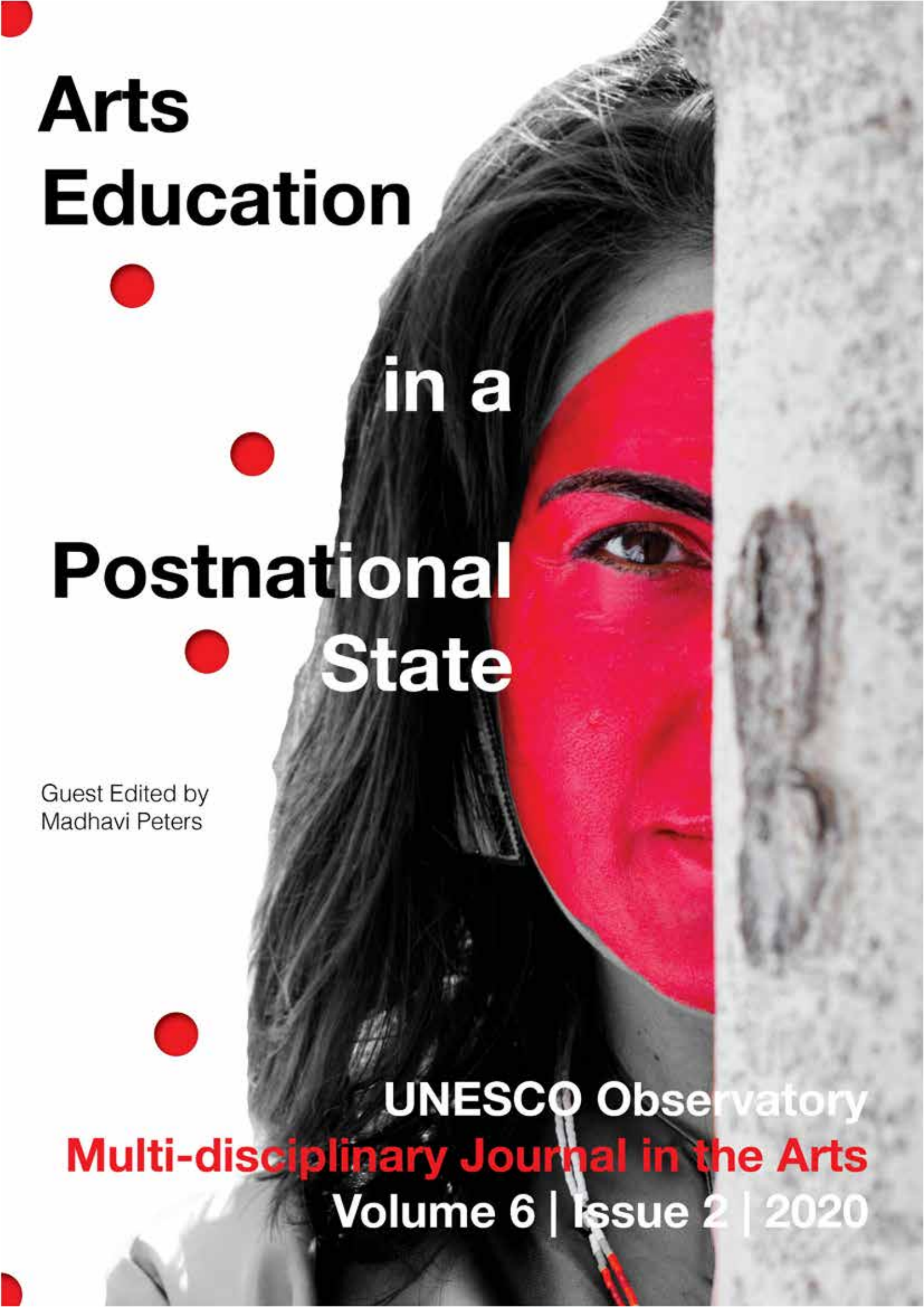
Arts Education in a Postnational State



Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

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Multi-disciplinary Journal in the Arts
Volume 6 | Issue 2 | 2020

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE
'Apîtaw-Picîkwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:
Lana Whiskeyjack

Photo:
Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between Edmonton-based photographer Rebecca Lippiatt and art actionist / educator Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego, 'Apple', in Cree, 'Picîkwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

Chinese Diaspora in Canada: Chinese Canadian Art as an Apparatus for Revisiting History

Henry Heng Lu
Artist / Curator

BIOGRAPHY

Henry Heng Lu is an artist, curator, programmer of moving images and translator, based in Vancouver and Toronto. Presently, he is curator at Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. He is co-founder and curator of Call Again, a mobile intiative / collective committed to creating space for contemporary diasporic artistic practices and to expanding the notion of Asian art in the context of Canada and beyond, through exhibitions, screenings and roundtables. He has presented projects through numerous channels, including Creative Time Summit, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, The New Gallery, Vtape and Trinity Square Video. Most recently, Henry served as the artistic director of Modern Fuel, an artist-run centre in Kingston, Ontario. His writings have been published by *Canadian Art, ArtAsiaPacific, Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, C Magazine,* The Richmond Art Gallery, the PLATFORM Gallery, *ArchDaily,* OCAT Shenzhen and the Gardiner Museum. In his research, Henry investigates often overlooked narratives surrounding cultural identities and inequalities during the 21st century.

The history of the Chinese diaspora is closely connected with the histories of its destinations, since the mid-19th century. In Canada, the ethnic Chinese's first appearance in large numbers dates back to approximately 1858, when they joined the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush in British Columbia. Over the centuries, the diasporic Chinese have gradually set down roots in this land as immigrants and settlers. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, targeted and banned the majority of forms of Chinese immigration from 1923 to 1947. After the abolishment of the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act in 1947 and the adoption of multiculturalism as an official policy, the late 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of Asian[1] Canadian identity politics. Having decided to claim culture, defined as 'the symbolic dimension of human existence', as 'a key component of political and social struggle' (Li 2007, p.3), through their activistic cultural practices such as the establishment of the Toronto-based theatre Loud Mouth Asian Babes and the periodical *The Asianadian: An Asian Canadian Magazine*, Asian Canadians have made an ineradicable mark on both the Canadian and international cultural landscapes since the late 1980s. These cultural endeavours have been an integral part of the attempt to develop an Asian Canadian culture, and have not only made clear the demand for racial equality and social justice, but also introduced the contemporary Asian Canadian imagination to a larger society.

For Asian Canadian art (the visual arts specifically), the early 1990s was a time when influential exhibitions started to proliferate, at the peak of Canadian cultural politics after the Multiculturalism Act came into effect in 1988. The exhibition *Yellow peril: reconsidered*[2] is a prime example of the rise of identity politics amongst minority communities in Canada. It was one of the first major exhibitions devoted entirely to the works of Asian Canadian artists, with a focus on artists of East and Southeast Asian descent. Throughout 1990 and 1991, the exhibition toured artist-run centres in Halifax, Montréal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. It addressed and examined historical and contemporary depictions of Asian Canadians by including the artworks of twenty-five artists of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipino descent. The exhibition sought to complicate and highlight the fact that Asian Canadian artists and their works had been historically marginalized from dominant discourses

The curator, Paul Wong, explained what prompted him to produce *Yellow peril: reconsidered:*

> Asian Canadians have been excluded from contemporary art and from the production of film and television projects. As visible minorities, we have historically faced numerous racist obstacles… The legislative acts prevented earlier generations from obtaining equal rights in Canada, such as voting, land ownership, education. They also legitimized popular racism against the yellow hordes. This in turn created an inferiority complex that has helped shape behavioural practice within our communities, and the way our community is viewed in the New World by the dominant culture. (1990, p. 6)

Yellow peril: reconsidered started a new era for Asian Canadian art by drawing together artists who were outside the mainstream and socio-politically disadvantaged. The exhibition was a diverse selection of experimental and documentary photo, film and video work. Through including only those three then-developing artistic media in the exhibition, Paul Wong intended to challenge stereotypes of Asian art. 'I wanted it to be in your face … When we talk about Asian art, people always think of Chinese landscape paintings, ink drawings… I wanted something new', said Wong in an interview with the author on 31 October 2016. He wanted to prove that not all Asian art is the same. 'We can do these [new media] too. Not all Asians paint and draw'. Against a blank canvas—for there is a complete absence of historical record — the exhibition put artists forward, letting them write and speak their stories and histories.

The exhibition not only attested to the West's almost deliberate misconceptions of Asians, but also asked the question: what is 'Asian-ness'? Another crucial question the exhibition asked was: where is Asian Canadian art in the history of Canadian art? The word 'Asian', as we may encounter on a daily basis, is undoubtedly a broad term. It has also started to become problematic, as it has been widely used by the West to generalize and stereotype people of Asian descent since the 19th century, as if 'Asian' equals only Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Based on shared experiences of Asian Canadians, the 1990 exhibition focused on specific works that reflect Asian Canadian sensibilities. 'Asian', for that exhibition, implied the colour of skin and the geographic regions, as well as the ways in 'which [Asians] have been depicted, treated and consequently viewed by others in the 'New World'. [Their] experience and place in Canada differ from those of other visible minorities: Black Canadians, Indigenous peoples and Indo-Canadians.' (Wong 1990, p. 6)

Often discussed along with *Yellow peril: reconsidered*, the 1991 exhibition *Self not whole* at the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver specifically asked the question: what is 'Chinese'?

While one of the main agendas of the exhibition was its focus on issues of identity, heritage and race, each of the works by seven Chinese-Canadian artists (hyphenated, as proposed by the curator Henry Tsang, Tsang 1991) speaks about these issues in very different ways. Vancouver-based artist Kiki Yee's photo-based *Gwei Mui* ('foreign white girl'), for instance, depicts how she was called 'Gwei Mui' by her relatives when she visited them in Guangzhou, China for the first time; Montréal-based artist Mary Sui-Yee Wong's installation *Dong Nam Sai Buk* ('East, South, West, North') illustrates how, as a member of a marginalized community, she can only feel safe when near her family, which shows that the precariousness of her own identity is in fact a part of who she is. 'Chinese', as addressed in this exhibition, did not necessarily imply where the artists and/or their families originated, but indicated what was seen or identified as Chinese in a broader sense. It proposed 'Chinese-ness' as a notion that was open for questioning and re-examination.

What are some of the new developments in the Chinese Canadian art community since the 1990s? The exhibition *Far and near: the distance(s) between us*, which I curated, and which took place at the University of Toronto in September 2017, sought to make a connecting link between the previous and the more recent generations of artists. The goal was to place the perspectives of contemporary Chinese Canadian artists within the Chinese Canadian community's historical and cultural evolutions, by engaging with a number of Canadian artists of Chinese descent based in urban areas with large Chinese populations: Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal. The works included in the exhibition investigated overlooked narratives by exploring notions of distancing and being distanced in relation to race, identity, sexuality and their intersection with Chinese Canadian history. The idea of distance unfolds in multiple layers: in the geographic sense, as in going through a distance from point A to point B, like the construction process of the Canadian Pacific Railway; in the cultural sense, through the mainstream's imposition of stereotypes, as in how the Chinese Canadian community has been culturally isolated and essentialised; and in the context of the Chinese community itself, as in who is the 'Us' and the distances between different groups of ethnic Chinese.

Inspired by earlier hallmark exhibitions as a means to carry out Asian Canadian artistic activism, this multifaceted exhibition aimed to offer insight into the shared experiences of Chinese Canadians as affected by specific laws, government policies and cultural history. Part of the ongoing exploration and manifestation of ethnic and social forms of identity, it sought to create new dialogues amongst different generations and highlight their urgency in the context of the rise of global conservatism and the resurgence of nativism.

Arranged from A to Z in 26 segments, Vancouver-based artist Ho Tam's video *The yellow pages* (1994) roams across the past and present of the Asian experience within North America and beyond in a satirical manner. Serving as an introductory vocabulary for the exhibition, this work touches upon Asian stereotypes, such as Chinese railroad laborers, Hiroshima and the Korean War, the arrival of the Boat People from Vietnam and the more recent millionaire migrants from Hong Kong and China, to further reflect on collective cultural diaspora and family history.

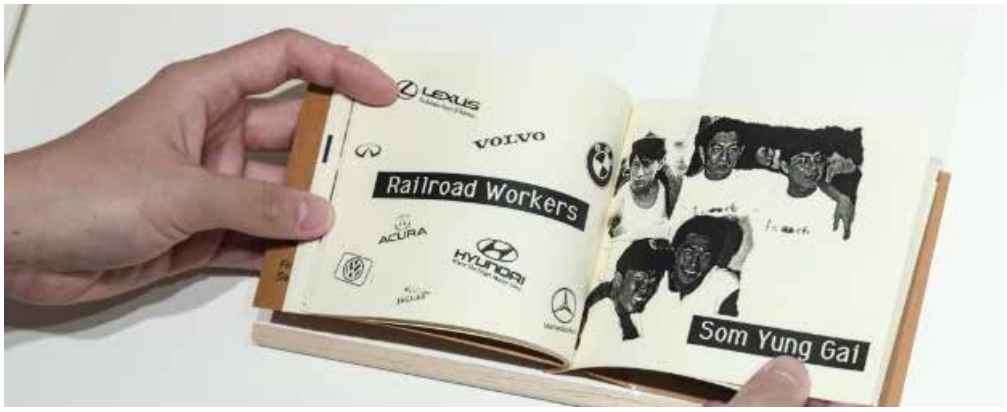

Figure 1
Ho Tam
The yellow pages
1994 artist's book
photo by Toni Hafkenscheid,
courtesy of the artist and Art
Museum at the
\University of Toronto.

In *Chinaman's peak: walking the mountain* (1992, Cantonese: Hang San), which refers to the beliefs and rituals associated with Chinese ancestral worship, Vancouver-based media artist Paul Wong creates a geographic, physical and metaphorical place within a somewhat cinematic space of absurdity and informality that frames and revisits lesser-known tales about the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Similar to Wong's video in terms of aesthetic and conceptual approach, Toronto-based filmmaker Winnie Wu's *Iron horse and the pig* (2015) is a personal documentary and tribute that focuses on the artist's great-great grandfather, a former Chinese railway worker, who died alone in Toronto in 1933. The artist conveys the story through a cross-nation root-tracing journey, combining interviews, archival footages, personal narratives and footage of the journey from China to Canada. Utilizing the gesture of walking and the practice of cultural rituals, both artists address race, class and the history of migration that put forward a discussion of issues of cultural heritage.

Figure 2
Karen Tam
Gold Mountain restaurant Montagne d'Or
2003–17
installation
photo by
Toni Hafkenscheid,
courtesy of the artist and
Art Museum at the
University of Toronto.

A pair of photographs of the interior of the family associations in Toronto's Chinatown from Mississauga-based artist Morris Lum's larger ongoing photographic project T*he Chinese Canadian railway* searches for community clusters that, over time, have brought a sense of belonging to the diasporic Chinese. Started in 2014, the project focuses and directs the attention towards the functionality of Toronto's Chinatown and explores the generational context of how 'Chinese' identity is expressed in these social spaces. In dialogue with Lum's work, Montréal-based artist Karen Tam's site-specific installation *Gold Mountain restaurant Montagne d'Or* (2003–17) recreates an old-style Chinese café from the 1960s to the 1970s through furniture, props, lanterns, pictures and other materials found in Toronto. While exploring Chinese cafés as a portal between the Chinese community and mainstream society, Tam, whose father ran a Chinese restaurant when she was younger, sees the restaurant as a place where she could reconnect to her family's heritage. Both artists discuss the notion of Chinese-ness, but from different angles. While Lum links the formation of Chinese Canadian identity with Chinese-ness, Tam questions the authenticity of Chinese-ness in spaces like Chinatowns where people of Chinese descent are expected to perform Chinese-ness.

Figure 3:
Will Kwan
If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail
2014
video
photo by Toni Hafkenscheid,
courtesy of the artist and Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

Toronto-based artist Will Kwan's *If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail* (2013) re-makes John Massey's *As the hammer strikes* (1982) by replacing the original characters with a Caucasian real estate agent and a Chinese Canadian homebuyer. In the video, the characters travel to visit prospective homes for sale, driving from a suburban neighbourhood of tract housing in Markham, Ontario to Forest Hill, an affluent district in Toronto of primarily white homeowners. Their conversations enunciate the tendency for one's socio-political status and views on neoliberalism to become the common ground in cross-cultural encounters within a multicultural society. By portraying an intercultural experience within the larger context of mainstream society's fear of the 'foreign', Kwan complicates concerns and themes rooted in the aspirations of the East Asian diasporic community, while deconstructing the ideal of the model minority imposed on them.

Konjac, a starchy tuber, is a common base ingredient found in many kinds of Chinese food. Taiwanese-born, Montréal-based artist Chih-Chien Wang considers it as a vessel that can hold sound, time and atmosphere. Using konjac jelly as a recording apparatus in lieu of the camera, he documents the stories and histories of his neighbours in the Le Pierce building on the corner of de Maisonneuve and Guy Streets in Montréal in his work *Jelly project #1* (2008). Located in the city core, an area of diverse communities, the building is occupied by mostly Chinese Canadian households. Making references to their social and cultural experiences of living in Le Pierce and Montréal, Wang's gesture proposes an ambiguous definition of community and of belonging within a vast Chinese culture.

In their recent project *ALIEN IN RESIDENCE* (2014), Ottawa-based artist Alvis Parsley Choi, a Hong Kong native who immigrated to Canada fairly recently, asks the question with performativity: where is home? The artist challenges the customers at the Value Village on Woodbine Avenue in Toronto by confronting them as an awkward creature from outer space. During their residency, the artist's alter ego Kernel, an expelled queer alien from Planet Kernelus, performs to and engages with the customers at the store to explore a wide range of topics such as race and gender politics, immigration and social expectation, based on the artist's personal everyday struggles living in multicultural Canada. Seemingly positioning themselves as a parallel to the mainstream society, they have to search for a safe space of tolerance in which they hope to be accepted as a visible minority but in fact are further marginalized at the same time.

Within the realm of postcolonial theory, there have been recurrent discussions of where home is. To Chinese Canadians, Canadian-born or naturalized, is Canada home? 'Chinese', as addressed in this essay, does not necessarily imply being born in China, but indicates what is seen or identified as Chinese. While 'Chinese' is highly debatable as a term to categorize and configure multiple ethnicities, how does mainstream Canada fabricate the difference of 'Chinese' identities?

Hyphenated citizens or not, how do Chinese Canadians position themselves in national narratives?

In Canada, discriminatory legislative acts, such as the Head Tax, imposed on Chinese immigration from 1885 to 1923 and the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 (although it was repealed in 1947, but some of the unfair policies were retained until 1967 when the ethnicity-based immigration system ceased to be in existence), evidence the racist past of this country. Meanwhile, the 1988 Multiculturalism Act fails to acknowledge the historical inequities of race and ethnic relations (Fleras 2014), also contributing to the entrenchment of a problematic cultural essentialism, while neither eliminating ongoing systemic racism nor challenging whiteness on an institutional level. Starting with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway through to current multicultural policies, the exhibition *Far and near: the distance(s) between us* aimed to open up conversations about what Chinese-ness, Canadian-ness and community mean in the evolving political landscape of Canada. It
challenges the model minority stereotype as applied to more recent Chinese immigrants. It attempts to degeneralise them as counterpublics and to highlight how they are being socially, culturally and politically segregated.

From Yellow Peril to the Multicultural Act, how far have we come? Coinciding with Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation, rather than unpack nostalgic sentiments of the past, the artists in *Far and near* weighed in on recollecting some of the less visible as well as some of the more contested histories of the country. Within such commemorative framework, the selection of the works was intended to reflect on issues of historical representation and the aesthetics and politics of the Chinese diaspora in Canada in response to national and transnational networks, as an effort to multicentre Canadian art history as negotiated by the diaspora.

Far and near also sought to bring forward the reality that as of today, Asian Canadian art practices in general are still being under-addressed in various spheres of Canadian contemporary art. Specific to Chinese art, while the global interest in one of the art market's favourites – Chinese contemporary art by Mainland Chinese artists – grows steadily, what place does art by Chinese Canadian artists hold? How can we (further) acknowledge and recognize the practices of Canada's Chinese and diverse Asian communities of artists? Perhaps, it's time for us to move beyond the idea of an Asian diaspora and to think about the idea of 'Global Asias' that can be situated beyond citizenship and territory.

Notes

1. The simultaneous use of the terms ‘Chinese’ and ‘Asian’ here only is to highlight the shared experiences and entangled histories of the Asian Canadian communities, which cannot be neatly divided. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 was the first and only act in Canada that targeted one specific ethnicity, but it has been a major symbol and embodiment of the ‘Yellow Peril’ (see footnote 2 below) sentiments of the country.

2. ‘Yellow Peril’ is a racially discriminatory term coined by the white majority to refer to the skin colour of people of Asian descent in the West, suggesting that Asians were primitive, dangerous and evil. (It is universally accepted that, in North America, the acceptance of the notion of ‘Yellow Peril’ peaked after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, but subtle or forthright, it has been ongoing in different forms through to present days.)

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