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## Dan S. Wang Interview

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**Interviewer: Katy Canzone**  
**Artist: Dan S. Wang**  
**Method: Phone interview, Chicago**  
**Date: May 12, 2013**

*Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 202: Art-Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.*

**Artist Bio:**

Dan S. Wang is a writer, artist, organizer, and printer who was born in the American Midwest in 1968 to immigrant parents. Dan's constant concerns are the relationships between art + politics, critical reflection + social action, place + history. His research includes inquiries into the postindustrial cultural politics of the Midwest, letterpress printing as an archaeology of obsolescence, race and difference in the theater of crisis capitalism, and the cultural landscape of postsocialist China.

As a print media artist he primarily uses letterpress printing and hand set typography but avails himself of other media as words and letterforms hit their limits. His drawings, prints, sculptures, and other projects have been featured in two solo exhibitions and more than twenty-five group exhibitions, but mostly exist in small circles of functional and activist settings.

– bio from <http://prop-press.net/01d.htm>

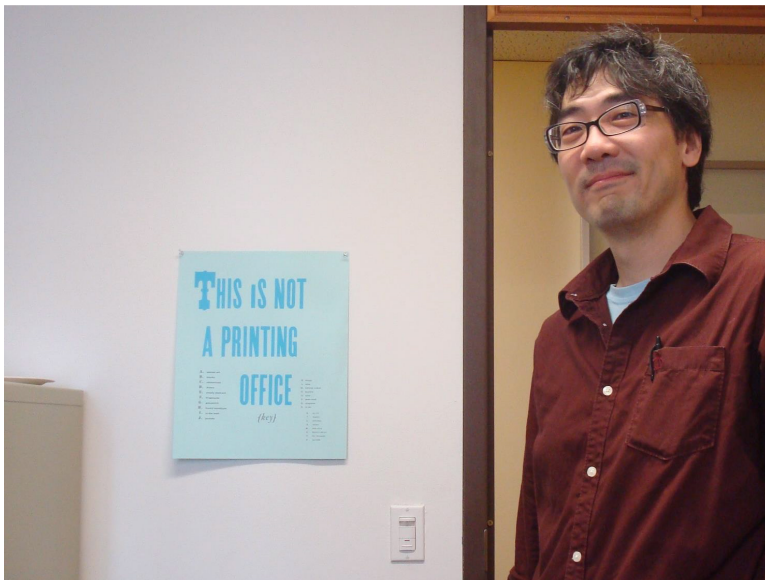


Photo taken by Philip Von Zweck

*Note: This interview was not recorded. Dan S. Wang's answers to my questions are based on my notes, which were then proof read and edited and expanded upon by the artist via e-mail.*

**Katy Canzone:** To start off tell me a little bit about yourself, where you grew up, what your family dynamic was like.

**Dan S. Wang:** I was born in Midland, Michigan in 1968. This is the northern most of the industrial cities of the lower third of Michigan, which is the automobile industry's part of Michigan. Midland is the place where Dow Chemical is headquartered and that was where my father worked his first job as a chemical engineer. My father was part of a wave of Taiwan educated engineers all hired in the mid-late 60's. My father's Chinese-American peers and coworkers were of the same generation. Many of them got married and had kids around the same time and therefore I grew up around other Chinese-Americans.

My parents are actually not from Taiwan. They are from what became South Korea during the Korean conflict. In Korea my parents were from a community of the ethnic Chinese minority. My Father came in 1961 and my mother came some years later around 1963 or '64. I grew up in a restaurant that my parents opened to provide employment for incoming family members. Back in Korea there were certain discriminatory laws against minorities. For example, if you were Chinese you could not register your business in Korea unless you took on a Korean partner. My parents thought there was no real future for them in Korea.

My family is a very entrepreneurial family; my father and his older brother were the first two to come to this country, leaving behind a big extended family in Korean, but understanding that they might eventually help others come over.

**KC:** It seems like you are very inspired by your father.

**DSW:** Even more so by my mother. My mother was the youngest of her family, and the most outward looking of them. She learned English—spoke it very well, in fact—and attended high school and college in Taiwan. She won a scholarship to attend Miami University of Ohio all by herself and even without her parents' permission. After she won the scholarship she told her parents she was going to America and there was nothing they could do about it. She came to America with a suitcase and \$300 in cash. When she arrived on campus she didn't even have a place to stay. She met someone that day who took her in, a kindly local woman named Ms. Braeckney, who became like her second mother in America. You can see how important the immigrant narrative is to me, particularly the part about this being a welcoming country.

**KC:** Is identifying as Asian American important to you? How do you feel when people categorize you in this way?

**DSW:** In my perception I am not categorized as an Asian- American artist, and that was deliberately played. When I finished grad school I had to make a decision. All through grad school everything I did incorporated some element, either theme or motif, that was identifiably Asian, or Chinese, or Chinese-American, or Asian-American- I tend to separate those into four different but overlapping categories- and I didn't know if I wanted that kind of work and those themes and that content to be what my career would be about (and now I'm questioning the whole idea of a "career," but that's another discussion); by this time I had a backlog of ideas I never got around to in grad school—the whole range of things that I've addressed since then. Anyway, when school ended I made the decision not to emphasize my identity as an Asian-American artist *in the work*. As opposed to, in conversation. It's important to note that around 1992-95 (later half of the early 90s) was the first really pronounced flowering of Asian-American cultural stuff in the Midwest. For example, the Asian- American Reissuance came into being in those years in Saint Paul, and was the first organization of its kind in the region (and maybe even

anywhere). That organization highlighted a lot of literary activity and performance stuff but it had a visual arts side to it, as well. Theater Mu of Minneapolis was founded around then and so was the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media in Chicago. So there was a lot happening in those years, it was an exciting, interesting moment where a bunch of organizations were starting that all had this ethnic identity kind of thing- and they were winning grants and finding support. In a sense we were all the children of the 1965 Immigration Act, coming into cultural fruition. I watched this activity from a distance because I was moving around in those years, working some adventurous jobs, not having made the leap yet to focusing on being an artist. But even then I could see that Asian- American artists were making things happen for Asian- American communities and beyond, and that one consequence of this was a “label-ization” of things Asian-American.

It’s not even that I resisted the label so much as it was that I subscribed to a wider view- a political analysis that went far beyond being an Asian American. So fifteen, almost twenty years later I find myself not being firstly categorized as Asian- American when it comes to defining what kind of an artist I am. I made the right decision. It allows me to have more control over asserting my identity. I assert it when I want to, or see it as useful, while hardly ever being categorized by identity. Let’s put it this way. It is about *identification*, an action, rather than *identity*, as a stagnant category. I fully realize that I am afforded opportunities because I am a part of this minority group. And in the circles I work in- the political activist-artist circles- the people are often mostly white, and I stand out. I feel it has all worked in my favor, i.e., avoiding ghettoization and still being able to benefit from a minority membership.

**KC:** You are seen as an artist/curator/political activist etc. Which role do you enjoy most?

**DSW:** The most satisfying is the printing, any of the traditional manual printing techniques are the most fun on the most basic level of feeling like you’re creating something that wasn’t there before. The writing and blogging is satisfying in a different way because writing and blogging is surrounded by discourse. There is a gap between making art and the audience and it is always a problem. You show it, and people come to see it and maybe it exists somewhere in documentation, but you have to work to tie it into the conversation/discourse. By comparison writing and blogging is automatically part of an ongoing exchange with a lot of people- there is a social element, a guaranteed dynamic of getting feedback/knowing the work is going out and being thought over. They are definitely two different types of satisfaction.

Political activism is a necessary sphere of activity, given the society we live in. Activism can be very tedious and nowadays it can be its own career path. I think professionalized activism is another problem, and that’s partly why I chose to professionalize as an artist. My activism could then be another part of my art practice, with all the experimentation, wandering, and play that art making includes.

Curator? I never think of myself as a curator. If anybody else does, I would love to meet them.

**KC:** Do you have a particular philosophy about art?

**DSW:** I have reasons for doing what I do, but on a larger level, when it comes to consuming art and what kind of art I am interested in and what kinds of tastes I have developed over the years, I think I have a very open mind. People are often surprised that I am not as rigid as I may come off

in my writing. And part of that comes from being a teacher, which involves being able to talk to every student intelligently and in a way that encourages them, whatever their interests are. Teaching art students, for example, you may have a student who is obsessed with robots (or octopi, or hot rods, or filigree, or you name it) and you have to learn how to talk to that student in a way that encourages them to continue to create. So teaching has helped me to maintain that kind of openness. That said, I definitely have my own obsessions.

**KC:** When looking through your prints, it seems like you favor outside displays with a lot of repetition; what inspired you to use this technique?

**DSW:** Whenever you're showing artwork outside, it is competing with everything else outside. Enlarging the scale through repetition, and in my case I am printing with variation; printing on different kinds of paper, using multiple layered images, printing the same message in different ways. Part of the reason I do this is because it is fun to do; there is a built-in surprise with the process, you never know exactly what it's going to look like when you lift that paper off the block. You can never exactly predict what the print will look like. I am not such an academic formalist that each my prints stands alone as a formally innovative print. When that happens I will put the print aside and present it as a stand-alone work. But when I don't feel the prints are strong enough to stand alone, I'll see if they make for a striking pattern if I put them together.

Also, I should say, if you're looking for pictures of my work online, you won't find too many compared to all that I have made. Much of my work has never made it online; the writing, on the other hand, is in lots of places. It goes back to that gap I was talking about.

**KC:** What inspired you to create protest art during Obama campaign? In particular I was looking at a particular poster you printed during the Obama campaign, what was the inspiration behind that? [figure 1]

**DSW:** There was about a week-long period between when Sarah Palin was introduced to the country and when she started to be picked apart. And it was in that week I got really scared that the campaign was going to be lost, that McCain really had a chance to be president. In that moment I felt the message needed to be a direct reminder of what the campaign was really about. The campaign was really about, as I say in the poster, having "had enough." Obama was really riding the fed-up wave, properly so, and I felt the campaign needed to be about refusing to forget what had happened in the previous eight years. Part of what Barack Obama benefited from was the way everybody took the initiative to make pro-Obama stuff. The campaign did not have control over the Obama message. And the poster I made was something of an antidote to the positive belief in Obama, that was somehow a savior. I lived in Hyde Park through Obama's years as a state senator, so I knew he was smart and had some integrity, but that he was no radical.

**KC:** As far as feedback you receive on sites such as Vimeo and your blog, do any comments stick out in particular?

**DSW:** It is always nice to get comments but few are memorable. Comment threads are rarely the place for serious exchange. It's like Twitter—who wants to have a discussion through such a limited and casual medium? The text field for a blog comment is not much better than that. The best comments and exchanges happen in person, by phone, or sometimes by email.

**KC:** What about conversations with your parents about your works?

**DSW:** My mother is now deceased; however, I have had very few conversations with my parents about my political activism. My mother was not an intellectual, she was very bright, one of the most intelligent women I have known. She was an unbelievable judge of character, and could talk to just about any kind of person, and was an amazingly organized person. But she was not a serious political thinker, and did not have a good sense for history. My father is an intellectual with a great grasp of history, and a well-informed grasp of Asian history in particular, so it is fun to talk to about that stuff with him. As far as the interpretation of art goes, though, my father is pretty untrained, and he does not have the vocabulary to discuss art in a detailed way. But he pays attention to global economics and current events, so I check in with him about those kinds of things—the money supply, commodity prices, development in China, and so forth. He pays attention to Chinese language media, too, so he’s helpful to me that way.

For about ten years, before my mother became too ill to travel, my parents made probably forty or more trips to China. So we talk China all the time, too.

**KC:** What are you currently working on?

**DSW:** I’m trying to print as much as I can, but they are all very small things, single prints or a poster here or there. They accumulate, and currently I am showing a selection of them on a wall in a gallery in Madison. This is my first time showing in Madison since I moved here in 2007. A lot of people in town are seeing my work for the first time and are curious. I am going to continue putting up arrangements of my printed matter in a free form pinned display. The first time I ever did this was in Vienna, Austria, where I was working as a visiting artist. I wanted to show people what I make and the prints were convenient to take with me. This happened again when I went to the Kansas City Art Institute for a visiting gig. This show in Madison is the third time around, and I feel it is the most finished presentation, the least impromptu, the most thought through. I will continue doing it, and continue printing; it is way to keep up with my printing chops, to continue the craft of printing.

More specifically I have a project in Chicago in the fall- it is the exhibition component of a yearlong project called “Never the Same.” NTS is similar to what you are working on- building an archive, the NTS one focuses on socially engaged art in Chicago. There are five artists taking part in the exhibition; each of the five artists has or has had a deep engagement with socially engaged art in Chicago. I am the only one of the five who no longer actually lives in the Chicago. I am not sure what I am going to do for that exhibit but it will probably involve some printing.

[Dan S. Wang and I discussed the bigger context this interview would be placed into and through the discussion he decided he’d like to include information on another long-term project he has been working on]

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This goes back to the question of what I am currently working on. I am working on a larger ongoing research project; this is something I have been doing for the last few years that involves trying to figure out and describe parts and examples of what I call the Global Midwest—a term that the journalist Richard Longworth also uses. I have been doing this mostly in a collaborative

context with a group of artists called Compass. Compass is made up of artists and writers from around the Midwest, including and especially Chicago.

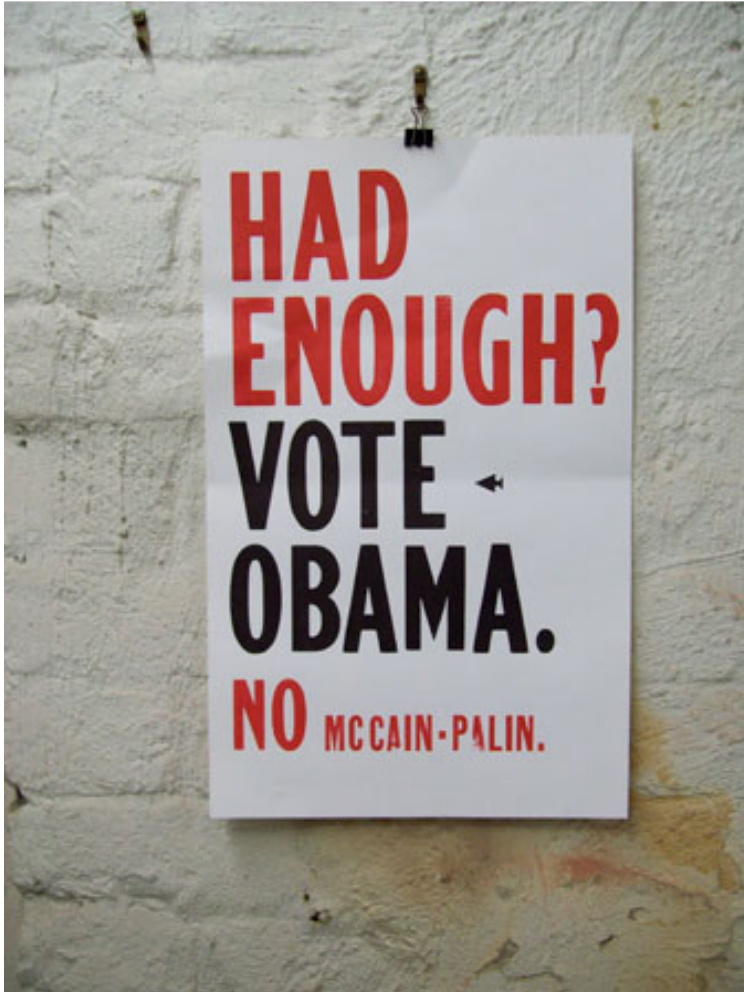
My own contribution has been researching and exploring the connections between where I grew up and have lived, and places in China; and it is through this experience of making myself a conduit between the two that I function. So this is another dimension to what you could call my current work.

Just for example, around the Midwest I have occasionally been doing events that are about explaining recent Chinese history to people in the United States so they have an idea of what's going on and why China is the way it is. And on the flip side, when I go to China I have been trying to explain what the Midwest is to the people there through different media. On my last trip to Beijing I brought with me a handful of vinyl records, which I played and made comments on before an audience at an art space called Homeshop; all the selections were of music that came out of the Detroit area—the full set list is here. <http://prop-press.typepad.com/blog/2011/05/selections-for-homeshop-music-from-detroit-and-michigan-some-of-us-in-this-room-are-just-embarking-on-about-twenty-days-o.html>

I played these records in front of a projected selection of vintage Detroit moving imagery from the Prelinger Archive. The point was to tell the story of Detroit and why that city was so important to American history and the global market. In China people are fascinated by American culture but they don't often have well-informed people to guide them through it. Their understanding of America is similarly shallow and distorted in the way Chinese culture is understood here. Particularly the countercultures and subcultures—between these there are few pathways of exchange and mutual learning. Popular and mass media cannot be left to fill the interpretation void. What was once a concern for identity has changed over the years of my work, and the years of globalization I have lived through, to become a project of sharing through the hybridity that is now taken for granted but rarely used to its potential.

**END**

Figure 1:



Barack Obama/Anti-Amnesia, 2008, letterpress. Displayed at the Wettlinger space, 16th District, Vienna.

photo from: <http://prop-press.net/01c1.htm>