuing onwards, as they frequently do now. So far as air travel goes, open skies promises direct and speedy passage, rendering the world more accessible than ever before.

All of these developments, from the miracles of email, the Internet, good Sri Lankan food no matter where, the standardization of art museums, and direct passage from one point to any other in the world, have contributed to an overwhelming sense and belief that St. Petersburg, Russia, can indeed be found in St. Petersburg, Florida. Or, for that matter, that St. Petersburg, Florida, can equally be discovered in St. Petersburg, Russia. There is just too much evidence to dispute that this is so. Moreover, it has become in the economic self-interest of nearly everyone, including the art world, to regularly underwrite this byline of globalization. So why not heed the modernist directive of Baudelaire

and simply immerse oneself in globalization's promises, many of which are indeed being delivered, albeit usually with a price sticker?

But there is a problem, a very serious problem, with not examining the whole for the parts. This problem is one of selection, a condition from which the art world greatly suffers. Huge swathes of the world live in impoverished misery, just as huge swathes of that same world are dotted with McDonald's restaurants. Can anyone claim that hunger in the world is declining despite the paradox that more people are being fed? To say that Calcutta can be found in Berlin is to make a selection of certain attributes of Calcutta from a far broader, often much sadder, and more complex set of attributes that comprises the experience of actually being a resident of Calcutta, especially an impecunious resident. Furthermore, there are large parts of the world where even McDonald's does not bother to proselytize its offerings, places like much of the Sahara-dominated and economically bereft West Africa. Given how the word "globalization" now slips so easily off most curators' tongues, is it merely an oversight that less than a handful of the Western world's leading museum curators actually paid a visit to see the last Dak'Art, West Africa's most important biennale of contemporary art?

It is time for the art world to stop following the path laid by McDonald's. Eat their burgers if one must—I certainly do on occasion. But stop following in its path. The art world should be laying its own path and West Africa is as good a place to start as any. That Islamabad, Pakistan, is in Santa Barbara, California, is only a partial truth, one that is regularly exploited and re-conveyed by Benetton and Disney as an absolute truth. To borrow from Hegel, even the absolute is relative. Does globalization have such a potent allure that it obscures the role of the artist as critical practitioner? Is the promise of oneness with the world so great as to suggest that the problem of non-identity with the world is no longer a problem? The pace of globalization has rendered us all giddy and no one is saying ours is not an exciting, and even revolutionary, age. But the giddiness has created what archaeologists call "relative archaeology," the gap between what one envisions and the excavated evidence. Parts of Paris may indeed be found in Bamako but the sum of Paris is far greater than any part of Paris, just as the sum of Bamako is far greater than any part of Bamako. Despite the rhetorical equation of sameness—the only equation that interests a company like Benetton—these two sums are in fact profoundly unequal. Life in Bamako is much harsher than life in Paris, to state an obvious yet readily overlooked fact.

In the end, what does it mean, exactly, to say that Calcutta is in London and London is in Calcutta, that the two places are different but equivalent? Does it mean that one knows a good Indian restaurant in the Indian neighbourhood of London's East End? More importantly, does

it suggest any understanding beyond a cursory one of what it means to be from Calcutta and live in London? In the end, does it mean anything at all?

### 3 April 2000

*Dateline: Hangzhou, China*

The red carpet was practically rolled out for me as I began my stint as a guest professor here at the China National Art Academy. I am more than a little nervous, considering the task at hand, but it is very exciting at the same time.

So much has been written about the changes that are apace in China. Hangzhou, one of China's most important cultural cities, was spared much of the wrath of the Cultural Revolution. The city is situated on a beautiful lake called the West Lake, from where one can see in the distance several prominent temples and pagodas.

Yesterday I took a walk in this city of two million. That is easier said than done, as traffic seems hell-bent in every direction. To try to develop some semblance of civic regard for traffic rules, there are trucks with loudspeakers exhorting people to wait at intersections until the light turns green. The same exhortation applies to cars as, from what I can tell, there is little concern for driving with courtesy. Grannies with little children walk casually across the most busy and relentless intersections yet somehow make it across unscathed. People tell me that they resent the trucks with loudspeakers because they remind them too much of what passed during the Cultural Revolution, nevermind that now the trucks have sensible rather than ideological reasons.

The art academy in Hangzhou is China's most important. There used to be two equally important schools, the other being the Central Art Academy in Beijing. But for all kinds of obvious reasons there was a clampdown of the Beijing academy, while Hangzhou has the advantage of distance from the capital city. All of the best-known Chinese artists in the West graduated from Hangzhou: Yan Pei-Ming, Huang Yong Ping, Chen Zhen, etc. The reasons for this are complex, but the relatively liberal environment of the Shanghai area (Hangzhou is ninety minutes away by train) has much to do with it.

My first class begins this afternoon. As I mentioned earlier, I'm more than a little nervous.

### May 2000

Aside from the usual and often irrational worries and self-doubts that must annoy every mid-career artist's life, I have finally stepped back into

the studio after several months of deliberate absence. This entry will deal with what I did away from the studio—that is, away from making new work. I have been reading a lot more. Perhaps I should be more precise—I have been reading a lot more about things not directly about art—mostly about Africa, modern Africa, the apogee of the independence movement during the late 1950s through to the mid-'60s. I have been reading about Négritude and the problem of identity without a subject. I finished a brilliant book called *King Leopold's Ghost* by Adam Hochschild. It is about the terrible reign of Belgium's Leopold over the then Belgian Congo at the turn of the last century. Reading about historical horrors is always worthwhile but Hochschild's book is really about the founding moments of two very twentieth-century institutions—those of public relations and human rights campaigns—and their equally modern techniques. My interest in Africa comes out of my travels over the last few years, travels that have taken me afar from the usual stops in Europe or America. My interest in art for some time started to drift afar as well, but now art seems more relevant than ever to me. As a result, I've stepped back into the studio after about nine months of studio fasting and it feels wonderful.

I was reading something last week about Julius Nyerere, the founding president of independent Tanzania. Apparently, he translated Shakespeare into Swahili, the first translation of Shakespeare into an African language. He did this in 1966, the same year as the first international festival of Black African art that took place in Dakar, Senegal. This was also the highpoint of the Négritude movement as it was defined by Léopold Senghor. Négritude is an interesting context for Shakespeare, but what is also interesting is that Nyerere chose to translate *Julius Caesar*, not *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. I think Nyerere was interested in the allegorical lessons *Julius Caesar* offered to Africans. Caesar was a charismatic dictator—like many African leaders. He was betrayed by a group of Republican senators, each with their own personality—i.e., the countries of the West. These Republicans were really a bunch of aristocrats out to protect their own interests. Brutus's regret at killing his friend Caesar is ambiguous—just like the West's attitude toward Africa. Mark Antony says “let slip the dogs of war” after Caesar is killed—of course, “dogs of war” is a euphemism for mercenaries. Civil war breaks out after Caesar is slain. From what I can tell, no one has written about this yet; thus I am doing so now by writing an essay for the *Journal of African Studies*.

What else can I say without sounding self-indulgent? I wrote a long essay on McLuhan, Expo 67, and what is going awry in Canada's culture. I'm actually getting a bit tired of writing because it is starting to suck up

my artistic juices. But in many other ways, it has rejuvenated my desires to be an artist, to remain an artist. And what is really amazing is that, more and more, I see being an artist as something that can exist apart from all that goes on in the world of art—that being an artist does not even mean having to always make art. I am sure many people know this already but perhaps I am a slow learner.

### 1 June 2000

*Dateline: Vancouver*

My jaw dropped when I read the following press notice in the *New York Times* business section. But a few hours later, I wonder why it should be so surprising at all. Better to post the entire notice for those who missed it.

#### SBA ISSUE IMPENDING, ARTISTS SIGNED

SBA Sterling Ltd., a private Cayman Islands registered company which late last year created a \$3-billion incubator fund for contemporary art related start-ups will announce before the end of the year it has received signed confidentiality agreements from “dozens” of “significant and well-known” artists and collectors. It is believed that the European Commission, Europe’s competition watchdog, will give a favourable review to SBA’s proposal of an integrated art market company now that Arnaud Desprès, long time Chair of the Commission has resigned to assume a position as technical advisor with SBA. Lauren Wei-Cheng, spokeswoman for SBA said: “Market consolidation is necessary to clarify the rules for market expansion.”

Unprecedented interest in contemporary art continues to be the overwhelming reason financial experts are betting on the success of companies such as SBA. One insider who preferred to remain anonymous argued that “Issues and content do not count for very much today as perhaps they once did.” Instead, he promoted the idea that the increasing “spectacularity” of contemporary art means a new era for art, one that will submit the art world to the disciplining affects of internationally defined financial ground rules. Moreover, he argued that the art world needs to become democratized and that will happen once companies such as SBA become publicly listed. “Let’s be honest about it, for too long the art market has been a shill game masquerading as a scientific system of a moral dimension.”

Competitive plans for other art related companies are already afoot. One such start-up is NewArtStar, Inc., of Miami, Florida, which will concentrate on unknown artists and build a branding plan around their contract artists. Interested and potential collectors are reportedly signed through tie-in clauses. Company president Anthony Tonel, the ideas architect behind pop singer Mariah Carey and the Tommy Hilfiger fashion label, is apparently negotiating with several museums in Asia about “advanced placements.” Mr. Tonel said art companies should play a more active role in shaping the future of the art industry.

“I think we have to do everything we can to give countries such as Burma and The Philippines as much leverage as possible to compete globally and contemporary art is still a cheap way of building up leverage. We just want to add fairness to the way art history is made.”



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2001-2010



# Inaugural Editorial

For over thousands of years, knowledge issuing from and cultivated by the Chinese has propagated outwards from China to the benefit of the entire world. Epistemes of Chinese thought and practice have disseminated throughout the sea routes of East Asia, transforming the cultures that they touched. Chinese ingenuity crossed into the great territories of Central Asia and beyond, including Europe, by way of the famous Silk Road. Today China is once again an ascending global force in commodity production, from high technology goods to throwaway trinkets. More profoundly perhaps, Chinese voices are being recognized worldwide for their contributions to the arts—in particular, the domains of film and visual art.

The list of notable Chinese inventions that have impacted the course of world history is extensive; the effects of these inventions abide. Chinese ingenuity has also played an ineffaceable role in the shaping of the condition of modernity. Western modernism, that quintessentially European ideology of commitment to the contents of the ontology of the present, is itself a conglomeration of many non-Western ideas, including Chinese ones. From Sinclair Lewis to Voltaire, from French chinoiserie to English tea drinking, from the Confucian sensibilities of Ezra Pound to the paintings of Mark Tobey, Chineseness as an idea, as a perspective, and as a way of being has consistently infected the definition of modernism.

Just as it is important to note the contributions of Chinese culture on world culture, so much of China's cultural constitution, including many of its most traditional attributes, have also been shaped by China's long history of contact with other peoples and cultures. To cite one obvious example is Buddhism, which was decisively introduced to China from India during the reign of Emperor Ming Di. Three points should be made here regarding Buddhism. The first is that as Buddhism consolidated into China, it was both transformed and preempted by Daoism, which saw Buddhism as a challenge to its identity. For example, Daoism incorporated many accommodations to Indo-generated Buddhist ideas, including reincarnation. The second point is that the entry of Buddhism into China was not an entirely passive process, but at times a violent one marked by the persecution of its adherents. The third and most important point is that Buddhism is but one of many important and enduring markers of intercultural exchange within the development of Chinese civilization.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, when European missionaries began to assert themselves as an important presence with proselytizing outposts along the southern shores of China, much of the contact with the West has also been of a terrible nature. China's complex admixture of

fear and resentment toward the West, on one hand, and admiration and emulation on the other, has characterized and often transfixed China's perspective on Europe since the advent of the industrial revolution on that continent. In the name of Western civilization, the whole of Chinese society, comprising its cultural, political, and scientific systems of functioning, has been shaken severely and subjected to the dismantling and often ridiculing gaze of the West.

The launch of the Opium Wars in 1840 marks a particularly ignominious moment of painful contact with the Western imperium. Although the ignominy was exacerbated by China's complacency in terms of its own ancient achievements in culture and science, the effect of 1840 was decisive and exposed China to a new global economic and political situation dominated by the West. 1840 represented as much an awakening from a dream as it did an awakening into a nightmare, in which the West saw the world in increasingly providential terms, as an artefact to be shaped and determined as it saw fit. As Edward Said has argued in *Orientalism* (1978) and which bears repeating once more, the West increasingly saw itself as the only legitimate culture and, on this basis of belief, attempted to install itself as the singular civilization of reference the world over. It did so with the power accrued from a diagnosis of the Other in the ideology of Orientalism, in which European civilizations can be defined in relation to a constructed Eastern Other and in which Europe always holds the dominant hand. The launch of the so-called Opium Wars introduced a distress to the Chinese psyche—hitherto unknown to the Chinese—for its discursive trappings in areas such as judicial and trade language.

In my many visits to China, the view has been frequently put to me that China's confrontation with Western modernity resulted in a modernity quite different from that of other nations. This insistence on China's differences from the rest of the world deserves to be problematized, not simply accepted. Differences should not be absolutized and fixed in their authority, to the point of deflecting from the greater common ground that China shares with Africa, the rest of Asia, and the cultures of the non-European Americas. And what is that common ground? It is an historical and cultural territory of a shared problematic relationship to the primacy of the Western narrative. In particular, the insistence on distancing China from poorer parts of the world is to extend the idea of China's autonomy from the West to that of history itself. To do so ignores the fact that much of the world experienced a shared, albeit differently marked, relationship to Western imperial history. In this regard, China's 1960s engagement with much of the

world's formerly colonized peoples, particularly in Africa, is a shining example of a truly progressive and purposeful Chinese perspective. Why set China apart from the formerly colonized peoples of Africa based on quantitative differences regarding degrees of colonization? Often, it seems it is the non-Western world that maintains the aegis of the West, but then this is also one of the salient features of the ideology of Said's Orientalism.

The historic phenomenon of colonialism casts a huge and painful shadow over much of the world; it gave rise to a diversity of material effects over much of the world that it conquered. The important point to not lose sight of is the fact that postcolonial theory has been produced in all societies into which the imperial force of the West has intruded. From this perspective, China has much in common with not only the many nations of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, but the minoritarian and diasporic populations that also know of racism and oppression from within the territory of Western nations themselves. Thus, there is truth to the statement that the West is nowhere and yet everywhere.

"What is that which has been obscured and repressed since the start of China's engagement with the Western art world?" professor and author Sarat Maharaj asked of Chinese artists and scholars during his visit to China in 2000. The politically understandable response from many Chinese scholars is that local voices of Chinese culture have been lost under the perceived monolith of international contemporary art. Such a response should include a deeper inquiry, more salient to an understanding of the reasons why the start of the 1980s now represents an Edenic point of beginning for the narrative of contemporary Chinese art. In other words, what happened by the end of the 1970s to cause the eruption of so much art and engagement? How can we understand the historical and cultural processes by which so many art objects, which seemed to spring out of nowhere at the start of the 1980s, came into being? For an initial inquiry, the anteceding decades of the 1960s and '70s, that is, the period of the so-called Cultural Revolution, can offer valuable insights.

Lord Elgin, the British official who ordered the razing and ransacking of the Summer Palace during the Second Opium War, was reported to have felt a momentary regret over its senseless ruination.<sup>1</sup> This was but one tiny fissure in the then impregnable face of the West that was projected into China. Prior to the First Opium War, Royal Navy captain Charles Elliot incurred the ire of his countrymen when he posted a public notice citing the danger in the illegal trafficking of opium by British merchants, which he claimed "was rapidly staining

1 James Bruce, eighth earl of Elgin and twelfth earl of Kincardine (1811–63) was appointed high commissioner and plenipotentiary in China in May 1857 as part of Britain's efforts to open China and Japan to Western trade. He served as governor-in-chief of Canada from 1847 to 1854.

2 *Statement of Claims of the British Subjects Interested in Opium Surrendered to Captain Elliot at Canton for the Public Service* (London: Pelham Richardson, 1840), 98.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36.

4 Régis Debray, "A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary," *New Left Review* 115 (May/June 1979): 58.

the British character with deep disgrace."<sup>2</sup> This was another tiny fissure. Since those contemptible days of the nineteenth century, the fissures have grown into rhizomes and many of the rhizomes have amalgamated into valleys that course through the monolithic term known as the West.

It is true that the modernist narrative of Western art is propelled by the contradictory condition of artistic practice within a capital-fuelled marketplace. Wariness in the face of the marketplace is necessary not only to Chinese artists but also to non-Chinese artists. The potential uprooting and loss of the many collective identities and traditional cultures of the world in the name of a unified aesthetic sensibility is another legitimate concern. However, this does not necessarily mean that there may not be any effective resistance to this homogenizing phenomenon by any particular or local sources.

Today, the productive and destabilizing forces of revolutionary cultural exchange are all bearers of hybridized identities, including Chinese identities. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, "claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity."<sup>3</sup>

In Régis Debray's "A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary," a reflection on the events of May 1968 in France, Debray put forward the view that leading French artists and intellectuals, including Julia Kristeva and Jean-Luc Godard, have suffered from the cultural misrecognition of China. Debray criticized the French obsession with the thought of Mao Zedong as the obsession of adventurers: "all the Columbuses of modernity thought that behind Godard they were discovering China in Paris, when the fact they were landing in California."<sup>4</sup> Is it possible that misrecognition goes both ways, from the West as well as from China? Is it possible that both sides are too quick to jump to conclusions regarding the so-called "basic understanding" of one to the other?

As the art world becomes increasingly open to the voices and perspectives of alterity and different communities from around the world, alterity is not simply an accommodative term within the discursive logic of an hypostatized contemporary art world transfixed to the marketplace. To believe so would be to foreclose the possibility that there can ever be a world of art in which genuine dialogue between different communities can take place and affect one another.

A genuine openness to cultural difference cannot begin so long as the signifiers of cultural diversity continue to hold authority over any notion of cultural exchange. Only after claims to cultural fixity are dislodged can a mutual interrogation of traditions and alternative

modes of conduct be possible, and only then can a dialogic democracy be developed, one which is based on the recognition of the authenticity of the other. Until these claims are questioned, the idea of China and the idea of the West will remain totemic terms mutually exotic to one another. As history has repeatedly demonstrated, exoticism is a term soaked in the irreconcilable and the tragic.

# Prix de Rome Commentary



In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau drew a distinction between “space” and “place,” according the meaning of “practiced place”—that is, shaped by historical subjects who constantly redefine its use—to the first term, and according a configuration of discursive stability—that is, under the command of the law of the proper—to the latter term. Certeau thought of “space” as a fomenting point of mobility and resistance to the enshrinement of power and locatedness in “place.” “Space is fundamental to any exercise of power,” Foucault famously wrote. Both Certeau and Foucault identified spatial practice in political terms. After all, what is public space if not political public space and, by extension, what is public art if not, to some degree, political public art—art that is concerned with the expression of new and diverse political and cultural imaginings?

Today, the status of public space is challenged and diminished in a social environment in which property rights have primacy over both individual rights and collective rights. The possibility of social integration, which is suggested by the idea of a shared urban space, is increasingly negated by systematic displacements of peoples from one another or, somewhat conversely, by the subsuming of people into the spectacular narratives of privatist sign systems that saturate the public sphere. Baudrillard argues that the problem of Debordian narratives has dissipated into an “ecstasy of communication” crisis, a crisis revealed not only by the loss of public space but also by the loss of genuine private space. For example, television continues to be conceptualized as existing almost entirely in the private realm of the home, whereas, in fact, its presence is significant in a wide range of public and semi-public spaces, from building foyers to subway station platforms. Consequently, the amount of space that is produced outside the surveillance and influence of the dominant culture is small and ever decreasing. Art that can lead to a better understanding of public space—that is, art that can produce space which resists this crisis, however provisionally—is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

Such thoughts came to mind when I was honoured by an invitation to assist in the jurying of the 2003 Prix de Rome Art and Public Space competition. Issues of identity, especially along the interfaces where languages and cultures meet and often collide, have long occupied my interest as an artist. I have also been concerned with the problem of how to insert a now artistic (utopian) language into the commercial sign system of the street without falling into the trap of a lot of public art, which ends up functioning as little more than a private version of public welfare.

I was first of all intrigued by the almost lapidary name of the competition: Art and Public Space. This name is inclusive, suggesting a dimension of philosophical interchange between the term “art” and the term “public space” that would not exist if the title of the competition had been the more commonly used form of Art *in* Public Space. The use of the term “and” suggests art as a supplement to public space and not necessarily as an integrative operation to or in public space. The name suggests a competition in which no semantic or aesthetic construct is foreclosed from consideration a priori. Art and Public Space suggests an openness of possibilities in the ways of thinking about both terms, of art and of public space. Intangible concepts such as truth and reality could be explored without any narrowing prescriptions or orthodoxies of thought concerning public art. The very process of measuring can influence that which is to be measured. In being so named, the Prix de Rome competition declares itself open to critical self-examination regarding its role and performance in terms of its own positioning in any examination of art and public space.

The adjudication process began with a rapid run-through of slide images from unnamed artists who were referenced only by a number. There was strict insistence on protecting the anonymity of the applicants and, except for the artist’s statement that accompanied each of the respective dossiers, very little background information was offered by the officials of the Prix de Rome. This condition of anonymity, along with the quick viewing of the transparencies, emphasized the importance of an immediate impression. At first, I thought there was something positivistic about this process of viewing slides as so many Rorschach inkblots. There seemed to be an unspoken theory underwriting this procedure that tied the conditions of instantaneity and anonymity to the space of self-evidence and pure response. As is often said, first impressions can be deceptive; more so when slide images stand in for the actual work. The jurors were trusted to pursue their initial, visceral responses, which could then lead to further and more sustained viewing of a particular work. There was also the logistical problem of addressing the many applications in as fair and efficient a manner as possible. For better or worse, time and practicality must be considered in any such large competition. All the jurors were aware that every jury process has to have rules and that it was up to them to navigate such structures so that the process did not disfavour good applicants whose works required slower viewing and greater attention.

As the adjudicating proceeded, there were a number of repeated disappointments. The slide selections made by certain applicants seemed to be rather a hodgepodge, and in some cases even indifferent to the

necessity of providing the jurors with some sense of an intelligent and intelligible artistic narrative. Such lack of understanding of the demands of a juried competition betrayed an artist out of touch with the exigencies of contemporary curatorial operations. It suggested an artist with no sense of the political negotiations that are inscribed, for better or worse, in juried art competitions. There were also applications from artists who had no grounds for entering this competition, their work having no relation whatsoever to the specified category. One artist, for example, submitted a dossier of expressive nude renderings with no substantive artist's statement appended. For this artist, the competition was akin to a stab at the lottery. What seemed important to me was that such examples indicated that no applications had been screened or disqualified beforehand as inappropriate for the category, something often done in other competitions, such as that of the Canada Council. In the Prix de Rome competitions, there is no prejudging of any application by screeners; the panel of jurors considers every application and it is the jurors who are entrusted with making all the evaluations.

There were several very good applications but far fewer than the jury had hoped, and a discussion ensued as to why so few good applicants had come forward. Sixty-six had applied, and twelve were short-listed for brief discussions about their work before a final four candidates were determined. There were some comments about the amount of time and energy that would be called for once an applicant had passed the first adjudication stage. Short-listed candidates have only a few months to produce a work that will be scrutinized in exhibition, which, in practice, means putting everything else aside for the Prix de Rome. Was the relative shortage of good applications related to the increasing professionalization of the art world where exhibition opportunities abound in unprecedented ways? Were the Prix de Rome prizes themselves too much trouble for what they are worth, especially when conjoined to what some may consider a narrow window of opportunity to produce work? Is it a case of indifference on the part of artists, particularly Dutch artists? Any artist who has spent the previous two years in the Netherlands is eligible to apply to the Prix de Rome, and it was noted that a disproportionate number of applicants were non-Dutch artists rather than Dutch artists.

The second stage of the adjudication involved fifteen-to-twenty-minute discussions with each of the short-listed candidates. These face-to-face meetings with the artists provided an opportunity for the jurors to test their initial assessments in a more fleshed-out and nuanced setting. For me, the encounters with the artists furnished the most enjoyable and often poignant moments of the adjudication process and

reminded the jurors of the weightiness of their responsibilities. The jury's expectations were generally affirmed during the meetings and, where the expectation was ambiguous, the discussion offered clarity, sometimes negatively and at other times positively.

I very much enjoyed bantering and sometimes sparring with my co-jurors. We were far from a homogenous group of artists and critics—very different people, with divergent practices. The jury was comprised of artists Antony Gormley, Narcisse Tordoïr, Alicia Framis, and myself, and cultural critic Dirk van Weelden. One of the jurors, Alicia Framis, was herself a former Prix de Rome winner and is now a successful and respected artist. The jury noted that many Prix de Rome winners went on to develop solid careers as artists and that the Prix de Rome has been instrumental in the discovery of some of the best artists working today.

After a couple of days sitting in the dark confines of a windowless room of the Rijksakademie, I began thinking about the *Imaginary Museum* of André Malraux. I thought about the many ways that works of art conjure references to other works of art and how all art is linked by the fundamental impulse to communicate an aesthetic effect or meaning. But I was also deeply aware of an opposing approach raised by the *Imaginary Museum*, one that sees the jury process as a decentring from such referential linkages. Rightly or wrongly, I felt there was some irony in viewing numerous images of art projects set in the public realm

from within the sheltered environment of a darkened room. For me this raised questions regarding the role of photography in articulating aesthetic resolutions to fundamental contradictions in public space. Documentation is always a problem because the judgment of the jurors is contingent on it, and because original experience can never be retrieved in its full complexity.

The relationship of art to the common contents of everyday experiences is an important theme for many artists working today. A significant number of applicants tilled the ground of the quotidian, often through anonymously executed public actions. One artist had repainted public amenities—for example, a park bench—in different colours. For this artist the point was to reduce the distance between art and



André Malraux, *Imaginary Museum*, 1947

non-art action to the point where they become indistinguishable. “Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all,” stated Henri Lefebvre and, while his words may ring true, they also signal, at least to me, a growing consensus among younger artists that art can no longer declare its goals, and that, if it does, it can only do so in whispers. The strength of art lies in a complexity that is often not apparent, but its strength also lies in its insistence on itself as art. What is important is that the elusiveness of art is something that is discerned not in retreat from social interactions with people and public environments, but in active engagement with them.

Among the entries in the competition, there was notable use of art based on a pseudo-documentary premise that explores the question of mediated reality through the framework of reality television. Some submissions were concerned with the idea of cyberspace as a new kind of public art space. There was very little art as dissent and also few entries involving video installation, which is surprising given its influence in both the private realm and public spaces. Many of the applications expressed good ideas that did not quite coalesce. The most successful works surprised in their treatment of the problem of the diminishment of public space in favour of lived experience and true desire. The best applications were not satisfied to merely blur the lines between art and real life. The work of the final four saw art as an instrument for change; their art provided opportunities for alternative approaches to overwhelming social and individual problems. The finalists—James Beckett, Natasja Boezem, Katrin Korfmann, and Tomoko Take—from diverse geographical backgrounds, all surprised in their inventive interactions involving art and public space. All gave thought to the double-edged role that social-political structures can play in furnishing art with sustenance and in censoring many possible actions.

The Prix de Rome stands apart from many art awards competitions, such as the more celebrated Turner Prize or the Hugo Boss Prize. By its steadfast attention to the evaluative problem of predicating qualities to art, the Prix de Rome can seem out of kilter with an art world that is, by and large, given over to entertainment and marketing values. The Prix de Rome does not reject the art world, but neither does it accept the art world uncritically. The aesthetic effect of art is often created by such paradoxical tensions and, in keeping with this particular competition, possibly no more so than when art is considered in the light of public space.

# Aesthetic Education in Republican China

## A Convergence of Ideals

Published in *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945*,  
eds. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, and Zheng Shengtian  
Museum Villa, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004

In preparing for *Shanghai Modern*, the curators—Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Zheng Shengtian, and I—paid several visits to the West Lake (Xi Hu) city of Hangzhou, ninety minutes by train west of Shanghai. One of six capital cities in the long history of China, Hangzhou was the national capital during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279). Many of China’s most celebrated poets and writers, including Lin Bu, Bai Juyi, and Su Shi, lived in and around the Hangzhou area. The beautiful West Lake, around which is poised the city of Hangzhou, is the source of many of China’s most cherished myths and fables. During the middle of the Ming Dynasty (sixteenth century), Literati traditions in literature and art flourished in Hangzhou. According to Christopher Reed, Hangzhou from the middle of the Ming through to the Qing Dynasty was the second most important centre in China for “elite publishing” by Literati artists.<sup>1</sup> The most important centre was Suzhou, a city a two-hour drive north in neighbouring Jiangsu Province, and cited alongside Hangzhou in the saying: “As there is paradise in Heaven, so there is Suzhou and Hangzhou on earth.”

The Literati were educated gentlemen who devoted themselves to traditional Chinese scholarship in literature and art. Often men of wealth, Literati scholars drew prestige from maintaining large libraries that included many self-published books of their own writings and commentary on important Chinese texts, expressing their identification with China’s cultural past and traditions. In art, Literati or Wenrenhua painters revitalized Southern Song Dynasty styles, including the Ma Xia landscape tradition of light brushwork and ethereal representations of space and form. The Literati model was a synthesis of both Confucian and Neo-Daoist ideals. Painting and poetry were means of self-expression that reflected the Confucian (scholarship) and Neo-Daoist (poetry and art) ideals of attaining *junzi*, or noble gentleman status. For the Literati, art and literature were defined as the ideal categories of cultural achievement and Hangzhou was one of their most important centres.

Given this historical context, it must have been a decision of considerable symbolic weight for the Ministry of Education to designate Hangzhou, in 1928, as the home of the National Academy of Art, China’s first officially sanctioned institution for an education in Western-style modernist art. It was in the tradition- and culture-laden city of Hangzhou that the project of teaching and developing a new aesthetic modernity for China would begin. Lin Fengmian, an artist who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and recently returned from Europe, was appointed to direct the National Academy of Art with the purpose

1 Christopher A. Reed, “Printing and Publishing in Late Imperial China,” presentation at the conference *New Paradigms and Parallels: The Printing Press and the Internet*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 5–6 October 2000.

2 Chen Duxiu, *Youth Magazine*, 15 September 2015.

of developing “both Chinese and Western art, to create art of the day and to carry forward Chinese culture.” Carrying forward Chinese culture called for a reconciliation of China’s tradition-bound history with Western modernism. The National Academy of Art project expressed an anxiety regarding the social and technological conditions of China as compared to the standards set by the more developed and powerful West. Chinese art and literature were seen as frozen, irrelevant, and unproductive in its disconnection to contemporary life. Chinese culture and the traditional ethic represented by Confucianism were vociferously attacked in *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*), the first magazine in China composed in vernacular Chinese and edited by the French-educated, leftist intellectual Chen Duxiu (1879–1942). Demands were made for the formation of a new culture unfettered by Confucianism and feudal ideas and institutions. One of the demands was the radical step of language reform, the legitimizing of vernacular Chinese as the official written language of China. Lu Xun, the great modern writer of this period, would be among the first to publish writings in the vernacular. More than a pedagogical tool for the advancement of universal Chinese literacy in a country of high illiteracy, the adoption of the vernacular also symbolized an important step toward an all-encompassing transformation of China by various new literary and political ideas, many of them Western in origin. A number of intellectuals feared for China’s future as the country experienced an ever-deepening crisis of what philosophers would call “the oblivion of being.” Many had lost faith in the ability of traditional culture to be renewed while others presented traditional culture as the central problem facing China. Intellectuals such as Lu Xun and Chen Duxiu argued that China was doomed unless extreme measures were adopted that could pave the path for a total redefinition of China, which would include the *mise en cause* of all sacrosanct Chinese traditions and values. As early as 1915, Chen proclaimed: “All our traditional ethics, law, scholarship, rites, and customs are survivals of feudalism. When compared with the achievements of the white race there is a difference of a thousand years in thought though we live in the same period.... I would rather see the past culture of our nation disappear than see our race die now because of its unfitness for living in the modern world.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2000, I spent some time teaching at the China Academy of Art (formerly the National Academy of Art) as an invited lecturer. By the time of our curators’ visit two years later, much had changed. The Academy was in the throes of new construction. The street-facing wing of the original Bauhaus-style campus had already been razed and replaced by a much larger and far less modestly styled building. The ambiguity of that moment was worth noting—a historical institution



that at one time spoke of the future was now deemed obsolete and about to be fully replaced by something more “contemporary.”

What vision do the new buildings represent? The original campus of several interlocking mid-rise buildings surrounding a sports field clearly proffered Bauhaus architectural values. Indeed, the founding of the National Academy of Art occurred during when the short-lived Bauhaus School of Germany was in operation, but became fully realized after the Bauhaus was forced to move from Weimar to Dessau. The appeal of the Bauhaus to a China seeking redemption with modernity must have seemed self-evident to Lin Fengmian, who, after leaving Paris in 1923, moved to Berlin with the purpose of studying German cultural ideas.<sup>3</sup> The Bauhaus would stand as a possible generative model for China for the reason that it represented a socialist-inflected reconciliation between the forces of capitalism and a new critical modernism of industrial orientation. The reinforcement of art, architecture, and design in a new social vision of what could be achieved for the masses was crucial to the liberal vision behind the building of the National Academy of Art in 1928. The German Bauhaus was riven by a vigorous debate about the associated discursive relationship of art to politics. In *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich* (1989), Elaine Hochman wrote of the rise of calculated political agnosticism at the Bauhaus—particularly during the stewardship of the architect Mies van der Rohe—as a survivalist tactic adopted during a climate of consolidating Nazi strength in German social life.<sup>4</sup>

The affiliation of the National Academy of Art with leftist politics was also ambiguous, despite the demands from nationalists for a general cultural production that would reassert traditional Chinese values, and from leftists for a cultural production that matched social needs. Though largely sublimated within the discursive logic of Western modernism, it is worthwhile to be reminded of the intercultural exchange within Bauhaus design tenets. For example, Bauhaus architecture often exhibited minimally fixed walls and sliding wall panels, an idea that is derived from Chinese and Japanese principles of architecture as an extension of landscape. There was also some mediation between Frank Lloyd Wright’s work on the Tokyo Imperial Hotel of 1922 and Bauhaus development.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of China’s economic condition in the 1920s, the presence of a modernity that could exist in a discernibly systematized fashion, as in the example of Europe, was highly tenuous. The disadvantages of economic capacity were largely compensated through new institutional arrangements advanced by the state. Intellectuals within the government promoted an education that would increase the representation

3 Xu Jiang, “The ‘Misreading’ of Life,” in *Shanghai Modern: 1919–1945*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, and Zheng Shengtian (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004): 74.

4 Elaine S. Hochman, *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

5 Cary James, *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1988).

of liberal ideas, such as the fostering of aesthetic education in terms of Chinese society in general.

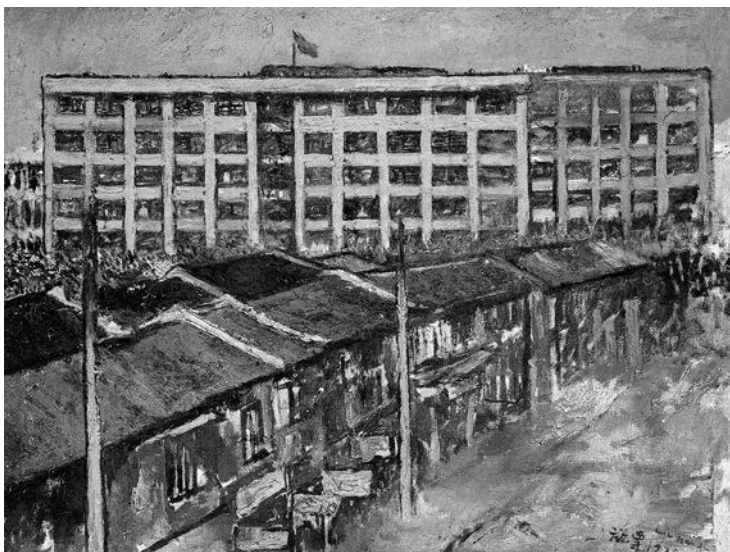
Comparisons with the economic standards in the West were mobilized as a historical problem in the intellectual milieu of the New Culture Movement of 1917–23, a period which includes the often synonymous May Fourth Movement of 1919, a series of protests that broke ground for artists to address questions of intellectual and artistic freedom. This period deeply influenced many of China's artists and critics in terms of receptivity toward Western ideas of art and literature, including figures such as Cao Yu, who is often referred to as the father of modern Chinese drama, and the novelist Ba Jin. As in the case of Weimar Germany, modernism in republican China was both an expression and diagnosis of cultural crisis, one that extended into questions of identity and subjectivity, both collective and individual.

Following this period, a key debate ensued regarding the ideological constructs that China should follow in its striving for modernity. Positions were adopted by a spectrum of intellectual proponents that ranged from the wholesale transformation of China into a Western-styled state; a non-Marxist, non-materialist democracy; or a Marxist socialist state. The fragmentation of ideological goals and the semi-colonial situation of China at this time complicated the question of national solidarity. Since the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, a consequence of China's humiliation in the Opium Wars, China's status as a sovereign country was severely compromised. Shanghai especially was marked by the principle of extraterritoriality under which foreign concessions siphoned off trade with China to their advantage. No genuine central government with a modicum of popular support existed during the entire period after the republican revolution of 1912 and up to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The so-called Warlord Period (1916–28) was followed quickly by civil war, while Japanese aggression deepened in China. Despite these terrible circumstances, there is no denying the intellectual productivity that marked this period, as various nationalisms arose and competing ideas about saving China came to the fore. The question of art's relationship to politics was a source of vigorous debate among cultural workers. The distressed social milieu meant that artistic practice necessarily operated in a complex and often contradictory set of interactions. Chinese modernist artists such as Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian struggled to maintain the integrity of their aesthetic pursuits in the face of mounting social distress, negligent popular and economic support, and demands, especially from the left, to surrender the brand of introspective, European-rooted modernism to the project of nationalism and political reform. As Ralph Crozier has stated:

“For the left, the modernist exploration of style as a new language for communication of personal feelings was useless for China’s real needs.”<sup>6</sup>

As the curators of *Shanghai Modern*, we were in Hangzhou to inspect the inventory of Ni Yide paintings in the collection of the China Academy of Art. Ni Yide, along with Pang Xunqin and others, co-founded the Juelanshe (the Storm Society) avant-garde art group. Its name is coincident with Germany’s *Der Sturm*, an art periodical that lasted from 1910 to 1932, published in Berlin by critic and poet Herwarth Walden. The Storm Society, like its German counterpart, also promoted modern and revolutionary art (in the sense of promoting radical social and political change), emphasizing the aspect of personal expression. Ni is one of the key artist-intellectuals in China’s first modernist movement. He worked in the National Academy of Art in the 1930s until just before the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

As in the case of many Chinese modernists, Ni had lived and studied abroad, in Japan. As Shu-mei Shih points out in her remarkable book *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-Colonial China, 1917–1937* (2001), despite the aggressive expansionism of Japan’s ambitions in China, Japan represented a key, albeit contradictory, exemplar for Chinese intellectuals wanting to know more about the West. According to Shih, Chinese intellectuals looked to Japan “as a model of successful modernization/Westernization.” Furthermore, “Japanese cultural products and mediated presentations of Western culture were valued and deemed necessary for China to understand the West and ‘Asianize’ it for Chinese use. More than a model, Japan was the medium and the shortcut to Westernization.”<sup>7</sup> Japan emerged as an industrial state during the Meiji Era (1868–1912), when Japanese culture was modernized and Westernized. In China, Western ideas did not come to be considered as the dominant course until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. “Another dimension of the contradictory perception of Japan as mediator,



Liu Haisu, *Four Banks 'Godown,' 1938*

6 Ralph Crozier, “Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republication China,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1993), 143.

7 Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-Colonial China, 1917–37* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 17–18.

8 Ibid., 18.

9 Crozier, “Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai,” 136–37.

aggressor, and exemplar was the view of Japan as an ally in the struggle against Western imperialism,” a view that Shih says “was less commonly held but nevertheless influential.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, for many of the Chinese modernists, their association with and regard for the “West,” including, curiously, Japan, represented a problem of non-identity with the experiences and expectations of art of the general public. Their own status was isolated, far from understood outside of a very small public, and generally not well supported. And yet, it was precisely their Western training that made them valuable to a China seeking to modernize by drawing lessons from the West. A response was initiated, of which the National Academy of Art was part of the outcome.

In 1917, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) proposed a curriculum of aesthetic education that would be taught in newly established government-supported institutions. The path toward modernity would be achieved through social evolution rather than radical revolution. According to Ralph Crozier, “Cai Yuanpei, president of Peking University and probably the most influential educator in China, first proposed the famous slogan ‘aesthetic education as a substitute for religion.’ He did not totally opt for Western art, and he did not even recognize the modernist-traditionalist controversy, but it was the supposedly rational spirit behind Western art that inspired his vision of a higher and more human culture.”<sup>9</sup>

What is interesting is the affinity of Cai’s use of the words “aesthetic education” with J.C. Friedrich von Schiller’s *Lectures Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), a philosophical text fundamental to any consideration of European romantic and modernist art. Cai, who studied philosophy, aesthetics, and experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig in Germany, wrote a book on *The History of Chinese Ethics* (1910) and translated several German books into Chinese before returning to China in 1911, as the revolution to displace the Manchu Dynasty was erupting. German sociologist Max Weber had argued that state-supported education was a necessary corollary to the modernization of the state. In 1912, Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, appointed Cai minister of education. A modern and cosmopolitan thinker, Cai saw art as providing refuge from theological displacement. This is also a key theme of Schiller’s work.

Schiller conceived of art as a pedagogical tool for the elevation of human freedom, especially necessary in the context of political disorder and/or tyranny. His 1795 text was written in part as a response to the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution. Schiller argued for the centrality of aesthetic education in the healthy development of both

society and the individual. He believed that “beauty,” as a category of sensual experience, represented the key not only to general well-being but also to a triadic model of historical progress—in a lineage akin to Hegel’s dialectic of absolute idealism—from the physical to the aesthetic to the moral. Cai was also deeply influenced by American philosopher John Dewey’s so-called Orders Objective for modern education. Dewey was a Hegelian who espoused an organic view of society in which an individual’s measure is linked to his or her performance in and for society. The system of education within such a view would be an expression of the highest form of Hegelian reconciliation, identified metonymically as an Absolute. In *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel defined the Absolute as a dialectical movement of free and constituting self-activity, motivated by the synthesis of contradiction, toward new stages of existence. Furthermore, to Hegel, each new stage marks not an end but another departure point in an endless process of the social individual’s reconstitution with the contemporary or present. With parallels to both Schiller and Hegel, Cai proclaimed: “We must follow the general rule of freedom of thought and freedom of expression, and not allow any one branch of philosophy or any one tenet of religion to confine our minds, but always aim at a lofty universal point of view which is valid without regard to space or time. For such an education I can think of no other name than education for a world view.”<sup>10</sup>

Aesthetic education was proposed in China during a time of immense political uncertainty. Sustaining creative cultural life under such conditions was difficult. As an educator who followed Dewey, Cai insisted on the independence of education, unfettered by religion or politics. Similarly, artists tired of the Confucian morality that they felt represented a hindrance to China’s cultural advancement advocated the separation of art from politics and religion, as a practice with its own intrinsic and purposeful set of values. The republican government was quite liberal in cultural matters and the social upheaval reflected by national fragmentation and precarious official governance freed the curiosity of new audiences (mostly of the middle class) to new ideas in art as the old Confucian order came increasingly under challenge. The unity of art and technology was propounded in visionary terms of an aesthetic, scientific, and technically advanced future China, but during a contradictory time of utter cultural and political disorder. Aesthetic education was an ideal that was upheld as a necessity in the face of social catastrophe.

As such, the debate about art and politics around the affirmation of the sovereignty of art as a politically useful practice according to its own terms versus art as a practice of extending the social consciousness

10 Lizhong Zhang, “Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940),” *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* 23, nos. 1–2 (2000): 147–57.

11 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–52.

12 Quoted in Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, eds., *Brecht on Art and Politics* (London: Methuen, 2003).

13 Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

of the immediate political environment, was of central contention among China’s modernist artists. The relationship of art to politics is a given in the modernity of avant-garde art, as Walter Benjamin noted in his celebrated essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”<sup>11</sup> The experimentation with modernist painting techniques that artists such as Ni Yide, Pang Xunqin, and Wei Tianlin performed were seen by them as advancing the political project, in the Benjaminian sense, of individual artistic expression and inner feeling. To these artists, the lack of understanding in China of modernist art was not so much a sign of their own disconnection with China but proof of their own connectedness to the more “advanced” modernity of the West, a connectedness that both highlighted China’s painful condition and the need of China to meet the level of modernity of the West. As intellectual artists with cosmopolitan experiences, they would have understood the relationship between their artistic practices and the difficult social environment in which their work was inscribed. So the debate about art and politics that ensued in China was much more complex than a contest between realist versus modernist content. The problem of what Brecht called “self-activity” was at the heart of the debate. To Brecht, self-activity was a term drafted in the category of social agency and directed at what he called “the art of living” or self-governing.<sup>12</sup> Developed from Hegel, self-activity was productive and purposeful activity aligned with the needs of the working class. To China’s modernist artists, as represented by the Storm Society, the question of politics in art could not be consigned exclusively to an artwork’s content or its political intelligibility. The category of form in art is equally of value to the category of content.

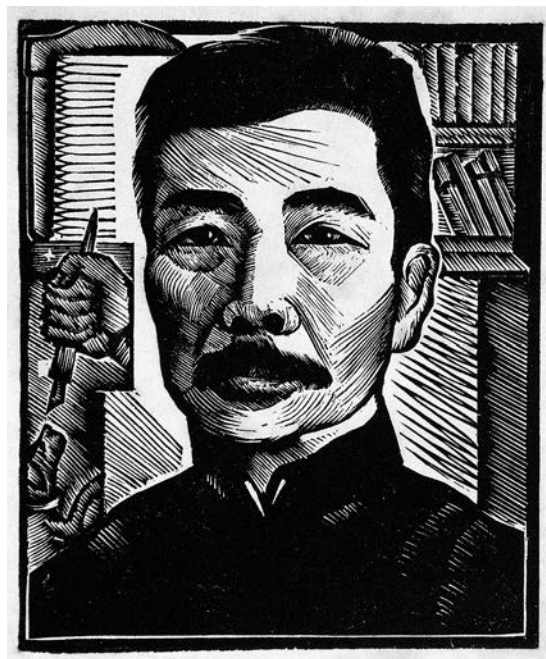
Following the reformist May Fourth Movement, some intellectuals on the left of the movement, observing closely the situation in the new Soviet Union, launched the Communist Party of China. There were concerns among the modernist artists that leftist demands for centralized control of economic production could very well extend to cultural production, raising the danger of the erasure of self-activity in art. It should be recalled that Stalin officially imposed socialist realism on Russian artists and writers as early as 1932. Recent scholarship has highlighted the preparation of socialist realism in Russia before the Russian Revolution, examining an artistic thread that began in mid-nineteenth-century realist art with demands that art be popular, accessible, technically proficient, and socially committed.<sup>13</sup> As would be the case in China, artistic transformations occurring around the October Revolution were politically determined along the axis of “avant-garde”

artists versus “traditionalist” artists, the former being completely eliminated by the mid-1930s.

According to proponents of a socially obligated art, the modernist understanding of individual freedom and expression conflicted with the greater need of the people for freedom from hunger and oppression. Aesthetic education was a program founded on a process of social evolution that conflicted with the imperatives of social transformation. The modernists of China were somewhat paralyzed in the face of such contradictions, but held fast to their pursuits in purist fashion. They never really challenged the conventional view of the artist’s role as a purely artistic enterprise, as Benjamin insisted artists should see it. In his essay “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin saw artists as latent educators who had to master technology and industrial production techniques in order to assist in the empowerment of the audience in becoming producers as well as consumers of meaning.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, both the project of the Storm Society and the programs of purely aesthetic education remained somewhat undefined (in political terms), mimicking Western models of art without challenging or, at the least, refashioning the models in a critical manner so as to raise the level of political self-consciousness and self-activity. Aesthetic education (or such educational models) assumed as truth the modernist myth of progress. It also assumed that the fundamental person, purged of religion and other traditional commitments, would then be induced by the space of creative freedom to desire and achieve unqualified good for the whole of society.

Looking at Ni Yide’s works, stored at the China Academy of Art, and considering them in the context of the historically brief and limited existence of the Storm Society, the figure of Lu Xun looms ever larger in importance. Like Ni, Lu Xun also received his formation in progressive ideas about art in Japan. In many respects, he shared the views of the modernists who admired Fauvism, Picasso, and Matisse: he challenged the Confucian social landscape as anachronistic; he was a great admirer and even collector of European avant-garde art; he was a cosmopolitan who defied any notion of a fetishized or pure China; his own literary production openly paid

14 Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harvest-HBJ Books, 1978), 220–38.



Li Qun, *Portrait of Lu Xun*, 1936

15 David E. Pollard, *The True Story of Lu Xun* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002).

16 Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 204–6.

17 Lu Xun, *Wild Reeds* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985).

18 Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 58.

19 *Ibid.*, 78.

homage to Western writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, Charles Baudelaire, and Friedrich Nietzsche; and he believed in the wholesale reform of China into a modern, twentieth-century society of proper importance to the world.<sup>15</sup> Like the modernists, he also at times felt himself distanced from China, despite his deep love for his country. While in Japan, he gained acute perspectives on the traditional conception of China he might not otherwise have gained had he remained in China. Where Lu Xun did deviate from the Storm Society modernists was in his brand of social modernism. Early in his career, his practice as an artist consistently extended to political causes. For example, he was a leading figure of the May Fourth Movement. Later in his career, he relegated himself to the role of a moralist observer of everyday life, emphasizing the lived experience of ordinary people. It was a relegation that reflected, to some degree, his uneasiness about the ever-increasing intertwining of politics and art.

Lu Xun was also a noted advocate of women's rights. Female freedom in place of filial piety and even chastity was a tenet of the May Fourth Movement, although according to Shu-mei Shih, the May Fourth doctrine of free love and feminine individuality reflected as much a trope of male intellectual self-regard as genuine advocacy of women's rights and freedoms.<sup>16</sup> Among a large collection of prints by many of Europe's leading avant-garde artists, including Erich Heckel, Fernand Léger, and George Grosz, Lu Xun owned many prints by Käthe Kollwitz, a socialist German artist whose work often touched on the emancipation of women. His sponsorship of a veritable movement in woodcut prints established a connection between the German and Chinese woodblock print traditions, inspired by German expressionist re-conceptualizations of the traditional form. Above all, woodblock printing is an inexpensive process of art-making compared to painting. In this sense, it was more "democratic" and inherently populist than the painted form.

Lu Xun's celebrated 1927 book *Wild Reeds*, a collection of prose poems, was inspired in part by Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) (and Baudelaire's *Spleen et idéal* [1857]) and brilliantly conjoins the traditional form of Confucian analects with Nietzsche's aphorisms in a deeply personal and melancholic expressivity.<sup>17</sup> According to Shih, "Nietzschean existentialism was imported into China as early as 1902, and met with immense popularity during the May Fourth decade."<sup>18</sup> During his Japanese residency period, Lu Xun wrote "On Cultural Extremism," a widely read essay in which Nietzsche is presented as "the major theoretical support for his advocacy of individualism, in which the self is situated against the masses, the individual against the collective."<sup>19</sup> Echoing Nietzsche's "Superman," Lu Xun added: "The masses constitute



the realm of conformity, vulgarity, and corrupt materialism, against which the individual must rebel.”<sup>20</sup> It is at this point that Lu Xun’s caustic moralism converges with the sentimental education idealism of Cai Yuanpei and the individualist anguish of the Storm Society painters, through their common advocacy of the individual as someone embodied with the potential of deeply humane values and the modern spirit. Compare the aforementioned quotation by Lu Xun with the opening sentence of the Storm Society Manifesto: “The air around us is too still, as mediocrity and vulgarity continue to envelop us. Countless morons are writhing around and countless shallow minds are crying out.”<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective of today, it is interesting, even prescient, that Lu Xun should have had such an interest in Nietzsche, the great anti-rationalist philosopher of the here-and-now. Nietzsche’s attacks on the Enlightenment science of reason is at odds with the dialectical path of Kant, Hegel, and even Marx, the latter of whom Lu Xun embraced even though he was a Marxist who was at once a taciturn Communist, one who consistently refused to formally join the Communist Party. Nietzsche’s famous idea of the “eternal return of the same” expressed his concern with life lived as it is, without the escape of transcendence:

“O Zarathustra,” said then his animals, “to those who think like us, things all dance themselves: they come and hold out the hand and laugh and flee—and return.

“Everything goeth, everything returneth; eternally rolleth the wheel of existence. Everything dieth, everything blossometh forth again; eternally runneth on the year of existence.

“Everything breaketh, everything is integrated anew; eternally buildeth itself the same house of existence. All things separate, all things again greet one another; eternally true to itself remaineth the ring of existence. Every moment beginneth existence, around every ‘Here’ rolleth the ball ‘There.’ The middle is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity.”<sup>22</sup>

The Eternal Return of the Same is a category of Being, a process that never ceases to become. As a finite category, Being—in order to remain Being—is obliged to implicate itself in all the things and events that comprise the world. In so doing, Being redefines itself as Being in as infinite a number of ways as there are things and events in the world. The Eternal Return of the Same is a process that must be willed or enacted. The Self is enacted in relation to all other possible and previous

20 Ibid.

21 “The Storm Society Manifesto,” *Art Trimonthly* 1, no. 5 (October 1932).

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969).

selves. The Self is relativized to all other possible and previous interactions with the other.

From the perspective of today, especially in light of post-structuralism, it is interesting to compare Lu Xun's intellectual lineage of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to Cai Yuanpei's lineage of Hegel and Schiller. Lu Xun's sober and frequently despairing writings express his alienation from his Chineseness, a key correspondence to the Nietzschean loss of a given identity by way of the "death of God." Lu Xun was opposed to the idea of Chineseness as a fixed term while he continued to develop and broaden what it meant to be Chinese. To Lu Xun, the renewal of China was possible only after the renunciation of all fixed categories of understanding China. Again, like Nietzsche, it is a renunciation that must be willed. By contrast, Hegelian movement is inexorable and implies a certain degree of stability of the self as a precondition for social betterment.

Looking back, the hopeful social evolutionary thread of aesthetic education that Cai Yuanpei followed now seems somewhat quixotic in light of its foreclosure by China's tragic history. In both cases, there was recognition of historical changes in the categorization of China and Chineseness, of its sense of time-honoured values and identity. Against a background of extreme social tumult, modernists such as Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei, Ni Yide, and others understood through their artistic and intellectual debates a China that was confronting its own crisis of identity. Some, such as members of the Storm Society, argued for an exploration of identity as subjectivity, a category of identity that is central to what it means to be modern, but which was repressed within the polity of Confucian culture.

Identification as a social process, particularly in relation to the question of political solidarity and commitment, is a major theme of Lu Xun's work. From the sanctity of today, especially in the context of a prospering and awakening China, it may be difficult to appreciate the depth and breadth of the debates that ensued in the country during these decades of immense socio-political strife with respect to the question of modernism and China's futurity. Looking back, one cannot say that Lu Xun was right and the Storm Society was wrong in terms of the artistic projects they pursued during difficult times. One is tempted to say, somewhat maladroitly, that the modernist ideals of the Storm Society were perhaps less appropriate than Lu Xun's in terms of the comportment and actions that must be taken by artists in the face of utter social and political despair. From post-structuralism, one learns that history itself is a deeply flawed judge. So who is to say who was right, or even more right, in the intellectual debates that took place? Looking at

the work of Ni Yide, Liu Haisu, and the many other modernist painters today, one sees beauty, pleasure, and self-understanding as important terms in their work. One also detects great courage. The social and technical conditions at the time in which these artists worked were difficult and would not at first seem generative of such great cultural production, and in many respects it was not. The output of modern art from this period in China is meagre when compared to modern art production in Europe or Japan. Many, if not most, of the works produced during this period have either been lost or destroyed. Still, the works that have survived are often complex, beautiful, and deeply meaningful.

As we departed the China Academy of Art that day, workers packed the Ni Yide paintings back in their respective crates. I took one last look at the remaining Bauhaus-style sections of the campus, now destroyed. I took one last look at the beautiful sculpture of Xia Peng (also known as Yao Fu) that stands outside by the edge of the sports field facing the sculpture wing. I had passed this sculpture many times before during my time of teaching at the academy. It is a modest bust of the young woman on a plinth inscribed with text. Born in 1911, in 1929 Xia Peng was a student in the Department of Sculpture. She soon became a member of the progressive student organization Eighteen Society, an early proponent of the New Woodcut Print Movement led by Lu Xun. In 1930—five years after the passing of Sun Yat-sen; the same year that the Nazi Party won 107 seats in the election for the German Reichstag, thus becoming the second largest political party in Germany; and the same year that Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek unleashed several attacks against the Communists rather than against the Japanese threat that aimed to take over much of China—Xia Peng went to Shanghai to participate in anti-government demonstrations. By 1932, the Eighteen Society was shut down and Xia Peng was expelled from the academy. She joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1933 and was twice arrested for her activism. In 1934, she was arrested once more for putting up political woodcut posters in Wuxi, an important cultural and industrial city in the centre of the Yangzi Jiang River Delta, two hours east of Shanghai. Xia Peng died in prison in 1935 and is today remembered as a martyr of the school and of her country.

This is but one story of one very special young artist living in China during turbulent times. As I took one final look at the academy grounds, I tried to imagine what it must have been like to be a teacher or a student during the opening days of the academy. It must have been like a sanctuary and a beacon of hope during very dark times. But, as Lu Xun has written: “Despair, like hope, is but vanity.”<sup>23</sup>

23 Lu Xun, *Wild Reeds*, 20.

# Should Artists Be Curating the Next Documenta?

Published in *The Next Documenta Should Be  
Curated by an Artist*, ed. Jens Hoffman  
New York: E-Flux, Revolver, Platform Garanti, 2004

The real question is: Should artists be curators? If so, it in effect dislodges the need for a separate curatorial tier that has long exercised power over artists. Another related question is: Should artists be art critics? What are art critics and art historians besides agents in the service of art connoisseurship and a tendentially defined art history? This question of whether or not artists should curate the next Documenta<sup>1</sup> is a question that has been posed since the dialectic of art and life surfaced as the fount behind modernist art. The question was expressed more succinctly in conceptual art. An ironic response sometimes came from art critics, who declared themselves to be the true artists. I say ironic because of the short discursive distance between Kosuth's art as idea as idea and the notion that art is only art after criticism.<sup>2</sup> Another response took the form of so-called alternative or artists' spaces, which are often led and programmed by artists and funded as non-profit venues. Women artists, artists of colour, lesbian and gay artists, and artists working in once marginalized media such as video and performance often exhibited their art first and foremost through the alternative gallery network. In Canada, where I live, in lieu of a culture of private art collecting, artists have often played the roles of curator, art critic, and even art collector (by providing their advice to such agencies as the Canada Council Art Bank). Is such a situation a positive or a negative thing for Canadian art? In Canada, the artists' gallery system was developed in large part as a necessary nationalist project, so there is no straightforward positive or negative answer to the question, but I do worry about the problem of the bureaucratization of the artist.

Should artists be in charge of the next Documenta? Would this result in the further bureaucratization of the artist? Would it lead to the curator/artist relationship being replaced by a bureaucratic artist/artist relationship? Would the guiding hand of the artist eliminate the imperfections of large-scale exhibitions? Would the historical imbalances in art history and art evaluation be redressed, even in part, by the leadership of artists? It is true that Documenta is a megalithic enterprise and one more spectacle, however reflexively conceived it may be, in a world awash in spectacles (and biennials). But the importance of Documenta is only equal to the importance artists bestow upon it. Some editions of Documenta were definitive while other editions were forgettable. Does Documenta really have such a large sway over the performance of art history? Probably far less than most artists imagine. Whether one gets into a Documenta or not, one still has his or her work to do, which is to make good art. Does the Documenta format need to be reworked to better address the situation of a globalized interest in art? Probably, but that is not the same question as whether artists should be in charge of

1 Founded in 1955 by Arnold Bode, Documenta is a contemporary art exhibition held every five years in Kassel, Germany. *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated By An Artist* project (2003–04) sought to explore the relationship that artists have to the profession of curating. Contributors to the project included Marina Abramović, AA Bronson, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, and Serkan Özkaya.

2 Joseph Kosuth (American, b. 1945), one of the originators of conceptual art. His 1968 solo installation *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* included photo-stats of dictionary definitions of words like "water," "meaning," and "idea."

Documenta. Does the circus of Documenta cause artists to be politically mindful of the limits that the art system imposes on art at any given time? The answer to this last question is surely yes, just as it has always been for artists through the ages. The non-identity between the art system and art is a problem that artists should always remember. My view is that the idea of art is always larger than any art system. It is the reason why it is often so painful to be an artist, just trying to negotiate the passage of art into the art system, all the while challenging the historical terms of the relationship. Now that I have offered my thoughts, I ask the question anew: Should artists curate the next Documenta?

# Surprising Sharjah

**Monday, 21 February 2005**

The seventh Sharjah International Biennial opens in a little less than two months. Every morning, more emails arrive in my Sharjah inbox. I have numerous must-dos each and every day, including hounding artists to send in their statements for the catalogue and/or passport information for air reservations to Sharjah. Besides all this, I have a presentation to give in Miami and a public art project to work on in Melbourne, Australia. There are also University of British Columbia duties, lots of them. Princess Hoor Al Qasimi, director of the biennial and one of the daughters of the ruling sheik of the Emirate of Sharjah, wants to discuss the film series being planned in conjunction with the biennial. I find it rather surreal—or is it unreal?—to be in this position of associate curator of an art biennial in the United Arab Emirates.

I remember my first visit to Sharjah, in the summer of 2003. I arrived on the first day of Ramadan. It was 46°C and surprisingly humid. The littoral on the Persian Gulf where Sharjah is located is humid, but half an hour south by car, it is arid as can be. It was surreal from the start: my flight to Dubai went straight across Iraq, right over Fallujah. I thought: I guess there is no more no-fly zone.

**Sunday, 27 February 2005**

I write from Miami International Airport, utterly exhausted. I was invited to a symposium on the future of the art school. The dozen artists and designers invited included Hani Rashid, Stephen Prina, Rita McBride, Dana Friedman, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Richard Wentworth, and Jorge Pardo. I felt a bit out of place in this grouping as I was the only one not from a major art capital.

The discussions were lively, intelligent, and yet loose, a combination of qualities I seldom find in comparable Canadian events (especially loose). I came down Friday from Vancouver and am awaiting a homebound flight—via Los Angeles—on Sunday. This is not good for the body, I tell myself.

Things happen when you meet people in the United States. I was asked by one of the several celebrated museum directors in attendance to join a future project. Last night, after a long day of discussions, we were taken to what I can only describe as a wise guys' restaurant, a steak house full of people with huge gold baubles and women with big or extremely long hair. Back at my hotel, I opened my laptop to find numerous messages from Sharjah, several of them marked "urgent!"



**Saturday, 5 March 2005**

Every morning, a whole new set of problems to deal with. Indonesian artist Heri Dono has not received the official invitation to the biennial that he requires for a visa. It is a very urgent matter and I am not so good at yelling at people, but yell I had to. Other problems are even amusing. Mexican artist Miguel Calderón wants to recreate one of Monet's *Water Lilies* paintings in toilet paper. I need to find out just what is available in the United Arab Emirates in the way of coloured toilet paper. Some of the colours Miguel wants I just don't think could possibly exist for toilet paper.

As usual, I feel tired. I am always behind a computer, writing away. Yesterday, I received news that I won a large public art commission. Today, officials in Melbourne, Australia, asked me to come for a visit to inspect the site of another public artwork. The commissions are good news, but I find myself with little time to savour either "victory."

**Wednesday, 9 March 2005**

Tracey Moffatt wants to deal only with me. No one must know her email address. No one else can communicate with her. Much more work for me, as I have to relay everything to the staff in Sharjah, rather than her doing so directly. I don't think I am cut out to be a curator, at least not for much longer. I can't wait to just get back to making art, doing some drawings, refining ideas. At some point, being a curator becomes counterintuitive to being an artist.

**Sunday, 13 March 2005**

Sharjah is a long way from Kelowna, BC, and I don't just mean in distance. I am here on University of British Columbia business, staying in the Eldorado, a famous old hotel that fronts directly onto Okanagan Lake. It is a magnificently beautiful place, so beautiful it stirs in me thoughts of dropping the art-world route and just hanging about here a while. I feel at ease. There are few of the stresses I feel whenever I think about the art world. Of course, it is in part a privilege to say this, given how artists here feel just the opposite—the lack of stress because of the lack of an art world is precisely what is stress-inducing. The artists I have met here are curious about art in Shanghai, Dakar, and Sharjah. They hang out weekly at a beautiful bar called Sturgeon Hall. They may have an artist's discontent but their lives are happy: an impossible

contradiction, I would have thought at one time. But then, at one time, I thought an artist's life was art and nothing else. In less than a week's time, I leave for Sharjah.

#### **Thursday, 17 March 2005**

From the Air Canada lounge at Vancouver International I write, finally about to depart for Sharjah. Endless items to juggle. Taro Amano, a curator of this year's Yokohama Triennale, will be attending and wants me to book him a hotel room plus get someone to meet him at the airport in Dubai. Not a big demand, but they do add up. Charles Merewether of the Biennale of Sydney will be attending as well. Received email from Hans-Ulrich Obrist, who may also come. He writes that he hears that Sharjah could be very interesting. While comforting to read such words, I wonder where they come from because Taro Amano mentioned the same thing. The art world is a world in which consensus and conformity arise very quickly. While I think Sharjah will indeed be a very good show, the point is that when something feeds the grapevine, facts become secondary. I know it is cynical to think this way, but consensus in the art world is like a moving truck; it really can't change course very easily.

#### **Saturday, 19 March 2005**

Dubai International Airport is packed with people at midnight. The shopping concourse looks like a posher version of Toronto's similarly scaled Eaton Centre. The queue through passport control is full of Russians and oohing-and-ahhing Europeans suffering Stendhal syndrome from the airport's over-the-top Donald Trump-esque architecture, plus thousands of guest workers from Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia and, especially, India.

Dubai is the centre of gravity for millions of people from a large and complex part of the world we in the West know little about. For example, Iran is but two hours north by boat. There are many Iranians here, as there have been for millennia. Iran's status as a pariah state is not as clear-cut as the American and Canadian media often make it out to be.

This morning in the local paper, another big bombing killing at least fifty near the Kashmir border. Every time I am here there is news of bloodshed in Kashmir, and yet this area gets very little attention in our media.

I am writing from my office at the Sharjah Art Museum. Young women dressed in long black robes and young men in equally long white robes are darting back and forth as the phones ring constantly. It is near mayhem here. Terry Atkinson was on the phone about his plane ticket.



Bin Al Stroker, Al Nahda, Sharjah, 2011

Miguel Calderón is complaining that no one has replied to his last request. Carlos Garaicoa is worried about his work making it to Sharjah from Madrid in time.

On the symposium front, lots of good news. Geeta Kapur, Charles Merewether, Okwui Enwezor, Jean Fisher, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Achille Bonito Oliva, to name but a few.

### Sunday, 20 March 2005

“Car bomb at Qatar theatre kills Briton, wounds 12,” reads the headline in this morning’s *Khaleej Times*. Doha is the capital of Qatar, an oil-rich Persian Gulf state that, along with Bahrain, rejected confederation with the United Arab Emirates. Also on page one, an announcement of a massive five-star residential development on artificial islands reclaimed from the sea. At breakfast, half the restaurant is filled with American contract workers destined for Iraq. Most talk and strut like poor bubbas from the South, their eyes attentive to the bearded Arab men who enter the room in long white robes.

I took a tour of the massive Expo Centre, where much of the biennial will take place. A team of mostly Indian workers is there twenty-four hours a day erecting pavilions and rooms in the hangar-like space.

Most work in silence, and I feel odd walking about with a big blueprint in hand of the work they are doing. Clearly they look at me as one of the bosses and I suppose I am, but I don't feel comfortable as a boss. Wherever I go, guest workers attend to my every need. "How are you today, sir?" "Of course, sir." "Right away, sir." It makes me feel sad. I want to say, "Please don't treat me as your boss," but it would have no effect, and perhaps it would only further confuse the terms of our relationship.

As artists start to arrive onsite, the show looks more and more interesting. The sheik of Sharjah will tour the sites this afternoon, I am told. Radio Dubai wants an interview with the curators right afterward. Every day we receive letters from various ambassadors, including the Canadian ambassador, accepting our invitation to the biennial inauguration. For the Indian workers, it is all the same.

### **Tuesday, 22 March 2005**

Early morning and already a scorcher. Later today, an interview with Radio Dubai. More irate emails from artists. "Where's my ticket?" "Where's my production fee?!"

### **Wednesday, 23 March 2005**

The heat just cranked up outside from the high twenties to the mid-thirties Celsius. Most of my day is spent darting between the biennial offices in the Sharjah Art Museum and the Expo Centre, about fifteen minutes away by car. There are also regular, quick trips to Dubai to pick up materials. I just returned from Carrefour, a giant French hypermarket in Dubai's City Centre Deira mall. The mall is huge, but what is really interesting is the shoppers—expatriate Brits, Arab women veiled from head to toe while sporting Chanel handbags and new Adidas sneakers, guest workers from Africa, India, the Philippines, Nepal, and Egypt.

I was on Radio Dubai yesterday in a new radio show focused on art and culture in the UAE. While the questions posed by the host were quite generic, the show itself is surely a sign of a maturing society. After all, the UAE was only founded in 1971!

Every day more artists arrive. The show is also finally taking form, and I detect a growing confidence among everyone. More critics have contacted me about attending the opening and symposium, including Brits Sacha Craddock and Charles Asprey. But I don't think the Sharjah crew can take total credit for the rising interest in this biennial among the art cognoscenti. I suspect it is partly due to the bandwagon effect in the art world: a couple of key curators or critics announce their intention

to attend an event, and this in turn spurs others to come. Again, consensus and conformity.

### Friday, 25 March 2005

I am not feeling well. Yesterday I put in another twelve-hour day. Afterward, several staff members decided to go to Dubai for drinks and karaoke. I declined and retired to my hotel room. Two calls in succession asking me to come along, and I relented. Traffic was very heavy as it was a Thursday night and Friday is akin to Sunday here, which makes Thursday akin to Saturday. It took more than an hour to make it to Dubai. We went to the fifty-first-floor bar of the Emirates Towers hotel. It was packed with Arab men in traditional dress and expat Brits living it up. The hotel connects to a huge upscale mall full of chic bars and restaurants, and some among us decided to bar-hop. I followed along to a karaoke bar. One song was “California Girls,” and the scenario included the usual corny narrative of a young woman in love, strolling the streets with her lover—except the background was Kitsilano Beach and Stanley Park! As I went to the bar to order another drink, I bumped into the “Dubai Eye girl,” Siobhan Leyden, who interviewed me on Radio Dubai. Talk about a small scene. I also met Sunny, a spunky Iranian woman intent on opening a high-quality contemporary art gallery in Dubai. She pointed out that Dubai has put money into everything except museums and libraries, but that there was finally talk of addressing those deficiencies. Indeed, Dubai has amazing potential. In a way, a biennial of contemporary art makes more sense here than in pious Sharjah. At about 1:30 a.m., utterly exhausted from both work and fun fatigue, I headed back to Sharjah only to find a note from the director of the Sharjah Art Museum under my door. “Ken, I request your presence at the Sharjah Art Museum at 8 a.m. precisely. Hisham.”

### Tuesday, 29 March 2005

Though it is sunny and hot outside, I have been suffering a very bad cold. I feel weak and in need of rest. Trouble is, there is no time, as I am constantly shuttling between the two main biennial sites, the Expo Centre and the museum. Artists are arriving now en masse and asking to start their installation work, even as construction continues apace to finish their exhibition spaces. Yesterday, I went to Dubai again, for another hour-long interview. Everything is now in super-high gear. What was confidence only days ago is now borderline panic as everything is now a race against the clock. A lot of the embassies have been pestering



Sharjah exhibition spaces, designed by Mona El Mousfy and Sharmeen Syed, 2005

the biennial officials for extra dinner tickets. I managed to finagle five for Canadian diplomats and their associates. The director of the Sharjah Art Museum kindly told me that he was allowing me five because I have been doing a lot of copy editing for the catalogue and rewriting of news releases, tasks not part of my curatorial responsibilities. As I mentioned on Radio Dubai, this edition of the Sharjah International Biennial will be the breakthrough, just as the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was the breakthrough for all subsequent editions.

### Monday, 4 April 2005

It is the night before the opening. Yesterday all seemed hopeless. The mountains of debris made it difficult to assess how near we were to completing the installation. I put in more than fourteen hours yesterday and stayed up until 3 a.m. working. Some rooms were in deep trouble late yesterday, with serious technical problems. Today, the story is much clearer and the rooms much cleaner. It looks possibly like an all-nighter. Some artists have been fantastic, helping others to install. Others have decided simply to drop in for the opening and fly out the next day. I don't think I would allow this to happen again if I were given a second chance to work on something such as this. People are running back and forth constantly. A hammer or a drill or a ladder become prized possessions. It has been an amazing amount of work. I am just taking a few minutes to write this, but I really have to return to the galleries. If I close my eyes, I think I will collapse instantly into sleep. I am that tired.

### Tuesday, 5 April 2005

The day began with another early rise from bed and a walk straight to the museum. My muscles felt completely flaccid. My legs could barely support my frame. Two installations still unfinished at 9 a.m., and I was due at the Expo Centre at 10 for the official opening of the biennial with

the sheik of Sharjah. An artist whose room remained unfinished did not help matters—complaining, berating people, constantly threatening to pull out. I was a hair from basically telling him to screw himself. I realized how much crap a curator has to endure from artists.

I made it to the Expo Centre by 10 a.m. and lined up with the artists next to a long red carpet as the sheik entered. A media throng engulfed him as he shook hands with the artists. It was very exciting to meet the sheik, I must confess. The international art crowd descended into the exhibition space and, very quickly, word was that the show was a great success. (This was confirmed a few days later with a full-page laudatory review in Germany's most prominent newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and similar coverage in the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto*.) *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Flash Art*, *Contemporanea*, and *Art Press* are just a few of the magazines covering the show.

After the opening, which was great fun, everyone went to the neighbouring emirate of Ajman for a drink. Unlike Sharjah, Ajman is not a "dry" emirate. There was a large crowd at the seaside bar and everyone sat outside on Adirondack chairs beside an exquisitely beautiful beach. The surf was strong and powerful, and provided perfect background music. I was utterly exhausted but I felt good about the show. At one point, I walked along the beach and looked out into the darkness. Iran is only ninety minutes away by boat. To the north, on my left, a war rages in Iraq.



Corridor of the Sharjah Art Museum, 2005

# Art and Ethnology

## A Relationship in Ironies

Published in *Intruders: Reflections on Art and the Ethnological Museum*,  
eds. Gerard Drosterij, Toine Ooms, and Ken Vos  
Zwolle, Netherlands: Waanders; with the National Museum of Ethnology,  
Leiden, 2005



The train departs Linz for Vienna in fifty-four minutes and I am hungry. The only true restaurant in the Linz railway station is rather shabby-looking, a quality that somehow lends itself to the cabin-in-the-woods theme of its weathered, wood-panelled interior. Once I have seated myself, I scan the assortment of display boxes that are distributed on the walls throughout the room. There is a vintage-looking Joseph Cornell-type box showing off various types of paraffin.

On either side of this box, there are stuffed songbirds (presumably of the alpine forests) perched on tree boughs. There is another box displaying tresses of unrefined wool. The paraffin-and-wool displays remind me of the work and myth of Joseph Beuys. But the displays reference beyond the art museum to natural and social science museums. I recall visits to the Museum of Anthropology in my native city of Vancouver, with its many glass shelves of artifacts produced by the various Indigenous peoples of Canada's western coast. I ask myself the question of the ethnographer: what is the language being spoken here by the displays, and to whom and why?

The menu offers typical Austrian fare, many meat and dumpling dishes with the one exception of spaghetti bolognaise. I note my watch again and opt for a bowl of soup, which arrives with forty-two minutes left before departure time. As I eat my soup, I again scan the room. Off to one side and near the bar, there is a gathering of burly men, mostly smokers and apparently big beer drinkers. They seem comfortable in this room; they are probably regulars of the bar—in this place where mythical signs and symbols of Austria abound. However, this being a train station restaurant, customers of all stripes can be found, including me. Time feels compressed here, the past of the burly men catching up with the present of the travellers who in turn attend the future arrival of their trains. There are so many contact zones in a train station. I am mindful of the time, as I do not want to miss my train while I indulge in a bit of fieldwork in the ethnographic present.

Is this the problem facing the museum, in particular the anthropologically defined museum? The deadness of the ethnological museum is somehow underlined by the vital extension of the application of ethnographic techniques that have given rise to new categories of adjectival anthropologies—in cinema, television, and now the Internet. The project of the ethnological museum, borne of nineteenth-century ideas of preeminent civilization and universalistic objectivism, has long become disconnected from the present. This is not a new view, as profound criticisms of social science museums have been exegetically performed under the coda of the “New Museology.”

The crisis of representation is a historical phenomenon encompassing all ideas associated with disciplining and consecrating acts, and this

crisis has especially afflicted the social science museum. The reasons for this are well known. Colonialism casts an uncomfortable shadow over the terms of ethnographic research within anthropology. The compact between a discipline and its museum has become untethered by the dismantling of normative values, the inexorable fragmentation of disciplinarity. All framing assumptions have become suspect because of their reliance on foundational ideas of identity formation and community. Terms of locality and indigene are constantly being converted by the circuit of global commodity exchange into exchange value and goods for travel and tourist use. The phenomenon of globalization and its processes has only confirmed the impossibility of a conceptual split between subject and object, or -etic and -emic perspectives (the difference between the observed versus the experienced). Post-structuralism has taught us that any set of beliefs is a function of rhetorical conventions, which are socially derived or constructed and therefore suspect with regard to the question of truth. In addition to all these reasons, it remains an open question whether a museum, whose roots are fundamentally tied to the project of colonialism, can convincingly transform itself into something other than what it has for so long advanced and achieved. Theodor Adorno famously wrote: “Museums are family sepulchres of works of art.” Adorno was referring to the *memento mori* roots of the museum, which began as a collective site of mournful reconciliation for the viewing of medieval reliquary. Given its roots as a colonial enterprise, loss inhabits the ethnological museum but perhaps without the possibility of atonement.

A crisis of representation also confronts the art museum, but in ways that are surprisingly productive, at least for the production of art and the servicing of art museums by new art products. Crisis can serve as sustenance for art by providing art with its critical edge regarding the social environment or matters specific to art itself. The art museum is a beneficiary of this crisis as much as it is often a symbol or a target of this crisis. Recent developments of interest in ethnography on the part of artists, of what Hal Foster has called an “ethnographic turn,” are in a certain respect an extension of a longstanding and central dialectic of art since modernism—the question of the relationship of art to life. In contrast to ethnology, the crisis of representation in art does not signal either life or death for the art museum, but rather a stage in its ongoing history, albeit one that is frequently punctuated by spasms of self-doubt. Art also has a different hermeneutic understanding than a social science; artistic interpretation is not so identified with the causal importance of cultural understandings.

Thus, relative to the status of art, the historical contingencies of autonomy and foundation have disabused the social sciences to a far greater degree than art. Another reason for this has to do with the status of art as being resolutely non-scientific, although paradigms of science can be employed by art for producing artistic meaning. Art is often motivated by a distance from paradigms and a non-subscription to normative values. Ironically, it is worth noting that normative values have themselves become the subjects of ethnographic analysis, particularly in so-called museum studies.

Michel Foucault, calling attention to the special case of anthropology, examined the discursive construction of differences between observer and participant that were exercised in authority-producing operations as they were applied to the study of other cultures. Binaries of different ethnographic considerations would be enacted by ethnological museums in the form of artifacts collected for aesthetic consumption and circulation within the boundaries of its cultural totality. But it is no new idea that the conceptual division of the world into a binary of differences—that between a West motivated by a Hegelian Spirit of Europe and that of a rest-of-the-world periphery—can no longer be philosophically maintained. Like many other practices, including artistic practice, ethnology must now reflect upon and cannibalize its own histories and practices for study. The discursive and operational linkage between the act of accumulating objects and the idea of preserving a past that is broken from the present is no longer tenable.

The social science museum has had to confront its own epistemological, terminological, and representational crises in the context of a disjunctive and yet ascendingly interactive global situation. In the 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer wrote of his times as increasingly defined by modernity beset by anthropometry or the measuring of mankind in all his details. While for Kracauer the surfeit of details in everyday life held the danger that deeper reflections could be displaced by the fascination with surfaces, ethnographic analysis has become, for better or worse, an adaptive application of an everyday understanding in crisis. The spread of ethnographic application to the category of the everyday is not necessitated or even motivated by an end value such as self-knowledge, although that may be a conclusion. Rather, it has become a relativizing exercise pushed to the horizons of the category of the Everyday. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault wrote of the pervasiveness of modern-day normalization processes on all relations within the Everyday. According to Foucault, productive resistance must fight the dissipated conditions of isolation and individuation. There is some irony in the fact that such

dissipation proves fertile for the application of ethnographic technique, and all the while that a crisis of doubt ravages the epistemological ground of the ethnological museum.

Many museums today have adopted a strategy of affirming their continuity with the circuit of information technology and the media. The purpose of such a strategy is to displace the problems of hierarchy and discursive condensation in terms of museum definition and practice. In a field such as ethnology, in which interest in all aspects of social identity is fundamental, the pervasiveness of information technology in all aspects of social life today needs to be acknowledged. Issues of what Clifford Geertz has called the “thick description” of signs that contribute to dialogue among different cultures have become continuous with Internet media and especially hypertext, with its nonlinear narrative and a central theme of informational interaction and intertextuality. While media is seen as the way for museums to re-engage with the present through the utopian technological vision of an open and shared humanity, there are also attendant risks—what Gianni Vattimo called the potential of mass media to produce a more chaotic society rather than a more transparent one. In other words, a chaotically conceived world is a function of a pluralism that does not lead to understanding while a transparently conceived world is a function of a diversity that does lead to understanding.

For progressive museums of ethnology, the impasse also represents a propitious ground from which new thinking about their purpose can emerge. What this means is not so much an occasion to re-imagine a new and impossible ethnological paradigm but an occasion for advancing the problematic status of the museum in extended procedures of ironic play. Having admitted *mea culpa* in its performative role as a disseminator of colonialist perspectives, the ethnological museum of today is eager to project an identity of itself which can be read contrapuntally to its own historical past. The museum of today places bold quotation marks around its own past. With a nudge and a wink, the irony is often so sly that there is often very little effective change in the way that the museum appears in its core epistemological operations. In a sense, the ethnological museum must project itself simultaneously as a meta-museum, a double-identity institution of present and former selves. The present self of the museum performs as a more enlightened but ironic version of its former self without having to cleave from its former self or to deconstruct its former self in a true sense. The strategic doubling of identity would present the spaces of the museum as renewed spaces riven with self-consciousness with reference to the problem of the historical memory of colonial transgressions. Despite this historical acknowledgement,

a tour of most ethnological museums, especially those bearing national status, would likely reveal just how unblasted are the fundamental moments of experience that Walter Benjamin excoriated.

The museum of ethnology continues, but it has become an impossible place because the enterprise of ethnology has become impossible. Paradoxically, its only recourse is to proceed ironically with quotations about a curious nostalgia for the way things were but can never be again. It is as though a visit to the museum should be like a visit to a haunted alchemist's laboratory, forlorn and perhaps historically misguided, but an experience resonating with the lost aura of alchemy that appealed to science.

Even today, the world's myriad identities continue to be consumed on the level of both cultural artifacts and as exotic sites for psychological release from the pressures of Western modernity. In fact, it is even more the case today than it has ever been before. The taxonomic framework of ethnology continues to the present in the form of *National Geographic* productions, travel and leisure industry promotional strategies, and within cultural anthropology itself. (Ironically, the National Geographic Society, begun as a men's club in the nineteenth century with the purported aim of promoting geographic—and cultural—knowledge, has transmogrified into a brand name not unlike lifestyle brand names. *National Geographic* now serves as entertainment in pedagogic and scientific forums and in various media.)

James Clifford has argued that a predominant tendency within cultural anthropology has been a focus on “the ethnographic present,” conceived of as a tradition in which a more natural past and a corrupting present come together. Such a tendency identifies with what the late Michel de Certeau wrote about the privileging of the anonymous and the everyday as central categories of an increasingly sociologically oriented society. Given such a situation, Certeau believes that resistances and challenges to cultural representations constructed along race, class, gender, and ethnic lines, can only be effective at the micro-political level. Put another way, heterogeneous struggles are limited to the micro-political—or worse, atomic—level; equally important is their non-cumulative character. The fascination with the Everyday conjoined to the dissipation of political consciousness on a general level may be a reason why so many important art exhibitions, such as the Sydney Biennale and Young British Art—type shows, have been devoted to the theme (or non-theme) of everyday practices. A turn by artists toward ethnography does not necessarily signal an artistic return to ethos-political attention, despite the appearance of having done so. The Everyday may be a terrain for artistic probity, but one enervated of actual “sociology.” For artist and

ethnologist alike, crisis is seen as little more than an intensification of the experience of everyday life constituted by independent and overlapping partial and accidental forces of a bewildering quality. Today, crisis is reflected by the ideology of Quotidianism.

Not surprisingly, photography has been important in the dissemination of Quotidianism. Much of the history of post-World War I photographic discourse has focused on the idea that the photographer exists within a Hobbesian world of order. Photographic discourse, from Kodak advertisements to New York School photography, identifies the Everyday (or “the street” as in so-called “street photography”) as a delimited category of social experience from which metonymic truths can be extracted in the form of images but which can never be expressed except as partial notions exempt from critical analysis.

The “ethnographic turn” in art follows many passages, as interest in contemporary art spreads globally and the negotiated production of art from one point to another in the world becomes ever more rhizomic in character. It is in the context of such a multiple and ironic set of discursive processes that artists have been asked to respond to the case of the museum, especially those with a focus on either natural history or ethnology. In so doing, artists have been asked to convert the historical essentialisms and truths that motivated the quest of such museums into another kind of truth which only art can furnish. Artists have been asked to elucidate the complex interrelations or Cliffordian “contact zones” during and after the colonial period, as congealed in museum objects. In effect, artists have been asked to assist the museum in subjecting the museum to ethnographic scrutiny, but without the scientific contamination of ethnological guidance.

Throughout the history of art, certainly since the nineteenth century, there has been a close relationship between art and the cultural productions of subaltern groups. The Impressionists adopted many perspectival techniques of Japanese ink paintings. Picasso’s fascination with and surrealism’s fetish of tribal artifacts were contingent on modernism’s reflexive cleaving of form from content and context, or at least redirecting form toward the self-interested context of the artist/appropriator. In Toronto, artists have been asked to intervene in the Grange, that city’s most important historical manor and now a museum. The staff of the National Museum of Ethnology of the Netherlands has asked a dozen-or-so artists, including myself, to respond to their institution on the occasion of the museum’s sesquicentennial anniversary.

There is by now a long tradition of artists challenging the relationship of art to the exhibition space. The Surrealists often created exhibitions that attempted to upset the understanding of art as a

category autonomous from the social. Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*, Andrea Fraser's performances as a museum docent, Komar and Melamid's investigations on popular taste in art, Hans Haacke's profile of museum attendees, and Fred Wilson's museum interventions are just a few examples of artists fascinated by the dynamics of cultural artifacts and especially in relationship to the dynamics of the museum. Artists are called in to debunk the cult of the social science institution and to implicitly replace it with the cult of art. The artist performs the role of the court jester of the imperial Chinese court, a wise fool who used his position to make serious and illuminating jest while never having to be taken seriously.

The game of art today is rather like the case of Don Quixote; when seeming to regain his reason just before dying, the reader is unsure whether reason merely signals another relapse into madness. That is how an ethnology museum must function today, as a house divided, forced into schizophrenia by its own historical record and a deep eschatological fear. As a consequence, the ethnological museum now behaves more like an art museum, while museums in general are given over to entertainment and spectacular values. Such behaviour is a reflection of the collapse of a scientific paradigm with nothing to replace it but an "art" paradigm. Ironically, within art history, the art paradigm has now ceded more toward a social science in the form of various cultural or visual studies.

Ethnological analysis should be about how actual people make sense of their symbolic world, one in which madness is always a disruptive force. Ethnology should be open-structured and rhizomic, allowing people to interact with information in different ways. Ethnology should not be grandly judgmental and narrative-driven. This is what is happening within ethnology, as it becomes increasingly subjectively based and decreasingly based in scientific social science research methods—and thus why it ironically signals its irrelevance. After all, in lieu of the question of whether theories of interpretation can be developed as a useful tool in the understanding of all symbolic events, what is there left of ethnology as an idea? Even so, it is worthy to note that the alternative of giving history back its capital "H" seems again on the rise. There is now a push among some social conservatives against what they perceive as the debilitating effects of relativism. Norman Rockwell has now opened at the Guggenheim Museum and been reevaluated by some as a worthy heir to the great Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. It is the return of *us* and *them*, or perhaps *us* versus *them*, or as some would have it, the impending "clash of civilizations." Talk about madness. Talk about irony. Talk about a case study for ethnographic analysis.

# Unfolding Identities

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In recent years, it has become de rigueur for major art exhibitions that survey large swaths of global art developments to draw parallels between the nomad as a figure of creative resistance and the cultural figure of the artist. The disseminations of contemporary artistic interest worldwide signal a decentralization from a more historically particularized and syndicated understanding of art to one that has seen a shift of emphasis from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from static to temporal processes or events, from object-oriented to site-specificity, and from art that is declarative to art that can double as non-art. In conjunction with social and political activism and emergent anti-imperialist movements, critical practices and institutions are looking for new modes of production and participation and new spaces of critique in the overlapping fields of culture, urbanism, and politics. Notably, conceptual artists have extended the reach of art into multiple and overlapping public and private domains, with art taking multifarious forms and penetrating many media and channels, including Internet and community-based practices.

It is understandable that as the world shrinks ever faster, the trope of the nomad has become increasingly popular in terms of lending theory to emergent forms of reterritorialized and delocalized social movements and neo-tribal collectivities. Mobility in the form of human migration and communication (i.e., the rise of mobile telephony) signals the potential for a new radicalism that can challenge what Henri Lefebvre called the “representations of space.”<sup>1</sup> For Lefebvre, such representations of space meant the encoding of hegemonic power into the built environment so as to be experienced by the individual as a disembodied and naturalized assemblage of segmented, spatial spectacles.

The channelling of nomadic movements by the state, institutions, and other dominant forces is challenged by the metonymic power of the rhizome, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari saw as an endlessly creative, decentring, and variegating set of machinic assemblages with the capacity for new and often provisional collectivities that can escape and even break down processes of encoding and enframing. “How many people today live in a language that is not their own?” asked Deleuze and Guattari in *From Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, how many people lead lives that are able to transgress the delineations between theory and reality? Confronted by codes of “language, literature, thought, desire, action, social institutions, and material reality,” the nomad is protean in its adaptive capacity and signifies a subversive force from within any system in order to, as Deleuze and Guattari famously said, secure “c’est de sortir, c’est d’en sortir.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Homi Bhabha, the nomad is an “unfixing” figure, as much a traveller of undetermined movement as a tropic figure of critical

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38–39.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *From Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

3 Ibid.

4 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–18.

5 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

6 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (winter 1992): 3–7.

exile from the rigidities of imperialist categories.<sup>4</sup> Nomads in the form of immigrants or refugees are impervious to borders, not necessarily by choice, but often by lack of choice; the barriers of containment nonetheless heavily mark their transgressive bodies. Nomads operate at the thresholds of space and politics, language and power, and in so doing, constantly negotiate and produce new concepts of transcultural identities, both personal and collective, that are destabilizing to established orders, systems, and codifications.

Mobility, for Arjun Appadurai, has become an emblematic concept of life within the globalized world, understood in fluid terms of cultural “flows” and “scapes.”<sup>5</sup> Mobility is conceived of in all its aleatory complexity, from diasporic movements to the circulation of resources and ideas. But nomadology, in the truest sense, is available not only to the poor and those without official papers, it is even more accessible to the privileged and the powerful. This is an often under-considered aspect of much of the writing about nomadic resistance, lending such writings an air of idealism and/or abstraction. In this cat-and-mouse game played between containment and elusiveness, the winner is overwhelmingly the cat.

The forces of globalization are not total. Nor are they isomorphic. Rather, they are full of disjunctures in which meaning and identity are re-grounded as much as they are uprooted. While much has been written in terms of an individual’s localized relationship to structures and processes of dominant power, issues of longing and belonging, of a desire for attachment, have been de-emphasized. Longing and belonging compel the nomad; they are not exclusively terms attached to notions of stability and rootedness. Here it is worth recalling Antonio Gramsci’s famous theory of hegemony and the ambiguous desire on the part of individuals to be accepted within the norms produced and perpetuated within a social order that often operates in their disfavour.

Nomadology as a tool to theorize the multiple means by which travelling individuals negotiate and renegotiate subject positions in the context of codifications of family and community groups, gender, skin colour, economic and social class, and nationstates is useful but problematic in terms of the often devastating psychological and physical damage borne by these same individuals during the very process of negotiating subject positions. Deleuze’s idea of “limitless postponements” of postmodern “societies of control” seem utopian, since “limitless postponements” themselves are configured as stratagems of control.<sup>6</sup> Stress, social loneliness, feelings of exclusion, powerlessness in the sense of the inability to control or even have a say in one’s own future, physical duress, lack of education or under-education resulting in a deficiency of skills, hunger, and illness are all characteristics of the

experiences of the poor. Poverty and other examples of global distress are as much a multifarious and rhizomic condition as they are expressions of containment and control.

Many artists have responded to global social problems by adopting a documentary model of practice, a model that further collapses, at the very least, the conventional distinctions between art and non-art. At the same time, there is a pedagogical aspect (and even a shock aspect) to the documentary art so prevalent in such seminal exhibitions as Documenta II. The shock is not the modernist “shock of the new” but the shock of recognizing the complexity and diversity of social experiences and subject matter in the world to which art, confined largely to Euro-American terrain and perspectives, has until recently failed to engage.

Until recently, an obstinately normative narrative continued to push to the margins artists of difference, such as women artists and artists of colour, from the vast expanse of the developing world. Criticality in art was highly circumscribed by the prevailing Euro-American codes of art historical understanding, not by the politics of difference with its intersections of postcolonial, feminist, and anti-racist debates.

The forces of globalization have pushed to the fore issues of identity as they relate to geography (or locality), politics, history, and questions of ethnicity, gender, and race. But they have also propelled the global oligarchs to map the world according to their desires, to assert their will over the world’s resources and its many exploitable peoples. The playing out of cultural symbols and histories, the delineations of various groups and ethnic definition and assimilation, and the interplay between traditional and modern concepts of identity and space are also key concerns. Questions of constitution regarding disciplines by methods of interdisciplinarity are creatively examined by many of today’s artists. And that is to be expected, for it is through the various group identities of difference—identities that elude the development of rigid definitions—through their very bodies, such diversely rich ideas for the enactment of new political analysis can eventuate.

Issues of exclusion and cultural marginality are particularly resonant today in the Arab world, as is the supposed incompatibility of religious traditionalism with secular enlightenment and modernity, which provides the pretext for imperialist enforcement in Iraq. The Emirate of Sharjah, recognized by UNESCO as one of the world’s great heritage sites, is located at the crossroads of one of the world’s most complex geographic intersections. In terms of the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq sit to the north; Pakistan, India, and China to the east; Saudi Arabia to the south; Israel, Palestine, and the continent of Africa to the west.

7 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (spring 1986): 22-27.

The orbit of departure and arrival into the United Arab Emirates is just as likely, if not much more so, to be Delhi, Colombo, and Addis Ababa as it is Paris, London, and Rome. The world beyond the so-called West is full of such orbits, which are scarcely thought about let alone imagined to exist as anything worth knowing except to serve as alimentionation for further Orientalism.

The cultural emirate of Sharjah makes for a particularly fecund heterotopic space, a "counter site," as Michel Foucault defined it in his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces" (my mind deviates to Robert Smithson's notion of a non-site), in which "the real sites, all of the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."<sup>7</sup> Such sites would include the complex ways in which modernity and traditionalism co-exist that, according to Foucault, presuppose "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them (as heterotopias) and makes them penetrable."

In recent years, Arab intellectuals from Edward Said to Mohammed Abed al-Jabri have offered radical new perspectives that find in the past the basis for a pluralistic exegesis of the Arab context today. The geopolitical location of Sharjah, within a framework of rich cultural heritage and contemporaneity, provides a diversity of openings for intellectual dialogue and creative activity. Within the considerations here outlined, in a culture rooted in actual nomads and Bedouins, and not just metaphorical ones, there is much dramatic evidence challenging the most entrenched preconceptions of what it means to actually experience and partake in the offerings of this part of the world.

The problems here are global in scope, albeit more underlined in terms of questions of religion, gender, and Arab identity; the struggle of self-affirmation, of the maintenance of tradition in terms of a historical rather than ahistorical reading; of an engagement with the West in a manner not philologically and methodologically Orientalist but mutually contributive; of negotiating the flows of globalization with regard to the interplay of local, regional, and international considerations in ways which are not merely assimilative of Euro-American values but permissive and acknowledging of natal perspectives.

The Sharjah Biennial offers a unique context for artists to fill their symbolic roles as nomads and contribute to the creative and intellectual dialogue ensuing in this vital and often misunderstood region of the world. The distrust of art as a function of institutions, so common in the Euro-American context where the administration of art is more developed—that is, where the political economy of the art world that maintains the categorical status of art is extremely developed—is less

germane in Sharjah, where contemporary art is less enfolded within an art system.

On the contrary, art can be more greatly empowered in such a situation; in effect, it can repair its earlier vital role, away from the emasculating context of the Euro-American situation where irony often offers the limits of critical expression. Art can bear content more complexly, if not necessarily more freely; it can offer meaning, experience, and emotional effect. In what Raymond Williams called “structures of feelings”—that is, issues of friendship, happiness, longing, and belonging—art can imaginatively and politically help in the understanding of the world. In Sharjah, as in other sites of the so-called periphery, art can rediscover its collective impulse, as a practice of critical reflection and longing.

I would like to add a few personal words. It is a cliché to say so, but art is indeed a voyage of discovery and self-discovery. As an artist, I have found both discovery and self-discovery in extending my practice to beyond just making my own works of art for exhibition. I have found that the true heart of art beats strongly in many parts of the world, often more strongly than in the so-called centre, and often it does so in the furthest reaches of the world, places such as Senegal, Mexico, Nigeria, Indonesia, Brazil, Cuba, and many other points of the so-called periphery. Being an artist often means a life of non-identity with one’s environment. Artists also long to belong, but the curse and saving grace of art are that it can never entirely belong.



Sharjah streets, with installation by German artist Olaf Nicolai, 2005

# Contemporary Art Within and Without Institutions

Opening statement at  
*The Making of International Exhibitions:  
Siting Biennales, New Delhi, 2005*

In the past, I have often shared dinner or drinks with artists where we discussed the problem of art and its entanglement with the art system; in other words, the problem of the non-identity between art and the art world. I define the art world as that social, economic, and political network of forces in which art is implicated epistemologically and hermeneutically, to be ultimately processed as exchange value. The discussions would often lead a consensual view of the art world as an ersatz regulatory body, with respect to the conferment of value and status to artworks and to the recognition of artists. The problem of non-identity comes into play when the artist defines his/her practice as a challenge to the status of the work of art and its social and cultural value in society. Admittedly, such a challenge is often made with the complicit understanding of a Duchampian law: that any challenge can only be a paradoxical challenge, to be read *à la limite* as a wholly artistic gesture fated for artworld gurgitation.

I think the point of our concerns have to do with a certain *je ne sais quoi* dissatisfaction with art and especially with the parameters of its understanding within the art world. My artist friend Rodney Graham, for instance, would often ask why an artist couldn't be an urban planner for a day, or a week, or a year, without the legitimatizing authority of either the art world or the world of urban planning? Why can't an artist just practice different creative endeavours without the recognition of such endeavours within the network effects and cultural continuity of the art world? Why is the system of art validation so flawed that the measurement of so many good and bad artists is completely fungible? And if this is the case, whose interest, ultimately, does this pretense of objective measurement serve? Why is there so much consensus in terms of the narrative of contemporary art historical unfolding, such that seemingly every museum in the Euro-American art world is experienced more or less similarly?

As a much younger artist, I remember visiting the Grey Art Gallery, the art museum space of New York University in New York City, with the American artist Dan Graham. We were visiting an exhibition of west coast American (mostly Californian) minimalist art. It was not the usual canonical treatment of minimalist-era artists. Neither were the works conforming to austerity or rectilinear in form. I did not recognize many of the artists, while Dan recognized many of them and would offer comments such as: "Good to see the work of artist 'A' again. He was a very good artist. Artist 'B' influenced a number of artists who became better known. Artist 'C's work did not really fit in then but now it looks completely relevant to our understanding of that period. Artist 'D' was one of the very few woman artists who received some recognition within

1 Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vols. 17–18, bk. 3, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), section 1003a.

this group.” Graham’s comments about these artists brought to light the anomalous place of artists within the art system in any given time and the precariousness of artistic lives as they are subject to the reductionism and conformity of the historical canon. Many of the artists in this exhibition withered to near obscurity in the light of art historical remembrance, their difficult and often enigmatic work that exuded formal radicality all but forgotten. The challenge to art since conceptualism has been one of a persistent unraveling or extension of art in terms of its institutional prescription.

In recent years, this is where the curator’s influence has been growing. Leaning toward institutional theory, the curator insists that a modicum of recognition is necessary for an artwork to be known as such. Today’s art world is rather like what is happening in one sector of the music world. A curator occupies a similar function to the DJ in music. A curator has become like Dimitri from Paris or DJ Spooky, mix masters of CDs based on current dance floor trends. The practice of straddling art and non-art by many artists is corralled by the DJ/curator, as the curator’s role is expanded into creator of high art. Aristotle said that “a thing can be said to be in many ways” but ultimately it is the curator who channels this dictum of multivalent speech through the prism of art.<sup>1</sup>

Since the arrival of conceptual art, artists have notably extended the reach of art into multiple and overlapping public and private domains, with art taking multiple forms and penetrating many media, including, more recently, the Internet and community-based practices. As such, the artistic tendency is toward decentralization but also democratization, as interest in contemporary art is disseminated the world over and new participants enter for the first time into artistic discussion and practice. Over the last decades, for example, practices in “art in public space” have shifted from a contested category within contemporary art to conceptually informed artistic practices that challenge the limitations of artistic production’s formats of presentation, distribution, and space. This reflects a shift in emphasis from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from object oriented to site specificity, and from static to temporal processes or events. However, processes of ever-expanding global capitalism, corporatization of culture, and the dispossession of public space and dialogue by privatization challenge the status of art and its mutual relationship to notions of “publicness” today.

In conjunction with social and political activism and emergent anti-globalization movements, critical practices and institutions are looking for new modes of production and participation, and new spaces of critique in the overlapping fields of culture, urbanism, and politics. The purpose of a curator is to reinvigorate the exhibition medium by



idealizing public space as something that can be unified, a place in some ways akin to Jürgen Habermas's idea of a true public sphere "where true public opinion could be formed."<sup>2</sup> In difference to Habermas, whose definition of a true public sphere was bereft of commercial or private interests having any authority, I would argue that an exhibition medium—as it is largely understood today—is not only implicated but also defined by the terms of the art system and is always, in large part, a measure of the function of private interests.

In an increasingly corporate world, the curator's role is also one of mediator between patrons and producers. The expansion of art not just in terms of form but also geographic reach has meant that the flow of information about art, especially on the part of the West, requires a radical reconfiguration of the historical literacy essential to its understanding. In other words, the expansion of art represents a diffusion of art both in terms of spatial dissemination and a diffusing or unsettling of the stabilizing categories of normative measurements of art. This diffusion is a good thing because of its fecundity of approaches toward the production and display of art—a fecundity that is often difficult to categorize in terms of movement and even legibility—as this art (that which is diffused) often exists at the margins of the art system.

This diffusion has also been read negatively as a threat to the historically standardized authorship of discourse surrounding art, which seeks to perpetuate certain bases of power (such as major museums and corporations with collecting programs). In other words, the centre erects standards not only to define itself as centre but also to define all of the production that takes place outside of the centre. In so doing, expectations are validated about what is to be seen so that, for instance, so-called Beijing Pop, which emerged immediately after the arrival of Deng Xiaoping's liberalization policy in China, is seen from the perspective of the centre as a movement at worst, derivative of, and at best, affirmative of, American pop art. To think otherwise would mean taking seriously the question of what Egypt would be without the pyramids—or, what would art be without the Centre Pompidou or the Museum of Modern Art?

2 Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 49.

# Gentle Indifference

## The Art of Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky

A slab of concrete sidewalk patched up with a dollop of unevenly applied asphalt. Flat-topped metal newspaper boxes that double as platforms for Starbucks coffee cups or 7-Eleven drink containers, until they are, inevitably, lost to the wind. The urban landscape is full of such combinations and assemblages—metastasizations that function intransitively to any actual object; their physical presence is understood and undermined not so much by their *provisionality* but by their makeshift character. As such, their presence is as much image-based as it is physical or sculptural. According to Walter Benjamin, absence and presence are articulated in a productive synthesis within the artistic dream-work;<sup>1</sup> however, the two examples cited here (and there are innumerable more) exist as combinations without feelings. Nor do they ever generate feelings, except as the perfunctory and homeostatic responses of human adjustment—opposed to that of adaptation. They are not so much objects to which a subject relates and wishes to grasp through representation, as their social affects are accorded by their intransitive status in the relation between subjects and objects.

The concern is not how these examples represent instances of despair, isolation, and alienation wrapped within the familiar trope of the city as urban wasteland, which they may well do, but that their indeterminacy is fraught with a muffled subjectivity, contained to the point of evacuation. To borrow from Albert Camus, they are combinations that express “the gentle indifference of the world.”<sup>2</sup> The world in its physical manifestations is both elusive and elliptical with little in the way of connection to the inner life of its inhabitants. In a world waning in moral conviction, there is no response to indifference except homeostatis, a physiological adaptive response forced upon the subject by changes in the environment. Homeostasis is not an interior response in the psychic or self-reflexive sense of moral negotiation with the outer world, but rather a biological adjustment whereby the subject is reduced to form and matter.

The works of Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky illuminate the way in which art functions as an indexical operation of language and image—as generating forces for both presence and embodiment. The surface of their art is an index of an eviscerated interior, but one in which the negative space filled in by plaster or resin is made to resemble the original object/model from which the cast is made. This is in contrast to the work of Rachel Whiteread, for example, or earlier Bruce Nauman or Carl Andre pieces, where the negative space is always announced as such, as the counterpoint to positive space—negative presence versus positive presence. Mahovsky and Wepler obscure this difference between negative and positive presence by, for instance,

1 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 155–200.

2 Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1998), 122.

adding colour as a visual pun on the reference made by the particular work of art, be it stripes on a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket or black paint to suggest a full coffee cup. There is a slippage in the way colour is read, in the artists' words, "as an impoverished or minimalist trompe l'oeil or as a kind of codex for a set of cultural signs." Slippage occurs because the meaning of the colour slips between what it stands for—gravy or a hole in an empty tissue box—and the colour itself. Krylon red spray paint may stand in for ketchup, if only in the most impoverished of terms, as the Krylon red spray paint continues to announce itself as Krylon red spray paint.

The form of the respective work functions as a shell or approximation in which things are placed or embedded together but not synthesized. The shape of a Styrofoam drink container, rendered in plaster, may be conjoined with a similarly produced version of a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket to express a potential narrative, but the sum of these two parts are not meant to be revelatory in the sense of a whole that is sublimated from its parts. Plaster or resin are familiar materials employed for making copies or molds, but Mahovsky and Wepler are not creating copies in order to capture the essence of an original; nor are they commenting strictly about a Baudrillardian state of emptiness. Rather, they are interested in questions of loss and retention, where loss is dissipative and absent of longing and retention is not something to be claimed for history. Their works point to questions of affect, truth, and fiction in subject-object relations while alluding to a narrative construction. Their effect is that they operate as markers of indifference, yet it is not a postmodern indifference whereby the act of pastiche or the overloading of signifiers renders a critical emptying of modernist dicta. The indifference called up by Mahovsky and Wepler is one that taps into a set of emotions that sit vicariously between nostalgia, sentimentality, and haptic or embodied experiences, all within the matrix of a capitalist social order.

A tissue box, gift boxes, chicken containers, coffee cups, soda cans with straws, and blocks of caramel all conjure physical contact—the wiping of tears, the anticipation of gift opening, the eating of finger-licking good chicken, the quenching of thirst, the pleasure of sweets—and the emotional connections made through everyday habits and rituals. Mahovsky and Wepler's art offers a bare minimum of potential for such emotional connections. Consequently, the viewer is left with form: neither an empty container nor a filled one, but a container that is denied even its potential to function as a container. Here it is memory that fills in for that which is denied by the objects. Another circuit takes place in which visual memory replaces the blankness (or blank surface)

of the object so that the subject suddenly becomes the viewer who is the true container. In his book *The Skin Ego* (1989), Didier Anzieu describes the Skin Ego as a “mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during the early stages of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychic contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body.”<sup>3</sup> The Skin Ego is a container for the Self, establishing the psychic parameters for the emergence of the Ego from the Skin Ego. Mahovsky and Weppler’s containers are paradoxical in that it is through their sealed forms that the spectator is evoked as a being that occupies the space between subjecthood and objecthood.

The pop and minimalist art of the 1960s served as important referents for both Mahovsky and Weppler prior to their collaborative partnership. The repression of social concerns, through the fetish of surface over substance in pop art, and of formal and phenomenological concerns in minimalism, is the salient character of American postwar art. Emphasis was placed on the manifest rather than the latent, on an expression in the opposite direction of expressionist art, perhaps as a Foucauldian means of escape from the tyranny of the subject. The language of presence, which so guided minimalism, was a language of spectatorial reification, and thus held an alienated relationship to a world where the human dimension had been diminished. Mahovsky’s minimalist-like boxes, placed very near the corners and surfaces of white-walled galleries, permitted spectators a glimpse of a Plato’s Cave shadow show of human drama and history projected from inside the faceless boxes. The source of the shadow theatre was never revealed, the only indicator being the emanation of light coming from within the boxes.

In *Mutoscope*, an early work from 1997, Mahovsky presented a one-person movie theatre, again in the trappings of minimalist form. The spectator completed the work by entering into its form only to be treated to a flip-card animation movie about a cycle of mundane, if ambiguous and at times menacing, domestic interactions. With this work, Mahovsky unleashed the repressed social energy of minimalism as individual cinema and spectacle. But to see this work as channelled from minimalism is perhaps too reductive and runs counter to the question of embodiment that is the theme and sustenance of the work. In correspondence, Mahovsky wrote of *Mutoscope* thusly: “So though your body is frozen and the experience of this minimal form is returned to something that is private and visual, the narrative itself is machinistic—endless and actually it induced physical discomfort. You are reminded of your body.”

On the other hand, Weppler’s earlier pieces played with 1960s and ’70s concerns of repetition and pattern. Her works dealt with the logic of

3 Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 39. Originally published as *Le Moi-Peau* (Paris: Bordas, 1985).

commodity production in regard to capitalism's surface as a continuous and discursive plane replete with circuitous formations. Other works had made use of the flimsiest wood veneer in place of actual wood for furniture constructions, which resulted in melancholic works of extreme structural precariousness, recalling the brilliant soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg. Weppler's wood-veneer works shared with Oldenburg's soft sculptures an interest in common household objects, but whereas Oldenburg's works were imbued with sexual energy—for instance, the flaccidity of a light switch that is *turned off* rather than *turned on*—Weppler's works were brittle, rather than soft, with survival being a more urgent metaphor than eros. The point is confirmed in my correspondence with the artist, who offered a personal note about privation and a family culture of frugality—of making things out of scrap materials in order to procure what they could not otherwise have. Moreover, the things that were made from scrap possessed, for Weppler, both a Disneyesque quality, like the animated brooms in *Fantasia* (1940) as well as a blunt honesty regarding their materiality, rooted as they are in the embodied experiences of life's struggles.

In their earlier works, Mahovsky and Weppler were, in their own ways, working through the problem of art and embodiment in a dehumanized age. How can art humanize the dehumanized situation of the world without resigning itself to a neutralizing, anti-humanist rhetoric? Minimalism's anthropomorphizing of physicality and form was not a recovery of the subject based on a concentration of social relations, no matter how hidden, but on a unity of formal effects. The agnostic qualities of pop and minimalism (and indeed conceptual art) in relation to the questions of utopic embodiment and the mending of alienation describe a situation in which social relations seem to be beyond human control and are features of nature rather than of human construct. Moreover, the agnosticism or indifference (albeit one that may be fraught with critical potential) of 1960s avant-garde art expressed both its strength and limits, its ahistoricism being a defining expression of contemporary art's inability to assert political effectiveness to socio-historical circumstances.

The impasse between art and social effect is a good starting point for an entry into Mahovsky and Weppler's collaborative works. In their car sculptures, for example, the interpellation of the spectator—the work of art calling the spectator into being and the spectator calling the work of art into being—becomes more pronounced. A degree of absurdity infuses the car works, with the use of household aluminum foil to form a cast or template of an actual automobile. Too thin to resist gravity, the foil template is inherently unstable and the shape of the cast slowly



Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky, *1989 Ford Escort 2*, 2004

crumples in interesting ways, away from the more static terms of identification and identity (of the thing cast) and toward something more operational to the *informe*. The effect is one whereby the spectator is impelled to make new connections between what is being signified and what is being experienced.

This slide toward formlessness also calls forth the construction of the self and the processes of spectatorship, an embodiment that is unstable in relation to all that is outside the self—or all that exists within the frame of otherness. Each changing state of the foil work represents a different moment in the process of enactment, of becoming present, as a result of spectatorship and embodiment. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), embodiment refers to the actual shape and the innate capacities of the human body, the ways in which the body opens up to the world:

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon those primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 146.

5 From a lecture given by Lacan at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1966 titled “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever,” in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).

of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body’s natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world.<sup>4</sup>

Signifiers are also at play, as foil is a polyvalent term. Beyond being a material of metallic leaf, foil also suggests something that cannot be exposed or revealed, something that obfuscates and thwarts, including the undermining of certitude and success. Foil, in this sense, is somewhat of a negative term, connoting deflection or perhaps Lacanian deferment, underscoring all that cannot be said but experienced as embodiment contingent on desire. According to Jacques Lacan, “the signifier, by its very nature always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it [and] it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning *insists* but that none of the elements *consists* in the signification of which it is at the moment capable.”<sup>5</sup>

As such, the process of producing the works is very much central to an understanding of the content of the works. A concern for literalism and process that characterized much of 1960s and ’70s art is complicated by Lacanian unfolding. To wit, the aluminum foil car sculptures are made by casting a real car. Large sheets of aluminum foil are hot-glued together, rubbed onto the surface of a car, and brought back into the exhibition space where they are provisionally supported by cardboard armature that assumes the approximate form of the referent car. The artists then crawl inside the foil car and remove the cardboard armature. Ultimately, there is nothing to support the aluminum foil frame except the aluminum foil itself. Once again, the materiality of the work announces its own physical properties, as the aluminum foil sculpture collapses unpredictably over time. In doing so, the work slips between 1960s concerns of anti-representational literality and representation. Mahovsky and Wepler’s use of foil also approximates, in a witty but deliberately enervated way, the process in which automobiles are made, as it involves a great deal of cast metal, including aluminum. In emphasizing this process, their cars pay homage to the process art of the mid-1960s with its concerns attendant to time and space, chance and movement—concerns which lie at the core of bodily experience.

Death and disaster in the context of an economy of excess was an abiding theme of the “automobile” sculptures of Arman and John Chamberlain, and of course, it is key to an understanding of Andy Warhol’s early disaster paintings, which included a series depicting horrific car accidents. Mahovsky and Wepler’s car sculptures also express an eschatological element, but they do not culminate there. Sinistation



is not the sole expressive endpoint. Their cars deflate more than they crumple, with surfaces too fragile to buckle, and, in so doing, they transform themselves into a continuous “something else.” The behaviour of their sculptures unfolds in the manner of a Lacanian signifier. There is no entombing of cars in concrete, as in the case of Arman, or muscular bending and twisting of metal, as in the case of Chamberlain. With the foil car works, Mahovsky and Weppler continue their interest in art as an embodied vision, a concept cogently theorized by Jonathan Crary. The idea of embodied vision is given greater resonance in knowing that the aluminum foil car sculpture Mahovsky and Weppler produced was modelled after Mahovsky’s own car, the only car owned by either artist, and the one relied upon by both artists, a Ford Escort.

Both Mahovsky and Weppler worked through the lessons of pop and minimalist art, lessons that continue to resonate today in their paradoxical expression of the relationship between materiality and human presence, and the contingency of art to the indexes of architecture and photography. The life-denying repressiveness of capitalism formed the core of much of pop and minimalist art’s subject matter, of which their procedures mimicked the processes of capitalism itself. This is exemplified in Warhol’s famous statement, “I am machine,” and in minimalism’s hypostatization of objecthood and its troubled sense of relation—a conflicted consciousness in terms of minimalism’s reference to the social world. Mahovsky and Weppler’s notion of embodiment is neither strictly formalist nor completely given over to socio-political concerns. Their work fluctuates between these two poles, resisting encampment at either end. Here, embodiment is a term that extends beyond spectatorial engagement and the interpellation of self-awareness by the work of art, to an articulation of the subject positions of the artists themselves. The art of Mahovsky and Weppler is a restless art, fraught with contradictions, calm yet agitated, tender yet resistant, and expressive yet restrained. It is the very nature of being.

# Something's Missing

Several years ago, in Dakar, Senegal, on the occasion of Dak'Art, the largest art biennial in West Africa, I was on Gorée Island, a short ferry ride from Dakar, a place developed during the seventeenth century as an administrative post for the embarkation of slaves destined for the Americas. For more than three centuries, European nations fought for control of Gorée's lucrative trade in human beings. At the former fort, now a museum known as Maison



Adolphe d'Hastrel, *Maison de la signare Anna Colas à Gorée, 1839*

des Esclaves (House of Slaves), a “door of no return” signals the threshold over which slaves would pass to begin their harrowing, often deadly transatlantic voyage, shackled to the low-ceilinged holds of wooden slave ships. The slaves were forced to lie on their backs, pressed up against one another in head-to-toe and toe-to-head formation. On display in the House of Slaves were various historical documents produced by colonial officials, including drawings that depict the organization of human cargo on the ships in stick-figure form. These drawings were, in essence, what businesses today would call efficiency-analysis charts, as they aided slave-trade officials in working out a ratio of the maximum possible human freight to the lowest acceptable number of deaths. While in the House of Slaves, I saw many people who had come to Gorée Island in an act of remembrance of their roots. It was quite a moving sight: grown men and women sobbing uncontrollably at the magnitude of the historical trauma.

Leaving the House of Slaves, I encountered a man selling what appeared to be scarves. They were made out of cloth and laid out like drying laundry in the sun. Painted on the cloth were stick-figure patterns that echoed the drawings I had just seen. The man had used the stick-figure motif to create a pattern that could also seem abstract. The effect of his works hovered between historical and aesthetic engagement.

I stopped to talk and I asked him about his work. He told me that they were paintings, works of art. I learned that he spoke several languages and had worked for some time as a Russian translator when Senegal was briefly a client state of the Soviet Union. He then asked me

1 Walter Benjamin, “The Artist as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 97.

if I would be interested in buying one of his paintings for a thousand dollars. As I was about to leave—not committing to a purchase—he said that if I wanted a painting as a scarf, he would be willing to sell it for ten dollars.

This story from Senegal is a poignant reminder of the relationship between political economy and art. By political economy, I am referring to the social determinants of production that shape and place limitations on art. The man outside the House of Slaves saw himself as an artist and profoundly understood the ways in which he had been shaped by political economy. As I spoke to him, his poverty evoked in me the responsibilities so well formulated by Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Author as Producer,” in which he expressed his belief that it is incumbent upon the artist to identify with the poor. He wrote that upon seeing a poor man, an artist must recognize “how poor he is and how poor he has to be in order to begin again from the beginning.”<sup>1</sup>

Political economy is a constant yet largely unspoken referent in many of the contemporary art biennials that take place around the world. In Dakar, I heard complaints from several visiting European and American critics and curators about how shoddy Dak’Art looked. Exhibition walls were not always properly painted and the technical equipment was older and more modestly scaled than in the richer biennials of the West. Leading critics and curators failed to recognize the degree of lack in a place such as Senegal. Even immersed in the hard realities of West Africa, the myth that all artists start from the same place continued to be perpetuated.

We like to believe that art operates in a space separate from political economy. We even like to believe that this separation is necessary in order to maintain a critical distance from the social order. There is some validity to this separation, in that critical distance from one’s own presuppositions can allow for different epistemic perspectives. But I am also wary of the ways in which this separation can be used in the service of a neo-colonialist logic in the context of places like Senegal, where, historically, cultural production has often been measured in imposed-from-afar formalist or anthropological terms, but seldom regarded in terms that recognize indigenously derived criteria.

There have been several occasions in my life when I contemplated withdrawing from art in order to find out what I did not know about art. But my withdrawal was in the manner of a Heideggerian withdrawal of the withdrawal. The trip I made to Dakar in 1998 was undertaken on my own initiative as a means of breaking out from the art system as I then knew it, an effort to deepen my understanding of how art could be defined differently. This was a time when I felt great disillusionment

about art and great disappointment in myself, a crisis of being that I believe afflicts all artists from time to time. I had a choice: I could either stop being an artist or I could enlarge my frame of understanding of art by looking away from what I was accustomed to.

I began to embrace an increasingly philosophical view of artistic purpose, one inscribed more in terms of the artist's life and less in terms of the art world's idea of the artist. I saw the necessity of letting go of the art world as I knew it in order to be more free, to rediscover the true purpose of art, and to become re-encharmed with it by giving myself over to the world.

I became increasingly interested in initiating projects that could contribute to a wider understanding of contemporary art. In the mid-1990s, I wrote an online column for a leading English art magazine. In 1998, I was appointed project manager for the exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*. In 2001, I organized a symposium in Italy involving Palestinian and Israeli artists that centred on the question of how one makes art in an environment of great social and political distress. Last year, I co-curated two exhibitions. The first was a historical project about China's troubled relationship to modernism during the pre-Communist period of Republican rule. The second was the seventh Sharjah Biennial, the most serious and ambitious art biennial in the Middle East. I saw all of these projects as extensions of my artistic practice, as I no longer saw artistic practice defined solely in terms of the production and exhibition of my art.

I am constantly asking myself: Is this all there is to art? To ask such a question is to remain forever dissatisfied, a necessary condition for an artist. To be an artist means to be in a constant search for meaning. This calls up Bertolt Brecht's memorable two words from *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*: "Something's missing." In Brecht's opera, Mahagonny is a city built on illusions. It is "a hollow place" where the promise of human happiness is always tied to money and never met. I had started to think of the art world as such a hollow place, where something was missing beneath the plenitude of display and consumption.

Visiting Poland in 1999, I saw an exhibition of Polish conceptual art in Warsaw entitled *Conceptual Reflection in Polish Art: Experiences of Discourse: 1965–1975*. At the time, I was a contributor to *ARTMargins*, a Web-based publication of the University of California, Santa Barbara, concerned with issues of contemporary Central and Eastern European visual culture. The exhibition had as its objective a realignment of the field of conceptual art. From the perspective of the West, the primacy of American and Western European conceptual art was de rigueur in any formulation of art-historical narrative and usually went as follows:

Eastern European artists, yearning to be free from tyranny, looked to Western artists and institutions for guidance. With its emphasis on dematerialized forms and metaphysical critique, a Western-formulated conceptual art imparted an inherently democratic ethos that made possible an allegorized critique of Poland's authoritarian social environment. The lessons offered by the West in terms of artistic strategy would inspire Polish artists to formulate their own conceptually based responses to their own subjugation.

But this asymmetrical narrative of conceptual art is just one example of the many problems and contradictions inherent in Western art-historical accounting. Important to consider is the specific political context from which Polish conceptual art emerged. Such a consideration offers a more complex understanding of conceptual art as a category. Western conceptualism used its connections to Polish conceptualism to dispel an agnostic ambivalence toward a positioning of art in relation to *realpolitik*. And Polish conceptualism needed Western conceptualism to push its allegory of politics under the guise of an apolitical universalism.

Polish conceptualism can only be understood by acknowledging the cruel absurdity of Poland's political and social environment. In a performance entitled *Memorizing*, by the Polish art collective *Druga Grupa*, a mnemonic exercise of a fortuitously chosen piece of text underlined the many rules Poles were required to abide by in their daily lives under authoritarian rule.

A salient feature of Polish conceptualism was the insistence on audience interaction. In this way, it avoided the trap of metaphysical formalism so endemic to Western conceptual art. In Polish conceptual art, metaphysics was but the first step of a philosophical proposition, the second being its application and grounding in materialism. What is remarkable is how this second step did not render the works didactic, nor did it diminish any utopian allusions. On the contrary, by underpinning their art with an analysis of the political economy within which it was produced, Polish conceptual artists expressed a utopianism that was all the more painful and fragile to experience.

This is but one example of the insight I gained after my refusal to be confined by the parameters set by the art world. Another came from teaching in Martinique in 1997. The Caribbean island is not far from South America, or, for that matter, Florida, yet Martinique television aired only French stations and its kiosks sold only French publications. The entire media focus was directed to and from France. The art education of the students at the *Institut régional d'art visuel* reflected Martinique's *outrre-mer* status as a department of France. I was struck by

their incertitude regarding the problem of incorporating their own situation into their art; the students doubted that their lives could be valid content for art.

They knew very little about contemporary art outside of France. They were familiar with Andy Warhol, of course, but a discussion of Warhol would inevitably lead to Pierre Restany, Martial Raysse, and the *nouveaux réalistes*, not to Pop manifestations in South America or Britain, and certainly not the United States. The collation of the school's pedagogical program with Paris was reflected in the faculty. Almost all of the instructors were given bonus isolation pay. And despite the paradisiacal setting of Martinique, there was a palpable sense of humiliation among the instructors for having to be there.

My students were not very familiar with the work of Frantz Fanon, who wrote about the psychological effects of colonialism and the internalization of racism, and is—along with Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant—one of Martinique's most celebrated thinkers. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon wrote:

I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek therefore the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

I felt that the students of the Institut régional d'art visuel did not question enough the world that produced them. The problem was not complacency, as is often the case with art students from places of surfeit and privilege. Rather, they had not been given the tools to critique their own situation. As a result, they were unable to define themselves in relation to historical trauma in the context of the Caribbean. I sensed their sense of isolation, their sense of "something's missing."

When I asked where they had travelled to, they said they had not been anywhere except Guadeloupe, an island north of Martinique that is also an *outré-mer* department of France. Asked where they would like to travel, they unanimously responded: "Paris." While most people would like to travel to Paris, their response reminded me of a scene from *Touki Bouki* (1973), a key film of the West African new-wave cinema of the 1970s, in which the two protagonists incessantly sing the Josephine Baker song "Paris, Paris, Paris." *Touki Bouki* is about the psychic persistence of colonialism among the colonized; it persisted among my students in terms of where they desired to go. The film presents the dream of going to Paris as a self-searching journey and makes ironic the unfulfilled promises of the postcolonial condition. In my view, my students saw the

world in similarly bracketed terms. The art school in Martinique ran counter to my understanding of what art should do, which is to raise one's consciousness of one's place in the world, and to produce expression at the borders of what can and cannot be said in any given social and historical context.

These experiences in Martinique are never far from me, regardless of where I am. I believe that the role of the artist is to give expression to his or her experiences in a continuous act of self-definition. In a famous passage from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, the fictional narrator describes the experience of eating a petite madeleine over lime-blossom tea:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palette than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. I put down the cup and examined my own mind.

The passage articulates the centrality of sensory experience to artistic consciousness. Being an artist entails the assumption that everything in life is relevant. I have learned that the expression of experience need not be determined by the dictates of the art system. This does not mean that I have completely extricated myself from this system, only that I have re-evaluated what it means to be an artist.

In Delhi last year, I was part of a conference entitled "The Making of International Exhibitions: Siting Biennials," organized by Geeta Kapur and Vivan Sundaram. The theme of the conference had to do with what Kapur has described as a re-imagining of community that considers the specificities of the developing world's relationship to modernism.

During an afternoon break, I took a bicycle-cab ride through Delhi's busy streets to the Chawri Bazar in Chandni Chowk, a seventeenth-century market considered by Delhiites to be the soul of their city. Chandni Chowk is an utterly phantasmagoric experience. As I was navigated through its crowded passageways, I wondered what Walter Benjamin would have had to say about such a place. In his discussion of nineteenth-century Parisian shopping arcades, he describes the passageways within the arcades as spatialized pasts:

The bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an *intérieur* for him, now this *intérieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city.... The *flâneur* is



someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity.

But the Chawri Bazar in Chandni Chowk is far more hallucinatory in the breadth and depth of its sensory offerings. In contrast to Benjamin's emphasis on the singularity of the *flâneur's* experience in the Parisian arcades, spectatorial embodiment is completely broken down in the Chawri Bazar. To enter this space is to enter a maze of narrow lanes teeming with people—from shoppers and urchin children to beggars and mendicants. Tiny shops saturated with colour and flashing lights compete for the attention of the throngs of people filling the narrow passageways. The market is divided into different quarters, each specializing in particular commodities and services, from foodstuffs and fabrics to chemicals and industrial appliances. Interspersed throughout are countless eateries engulfed in steam and filling the air with a plethora of smells. Barking voices from megaphones clash with music from loudspeakers. There are mosques, Hindu and Sikh temples, and Catholic and Protestant churches all in close proximity to one other. Little children barely the height of my waist weaved themselves around the adults, heading for where I had no idea. Teams of long-limbed, yellow-brown monkeys darted from the shoulders of one person to the next, their sudden appearance surprising no one but me.

Tangled webs of electrical cables could be seen overhead in thick and unruly masses. I noticed a large knot of badly burned cables that had melted into a ball. Underneath this ball I could see the charred surfaces of a former shop, barely visible under a skin of brightly coloured posters. A man from the shop opposite noticed me and shouted, "It was a terrible event, the fire." I looked at the man and then up at the burned-out cables. I asked myself: How can art compete with what I have just experienced? How can art even come close to all that I have seen, smelled, touched, and heard here? I realized that the question is not a fair one, for art cannot compete. Life is infinitely more complex.

And yet art should be about life, and draw from it sustenance and relevance. The purpose of art should be to offer a space for pause and reflection. Nothing can take the place of what I experienced at Chandni Chowk, not even art. But what art can and should do is evoke Chandni Chowk.

# Encountering Chen Zhen

## A Paris Portal

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I first met Chen Zhen in 1995. I was living in Paris and teaching at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. While there I was introduced to a number of Chinese artists and curators who had immigrated to France. They included the artists Yang Jiechang, Huang Yong Ping, Yan Pei-Ming, and the curator Hou Hanru. It was the latter who suggested that I contact another Chinese artist living in Paris: Chen Zhen. Hou said he was sure that we would get along. His intuition intrigued me. Apart from our Chinese heritage, what common ground could I possibly share with someone who had grown up an ocean away? I did not know much about Chen, except that he was one of many Chinese artists who had moved to Paris during the 1980s and chose to remain after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. I was interested in learning more about him.

This was at a time when I felt great disillusionment about art and great disappointment in myself, a crisis of being which I believe afflicts all artists from time to time. I wanted to enlarge my frame of understanding of art by looking afar from that place which I was accustomed. I began to embrace an increasingly philosophical view of artistic purpose, one inscribed more in terms of the artist's life and less in terms of the art world's idea of the artist. I saw the necessity of letting go of the art world as I knew it in order to be more free, to rediscover the true purpose of art, and to become re-encharmed with it by giving myself over to the world. I would soon discover that Chen Zhen had long ago chosen a similar route.

Although not so many years distant, the Western art world in 1995 was only beginning to acknowledge artists and curators working outside of Europe and North America. In spite of the prescience of conceptual art and its relationship to the processes of globalization, the Western art world has been slow in transforming rhetoric into practice. I recall meeting the curator Okwui Enwezor for the first time in Paris in 1995. He was relatively unknown then and was interested in curating exhibitions focused on contemporary African art. But he was having difficulty finding institutions that would commit to his projects. Nevertheless, something was in the air. New faces were appearing in the art world from places such as China, Africa, Mexico, and other previously marginalized areas of the world, and their presence contributed a new and urgent purpose to art. It struck me that there was much to learn during my time in Paris.

I called Chen and was kindly invited to his apartment near Paris's Chinatown in the 13th *arrondissement* for dinner. I had never been to this part of the city before and was struck by how different it looked from the rest of Paris, with its concrete high-rises and an ambitious modernist complex called *Les Olympiades*. An uncanny feeling of

1 Reference to a “spiritual running away” is made in *Transexperiences: A Conversation Between Chen Zhen and Xian Zhu* (Kitakyushu: Center for Contemporary Art and Korinsha Press, 1998), 1.

2 Chen Zhen, *Chen Zhen: Invocation of Washing Fire* (Gli Ori: Prato, 2003), 190.

familiarity—a “spiritual running away,” as Chen would say—washed over me as I walked past Chinese Parisians going about their day.<sup>1</sup> At that moment, I suddenly felt as though I was no longer on my way to meet a stranger, but rather someone connected to my past. And, in a sense, I was.

My formative knowledge of China came from my immediate family growing up in Vancouver’s Chinatown. My grandfather would tell me stories about China before and after the Communist Revolution of 1949. Every month he would bring home a copy of *China Today*. It was an illustrated publication glorifying life in Mao Zedong’s China. Chen Zhen could have been one of those children featured in *China Today* that I had related to as a boy. It was difficult for me to articulate why, but as I walked toward Chen’s apartment I sensed an opportunity to know myself better through another.

I arrived on Chen’s street but had difficulty locating his apartment. I could not find the apartment number, for no number existed on his door. Or, perhaps, there was a number, only I could not find it. It was only after Chen came out into the courtyard of his complex that his home was revealed. In hindsight, the absence of a number pointed to a kind of dislocation of location, a home without an address. Chen explored this sense of dislocated habitation in much of his work.

*Maison Portable* (2000) is a work that is simultaneously a cradle, a cage, a wagon, a playpen, a Chinese sedan, and a prison. Constructed mainly of wood and supported by four wheels with handles at either end, the interior is filled with melted red candles that form an anthropomorphic shape lying in repose. The caravan-like appearance of the work suggests mobility. And the viewer is invited to speculate on the future course this enclosed figure will take.

Describing *Maison Portable*, Chen wrote: “The house can be a utopian space, virtual, immaterial, spiritual, a space ‘between.’ This is why the real house has no address. I am a ‘homeless person’ and even Paris, where I have been living for fifteen years, is just a stopover for me.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, Chen did have a fixed address and was not homeless in the destitute sense. He did not identify himself as a nomad, a figure of great currency in the art world embodying the flows and distributions of migration and power. Indeed, there is an ambiguous parallelism with the contemporary art world’s equation of the artist as nomad.

Artists today are increasingly called upon to represent particular ethnic communities of which they may be a part. One of the potential problems with this is the reification of essentialized ethnic identities that contradict the increasing levels of transnational privilege and mobility that many artists working today enjoy. Chen negotiated this

contradiction by constructing the experiences of “homelessness” developed by ancient Chinese philosophers such as Shen Tao and Lao Tzu. The former famously advocated that one should “abandon knowledge and discard self” in order to experience a life unencumbered by those conventions produced in the service of the social order.<sup>3</sup> Lao Tzu claimed that:

When all beneath heaven is your self in renown  
you trust yourself to all beneath heaven,  
and when all beneath heaven is your self in love  
you dwell throughout all beneath heaven.<sup>4</sup>

This passage describes an unanchored state where the self is located “all beneath heaven” and has the capacity to open up to the world.

The *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Classic of the Way of Virtue* (ca. 600 BCE), is attributed to Lao Tzu, record keeper of the imperial library during the Zhou Dynasty. Comprised of paradoxical poems, the *Tao Te Ching* is a literature of metaphysical teachings emphasizing the contingency and continuity of all that comes to pass in the world. The Tao is a Principle or Way, which represents “unimpeded harmony” and is everywhere and in everything. It is not something imposed from without but something that requires discovery from within:

It is we who need to discover that Way [Tao], which is immanent in all aspects of the world, not a rule imposed from without; and we need to fit into it, letting things take their course, not exerting ourselves in opposition to it by trying to bend things to our will.<sup>5</sup>

One must give oneself over to the world and the contingencies of existence. But it is necessary to maintain an ethical life. Throughout his career, Chen spoke about finding love in one’s relationship to the world, a love that can only be found upon the forsaking of self-love. Chen’s notion of a surrender of the self is not meant to function as a means of transcendence but rather a way to challenge us to revise our notions of identity and to think of ourselves differently, away from processes of individual definition with its inherent inflexibility against collective memory and its focus on self-affirmation.

When I met Chen for the first time, he shook my hand warmly with both hands. I immediately felt a connection. At first I felt awkward about not being able to converse in Mandarin. But unlike others who have questioned and even ridiculed me for this deficiency, Chen accepted me for who I am. He understood the historical reasons why

3 “Daoism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 28 June 2007, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/daoism>.

4 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. David Hinton (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 2002), ch. 13.

5 *The Essential Tao*, trans. Thomas Clearly (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 10.

6 Confucius, *Analects*, ch. 2,  
v. II.

my Mandarin-speaking mother decided that my brother and I learn Cantonese and English rather than Mandarin. When I was growing up, Mandarin was not spoken in Vancouver's Chinatown. Almost all of the Chinese inhabiting the city at that time had emigrated from Guangdong Province in the south of China where the Cantonese dialect is favoured.

Our dinner conversation kept returning to the topic of travel and identity. Chen's ideas about travel were more complicated than the metaphor of the nomad, that boundary-defying muse of so much contemporary art theory. He was more interested in thinking about acts of passage and the laws of the immigrant. For Chen, passage bears moral weight and historical anchoring, perhaps akin to Confucius's regard for China's ancient past. Confucius saw the past as a point of perpetual return for understanding the present. As he would say: "Study the past as if you would define the future."<sup>6</sup>

The intertwining of diachronic and synchronic time is a salient thread in Chen Zhen's art. So many of his works use materials that are in themselves full of time. The layering of time is powerfully conveyed in his extensive use of natural materials such as earth, iron, wood, ceramic, foodstuffs, candles, and cotton clothing. All of these materials refer to the lived world that they once occupied.

In *Chair of Nirvana* (1997), several chairs are tied together to form a latticed dome over a cradle base. The assemblage of weathered chairs constitutes a present community but makes reference to past lives. The title of the work calls up a third temporality, that of eternal time.

Chen's work also often invokes ideas of suspension and states of liminality. Like *Chair of Nirvana*, many of his installations employ materials that suspend or elevate other materials. String, rope, and steel are used to render liminal everyday objects so that they are given new orientations and meanings. Chairs are often made to hover in the air, their physical injuries accompanied by a sense of transcendental endowment. Chen salvages them, imbues them with love, and sets them on a new path.

In *Round Table* (1995), chairs from five continents are brought together to form a new structure that evokes the round dining tables of Chinese banquets and restaurants. But the familiarity of the tables and chairs is rendered strange by the ways in which they have been embedded into one another and stripped of their original function. In his discussion of the table that appears in Karl Marx's *Kapital* (1867), Jacques Derrida states:

This table has been worn down, exploited, over-exploited, or else set-aside, no longer in use, in antique shops or auction rooms. The



Chen Zhen, *Round Table*, conceived for the exhibition *Dialogue of Peace* in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, 1995

thing is at once set aside and beside itself. One no longer knows, beneath the hermeneutic patina, what this piece of wood, whose example suddenly looms up, is good for and what it is worth.<sup>7</sup>

Chen's table looms up but in a different way. It is not a table by itself, but altered so that a series of paradoxical significations emerge.

In other works, Chen employs a strategy of supplementation in order to draw attention to paradoxes existing in the relationship between life and death. The supplement, according to Derrida, "comes to an aid of something original or natural."<sup>8</sup> The supplement is a device dependant on ambiguity. What is supplementary can always be interpreted in two ways.

In *Un monde accroché/detaché* (1990), ninety-nine found objects of varying scale, degraded of their use value and recuperated from abandonment, are conjoined onto the branches and trunks of a burnt forest outside of Paris. The denatured landscape is given visual and symbolic sustenance by the affecting supplementation of everyday objects. The viewer is confronted with a strange and haunted landscape that embodies the crossover between the real and the unreal, on the one hand, and

7 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 142–46.

8 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 181.

9 Chen Zhen, *Invocation*, 310.

10 *Ibid.*, 321.

11 *Ibid.*, 334.

12 *Ibid.*, 336.

completion and depletion, on the other. In the reanimation of the forest through supplementation, the objects function as a *memento mori* of that space.

Chen and his wife, the artist Xu Min, made a wonderful meal. I recall Chen deftly handling the wok for one of the dishes. He told me of his desire to become a doctor of Chinese medicine so that he could heal himself from the life-threatening disease that scourged his body. We talked at length about health and the spiritual dimensions of life. I recall thinking about how spiritual Chen was in terms of his affinities to Chinese ontological precepts. I remember thinking about how Chen was not a man in search of wholeness but one who understood the world as a whole no matter how deficient and injurious the world may be.

The body, health, and medicine are syncretic terms in Chen's art. As in the concept of the yin and yang, the condition of illness contains within it the potential of health and wellbeing, just as the reverse is also true. At one point during the evening, Chen asked me if I had suffered illness or if there had been any illness in my family. I did not find the questions intrusive in the least. On the contrary, his caring curiosity was reassuring and caused me to think about my existence at that moment. It also made me think about my mother, who had died years before of leukemia, and my sister, who had never been given the chance to grow up.

Chen shared with me his experiences of illness. He told me that many members of his family were doctors. And he spoke convincingly of the possibility of healing himself. This was conveyed with a modesty that struck me. I sensed his belief that nothing in life was self-evident and that one had no choice but to give oneself over to life at every moment of being. Chen wrote, "I dream of discovering how the immune system is 'a second brain,' and how we can cure by being attentive to everyday experience."<sup>9</sup> He claimed: "When one's body becomes a kind of laboratory, a source of imagination and experiment, the process of life transforms itself into art."<sup>10</sup> This statement is a reminder of the profound interconnectedness of art and life that complicates the Western art-historical ideal of the sublation of art into life as a reconciliation of two estranged terms. For Chen, every day meant taking medications that let him "keep a cool head" and made him "less proud."<sup>11</sup> He asserted that the project of becoming a doctor would be a synthesis of his life and the making of art.<sup>12</sup>

*Six Roots* (2000) takes the form of an allegory comprised of seven installations in six parts. The title refers to a Buddhist expression describing the main senses of our body. Chen borrowed this Buddhist theme to consider the "six stages of life" and the many contradictory



aspects of human behaviour.<sup>13</sup> The themes of birth, childhood, conflict, suffering, memory, and death-rebirth are presented. Significantly, death is not presented as the end stage, but rather the setting for a transcendental re-emergence in life. Conflict and suffering and the memory of them express the ineluctability of life in the here-and-now. The acknowledgement of conflict and suffering was but the first step in effecting their respective conclusions. *Six Roots* asks us to consider the following questions: How does memory operate in relation to a reordered life where there is disjuncture between past experiences and present realities? What is rebirth in the context of a haunted inner life and an exterior that may be deeply discordant with the values of one's memories? And given the circularity of death and rebirth, are exile, displacement, and loss permanent symptoms of identity creation and recreation? For Chen, harmony and reconciliation are ambiguous terms, effected by the passage of time and the accumulation of wounds.

13 Ibid., 312.

Chen's warmth and compassion seemed without end in him. The puffiness of his countenance, caused by cortisone treatment, gave him a Buddhist aura. He was curious about what it was like for me to be Chinese, and born and raised outside of China. He told me that he had a sister living in Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver. He was fascinated with how Vancouver's sizable Chinese population occupied an important role in terms of the city's social politics.

I told him that it had not always been this way, and that the Chinese in Canada could not vote until 1947 in national elections, and 1949 in the province of British Columbia. Canadian immigration laws made a special case of the Chinese through the Chinese Exclusion Act, which placed a head tax on all immigrants from China. This head tax effectively eliminated the immigration of Chinese women and children, and was combined with laws that made it illegal for white women to work for Chinese-owned businesses, namely restaurants and laundries. Several generations of Chinese men, integral to the building of the Canadian nation, died without ever re-establishing long-severed familial ties. This is in contrast to the way in which Paris's Chinatown is found at some distance from the historical centre of the city. Today, the Chinese in Vancouver reside not only in Chinatown but also in all parts of the city.

This awareness seemed to give Chen satisfaction in knowing that the unity of different peoples was possible. For him, ethnicity was a category of mediation existing between groups that can only function in the presence of more than one group. One of ethnicity's fundamental properties is the articulation between self and other. Chen's reference to Chineseness in his work emanated from his own relationship to the world as an ethnically Chinese man. Stuart Hall has emphasized the

14 Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," in *New Times*, ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), 133.

15 Lu Xun, *Ah Q and Others; Selected Stories of Lusin* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971).

16 Chen Zhen, *Invocation*, 250.

necessity of recognizing that the figure of the migrant "comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power."<sup>14</sup>

It is important to consider the ways in which Chen modulated the terms of migration and ethnicity without reducing them to reified terms. Rather, his modulation is highly situational and relational, and allows for an examination of social identity in multitudinous layers. Much of Chen's art is an expression of how ethnicity is a contingent, rather than closed, concept. The presence of subjectivity sits in complex fashion next to the traditional Chinese concept of ontology, a theory of being that is founded centrally on a heterogeneous synergy of being revolving around a yin-yang dialectic of bipolarity that abounds with philosophical agonisms. At the heart of Chen's art is the idea of self-actualization. It is an idea that the Chinese poet Lu Xun deals with in *Diary of a Madman* (1918), in which he equates China's national turpitude at the beginning of the twentieth century with the repression of the individual.<sup>15</sup> For Chen, the experience of ethnicity is a constantly changing process.

In *Precipitous Parturition* (1999), numerous bicycle frames and tires are suspended on rafters to appear as a "dragon-snake giving birth to countless toy cars painted in black."<sup>16</sup> The idea for the work emerged from the remark, commonly expressed, regarding the transformation of China from a nation of bicycles to a nation of automobiles. The celestial origin of the dragon is vetted through the prism of actuality, as there is no masking the constituent parts of its construction and the support system of the exhibition space rafters.

Signifiers of Chinese identity in the image of the bicycle and the dragon are conflated. The dragon is an ancient symbol of Chinese culture, while the bicycle is a marker of Maoist modernity with its links to social utopia. The toy cars in the installation prosecute an ambiguous role as both natal and parasitic, appearing as an army of insect-like vehicles that breach the symbolic space of the bicycle-dragon into the real space of the exhibition space. As a symbol of power and divinity, the dragon is swarmed by the little cars, and there is a sense of foreboding that the dragon itself could be destroyed by the cars that it begat. Past, present, and future are braided together in a complex and tension-filled entanglement. Yet the materials employed and the forms produced do not evoke only a problem of modernity confronting China, as they also have resonance with other places in the developing world.

Chen was curious about the life of those Chinese who had immigrated to British Columbia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I told him about my grandfather, who arrived in Vancouver

in 1908. He was one of the last of the coolie immigrants brought over to Canada to work on the construction of the Canadian railways. I told Chen that my grandfather never forgave me for accepting student summer employment with Via Rail, a government-run passenger rail service that took visitors to the Rocky Mountains. My grandfather saw my action as a personal betrayal. It was not fair of him, but in light of his experiences while building the railway, it was understandable. At that point, I recall vividly Chen mentioning something about the violence of migration. He said that migration imparts a violence that goes beyond the ideological inscription of social othering and stigmatization. He said that it has the ability to penetrate deeply into the recesses of the individual's physical body, to the cellular level of mnemonic registration.

Chen's idea of the migrant as both an eschatological and regenerating subject is a thread that courses through much of his art. In *La digestion perpétuelle* (1995), new and used Chinese artifacts such as abacuses, Mahjong tiles, electric fans, scales, vases, and porcelain dishes are partitioned in loose groupings within a food turntable, or "Lazy Susan," mounted on a dining table surrounded by traditional Chinese chairs. The food turntable is a feature of many Chinese banquet tables. Used here, it is a device that invites the viewer to symbolically partake of the objects in an eternal cycle of bodily processing and maceration.

Such ideas recur in *Field of Waste* (1994), where the supplementary binary of degeneration and regeneration forms the axial points of an installation comprised of sewn-together garments and interspersed Chinese and American flags laid out on the floor. The assemblage of clothing and flags takes the shape of a wedge, which pierces a mound of charred newspapers that resemble coal. At the base of the wedge are sewing machines similar to those found in sweatshops today. The two components interact dialectically in that there is an ambiguity in terms of which one is devouring the other.

Often overlooked in writings on Chen's work is the particularized and sharp political content that imbues his art. The politics in Chen's art operates as a re-imagining of community that considers the specificities of China's and, by implication, the developing world's relationship to modernity. It is a politics articulated in terms both concise and poetic. *Field of Waste* is very much an expression of anguish relating to the plight of the garment-factory sweatshop worker, of which many are Chinese. According to Chen, the work,

Introduces burning and sewing as the main plastic method and the way of transformation. The first is revolutionary, destructive and chaotic, while the second is more constructive, re-organizing and

17 Ibid., 198.

18 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), 124–25.

19 *Transexperiences*, 3.

crossbreeding. The sewing process as a “plastic language” links very closely with the fact that the sweatshop was, and still is one main method of survival for Chinese immigration.<sup>17</sup>

As someone who is a beneficiary of the labours of the sweatshop—my mother, aunts and uncles all worked and continue to work in sweatshops—Chen’s invocation of politics within the complex forms of his art continue to affect me in a profound way. Very early on in my life, I became aware of the experience of the migrant in terms of social hardship and penury. I witnessed the psychic and physical damage caused by economic and racial exploitation.

In spite of the painful realities that often accompany the experience of migration, it is necessary to acknowledge the shifting definition of the migrant. It is necessary for the reason of accepting all that may be possible in terms of the empowerment of that individual defined as a migrant. Salman Rushdie has written extensively on this subject:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Gayatri Spivak’s theory of “strategic essentialism” is that which enables diasporic identifications with a specific ethnicity—such as Chineseness—to carry some originary cultural identity with the idea of a return home, despite identity being marked by hybridity rendering home a highly problematized site of desire. It seems to me that this contradiction is at the forefront of what guides Chen’s art. He coined the term “transexperiences” to articulate “the complex life experiences of leaving one’s native place and going from one place to another in one’s life.”<sup>19</sup> Leaving one’s native place for another place implied for Chen a concomitant passing-through from this life to whatever may follow. For Chen, illness became a succor for his creativity. The yin-and-yang dualisms of life and death, and degeneration and regeneration, became for him a dialectics of his art. They are processes that Chen would diagnose through his art.

Toward the end of our dinner, I felt a strong bond with Chen that carried far beyond our common ethnic heritage. During a period of disillusionment for me, he reminded me of the need to always form



# Visuality and Opticality in the Art of Tania Mouraud

Tania Mouraud (b. Paris, 1942) has consistently pursued the relationship between the body and opticality in her art. Her *Borderland* series (2008) comprises landscapes that have been photographed with a filter made out of the same transparent plastic that is used to bale hay. The result is an image of the landscape that is unevenly reflected in the plastic wrap. The landscape is, in effect, mutated by a material that is toxic. The reflection evokes in the viewer a desire to imagine a “natural” landscape in its place. As a result, the viewer experiences a reverberation between sensations of the body and fomentations of the mind. Looking, filtering, distortion, and *looking again* together form a recurring strategy in Mouraud’s work.

This relationship between the body and the mind is but one of the many dualities explored by Mouraud. Others include the human and the animal in *Roaming* (2008), the public and private in *How Can You Sleep?* (2005), and night and day in *Entrer dans la nuit* (2009). A consistent characteristic of Mouraud’s art is its inherent challenge to the hypostatized ideological (capitalist) order in which it is situated. Her work is destabilizing, directed foremost at the viewer’s entrenched sense of self. Reminiscent of Didier Anzieu’s concept of the “skin-ego,”<sup>1</sup> a viewer at a Mouraud exhibition is often discombobulated in terms of what she is seeing. But this is done with critical purpose, with socio-political implications in terms of the naturalized rule of dominant ideology.

Mouraud’s work is often highly optical. This contributes to a temporary sense of disembodiment in the viewer: opticality can be defined as disembodied visuality. For Mouraud, it is a necessary precursor toward a newly defined and more humane visuality. In his celebrated essay “A Short History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin wrote of an “optical unconscious,” an unconscious visual dimension that remains hidden from social consciousness but for its exposure through photographic technique. He described it as “a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously.”<sup>2</sup> Mouraud is similarly interested in employing the procedures of modernist and abstract art to comment on humanity’s alienation from the world. Through the use of architecturally scaled text that is optically difficult to read and large projected images of animals that require the obscurity of night to see, Mouraud’s art is as visually arresting as it is socially engaged; it seeks alternatives to seeing and understanding the world within monolithic scopic regimes such as the prevailing positivistic order.

Opticality was also addressed by the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who described the alignment of visuality with modernity by

1 Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

2 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 511.

3 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

4 Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

way of the code of modern painting. For Greenberg, “good” art exacts a demand on the way we see and experience the world that eliminates the problem of mediation with the world.<sup>3</sup> The model of painting that calls attention to itself interpellates the viewer to become self-aware. The art historian Victor Stoichita has referred to paintings that are concerned with their own art as “self aware images.”<sup>4</sup> In Stoichita’s rhetorical terms, he called such paintings “meta-paintings” because of their capacity for agency through containment. By this he meant the ability of painting to question its own ontology and critical positioning in the world. Mouraud’s *Borderland* photographs seem to suggest that humans exist in a world of containment *without* agency, a world that is filtered in various ways so that what we see are representations, always distorted. In *Borderland*, the containment of hay acts as a metaphor for the containment of the natural spirit—but it is not an absolute containment, as the viewer is still able to sense the proximity and profundity of land and sky.

In confronting a work by Mouraud, one is never sure of what is seen or experienced despite, paradoxically, the artist’s insistent technical transparency. The renewal of vision through the self-awareness of one’s body in social space, and the corresponding hope that such renewal evokes, is at the heart of the art of Tania Mouraud.



Tania Mouraud, *HCYS?*, 2005



# Dear Steven

Published in *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*,  
ed. Steven Henry Madoff, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009

Dear Steven,

I've been struggling with the essay for the art education book. I just can't seem to get a proper handle on what I want to say. Much of this has to do with a kind of doubt that I have about the role of the art school in today's world. This doubt has surfaced from time to time, but never with such persistence as of late. Two years ago, I resigned from a tenured teaching position at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and this year I decided not to return to teach at Bard College in New York. I still enjoy teaching, but only for defined periods of time and if it allows me immersion in a new place. Writing this letter has been helpful in that it's forced me to re-evaluate my relationship to both art and pedagogy. Despite my mixed feelings about the nature of many art schools today, I've found this exercise extremely useful in reminding me of why the teaching of art continues to be important.

For a number of years, I saw pedagogy as a veritable extension of artistic practice. Teaching offered me more than monetary sustenance. It allowed me to survive without having to worry about living off art sales. I was and continue to be grateful for this, because the business of art has a way of shaping and even defining artistic production in ways that might not be in the best interest of being an artist. Yet it's important not to take this space afforded by teaching as a space of refuge and retreat from the world. All too often I've seen art schools exist as cloistered spaces where art is spoken about in lofty terms without any acknowledgement of how it is manifest in the real world. And this is closely connected to a lack of attention paid to what I'd call the "life knowledges" of students. These knowledges are grounded in the body and often discernible in the movement and conduct of individuals. The operative questions that should be asked are: What does it mean to be in someone else's place? How is it even possible to express something of the pain and suffering or happiness and joy of someone else?

The answers to these questions go beyond fostering social skills or finding paths of resolution, since such answers would belong more in the domain of social science than in art. The navigation of the social world is a lifelong process, but it's especially important for artists to explore. There have been several times when I accepted teaching posts outside the frame of social familiarity—in places such as Fort-de-France in Martinique and Hangzhou in China. These experiences provided me with the chance to expand and deepen my understanding of the possibilities of art, particularly as it issues from radically different social contexts from those I'm accustomed to.

In 1995, I taught as a guest professor at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. I was happy to go there because I was deeply unhappy with my situation at the time in Vancouver. Paris gave me a renewed impetus to develop my teaching skills in a different language and setting. The École is housed in a former cloister located in the heart of the city's chicest *arrondissement*. Many of the interior walls are designated with heritage status, and the students aren't allowed to mark them up in any way. I was struck by how the working environment was made too precious for practical use. During my second year at the École, I proposed an exhibition of student works, entirely organized by the students and in cooperation with the students of the École nationale supérieure d'arts Paris-Cergy. The latter is located in the *ville nouvelle* of Cergy-Pontoise built atop a geological rise at the very end of a Regional Express Network commuter line. A long pedestrian boulevard located at one end of its commercial district symbolically links this distant suburb to the axial meridian line that connects to Paris's Grande Arche, Arc de Triomphe, and Place de la Concorde. But Cergy-Pontoise is somewhat disconnected from the mythic ideals inherent in its status as a planned township, as it's now home to a large immigrant community that has turned the utopian architecture of the downtown core into a souq-like environment.

The aim of my proposed student exhibition was to bring together these two somewhat separate worlds. I felt that it was important for both groups of students to be aware of what connected and separated them from one another and to work through these connections and separations collectively. The exhibition took place in a large but empty retail space in the main Cergy-Pontoise shopping concourse. There was a lot of support from the art school in Cergy-Pontoise, and the students there were excited (if not a little surprised) to be working with their Paris counterparts. What unfolded was an incredibly dynamic exchange between the students involved. The Paris students realized that there was much to learn from their counterparts and the Cergy-Pontoise group realized that they were equals, in every way, of their École des Beaux-Arts colleagues. The result was a vibrant exhibition, which was well attended by the citizens of Cergy-Pontoise. It was telling and disappointing that the faculty and administrators from Paris didn't bother to show up.

An important lesson I learned from the project was that it really doesn't take all that much to transform student thinking about art and to open up a world of possibilities to them. In this case, all it took was a change in locale and a sustained period of time for students to get to know the new place. A student from Paris told me she would never take

1 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 46.

the suburbs for granted again. She then added that she would also never think of Paris in the same way again. I didn't ask for her to elaborate, but I was pleased by what she said.

In 1997 I spent some time teaching art in Fort-de-France in Martinique. This Caribbean island isn't far from South America, and yet Martinique television aired only French stations and kiosk stands sold only French publications. The art education of the students at the Institut régional d'art visuel also reflected Martinique's *outré-mer* status as a department of France. I remember witnessing the incertitude of the students about addressing their lives in their art. They doubted the possibility that their situation could be valid content for their art. They also knew very little about contemporary art outside of France. They were familiar with Andy Warhol, but a discussion of Warhol would inevitably lead to Pierre Restany, Martial Raysse, and the *nouveaux réalistes*, not to pop art manifestations in the United States, Great Britain, and South America. The collation of the school's pedagogical program with Paris was reflected in the school's faculty. Almost all of the instructors were given isolation pay bonuses. And despite the paradise-like setting of Martinique, there was a palpable sense of humiliation on the part of the instructors for having to be there.

My students in Martinique weren't very familiar with Frantz Fanon and his writing about the psychological effects of colonialism and the internalization of racism. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself."<sup>1</sup> I felt that the students of the Institute didn't question enough the world that produced them. The problem wasn't that they were complacent, but that they hadn't been given the tools necessary to critique their own situation. As a result, they were unable to define themselves in relation to historical trauma in the context of the Caribbean. When I asked them where they had travelled to, they responded by saying they hadn't been anywhere except Guadeloupe, another island department of France to the north of Martinique. When I asked them where they'd like to travel, they responded, "Paris." Their unanimous response reminded me of a scene from the 1973 movie *Touki Bouki* in which the two protagonists incessantly sing the Josephine Baker song, "Paris, Paris, Paris." The film presents the dream of going to Paris as a self-searching journey and makes ironic the unfulfilled promises of the postcolonial condition. The students I worked with in Fort-de-France saw the world in similarly bracketed terms. Their school ran counter to my understanding of what

art should do, which is to raise the consciousness of one's place in the world and produce expressions at the borders of what can and can't be said in any given social and historical context.

In 2000 I accepted an invitation to teach contemporary Western art at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. The campus was founded in 1928 and modelled after the Bauhaus campus in Dessau, in both physical appearance and pedagogical direction. Many Chinese intellectuals saw the Bauhaus as a possible regenerative model for a China seeking redemption within modernity. In this way, the China Academy of Art exemplified the desire to reconcile a tradition-bound culture with Western modernism. But while I was there, students lived in dorms on campus that seemed bleak in comparison to what we're used to in the West. The hallways were dark and the rooms cold. The men's toilet was basically a communal trench in a concrete enclosure. There was only one computer for the entire school, and not a very powerful one at that. It was located in the director's office and was the only source of Internet access, via telephone dial-up.

While in Hangzhou, I witnessed the selection process for new students. Works consisting solely of calligraphic and ink-brush paintings were put on display in a large room. An elderly man with a long white beard entered the room. An entourage of school officials followed him. I was told that he was akin to a professor emeritus and was highly regarded as a master ink painter. He surveyed the room and then pointed his cane to works by those applicants he deemed of sufficient quality for acceptance into the academy. I found this process curious, based as it was on the reverence of a master, as this figure is a contentious one in Western discourses of contemporary art. I was told that a master becomes one not just because of talent and skill, but because of a lifelong commitment to being an artist.

The curriculum at the China Academy of Art emphasized traditional Chinese categories and standards of art. Students were not permitted to look at Western examples of art during school hours. However, after school hours there were no such restrictions. Students would pin up reproductions of works by artists ranging from Jackson Pollock and David Salle to Anthony Caro and Nam June Paik. I actually held a number of my classes after hours precisely because the environment then was less official and more open. What the students at the academy had learned to do was negotiate the restrictive and contradictory environment of the school. In contrast to the situation I experienced in Martinique, my students in China understood their position as political beings and were learning to imbue their art with a transgressive authority.

2 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macy (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.

In fact, I've been increasingly troubled by the attitude that many students have in art schools now. High tuition fees make art school a place of privilege that disfavors those who aren't as well off and a lot of students come from places of surfeit and privilege. This produces a kind of insularity that distances them from certain kinds of "other" knowledge. They seem more alert to the gamesmanship of art as never before, and they know how to produce works that achieve the appearance of completeness and finish. But something's missing. They have to be taught to recognize these limitations by questioning the assumptions that they hold.

To me, an art class should hold a dynamic exchange, and that's most likely to happen when there is a heterogeneous mix of students, a mix that allows the articulation of unexpected and different ways of knowing. In a 1976 lecture at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault spoke about the place of subaltern knowledges in the formation of disciplines. I've always found his definition of knowledges meaningful in terms of teaching: "When I say 'subjugated knowledges' I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systemizations. I am referring to blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship.... When I say 'subjugated knowledges' I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity."<sup>2</sup>

Foucault turned to the localized struggles of everyday life in order to challenge the autonomous production of knowledge. His contention was that these localized struggles produce life knowledges, and that these knowledges are very different from institutionally produced and validated knowledges. I think what's important to grasp here is that life knowledges don't lend themselves so easily to representation. This idea relates strongly to the practice of art in which the aim is not to transparently represent the real (because this is an impossibility) but rather to reframe the real in ways that ask us to imagine the world otherwise.

As a teacher, I've encountered many students who are at an impasse in terms of what to say in their art, even though they're inundated by contemporary examples of art aimed at providing a blueprint for creative and critical production. Often overlooked are the specific subject positions of the students themselves. These specificities are important, but they're in danger of being subjugated in favour of a more

homogeneous narrative that complies with the expectations of what contemporary art *should* look like. What I would argue is that students should be wary of the frictionless alignment of art school pedagogy and capitalist marketing strategies. This makes me think of Thomas Frank's book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, wherein he offers an astute reading of how countercultures have been co-opted by corporate marketing forces to promote specific products.<sup>3</sup> If you haven't read it, I think you'd find it revealing because the same phenomenon is definitely present in the contemporary art world, where the production, circulation, and exhibition of art are anchored to corporate bodies and promoted like any other commodity in a capitalist system. This is in spite of the persistent myth that art is somehow separate from the world of commodities, despite art's obvious commodity status. Students need to be taught to recognize these myths and to find ways to challenge them in their thinking and in the art that they make. We have to help them see the world in terms not solely defined by the art system.

Of course, there are counter-forces in the world that have opened up spaces for creative and critical expression not reliant on this system. Ironically enough, they're products of the same capitalist model. An example of this is YouTube, which functions as a site where people can be creative without any affiliation to any particular creative discourse such as contemporary art. YouTube's status as a corporate entity often collides with its functioning as an open repository for unfettered postings by any YouTube user because of potential violations of copyright. We have only to think of the outpouring of videos produced and posted on YouTube in homage to the actor Heath Ledger after his death. These came overwhelmingly not from artists, but from Ledger fans all over the world. Many of the contributions were deeply affecting precisely because they connected directly to the feelings of a community of mourners who knew nothing or had little regard for the rules of artistic discourse or form.

Despite my ambivalence toward the art world, I have to acknowledge that it has given me many experiences that I wouldn't have had otherwise, growing up as I did in a poor neighbourhood on the East Side of Vancouver. Whenever I teach, I'm always mindful of my roots. I made a sculptural installation out of rental furniture in 1982. The installation was exhibited in my studio. I was taken aback by people's responses. A lot of people laughed at the perceived tackiness of the furniture. Others thought my aim was to poke fun at bad taste. But this was not the case. I rented the best sofas I could, based on what I thought my mother would have liked. Today I can see how garish the selected furniture must have

3 Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

4 Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

looked. I recently recounted this story during a presentation I made at a well-known American art school. A noted art curator was in attendance. At the post-presentation dinner, I noticed the curator looking at me. I turned to him, and he said somewhat tentatively, “I don’t believe you.” “What do you mean?” I replied. He then said, “I don’t believe you when you say that you liked the look of the furniture you selected. It was clearly ugly.” His words shocked me. They were a prescient reminder that little has changed in thirty years. This individual refused to imagine how class inflects what is possible in terms of art production.

When I was six years old, my mother would wake me in the middle of the night. After breakfast we would walk to the edge of Chinatown, where a delivery truck would pick us up. It was filled with elderly Chinese seated on small wooden stools. They were holding onto a thick rope hooked to the wall in lieu of safety belts. My mother and I climbed aboard, and the doors were shut behind us. The interior was completely dark, except for a beam of light that streamed in through a slit at the top of the doors. This was the beginning of what would be an hour-and-a-half journey to the strawberry fields located beyond the Vancouver suburbs. The truck always stopped at the same gas station so that we could get out and stretch our legs. After this brief interlude our journey resumed, and we were eventually dropped off at the edge of the fields, ready to work for the next twelve hours. The sun was always low on the horizon. I accompanied my mother to these fields during the summer months to help support our family. I wasn’t the only child there, but I was the youngest. Perhaps this is why my elderly travelling companions treated me with such affection.

I’m telling you this not to solicit sympathy, but to open up a space to consider what such an experience might have entailed. My concern is with who has the power to articulate their experiences and under what terms those experiences are validated. Gayatri Spivak addresses a similar concern in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>4</sup> Her central point is that the subaltern cannot speak because the channels for being heard are absent. If the subaltern could speak—that is, speak in a way that really mattered to us—then he or she wouldn’t be subaltern. Spivak concludes by stating that the task is not to speak for the subaltern but to open up a space in which the subaltern can be heard. There isn’t a more appropriate place for this to happen than in art school.

I enrolled in my first art class thirty years ago. It comprised approximately fifteen students who were diverse in terms of their backgrounds, ages, and aspirations. Most didn’t know much about art and possessed only a vague notion of the art world. I was a science student who didn’t have any plans to be an artist. Our instructor began the



class by giving us an informal exam to assess our knowledge of art. Slides were projected and we were asked to identify the artist responsible for the work. Several seminal works from the canon of twentieth-century art were shown, and I was unable to identify any of them (including works by Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol). Although the instructor was incredulous at my lack of knowledge, I wasn't made to feel inferior. After all, my background was in the chemical sciences.

However, his incredulity revealed an all-too-common assumption about the accessibility and democracy of art, and it belied the fact that art is an insular enterprise subject to specificities of time and place. If this insularity is removed, then great things can happen for art and the art school environment.

I'd like to conclude this letter by reiterating a point that I made earlier: it really doesn't take much to make a dynamic art school. The first step is for students to theorize the environment in which their school is situated. This means that students in Kansas City or Mumbai can begin by thinking about their place in Kansas City or Mumbai and the complexities of their subject positions in relation to the rest of the world as they know it. If they're able to do this, then I think that they'll be able to define art in ways not necessarily dependent on the authority of the art capitals. This is not to say that students should disregard this authority and pretend that it doesn't exist. Rather, my point is that students need to challenge dominant ideologies by coming into dialogue with them. This is one of the art school's primary roles. But such a role can be achieved only if the instructor's knowledge about the art world is convincing to students. This is one of the reasons why I think that it's important to teach, even if I continue to have doubts about the art world at large. What students need to be taught is that art is about making everything in the world relevant.

Yours sincerely,

Ken



Jean-François Millet, *Des glaneuses* dit aussi *Les glaneuses*, 1857

# To Say or Not to Say

Twelve years ago I visited an exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris titled *Face à l'Histoire* (Confronting History). The exhibition brought together art objects and archival documents that dealt with French history between the years 1933 and 1996. Themes focused on the French experience of the Second World War and the German occupation of France. Other themes included the events of the Algerian War of Independence as well as the Indochina Wars. The archival documents were displayed in long glass vitrines located along the central corridor that connected large galleries on either side where art was displayed. The vitrines formed the spine of the exhibition, with photographs, street pamphlets, and posters anchoring history in an agonistic face-off against the historicity of art. The galleries contained major works by artists such as Salvador Dali and Gerhard Richter, and were historiographic in nature.

I experienced an epiphany while walking through the exhibition. It was not the sort of epiphany I recall experiencing when I first encountered a Jackson Pollock painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a young artist. It was 1981 and I had just abandoned my studies in science for art because I believed that the latter had a liberating potential for me that I had not found in science. Art could allow me to say things that I could not otherwise. These things related to feelings that were and continue to be very difficult to express in terms of language. Art seemed capable of expressing the deepest wounds of a person. A famous work by Bruce Nauman asserts that *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967).

My epiphany at the Pompidou had to do with the fact that the archival component of the exhibition was utterly packed with people. The attention being paid to the materials in vitrines was unrivalled by the attention paid to the art. Many people leaned over the glass surfaces in order to more closely examine photographs or read letters. Some of the older visitors appeared to be revisiting a place of trauma. It seemed to me that the archival material had the capacity to expose an underlying anguish that had never been fully reconciled. In sharp contrast, the galleries seemed staid and were relatively empty of people.

This experience at the Pompidou has stayed with me. It offered me a lesson in terms of the effectiveness of art in the face of the Real. It should be said that my reading of the exhibition was inflected to a large degree by a deep dissatisfaction that I felt toward art at that time. I was finding it increasingly difficult to believe in the endeavour of art. I had started to look to places largely ignored by the art world that I knew. More and more of my time would soon be spent working on projects in

1 Michael Burawoy, "Durable Domination: Gramsci Meets Bourdieu," lecture, University of Wisconsin: Madison, WI, 2008, 26.

2 Nina Power, "Intelligence Agency," *Frieze*, 1 September 2009.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* (London: Athlone, 1986), 208.

such places as Senegal and China in order to learn to see art differently. As a result of these projects, the borders of art began to widen again.

When I started out as an artist the category of art seemed borderless to me. Anything seemed possible as potential subject matter for art. But as I established a position in the art world, I began to see that there were many limits in terms of what defined art. These limits I have found are often socially and economically determined. They are fuelled by the myth that entry into the art world is somehow unencumbered by categories of race, gender, and class. These limits are not necessarily made explicit, but they are there. At some point, I found such limits intolerable because it was as if the art world had become a *plenum*, described by Gaston Bachelard as a space utterly contained.

I had been feeling for some time that much of art, and my life within it, had become cliché—perhaps not so much because of art itself but because of the ways in which art has become culturally dominated by the social structures in which it is incorporated, the habitus of the art system. Part of what the art system often does is to commodify categories of the intolerable behind the curtain of universality, thus expunging such categories of their discontinuity.

Increasingly, I was seeing a chasm between that which could be spoken about in art and that which can be actually *spoken as art*. According to Pierre Bourdieu, "the invisibility of domination is founded on the concordance of a social structure with a habitus inculcated by the same social structure."<sup>1</sup>

But a paradox is that as art increasingly follows the logic of capital, it becomes deterritorialized to itself. As Sylvère Lotringer stated in a recent interview:

The art market has expanded exponentially and has been losing its shape to achieve monstrous proportions. It is occupying all the space, wildly metastasizing in every possible direction. It is so bloated at the core that it does not seem able anymore to digest all the data. It is on its way to surpass its function.<sup>2</sup>

So perhaps the purpose of art is to concentrate on discontinuities in order to flag those lackeys of capitalism: clichés. Gilles Deleuze defined clichés as "floating images which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute our internal world so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés of what he thinks and feels, is thought and is felt, being himself a cliché among others in a world which surrounds him."<sup>3</sup> Deleuze claimed that, "physical, optical,

and auditory clichés and psychic clichés mutually feed on each other. In order for people to be able to bear themselves and the world, misery has to reach the inside of consciousness and the inside has to be like an outside.”<sup>4</sup>

“How,” Deleuze asked, “can one not believe in a powerful concerted organization, which has found a way to make clichés circulate, from outside to inside, from inside to outside?”<sup>5</sup> My own interest in the cliché has to do with how clichés mitigate reality by denying us the ability to examine life more deeply, particularly in terms of the category of the intolerable. There is no way for habituated perceptions to reach the intolerable through language given the compromising force of the cliché. What art must do is open itself up to the intolerable so as to render the cliché strange. To render strange is to overturn the habitual. Here I would like to consider the term “catastrophe” for a moment. The etymology of this term is from the Greek *katastrephein*, meaning “to overturn.” It was only later that “catastrophe” came to be associated with “sudden disaster.” This later association of “catastrophe” with “sudden disaster” took this term in a slightly different direction: from the concerted act of a body to an unexpected accident. So this later association shifts the meaning of this term from a political act to an act of nature, much as Barthes saw myth as that which turns history into nature.

“To overturn” suggests a desire to see that which was previously concealed. So in this way, the catastrophic implies a desire to experience otherwise. At the Pompidou, the central corridor functioned like an open wound of the Real in all of its gore. How does one reconcile a past that includes Nazi collaboration and unspeakable colonial acts? Perhaps it is not a matter of reconciliation. Perhaps it is more a matter of realization. So the question would then be:

How does one realize a past that includes Nazi collaboration and unspeakable colonial acts? To realize is to understand clearly, to bring into existence, and to make real the crimes that have been committed against those who have been so gravely Othered. To reconcile is to come to terms with, to agree that this is necessary, and to “sew up” the wound, so to speak.

One of greatest atrocities in modern times took place in the Belgian Congo—now the Democratic Republic of Congo—during the late nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century. Up to an estimated fifteen million Congolese were killed working as forced labourers in the colony’s many mines and rubber plantations. Working conditions were especially gruesome on the rubber plantations, as King Leopold II of Belgium decreed an accelerated harvesting of rubber following the

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.



“In the Rubber Coils,” a cartoon from *Punch*, shows King Leopold’s stranglehold on the Congo, 1906

6 From 1885 to 1908, the Congo Free State was the personal fiefdom of Leopold II of Belgium (1835–1909), who extracted great wealth in ivory, rubber, and minerals. Reports of human rights abuses and atrocities became an increasing source of embarrassment for the Belgian government, which reluctantly annexed the colony in 1908.

7 This phrase is usually attributed to Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), an accomplished poet whose literary achievements are vastly overshadowed by his career of five decades in the Department of Indian Affairs. As the department's deputy superintendent from 1913 to 1932, Scott oversaw the expansion of the residential school system.

8 Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in June 2008 and formally concluded in December 2015. It received testimony from over 6,500 individuals and issued a six-volume report, including ninety-four calls to action.

invention of the inflatable rubber tire. The bloodshed eventually incited protests around the world by those who wished to speak out against the atrocities.<sup>6</sup>

These protesters wanted the world to know the truth of what was going on in the Belgian Congo. In response to widening accusations of crimes against humanity, including from cultural figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, and Booker T. Washington, Leopold engineered the creation of numerous “philanthropic” public relations agencies. Money was spent building hospitals and schools in the Congo with the aim of reconciliation, of “showing” and “telling” the world that all was well in this part of Africa. Meanwhile blood continues to be shed in the names of “progress” and “profit.”

In recent years following the example of post-apartheid South Africa, there have been numerous states that have instituted their own “truth and reconciliation” commissions to address past atrocities committed by the state upon those deemed Other in that state. An example of this is the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formally established here in Canada by the Stephen Harper government two years ago. The aim of this commission was to discursively redress the deep wound inflicted by the residential school system on First Nations children and their families.

In 1894 the Department of Indian Affairs began to remove First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children from their homes and take them to residential schools. These schools were operated by churches of various denominations and funded by the federal government under the Indian Act. In 1920, it was mandatory for all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children between the ages of 7 and 15 to attend residential school. Priests, Indian agents, and police officers confiscated children from their families so as to “kill the Indian in the child.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1931 there were eighty residential schools operating in Canada. During the 1980s residential school students began disclosing forms of abuse at these schools. In 1996 the last federally run residential school closed near the town of Punnichy, Saskatchewan.

Harper had a public relations coup with the public apology that he delivered in Parliament ten days after the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission was introduced.<sup>8</sup> Like King Leopold of the Belgian Congo, Harper understood the power that could be gained by “reconciling” wrongs through cliché. The question that I have is: What has this apology actually wrought for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis survivors of the residential school system and their relationship to Canada?

The French artist Bracha L. Ettinger has stated that the place of art is for her the transport-station of trauma. If we consider that the term “trauma” originally signified a “physical wound,” then the relationship between the injured body and the memory that it carries is of the utmost importance to attend to in art.

Walking past one of the vitrines at the Pompidou, I noticed an opening in the crowd, which I immediately filled. I found myself looking at a photograph of a young French Resistance fighter running across a street with a rifle in his hands. The accompanying label indicated that this photograph was taken in the Marais: the same quartier as where I stood in the Centre Pompidou. At that moment I was made acutely aware of my own existence in relation to the material laid out in front of my eyes.

The gap between the spectrum of human experience and all the possible subject matter contained within this spectrum and the general constitution of art is startling. Art has become less and less important as it transforms into an industry. New information technologies have opened up spaces for creative and critical expression not reliant upon on the art system. An example of this is YouTube, which functions as a site where people can be creative without having to vet themselves as artists through the art system. Despite YouTube’s corporate ownership by Google and increasing problems with copyright infringement issues, it can function as a direct repository for all kinds of spontaneous, creative works that can be posted and accessed by just about anyone.

But sites such as YouTube are not immune to the politics of the art world. I attended a symposium in Chicago two years ago that dealt with the relationship between globalization and the emergence of new aesthetic forms. One of the presentations under the panel discussion “Challenging Cultural, Political, and Formal Boundaries,” included a YouTube clip featuring the Back Dorm Boys lip-synching the Backstreet Boys’ song “I Want It That Way.” The two performers are wearing Houston Rockets jerseys, the team of Chinese basketball star Yao Ming. Significantly, no mention was made of the fact that the Back Dorm Boys were art school students from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in China. Huang Yixin and Wei Wei have spoken about how their art-school education played an important role in determining the composition, visual effects, and lighting in their videos. Their YouTube posts garnered them international success and they were signed as spokespersons for Motorola mobile phones while still in school. A few months before they graduated, the Back Dorm Boys signed a five-year contract with the Beijing media company Taihe Rye to continue making lip-sync videos. In Chicago, the audience was completely enthralled by the video.

9 Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image* (London: Athlone, 1989), 166.

They assumed that it was a non-art expression of creativity. But when I pointed out that Huang and Wei were art school students making works of art, the initial excitement in the room dissipated. We live in a time when knowing something is art may actually detract from an appreciation of the affect of a work. Deleuze said, “the modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us.”<sup>9</sup>

I have just returned from the West Bank of Israel/Palestine to see the Riwaq Biennale. During the conference that was organized in conjunction with the exhibition, the following question was posed: How does one make art in an agonistic context where artists are caught between the oppression of occupation and the acculturating process of the normalization of occupation? This question is a difficult one to answer. But it can be extended to other contexts besides that of Palestine. So perhaps the question can be slightly reworded: How does one make art recognizing—not reconciling—the agonistic contexts that many live in at this very moment in time?

In 1986 I returned to New York for a solo exhibition. My grandmother was living in Brooklyn and so I visited her and told her about the show. Like my other relatives in New York, she worked in a sweatshop sewing garments together. Her experience of the city was almost exclusively restricted to her place of home and her place of work near Chinatown. She knew not a word of English.

Halfway through the gallery opening, I suddenly heard my grandmother’s voice over the din of chatter. She was loudly calling out my Cantonese name. I remember thinking: Is that my grandmother’s voice? Is she here? Moments later I saw her emerge from the crowd dressed in poor Cantonese attire. She was holding a gallery invitation card in her hand. It was this card that she had shown to strangers in order to find her way to the gallery. At first I was completely stunned, even mortified, for I felt completely exposed. My family. My class. My race. My private self as opposed to my public self. My non-artist self as opposed to my artist self. They had been made painfully visible to me and for all to see.

My grandmother had lived through so many difficulties. She had witnessed the murder of her younger sister at the hands of Japanese soldiers. She had left her homeland and lived in a tiny, cockroach infested, one-bedroom apartment with several family members in the Lower East Side of Manhattan before moving to better premises in Brooklyn many years later. I could go on but I will not. I think that I have said enough. What I will say is that the presence of my grandmother at that gallery opening revealed to me a deep disjuncture between art and the real. My grandmother did not know anything about the art world, or what



contemporary art could even be. And yet there she was. As we stood next to one another in that space, she asked repeatedly: Who are all these people? She wanted to know.

Foucault wrote that “one cannot speak of anything at any time; it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground.”<sup>10</sup> This should be the challenge put to art today.

10 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 44.

# Barthes in Beijing

I took this picture of the Roland Barthes boutique in Beijing in 2009. At the time, I was astounded by my discovery, which gripped me with hilarity. But I can now see that I should not have been so surprised. Over the years, I have taken many pictures that are akin in spirit. In Wuhan, China, there is an “Amega” watch store, the first “A” designed in sleight-of-hand fashion to resemble an “O.” Last year, several faux Apple stores shut down throughout China. I recall reading that several of the dismissed employees were convinced they were working in an actual Apple store! The devil is in the details, but apparently the details were well attended to for the most part. During one of my first visits to China, I recall walking by a vendor selling signature Burberry scarves. On one table were “Buberry” scarves—without the first “r.” On another table was a sample Burberry scarf of the same design that was not for sale. The vendor told me that all the Buberry scarves came from the same factory as the Burberry scarf and were in every way identical. The vendor added that he could sell me a Burberry if I wanted one but it would be a lot more expensive, and that it would not make sense to him since the Buberry was the same scarf (except, of course, for the Buberry, and not Burberry, tag). This reminded me of when I was on the famous slave disembarkation site of Gorée Island off the coast of Dakar, in Senegal. A vendor was selling paintings that he had done based on the configuration of slaves as they lay in the holds of ships. The paintings were done on thin cloth and quite meticulously rendered. The vendor wanted USD 1000 per painting. I mentioned that I thought they were scarves at first and not paintings. The vendor did not object and offered to sell me the same painting as a scarf for ten dollars. I asked him why the large discount in price, and he replied that a work of art is special and should always be worth more than a mere article of clothing. I have had other fashion-related encounters in Peru and India, each offering its own spin on the so-called developing world’s profound understanding of the fashion system (of which Barthes wrote, of course, a seminal book on fashion theory) and, by extension, the whole entangled world of signs and commodity exchange. I have no idea how it is that someone in China decided to name a clothing store after Roland Barthes. But it seems to me that someone in China (or India or elsewhere) understands in the deepest sense the nature of a *punctum* as not so much that which pierces the viewer but that which pierces the system.



Ken Lum, *Barthes in Beijing*, 2009

# Melly Shum Hates Her Job but Not the Witte de With

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Published in *20+ Years Witte de With*  
Witte de With Publishers, 2012

I had the honour of being the inaugural exhibitor at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art when it opened its doors in 1990. The exhibition was a survey of my furniture sculptures, language paintings, and photo-text works. One of the latter works included was *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1989). Represented is a dishevelled young woman sitting in her cramped office. Along with this photograph is text that echoes the title of the work. The vibrating “HATES” speaks to the frustration of Melly Shum, even though the voice of the text is ambiguous. Before the opening of the Witte de With, the work was only ever shown indoors alongside other artworks. When I was asked whether I would agree to remake one of my photo-text works in billboard form so that it could be displayed in a street context for Rotterdam, I immediately thought of Melly Shum.

After the work was taken down due to its weathered state, something extraordinary happened: the Witte de With staff received several telephone calls and a number of written messages protesting the disappearance of Melly Shum and demanding her reinstatement. Asked why it was important for Melly Shum to return to the corner at Witte de Withstraat and Boomgaardstraat, one caller reasoned that every city needs a monument to the problem of hating one’s job. Since then, Melly Shum has become much more than a marker for the people of Rotterdam: she exists as a dynamic symbol of the relationship between the Witte de With and the world at large. The ways in which people have interacted with *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* continue to surprise me. Flickr and Facebook pages have been created in honour of Melly Shum and her persona has even been adopted by a Tweeter who regularly tweets about hating his own job. While I may have created *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, the public has been activating the work far beyond my initial intentions. This is largely due to the Witte de With and its mandate to extend contemporary art beyond its walls.

In providing me with the opportunity to situate *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* in the public realm, the Witte de With accelerated a growing interest that I had in making public art. At that time, it was clear to me that the Witte de With understood the historical impasse that confronted art museums in 1990. This particular year marked an interregnum period comprised of several years bracketed by the demise of neo-expressionism, with its problematic correspondence to



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, Witte de With, 1990–present

1 This statement is from the mission statement posted on the Witte de With's website: [https://www.wdw.nl/en/about\\_us/](https://www.wdw.nl/en/about_us/) (accessed 1 August 2019).

conservative sentiments in art, and the emergence of a globalizing art world, with its acknowledgement of postcolonial theories and adoption of neo-conceptualist tactics. This impasse is one that the Witte de With continues to grapple with today. It is eschatological in nature and has much to do with the life-denying repressiveness of capitalism as expressed by an agnostic separation between the museum and the outside world. During the 1960s and '70s, conceptual artists insisted on the extension of art beyond hermetic museum control. They challenged the containment of art both ideologically and physically. Apparatuses of ideology were exposed and the status of the art object called into question. Somewhat ironically, the Witte de With absorbed these lessons from conceptualism that many artists working today have forgotten or chosen to ignore.

Since its inception, the Witte de With has consciously defined itself as a venue primarily concerned with extending aesthetic language into public space via its public programming and publishing projects. Its vitality is derived from the consistently transparent ways that it uses the tools of the museum for speaking truth to power. Housed in a former public school building, the pedagogical impulse in the Witte de With's activities is strong. Notable is the fact that the museum's appearance continues to resemble a school, thereby visually presenting itself as "an alternative to both the classic museum for modern art and existing artists' initiatives."<sup>1</sup> The question of who constitutes the public is constantly foregrounded because of the way that the Witte de With has maintained its ties to public education in such a visual way.

A tour of the Witte de With reveals a striking modesty. There are no freight elevators in spite of the fact that the primary exhibition rooms are located on the upper two floors of this four-story building. This indicates how the structure itself was never fully retrofitted. It is possible that a major renovation was not performed so as to maintain the public character of the building.

There is no museum café or restaurant, nor is there a bookstore offering t-shirts and other knickknacks bearing the Witte de With's logo. Its total staff number is small in comparison to other peer institutions. Moreover, there is a term limit of six years for a director to make his or her mark. Far from constraining what the Witte de With can do, the instituted modesty has cultivated an intellectual fleetness and creativity that translates into openness and innovation. A problem afflicting too many art museums today is the alignment of institutional authority with an air of exclusivity, the message being that art is largely for those possessing economic wealth or an academic education. Such an alignment represents a crisis of division between the wider public and a narrower

elite. It is much more than a matter of public accessibility. Trust must involve an audience, and a wider trust would involve a wider audience or public with implications for issues of polity.

The program of the Witte de With is ambitious, and its exhibitions can be difficult in the sense that “concessions are not made to content.”<sup>2</sup> Yet I have always trusted that its programming started with the following conceptualist dictum in mind: “It was the result of a greater aesthetic open-endedness that allowed art to intersect with an expanded range of social life.”<sup>3</sup> However, as Michael Brenson notes, openness and transparency have become catchwords for many museums in terms of their aims. The real measure, then, is how these terms are expressed psychologically within and beyond the experience of the exhibition sites. “How much,” Brenson asks, “does being open and transparent challenge power and how much does it reinforce it?”<sup>4</sup>

Following the decimation wrought by the Second World War, Rotterdam opted for a reconstruction that took into account an increasingly globalized world defined by the expressions and agonisms of a postcolonial condition. The city boldly decided to re-imagine itself according to new innovations in architectural and urban planning principles while also striving to achieve social objectives for regeneration. In 1990, the world was a very different place than it is today: apartheid in South Africa was still in effect; the Soviet Union was still in existence;<sup>5</sup> and analysts were only beginning to recognize China as an impending economic power in the world. By the mid-1990s, theories of globalization as constituting a new world order abounded. Hence, the Witte de With was founded within a context that foresaw the emergence of the world citizen as a result of a post-apartheid, post-Soviet, and post-Maoist set of conditions.

The Witte de With defined its mandate in terms of the development of contemporary art for a world underlined by the often-involuntary movements of peoples around the globe. Melly Shum herself moved from Vancouver to Rotterdam. Her presence on the side of the Witte de With serves as a salient reminder of the precarious relationship between the local and the global. Local identities can only be defined by breaching the dichotomy of the global and the local as two distinct terms. Conversely, the fraught phenomenon of globalization can be best understood through a consideration of local traditions and histories. In *The Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci claimed: “If it is true that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone’s language one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world.”<sup>6</sup> What Gramsci was arguing for was the empowerment of individuals to

2 Ibid.

3 Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, eds., *Art After Conceptual Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 14.

4 Michael Brenson, “The Curator’s Moment” (1998), in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 60.

5 Many of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union began the process of secession in the spring of 1990.

6 Antonio Gramsci, “Selections from *The Prison Notebooks* (1971),” in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 60.

7 Edward Said, "Dreams and Delusions," *Al-Abram Weekly*, no. 652 (21-27 August 2003).

8 See: "Foxconn suicides: 'Workers feel quite lonely,'" BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10182824>, (28 May 2010), (accessed 1 August 2010).

9 See "Companies brace for end of cheap made-in-China era," *Japan Today*, 12 July 2010, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/business/view/companies-brace-for-end-of-cheap-made-in-china-era> (accessed 2 August 2010) and "The end of cheap Chinese labour?," *The Economist*, 18 July 2010, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freexchange/2010/07/china> (accessed 2 August 2010).

develop a wider understanding of the world in its historic richness and complexity, particularly with respect to the bridging of differences from one community to another. In the context of an increasingly multicultural and multiracial Rotterdam, it seems to me that the Witte de With assumed, with great clarity and prescience, a role for contemporary art in facilitating just such a wider understanding, believing, as Edward Said did, that "there is a common field of human undertaking being created and recreated, and no amount of imperial bluster can ever conceal or negate that fact."<sup>7</sup>

Visiting Rotterdam earlier this year, I noticed many changes throughout the city, particularly in terms of its increasingly multicultural appearance. A Chinatown is emerging not far from the Central Station and the area of Zuidplein is arguably one of the most diverse neighbourhoods ethnically in all of Europe. The city, along with the Witte de With, continues to interpret and re-envision the subject of identity on multiple levels. While the city's aims may be to alleviate social tensions, I read the aims of the Witte de With differently. Its purpose is not so much to remedy social tensions as to provide an outlet for their expression through art in as surprising an aesthetic language as possible. In so doing, the museum seeks a role for art that is aligned to a more complete experience of the present moment.

## Epilogue

This summer the Witte de With presented a Chinese-language version of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* on the front of the Dutch Cultural Centre as part of Expo 2010 in Shanghai. Concurrent with the opening of the Expo was the revelation of numerous jobsite suicides at a factory owned by the Foxconn Technology Group in Guangdong Province. It is here where the world's Nokia phones and iPhones are produced. The headline of one news site stated that Foxconn workers "feel quite lonely."<sup>8</sup> Foxconn responded by raising the wages of its production-line workers in order to halt the spate of suicides and the ensuing publicity. This decision was met with some concern. Headlines such as "Companies brace for end of cheap made-in-China era" and "The end of cheap Chinese labour?" blared with foreboding and uneasiness.<sup>9</sup> In what way did Melly Shum's presence in China at this time tap into deeper global forces as embodied by the striking workers who were so unhappy with their jobs? Such a question could not be asked were it not for the perspicacity of a modest contemporary art centre in Rotterdam to extend itself into the world.



# Hope in Saint-Roch

Published in *Habiter*,  
curated by Giorgia Volpe and André Gilbert  
Quebec City: VU, 2010



Ken Lum, *Ayoye*, 2006

In 2006, I was invited to Quebec City to participate in *Habiter*, an exhibition that took as its theme the Saint-Roch neighbourhood of the city. This neighbourhood constitutes the working-class heart of the city and is markedly multi-ethnic relative to the rest of the city. Its history is fraught with poverty and gang violence. The largest church in the city, Saint-Roch Church, anchors the neighbourhood. It was constructed between 1914 and 1923 on the site of two previous churches.

I came to Quebec City as an outsider, having visited the city twice before as a tourist. These previous visits were spent in the older sections of the city. As I walked around Saint-Roch, I was struck by how different it was from the museum-like setting of Old Quebec with its many tourist haunts and high-end restaurants. Saint-Roch is a neighbourhood where its inhabitants live, work, and socialize. But I could see many signs of change gripping the neighbourhood. Designer fashion stores were opening up and buildings were being upgraded and converted into expensive lofts.

Notably, there was an earlier experiment in the 1970s to “reclaim” several blocks of Rue

Saint-Joseph, the main street of Saint-Roch, by encasing it in under a roof that connects it to the railway station. The “mall” extended as far as the side of the magnificent Saint-Roch Church. In 2000, two-thirds of the roof structure covering Rue Saint-Joseph was torn down. The result was the rehabilitation of open space on all sides of Saint-Roch Church. To me, the mall had clearly been a class-laced exercise in capitalist territorialization, a reclamation that had little to do with any redress of the social maladies that may have afflicted the area. The experiment failed because the malled section created an atmosphere that reduced the previous richness of activity on Rue Saint-Joseph to a singularity—that of a highly regulated shopping concourse.

Though lesser in scale than the phenomena of wholesale displacements of cities and nations, displacement through gentrification is another problem induced by disruptions of social networks. The social identity of local distinctions, such as the characteristics of a particular neighbourhood, is often predicated on the identification between

insiders and outsiders and not simply the local social networks that one participates in. A neighbourhood is also a social perception and, therefore, a subjective process of categorization and determination. Change occurring in a neighbourhood cannot be reduced to an Arcadian “good” and a present-day “bad.” Neighbourhoods are always changing and indeed need to accommodate to change in order to sustain their character. After all, the world never ceases to change in terms of global flows of bodies and capital.

Gentrification involves binary terms of upgrading and downgrading, settlement and unsettlement, in terms of the influx to a place by an upwardly mobile population and the outflow of the economically disadvantaged population. Gentrification is a complicated term involving more than the exchange or replacement of one population by another population. It can also be supplementary to that which makes a neighbourhood distinctive in terms of the routines and habits established within that space. But such supplementation must somehow be squared with the dehumanized and abstract values of commodity exchange by which gentrification is driven.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard urges architects to base their work on the experiences it will engender rather than on abstract rationales that may or may not affect viewers and users of architecture. He starts with the premise that the psyche is a place, and the house is an extension of that place. Both the house and the consciousness house memories. He uses the term *topoanalysis* as a way to theorize the topography of the self. Such an analysis will always lead to an understanding of place because the topography of the self is projected onto our physical environment:

To come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms: one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced. For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.<sup>1</sup>

Bachelard’s theory of topoanalysis and its application to the space of the home could be productive in considering actual neighbourhoods and those structures and habits constituting them.

As I think about what is taking place in the Saint-Roch district of Quebec City, I cannot help but think about what is happening from where I write this text. Vancouver is a place undergoing massive change on a citywide scale. The change is traumatic and involves great injury to many people. Rue Saint-Joseph recalls in me Hastings Street

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 9.

in Vancouver at the time of my childhood. There are many parallels between the Rue Saint-Joseph of today and the Hastings Street of the 1960s. Both streets were lively thoroughfares for the working and immigrant classes of their respective cities.

While Rue Saint-Joseph has undergone sensitive redevelopment as a result of enlightened civic policy, Hastings Street has become a hellish enclave for the poorest and most physically vulnerable of the city. Hastings Street is located in the heart of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver in walking proximity to Gastown, a tourist haunt. This is similar to Saint-Roch's proximity to Quebec City's tourist district.

Today, in spite of its problems, Hastings Street is considered Vancouver's next ingénue neighbourhood. As the 2010 Winter Olympics loom, the Downtown Eastside has become the site of ruthless redevelopment. The perceived problems afflicting the neighbourhood are in the process of being physically swept away, with mass arrests and evictions. But the problems of poverty and drug and alcohol addiction are only being dealt with cosmetically, in order to save the city's face when Olympics visitors begin to arrive.

The Downtown Eastside has been a source of much political anxiety over the last twenty years, as the City of Vancouver has become an increasingly sought-after tourist and residential destination. The Woodward's Building, a highly important historical structure built in 1903 and located in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, was mostly demolished in November 2006. The site is now a bastion of the developers. An empty lot exists where the building once stood. Building cranes and construction crews are working busily to construct a new face for the Downtown Eastside, one which makes no reference to the inhabitants that will be soon be displaced.

In Saint-Roch, social displacement has taken place but in a much different way. Historical buildings are not the exclusive fiefdoms of the developers to decide whether to allow them to remain standing or not. The problems addressed in Saint-Roch had more to do with questions about how change could be accommodated in the context of an established neighbourhood. Unlike in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the citizens of Saint-Roch are recognized and listened to. During my recent visit to Saint-Roch, I could see that the correct questions were being asked about gentrification. I could also see that they were in the process of being feasibly answered. This gave me much hope in terms of how cities today can negotiate the pressures of development with the history embedded in them both materially and psychically.

The *role of memory* in relation to the experience of space is crucial to consider in any discussion of urban change and gentrification. For it

is memory that has the ability to activate a space long after change has occurred. Memory has as much to do with the past as it does the future. As Bachelard claims in *Dialectic of Duration*:

What makes the social framework of memory is not just history lessons but far more the will to a social future. All social thought is pulled towards the future. All forms of the past must, if they are to give us truly social thoughts, be translated into the language of the human future.<sup>2</sup>

My experience of Saint-Roch is tied to my memories of Hastings Street. I can see the difference between what is in Saint-Roch and what failed to be in Hastings Street. That said, Saint-Roch could very quickly have turned into a failure, but the right decisions were made at the right time to stop problems from worsening. I think it is in the nature of neighbourhoods to evoke associations with other neighbourhoods. The associations are made across time and space, and across hope and despair. Such is the delicate constitution of neighbourhoods.

2 Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration*, trans. Mary McAllister Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 61.

2011-2018

A billboard advertisement for Alia Naffouj. The billboard is divided into several sections. On the left, it says "RINDY SARGENT" and "EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH" with a photo of a man. In the center, it says "ALIA NAFFOUJ" and "Hooked on Tennis" with a photo of a woman. On the right, there are several small photos. Below the main text, it says "MEDIA".

NEED A BILLBOARD?  
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CALL TODAY! - (514) 433-9060



# The City of Brotherly Love

I write from my new home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From where I sit, I can see the sweep of downtown from the Center City District all the way to the Old City. I can see I.M. Pei's Society Hill residential towers just past Washington Square, which were an early 1960s effort to rejuvenate a then-declining part of the historic heart of the city due to the massive loss of its industrial base and the exit of the solidly middle class to the suburbs. As recently as the late 1990s, vast areas of downtown Philadelphia were little more than fallow lots full of weeds. Since then, however, the city has been rapidly gentrifying with its population growing at a healthy clip, particularly among young urbanites (many of whom have been squeezed out of the New York real estate market), and the decommissioned Navy Yard now serving as the headquarters for several multinational corporations. In short, what I see is nothing less than the history of the city's social and economic disasters, and the political resolve (however fitfully executed) to address its problems.

My recent move to Philadelphia was prompted by the offer of a professorship earlier this year from the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania. At first, I was unsure about making such a drastic change in my life. But my wife thought that the interaction with students in the context of an Ivy League school would be something that I would enjoy. The move here was not without its stresses. For instance, I spent nearly three hours in the waiting room at the Philadelphia Electric and Gas Company (PECO) just trying to open a residential account because it was necessary to have my ID verified in the presence of a PECO representative. Many who sat in the room waiting with me were there to either prove their identity or dispute a bill. Many of them were very poor and did not necessarily possess forms of identification such as passports or driver's licenses. I was reminded of how contentious voter rights are in the United States with many of its jurisdictions making it difficult to vote because of such onerous ID requirements. After I left the PECO building, I discovered a shoeshine shop employing older black men with stooped backs, riven faces, and coarse hands. Photographs of famous Philadelphian athletes, past and present, covered the walls. The man who shined my shoes spoke a patois that betrayed his poverty. Everything he said issued out of a life of hard work. As he shined my shoes, I looked at him from my privileged height and thought about the history of America in all its glory and infamy.

The more time that I spend encountering people on the street, in playgrounds, and at the university, the more I am reminded of how much Philadelphia is an African-American city. There are numerous markers of the city's rich African-American history where I live on South Street, from the Engine 11 firehouse (the city's de facto headquarters for



African-American firemen during the segregation of the Philadelphia Fire Department that lasted from 1919 to 1952) and the “Mapping Courage” mural (memorializing the work of W.E.B. Du Bois) painted on the firehouse’s outside wall to the Waters Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church and Ms. Tootsie’s Soul Food Cafe. This is a history that I am eager to learn more about now that I am a resident here. The following day was Canada Day and I found myself standing in front of the George Washington memorial in Washington Square. The memorial is an elegant one, with a statue of Washington standing before an eternal flame burning on top of the grave of an unknown revolutionary soldier. The statue’s gaze is directed toward the nearby Independence Hall. A group of Americans were standing next to me. Their faces were solemn and their hands over their hearts. A couple of young children approached the memorial and were instructed by their parents to salute the sculpture. My thoughts turned to Canada for I could not imagine a Canadian equivalent. I wondered how my toddler son would be influenced by the patriotic impulse that is so fierce in the United States. He has recently become fascinated by the American flag and points excitedly whenever he spots one fluttering atop a skyscraper or hanging above a residential doorway. He has even started to utter the word “star” due to the prevalence of this symbol on the Star-Spangled Banner.

I was nineteen years old when I visited Philadelphia for the first time. I was a science student then and knew little about art. My trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art was due more to a sense of touristic obligation than a curiosity about art. At one point in the museum, I walked into a room that was empty save for a large wooden door, not realizing that it was part of Marcel Duchamp's celebrated *Étant donnés* (1946–1966). Two years later, I took my first class at Simon Fraser University. During a lecture, the instructor showed the class an installation view of *Étant donnés*. It was then that I learned the “secret” behind the keyhole of the wooden door. When I flew to Philadelphia last month to begin the moving process, one of the first things that I did was to revisit the Philadelphia Museum Art and peep through the keyhole of Duchamp's door. Upon doing so, I felt like a chapter of my life that had haunted me for many years had finally been closed. Now another chapter is set to open.

# From Analog to Digital

## A Consideration of Photographic Truth

Lecture at the Banff Centre for the Arts  
Banff, Alberta, 7 February 2012

1 Calhoun (1772–1850) held a number of elected and appointed political offices, including United States senator for South Carolina, secretary of war, secretary of state, and vice president of the United States. He was also a strong advocate for slavery in the American South, arguing on the floor of the Senate that it was a “positive good.”

I want to start by describing three images as a way to start thinking about the intersection of photography, facticity, and politics. What you will see is that they present us with a revelation in excess of what they depict. This is the case with any photograph. Meaning will always be in surplus. It is just the *noumena*, or the “thing itself.”

A famous photo portrait of Abraham Lincoln has his head placed upon the photo of another politician, John C. Calhoun.<sup>1</sup> The trickery is attributed to Thomas Hicks, although no one knows for certain—a portrait painter from that era who had painted Lincoln before and who was thought to have created this composite in the early to mid-1860s. Many historians believed that the photo was created after Lincoln’s assassination because there were hardly any heroic, presidential-looking portraits of Lincoln at that time. Calhoun’s image is a woodcut while the image of Lincoln is more detailed, because it was taken from Matthew Brady’s portrait of Lincoln, the same one later used for five-dollar bills. Lincoln’s head is actually flipped such that his famous facial mole appears on the wrong side of his face. In the Calhoun image, the papers on the table say “strict constitution,” “free trade,” and “the sovereignty of the states.” In the Brady image, these words have been changed to read, “constitution,” “union,” and “proclamation of freedom.” Despite the oddness of this

chimera, it continues to be widely cited as one of the most important Lincoln presidential images. What is revealed here is that a dignified, full-bodied image of Lincoln in presidential pose was needed when there was in fact an absence. When an image is needed, it does not matter the means. In this case it presents Lincoln in the manner everyone expects Lincoln to be presented. The image fulfills a collective desire. Or it reflects the power of the state to conjure a collective desire to be fulfilled.

A Pulitzer Prize–winning photo by John Filo, who at the time was a photojournalism student at Kent State University, shows Mary Ann Vecchio screaming as she kneels over the body of student Jeffrey Miller at Kent State, where National Guardsmen had fired into a crowd of demonstrators on 4 May 1970, killing four and wounding nine. The original photograph included a fencepost directly behind Vecchio’s head. This was how it first appeared in public but an anonymous editor would soon have the fencepost removed. It is this altered version that has been used almost exclusively since then by the media and it is this version which



John Filo, photo of Mary Ann Vecchio, Kent State (with and without fencepost)

continues to be widely circulated today. What is revealed here is the need for an iconic photograph of a traumatic event, one that required no distraction. There has not been, from what I can tell, any criticism or charge of manipulation in respect to the removal of the post. But what the removal of the post does is that it brings attention to the body on the ground, moving the photograph into the realm of the symbolic, rendering the photograph less fixed in terms of the specificities of place and time. The woman is no longer pinned down like a butterfly by a post.

A 2007 study published in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology* shows that people's memories of events can be altered by viewing doctored images.<sup>2</sup> For example, when presented with doctored images of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, participants recalled the event as larger and more violent. In other words, doctored photos of past public events can influence what people think they remember of the incident. One of the co-authors, E.F. Loftus, has expressed alarm at the spread of photo manipulation, calling it "a form of human engineering that could be applied to us against our knowledge and against our wishes." "It shows the power of anyone to tamper with people's recollection, and it gives the media another reason to regulate such doctoring, besides ethical reasons."<sup>3</sup>

It is not entirely certain the derivation of the phrase "spitting image." Some think the word "spitting" evolves from "splitting," referring to the splitting of wood such that one half is identical in pattern to the other half. Others believe "spitting" to have more literal origins, as in someone looking so much like someone other that he or she must have been spat out by the latter. This use of the phrase was in popular circulation by the late seventeenth century as evidenced by the example of Irish dramatist George Farquhar's use of it in *Love and a Bottle*, his comic play of 1689: "Poor child! He's as like his own dad as if he were spit out of his mouth."

Whatever the derivation, when the term "spitting image" is evoked, it is meant to convey verisimilitude. A hand-drawn portrait can be said to convey the spitting image of its subject, for instance, suggesting an alignment between a high level of manual command and the capturing of likeness. A photographic portrait, on the other hand, is never said to be the spitting image of its subject. It is simply assumed to *be* that subject. Hence, the power of the photograph is deferred in respect to the matter of truth to likeness. This deference is an acknowledgement of the indexicality of photography and its ability to reveal more to the eye than the eye can apprehend.

The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin referred to this ability as the "optical unconscious." He defined the optical unconscious

2 D.L. Sacchi, F. Agnoli, and E.F. Loftus, "Changing History: Doctored Photographs Affect Memory for Past Public Events," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 21 (2007): 1005–22.

3 Ibid.

4 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13 no. 1 (Spring 1972): 7.

5 Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, "An Interview with W.J.T. Mitchell," *Image & Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative* 15 (November 2006)

as the visual unconscious that is normally invisible to people's social consciousnesses but which can be rendered visible through photographic technique. He claimed that "it is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously."<sup>4</sup> Benjamin saw the photograph as being able to captivate us through its proximity to a *seemingly* objective truth. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind, as W.J.T. Mitchell has stated, that any picture is at least potentially a kind of vortex or "black hole" that can "suck in" the consciousness of a beholder, and at the same time (and for the same reason) "spew out" an infinite series of reflections.<sup>5</sup>

I would like to consider what is meant by the "power" of photography to "capture" reality in a way that satisfies the desire for the "truth." This "truth" is aligned with the discourses of power and knowledge in ways that often ignore the processes of manipulation or place undue emphasis upon speculating on authorial intention. This is evident if we consider the use of photography shortly after its invention to illustrate the calamitous effects of war.

One of the first wars to be documented by a camera was the Crimean War, which took place from 1853 to 1856. The British photographer Roger Fenton was sent to the Crimean Peninsula by Prince Albert in an attempt to alter public opposition to the war. Before he departed for the frontline he was told: "No dead bodies." The over three hundred wet plate negatives that he would go on to produce depicted highly posed soldiers in their camps as well as the barren plains upon which they pitched their tents. We see his documentation of the cannonball-strewn aftermath of the Valley of Death. The site was so named by British soldiers who came under constant shelling there.

Fenton made two exposures from the same tripod position. Some, including Susan Sontag, believed that Fenton moved the cannonballs from the side to the centre of the road. It would certainly make the picture more graphic with the dark balls strewn against the light surface of the road. Such an opinion would order the photograph with cannonballs entirely on the side of the road as the first exposure. But the fact is that it remains uncertain which exposure came first. Any forensic attempt to determine the correct order in which the two photographs were taken is hindered by the absence of original plates. In arguing similarly to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, in which the representations of things come to replace the things being represented or the representations become more important than the actual thing, the documentary filmmaker Errol Morris posed several questions about Fenton's prints:

The prints are distributed in public and private photography collections around the globe. There is something deeply unsettling about the thought that all the evidence might depend on a print. Why one print over another? Which print? If all the prints are different, where is reality? How can the real world be recovered from the simulacrum?<sup>6</sup>

6 Errol Morris, *Believing Is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (London: Penguin, 2011), 55.

7 *Ibid.*, 20.

Spurred by this uncertainty and critical of the demagogic certainty of some in terms of manipulative intent on the part of Fenton, Morris added:

Much of the problem comes from our collective need to endow photographs with intentions—even though there are no people in the frame, including Fenton himself, who is conspicuously absent. The minute we start to conjecture about Fenton’s reasons, his intent, we are walking on unhallowed ground. Can we read Fenton’s intentions off of a photographic plate?<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to Fenton’s documentation of the Crimean War, photographers during the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 did not shy away from depicting dead bodies.

In Timothy O’Sullivan’s “A Harvest of Death,” we are presented with the aftermath of a violent episode from the Battle of Gettysburg. Especially painful is the marked anonymity of the dead men: it is difficult to make out their faces. The scattering of their bodies across the visual field evokes even more bodies out of frame and thus out of view. Death, even if by war, is presented as horrific yet natural, akin to the agrarian laws of sowing and reaping. The photograph was taken in 1863 but not published until 1865 by Alexander Gardner in a book titled *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, along with ninety-nine other photographs. Only a small number of copies of this book was produced and sold for an exorbitant \$150 per copy. Notable is the title of the book: *sketch book* suggests something preliminary as well as a repository for both documentation based on observation and the play of artistic ideas. The cover presents the war like a picturesque theatre set complete with a curtain pulled back to reveal the title, hinting at the organizing principle within the book, which would guide viewers in their interpretation of the images. The book’s text serves as a thematic umbrella to the solitarily presented pictures, frequently to the point of deliberate misrepresentation. In his book *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940*, Miles Orvell points out that Gardner had good reason to misrepresent his images, given that he could only expose

8 Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 96.

9 Alexander Gardner, text for Plate 36 “A Harvest of Death, Battle-field of Gettysburg,” *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (New York: Dover Publications, [1865–66] 1959).

10 John Joseph McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.

a limited number of negatives on the battlefield; and yet Gardner had so many compelling stories to tell, so “he paired a plausible image with a convincingly written narrative, and the viewer could never tell the difference.” Orvell goes on: “[Gardner] played on his audience’s belief in the veracity of the medium while taking for himself a much more flexible view of photographic practice,” one in which “the manipulations of the photographer were permissible in the interest of achieving a rhetorically convincing effect.”<sup>8</sup> The text that Gardner wrote to accompany O’Sullivan’s photograph reads as follows:

Slowly, over the misty fields of Gettysburg—as all reluctant to expose their ghastly horrors to the light—came the sunless morn, after the retreat by [General Robert E.] Lee’s broken army. Through the shadowy vapours, it was, indeed, a “harvest of death” that was presented; hundreds and thousands of torn Union and rebel soldiers—although many of the former were already interred—strewed the now quiet fighting ground, soaked by the rain, which for two days had drenched the country with its fitful showers.<sup>9</sup>

While Gardner employed photographers such as O’Sullivan to produce images for his book, he also took photographs during the war himself. His photograph “The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter” (1863) features another dead soldier, even as O’Sullivan’s “Black Canyon, Colorado River, Looking Below, near Camp 7” (1871–73) features a landscape devoid of human bodies. In spite of the different contexts in which these photographs were made, formal affinities exist between them. From 1867 to 1869, O’Sullivan was official photographer on the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel. This meant that he was responsible for taking photographs that could be used to entice settlers to the “virgin land” between Cheyenne, Wyoming, and California. While his image of Black Canyon presents a landscape of pristine nature it was in fact a highly contested space. The land that settlers would eventually claim as their own was not virginal land at all but the land of Native Americans. Death as a necessary precondition for rebirth is the unspoken narrative that haunts “Black Canyon” and “Slaughter Pen, Foot of Round Top, Gettysburg” as well as the aforementioned “A Harvest of Death.”

According to Benjamin, photography and cinematography contributed to a crisis of representation by creating what he called a “shattering of tradition,”<sup>10</sup> which undermined the existing function of art. Similarly, digital simulation has heralded a world in which paper photography was displaced by a dematerialized image that can be manipulated by a viewer



interactively through software commands. This crisis of representation has all but annihilated any claims of correspondence between material reality and its cultural representation. Today, an imperative question is: In what ways are the means of producing an image integral to its understanding? Historically, the discourse that has circulated about photography has foregrounded its denotative capacity, even at the expense of connotation. Semiotically, the photographic signifier is often seen to be virtually identical with its signified: that is, what is depicted is seen as nearly equal to what was there before the camera's capture. This equivalence between an original and a depicted thing is itself a socially constructed narrative and one that frequently evokes the idea of human beings as autonomous fortunates or unfortunates in an existential totality. Such a narrative is so forceful that the photograph becomes regarded as a "natural" sign produced in nature without social or cultural intervention.

Just as the language of painting was widely available to viewers of photography at its advent, the language of photography today is widely available to digital media viewers and is shaping new approaches to what can be imagined. As such, the emergence of digital technology has done much to throw the claims of analog photography into question, claims that have to do with the waning status of the documentary photographer in the age of iPhone eyewitness pictures. And yet there continue to be debates that pit the two different forms against one another. What interests me is why such debates have occurred, how they continue to be activated even today, and how we might begin to speak about photography in more productive ways.

A general view that I want to touch upon is that digitally generated imagery is more disposed to manipulation than that produced by its analog counterpart, despite that digital imaging is used widely today to verify authenticity in everything from the presence of cancerous tumours in a body to anthropological artifacts. The perceived proximity of analog photographs to the floating signifiers of authenticity and truth is a perception full of irony and one rooted in the mis-recognition of the vividness of photography as a substitute for a clear, shared understanding of some "larger" reality. Many adherents of analog photography believe that a "true" photograph is one that presents an unadulterated "reality."

Consider the irony of photographing a landscape using both analog and digital technology. Now let us just say that the analog picture is in black-and-white and appears "minimally" altered while the digital picture is in colour and greatly enhanced so as to approximate how the scene was experienced at the time the picture was made. Which

11 Therese Thau Heyman, ed., “Selected Critical Excerpts,” in *Seeing Straight: The f/64 Revolution in Photography* (Oakland: Oakland Museum, 1992), 53.

of the two images would you say is “closer” to the aims of capturing the “reality”? Such a question must take into account the many paradoxes that haunt a term like “straight” photography. As we have already seen with the examples from the Crimean War and the American Civil War, a recording of “reality” is anything but “straightforward.” The term itself first came into use in the late nineteenth century by those opposed to pictorialism in photography, with its reliance on a painterly approach. By 1904, the critic Sadakichi Hartmann called on photographers to produce pictures that looked like photographs. By this he meant that photographers must reject excessive manipulation and instead concentrate on the basic properties inherent to the camera and the darkroom.

The principles touched on by Hartmann that objected to the manipulated “creation” of a photographic image would go on to be manifest in the categories of landscape photography, street photography, and photojournalism. Ansel Adams’s “Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley” (1944) is an image where signifiers of objectivity, clear delineation, and the “natural” run rampant.

With the formation of Group f/64 in the 1930s under Ansel Adams and its theory of landscape photography, the term “straight” was sometimes used interchangeably with the word “pure.” So-called “pure photography” was a modernist movement that restricted treatment of photographs to those techniques deemed wholly peculiar or specific to photography. Pure photography emphasized recursiveness by eschewing artistic conventions outside of the strictures of the camera. Deep focus technique that emphasized a sharply delineated and wide depth of field was also favoured, a technique that would extend to cinematography such as in *Citizen Kane* (1941). A section from Group f/64’s manifesto of 1932 that accompanied its inaugural museum exhibition at the De Young Museum in San Francisco reads as follows:

Group f/64 limits its members and invitational names to those workers who are striving to define photography as an art form by simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods. The Group will show no work at any time that does not conform to its standards of pure photography. Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technique, composition or idea, derivative of any other art form.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the category of street photography as emblemized by the American photographer Garry Winogrand in “American Legion

Convention, Dallas, Texas” (1964) implied the straightforward photographing of scenarios without complicated setups.

I would argue that a belief in straight photography and its purity is a belief in the power of the perspicacity of the photographer whereby the photograph and the author of the photograph are identified interchangeably. What I am suggesting is that the language of straight photography has often been a language of communion between an individual (overwhelmingly male) photographer and either unfettered nature (*à la* Adams) or a fettered streetscape (*à la* Winogrand) to which a photographer could extract not simply meaning but the “truth.”

As I tried to demonstrate with the photographs of early American Civil War and Crimean War photographers, the analog photograph is subject to manipulation as much as the digital photograph. Were we to closely examine the works of Adams and Winogrand we would soon find that both photographers were active manipulators of their images for the purpose of getting at the “truth” of whatever subject they were capturing (whether it be Yosemite or life in America). This is the eternal Yosemite. This is essential America. And yet there is a looming paradox present in all of their photographs. The paradox is that so much subjective decision making went into the final image (from framing to printing) and yet this final image is considered to be the most objective element of all.

When one breaks down photography’s stance of authority to understand how the medium has worked, what is revealed is an alignment with notions of eternity, fixity, and constancy. And often, the imbuing of authority in the photograph is based on claims of nature where history is constructed or represented as an unquestionable truth when, in fact, photography is contingent, a condition of all socially developed practices. Even vision itself is assumed to be “natural” when it is anything but. We learn to “see” in particular ways that are dependent upon our place and time in the world. An example of this is what we see as qualifying as “beautiful” or “horrific.”

In 2006, the news agency Reuters found itself in hot water over the publishing of “blatantly manipulated” photographs taken and then digitally altered by Lebanese photographer Adnan Hajj of the aerial bombardment of Beirut by an Israeli Defence Forces attack. The manipulation made the bombardment more photographically visual. An ideologically motivated right-wing blogger who exposed what he called a “fraud” wrote:

A Reuters photograph shows blatant evidence of manipulation.

Notice the repeating patterns in the smoke; this is almost certainly

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Ilan, "Introduction," *The International Journalism Industry: Cultural Production and the Making and Selling of News Pictures* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

caused by using the Photoshop "clone" tool to add more smoke to the image.<sup>12</sup>

There are several significant points to consider here. The first is that the scandal represented an unsettling of the authority of Reuters, a powerful and highly influential news agency. The second is that such a scandal is not an isolated event but relatively common. In recent years, distinguished publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's*, *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, to name a few news sources, have each been widely criticized when it was revealed that they published doctored photographs, often on their covers or front pages. Regarding the Reuters controversy, what is noteworthy is that the indignant blogger pairs the word "fraud" with the sentiment of outrage. Without condoning the actions of the photographer who submitted the doctored pictures, the deeper problem is the insistence on the possibility that a picture can be read as natural and innocent, uninflected by ideology and relying on an available and shared consensus about the nature of reality. As Teresa Ebert has argued: "Reading is a process through which a historically situated subject makes sense of the way her culture represents itself and produces pictures of [acceptable] reality."

Less than a year after the Hajj controversy, Reuters published an article titled "The Use of Photoshop" for its staff photographers and freelancers. Cropping, minor colour correction, subtle use of the burn tool, and adjustment of highlights and shadows were listed as *allowed* while additions or deletions to the image, airbrushing, selective area sharpening, excessive lightening and darkening or colour tone change, and the eraser tool were listed among the *not allowed*. What "The Use of Photoshop" reveals is an absurd desire to argue for the "truth" implicit in a photograph. This desire is absurd because Photoshop is a software tool used precisely to manipulate the photographic image.

In 1990, the first commercial digital camera was marketed. That same year, the United States National Press Photographers Association approved a code of ethics. Under the oxymoronic header of "Digital Manipulation Code of Ethics," the statement of principle reads as follows:

As journalists, we believe the guiding principle of our profession is accuracy; therefore, we believe it is wrong to alter the content of a photograph in any way that deceives the public.

As photojournalists, we have the responsibility to document society and to preserve its images as a matter of historical record. It is clear that the emerging electronic technologies provide new

challenges to the integrity of photographic images ... in light of this, we the National Press Photographers Association, reaffirm the basis of our ethics: Accurate representation is the benchmark of our profession. We believe photojournalistic guidelines for fair and accurate reporting should be the criteria for judging what may be done electronically to a photograph. Altering the editorial content ... is a breach of the ethical standards recognized by the NPPA.<sup>13</sup>

In 1999, John Long, the ethics co-chair and a past president of the NPPA, wrote:

One of the major problems we face as photojournalists is the fact that the public is losing faith in us. Our readers and viewers no longer believe everything they see. All images are called into question because the computer has proved that images are malleable, changeable, fluid.<sup>14</sup>

Three points are problematic with reference to Long's lament. First, he blames the computer for the public's loss of faith in photojournalists. Presumably, he is referring shorthand to the unofficial photojournalists and their computers who now maintain such presence on the Internet. His lament is undoubtedly connected to his own status as a member of the official media feeling vulnerable to the question of who gets to control representation in respect to the public. Second, photographs have always been malleable, changeable, and fluid. Third, there is something decidedly Orwellian in the revealing sentence that reads: "Our readers and viewers no longer believe everything they see." After all, is it not a positive thing that viewers of photographs (both analog and digital) no longer believe everything they see and are called upon to become actively engaged in questioning what they see?

I would argue that the entire meaning of photography is encapsulated in Long's complaint, which acknowledges the difficulties of deriving authentic meaning in an image-saturated and hyper-mediated world. I have tried to argue that photography is vexing precisely because it calls up so many questions about ontology, photographic intervention, about authorship and intentionality, about the verity and nature of photographic evidence—about the relationship between photographs and reality. As consumers of pictures, we have little choice but to work hard at reading photographs in the context of criticality and history. It is only when we start to ask such questions of photography that we are able to see photography for what it is and for what it is not.

13 National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) board of directors statement of principle adopted 1991. <https://nppa.org/page/5167>.

14 John Long, "Ethics in the Age of Digital Photography" September 1999, quoted in Julianne H. Newton, *Journalism Practice* 3, no. 2 (2009): 239.

# Canadian Identity Debates Are Broken. Let's Fix Them.

I have received two invitations to attend conferences in Canada dealing with the issue of “safeguarding” Canadian art and culture. One conference in Toronto had as its theme “What makes Canadian art Canadian?” while the other in Edmonton dealt with the question of “Who speaks for Canadian culture?” Both questions are vexing, not because possible answers are elusive (and they are) but because of the presuppositions inherent in the questions. Both perpetuate a logic premised on the binaries of inclusion-exclusion and qualified-unqualified. Such logic reduces complex but legitimate debates about identity and nationality to the essential and fixed. Also problematic is the way that such logic expects deference to those authorized to speak.

In his conclusion to the 1965 volume *Literary History of Canada*, Northrop Frye wrote about a Canadian imagination defined by a “garrison mentality.” He was referring specifically to a literature begotten out of a fear of nature embodied by the expansive emptiness of the arboreal ranges and permafrost plains of the Canadian landscape.

Of course, this landscape was never empty, but only deemed so in the service of those who sought to present Canada as an uninhabited terrain at the expense of a First Nations presence both past and present. To frame Canada as a landscape to be arrived at from afar is to deny those people who were always there. What gets justified in such a framework is precisely the garrison mentality that consists of fortification followed by venturing forth and staking claim to the land. Obviated by the narrative of identity-as-landscape is the pre-existing right of the First Nations to an indisputable claim to the land.

This narrative is complicated by the multiethnic and multiracial populations in Canada, whose stories become subsumed into an overarching tale of landscape. The dominance of landscape narratives evens out difference, so that human subjects become something akin to tiny topographical features like a tree, or a hilltop, or a rill, or a crag. The situation also becomes one of exclusion in terms of the disjunctive stories that cannot be contained without a universalizing landscape narrative that cloaks their disruptive voices. Here, landscape is used as a unifying device premised paradoxically enough on exclusion, not so much through racial or religious cohesion (although such factors are significant) but through sameness by relativization (in the form of multiculturalism).

Former governor general Adrienne Clarkson concluded her 1999 installation speech to the Canadian Senate by stating: “I pray that with God’s help, we, as Canadians, will trace with our own lives, what Stan Rogers called ‘one warm line through this land, so wild and savage.’” To equate a sense of national unity with the “wild” and “savage” land



Confederation Caravan, 1967

illustrates the persistence of the garrison mentality in Canada.

Clarkson made a number of trips to the Far North in her tenure as governor general. She professed a deep love for the region and its people and transmitted the message that it was there where the “soul” of the nation resides (in spite of the fact that the Far North is itself rife with an alienation wrought by the violent permeations of modernity).

As a Chinese Canadian, I am particularly interested in how Clarkson negotiated her remarkable biography, arriving in Canada as part of a refugee family from Hong Kong during the uneasy

interregnum of civil war in China. I identify with her life story as the son of parents who came to Canada with very little.

My formative experience of Canada was highly urban and racialized, circumscribed to Vancouver’s Chinatown and Strathcona neighbourhoods. Yet the formative impressions of Canada as taught to me in school were about anything but my immediate environment. The majestic mountains of the Rockies, the boundless prairie skies, and the Group of Seven landscapes of northern Ontario were far removed from my experiences as a boy growing up in Canada.

While employed as a young man by Via Rail, I encountered for the first time the “warm line through this land.” It was neither “wild” nor “savage.” While the landscape was often impressive, it was the people and the often mundane and sometimes sad conditions in which they lived that left a deeper impression. I saw modest makeshift grave markers for Chinese railway workers by the side of the railway tracks on the climb to Jasper. I saw the devastating conditions of reservation land in northern Manitoba. I saw children gathered together and waving to the Via crew as we arrived for a short stop in Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan.

What I saw, to borrow from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s 1982 film *Reassemblage*, was life looking at me. What I saw was at odds with the official images that confronted me in my mind.

I was not able to attend either conference in the end. I was not permitted to leave the United States due to the restrictions of my visa status at the time. To return to Canada would have jeopardized my right to continue to work at the University of Pennsylvania.



But the questions that the conferences posed have continued to occupy my thoughts here in Philadelphia. I think that asking what makes Canadian art “Canadian” or asking who should speak for Canadian culture is to recycle identity-as-landscape narrative with all of its binaries. They do not call upon Canadians to do the work of reimagining ourselves wherever we are.

Perhaps the following questions could have been asked instead: Why are these two questions being asked? Who’s doing the asking?

Such questions are productive in that they ask us to think about the motives behind the construction of categories such as “Canadian art” and “Canadian culture.” Such questions are also productive in that they shift the question of who speaks for Canadian art and culture to the question of who is and who is not being listened to.

# Looking Up

Lecture at M+ Matters  
ARTWORKDOCUMENTATION:  
Rethinking the Categories of Art and Documentation  
M+, West Kowloon, Hong Kong, November 2013

I would like to begin with a work by the Soviet-born artist Ilya Kabakov. At first it is jarring to see what appears to be a radio antenna in such a pastoral setting. But upon further inspection handwritten words can be made out between the aerials:

My Dear One! When you are lying in the grass, with your head thrown back, there is no one around you, and only the sound of the wind can be heard and you look up into the open sky—there, up above, is the blue sky and the clouds floating by, perhaps this is the very best thing that you have ever done or seen in your life.

The work provides a space for the viewer to simply lie down, look up, and wonder. It may be open-ended in its specific meaning. But it is very specific in terms of how it calls up our relationship to the earth, technology, community, and the question of freedom without leading to universal conclusions.

There is unprecedented interest in art today. Art academies, art museums, art biennials, and art markets continue to grow despite the precarious global economic picture. Contemporary art development in places such as China has been nothing less than phenomenal. Mirroring the rapid economic development in China, the newness of contemporary art offers one of the few vital outlets for truly critical and imaginative expression. So, too, in much of the rest of the world is contemporary art seen as a symbol of discursive freedom and a sign of a nation's openness to reinvention. How is it that art has reached such a point of importance today when there are so many contradictory and debilitating factors at play for art? After all, the freedom of art to be art seems increasingly compromised by its capture by commercial markets and national interests.

A useful pathway to take to understand the situation of contemporary art today is to look back at the avant-garde art movements of the 1960s and how they challenged a modernist understanding of art that privileged the ideas of individuality, subjectivity, autonomy, and



Ilya Kabakov, *Looking Up. Reading the Words ...*, permanent installation in Munster, 1997–present

universality. But before doing so, it is important to reiterate the point that modern art is a largely Western invention that grew out of a long history of visual art in Europe that was greatly influenced by cultures outside of Europe, such as China. These influences have always been greatly under-regarded or repressed within European visual art history. The decade of the 1960s at its bracketing by pop, minimal, and conceptual art was a tumultuous one with the transcendent nature of the art object and the sanctity of the exhibition space called into question. Today the term *autonomy* has been largely displaced by the term *contingency*. The negotiation of the present as well as the unpredictability of the future is at the heart of such a term.

Whereas modernist art required viewers to work at understanding the painted or sculpted surface before them so as to enter its depth, pop art destabilized the self-absorbed character of modernist art through its embrace of mass cultural imagery. Pop art framed the art object as a text within a semantic field of culture and deemphasized the artist's "hand." In Andy Warhol's *Woman Suicide* from 1963, the repeated screen-printed image of an apartment building façade appears as a much larger building with many women jumping to their deaths. The degradation of the image from the screenprinting process results in the rendering of the subject with a cruel indifference, calling into question the authority posed by authorship. Yet the viewer is compelled to think about other people and the many tragedies that surround us every day. The filmic quality of what appears to be stills in *Woman Suicide* places the falling subject in a state of physical and temporal suspension. In effect, she never dies and is always about to die. This lends to the work a kind of horror in that the viewer is also left in a state of suspension. This would never be the case with a modernist artwork where the viewer would be carried into a transcendent state far from the mundane.

Pop art was image- and graphics-oriented, while minimalism was fundamentally sculptural and architecturally oriented. Like pop art, strategies of seriality and repetition were incorporated, tailoring the minimalist work to the physical measurements of the exhibition space. Minimalist objects looked very much at home in the abstract starkness of the modern gallery space. Their forms mirrored the condition of spatial emptiness of non-referentiality.

*Untitled (L-Beams)* by Robert Morris (1965) is comprised of three L-shaped forms identical in every way but their placements in space. As the viewer moves about them, he or she has a different perceptual and experiential relationship to them. Their appearances vary according to the position of the viewing body and in relationship to one another. Only their L-shaped forms are emphasized as any clue relating to the

materials and processes used in making them is suppressed. Another key is the uniqueness of the viewer's experience of the work, as the arrangement of the L-units is never the same for each new installation. Important to highlight is that the viewer is interpolated to perform his or her viewership in time and space. Such ideas of embodiment and corporeality are highly important for the understanding of contemporary art today.

The artist-critic Dan Graham recognized the affinity of minimal art to the built modern landscape of the post-Second World War American city and suburbs. His *Homes for America* was an expose of suburban tract housing in the United States. His photographs premiered in the form of a slideshow in 1966. Like minimal art, this photograph of a row of houses highlights a relentless conformity. The featureless sky in the photograph looks like the gallery space and the houses all in a row look like a formation of minimalism. The permutational variation of the homes cannot hide the compressed sense of regularity and regimentation to daily life. Minimal art was, in many respects, a highly distilled representation of this realm of spatial and temporal limits.

Like Kabakov's *Looking Up, Reading the Words ...*, minimal art, despite its announced intentions, imparted something real about the everyday condition of life for so many. In doing so, a moment akin to lying in the grass and looking up arrives.

An early furniture work of mine is titled *Sculpture for Living Room/ Public Lounge* (1978). I was new to art at the time, arriving as I did from the world of science, and excited about the potential of art to question through an aesthetic lens the world that one knew. With this particular work I tried to tackle the subject of the negated social content of minimalism. I used pieces of modular furniture and arranged them in a configuration that followed the logic of minimalist display. Parallels were drawn between the relationship of a viewer with minimal art and that of a private citizen at home in his or her sofa. The parallels were not to be understood simply in formal terms but also psychological ones. The art historian and critic Michael Fried famously criticized minimalism's claims to pure form and pure engagement as nothing more than theatrical contrivances. With my furniture sculptures, I tried to place this theatricality into quotation marks, I tried to say something about the logic of private space construction and by extension the rules by which we organize our lives across the divide from public to private space.

Certainly more so today than during the time of minimalism, the demarcations between public and private realms have become blurred. The question of what is truly public space is difficult to answer. Another

important question to consider is whether public space can meaningfully exist within a social economy built on the ideals of privacy and property rights. As such, many contemporary artists have deployed strategies of publicly activating spaces through performances or installations that are often residual in appearance and temporal in nature. Here one can think of the work of Gabriel Orozco and his improvised interventions as he walked through Mexico City. Or the melting snowballs of David Hammons. The deepening division between wealthy and poor has also exacerbated the non-identity of one human to another, such that the problem of alienation that was a central concern of much 1960s art is more naturalized. Social media is very important today in bridging human separateness by channeling users to one another through private online sites such as Facebook. But contact made through these sites is highly disembodied.

Whereas pop art and minimalism expressed a harsh coolness that was either ironic or ambivalent to the question of genuine engagement with the social and political realms, conceptual art provided the most useful lessons for contemporary artists in respect to a template language for artistic thinking and procedures, as it radically democratized art in terms of its possible practitioners by emphasizing concept over making. A binary that preoccupied conceptual art was that of the difference between art and non-art. Another binary concerned the distinction between art in the art world and art in the world. Conceptual art referenced administrative and informational systems (including systems of presentation that are salient to the world of non-art goods-and-services exchange). It provided a critique in the negative of the containment of art by the art system (including the art market). And it employed strategies that called attention to this containment by emphasizing the formal disappearance or dematerialization of the work of art. To wit, this work by Robert Barry, titled *Some places to which we can come, and for a while, "be free to think about what we are going to do."* (Marcuse), very much echoes in spirit Kabakov's work *Looking Up, Reading the Words...* Or consider Barry's *All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:36 pm; June 15, 1969*, in which the state of a brief moment of unthinking or not thinking is highlighted. The demand for decentred definitions of art extended to newly emerged art practices in the form of performance, video, and site-specific art, prescient of the global contemporaneity that is a condition of all art today.

I entered into art at the tail end of conceptual art. As a Canadian artist of Chinese heritage, I felt receptive to an art world that may not have been so welcoming to me only a few years earlier. It was a period in art of productive confusion. It seemed each day that art was extending into

new categories of practice at the same instant that normative metrics for art were constantly being challenged. There was a strong sense that a certain idea of art, or a certain world of art, had reached an end point.

A key problem preoccupying contemporary artists today is how to negotiate through art the many different identities that comprise the world without relying on universal truths. Given the different histories and cultural values that have engendered different artistic responses according to different experiences of geography, history, and identity, can there even be a comprehensive strategy for defining what contemporary art is? The particular terms and conditions of contemporaneity may differ from one locale to another but all the points converge in terms of a shared sense of limits (we share the same planet) and temporality within which certain urgencies appear to which art is well suited to respond. Contemporary art may be elusive to define but it is precisely this quality of elusiveness that allows art to express politics through aesthetics. The social critic Irit Rogoff has employed the term “urgencies” to refer to those things that issue out of the human conditions produced by a globalized contemporaneity that need to be addressed. Often such urgencies are difficult to articulate as they encompass the terrain of desire and repressed feelings, a terrain contemporary art is well suited to negotiate. The urgencies of representing difference, of opening up public space, of initiating dialogue, and of advancing notions of democracy for everyone are responded to by contemporary artists through a heterogeneity of production that is often independent of formal unity. I began this presentation with a discussion of a work that illustrates some key features that define contemporary art today. *Looking Up, Reading the Words* calls up our relationship to the earth, technology, community, and the question of freedom, but does so while also maintaining a space for pause, difference, and wonder.

# Ian Wilson

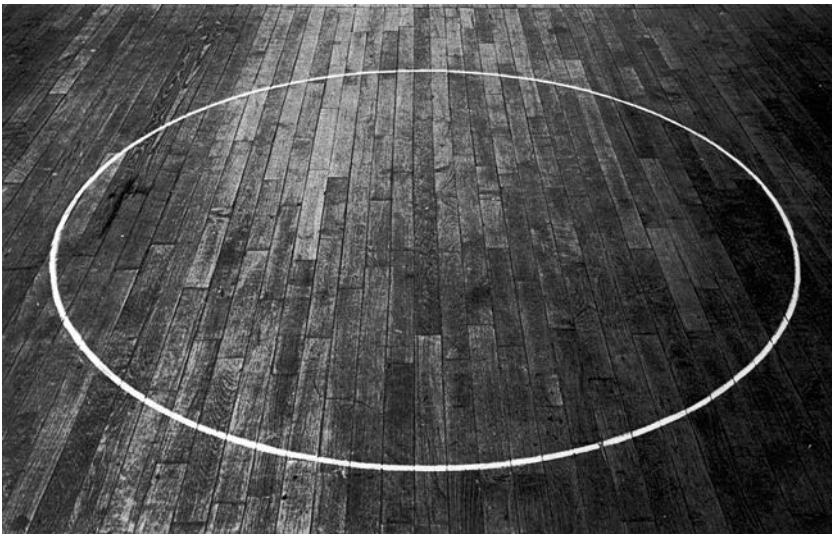
## From *Chalk Circle* to Full Circle



When the Dia Art Foundation invited me to speak about one of the artists in their collection, I chose Ian Wilson for the most personal of reasons. I would like to take you back to 1983. I was running a little storefront gallery in the industrial sector of Vancouver, Canada. One of the first exhibitions that I did was to co-organize an exhibition with the artist Ian Wallace that included Wilson's *Chalk Circle on the Floor* (1968) along with works by Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, On Kawara, and Lawrence Weiner. I remember feeling a sense of exhilaration over an exhibition of such celebrated artists in what was basically my living room at the time.

The works for Wilson, Buren, and Weiner were realized by following instruction cards. The instructions for *Chalk Circle on the Floor* were as follows:

Attach a white china chalk pencil to one end of a 3-foot-long thin wire (the actual chalk center of the pencil would be  $\frac{3}{8}$  of an inch before sharpening). At the other end of the wire attach a nail. After hammering the nail into the floor, draw the circle around the nail, keeping the wire taut. Using the enclosed photo of the density of the white chalk, gradually build up the line until it is  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick. When the circle is drawn, remove the nail from the floor. From time to time using the above described method, redraw any portions of the circle that have been smudged, keeping the circle as clean and as well defined as possible.<sup>1</sup>



Ian Wilson, *Chalk Circle #7*. Installation view, Bykert Gallery, New York, 1968

1 Guillaume Mansart, "Ian Wilson: Chalk Circle on the Floor," *Frac Lorraine Collection*, <http://collection.fracloiraine.org/collection/print/764?lang=en> (accessed 25 September 2019).

2 Edward Allington. "About Time," *Frieze* 92 (Jun–Aug 2005): web.

*Chalk Circle on the Floor* inspired me to think about the relationship between art and democracy. The work existed as an infinite edition. This meant that it could be acquired by any number of individuals or institutions. The work also challenged (without disaffirming) a view of art that I had always held regarding the integral place of drawing in the production of art.

I had always loved to draw. But coming as I did from a poor and fractious Cantonese family, a career in art was never an option, even if there were many times that I felt art, at least in terms of drawing, was my calling. My mother spoke not a word of English and the world beyond Vancouver's Chinatown was, at least in my earliest years, like the proverbial edge of a flat world where ships risk falling off into the abyss.

What was drilled into me as a boy was that I should pursue a profession that guaranteed a good and steady salary. So in university, I studied an area of chemistry and soon found myself working in a laboratory dedicated to pesticide research. I spent a lot of time in a white lab coat with pocket calculator attached to my belt and Dimilin baseball cap on my head. Dimilin is the trade name for diflubenzuron, a benzoylurea-type insecticide of the benzamide class, a derivative of benzoic acid, which is used in forest management to control insect pests by inhibiting the production of chitin, which is the main component used by arthropods, including insects, to build their exoskeletons. It is also, by the way, one of the metabolites of diflubenzuron, 4-chloraniline, which has been classified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency as a probable human carcinogen.

One day in the laboratory where I worked I had a day of reckoning. My superior, Dr. Bob Costello, put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Ken, you keep working the way you are, and one day this lab will be yours." I scanned the room about me and all I could see were other white-coated co-workers, many also wearing Dimilin caps. Within a week, I quit science and entered into art at the very tail end of conceptualism.

Wilson's work is difficult to research because there is so little in the way of proper labelling and documentation. Art relies heavily on its ability to be documented. Art generally has a form, even if it is an aesthetic presence mentally conceived. But Wilson's work, as Edward Allington has written, seems "to be directed at establishing something even less tangible than this."<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to make art over a long career that is so resistant to the artistic and even historical archive? Wilson stopped making object-based art in 1968 and devoted himself entirely to conversation as

an art form. Two years later, he gave a telling statement about why he chose language as his art:

I present oral communication as an object ... all art is information and communication. I've chosen to speak rather than sculpt. I've freed art from a specific place. It's now possible for everyone. I'm diametrically opposed to the precious object. My art is not visual, but visualized.<sup>3</sup>

I wrote to Wilson to ask him whether he missed making object-based art and time spent in the studio. I asked him this because it seemed to me there was a gentle and quietly elegiac quality to his early, object-based art that shone through even in the sparse amount of visual documentation I was able to secure from Dia on his work.

He replied:

No, I don't miss making objects at all. I like the space I live in to be empty. But there are plenty of decisions involved in arranging discussions that have a structure that encourages participation: the subject (of the discussions), the number of people, etc. There are so many different types of discussions that require different approaches. The art system is the same as it was when I started. We were more critical of the establishment then.<sup>4</sup>

"I like the space I live in to be empty." This line struck me. I live a rather quiet life with my wife and son. We do not have a television. We are not on social media. Nor do we subscribe to Netflix. We play with our little boy a lot. We read to him before he goes to sleep at night. And when there is time, I spend it working on my art. We do not believe in accumulating things and we have made it a habit to relinquish items to our neighbourhood thrift store on a regular basis. But the space we live in is not empty. It is full.

*Untitled (disc)*, from 1966, was one of a series of untitled discs that Wilson made using wood and plaster. It represents a final stage before his abandonment of materially constructed objects. *Untitled (disc)* is a circular object, lightly convex, which, once installed on the wall, takes on many associations: a navel on which the viewer casts his or her gaze or an outgrowth of the wall itself. There is tension between what is inward and what is outward, what is whole and what is empty.

At the time of *Untitled (disc)*, Wilson was known primarily as a monochrome painter interested in the metaphorical content of non-objective

3 Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, "Ian Wilson: 'section 22,'" *Art Minimal & Conceptual*, <http://www.conceptual-art.net/iw.html> (accessed 25 September 2019).

4 Ian Wilson, letter to Ken Lum, 28 October 2013. Personal collection of Ken Lum.

painting, to which adjoining aesthetic value to language was also a concern. In 1966, he exhibited *Red Square*, a monochrome painting measuring approximately twenty inches square and realized on a thin sheet of fibreglass with inward curving edges that minimize the effect of shadows on the wall. The reduction of chromatic elements was important to Wilson's ultimate move to abandon all object form.

Much more intriguing is the explicit reference to Kazimir Malevich's celebrated work from 1913 of the same title. To pay homage to Malevich causes me to speculate on Wilson's political idealism for art and society, which may be a current that persists through the *Discussions* that he has been conducting since 1972. *Red Square* also exposes a repressed linkage between two avant-garde periods: 1920s Russia and 1960s America. The linkage calls up the inhibited role that politics plays in avant-garde American art of the 1960s and has played since.

Wilson's allusion to Malevich also calls to mind an important work of the minimalist artist Dan Flavin. In 1964, Flavin began a series titled "*monuments*" for V. Tatlin, an homage in fluorescent tubes to post-revolutionary Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920).

Evoking constructivism through Tatlin and suprematism through Malevich raises two important points. Both movements rejected the idea of autonomous art in favour of the idea that art could serve as an instrument for social purpose. Wilson identified with Malevich's goal of advancing art to its zero-degree point, the division between art and non-art. According to suprematist artist El Lissitzky, what is created at this point of division is "the ultimate illusion of irrational space, with its infinite extensibility into the background and foreground." At this point, it is interesting to think about the way in which one experiences *Untitled (disc)* as an object that extends into the background and foreground of the exhibition space.

For Malevich, when art reaches the precipice of non-art, it is the "supremacy of pure feeling or perception" that is achieved and consciously experienced. The language of suprematism pervades the title of a number of Wilson's *Discussion* topics, such as "The Pure Awareness of the Absolute," which was held here at the Dia Art Foundation last month and in which I participated.

More complex to answer in the work of Wilson is the instrumental half of suprematism, that of art as a tool for social change. Arriving in New York as a young man from South Africa in the early 1960s, Wilson's artistic career has to be considered in light of the time he spent growing up in a country led by a monstrous apartheid regime. His earliest memories, his earliest friendships, were formed in a place where questions of political freedom and human dignity continue to haunt today.

Wilson's artistic career also has to be considered in light of the emergence of modern interpersonal communications theory (which, by the way, enabled anti-apartheid movements to publicize to the world what was taking place in South Africa). According to communications historians Robert L. Heath and Jennings Bryant, the 1960s saw scholars adopting "communication as the central term because they wanted to study it as a significant and unique aspect of human behavior."<sup>5</sup> Claude Shannon, often referred to as the father of communications theory, was a mathematician, electrical engineer, and cryptographer following the Second World War that astutely theorized the transition of telecommunications from analog to digital transmission systems. According to Cornell art historian Maria Fernandez, Shannon "understood communication exclusively as the replication in the receiver of the data pattern entered by the sender. From this perspective, the semantic content as well as the receiver's interpretation of the message were irrelevant to communication." That is, in communications theory, what is paramount in importance are the pathways of communications.

Now allow me to read to you a part of a 2002 interview between Ian Wilson and Dutch novelist Oscar van den Boogaard in which Wilson is asked whether he could speak about some of the content of a particular *Discussion*. In the interview, he iterates a view identical to Shannon:

Boogaard: I've forgotten what I asked you in Basel. Do you remember it?

Wilson: Yes, literally even, but I don't want to talk about that, that would mean that we end up in the *Discussion*, and I only want to talk about the *Discussion*, about the technique, and not about the content. We need to make a distinction between the ideas of this interview and the ideas that take shape in a *Discussion*, because it is my experience that when the ideas are published it is always a disappointment, but when the ideas are formulated in the *Discussion* they are good. The actual content of the *Discussions* has to remain in the context of the *Discussions* themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Shannon's concept of pure communication was of great interest to many artists working in the 1960s and '70s, including Wilson as indicated by his assertion that "all art is information and communication."<sup>7</sup>

An ascending view among artists of the 1960s and early 1970s, such as Robert Barry, James Lee Byars, Joseph Kosuth, Lygia Clark, Douglas Huebler, Valie Export, and others, was that the object form of art reduced the effectiveness of art due to the mediation of art by the object form. Even more problematic is the mediation of art by the object form's

5 Robert L. Heath and Jennings Bryant, *Human Communication Theory and Research: Concepts, Contexts, and Challenges* (Hillsdale: Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 59.

6 Oscar van den Boogaard, "Interview [sic] Ian Wilson," Jan Mot Gallery, <http://www.janmot.com/text.php?id=22> (accessed 25 September 2019).

7 Daniel Marzona, *Conceptual Art* (Taschen, 2006), 92.

8 Anne D. Birdwhistell, *Transition to Neo-Confucianism: Shao Yung on Knowledge and Symbols of Reality* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1989), 111.

secondary status as commodity. For artists like Clark and Export, the silencing of women in a patriarchal society meant the prohibition of the woman's body to communicate. Their work was often premised on speech through the active participation of the viewer, also employing performance as an act of recovery of their bodies from male mediation. *Body Tape* (1970) is a striking work by Export. With the accompaniment of intertitles, the artist explores the discourse of her body as a synecdoche for all women's bodies via a series of sign-action transmissions.

James Lee Byars turned not only to his body through performance but the new communications medium of community access television. On 28 November 1968, he broadcast on live television *The World Question Center* as an expression of the empowerment of the questioner rather than those who provide answers. He asserted, by way of a question: "I can answer the question, but am I bright enough to ask it?" It is the interrogative that is important. Byars's question implies a second important question, one regarding not who gets to speak but who is not being listened to.

The idea of an authentic sublation of autonomous art integrated into the praxis of life was one of the key concerns of artists of the conceptual art era. Given such concerns, representation posed an especially egregious problem since representation is, by definition, an act of mediation. For many artists, the turn to the body meant a turn to the site whence creativity and consciousness issues. Such a turn in art had its parallel within a developing countercultural society, which included the exploration of the mind through drugs and the adoption of Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. I say this as the son of a Buddhist mother.

Wilson turned to the body, too. The bodies that participate in his *Discussions* are ones that think, listen, and speak. To dispense with material objects as the body gains self-understanding through the proximity with others in the search for an absolute awareness evokes for me a saying of the eleventh-century Chinese philosopher Shao Yong: "Forms can be split, but spirit cannot be split."<sup>8</sup>

In 1976, Wilson visited the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, then directed by Rudi Fuchs. From that point on, Wilson organized *Discussions* on a regular basis there until 1986. After 1986, *Discussions* were much more sporadically conducted although they continue to the present.

In the 1980s, Wilson experimented with the printed word and produced some series of books in which a single abstract word or short phrase, such as "unknowable," "absolute knowledge," or "perfect," is repeated on every page. The repetition of the word or phrase takes on the effect of a mantra, which in Indian philosophies is a verbal sound considered capable of "creating spiritual transformation." The sounds

are meant to engage the minds of both the one who chants as well as the one who listens.

Wilson has also produced a number of artist books, each simply titled *Section* followed by a number. The word “section” reminds me of how nations organize their constitutions according to “acts” and “sections.” During the apartheid government, Section 10 of the Natives Laws Amendment Act of 1952 outlined how all black South Africans had to be granted permission to reside in prescribed urban areas. Residency had to be permitted. It was not a right. And this residency was for the purpose of providing labour in industrial sectors of the society. Those who had received permission were referred to as “Section Tenners.” This permission was never permanent. It could be taken away at any time.

Linguistically, a section also always implies a pre-existing whole. A section can only be derived from a whole. Chapters have a different connotation in that they are like building blocks toward a whole. After all, a chapter can be incomplete while a section is always complete to the extent that it is a section. As such, naming his artist’s books *Section* followed by a number is homologically related to Buddhist or Hindu sutras, collections of canonical texts that were then assembled into a book of teachings.

Here is an excerpt from Wilson’s *Section 36* (1984), which plays on the binary of knowns and unknowns:

That which is unknown is not known. Not known, that which is unknown is not unknown. It is not known and not unknown. Not unknown, that which is unknown is not known and unknown. Not known and not unknown, that which is unknown is not known and unknown. That it is not known is not unknown, is unknown. That it is, is known. Not known and not unknown, the unknown is known. That it is not known and not unknown is known. That it is not known and not unknown is what is known. It is that which is not known and not unknown which is known of the unknown.

Veering close to tautological language, “that which is known and unknown is what is known” echoes the dilatational language of Eastern philosophies such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which sees conscious awareness leading to an understanding of an Absolute, which in turn leads to action as the core of what it means to be human. In Buddhism, those who know only the perceptible or knowable things without knowing the imperceptible or unknowable are deemed unenlightened by Buddha. Thus, “that which is known and unknown is what is known” are the words of a self-inquiring Ian Wilson on the path to enlightenment.

9 Shri Datta Swami, “There is no possibility of knowing the unknowable nature...,” Speaking Tree, <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/there-is-no-possibility-of-knowing-the-unknowable-nature-215325> (accessed 25 September 2019).

10 “DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers,” United States Department of Defense, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636> (accessed 1 August 2019).

Now compare Wilson’s text from *Section 36* with the following text from *Parabrahma Upanishad* as explained by Shri Datta Swami:

When the unimaginable nature of God is experienced through imaginable medium, it means that you have attained the knowledge of unimaginable nature of God. This does not mean that the unimaginable nature of God becomes imaginable. Knowledge of unimaginable nature means that the existence of unimaginable nature is detected or known. Without the knowledge there cannot be experience. The experience of unimaginable nature means only the knowledge of the existence of the unimaginable nature of God and in this point there is no possibility of the unimaginable nature becoming imaginable. Through the knowledge of the existence of the unimaginable nature of God, you have concluded the existence of unimaginable God in a specific medium. Here either in the stage of detection or in the stage of the result of detection, there is no possibility of knowing the unknowable nature of God. You can only know the existence of the unknowable God and this does not mean that you can know the unknowable nature of God.<sup>9</sup>

The language is akin. Opening oneself up to what is known and unknown evokes also the famous aphorism of Taoist philosopher Shen Dao that one should “abandon knowledge, discard self,” which is a call for humans to live life as it comes to you and not one prescribed by theory.

Let me turn to a quote by former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a Department of Defense news briefing in 2002 on the subject of missing evidence linking the government of Iraq to the supply of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups:

Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson’s words are not analogous to Rumsfeld’s, but they are structurally homologous, like an evil twin. Wilson is interested in knowing the Absolute through the opening-up of the Self to the infinitude that is life, while Rumsfeld was making the case for a frightening totality.



When I participated in Wilson's most recent *Discussion* here at Dia last month, titled "The Pure Awareness of the Absolute," I arrived about ten minutes early to find a group of people sitting in a circle that was approximate to the size of Wilson's *Chalk Circle on the Floor* of 1968. This work now takes on new meaning for me as a spatial marker for a participatory dialogue in the round. It is no longer possible for me to see it exclusively as a reductivist gesture, for there is now always an accompanying image that I have of strangers seated together and opening up to one another through self-reflection.

Prior to the start of the *Discussion*, no one spoke to one another. The ambience was both hallowed and awkward, with some browsing their smartphones and others simply sitting in anticipation of the arrival of the artist. When Wilson did arrive, I found myself sitting to his immediate right. The session began with a series of questions in the manner of a Socratic inquiry:

Could we agree that there is an Absolute?

Can we agree that the Absolute can be experienced?

Can we agree we can be aware of experiencing the Absolute?<sup>11</sup>

And so on.

Again, it is the asking of questions that is important. Wilson's use of the "we" is significant in that it implicated each one of us in what was being discussed. As people shared their thoughts, I could not help but study Wilson's visage. He is a tall man with the cellophane skin of age. Lodged in his right ear was a hearing aid, which was always in view to me. The session was regularly punctuated by his request to whoever spoke to "speak up" since he had such difficulty hearing what was said. I was moved by his vulnerability and the earnestness of his pleas for people to allow him to hear what they had to say. He genuinely wanted to hear answers to questions that he knows cannot be answered with any certainty.

Toward the end of the *Discussion*, Wilson surprised me when he recounted a recent trip he made to Berlin. He said that he had always wanted to visit the Neue Nationalgalerie of Mies van der Rohe in Berlin. He said that he was sure that he would encounter the Absolute there because he believed that extreme aesthetic beauty could bring one to an experience of the Absolute. But he said that he was disappointed because, upon encountering the museum, he felt nothing. But then he said that he noticed a brother and sister at play in the open plaza that envelops Mies's edifice. The brother was playing on a precarious ledge

11 Ian Wilson, "The Pure Awareness of the Absolute," 16 November 2013, *Discussions at Dia:Beacon 2011–2015*.

and soon admonished by his mother for doing so. This caused the young boy to cry. Seeing his tears, his sister embraced him to console him. At that moment, Wilson said, he sensed the Absolute.

This story expresses some of the conflict at play between the ideals of art and the realities of the world, a conflict which has driven Wilson as far away from art as possible while yet remaining within it. In some respects, the story of his art is the story of his withdrawal from art.

But perhaps this is not so accurate. After all, here we are gathered in one of the art world's great legitimating institutions participating in a presentation on the art of Ian Wilson. The story of his art is the story of the limits of art, the story of having doubts about art while still believing in art.

After the *Discussion* ended, I thought about how little it took for people to open themselves to one another. I thought about my beautiful wife and child, and how much I loved them. I thought about my love for my family as a kind of Absolute. I thought also of another circle in my life. When I began my art career, I would visit New York City as much as I could to take in the art world here. I often stayed with my grandmother who lived on Hester Street with five others. There were six adults, comprising my grandmother, my grandfather, my great-uncle, my uncle, and two aunts living together in a dilapidated one-bedroom. My great-uncle and grandfather worked in a Chinese sausage factory while the rest of my family, including my grandmother, worked in a sweatshop on the edge of Chinatown not far from SoHo. My grandmother was the boss of the household and she always larded me with as much support as she could give me whenever I visited. Last year, I accepted a job at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Soon after arriving in Philadelphia, I made a trip to New York. I was staying in a hotel near Seventh Avenue. I was looking for a place to eat when I felt that someone was watching. The feeling was so strong that I felt compelled to retrace my steps. Upon doing so I was shocked to discover a backlit photograph of my grandmother in the foyer of the UNITE HERE! labour union building.

UNITE HERE! is an acronym for two amalgamated unions: UNITE standing for the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees, and HERE standing for the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union. UNITE took over the formerly known International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, of which my grandmother was a part.

She led a hard life, moving from China to New York in the early 1960s (about the same time as Wilson), living with her family of six in a tiny apartment in a cockroach-infested tenement building in the Lower East Side, working in a Chinatown sweatshop, and passing away in 2005 at the age of 91.

It is difficult to know when the photograph of her was taken, but it looks as though she is in her late 60s or early 70s. She is depicted seated behind a sewing machine and wearing a favourite herringbone vest that she made and wore often. The portrait of her belies the hellish reality of what it was like to work in the sweatshop that she did. I remember going there with her as a boy and finding it almost impossible to breathe without a mask due to all the lint in the air. The air was intensely hot and humid, and the powerful electric fans providing relief did so at the cost of a loud and constant din. I remember seeing young mothers sewing with babies strapped to their backs while toddlers stood about idly, waiting for their mothers to finish their shifts.

I had my first solo exhibition in New York at Gallery Nature Morte at around the same time that my grandmother was photographed for the image that now hangs in the UNITE HERE! building. She surprised me at the opening by attending. I was chatting with some attendees when I heard her calling out my name in Cantonese. A crowd that had quickly formed around her near the entrance to the gallery obscured her.

She must have seemed like a novelty to this crowd, which was unaccustomed to encountering such a woman in this context. I could not believe that my grandmother (who spoke not a word of English) had managed to navigate herself from Chinatown to the East Village. I later learned that she had done so by showing the invitation card to strangers who simply pointed in the direction that she should go.

As I stood in the gallery in a state of disbelief, the crowd suddenly parted and my grandmother walked over to me. “What’s all this? Who are all these people?” she asked in Cantonese. These are two very good questions. I was speechless for a moment and then quickly responded in Cantonese. I felt a tremendous tenderness toward my grandmother. But I also felt utterly unmasked. I was unprepared for such a dramatic collision of worlds whereby an integral part of my identity (as exemplified by my grandmother) was put on view.

To be revisited by my dead grandmother so soon after my move to the East Coast was haunting. But it was also like a circle that has taken almost three decades to close. After I left Dia following the end of Wilson’s *Discussion*, I immediately went to 275 Seventh Avenue to offer my grandmother a Buddhist blessing.



Lightbox image of Ken Lum's grandmother Chiu at the UNITE HERE! headquarters in New York, 2009

# Some Reflections on Urban Public Art Today

Today, iconic public artworks, both permanent and temporary, are defining visual elements of many urban landscapes—from the LOVE sculpture (1976) in Philadelphia to *The Gates* installation (2005) in Central Park. This has not always been the case. While art in the broader sense has always possessed a public dimension due to its requirement of an audience, public art was not formalized as a category of discourse until the mid-nineteenth century.

From its inception, public art has been regarded as an instrument for public “good.” Yet for as long as there has been public art, there has also been uncertainty about how to define that public “good” and how to identify the kind of art that manifests such “good.” Whose interest does public art serve? Is it enough for a public artwork to be intellectually interesting, aesthetically pleasing, or to add to the character of a city? Or, in assessing the value of public art, should we consider the public “good” in a broader context?

### When Public Art Falls Short of Social Reality

The relationship of public art to social reality is at the crux of the instrumentality of public art. All too often, the value of public art is unquestioned as long as it is “artful,” without a consideration of the public aspect of public art. In other words, public art is often considered, by its very nature, a public good. However, it not always clear in whose interest public art is meant to serve and, in fact, history demonstrates that when poorly planned or when divorced from the social or economic reality of the city or neighbourhood in which it resides, public art can be a cause of more public harm than public good.

The famous Gateway Arch of St. Louis (designed by the Finnish architect Eero Saarinen and officially known as the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial) offers a particularly glaring and unsettling example of this. Beginning in 1933, there was



The St. Louis riverfront after land clearance for Gateway Arch National Park, 1942

1 The Basilica of St. Louis, King of France, formerly the Cathedral of St. Louis and usually called the Old Cathedral, was the first cathedral church erected west of the Mississippi River. The current structure was built between 1831 and 1835. The first recorded church on the site was a log house consecrated in 1770.

a drawn-out discussion among St. Louis civic leaders about what they saw as the problem of the historical waterfront district of the city. Their solution was the razing of thirty-seven square blocks.

The district in question fronted the Mississippi River and constituted the oldest part of the city with its original grid pattern designed by the founders of St. Louis, Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau. The city burghers deemed this a derelict area in spite of the fact that it constituted a vibrant neighbourhood for its many primarily African-American and working-poor inhabitants. At the time the destruction of the waterfront was approved, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that the area slated to become the grounds for the Arch contained 290 active businesses, five thousand workers, and a two-percent vacancy rate, with rents comparable to adjacent city neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the entire area was razed in 1939 except for a single cathedral.<sup>1</sup>

To experience the Arch today is to experience a landscape void of the human activities that defined the area prior to the 1930s. The sculpture looms up like an enormous tombstone marking a grave travesty of dispossession and displacement. The Arch haunts the city with its long and curving shadow. Its aesthetic magnificence points to the contradictions between the sculpture's intended purpose and the reality it brought to the city's waterfront district.

While intended to invoke feelings of hope, divinity, and possibility, to many the Arch now serves as a symbol of lost potential and displacement. The logic of the Arch's elliptical trajectory causes the viewer to peer into the sky only to be captivated by a ribbon that seems to narrow to a point at the sky's endpoint, invoking in the viewer a generalized



Eero Saarinen, *Gateway Arch*, St. Louis, Missouri, 1967–present

sense of a divine experience. Wrapped up in this experience is the narrative of Manifest Destiny and the opening up of the West as a divine right of American settlers. To visit the Arch today is to feel caught between this symbol of possibility and the reality of a stark and struggling urban landscape.

## Public Art Today

Public art today is increasingly linked to large-tract real-estate development in concert with major urban planning initiatives. Millennium Park in Chicago is one more example of this. Initiated in 1997 and completed in 2004, Millennium Park is actually a park built as a cap over the century-old Illinois Central rail yard, which cut off part of the downtown Loop District from Chicago's most important park, Grant Park, with its access to the lakefront.

Public art was tactically employed to provide Chicago with a new identity as well as draw more people to the downtown core via the new park. One of the works commissioned is a water feature that includes a fifty-foot-tall video sculpture by the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa, in which huge heads of various people give the effect of spouting water from their puckered lips.

Another work commissioned for the park was *Cloud Gate* by the British artist Anish Kapoor. The success of this work, colloquially referred to as "The Bean," is a testament to the potential of public art to forge a renewed sense of place. The popularity of the work owes much to its universality, as its shape approximates the saddle shape of the universe itself. The signifier of the universe is converged with the convex and concave surfaces of its mirroric form, which demands interaction by producing multiple points of reflection of the viewer in the context of others standing underneath and around the work.

But the acclaim of *Cloud Gate* should not negate the questions raised by the backstory of its coming into being. While the City of Chicago covered half the budget for the entire park conversion, Millennium Park is a public park whose navigable spaces are entirely sponsored by private parties, from the Pritzker Pavilion to the BP (British Petroleum) Bridge to the McDonald's Cycle Center to the Chase Promenade and the AT&T Plaza. Even the title of the video work by Plensa bears the name of the sponsor: *Crown Fountain* is named after the Crown family, one with significant holdings in everything from Hilton Hotels to Maytag.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, not only did private interests fund the public art that defines Millennium Park, private interests selected the artists and the artworks within the park. In effect, the park represents a series of

2 In 2015, *Forbes* estimated the Crown family's worth at \$8.8 billion. See "2015 America's Richest Families' Net Worth," *Forbes*, 1 July 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/crown/#4bfrfcd96044>.

3 Michael J. Lewis, “Acres of Art,” *New York Times*, 6 August 2006, 71.

4 Norie Sato (b. Japan, 1949) is a prominent public artist based in Seattle.

uncoordinated works of art, each reflecting the tastes and interests of its private funder.

This reality significantly affects the tenor and character of the park itself. As Michael Lewis wrote in the *New York Times*, “a park financed by donors given the power to select objects and artists will look very different from one in which aesthetic or social concerns predominate from the first. It will tend to be less a unified landscape than a series of detached vignettes.... Millennium Park is indeed a handsome souvenir of the park, but somewhere between the lines is a cautionary tale of what happens when the fund-raising arm assumes aesthetic control by default.”<sup>3</sup>

While Millennium Park is a popular destination for Chicagoans and tourists alike, and while it is often regarded as an unqualified success, it is important to consider the cautionary tale that underlies the project. As a venue for public art, Millennium Park certainly does offer a significant public good, but the public art in the park is perhaps a stronger reflection of private interests than of a cohesive, planned, public art venue.

### Is Public Art Dead or Alive?

Though public art is so named as “art” in the service of the “public,” or “art” in the service of activating “public” space, there exists a great divide between a public alienated from an art that is supposed to address the problem of public alienation. This has led some, such as the Seattle artist Norie Sato, to ask the question of whether public art is dead.<sup>4</sup>

I would argue that although it may be contested, public art is far from dead, as examples such as Chicano Park (1970) in San Diego, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982) in Washington, DC, or Rachel Whiteread’s Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial (2000) in Vienna attest. These are public art pieces that were well planned and well executed, where the art is effective and compelling, and the works fit seamlessly into the social, historical, and economic fabrics of their respective urban landscapes.

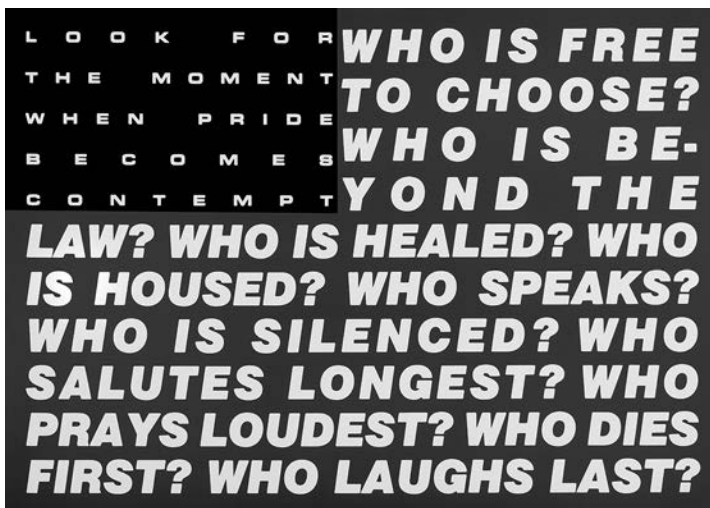
Like all elements of urban planning, planning for and executing successful large-scale public art projects is complex, as is finding the delicate balance in which a public art project is successful both in terms of art and of urban planning. I believe that public art is very much alive in today’s world, but that we must approach it with the eyes of a critical citizen.



# Living in America

Earlier this summer, I co-curated a large public art and urban research project titled *Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia*. The month-long project took place in the courtyard of Philadelphia's iconic city hall, where members of the public were invited to propose speculative monuments that they felt were needed at this point in time in the city. I encountered many Philadelphians who passionately described traumatic events that have marked this city yet are hardly ever spoken about in more official channels. I met an elderly African-American man who was unable to read or write, but remembered in remarkable detail the MOVE bombing that occurred in West Philadelphia thirty years ago. *Monument Lab* showed me that it is possible to inaugurate many things in America (including an ambitious and even potentially contentious project that took up a good part of the public courtyard of City Hall). Yet the project also revealed how utterly impossible life is for so many here.

It is the impossibility of life and the impossibility to speak the unspeakable that is the central dialectic of American art. This is not to say that artists here are not tackling meaningful societal concerns. They are. But the laws of an American way of life are deeply entrenched. To wit: this year, I discovered that I no longer had a right to vote in the Canadian federal election, a development that is shocking to me. I believe such a confiscation of a basic right could not happen so blithely in the United States. Despite this entrenchment, there is still space (albeit small) within contemporary art for the expression of views that challenge sacrosanct beliefs. I would argue that it is the opposite case in Canada, where the idea of art as social critique is more pronounced, in part because it is what is expected of art. I feel that this is true also



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1991

for Canadian non-objective painting, which cannot exist without a critical discourse of its right to be. At the risk of extracting essences from a complex situation, contemporary art in America is allowed (or rather expected) to exist without qualifiers or provisions. A work of art can just be. Of course, this has been a point of contention in American art since abstract expressionism. Contemporary art in America exists as in a western movie landscape: empty, lawless,

simultaneously ahistorical and trans-historical, a repository for unanchored expressions and anxieties.

After three years in Philadelphia, I have come to a realization: I may have left Canada, but Canada has never left me. I am not referring entirely to affection but also to some degree of disaffection in terms of certain memories that distress me. I make about three or four trips back to Canada a year, and the success of my home country increasingly reveals itself to me as my residency in the United States becomes more and more ensconced. Living in America is a Faustian pact in that it is hard to go back, not because it is so much better than Canada—it is not—but for the mundane reason that the tax system is structured in a way that discourages revocation. It is a cliché to say that one can come to understand a place better from afar. I feel a deepening appreciation for Canada the longer I am here. Political debate is far less Manichaean than here in the United States. There is belief in the state as a corrective force against excesses of human behaviour or the marketplace that could threaten the general welfare of the society. Despite the attributes of Canadian society, I do not regret moving to the United States. It would have been all too easy to remain in Vancouver. But relocating to Philadelphia has allowed me to follow a course of greater self-experimentation.

My thinking about art and life comes largely out of growing up in a quiet but skittish Vancouver, which has since transmogrified into something I barely recognize as my own. An immense influx of capital has transformed the city into a spectacle that engenders in its visitors feelings akin to the discovery of the secret of poetry, unaware that it is misrecognition of depth for surfaces. Vancouver has become adorned in what Walter Benjamin called dream kitsch, “the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things.” It is not just things that become outlived but the people for whom the city is no longer a possibility.

In 2014, I was invited to take part in the Whitney Biennial. During the opening, I ran into another Canadian artist whose work was also included in the exhibition. Over the course of our brief conversation, he lamented that try as he did to look at Canada, where he had lived and worked, Canada never looked back. Our conversation sparked a rather stinging memory of a studio visit that I had with a curator from a major Canadian museum when I was only at the start of my path as an artist. After looking over my work, the curator admonished me for making images that “did not look very Canadian.” It was my portrait-logo works that she seemed most bothered by. These diptychs were comprised of a

commercial-studio-photographed portrait on one side and an abstract corporate symbol constructed from coloured Plexiglas on the other. The curator described the works as “cold.” It was not the “coldness” (whatever that meant) that was most objectionable to the curator, however, but rather the lack of concern for a hopeful agency that could provide the viewer with an outlet from the alienating spirit that she felt the work engendered. This surprised me, as I had always thought my work to be an expression of my East Vancouver roots.

In Canada there was and continues to be a certain ideal of what can constitute Canadian culture. Entities such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation continue to advance the narrative of Canada as a culturally fragile place, with stories of success beyond the borders of Canada promoted as somehow rare. The narrative of a nation comprised of isolated communities under constant threat from the forces of nature endures, in spite of how much it is awkwardly negotiated with the reality of Canada’s increasingly cosmopolitan urban centres. The reality of vibrant, multiethnic urban clusters is folded into the former meta-narrative of the bush. But both narratives, like all narratives, are built on misrepresentations. While it is true that Canada possesses striking natural landscapes, the country is also home to arctic oil and mining exploration, massive tar sands development, neighbourhoods of the disenfranchised, and ravaged First Nations communities that continue to be maltreated by a highly paternalistic state.

In the United States, the narrative of an untouched nature has all but disappeared (no one really believes it anymore—except for perhaps the very wealthy, who can buy the acreage to fulfill such fantasies), the notion of the citizen has been replaced by the term *taxpayer*, and politics no longer even pretend to be about anything but disagreement between elites. Contemporary art has followed suit. It is not just that hedge-fund managers or real-estate moguls comprise a significant number of contemporary art collectors, which they do, but that their world views extend into the question of what art is.

Yet I still believe in art, if only in the narrow sense of what art has done for me in my own life. It is through art that I am constantly challenged to understand the world and my place within it, even if that place is one that I am not entirely at home in.

# The Other in the Carpet

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Walther König, 2016



**Pazyryk Carpet, preserved inside a glacier for 2,500 years, fifth to fourth century BCE**

1 Karen S. Rubinson, "The Textiles from Pazyryk: A Study in the Transfer and Transformation of Artistic Motifs," *Expedition Magazine* (Penn Museum, Philadelphia), March 1990, <http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/?p=2921> (accessed 1 May 2016).

2 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (spring 1986), 24.

The oldest hand-knotted carpet in existence is the Pazyryk Carpet. It was excavated from one of several burial tombs in the Altai Mountains of Siberia in 1949 along with mummified human bodies, a funerary chariot, decorated horses, wooden furniture, and Chinese silks. All of the objects were discovered frozen and remarkably intact in spite of the fact that they had been buried for more than 2,300 years.<sup>1</sup> Evident from the array of objects excavated was the importance of the horse to the nomadic Pazyryk in their movement over large areas of the Eurasian Steppe during the Iron Age. The carpet itself features rows of horsemen and horses in the outer friezes. Their style is similar to that of the horsemen and horses represented in reliefs at the ruins of Persepolis in present-day Iran. But unlike those reliefs, the carpet was physically mobile and therefore capable of addressing strangers during times of encounter.

The centre of the Pazyryk Carpet is comprised of twenty-four squares, each of which frames stylized lotus buds. Such references to the botanical world are ubiquitous in later examples of carpets produced throughout the Asian world that depict gardens in highly abstract ways. Michel Foucault notes how Persian carpets in particular sought to replicate the sacred space of the garden within their frame. He writes:

We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persian was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its centre (the basin and water fountain would be located there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that “the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space” calls to mind one of the ways that the Pazyryk Carpet functioned as an object simultaneously physical and symbolic. Its existence today in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg has made it possible for the Pazyryk to speak from beyond the confines of their burial tombs.

In the sixteenth-century poem “Ode to a Garden Carpet,” its anonymous Sufi poet describes a particular carpet in terms of the natural world:

Here in this carpet lives an ever-lovely spring;  
 Unscorched by summer’s ardent flame,  
 Safe too from autumn’s boisterous gales,  
 Mid winter’s cruel ice and snow,  
 ’Tis gaily blooming still.  
 Eyes hot-seared by desert glare find healing in its velvet shade.  
 Splashing foundations and rippling pools,  
 In cool retreats sore-wearied limbs restore,  
 And tired hearts awake with joy once more.  
 The way was cruel.<sup>3</sup>

In this poem the carpet is that which not only represents but also protects through its very representing. The “blooming,” “splashing,” and “rippling” will never end because they will always be present in the carpet itself.

To defy death was one trait attributed to carpets. Another was to defy gravity. The trope of the flying carpet has been a part of Asian literary traditions for thousands of years. There is reference to such a carpet in the Quran when Allah gives Solomon command over the winds so that he can travel a two-month journey in less than a day:

He [Solomon] had a mat made of wood on which he would place all the equipment of his kingship; horses, camels, tents and troops, then he would command the wind to carry it, and he would go underneath it and it would carry him aloft, shading him and protecting him from the heat, until it reached wherever he wanted to go in the land.<sup>4</sup>

The immensity of the carpet, at sixty miles long and sixty miles wide, meant that Solomon was able to travel with “all the equipment of his kingship.” He could survey his vast territory and his many subjects from the perspective of the sky, casting an enormous shadow “wherever he wanted to go in the land.” This land was presumably his.

3 Unknown, “Ode to a Garden Carpet,” sixteenth century, in Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 135.

4 Shaykh Safiur Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, ed., *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (abridged), volume 6, Surah Al-Isra, verse 39 to the End of Surah Al-Mu’minun, 1st edition (Riyadh: Darus-salam Publishers, 2000), 476–77.



Frederic Dorr Steele, illustration in *Collier's* magazine accompanying the Sherlock Holmes tale "The Adventure of the Second Stain," by Arthur Conan Doyle, 1905

5 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 34.

theatre whereby the body of a murdered character is removed from the stage in a rolled-up carpet. The murdered body rolled up in a carpet is a useful theatrical means to facilitate the removal of a dead character from the stage with minimal intrusion. Bodies and carpets are also entwined terms in murder mystery novels. In several Sherlock Holmes short stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, for instance, including "The Adventure of the Second Stain" (1904) and "The Adventure of the Yellow Face" (1893), Holmes discovers bloodstains in carpets or notices a discarded, rolled-up carpet as a possible site of a human body.

The association of dead bodies with carpets was also applied in a literary dialogue between authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James. The debate centred on the issue of truth telling in fiction writing. In a precursor essay to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne analogized the writing of romance to:

Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showcasing all its figures so distinctly—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility—is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests.<sup>5</sup>

The military tactic of carpet-bombing involves the indiscriminate destruction of territory belonging to and inhabited by others in a wartime context. Think of how terrifying the shadows cast by the airplanes would be for those below on the ground. The association of the term carpet with total annihilation is in marked contrast to its association in examples such as the Pazyryk Carpet and "Ode to a Garden Carpet" where it is life itself celebrated in symbolic form.

Perhaps the most prevalently referenced relationship between carpets and death is the hiding and transporting of a murder victim in a rolled-up carpet. Similarly, there is a device in



According to Hawthorne, the figures that appear out of the patterns of the carpet are what matter since they occupy a realm between poetry and prose, where continuity and realism are tempered by subjective narrative.

Henry James's response to this assertion was to demand that fiction project the deepest truths about life through art. In 1896, James wrote a short story that takes as its title the Hawthorne metaphor. "The Figure in the Carpet" is about the inextricable and complex intertwining of interpretation with truth telling. At one point he writes: "The thing we were all so blank about was vividly there. It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet."<sup>6</sup> Here the carpet is described in terms of a relationship between the visible and invisible. Not everyone could make out the "complex figure" when looking at the carpet. It was a matter of perspective.

The perspective from a carpet is a grounded one—unless, of course, the carpet in question happens to be flying. But regardless of whether the carpet is on the ground or in the sky, the body is implicated in certain ways. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines embodiment as both the shape and innate capacities of the human body and its relationship to the world:

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world: at other times, elaborating upon those primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world.<sup>7</sup>

The projection of a cultural world is a theme of a 1657 painting by Johannes Vermeer titled *A Maid Asleep*. Included in the painting is an oriental carpet crumpled on a table rather than stretched on the floor. It occupies the entire foreground of the painting. Atop the rug are symbols of nature and alterity in the form of fruit placed in a Chinese ceramic bowl. The labouring body of the sleeping woman who has been identified as simply a generic "maid" is as much an object in that space as the objects that surround her. In her sleep, the objects assume totemic qualities in surprising union with the disparate spatial composition. The physical room inhabited by the maid is modest, but her unconscious

6 Henry James, "The Figure in the Carpet," in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1964), 289.

7 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 164.

8 Emily Nathan, "Linda Benglis: Top Form," *Artnet*, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/nathan/lynda-benglis-new-museum-2-11-11.asp> (accessed 1 August 2019).

state implies abundant imaginative space. The sparseness of the adjoining room espied through an ajar door is in contrast to the rhythmic patterns of the carpet and objects, saturated that they are with alterity, that adorn the maid's own space. It is the carpet that sets everything into motion.

Henri Matisse designed limited-edition carpets late in his life, but carpets and decorative textiles appeared in many of his earlier prints and paintings. His *Statuette and Vases on an Oriental Carpet* (1908) and *Still Life with Jacinthe* (1910) are both paintings that can be classified in the category of *nature morte*, with carpets an important element contributing to a meditation on life and death, a vanitas. Matisse would continue to integrate images of carpets, tablecloths, wallpaper, and fabrics in complex ways in his work. Patterns would often fill the space of the painting; a rug, perhaps, would often extend from the ground to fill up an adjoining wall, such as in *Still Life on a Blue Table* (1911). In *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* (1926), the effusive, decorative logic of the oriental carpet in particular took on an increasingly symbolic charge to communicate a dreamlike world of arabesque forms in which a human presence coalesced into the allusive patterning.

To reference the female nude as merely a "decorative figure" in an "ornamental ground" as the painting above does is to contribute to the production of images of the "other" in terms of gender and race. This is a problem endemic to paintings of the so-called *odalisque*. In her *Odalisque: Hey, Hey Frankenthaler* (1969), Lynda Benglis makes reference to the reclining nude female figures depicted by artists such as Matisse. The river of paint created by Benglis recalls bodily functions such as spitting, shitting, vomiting, pissing, and bleeding in the bright-red latex that she used to pour onto the ground. Spill sculptures such as this one draw attention to the ground as a site for the insertion of an alternative narrative to a "male-dominated Color Field painting into something that breathed, embodying the more feminine notion of flow in its seeping, sensuous drips."<sup>8</sup>

Carpets occupy a liminal realm between figure and ground. Minimalist artists famously sought to capture this liminality by aiming for a sculptural condition that artist Tony Smith referred to as neither object nor monument. Carl Andre, for instance, covered exhibition space floors with pieces of tiled industrial materials, which displaced sculpture's traditional alignment with the condition of verticality and its identification with a standing human figure with art that emphasizes the condition of horizontality and the human sitting or lying prone. Paradoxically, the expressiveness of minimal art was owed to

its asocial character, which masked a repressed evocation of domesticity through its alignment of art with the floor. In the work of Andre, repression extends to the evocation of a human labour that works on its knees and is not acknowledged except in terms of a phenomenology of presence.

The elision of figure with ground, such that either term dissolves into the other à la Benglis, was explored by the Italian artist Rudolf Stingel in an ambitious 2013 project for the Venice Biennale. Stingel covered the floors and walls of the Palazzo Grassi with oriental rugs. The carpets appeared to extend outward from the floors and upward onto the walls, pushing the logic of the blurring of the division between painting and sculpture *in extremis*. Robert Rauschenberg's combine paintings and John McCracken's slab sculptures are famous examples of art that exists in the fused space of wall and ground while retaining their object status. McCracken has stated that his work exists "between worlds,' not only linking floor (the realm of sculpture) and wall (painting), but also matter and spirit, and body and mind."

A semantic play on the term "wall to wall carpeting," Stingel's Venice project pays reference to artists such as Rauschenberg and McCracken, but also to the originators of the carpets he quotes: the Turkic, Kochi, and Mongolian nomads of the Eurasian Steppe, who dwell in yurts with their carpet- and woven-textile-laden interiors. Eurasian nomads regularly produce rugs, tents, and clothing for their needs, much of it in highly decorative patterns. There is little material distinction between what one wore on the body and what one slept on and dwelled in. The body is blended as one within material culture. The chasm between the people of the yurt and the art goers of the Palazzo Grassi is immense. It is this cultural chasm that Stingel attempts to bridge by pointing out the separateness of one world to another.

Stingel's project also referenced the importance of Venice as a trading city, including its historical connections to the Silk Road, the trading route through Central Asia to China, and the travels of the Venetian merchant, explorer, and writer Marco Polo. Carpets serve as backdrops for the display of Stingel's paintings, which are painted almost entirely in black and white. The paintings allude to Western art and culture. They are contemplative for the mind and eye, and rigid in their interpellation of a viewer who stands immobile front-and-centre while viewing each painting. The paintings contrast with the suggestion of spirit and movement as embodied in the complicated patterns of the carpets. The carpets call attention to Otherness, as well as to the problem of unidirectional historical memory and the traumas visited upon colonized

9 Roberta Smith, "John McCracken, Sculptor of Geometric Forms, Dies at 76," *New York Times*, 10 April 2011.

peoples. To tour Stingel's installation is to go on an embodied journey of retrieval of love for one's own body and love for the body of the Other.

The relationship or distance of art to craft was also underlined by Stingel's project. Craft is often defined as being tied to practical function while art is seen in more elevated terms, as operating independently of the requirement of function. One version of art sees art as having a purpose aimed at achieving an affect derived from aesthetic experiences, which allows art to exist free from the criteria of utility. Another version of art defines art in terms of its functionality, be it a social function or a form that ever follows function, much as the forms and functions found in nature. Contemporary art tends to favour the former version over the latter, but the debate between aesthetic value and practical function is also a debate over a culturally constructed divide, which suppresses the value of craft for so-called non-aesthetic purpose and, therefore, non-artistic practice.

But just as modernity hid within its terms the feature of coloniality, so does the argument distancing art from craft conceal the presence and alternative histories of subaltern lives, including those of nomadic peoples, the abjectly poor, indentured labourers, and Indigenous peoples. Women, historically denied from art practice by men, were consigned to traditional craft practices that were linked to the spaces of domesticity or cooperative work. Women and children became identified with so-called "women's work," which included the manufacture of objects for the home such as baskets, quilts, clothing, and anything involving needlepoint, as well as carpet design and production. As societies modernized along a monetized stratum, the ground also became the site of subaltern labour, the migrant worker, and the housecleaner (who was most often a woman).

The feminist art movement of the 1960s and '70s challenged the assumptions underpinning the secondary status of craft activities, analyzing the relegation as patriarchally engendered, and demanded the opening-up of the study and practice of art to include the perspective of women. Fibre and textile art involving weaving, knitting, crochet, felting, tapestry design, and rug hooking became increasingly incorporated into high art by feminist women artists, practices that are now availed to both male and female artists.

Such practices have also become more conceptual, as the status of the artist has increasingly come to resemble more the global jet traveller than the nomad. The contemporary artist of today will often contract out production of artefactual objects to craftsperson artists, including subaltern object makers, to communicate concepts of difference and authenticity.

Traditionally, the ground or floor is an area devalued in art. Paintings would be associated with walls while ceilings could be adorned to suggest a celestial realm. By contrast, the most important part of a sculpture would often be elevated for upcast eyes, both gaze and sculpture separated from the ground by the base or plinth. In such an ordering, ceilings would be linked to the sacred and floors to the profane (the last stop before purgatory).

The lesson that a carpet offers is the lesson of taking in the world from the perspective of the ground and of the many ancestral and communitarian memories associated with such a perspective. I have tried to argue the many parallels between the work of art and the carpet. They include the modernist ideal of the sublimation of art into life and the retrieval of a will toward a world of enchantment through difference. As in any encounter with difference, it is the knowledge gained by opening oneself to another that is important, for such knowledge serves to prepare us for a world of mutability and change.

Carpets form a connection to the body, but from underneath and therefore some distance from mind and sight. Despite their ubiquity, they are liminal in terms of their presence. They occupy a liminal space between nature and culture. They are liminal to figure and ground. The architect Le Corbusier designed for the High Court at Chandigarh, India, heavy woven tapestries that he called “muralnomads.” He saw them as woolen walls that could be “detached, rolled, carried in one’s arm, travel to be hung elsewhere.”<sup>10</sup> The carpets represented for Le Corbusier the freedom to wander and to gain knowledge through travel. Carpets are like a skin to the ground, the substrate on which all organic life and knowledge emerges and grows.

10 Remy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 236.

# On *Monument Lab*

*Monument Lab: A Public Art and History Project* began with a conversation between Paul Farber and I five years ago. Farber had just returned to Philadelphia after completing his PhD in Michigan and I had just arrived from Vancouver. We both had new positions at the University of Pennsylvania, where we taught classes on public space—he in urban studies and I in fine arts. During our first encounter, we discovered that we had been asking parallel diagnostic questions about the complex narratives of Philadelphia's memorial landscape. We mused about organizing an exhibition for understanding the mechanisms of memorialization, particularly by questioning the status of the monument and how we might challenge a monument's canonical character. We were also interested in issues of embodiment that are inherent to the ambivalence that is part of any construction of symbolic unity, as well as the negated or unacknowledged histories that have been evacuated from the monument and yet remain palpable as an absence.

The extant memorial landscape of Philadelphia is identified with the dominant citizen class. This is expressed by the near total absence of officially sanctioned statuary of African-Americans and women anywhere in the city. Philadelphia unveiled the first public memorial to an African-American individual in September 2017, a statue of the great nineteenth-century civil-rights advocate and educator, Octavius Catto (1839–1871). We noted that African Americans make up more than forty percent of the city's population, and the story of African-American struggles and contributions are central to any appreciation of Philadelphia's greatness.

We noted also that there are only two historical women represented as full figures within the immense inventory of Philadelphia statuary, Joan of Arc (ca. 1412–1431) and Mary Dyer (ca. 1611–1660), a colonial-era Puritan-turned-Quaker and advocate for First Amendment rights—both important and tragic figures but neither with any affiliation with Philadelphia. This topic of the absence of public monuments to historical women in Philadelphia was the subject of Sharon Hayes's (b. 1970) *If They Should Ask*, a *Monument Lab* project in which an array of reduced-scale pedestals, modelled after existing Philadelphia monuments to men, were gathered in Rittenhouse Square in an agglomeration that formed a complex sculptural assemblage. Inscribed at the base of the empty pedestals were the names of important local, national, and international women from the Philadelphia area. *If They Should Ask* is a work predicated on what's forgotten by the exclusionary pronunciation of historiography.

This absence of the commemoration of women is not an act of omission but a willful structuring action that produces and reproduces the conditions of patriarchal society. The many monuments to white

men in Philadelphia would have us believe this is the natural order of history, achievement, and remembrance, without need for the acknowledgement of the enduring violence that has been perpetrated against women, African-Americans, and other peoples of colour. Given this vacuum, Paul and I aimed to create an exhibition that would embody democracy through the participation of a wide and varied audience engaged in public dialogue. We wanted to listen to all Philadelphians about their city and give voice to those citizens who too often go unheard.

We also saw *Monument Lab* as an exercise in spatial production, in which the spaces of the city are opened to question. Monuments tend to render their sites incontestable, where different readings of space are not permitted and where it is assumed that one system of values is shared unequivocally by all. We wanted to make an exhibition about monuments that challenged these assumptions. Philadelphia is a vast metropolis, with more than a quarter of its 1.5 million inhabitants living in poverty. Given that poor areas of the city also suffer more acutely from underfunded public schools, high crime rates, and familial fracturing, we erected *Monument Lab* containers, or labs, in sites located both within and far beyond the centre of the city, including Norris Square, Malcolm X Park, Marconi Plaza, Fairhill, Penn Treaty Park, and Vernon Park. Each lab offered a busy schedule of activities. Karyn Olivier (b. 1968), whose prototype sculpture, *The Battle Is Joined*, was sited



Karyn Olivier, *The Battle Is Joined*, Philadelphia, 2017



in Germantown's Vernon Park, noted the local residents' surprise and delight that an important art project would be installed in their neighbourhood, felt to be largely devoid of civic attention.

*Monument Lab* also took on, as part of its project, the re-animating of public art as art in the service of the public, or art in the service of activating public space. With the adulteration of public space by private interests, public art has become increasingly instrumentalized in two directions. On the one hand, public art is called upon to compensate for the shrinking of public space with its sheer symbolic presence. On the other hand, public art becomes an instrument of real-estate development logic, as the gifting portion of private interests.

In Fairhill, at the intersection of Indiana Avenue and A Street, Tyree Guyton (b. 1955), an artist from Detroit and founder of the Heidelberg Project, produced *The Times*, a work of community participation that featured community-painted images of giant clocks affixed to the facade of an empty, block-long, brick warehouse. Each of the clocks denoted a different time but together they existed synchronically. Guyton's piece is imbued with a strong sense of political protest against poverty and the abandonment of the civic body. Fairhill is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Philadelphia, which is itself the poorest of the large cities in America. The people of Fairhill are at some distance from rapid transit. During my visits to the area, there were always people trying to fix old cars. Transportation is a significant problem there, as is the cost of getting to work. I spoke to a woman in the neighbourhood who worked three part-time jobs: as a cleaning lady and as a worker in two different fast-food outlets that were far from each other. *The Times* meditates on the ways in which time and money are intertwined cruelly for the poor. People are not just poor because they lack money; they are also poor because they lack time. The lack of time to think or to properly attend to things, including the most mundane tasks of everyday life, demands of the poor that their mental concentration be devoted to the most immediate deadline, thus producing a steadily spiraling and compounding accumulation of other deadlines for which there is never enough time, let alone room for hope for the future. The constraints imposed upon the poor by capitalism are unceasing and compulsory. *The Times* is a work that demands the end of the system of forced obedience to hegemonic conceptions of time and space by which othered bodies are made to suffer.

In West Philadelphia, Hans Haacke's (b. 1936) proposal consisted of an archeological dig of a razed triangular block. The idea was to reveal the original foundations of the buildings that once stood along Lancaster Avenue in the Belmont neighbourhood. That portion of

1 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon Books, [1863] 1964).

Lancaster was once a lively commercial street left to abandonment. Haacke's work is best remembered as an image of an area, fenced in with chain link, with backhoes and workers digging up the ground. For the person driving by (which constituted most of the viewers), the image was highly ambiguous. Was what was happening a sign of redevelopment and all the associations that brings? Was the recent positive turn in the city's financial resources resulting in infrastructural improvement for an area in sore need of such improvement? For a person of the neighbourhood walking by, there was a different set of associations with the narratives of local memory, which are too often unrecognized for their insights into the nature of collective memory and historical consciousness.

To take in *Monument Lab* was to traverse and be present physically across every precinct of Philadelphia. We wanted to prompt the public to identify with the *flâneur*, a figure who wishes to “rush into the crowd in search of a man unknown to him” and to throw “away the value and the privileges afforded by circumstance,” as Baudelaire wrote in “The Painter of Modern Life.”<sup>1</sup> We wanted Philadelphians to visit places within their city that they had never visited, to experience their city through the lives and spaces of others.

We were interested in the idea of public memory serving as future speculation. At the labs, members of the public were asked to respond to the following question: “What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia?” By asking what would be *appropriate* rather than *ideal*, we opened conceptual space for respondents to subjectively interpret the question according to whatever criteria they chose. Indeed, the most common and immediate response from the public to this question was: “What do you mean by ‘appropriate’?” Indeed, what is or would be appropriate? The amorphousness of the question was meant to evoke something more than the recollections of memory, as well as the fundamentally democratic ideals of the origins of new historical knowledges.

The depth of public memory surprised us. Many proposals dealt with the terrible state of Philadelphia's public school system. Others dealt with the city's distinctive neighbourhoods, some at the most immediate street level. There was a small but significant number of proposals calling for a memorial to the 1985 bombing of the compound of MOVE, an African-American liberation group. The proposals revealed that Philadelphians are animated about the application of public art and public history to this city. And if they feel their ideas and experiences are valued, they are willing to participate directly and contribute ideas in a process of creative speculation. Through this project, we were reminded how rarely the public is asked to think about which histories, places, and people are worth remembering and commemorating in official contexts.

As we learned, Philadelphians are distinctly aware of the impact of politics on debates about memory and advocacy, the importance and significance of a broad range of monumental sites, and the city's historical sites and perspectives. It became clear to us that the people of Philadelphia were already thinking about our central question—or at least about some form of the notion of what the city is, what it was, and what it can be through a process of participation and monumental production.

Philadelphia is the home of the Liberty Bell. We saw the crack in the bell as a discernible fissure that haunts us, a collective wound that refuses to heal. For all the glorious language that makes up the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the United States of America is a place founded on the wounded bodies of others—Indigenous, Black, indentured, gay, impoverished, and many more.

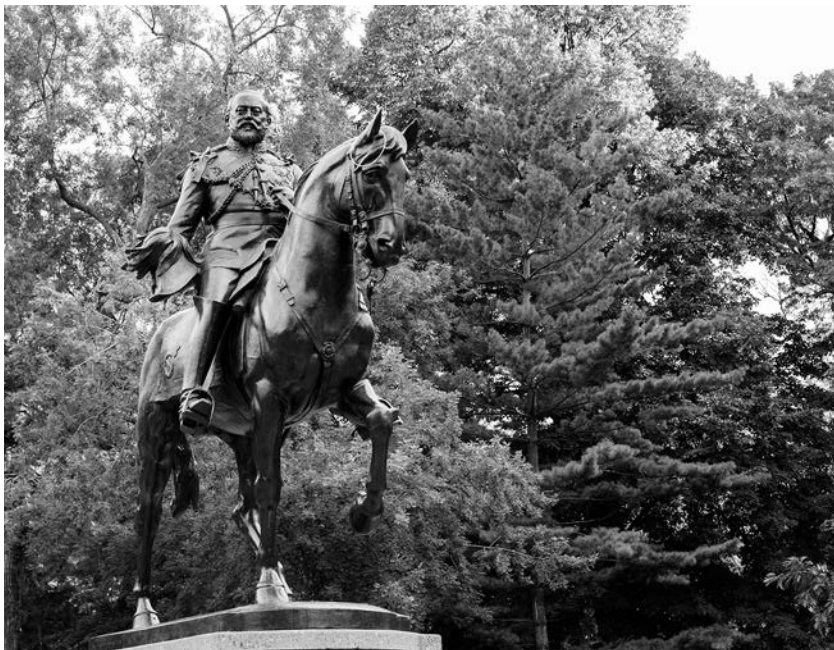
*Monument Lab* operates between digital humanities and civic engagement, offering key ideas and methods for Philadelphia and other cities. Seeing a shift in the public understanding of monumentality, we created a welcoming site-specific research method and the conditions for a more nuanced discussion about public art, public history, and social practice. The message of *Monument Lab* is that the city is a place of limitless possibility, and that in reflecting on this city, we can begin to understand the power of being a human among other humans. The city is itself a living monument to humanity, with all of its potential and all of its challenges. *Monument Lab* aims to unearth possible solutions to a better collective future for Philadelphia. But such solutions can only come about if we recognize that we must start with the fact that the city is a place of many voices, all of which deserve to be heard.



Tania Bruguera, *Monument to New Immigrants*, Philadelphia, 2017

# Tracking Colonialism from Delhi to Toronto

## Edward VII in Queen's Park



Thomas Brock, Equestrian statue of King Edward VII, Toronto, 1921

1 The park is home to the Ontario Legislative Building and its name is often used metonymically for the Government of Ontario.

2 Edward VII was born in 1841, the second child of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

3 Together the three plaques form chapters that tell the history of this statue.

It was a picture-perfect day as I sat down on a public bench in the centre of Queen's Park in Toronto. There were children playing about me, people casually strolling, and sunshine breaking unevenly through the canopy of oak and maple trees. I was early for my presentation at the nearby University of Toronto, so I sat and took in a scene from Toronto's most symbolically important park.<sup>1</sup> What I saw before me called up not just memories of previous park experiences but countless design renders, from city planning to landscape architectural presentations.

Directly in front of me was a large equestrian statue cast in bronze. I did not think much about it until I noticed a plaque at the front jutting up awkwardly from the ground. I was immediately compelled to know more about this work. It turns out that the statue depicts Edward VII, who was king of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1901 until his death in 1910.<sup>2</sup> Dressed in military regalia, he sits with ease on his prancing mount. One hand pulls back the reins while the other holds onto a plumed hat.

The aforementioned plaque is the largest of three in front of the statue.<sup>3</sup> Shaped like a shield and adorned with a bas-relief of the British crown with laurels and ribbons, it also proclaims:

4 John Nisbet, *Burma Under British Rule—And Before* (Westminster, UK: Archibald Constable, 1901), 43.

5 The park was renamed after Indian nationalist Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose following Indian independence in 1947.

6 A giant and luxurious tent city was erected in Delhi just to house the many maharajahs and their families, who had come from all across India for the event.

This Tablet  
Was Placed in Position by  
His Majesty King George V  
Emperor of India

On the Occasion of His Visit to Delhi for the Coronation Durbar  
15th December 1911

George V was the second and only surviving son of Edward VII. He became king of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, as well as the emperor of India, after his father died. India was considered to be the “the brightest jewel in the Imperial diadem” of the British Empire.<sup>4</sup> Royal Academy sculptor Thomas Brock was commissioned to create this statue of Edward VII specifically for the Durbar of 1911. Four years later it was relocated to Edward Park in Delhi.<sup>5</sup> The Durbar of 1911 was staged to mark the accession of George V. The event took the form of an extravagantly staged public reception with maharajahs from across India arriving to take their turns swearing loyalty to George V and his wife, Mary, the queen consort of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, and empress consort of India.<sup>6</sup>

The second plaque in front of the statue bears a modest stamp of the former coat of arms of the City of Toronto and declares:

Queen’s Park. This park was opened September 11th, 1860  
by the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII and named in  
honour of his mother Queen Victoria. Erected by the Toronto  
Historical Board.

1860 was an auspicious year in Chinese history. It was the year of the Convention of Beijing and the end of the Opium War, an ignominious conflict between China and the British Empire over the right of the British to exchange opium for silks, teas, porcelain, and other desired Chinese goods. With the end of the Opium War, Kowloon and Hong Kong were ceded in perpetuity to the British and in 1898 a ninety-nine-year lease was accorded to the British for an additional part of the Kowloon peninsula known as the New Territories. When that lease expired in 1997, Britain had little choice but to “return” what would have been an economically isolated Hong Kong. In advance of the repatriation of Hong Kong to China in 1997, thousands of Hong Kong Chinese applied for Canadian passports with the hope of settling in places like Vancouver and Toronto.

The third plaque reads:

Equestrian Statue of King Edward VII. Originally standing in Edward Park, Delhi, India, this statue was erected on the present site through the generous subscriptions of the citizens of this area. This gift to the City of Toronto was made possible by the Government of India and the former Canadian High Commissioner to India, His Excellency the Right Honourable Roland Michener, C.C., C.D., Governor General of Canada, and brought to the City through the personal generosity of Henry R. Jackman, Esq., Q.C. May 24, 1969. William Dennison, Mayor.

As a Canadian of Cantonese-Chinese descent, with knowledge and experience of the history above, this statement stands as a clear reminder of Canada's persistent colonial nature. The statue of King Edward VII was removed from India as part of a "process of getting rid of reminders of the days of British rule."<sup>7</sup> And yet, in 1969, during a period of major, global political upheaval, as the world decolonized from various European yokes after the Second World War, Canada wanted this statue as its own. This was also at the end of a decade of rising Canadian consciousness and sensitivity about Canada's place in the world, which developed under Pierre Trudeau's premiership and his Third Option politics of greater national autonomy, especially from American economic and cultural influence. There was also desire on the part of Trudeau and an increasingly multicultural Canada to lessen British cultural influence. Just two years later, in 1971, efforts were made to amend the British North America Act, which had served as Canada's de facto constitution since the Confederation year of 1867.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the story of Edward VII's statue is also a story of the divides within the British Empire itself, which, after the Second World War, was rebranded as the Commonwealth of Nations. The first divide is between those countries that were colonized and experienced the traumas of colonization, such as India, Africa, and the Caribbean countries, and those countries referred to as white dominions, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. (Originally, there were three other dominions, including the Irish Free State, South Africa, and Newfoundland.) The second divide could be experienced from within Canada, and it was between the ruling British (or Anglophiles) and the many subjugated and disenfranchised peoples within Canada who did not identify as British (or anglophile).

My childhood took place in Vancouver during the 1960s and I recall experiencing this oppressive distinction between Canadians of British descent and pretty much everyone else. Skin colour also constituted a

7 David Wencer, "Historicist: Here Comes the Equestrian Statue," *Torontoist*, 6 December 2014, <https://torontoist.com/2014/12/Historicist-Here-Comes-the-Equestrian-Statue/>.

8 Although the Constitution was repatriated in 1982, in 1971 the provincial premiers proposed the Victoria Charter, which would have enshrined fundamental rights, official bilingualism, and established a constitutional amendment formula. The document was ultimately rejected by Quebec.

9 I am thinking especially of the paintings of Richard Wilson.

10 Edward Hobart Seymour (1840–1928) was a Royal Navy officer who participated in the 1857 siege of Guangzhou (Canton) during the Second Opium War; he was promoted to admiral in 1901 for his service during the Boxer Rebellion (also known as the Boxer Uprising or Boxer Movement). Thomas Douglas, fifth earl of Selkirk (1771–1820) established the Red River Colony in 1811 in what is now Manitoba. William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98) was four times prime minister of Great Britain (1868–74; 1880–85; 1886; 1892–94).

major divide between white and non-white. British expatriate scholars dominated Canadian universities at the cost of academic diversity, and this dominance continued for many years until their retirements. The historical collections of art museums across Canada were full of British painters and especially those known for landscape-as-arcadia painting.<sup>9</sup>

The move of the Edward VII statue from Delhi to Toronto was financed by Henry Jackman, CEO of the aptly named Empire Life Insurance. The statue arrived in Toronto in late 1968 but its presence was not publicly acknowledged until early 1969, when the mayor of Toronto, William Dennison, formally accepted the statue as a donation on behalf of the Parks and Recreation Committee. This was all done without any public consultation. The mayor even agreed to Jackman's suggestion for its placement at its present site, directly front-and-centre of the oval grounds on the north end of Queen's Park, behind the Ontario Legislative Building. Such a move without democratic process would likely not have been controversial for the then-dominant British expatriate population of Toronto. As for the voices of other Torontonians, I suspect that they surely knew their places.

This was how I remember my childhood in Vancouver. At school, "God Save the Queen" was sung regularly each morning after "O Canada." The Lord's Prayer would then follow to open the school day. I remember several of my teachers referencing the government of South Africa as heroic in its struggle to bring "civilization" to the country oppressed by apartheid. The schools I attended, including Admiral Seymour Elementary School, Lord Selkirk Elementary School, and Gladstone Secondary School, were all named after Britons who had built their careers committing repressive acts against many colonized peoples. Admiral Seymour Elementary School was located in the eastern edge of Strathcona, a neighbourhood of predominantly working-class Cantonese-Chinese that bordered Vancouver's Chinatown. As an adult I learned that Admiral Seymour had been commander-in-chief of China Station, a naval formation of Royal Navy ships responsible for safeguarding British commercial interests along the entirety of China's coastline and waterways.<sup>10</sup>

In 1914, three years after the dedication of the Edward VII statue in Delhi, almost four hundred passengers from the province of Punjab in British India sailed the Japanese-registered steamship *Komagata Maru* from Hong Kong to Vancouver. As British subjects, their passports afforded them the privileges to travel and emigrate to any other part of the Empire—or so they thought. An armed Canadian navy ship was mobilized to meet the *Komagata Maru*. The ship eventually anchored in Vancouver harbour from 23 May to 23 July 1914, but only



twenty returning immigrants and a handful of others received permission to disembark.<sup>11</sup> The *Komagata Maru* was forced to return to India by way of Kolkata, and within hours of disembarking, twenty of its more than three hundred passengers would be killed by British Indian police gunfire.

In the centre of Queen's Park, Edward VII's equestrian statue tramples the ground on which it stands. This is the very ground on which First Nations history is sited, yet nowhere is that acknowledged by the statue or its markers. Any First Nations history is literally and figuratively overshadowed by a figure that embodies a certain kind of imperial and colonial power, and its forceful privileging of that which is male and white. While the statue may seem to be a benign part of a picture-perfect scene in Toronto's most important historical park, it is vital to look in the shadows of this statue and think about all that lies beneath.

11 There was already a small population of South Asians in Vancouver at the time.



376 Punjabis, mostly Sikhs, aboard the *Komagata Maru* in Vancouver harbour, refused entry to Canada, 1914

# Me and Mel Chin

In Romantic literature, representations of the self are often haunted by the spectre of the doppelgänger, the concept of the lookalike double being at once a harbinger of misfortune and a symbol of divided existence. The doppelgänger counteracts aspirations of a subject founded on principles of autonomy and represents a rupture to the politics of self-interest. Whether an evil twin embodying a conflicted personality or experienced as a sensed presence, the doppelgänger disturbs the action of self-identification in social space. It deconstructs the either-or dualism that is, according to Jacques Derrida, the foundation of all metaphysical history and logic, and which needs to be rejected in the process of recognizing the self as contingent to others.<sup>1</sup> Through the doppelgänger's being, hallucination inverts into desire, absence into presence, and Self into Other.

In "Modernity and Ambivalence," Zygmunt Bauman writes:

In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus, abnormality is the other of the norm, deviation the other of the law-abiding, illness the other of health, barbarity the other of civilisation, animal the other of the human, woman the other of man, stranger the other of the native, enemy the other of friend, "them" the other of "us", insanity the other of reason, foreigner the other of the state subject, but the dependence is not symmetrical. The second side depends on the first for its contrived and enforced isolation. The first depends on the second for its self-assertion.<sup>2</sup>

Mel Chin's *Two Me* was produced on the occasion of *Monument Lab* for the central courtyard of Philadelphia City Hall. It consisted of two identical but oppositely winding ramps, placed parallel to one another, each of which led to a plinth. Both plinths were adorned with the word "Me" on their facades. People were encouraged to make their way up one of the wheelchair accessible ramps to stand atop a plinth, where their bodies would become the statuary, with the attendant authority that comes with memorialized representational figures in public space.

During the opening of *Two Me*, people waited in line to walk up the ramps and pose however they wanted, while people from the ground looked, took pictures, or communicated in some other fashion. People would often come down from one plinth and then go directly to the top of the second, standing in the place of someone else whom they may

1 Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 14.

3 K. Hugenberg, M.J. Bernstein, and D.F. Sacco, "Perception and Motivation in Face Recognition: A Critical Review of Theories of the Cross-Race Effect," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, no. 2 (2011): 116–42.

have looked at from the plinth they were just on. The mood was celebratory yet subversive as people on the plinths often posed in amusing ways that mocked the solemnity of statues. *Two Me* functioned like an interactive theater set, in which the "I" in identity was assembled around a person's embodied experience while also imbricated within the canonizing language of monumental forms. The ascent up the aluminum ramp was a noisy affair, drawing attention to each participant. The two mirroring paths and identical granite-faced plinths called forth each and every participant as whole and individual, albeit to varying degrees of success.

Yet *Two Me* also destabilized this sense of individual wholeness as it was insistently accommodative of the most radical pairings of persons—a "me one" and a "me two" that could be marked by the widest set of differences from one person to another, be it any combination of race, ethnicity, age, and gender identification. The work also readily exposed the dangers of the lack of interracial circulation in society, magnifying the Cross-Race Effect, a finding of cognitive psychology whereby a person within a range of physiognomic features more readily identifies with others within the same range of physiognomic features.<sup>3</sup> A case in point is that I was twice misrecognized for Mel Chin by people looking at promotional materials for *Monument Lab*. Twice, I was told that my image was seen on the portrait page for the roster of *Monument Lab* artists. Of course, I was not an artist for *Monument Lab* and while my name was acknowledged as a co-curator, my mien was not shown on the *Monument Lab* website. Two persons (with whom I have had many interactions) had mistaken me for a different me.

I have long been curious about Mel Chin. My curiosity had to do with our shared hyphenated Chinese identity and our respective paths in an art world that once had very few Chinese American or Chinese Canadian identified artists. Although he is not me and his background is far different from mine, I saw in him the possibility of a form of kinship that had more to do with routes than roots. *Two Me* centred on the idea of the self as ontologically and manifestly split in space, with requital only possible through the recognition of another. There was a parallel between his idea for *Monument Lab* and my sense of Chin as someone close but long lost. Both of us share family roots from a particular part of Guangdong province in southern China. We ended up having dim sum together, along with Paul Farber, the other co-founder of *Monument Lab*, in nearby Chinatown. It turned out that we were curious about one another for similar reasons and at one point during our meal Chin called me his Cantonese brother, which moved me.

*Two Me* is a work about diaspora writ large—not the diaspora of a particular cultural group or groups, but human diaspora. All humans, no matter the separation of geographical distance, are entangled with one another through exchange, hybridity, and métissage. *Two Me* is structured as an interpellation machine (posed as a monument) that calls forth interaction from a public conditioned by the logic of social media and the presentation of the individual to the world through the form of the selfie. The interpellation is subversive, however, because it is not a reification of the constitutive process of individuals internalizing ideological values in the creation of subjecthood. “Two Me” operates like a Trojan horse, in which an artistic apparatus purposed for the affirmation of the Me is revealed as constituted by something else—the We.

# Eternal Glory to the People's Heroes!

On Beijing's *Monument to  
the People's Heroes*

2019 marks an ignominious anniversary in China. Thirty years will have passed since the violent crackdown on student protesters in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The events of 1989 continue to reverberate both in terms of China's domestic politics and its relationship to the world. It is important to note that internal protest against the prevailing government has recurred numerous times throughout China's history, going back to at least Emperor Qin Shi Huang in 200 BCE. The 1989 protests represent the latest mass challenge by Chinese citizens toward their own government. It was Chairman Mao Zedong himself who promoted the idea and necessity of a permanent cultural revolution to safeguard the purity of the Communist leadership as China's sole legitimate rulers. His Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and Smash the Four Olds campaigns, exhorted in 1956 and 1966 respectively, encouraged Chinese people to protest against authority and even to denounce official government policy, with the aim of purging all counter-revolutionary or capitalistic tendencies as well as tradition-bound thinking that might weaken Communist fervour.

It was in this spirit of ensuring the futurity of China by demanding political reform—though not necessarily the overthrow of the government—that formed the basis for student protests in 1989. From the perspective of the West, the aspirations of the students were seen as embodied aesthetically by the *Goddess of Democracy*, an almost ten-metre-tall foam-and-papier-mâché sculpture created by students of the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Hurriedly produced to bolster the flagging morale of students who had been encamped for several weeks on the square, the statue was seen as inflammatory by some members of the Chinese politburo because of its resemblance to the Statue of Liberty. The *Goddess of Democracy* stood all of five days before troops of the People's Liberation Army entered Tiananmen Square in tanks and armoured personnel carriers, in an act of bloody suppression.

The *Goddess of Democracy* has since accrued the status of a global icon symbolizing far more than its original affiliation with the student protest movement in Tiananmen Square.



Construction of the *Goddess of Democracy* in Tiananmen Square, 1989

Today, it embodies Western-defined democracy and freedom in the most general way. Replicas of the original statue have been installed in a number of cities around the world, including San Francisco, Vancouver, and Toronto. In Washington, DC, a replica of the *Goddess of Democracy* is dedicated to the victims of Communism worldwide.

But the most important aesthetic edifice relating to the events of Tiananmen Square is not the *Goddess of Democracy* but another sculptural work, designed not by the students of the Central Academy of Fine Arts but by its professors. The *Monument to the People's Heroes* is often overlooked by non-Chinese observers despite its centrality to 1989. It was in front of this particular monument that protesting students and workers first congregated. In fact, it had been a gathering point for protest since its erection in 1958, the same year as the launch of the Great Leap Forward, an economic and social campaign begun by Mao to collectivize all agricultural production and to purge from China all traces of private ownership.

The concept for a monument to Chinese resistance and martyrdom preceded the formal declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949, after Communist victory was assured in the civil war against Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces. There were many different conceptual iterations for a monument and the team tasked with its design pondered many questions, including the problem of how to negotiate Mao's presence within a form memorializing the dead. The *Goddess of Democracy* and the *Monument to the People's Heroes* operate in dialectic with one another. Temporally, one is improvised, non-official, and short-lived, while the other overly deliberated upon, official, and aimed at posterity.

The *Monument to the People's Heroes* takes the form of a traditional obelisk and was conceived in dialogue with the Tiananmen Gate upon which Mao Zedong's outsized portrait is installed. As the only vertical monument on Tiananmen Square, it was located within the square along the old north–south imperial axis, which dates back to the Yuan Dynasty of Emperor Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century. Its location in the square did not reassert the imperial axis so much as break with its language of sculptural autonomy and presence by forcing an upward gaze from viewers, rather than a gaze of integrated alignment northward toward the former court and residence of the Emperor. The highly visible isolation of the monument, standing as it does amid vast, flat concrete surroundings, operates in contradistinction to the hidden isolation of China's Communist rulers, who were now ensconced behind the impenetrable walls of the former imperial palace complex known as the Forbidden City.



A bas-relief frieze encircles the base of the monument, presenting a series of historical images that include, most prominently, a representation of students in Tiananmen Square as part of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, protesting against the government's concessions of Chinese territories to European colonial states, Russia, and Japan. Upon the stone surface on the back of the monument—the side facing away from Tiananmen Gate and the Forbidden City but toward the preserved body of Mao in his mausoleum—an epitaph by Mao is inscribed:

Eternal glory to the heroes of the people who laid down their lives in the people's war of liberation and the people's revolution in the past three years!

Eternal glory to the heroes of the people who laid down their lives in the people's war of liberation and the people's revolution in the past thirty years!

Eternal glory to the heroes of the people who from 1840 laid down their lives in the many struggles against domestic and foreign enemies and for national independence and the freedom and well-being of the people!

On the front of the monument, the side facing Tiananmen Gate and the Forbidden City, there is a single inscription in the style of Mao's distinctive handwriting:

Eternal glory to the people's heroes!

The key goal here is to extol brave Chinese to defend their country in the name of liberation and revolution. Those enemies need not only be foreign but can also be domestic, including the government. The year 1840 refers to the start of the Opium War against foreign powers as well as the beginning of the resistance to the Chinese government of the day, which prioritized self-preservation over the needs and demands of the Chinese people.

The iconography of the *Monument to the People's Heroes* grants permission from the state to the people of China to protest against their own government. It is no surprise then that the *Monument to the People's Heroes* was the site of a massive gathering in 1976 after the death of the beloved first premier, Zhou Enlai, who was perceived as a reformer and was engaged in a longstanding power struggle against more conservative

senior members of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. The gathering of mourners at the base of the monument quickly grew into what became known as the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1976.

In 1989, the death of the liberal reformist senior leader, Hu Yaobang, prompted protests among students who wanted Hu's reform agenda to be reinstated. Hu had been purged from his high-level position as general secretary of the Communist Party of China in 1987. The students again amassed at the base of the *Monument to the People's Heroes*, discursively protected by the ambiguous status of the monument as a symbol of the right of the Chinese people to protest. The protests quickly transmogrified into the global story that would end in government brutality.

The so-called Umbrella Protests of 2014 in Hong Kong were also begun by students challenging proposed Beijing-led electoral reforms. The protests were against political encroachment from the mainland, which threatens Hong Kong's democratic rights and its Western-hybridized identity. A model of the *Goddess of Democracy* could be seen amid the huge crowd of protesters and international media obligingly covered her presence. Significantly, a replica of the *Monument to the People's Heroes* could also be seen, installed at the very centre of the protest area of the Admiralty district. The irony of reproducing a monument that Mao himself had ordered to be built but using it as a centrepiece for the Hong Kong protests was not lost on Chinese eyes.

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