

**Between Selves and Others**  
**Exploring Strategic Approaches within Visual Art**

by  
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## Abstract

This body of research investigates how visual artists express ideas or meanings about *Otherness* and issues of belonging in their art. The focus of this study is on women artists with an (East) Asian diasporic background; however, the context of the inquiry includes other American and European artists of various cultural backgrounds. A further aim is to explore the artistic strategies and the historical circumstances of the works as well as to understand the theoretical correlations. The author of this study is a visual artist who has been exploring similar issues in her own artistic practice.

In order to examine various themes of *Otherness*, selected pairs of artists – where at least one is a woman artist of (East) Asian diasporic background – are compared and analysed using the following four categories: *literary devices* (such as irony, parody, connotation or juxtaposition), *reappropriation* (cultural references which are reclaimed and transformed), *anamorphic situations* (distortion of conventional ways of viewing in order to become aware of other bodily senses and experiences), and *theoretical correlations* (connections between artistic practice and relevant theoretical concepts). The specific artists and artworks chosen are: Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1965) with Patty Chang's Melons (at a Loss) (1998), Lorna Simpson's work in the 1980s and 1990s with Nikki S. Lee's Projects (1997-2001), Guillermo Gómez-Peña with Fiona Tan, and Yong Soon Min with Mona Hatoum. In addition, the author presents critical social and cultural developments that influenced these works such as the historical background of representations of Asian women in America, the rise of the Asian American movement, and the shift in contemporary art discourse from concerns of 'identity politics' to a 'post-identity' framework. Finally, correlations are made between the artistic strategies and relevant theoretical discussions about representations of race and gender, the role of power, knowledge, and truth in ethnographic practices of identification and categorization, and the function of place and 'cultural identity' in relation to concepts of origin and belonging.

The results of this research confirm the significance of cultural, historical, and geographic experiences on both the conception and reception of visual art and indicate that various artistic strategies have the potential to expose and undermine culturally constructed meanings of difference. Despite the abundance of research conducted in this area, the scope and framework of this particular study are original not only because it is written from the perspective of a practicing artist, but also because the focus on artistic practices from women artists with (East) Asian diasporic backgrounds is located within a more wide-ranging investigation of artistic approaches that articulate and interrogate themes of *Otherness*.

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## Introduction to Dissertation

*As the daughter of Chinese immigrants, I was born and grew up in suburban USA in the 1960s through the 1970s. A significant memory was the first time that I became aware that others saw me as 'different'. I had started kindergarten in suburban Maryland and most of my classmates were 'normal' looking, either 'white' or 'black'. There was, however, a strange-looking boy with black hair and slanted eyes that looked 'different' from the others. To my great consternation, all the other children thought the 'weird boy' and I were related or even twins, since we 'looked exactly alike'. Although I could see that the boy was visibly different, I saw my family and myself as 'normal'. I was shocked to find out that I was not.*

After this experience, I often wished that I had blue eyes and blonde hair and looked like the dolls and the Barbies that I owned. Eventually, I realized that there were other people who had similar stories, and I began to identify myself as an 'Asian American' or an American of 'Asian'<sup>1</sup> descent. After I moved to Europe (Germany and later Switzerland) in the late 1980s, I was confronted with another cultural identification situation, especially with the innocent question "Where do you come from?" Upon hearing my answer "America", the inevitable reaction was astonishment and the second question "But where do you *really* come from?" which I found difficult to answer. Many Germans and Swiss seemed more interested in the place of my ethnic origin and often believed that because of my Chinese heritage, my mother language must be Chinese. They were surprised to hear that it was not, and even commented on the difficulty in differentiating between the various Asian ethnicities: "I never can tell the difference between Chinese or Japanese, can you?" Although these comments and questions occur less frequently than before, it still appears to be unusual for someone who looks like me to be 'from' America.

Consequently, after I began to study photography in Switzerland in the mid-1990s, I often chose to explore my autobiography and my Asian diasporic background in my artwork. I attempted to communicate the double-sided feelings I had to my family's search for tradition and an 'American identity'. For example, I made two artworks that used old family photographs from Christmas. Christmas was, for my family, the ultimate holiday to document their successful new living standards by photographing our smiling faces next to large quantities of wrapped presents or with a roasted turkey. In fact, the act of posing and smiling in front of various Christmas decorations while waiting for the self-timer are part of my earliest memories of Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, 'Asian' will be used in the US American colloquial sense to refer to a person of East Asian descent (e.g. China, Japan, Korea, etc.) or Southeast Asian descent (e.g. Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, etc.). I am aware that in Britain 'Asian' usually refers to someone from South Asia (e.g. India, Pakistan, etc.).

In time, I realized that my artistic practice which focused on my Chinese immigrant family, my body, or representations of myself were an exploration about various ideas of *Otherness*. Furthermore, I became aware of other artists who were examining comparable themes about origin, belonging, and difference in their work and that these artists often had mixed cultural backgrounds analogous to mine. In addition, I began to reflect on various social and cultural theories including post-colonialism or Asian American studies. Throughout my Swiss art photography education (1994-1998), theory was limited and references to post-colonial discourse were completely absent. Even now, these discussions are unusual in contemporary Swiss art and cultural discourses as these themes seem irrelevant because of Switzerland's historically passive role in colonialist activities. Thus, to a certain extent, this dissertation is the product of my personal reflections about these themes which I hope can extend my own artistic practice in the future.

The research from this study has emerged from my interest in exploring various strategic approaches used to make visual art which both questions culturally constructed meanings of difference and reveals the cultural and historical processes and experiences involved in viewing and understanding art. In this introduction, I first present some background information about the demographics of Chinese migration to Europe in order to establish the increasing importance of investigations about cultural representations of Chinese or other East Asians in Europe. In addition, I include a few key references to theoretical concepts about the *Other* and related subjectivities as well as their connection to ideas about identity in various discourses such as post-colonialism, feminism and cultural studies. A comparative research method offers new perspectives by reviewing similarities and differences of specific examples. Thus, my methodology is to explore specific themes of *Otherness* through a comparison of women artists of Asian diasporic backgrounds with other American or European artists from various cultural backgrounds using a proposed set of categories. Finally, I provide an overview of the dissertation structure and the four main chapters. In this way, I hope that this research, which developed from my own personal interest and experiences, can contribute to enhancing the recognition of the significance of artistic practice in culture and society.

Currently available demographic data about migration to Europe indicate that there are growing numbers of ethnic Chinese who, similar to me, are not 'from China'. Various statistics have shown increasing migratory flows of Chinese to Europe since the 1980s that have resulted in new communities of 'overseas Chinese'.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese history scholar Gregor Benton argues in his article "The Chinese in Europe: Origins and Transformations" that a main reason for this demographic shift was the liberalization of travel policies for Chinese citizens after Mao's death in 1978 (64). According

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<sup>2</sup> Originally a Chinese expression, 'overseas Chinese' refers to people of Chinese birth or descent who live outside of China or Taiwan. See Elena Barabantseva's book *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities, and Nationalism* (2011).

to the 2011 census data about overseas Chinese populations, an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Chinese live in Europe with the largest populations in France (estimated 440,000) and the UK (estimated 400,000).<sup>3</sup> In the UK, this group is identified as ‘British Chinese’ and has increased from 0.4% to 0.7% of the total population since 2001.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, only an estimated 90,000 overseas Chinese reside in Germany whereas Switzerland is not even listed.<sup>5</sup> Using Swiss demographic data between 1980 and 2012,<sup>6</sup> an increase from 0.018% to 0.044% of the total resident population from East Asian or Southeast Asian countries is apparent but still does not compare to the statistics in France or the UK. Thus, despite increased numbers of Asians in certain areas of Europe, an awareness of issues related to overseas Chinese or other East Asians in Switzerland is still quite unusual and not often explored in the Swiss art context.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the growing presence of overseas Chinese, Benton notes: “Chinese outside of China have always suffered ethnic stereotyping” (64). For example, he states that although the Chinese are “scarcely less diverse than the indigenous Europeans, ... people perversely imagine them as cohesive to the point of clannishness and bound by common interests” (64). However, only limited research about Asians in Europe is available with a handful of studies focussed on demographic information<sup>8</sup> or economic developments, and only a few books that explore cultural representations of Chinese or other East Asians in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Books about Asian diasporas in German speaking European countries are even more scarce.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, artistic practices from visual artists of Asian diasporas have remained essentially unexplored in a Euro-American context. In comparison, the USA has had a longer history of examining both these issues, as exemplified by the Asian American movement and its cultural practices, which makes it an important area to review for this dissertation.

In contrast to the limited amount of material that deal specifically with my theme, there is no lack of theoretical sources from the humanities and fine arts that explore themes of *Otherness* and the relationship between the *Self* and the *Other*. Some of these concepts, especially in the areas of cultural studies, feminism and post-colonial theory, have been pertinent to this dissertation. In order to

<sup>3</sup> See “Overseas Chinese Population Distribution” from Overseas Chinese Affairs Council, ROC website.

<sup>4</sup> See “2011 Census: Key Statistics for England and Wales, March 2011” from Office for National Statistics, UK Government, website.

<sup>5</sup> See above, footnote 3.

<sup>6</sup> See “Ständige ausländische Wohnbevölkerung nach Staatsangehörigkeit (1980-2012)” from Federal Statistical Office (FSO), Swiss Federal Government website.

<sup>7</sup> Swiss artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds who include issues about their heritage in their art include Cat Tuong Nguyen and Quynh Dong, who were born in Vietnam and came to Switzerland as children. Other Swiss artists such as Mai-Thu Perret or Elodie Pong who were born in Switzerland or USA do not refer to their diasporic background in their work.

<sup>8</sup> For a good overview, see Li Minghuan’s article “Chinese Migration to Europe: An Overview” (2010) or Gregor Benton’s article “The Chinese in Europe: Origins and Transformations” (2011).

<sup>9</sup> See *Diasporic Histories: Cultural Archives of Chinese Transnationalism* (2009) edited by Andrea Riemenschneider and Deborah L. Madsen or Flemming Christiansen’s book *Chinatown, Europe: An Exploration of Overseas Chinese Identity in the 1990s* (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Two notable exceptions include *Asiatische Deutsche: Vietnamesische Diaspora and Beyond* (2012) edited by Kien Nghi Ha which explores the Vietnamese diasporic community in Germany, or Ruby Jana Sircar’s *Liquid Homelands: The Sonic Productions of Second Generation [South] Asian Women* which examines sound and popular music productions from women with South Asian diasporic backgrounds in German speaking countries.

understand various connotations of *Other* and *Otherness*, I found cultural theorist Stuart Hall's writings very helpful. In his essay "The Spectacle of the 'Other'", Hall outlines theoretical arguments in four disciplines where "difference" determines how we perceive and relate to other people and things. First, referring to Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic argument, Hall discusses how we use binary oppositions (such as the difference between "day" and "night") in linguistics in order to create meanings in language. Correspondingly, in chapter two of this dissertation, I will examine more in-depth semiotic constructions of representation and meaning in artistic works. Another argument from Hall is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism where "we need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other'" (235). Through interaction with others, we can start to make sense of what things mean in relationship to our environment and ourselves. Similarly, I feel that both my art and this dissertation have been dialogic processes. Hall's third argument, which refers to Mary Douglas (as well as Emile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss), comes from anthropology where each culture assigns meaning by defining principles of classification. In this explanation, binary oppositions are also significant "because one must establish a clear difference between things in order to classify them" (235). Chapter three of this dissertation will further investigate issues of classification as well as the history of anthropology in contemporary artistic practices. Referring to both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Hall's fourth argument is psychoanalytic and contends that differences are crucial in the formation of subjectivities and identities: "Subjectivity can only arise and a sense of 'self' be formed through the symbolic and unconscious relations which the young child forges with a significant 'Other' which is outside – i.e. different from – itself" (238). In the same manner, in chapter four, although my emphasis will be on diaspora, place and belonging rather than psychoanalysis, I will explore correlations between place, belonging, and identity formation reflected in visual art.

Feminist discourse has also made significant contributions to theories about the *Other*. Simone de Beauvoir's influential 1949 book *The Second Sex* analysed the concept of 'Woman' in Western culture. She determined that 'Man' is defined as the *Self* or the absolute human type while 'Woman' is always measured against this standard and found to be lacking and inferior: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xxii). According to Beauvoir, men have historically been characterized as positive, neutral, and essential, while women are only defined opposing to or in relation to men and thus negative and inessential. Beauvoir recognizes that a common way to understand the *Self* is through interactions with others; in fact, she states: "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other..." (xxiii). However, she asserts that women have been systematically oppressed and exploited in society and, that in order for feminism to succeed and to free themselves from this existence, women must recognize and reject this construction. These ideas about the *Other* were also fundamental for many post-colonial theories about marginalized peoples.

Edward Said's seminal book Orientalism written in 1978, challenged Western perceptions and representations of the East. Although Said's main focus was the Middle East, he notes that especially in America, Orient often refers to the Far East (mainly Japan and China). Said contends that the 'Orient' is constructed by and in relation to the West and exists as a mirror image of what is inferior, and alien or *Other*:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness (7).

Said eloquently describes the signification of group identification and ideas of belonging in concepts of the *Other*. Furthermore, he argues that the tradition of systematically distorted and exotic representations of non-Western cultures has been shaped by the hegemonic attitudes of European imperialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony... The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* – that is submitted to being – *made* Oriental (5-6; emphasis in original). Said's claims are connected to Gramsci's idea of hegemony where the dominating class retains its power with the consent of the subordinating classes by projecting their view of the world as 'natural' or 'common sense' which then becomes the consensus view. In addition, following concepts from Michel Foucault, Said emphasizes the relationship between power and knowledge and contended that the Occident creates and controls knowledge produced about the *Other* in order to legitimize its power. The body chapters of this dissertation will explore these themes further in my investigation of contemporary art practices.

As seen above, ideas about *Self* and *Other* are also intimately related to notions surrounding 'identity'. Hall has written considerably about his view that identities are "fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed... subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" ("Questions of Cultural Identity" 4). Because the concept of identity has been so thoroughly examined and theorized in multiple discourses, as well as in several contradictory arguments, it can be difficult to navigate through the different meanings. In addition to Hall, I found discussions concerning identity from Linda Martin Alcoff stimulating for my research. In her book Visible Identities, Alcoff focuses on social identities visibly marked on the body and distinguishes between two aspects of the *Self*: "public identity" and "lived subjectivity". "[P]ublic



identity is our socially perceived *Self* within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live” (92-93). In contrast, “lived subjectivity” is “who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our ‘agency’” (93; emphasis in original). In this way, our identities can be described as the relationships between perceived identifications from external influences, and our own sense of *Self* or inner subjectivity. However, Alcoff cautions against the “interior/exterior” terminology of the *Self* which implies that these two aspects are distinct entities instead of “mutually constitutive” (93) as well as how many constructions of identity can be “overly homogenizing, essentialist, reductive, or simplistic” (14). This dissertation will approach identity-related artistic practices similarly, distinguishing between the processes of perceived identification and inner subjectivity in order to conceptualize the relationship between the external influences such as historical, cultural and social conditions that situate an artist and the subjective nature of artistic production.

Similarly, Michel Foucault’s concepts of discourse and subject position also play a key role in these discussions. According to Foucault, all forms of knowledge and meaning are formed from systems of thought determined by cultural and historical processes or ‘discourse’. For example, Edward Said’s description of Orientalism, discussed previously, establishes it as “a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, ...” (1-2). In this way, it follows a certain internal set of rules and codes specific to itself. An individual or a ‘subject’ does not create him or herself, but is formed within a set of discourses. Thus, a ‘subject-position’ is the idea that a specific discourse determines what that subject can think or do in a specific situation. Whereas Alcoff’s ideas of “public identity” and “lived subjectivity” are concerned with the question of identity and the *Self*, Foucault’s subject-position is pertinent to his main concept of discourse. Stuart Hall explains this idea by stating that we “become its ‘subjects’ by ‘subjecting’ ourselves to its meaning, power and regulation. All discourses, then, construct subject-positions from which alone they make sense” (“Work of Representation” 56). Although Hall concludes that discourses create the subject-position from which they are the most meaningful, this does not mean that we cannot resist a specific discourse by shifting ourselves to an alternative discourse. However, he points out that knowledge is fundamentally a product of discourse and not of the subjects who speak or communicate it: “Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture” (55; emphasis in original). Thus, I realize that my art as well as this dissertation can only produce new knowledge within the specific discourses and limitations where I am engaged.

Another significant concept was the idea of “situated knowledge”, first introduced by Donna Haraway in order to describe feminist objectivity or “critical positioning”. In her 1988 seminal article “Situated Knowledge”, Haraway questions the idea of impartial or objective knowledge, what she calls “an

illusion, the god-trick” (582) and argues “for positioning, and situating, where partiality and universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims.... I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere...” (589). Thus, the nature of objectivity is related to personal experience and understanding. Although Haraway recognizes objective knowledge that is in some sense “real”, she emphasizes its aspects as shareable, communicable or transmissible: “partial, locatable critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (584). Using vision as a metaphor for knowledge, she argues that all seeing/knowing is embodied and invariably a located, partial perspective rather than a disembodied and objectifying all-knowing gaze. Furthermore, marginalized perspectives or “subjugated standpoints” offer more possibilities for “knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination”; however, just “being” marginalized does not guarantee critical positioning which is required to “see well” (585). Instead, she contends that “the split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history” (586). Multidimensional subjectivity which is thus necessarily imperfect but partially connected can be enabling and transformative for the “productions of knowledge” (592). Recognition of my own critical subjectivity or acknowledging that my observations come from a specific cultural and biological position is thus important in this dissertation and I attempt to use Haraway’s approach to think critically about how art and ideas about identity are situated in a network of interconnections between society and culture in order to explore themes of *Otherness*.

In art discourse, the question of subjectivity and positioning also exists and often determines the meaning and even the value of art. For example, in her book *Vision and Difference*,<sup>11</sup> British art historian Griselda Pollock refers both to Edward Said and Michel Foucault in her feminist analysis of art history. Pollock argues that Western art history has been a masculine discourse which supports specific underlying values and assumptions such as the figure of the creative artist: “one major articulation of the contradictory nature of bourgeois ideals of masculinity” (16). Furthermore, “High Culture” has been instrumental for the confirmation and distribution of “relative values and meanings for the ideological constructs of masculinity and femininity” where creativity is masculine, and the image is feminine produced for the “desiring masculine gaze” (161-162). However, during the 1970s (and continuing through the mid-1990s), conventions in art and cultural discourse were challenged by concepts of ‘identity politics’ and multiculturalism, particularly in the USA and Great Britain. Marginalized social groups recognized their oppression and initiated political activity based on their group identity which was then referred to as “politics of identity”. These ideas were exemplified by

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<sup>11</sup> See also Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker’s book: *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981).

several important art exhibitions in the USA<sup>12</sup> and Great Britain<sup>13</sup> which included work by artists who had been excluded from mainstream art discourses because of some aspect of their identity. In the mid-1990s, however, a backlash against ideas about 'identity politics' emerged and many cultural movements with the prefix 'post' developed as a reaction to or as a rejection of certain directions or concerns: 'post-feminism,' 'post-black,' 'post-queer' or 'post-identity' are some examples. Frequently embedded in popular culture or the mass media, these declarations assert that the globalized world has progressed to the point where these concerns are no longer significant. However, at the same time, various conflicts, often violent, based on perceived identifications including religion, nationality, ethnicity or sexuality have not ceased; thus, I believe these issues are still highly relevant in our contemporary world.

In art discourse, adverse reaction against artistic production which critically examined identity related issues also occurred. The term 'post-identity' became popular for the notion that art should not be affected by the artist's perceived identification. However, as the US feminist art scholar and curator Amelia Jones observes in her book *Seeing Differently*: "art is always already about 'identity' in more ways than the obvious: the artwork is always already identified in relation to various kinds of culture, various kinds of subject, various kinds of belief" (78). Fundamental concepts about aesthetics and art are imbedded within European based cultures understanding of subjectivity. In addition, both supporters as well as opponents of identity-related art often endorse the concept of post-identity art practices. Art theorist Alpesh Kantilal Patel observes: "The former does so purportedly to distinguish between different waves of artistic production concerned with primarily racial, gendered, and sexual difference, but seems to fall back on conceptualizing identity as positional or fixed; while the latter suggests that we are post or over identity, but only to return artistic value back to a dis-embodied art object" ("Open Secrets in 'Post-identity' Era"). His remarks point out the inherent difficulties with discussions about art with regards to aspects of identity and my own struggles in this dissertation to continuously interrogate fixed positions in constructions of identity. Jones offers a possible suggestion out of this quandary: "The key here is to acknowledge the complex histories of art and theory explicitly addressing the politics of identity, respecting the important need in the past to identify (construct) binaries, while eschewing the repetition of these binaries in this renewed theoretical framework" (173).

Following these arguments from Pollock and Jones, as well as Haraway, my contention is that the meaning of art is subjective and always situated in a network of interconnections between history, culture, and society. Furthermore, art is inherently a subjective expression of an artist and thus cannot be separated from the background and interests of the artist. As my research investigates artistic

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<sup>12</sup> An important exhibition in USA was the 1993 Whitney Biennial which will be further explored in chapter two.

<sup>13</sup> A landmark exhibition in Great Britain was "The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain" (1989) which was curated by Rasheed Araeen.

approaches for representations of *Otherness* which resonate with my own subject-position, these above ideas and theories were decisive for the selection of artistic works that I examine in this dissertation.

Clearly, certain physical markers of difference such as skin colour, gender, eye shape, etc., often determine our reaction to someone. However, the issue is not that we are all different, but that some physical markers have meanings that connote beliefs about that person's personality, abilities or intelligence. As Stuart Hall observes in his filmed lecture Race, the Floating Signifier,<sup>14</sup> classifying things is a human impulse, one that is necessary to determine meaning and to understand the world around us. However, a problem arises "when the systems of classification become the objects of the disposition of power" in the categorising of human beings; in other words, when these physical markers of difference become the reason one group of people receives more advantages than another. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier with Said's discussion about Orientalism, in order for the dominant group to maintain its power, the meanings of these signifiers appear to be 'natural' or normal – this is how cultural hegemony functions. Thus, as Hall argues in his book Representation, representations of difference (including race, gender, class, and more recently, faith or religion) in media and culture not only reflect but also constitute 'knowledge' and meanings about what these markers signify.

A key argument for Hall, and for this dissertation, is that meanings of representation are never 'fixed' or permanent; instead, they are constantly dependent on historical circumstances and conditions. In this way, our 'knowledge' or assumptions about the *Other* can be seen as culturally constructed. Moreover, cultural production (including both 'high' art and 'low' or 'popular' culture) becomes not only a tool for the dominant group, but also a possible form of resistance against cultural hegemony that can shift meanings of difference.<sup>15</sup> In his essay "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" Hall writes: "Cultural strategies that can make a difference, that's what I'm interested in – those that can make a difference and can shift the dispositions of power" (468). Similar to Hall, Griselda Pollock argues that because cultural ideology is always evolving, there are possibilities for resistance and change (Vision and Difference 26-29). According to Pollock, art is not reflective of nor constrained by dominant social belief systems; instead, she contends: "Artists work in but also on ideology" (Vision and Difference 47). As a practicing visual artist, I am both inspired and intimidated by Hall and Pollock. If art is a form of cultural production that can change or revise dominant ideological meanings about the *Other*, where do I begin? What kind of artistic strategies or approaches "make a difference" and "shift dispositions of power"? These are some of the questions that stimulated and influenced this research, in addition to other, more tangible concerns for my own artistic practice. For this dissertation, I ask, how do artists with 'in-between' cultural identities, especially women artists

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<sup>14</sup> Race, the Floating Signifier is a filmed lecture at Goldsmith's College by Stuart Hall directed by Sut Jhully, Media Education Foundation, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> See also Hall's essays: "New Ethnicities" (1989), "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1989), and "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1992).

with Asian diasporic backgrounds, represent notions about *Otherness*? What new correlations can be drawn between theoretical discourse and artistic practice?

In order to answer these questions, I investigate artistic strategies from artists with mixed cultural backgrounds who explore related themes of cultural identities and belonging in their work. As I was interested in examining perspectives similar to mine, I was attracted to contemporary women artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds who often explored issues of representation. For example, I selected Yoko Ono, a Japanese American, because of her image in popular culture, her historical importance, and her conceptual performance Cut Piece (1965) and Patty Chang, a Chinese American, because of her role in contemporary visual art culture and her critical performances and videos of popular Asian female stereotypes (often depicting herself) and exemplified by the video Melons (at a Loss) (1998). I noticed several interesting similarities and differences in these performances and explore these in chapter one. Similarly, Nikki S. Lee's Projects (1997-2001) incorporates images of herself, a Korean American woman, in various contexts and challenges notions about difference and belonging. Although I believe her intentions for this series could be questioned, I appreciate the originality and variety of her diverse roles. The photographs and videos from Fiona Tan, of mixed heritage and living in Amsterdam, offer a differentiated perspective about representations of the *Other* and interrogate ideas about truth and authenticity. I have seen several of her works in various contexts and feel strongly connected to her approach to art as well as the content. Subsequently, I present Korean American artist Yong Soon Min, who investigates concepts about cultural identities and origin through her re-presentation of history in installations and photographs or collages. Politically active background in the Asian American movement during the 1980s and 1990s, Min's exploration of her hybrid cultural identities was significant for her development as an artist and has similarities to my own artistic process.

In order to compare the similarities and differences, I also include three other artists who reflect about related issues concerning the *Other* in their artistic practices and whose works have personally affected and influenced me. For instance, I discuss artworks from the 1980s and 1990s of the African American artist Lorna Simpson, whose large-scale photographs with text were particularly significant during the popularity of multiculturalism and identity politics in US art discourse. As I mentioned before, I was essentially unaware of these topics during my Swiss art photography education, where I remember artists such as Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky with Bernd and Hilda Becher (Dusseldorf Art Academy), Jeff Wall, Nan Goldin or Nobuyoshi Araki being discussed. However, at this time, I discovered a catalogue of Lorna Simpson in a Swiss art book store<sup>16</sup> and immediately purchased it. For me, Simpson's catalogue was one of the first times, if not the first time, I came into contact with a

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<sup>16</sup> Although work from Lorna Simpson is included in important Swiss public and private collections (e.g. Fotomuseum Winterthur or Ringier), until now, 2014, Simpson has never shown in Switzerland, either in a solo exhibition or in a group show.

critical examination of identity-related issues of *Otherness* in an art context and thus always remained a critical reference figure for me. In chapter two, I will compare these iconic earlier works with Nikki S. Lee's Projects (1997-2001) series. Furthermore, I examine Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican American artist and cultural activist known for his provocative performances with extreme stereotypes that reveal cultural preconceptions about the *Other*. During the initial phase of my research, I read several of Gómez-Peña's books and writings. His direct, spirited and often contentious style of writing which includes a nuanced sense of complex theoretical concepts from the perspective of a practicing artist was inspiring and significant in developing my own thoughts about these themes. I will make a comparison between his artistic practice and that of Fiona Tan in chapter three. Finally, I analyse the artistic practice of Mona Hatoum, a twice-exiled Palestinian, who communicates the condition of exile with ambiguous objects and installations that make the familiar unfamiliar and threatening. I have had the opportunity to see several large-scale installations from Mona Hatoum and have invariably been deeply moved and affected. Furthermore, her well-known complex background as a dual exile was relevant for me in the exploration of concepts of origin and belonging which also made it interesting to compare her to Yong Soon Min in chapter four.

Far from being comprehensive, this research is located within a specific point of view. My choices for artists and artistic works are affected by my personal history, my artistic practice in photo-based and video works, and my context in Switzerland and Europe. I posit that these contemporary artists have created works that offered alternative, multiple, and relational perspectives about issues of difference and concepts of belonging. However, I do not wish to reduce their complex backgrounds or their artistic practice to their ethnicity and gender nor do I consider their perspectives homogenous or universally definitive. Instead, I am more inspired by an intersectional theory of identification that examines the intersection or interaction of socially and constructed categories of identity (e.g. class, race, or gender) on multiple levels. Rather than approaching sexism or racism independently, the intersectional approach analyses the interrelation between different categories of oppression that contribute to the creation of a system of power and oppression.<sup>17</sup> For me, there are multiple axes of social relations and subject formations that contribute to each individual; however, because of my own experiences and background, I am interested in artistic practices that reflect on concepts about the *Other* and articulate similar hybrid or in-between positions.

How do visual artists express ideas or meanings about *Otherness* and issues of belonging in their art? This is the central question of this dissertation. In order to understand the meanings and social effects of specific artistic practices, ideas from Pollock were helpful: "Firstly the practice must be located as part of the social struggles between classes, races, genders articulating with other sites of representation. But secondly we must analyse what any specific practice is doing, what meanings is

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<sup>17</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins' seminal book Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment (2000) for a good introduction to other important intersectional concepts.

being produced and how and for whom” (Vision and Difference 9-10). Accordingly, this dissertation first examines each artist within his or her biographical and historical context and location. Because of my own personal history and interests, I will focus on women artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds. As all the visual artists discussed are well-established and have exhibited widely at various international institutions, the audience (or the “for whom”) for this dissertation are other artists or theorists who are interested in strategic approaches to *Otherness* in contemporary art. Nevertheless, the main research interest is the investigation of “what meanings” and “how” these critical expressions of *Otherness* are being produced – specifically the artistic strategies or approaches that connect aesthetic choices and mediums to intentions and ideas for content and meaning. My research methodology is to compare selected pairs of artists – where at least one is a woman of Asian diasporic background – using a set of categories as a comparative framework. The suggested categories were influenced by writings from several art and cultural theorists who describe artistic strategies that interrogate beliefs about difference or *Otherness* and emphasize the complex dynamic processes involved in questions concerning identities and identifications.

For example, in her 1990 classic book Mixed Blessings which defined the US multicultural art movement, the art critic and theorist Lucy Lippard asks: “[W]hat does it take to turn a stereotype around, to undermine a commonly assumed ‘realism’? The options for breaking patterns, reversing stigmas, and conceiving a new and more just world picture are many and multifaceted. They range from opening wounds, to seeking revenge through representation, to reversing destructive developments so the healing process can begin” (241). Although this book was written in the midst of the multicultural art debate, many of Lippard’s insights are still significant, such as the strategies which artists traditionally marginalized in USA often use: “Irony, humour, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences-- inverse, reverse, perverse” (199).

Similarly, Griselda Pollock suggests that feminist artists follow Bertolt Brecht by employing “dis-identificatory practices” or “distanciation” strategies to “liberate the viewer from the state of being captured by illusions of art which encourages passive identification with fictional worlds” (“Screening the Seventies” 82). Her strategies are aimed at distancing or estranging the viewer from identifying with mainstream ideological expectations (e.g. the hero in a film, etc.) by not incorporating basic codes and conventions. Further Brechtian notions that she defines as “scripto-visual” such as collage and montage that combine or juxtapose disparate elements could also inspire new ways of making art (“Screening the Seventies” 84). However, Pollock is critical of feminist art that uses imagery which emphasize female sexuality as these images “are easily retrieved and co-opted by a male culture because they do not rupture radically meanings and connotations of woman in art as body, as sexual, as nature, as object for male possession” (Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses, 130).

Contrarily, the Asian American film theorist and filmmaker Celine P. Shimizu rejects the notion that sexualized images are always necessarily demeaning or negative for women in her investigation of representations of Asian American women in theatre, film, and video. For Shimizu, such denunciations are moralistic and often meant to “discipline” or control behaviour. Instead, she argues for a strategy of “productive perversity” where racialized sexuality, usually deemed demeaning or negative, can be seen as an empowering form of feminist resistance that criticizes conventional and normative definitions of sexuality (*The Hypersexuality of Race* 97). By examining how Asian American performers can both embody and work against stereotypical images, Shimizu’s argument does not simply reject sexualized representations, but contends that these images have the potential to contest and undermine what is considered normal sexual behaviour. Furthermore, she sees both the performer as well as the viewer as having mutually significant roles in creating meaning from a performance.

In a similar manner, cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes about various “trans-coding strategies” or strategies that take existing meanings and re-appropriate them for new meanings (*Representation* 270). According to Hall, strategies that reverse the evaluation of stereotypes (e.g. ‘blaxploitation’<sup>18</sup> films) or substitute positive images (e.g. “Black is Beautiful”) do not subvert stereotypes themselves, but only perpetuate the binary model (*Representation* 270-274). Instead, he suggests a counter strategy that “accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters as it were into a struggle over representation; while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed; there can never be any final victories” (*Representation* 274).

Comparatively, Amelia Jones also argues that earlier artistic strategies for countering the objectification or “fetishism” of marginalized people emerged as a result of early feminist visual theory and anti-racist theory of 1970s and 1980s and often reinforced binary models about difference. Her alternative is a model of thinking about visuality called “queer feminist durationality” in which:

artists strategically immerse themselves within the field of seeing and knowing in order to bring it elsewhere ... and to articulate the entire question of identity as one of *temporal flow and process*, rather than binary fixing of self and other. This is, one could say, a process of distorting the world picture through anamorphic strategies that queer the subject – among which, as noted, I am highlighting durationality in the proposing, adopting, and opening out of a potential range of identifications (109; emphasis in original).

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<sup>18</sup>“Blaxploitation” is a film genre that was popular in the USA in the 1970s, but now frequently criticized for its stereotypical depictions of Blacks. Both the cast and the target audience were Black, and the emphasis was on positively portraying or even celebrating what were normally considered negative stereotypes. This meant, for example, that the black hero was a professional stud who used extensive violence and a ‘bad attitude’ in a ghetto setting in order to achieve success against a white establishment. See Stuart Hall in *Representation* (1997), pp. 270-272.



Anamorphosis is a perspective technique that creates a distorted image which is only coherent when viewed from a specific angle. In order to see a comprehensible image, it is necessary to view the oblique anamorph from a position that deviates considerably from a conventional, frontal viewpoint. Because the observer of the work must actively locate the viewing position in order to understand the meaning of the image, he or she becomes aware of being a knowing and embodied viewer. Furthermore, there are also correlations between anamorphosis and the concept of *ostranenie* (“making strange”) which was introduced by the Russian Formalist critic and novelist Viktor Schklovsky in his influential essay “Art as Technique” first published in 1917. *Ostranenie* often translated to “defamiliarization” describes how art and literary works often disrupt the audience’s habitual perception of the world in order to provide a new perspective. Jones’ emphasis, however, is on the embodied experience as well as the duration or process of that experience: “anamorphosis exposes the contingency of the embodied viewer as a subject whose access to the world can only ever be through the various senses, which rely on bodily experiences taking place over time” (86). Thus, similar to Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge”, Jones believes that acknowledging the nature of objectivity as coming from a specific cultural and biological position can be enabling and transformative.

By distilling and combining these various theoretical approaches I propose the following four categories as part of a framework for comparison:

- *Literary Device*: What types of *literary device* (e.g. drama, humour, irony, or parody, etc.) is used to communicate the artist’s perspective?

While Lippard explicitly mentions several literary devices in the above quote as example strategies, Pollock emphasizes techniques that distance the viewer from identifying with mainstream values which describes how writers use literary devices to indicate an alternate opinion. Although literary devices usually refer to writing, it can be potentially useful to see how they are also incorporated in visual art.

- *Reappropriation*: What kind of cultural images or references has been reclaimed or reappropriated?

Appropriation or the use of pre-existing cultural images in art to make a point has been a significant artistic approach in the history of Western European art and continues to be a popular post-modern artistic strategy.<sup>19</sup> Both Hall and Shimizu, however, describe the possibility to reappropriate or reclaim previously negatively associated concepts in order to transform their meanings, not only to reverse them.

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<sup>19</sup> There are many examples of this ranging from Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades or Andy Warhol’s silk-screened Campbell Soup cans to Sherrie Levine’s photographs of Walker Evan’s photographs or . For more information about use of appropriation in post-modern artistic practices, see John Welchman’s book *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s* (2001).

- *Anamorphic Situation*: What kind of *anamorphic situation* is created? How does the observer of the work become aware of being an embodied viewer?  
Jones proposes “distorting the world picture through anamorphic strategies” in order to reveal the dependencies on other bodily experiences and senses inherent in the viewing process. This idea is not only related to Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” but also has correlations to Shimizu’s discussion of “productive perversity” as well as Pollock’s “distanciation” concept.
- *Theoretical Correlation*: What concept or idea is suggested or connoted by the artwork?  
This category of comparison developed out of my own interests for this research. In this way, I examine the correlations between the art examples and significant theoretical concepts.

These four categories are the results of my attempt to operationalize the referenced theoretical considerations into a more concrete form that may be more directly applicable for analysing artistic practices. By bringing together key elements from different theorists, I hope to provide a practical tool for determining how artists create work that express ideas or meanings about *Otherness* and issues of belonging in their art. In addition to comparing artistic strategies, this study will also examine the background and development of each artist as well as the context or historical circumstances present during creation and exhibition of their work because, as noted earlier, these aspects are crucial for determining the meaning of any artwork. Consequently, the theme of each of the four body chapters will be clarified through a comparison of two artists – where at least one is a woman artist with an Asian diasporic background – by using these categories as a comparative framework

The first chapter will investigate the history of representations of Asian women in the USA in order to provide a framework for understanding possible contemporary art reactions and to identify correlations between popular culture and visual arts with regards to depictions of Asian women. A brief introduction to the contested identification of ‘Asian American’ as well as the Asian American Movement will also be discussed as many of the issues concerning representations of Asian women in the USA have been examined in this context. Two comparisons, one in popular culture and one in visual arts, will be made between different eras in order to explore the developments in American representations of Asian women since the 1920s and the 1960s, respectively. By comparing the film characters, body image and sexuality between two Hollywood actresses Anna May Wong (active 1920s-1940s) and Lucy Liu (1990s-present), I will examine the shift in representational discourse of Asian women since the 1920s in film. I will investigate similar changes in the visual arts between the 1960s and 1990s by comparing the intention, historical context, and artistic strategies of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* in 1965 and Patty Chang’s *Melons (at a Loss)* in 1998. Finally, I will consider these connections between popular culture and visual art by evaluating the results of these two comparisons.

In the second chapter, I will examine and compare Lorna Simpson’s artworks from the 1980s and 1990s with Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* (1997-2001) in order to show the role of cultural connotations in

representations of the *Other*. Both Simpson and Lee have used strategies of “reading the body” (Hall) and made viewers conscious of the constructed nature of racial and gender signifiers of the body. In order to contextualize these two artists, I will explore the role of identity politics and the more current discussions about post-identity and color-blindness in art and cultural discourse and will also argue that these historical circumstances could be important factors to consider in interpretations and responses to Simpson’s and Lee’s works.

For the third chapter, I will compare the strategic approaches of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Fiona Tan in order to investigate the role of power, knowledge, and truth in classifying and identifying people. Both artists have examined ethnographic practices and revealed the correlations between power, knowledge and truth as well as how systems of classification, as well as the mediums of film and photography, are invariably subjective. Furthermore, I posit that both artists used methods of deconstruction to reveal the *Self* and created artworks that could influence historical reflections of the viewer. Moreover, as a background for the analysis, I will present some theoretical discussions about the correlations between knowledge and power and how this affects classifying and stereotyping. In addition, I will briefly examine the history of anthropology and its “crisis of representation” because both Gómez-Peña and Tan make critical references to this history.

In chapter four, I will focus on the ‘diaspora identities’ of Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum and their artistic practices that challenged conventional notions of origin and belonging and created artworks that investigated the concept of home as a ‘place where one belongs’ in order to offer new perspectives about who we are in relation to others. As a theoretical context, I will consider alternative views about belonging such as place, planetarity, or diaspora. In addition, because of Yong Soon Min’s active participation in the Asian American art movement, I will re-examine themes about Asian American identity, which are introduced in the first chapter, in order to contextualize Yong Soon Min’s artistic practice and her specific concerns as an Asian American woman.

Throughout these four chapters, I will endeavour to reflect on artistic strategies which undermine fixed meanings about the *Other* and also reveal the cultural and historical processes and experiences involved in viewing and understanding art. By using my proposed four categories (*literary devices, reappropriation, anamorphic situations, and theoretical correlations*) for an analysis of artistic approaches, I hope to offer new perspectives on how artists make work which potentially shift meanings about cultural identities, especially related to cultural origin and belonging. Through the comparative analyses, similarities as well as contrasts between artistic practices from women artists with Asian diasporic background compared to other European or American artists with various cultural backgrounds may also become more apparent. Moreover, my intention is to consider artistic practices from women artists of Asian diasporic background within a broader inquiry into artistic strategies that explore issues of *Otherness* in order to establish the relevance of specific experiences for understanding the more universal implications of questions of belonging in culture and art.

Furthermore, the historical and social contexts as well as theoretical concerns for the development of artistic strategies that interrogate meanings of difference will be established. The final chapter will draw upon the body chapters and present a summary of conclusions that correlate the visual art examples with the theoretical discussions as well as with the artist's context and background.

Since the 1960s with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, through the 1970s and 1980s during the peak of various political movements challenging injustices to particular social groups, and after the 1990s with the advent of terms such as post-identity, post-black or post-feminism, visual artists have consistently challenged and extended conventional beliefs regarding identification of differences. By investigating artistic approaches that explore alternative perspectives of *Otherness*, I contend that visual art has the potential to establish a way of seeing identities as intersectional, hybrid, relational processes rather than as a set of conventional fixed assumptions. The audience for this thesis could be artists and theorists who are interested in new contextual analogies for artistic practices in visual culture. The issues surrounding identity are socially and politically more relevant than ever; therefore, an analysis of artistic practices that explore representations of the *Other* can offer further insights into effective approaches for negotiating and positioning oneself and others in relation to issues of belonging and difference.

## Chapter 1. Asian Women in the USA: Representations in Popular Culture and Visual Art

### Introduction

*The denial of aesthetic representation to the subaltern has historically formed a corollary to the literal denial of economic, legal, and political representation. The struggle to 'speak for oneself' cannot be separated from a history of being spoken for, from the struggle to speak and be heard.*<sup>20</sup>

Ella Shohat, 1995

The concept of representation is multi-faceted and complex and has interested philosophers and theorists since Plato and Aristotle. It can refer to the aesthetic meaning to 'stand for' something that can be visualized as an image or it can denote a political sense to 'speak for' someone else where one individual 'represents' others. The influential post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak uses the German words *Vertretung* or "stepping in someone's place ... to tread in someone's shoes" and *Darstellung* or re-presentation which means "to place there" in order to distinguish between proxy and portrait as the two ways of representing ("Practical Politics" 108). However, as Edward Said notes in his critique of Western culture's distorted representations of the non-West that are perceived as objective and real: "it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting" (*Orientalism* 273). When representations of the *Other* such as subaltern or marginalized groups who have not had a voice and have been excluded from the hegemonic power structure of society are concerned, then cultural theorist Ella Shohat contends one must ask the questions: "who represents ... who is being represented, for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address ("Struggle" 173). Thus, as she notes in the introductory quote above, aesthetic representations cannot be separated from political circumstances and are often constructed images which are motivated by political and ideological intentions. Spivak has indicated the seeming futility of the subaltern's attempt at self-representation because "subaltern insurgency ... is an effort to involve oneself in representation, *not* according to the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation" ("Interview" 306, emphasis in original); however, I believe it is crucial that cultural activists and artists continue in their endeavour to challenge and shift these meanings about *Otherness* as a form of resistance against cultural hegemony and hope to argue this idea throughout this dissertation.

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<sup>20</sup> See Ella Shohat's essay "The Struggle over Representation: Casting, Coalitions, and the Politics of Identification" (1995), p. 173.

This chapter provides an introduction to historical representations of Asian women in the USA in order to understand the conditions and circumstances women artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds often experience in a Euro-American context. I investigate the shift of representations of Asian women in America and determine the parallels between depictions of Asian women in popular culture and visual art by making two comparative analyses from different time periods: firstly, between the Hollywood film actresses Anna May Wong (active 1920-1940s) and Lucy Liu (active 1990s-present); and secondly, between two contemporary art performances from Yoko Ono in 1965 and Patty Chang in 1998. By making these comparisons, I hope to establish the similarities and differences about representations of Asian women between different historical periods, and also between popular culture and visual art. Because the history of representations and perceptions about Asians in America has been a principal area of academic research in Asian American studies as well as in view of my own personal history and background, the USA will be used as a Western frame of reference. In the next section, I will first present a brief historical overview of Asians in America, including background and discussion about the emergence of the Asian American Movement.

## **History and Context of Asian Women in the USA: The Evolving of Asian American Women**




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Fig. 1. Afong Moy: *The Chinese Lady*, 1834, Print Archives, Museum of the City of New York.  
Source: [The Romance of China](http://www.gutenberg-e.org), gutenber-e.org, Web, 14 Feb 2013.

Although Chinese immigration to America began around 1820<sup>21</sup>, the first recorded Chinese woman, Afong Moy, arrived in 1834. Between 1834 and 1835, she was physically displayed in The American

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<sup>21</sup> For more information about the history of Chinese immigration to the USA see James Moy's *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (1994) or Huping Ling's *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives* (1998).

Museum in New York to show the public what a real Chinese woman looked like (see fig. 1). However, in March 1870, due to concerns that uncontrolled masses of Asian prostitutes were appearing, the State of California passed “An Act to prevent the kidnapping and importation of Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese females, for criminal or demoralizing purposes” where any Asian woman wanting to come to California had to prove that she was “a person of correct habits and good character”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as Laura Kang observes in her book *Compositional Subjects*, popular perceptions about Asian women were completely transformed between 1835 and 1870 from being an unusual novelty to a sexual danger that needed to be government regulated (1-2). Political fears about Asian women continued to increase as demonstrated by the first federal immigration law, the Page Act of 1875, which forbade all ‘Oriental’ women suspected to be prostitutes entry into America. Implementation of the law was essentially an exclusion of all Asian women. At the same time, the notion of the ‘Yellow Peril’, a widespread Euro-American belief that Western civilization was endangered by the expansion of power and influence from eastern Asian countries, was becoming increasingly popular. In USA, the response to the supposed threat of the ‘Yellow Peril’ was to prohibit or severely restrict Chinese and other Asian immigration to USA from 1882 until 1965.<sup>23</sup> As Asian American scholar William Wei notes: “The Yellow Peril was a myth to justify imperialism in Asia and anti-Asian policies and practices in the United States” (48). In any case, it is interesting to discover that the initial steps for limitation were targeted at Asian women who were considered prostitutes unless they could prove otherwise. After the elimination of these highly restrictive immigration laws to the USA in 1965, in addition to the increased economic and political connections to countries from Asia (such as the aftermath from the Korean and Vietnam wars), Asian presence in America radically increased.

In the USA, the term ‘Asian’ has historically referred to East Asians (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.) and Southeast Asians (e.g. Vietnamese, Thai, Filipino, etc.). This has been due, at least in part, to immigration from these areas which has historically been more extensive than that from South Asia. Furthermore, in comparison to Great Britain, where ‘Asian’ usually refers to South Asians, the US has been very ambiguous in its identification of persons with ancestry from the Indian subcontinent or South Asia (e.g. India, Pakistan, etc.) who have been classified as ‘White’, ‘non-white’ and ‘Hindu’ up to 1980.<sup>24</sup> The term ‘Asian’ became popular in America in the 1970s as an alternative to ‘Oriental’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For more information about sexually-based immigration laws controlling Asian and other women’s entry to the USA, see Eithne Luibhéid’s *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (2002).

<sup>23</sup> The federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited all Chinese immigration to the USA. It was repealed in 1943 by the Magnuson Act which allowed a quota of 105 Chinese per year for the USA. In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 finally abolished the restrictive quotas set by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as well as the National Origins Act of 1924 which had favoured immigration from northern and western Europeans.

<sup>24</sup> In US court decisions in 1910 and 1913, immigrants from the Indian subcontinent were recognized as ‘White’, allowing them to circumvent the restrictive citizenship, land rights, and anti-miscegenation laws for ‘non-whites’ until a court decision in 1923 when they were classified as ‘non-white’. In 1930 and 1940, the US Census identification was ‘Hindu’, but in 1970, it was again ‘White’. Since 1980, the official US Census classification has been ‘Asian Indian’.

which was considered colonialist and racist. The history of racism and institutional discrimination directed at Asians in the USA included the aforementioned immigration laws, but also laws prohibiting interracial marriage and intimate relationships as well as land laws<sup>26</sup> restricting ownership of property. Anti-miscegenation laws<sup>27</sup> were widely in effect until 1948 and were finally completely abolished by the United States Supreme Court in 1967. A further example of institutional discrimination were the Japanese American internment camps during World War II where an estimated 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent and Japanese living in USA were relocated and interned by the United States government because of potential disloyalty.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, during the Vietnam War, the racial slur 'gook' was used not only to describe the enemy soldiers and civilians abroad, but also Americans of Asian descent at home including Asian Americans serving in the US military. Wei writes his book The Asian American Movement: "As far as European American soldiers were concerned, Asians and Asian Americans not only looked alike but were one and the same. ... As a result of their military training and their brutalization by the war, therefore, American soldiers developed a deadly disdain for all persons of Asian ancestry ... [resulting in the statement] 'The only good gook is a dead gook'"(39).

Furthermore, Asians in America participating in anti-war protests in the 1960s and 1970s against Vietnam not only became more conscious about American racial discrimination against Asians, but also were politically engaged in a common cause independent of their individual backgrounds. In this way, a concept of an 'Asian American identity' emerged which implied "a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American" (Wei 1). Moreover, a significant feature of this collective identity was political mobilization: to "bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change" (Wei 1).

In addition, an important underlying motivation for an 'Asian American identity' was the realization that in order to become 'American', Asian Americans had not only rejected their Asian culture and adopted the values and attitudes of the European Americans, but also aspired to have a similar

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<sup>25</sup> In USA, the term 'Oriental' (meaning eastern) is seen as Eurocentric because it identifies Asian countries and peoples in terms of their location to Europe as well as its associations with exotic and romantic notions from an earlier era. Because of these racist connotations, it is no longer used in any US governmental documents to refer to persons of Asian descent. However, in British English, the term 'Oriental' is not typically considered pejorative and is used to refer to people originating from East and Southeast Asia. As mentioned earlier, in Britain, 'Asian' is generally used to describe persons from South Asia.

<sup>26</sup> Alien Land Laws were US laws that restricted or prohibited ownership of property or land to aliens ineligible for citizenship. The most famous was the California Alien Land Law of 1913 that was specifically directed at Chinese, Japanese and Korean immigrant farmers in California.

<sup>27</sup> In 1948, the California Supreme Court ruled that the Californian anti-miscegenation law was unconstitutional. This was the second state since Ohio in 1887 to repeal its anti-miscegenation law. As a result, during the 1950s, anti-miscegenation laws were overturned in most states in the USA and were finally ruled unconstitutional in all states by the United States Supreme Court in 1967.

<sup>28</sup> See William Wei's book The Asian American Movement (1993), p. 109.



physical appearance (Wei 43). Amy Uyematsu, a Japanese American poet and writer, noted in her 1969 seminal essay “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America”:

They have rejected their physical heritages, resulting in extreme self-hatred. Yellow people share with the blacks the desire to look white. Just as blacks wish to be light-complected with thin lips and unkinky hair, “yellows” want to be tall with long legs and large eyes. The self-hatred is also evident in the yellow male’s obsession with unobtainable white women, and in the yellow female’s attempt to gain male approval by aping white beauty standards (qtd. in Wei 43).

Inspired by the Black Power movement’s mobilization of solidarity in order to challenge racism, Uyematsu activated ideas of ‘Yellow Power’ which asserted the need for political power and recognition for Asians in America in order to address their own experiences of discrimination and oppression. As a result, the constructed identification ‘Asian American’ for diverse groups of immigrants from different Asian diasporic communities was formed from the idea that there were commonalities in their experiences of being raised in the USA and in their struggles with institutionalized discrimination and ethnic stereotyping.

Around the same time that the Asian American Movement was developing, a ‘second wave’ of US feminism was also emerging that focused on issues of women’s personal lives together with political change. Other voices appeared in the early 1980s that criticized the essentialist or universal concept of ‘Woman’ and raised other identification issues including race, religion, and class. In 1981, for example, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldua published the anthology This Bridge Called My Back which focussed on the experiences of women of colour and challenged the prevailing predominantly ‘White’ feminist movement. This collection of essays is a classic in feminist studies and introduced concepts of “intersectionality”<sup>29</sup> before the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term in 1989. One of the writers in this anthology was the Japanese American Mitsuye Yamada who wrote the essay “Invisibility as an Unnatural Disaster” that reflected on the double invisibility of being both Asian and a woman. Up to then, the experiences of Asian American women had been assumed to be either identical to those of Asian American men or located within concepts of ‘White’ feminism. Because many Asian cultures are traditionally patriarchal, Asian American feminism became an important source of identification as well as political power for Asian women.

However, the pan-ethnic Asian American identity has always been highly controversial as exemplified by its continuous transformation during its short period of use. From the beginning, reducing diverse Asian communities under a single Asian identification was considered problematic. In particular, the definition of who belongs to this pan-ethnic group has constantly shifted, as Asia has always encompassed more than East Asian countries. Furthermore, issues concerning mixed race, new

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<sup>29</sup> See discussion in introduction.

immigrants vs more established and assimilated generations, as well as class and education level have been raised in the term's recent history. As Christopher Lee summarizes: "... articulations of Asian American identity have long had to contend with its discursive instability" (*Semblance of Identity* 8). Since the early 1990s, a major shift in views concerning Asian American identity has occurred. For example, Asian American theorist Lisa Lowe notes in her influential essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" the importance of political unity in enabling "diverse Asian groups to understand our unequal circumstances and histories as being related" but also cautions that "essentializing Asian American identity and suppressing our differences – of national origin, generation, gender, party, class – risks particular dangers ... it inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogenous group, that implies we are 'all alike' and conform to 'types'" (71). Lowe suggests that the Asian American identity should be a position for formation of "crucial alliances ... in the ongoing work of transforming hegemony" (83). Similarly, Eleanor Rose Ty and Donald Goellnicht note: "Despite postmodern notions of anti-essentialism, we are still frequently caught in discussions about origins, differences, and authenticity" (*Asian North American Identities* 3). The problem of essentialism is invariably present whenever discussions concerning perceived identifications arise and indicates the difficulties involved in such a complex and contested area. In order to contest meanings of *Otherness*, marginalized groups (including Asian Americans) often refer to Gayatri Spivak's term "strategic essentialism" in order to defend their political mobilization strategy. Lowe, for example, writes:

The concept of "strategic essentialism" suggests that it is possible to utilize specific signifiers of ethnic identity, such as Asian American, for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of Asian Americans so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower (82).

Although the 'Asian American identity' has had many problems, I also believe that the Asian American movement has had a significant historical and cultural position in the USA. Furthermore, it has been a rich source of important and valuable contributions in areas of inequality and institutional discrimination. However, similar to other movements, such as feminism or Black civil rights, the concerns and the methods needed for challenging issues of *Otherness* have changed. Problems of difference have not disappeared, but the binary logic and thinking previously incorporated in ways of resistance must be reassessed and interrogated for developing new approaches to shift meanings of the *Other*. A more constructive approach, also suggested by Lowe, could be the integration of intersectional concepts or thinking about socially constructed categories (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality, religion) as intersecting on multiple levels. In any case, the establishment of Asian American Studies academic programs has been important for research about Asian diasporic cultural

production and examinations about representations about Asians in American popular culture. A substantial area of research, for example, has been the critical analysis of Hollywood films by Asian American film theorists in order to determine how Asian men and women have been represented in popular culture.

### **Between “Lotus Blossom Baby” and “Dragon Lady”: Hypersexual Hollywood Representations of Asian Women**

*I never saw Asian people on television or in movies, so my dreams were somewhat limited.*

*I would dream [voice changing to high-pitched squeal]*

*“Maybe someday I can be an extra on M\*A\*S\*H.”*

*“Maybe someday I could play Arnold’s girlfriend on Happy Days.”*

*“Maybe I could play a hooker in something.”*

*I’d be looking in the mirror, “Sucky fucky two dolla! Me love you long time.”<sup>30</sup>*

Margaret Cho, 2002

Margaret Cho, a popular US comedian, has made her career defying and mocking boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. Margaret Cho undermines stereotypes and norms of race and sexuality not only by directly addressing them but exaggerating them. In this passage “My Dreams Were Limited” from the Notorious C.H.O. tour, Cho describes two popular US television series from the 1970s and 1980s where Asians occasionally appeared: M\*A\*S\*H and Happy Days. These television series (which were also part of my childhood and adolescence) had a limited presence of Asians either as Korean ‘extras’ for the comedy series M\*A\*S\*H<sup>31</sup> or as the ludicrous owner of the diner “Arnold’s” in Happy Days.<sup>32</sup>

During the 1990s, more complex Asian characters began to appear in US television and film. For example, in 1993, the film The Joy Luck Club (based on the novel of the same name from Amy Tan) explored the relationships between four Chinese-American women and their Chinese mothers. In 1994, Margaret Cho starred in a short-lived American television sitcom All American Girl (1994), a show which followed the life of a young Korean American woman and her more traditional Korean American family. In 1998, Lucy Liu became a regular character on the television series on the

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret Cho, “My Dreams Were Limited”, Notorious C.H.O. (2002).

<sup>31</sup> M\*A\*S\*H (1972-1983) was concerned with a fictional Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War and starred Alan Alda as Hawkeye Pierce, an army doctor. Occasionally, a “Korean” or other Asian would be seen in the background.

<sup>32</sup> Happy Days (1974-1984) presented a family with their teenage children in an idealized version of America in the 1950s. Ron Howard played Ritchie and Henry Winkler became famous through his character Fonzie. There was one minor and somewhat ridiculous Asian character in the show, Matsumoto “Arnold” Takahashi, owner of the diner “Arnold’s”, played by Pat Morita.

American television series Ally McBeal (1997-2002) which revolved around the personal lives of a lawyer and her colleagues in a law firm. Since 2004, regular appearances of Asians on US television series have increased considerably. For example, Lost (2004-2010), a drama series which followed the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious tropical island, included three Asian characters in its main cast and was heralded as a major break-through for Asian American actresses and actors for mainstream television. Another pioneering example with a racially diverse cast is Grey's Anatomy (2005-present), a medical drama, that focuses on the personal lives of the surgical interns and residents as they become experienced doctors, which included a woman surgical intern played by Sandra Oh. Another significant popular television series is Glee (2009-present), a musical comedy-drama series which concentrates on a high school glee club or singing group whose members deal with 'coming-of-age' issues such as relationships and sexuality. The twelve singing high school students include: two African Americans, two Asian Americans, a Latino, an openly gay male, and a physically disabled (in wheelchair) character. Other example of US television series that feature Asian Americans include The Mentalist (2008-present), Hawaii Five-O (2010-present),<sup>33</sup> and a new Sherlock Holmes series with Lucy Liu as Dr. Watson called Elementary (2012-present). Nevertheless, only two short-lived American television sitcoms have been produced concentrating on a person of Asian descent: Mr. T and Tina (1976), starring Pat Morita as Mr. T and the aforementioned All American Girl (1994) starring Margaret Cho. Cho performs the final part of the joke seen at the beginning of this section as if to a mirror: "Sucky fucky two dolla! Me love you long time" her bodily and facial gestures emphasize the problems of an Asian woman growing up in the 1970s and 1980s whose only available popular media identification was a prostitute.

The sexual representation of Asian women in Hollywood films has been a significant area of study for many Asian American film theorists. In her much cited essay, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women" (1989), Renee E. Tajima identified "two basic types: the Lotus Blossom Baby (a.k.a. China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty), and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu's various female relations, prostitutes, devious madames)" (309). The "Lotus Blossom Baby" has historically been a more popular depiction providing a delicate, feminine and passive, yet exotic love interest to the white hero and is embodied in the popular Madame Butterfly archetype while the "Dragon Lady" is sexually seductive but devious and manipulative. These stereotypes can be seen as binary opposites or a pair of related concepts which are diametrically opposed, but which both eroticize the Asian woman as an exotic *Other*. Furthermore, depictions of Asian women and men are often defined in terms of their relationship to the white protagonists. While the main Asian female archetypes have

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<sup>33</sup> Hawaii Five-O was originally an American television series which aired from 1968-1980 that was set in Hawaii. It was named after Hawaii's status as the fiftieth state in the USA. Although the original Five-O series was innovative during the 1960s and 1970s because of its incorporation of two Asian American male characters to the four-person police team, their roles were clearly subordinate to the two main White protagonists and they were portrayed as submissive and nonsexual, a typical stereotype for Asian men in American film and media.

been portrayed as overly sexualized, the corresponding two main Asian male archetypes were depicted as asexual or emasculated. One Asian male stereotype was the evil and villainous Fu Manchu<sup>34</sup> who personified fears about world domination by the ‘Yellow Peril’, but was actually a “a sexual joke glorifying white power” (Chin 95). The other stereotype was a submissive, effeminate Charlie Chan<sup>35</sup> character that was both physically and sexually non-threatening to the white male.<sup>36</sup> In comparison, the role of an Asian woman in most Hollywood films was either to be seduced by or to seduce the white hero; neither of which entitled her to a happy end.<sup>37</sup>

Film theorist Celine P Shimizu proposes an alternative to this sexualized racial binary in her more recent book *The Hypersexuality of Race* (2007). She argues: “If we limit understanding of racial sexuality within good or bad, abnormal and normal, or right and wrong we may also limit how to enjoy, appreciate, and more fully understand our own sexuality as Asian/American women” (5). In her analysis of representations of Asian American women in theatre, film and video, Shimizu rejects the idea that hypersexual or excessively sexual images invariably are demeaning or negative and thus necessarily exploitive. Instead, she claims that such criticisms were moralizing and limiting for definitions of sexuality and for the desires of the Asian women producers, actresses, and spectators involved. Furthermore, she suggests a theory of “productive perversity” where racialized sexuality can be seen as empowering and a form of resistance against normative sexual behaviour rather than subordination. Similar to Hall’s position about cultural hegemony in racial discourse, Shimizu argues that although knowledge about racial sexuality is constructed by dominant discourse, minority performers and audiences can “insert critical revisions and similarly claim power” (55). Shimizu’s analysis aims to reframe articulations of sexuality and visibility of Asian American women as a race-positive transformative experience. Her intention is to provide an alternative to earlier feminist positions of sexual fetishism where representations of women were invariably reduced to passive objects of male desire.

Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy performances and various television roles can be seen as an example of this reframing. Cho’s live or filmed stand-up comedy routines which exaggerate and critique racist and sexist cultural beliefs often reflect on representations of Asian women in popular culture. The television series *All-American Girl* (1994) initially was based on elements of Cho’s stand-up routines which examined the life of an “American girl” with her more traditional Korean American family.

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<sup>34</sup> Feeding on early 20<sup>th</sup> century fears of the ‘Yellow Peril’, the evil and devious Fu Manchu was a popular fictional East Asian character created by British author Sax Rohmer in 1913 and featured in several books and films.

<sup>35</sup> Charlie Chan was a fictional U.S. Chinese detective created by Earl Derr Biggers in 1919 who helps solve crimes and murders for the Honolulu police. He has been featured in several books, films, and television series.

<sup>36</sup> For an overview about Asian male stereotypes in American film and media, see Frank Chin’s essay “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy” (1998).

<sup>37</sup> Other books which explore both Asian male and female stereotypes in film include: Eugene Franklin Wong’s book *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures* (1978), Gina Marchetti’s book *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (1994), and Peter Feng’s anthology *Screening Asian Americans* (2002).

After the cancellation of this series, Cho reworked various problems with the show such as being told that she was both “too Asian” and “not Asian enough” as well as “too fat” into new material for her one-woman stand-up comedy shows.<sup>38</sup> In fact, her articulation and critique of these experiences have transformed them into strong and empowering statements for many people, and especially for Asian American women.

I hope to incorporate Shimizu’s ideas with some comments about Cho in my comparison of Anna May Wong with Lucy Liu. As evidenced by the number of books and exhibitions about her life and career,<sup>39</sup> Wong is often considered to be the most significant Asian American actress in the history of film and laid the foundation for the described stereotypes with her film roles. In comparison, Lucy Liu, a popular contemporary Asian American film star, has also played several stereotypical roles, but has recently been offered other opportunities to play more complex characters.

### **Asian American Women in Hollywood: Anna May Wong and Lucy Liu**

*I was so tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that the screen Chinese is always the villain? And so crude a villain – murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass.*<sup>40</sup>

Anna May Wong, 1933

*It's like this – I got a few opportunities, and I try to make them as full and as three-dimensional as possible. Once those movies succeed, the studio sees that I am a viable person, who can bring in money. I still work on a couple of movies which perhaps wouldn't be my first choice, but as I build on momentum and audience, then I start doing my own projects .... You don't have a choice when you don't have options. So you have to create options that will ultimately create new opportunities.*<sup>41</sup>

Lucy Liu, 2003

In this section, I examine the changes in representations of Asian women from the 1920s until now in popular media by analysing and comparing the film characters, body image and sexuality of the two actresses Anna May Wong (1905-1961) and Lucy Liu (b. 1968). Wong was an internationally renowned Asian American actress who appeared in over sixty films in Hollywood, England and

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<sup>38</sup> After *All-American Girl* (1994) was cancelled, Cho wrote about her struggles with the show, including having to lose 30 pounds in two weeks, in her first one-woman show *I'm the One That I Want* (1999), which also was released as a book and a concert film in 2000.

<sup>39</sup> In addition to a recent documentary film *Anna May Wong: Frosted Yellow Willows* (2007) and a retrospective programme about her at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2004, there have been four major books written about her in the last ten years: Anthony Chan’s *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905-1961)* (2007), Graham Hodges’ *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (2005), Mi Chei Lane and Philip Leibried’s *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide to Her Film, Stage, Radio and Television Work* (2003), and Paula Yoo’s *Shining Star: The Anna May Wong Story* (2009).

<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Celine P. Shimizu’s *Hypersexuality* (2007), p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> See “Q Interview: Lucy Liu” (2003).

Germany during the 1920s through the 1940s. She is invariably referenced in any historical analysis about film representations of Asian women in Hollywood (e.g. Eugene Franklin Wong, Gina Marchetti, Renee Tajimi, Sheridan Prasso, Celine P. Shimizu). For recent film theorists such as Shimizu or Prasso, Liu is seen as her contemporary counterpart with several major blockbuster Hollywood films since the 1990s (e.g. Payback (1990), Shanghai Noon (2000), Charlie's Angels (2000), Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle (2003), Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003), Lucky Number Slevin (2006)). Although there are a few other Asian actresses working in America, only one other actress could arguably be added to this roster as a mainstream film icon: Nancy Kwan (b. 1939) most known for her starring role in The World of Suzie Wong (1960) with the infamous line used by Margaret Cho in an earlier quote: "Me love you long time".

The above comments from Anna May Wong and Lucy Liu are seventy years apart, yet both express discernible frustration about their respective film roles. However, they are also fundamentally different. Whereas Anna May Wong's statement reflects the difficulties and limitations which she experienced continuously throughout her film career, Lucy Liu's comment describes her pragmatic strategy to take control of her career after she made some compromises. Perceptions of Asians in the USA have evolved in these seventy years. Nevertheless, although ideas about the 'Yellow Peril' are no longer popular, what have the consequences been for depictions of Asian women in popular media? How have representations of Asian women in American cinema changed? By examining the film careers of Anna May Wong and Lucy Liu, developments in American representational discourse for Asian women can be observed.

Anna May Wong's career spanned many changes in film history, including the changes from silent to talking pictures, as well as black and white to colour, but her biggest challenge was the deeply entrenched racism and stereotyping of her time. As mentioned earlier, miscegenation was illegal in the USA and Hollywood rules forbade showing interracial relationships in a positive manner; even an interracial kiss was not allowed onscreen. By the time anti-miscegenation laws were abolished in California in 1948, Wong was no longer working actively in the film industry. Anti-Chinese sentiments were high, and white actors and actresses often played major Asian roles in 'yellowface'.<sup>42</sup> In fact, she was rejected in the 1930's for two Asian leading lady roles because "she did not look Chinese enough"<sup>43</sup> that were then played by white actresses in 'yellowface'. Similarly, producers of All-American Girl (1994) hired an "Asian consultant" for Margaret Cho in order for her to appear "more Asian" on television. Western media representations about "Asian" are thus shown to be constructed and distorted.

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<sup>42</sup> 'Yellowface' is a type of make-up where the eyes would be taped and the colouring would be more 'yellow'.

<sup>43</sup> MGM refused to cast her in the 1932 production of a Chinatown melodrama The Son-Daughter, and cast Helen Hayes. In 1937, MGM refused to consider her for the leading role in its film version of Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth, choosing instead the German actress Luise Rainer.

Through two of her earliest films, Wong's roles established the "Lotus Blossom Baby" / "Dragon Lady" prototypes. The first was in Toll of the Sea (1922), a silent film based on the Madame Butterfly story where she played Lotus Flower, the devoted, self-sacrificing, Chinese 'wife' of an American husband who leaves her, returns to take their child from her, and then abandons Lotus Flower to drown herself in the sea. Two years later, Anna May Wong had a supporting role as a treacherous Mongol slave girl in Douglas Fairbank's Thief of Bagdad (1924). Here she embodied the dragon lady: the sensual, dangerous, 'Oriental' who uses her sex and cunning in the service of an evil Asian man in an attempt to trap the white hero. Her last silent film was Piccadilly (1929), where she played Shosho, a scullery maid who saves a nightclub from financial ruin by performing as an exotic dancer. One of Anna May Wong's most memorable films was Shanghai Express (1932) where she played a supporting role with Marlene Dietrich. Wong's character Hui Fei is a Chinese prostitute who is raped (instead of Dietrich) and then kills the rapist. Film theorist Celine P. Shimizu has analysed Anna May Wong's role as often being a 'foil' for the white heroine, an alternate sexuality to the safe and moral haven of the white woman (69). Many of her films had her playing stereotypical villainous roles, including the evil daughter of Fu-Manchu in Daughter of the Dragon (1931).

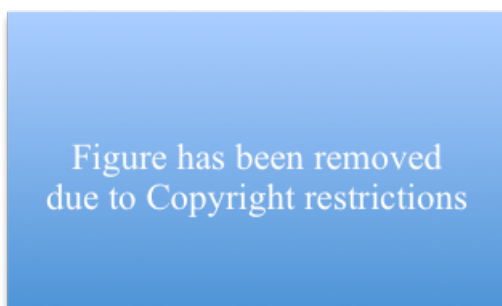


Fig. 2. Poster for Thief of Bagdad with Anna May Wong, 1924.  
Source: [Internet Movie Database, imdb.com](http://Internet Movie Database, imdb.com), Web, 12 Dec 2012.



Fig. 3. Poster for Piccadilly with Anna May Wong, 1929.  
Source: [Internet Movie Database, imdb.com](http://Internet Movie Database, imdb.com), Web, 12 Dec 2012.

In accordance with her suggestive sexual roles, Wong was often scantily clad, especially compared to other characters in the films of the times. For example, in the film Thief of Bagdad (1924), she wears a strip of black cloth to cover her breasts, black briefs and an apron held up by a string of beads, showing much more skin than the heroine who is always fully clad in long light-coloured flowing



garments. One of the film posters showed Douglas Fairbanks, the hero, also scantily clad and having a bare chest, poking a knife in her back (see fig. 2). Both the poster, as well as the film itself, portray a clearly orientalist and exotic adventure fantasy of the East and the half-naked bodies of Fairbanks and Wong make manifest the racially marked eroticism that was then and still often seen as ‘typical’ of the ‘Orient’.

In another film Piccadilly (1929), Wong’s character as an exotic dancer in a nightclub wears a costume that is a strange mixture of a Siamese or Balinese type of headdress with a very minimal metallic structure covering only essential areas, again a marked contrast to the female lead, the other dancer who wears more light-coloured and less revealing outfits. In an Austrian film poster of that time, Anna May Wong is depicted topless, which would be unthinkable for any white women (see fig. 3). However, because she is an Asian woman with questionable morals, it is possible to depict her body in a more revealing manner than the white heroine. For other film roles (e.g. Toll of the Sea or Shanghai Express), she wore more ‘oriental’ clothing, often the traditional cheongsam Chinese dress, to signify her ‘Asianness’ (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Anna May Wong in Toll of the Sea, 1922.  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org), commons.wikimedia.org, Web, 14 Jun 2009.

There were also other aspects of Wong’s film roles that were significant. The films often included hints of interracial romance and her inevitable death. She once said: “When I die, my epitaph should be she died a thousand deaths. ... They didn’t know what to do with me at the end, so they killed me off” (qtd. in Moy 86). Anna May Wong characters often died, either by suicide (e.g. Toll of the Sea (1922)), or violently (e.g. Piccadilly), and sometimes killed others (e.g. Shanghai Express). Interracial romance was a theme, but she was never kissed onscreen (inspiring the poem “No One Ever Tried to Kiss Anna May Wong” by John Yau). Frustrated with her roles in Hollywood, Wong moved to Europe twice where she was welcomed as a star and made movies both in Germany and in the UK. During her lifetime, she was always vocal in her opposition to stereotypes and typecasting; however, due to prejudices and laws at the time, she was completely denied any opportunity to act in roles that

were not to some extent racially demeaning. Wong's dreams were indeed "limited" as Cho describes in her earlier quote.

Wong's legacy is formidable, and interest in her life and work has recently increased as exemplified by a new documentary film, several new books and a retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>44</sup> Countless articles have analysed her films, her life and impact. Writers and visual artists have written plays (e.g. Elisabeth Wong), poetry (e.g. John Yau, Jessica Hagedorn) or been inspired to make visual works (e.g. Mike Kelley, Patty Chang). Her celluloid presence still haunts all US American films with Asian women. Her impact on representations of Asian women in popular culture was not only due to her stereotypical roles in Hollywood films, but also a consequence of her public criticisms of those roles. Both her roles onscreen and her life off-screen were strongly influenced by the extremely racist sentiments during that time period. However, with her talent and beauty, and in spite of the difficult historical circumstances, her accomplishments and her persona continue to be inspiring and significant for Asian women in the American film industry.

More than half a century later, the only contemporary actress who has similar mainstream star appeal is Lucy Liu (b. 1968). Whereas Anna May Wong's roles encompassed both "Lotus Blossom Baby" and "Dragon Lady" types, Lucy Liu has mostly been typecast as a modern dragon lady. Liu first attracted attention in her role as Ling Woo on the American television series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) which followed the romantic and personal lives of a lawyer and her colleagues in a law firm. Ling Woo was known for her outrageously politically incorrect views, and her nasty and bitchy comments (e.g. "there's nothing I enjoy more than seeing a happy couple and coming between them."). Viewers were encouraged to see her comments as satire which was emphasized by the musical theme of "Wicked Witch of the West"<sup>45</sup> being played whenever she came into the room. In the publicity picture for the series, she is dressed more like a femme fatale rather than a lawyer (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Publicity photograph for *Ally McBeal* with Lucy Liu, 1997-2002.  
Source: [Internet Movie Database, imdb.com](http://Internet Movie Database, imdb.com), Web, 6 Feb 2009.

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<sup>44</sup> See above, page 38, footnote 39.

<sup>45</sup> This song was made famous in the film classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

Her style of dress was less elegant and more sexually erotic in the film Payback (1999) starring Mel Gibson where Liu had a featured role as a brutal dominatrix. With long red fingernails, black fetish outfit, feather boa and whip, she demonstrated her skills on the male villain, a customer and/or comrade. Although there was some empathy between her and the hero, instead, much like Anna May Wong's roles, she embodied an alternate exaggerated 'perverse' sexuality compared to the blond female romantic interest (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Lucy Liu in Payback, 1999.

Source: Internet Movie Database, imdb.com, Web, 6 Dec 2010

Liu's racialized sexuality was also presented in Charlie's Angels (2000) where she played one of three professional detectives who assume various stereotypical gendered roles to get information (see fig. 7). Although all three women masquerade as various female stereotypes, often wearing as little as possible, dancing as belly dancers (with Liu in a blonde wig), strip tease dancers (Liu wielding a whip), in Bavarian costumes (Liu again in a blonde wig), it is clear that Lucy Liu's appearances are racially marked.



Fig. 7. Lucy Liu in Charlie's Angels, 2000.

Source: Internet Movie Database, imdb.com, Web, 6 Dec 2010.

She appeared as a masseuse at an 'Oriental' establishment, wearing a mini-dress similar to a cheongsam and her hair held up in a bun with chopsticks, and performed a massage with her feet on

the back of a suspect, before knocking him out with a foot in the neck. She also appeared as an “efficiency expert” dominatrix, dressed in a black leather mini skirt suit and brandishing a whip, she distracted the workers while her colleagues stole the secret computer program from the safe.

In another Hollywood blockbuster Kill Bill, Vol. 1 (2003), Liu had a further role as a dangerous and strong-willed Asian woman. While playing O-Ren Ishii, the boss of the Japanese crime world and a Chinese-Japanese American assassin, she cuts off the head of a Japanese man who questions her authority as a “half-breed”. Liu runs quickly in her kimono on top of the table where all the men are seated, takes out her sword and swings at the man. There is a shocked silence as blood spurts out of the man’s head, and one sees a perfectly coiffed Lucy Liu motionless behind it (see fig. 8). This is clearly not a self-sacrificing Madame Butterfly figure but a dragon lady with a heart of steel.



Fig. 8. Lucy Liu in Kill Bill, Vol. 1, 2003.  
Source: Internet Movie Database, imdb.com, Web, 14 Dec 2010.

It is interesting to note, that after I began the research for this dissertation in 2006, Liu’s image as a dragon lady began to decline. In fact, since 2009, Liu has worked almost exclusively on smaller, independent films. Although there have been several articles and books referring to Liu’s iconic dragon lady image,<sup>46</sup> there has been little written about her latest projects. Some remnants of her seductive and treacherous image continued through 2007 as seen in her roles as the romantic interest in Lucky Number Slevin (2006) or a femme fatale in Watching the Detectives (2007) or a vampire in Rise: Blood Hunger (2007). Nevertheless, after 2008, she has concentrated more on other types of characters that no longer emphasize her racialized sexuality, such as her more recent films: The Year of Getting to Know Us (2008), Nomads (2010), Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You (2011), The Trouble With Bliss (2012). Although this development could be related to the fact that women over forty are less likely to be offered these types of roles, the fact that Asians are also currently seen on several prime-time television series in less stereotypical roles seems to indicate that a shift in popular media’s depictions of Asians is in progress. Moreover, Liu’s latest project is playing a female

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<sup>46</sup>For example, see Celine P. Shimizu’s book The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene (2007).

Dr. Watson in a modernized Sherlock Holmes television series called Elementary (2012-present). In this series, Sherlock Holmes is portrayed as a former consultant to Scotland Yard and recovering drug addict in New York City with Dr. Watson as his ‘sober companion’ to assist him with his rehabilitation from his drug addiction. Unlike most of her previous onscreen relationships with white male protagonists, there are no romantic or sexual implications with their relationship at the present time. In fact, Liu recently told Mariam Brillantes from The Wall Street Journal in 2012: “It’s nice to be able to portray an Asian-American on camera without having an accent, or without having to be spoofy. And I think that’s a big step forward, because there are still representations of people that are more comedic. And that’s not what I’m playing. I’m just playing somebody who represents anyone else who would be living in America or outside of it, who is just a regular person.”

In comparing the film careers of Lucy Liu and Anna May Wong, several similarities but also crucial differences can be noted. A survey of Wong’s films helped Tajima to define the two classic Asian women stereotypes “Lotus Blossom Baby” and “Dragon Lady”. In comparison, Liu’s characters were never docile or self-sacrificing, but often seductive and manipulative, at least until 2008. She sometimes played these characters with a ‘tongue-in-cheek’ or campy manner so that the viewer had the feeling that Liu was mocking the stereotype. In terms of body image and sexuality, both Wong and Liu often wore sexually loaded or Asian specific (e.g. cheongsam Chinese dress or Japanese kimono) outfits in their roles. While Wong exposed her hypersexuality by wearing extremely revealing costumes that would be morally unacceptable for the virtuous white heroine of that era, Liu emphasized her alternate extreme sexuality by frequently wearing black leather fetish fashion as the display of ‘more skin’ is no longer a sign of wanton sexuality in contemporary society. However, since 2009, Liu’s roles have broadened considerably and no longer include characteristics of a “Dragon Lady” stereotype. Her strategy which was described by her quote at the beginning of this section seems to be successful, and she no longer accepts roles which could be seen as stereotypical or demeaning. Nevertheless, although Liu’s characters are often central to the plot and usually survive the film, her onscreen romances continue to be limited to a white protagonist. At least until 2013, no Asian American actor has been popular enough to play her romantic interest in a mainstream film. As mentioned earlier, representations of Asian men in American film and television have generally been asexual or emasculated. However, with the emergence of several attractive Asian American men in current prime-time television series, an Asian American romantic lead no longer seems impossible. Following Shimizu’s concept of “productive perversity”, I claim that both Wong and Liu inserted “critical revisions” in playing their film roles and as Hollywood celebrities. Although Wong was destined to remain disappointed with her limited character types in films, she managed in spite of these roles to become a star and an icon; at the same time, she publicly denounced these practices as demeaning and racial. Liu played her “Dragon Lady” roles with energy and often seemed to be mocking the stereotype. In addition, her quote from 2003 described how she knowingly accepted

undesirable roles in order to create better opportunities. Her current projects demonstrate not only the success of her strategy, but also a shift in representational discourse for Asian women in US popular culture since the 1920s. This trajectory is particularly evident in the last ten years as shown in the increasing visibility of Asian characters in both television and film and as compared to Margaret Cho's "limited dreams" which introduced this chapter. As this dissertation focuses on visual art practices, in the next section, I examine how representations of Asian women in visual art have similarly changed.

### **Asian American Women in Visual Arts: Yoko Ono and Patty Chang**

*People think that I'm doing something shocking and ask me if I'm trying to shock people. The most shocking thing to me is that people have war, fight with each other and moreover take it for granted. The kind of thing I'm doing is almost too simple. I'm not interested in being unique or different ... The problem is not how to become different or unique, but how to share an experience, how to be the same almost, how to communicate.<sup>47</sup>*

Yoko Ono, 1968

*The fact that I am in almost all the pieces makes it very difficult not to reference Asian female identity, either as fitting within the confines of Asian female representation or else consciously rejecting that identity.<sup>48</sup>*

Patty Chang, 2003

In order to investigate similar changes in representations of Asian women in the visual arts, this section compares two art performances from contemporary Asian American women artists: Cut Piece (1965) performed live by Yoko Ono and Melons (at a Loss) (1998) a video performance by Patty Chang. Ono's performance in 1965 is an early example of an Asian woman performing in an art context in the USA while Chang's video is a more contemporary work, produced thirty-three years later around the time Lucy Liu was making her name as a modern dragon lady. The above comments from Yoko Ono and Patty Chang give insights into the interests and goals of each artist. Whereas Yoko Ono's statement from 1968 does not refer to her Asian heritage and indicates her aim to share and communicate with others, Patty Chang's quote thirty-five years later is conscious that her representation is also a representation of Asian women. An examination of the similarities and differences in intention, historical context, and artistic strategies involved in the performances from

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<sup>47</sup> See "1968 Interview" (1968).

<sup>48</sup> See "Interview with Patty Chang" (2003).

Ono and Chang reveals how art discourse in 1998 anticipated current developments in representations of Asian women in popular discourse.

Yoko Ono (b. 1933) was known for decades in the popular press as “The Dragon Lady” and was often accused of “breaking up the Beatles”. Often overshadowed by her celebrity status as John Lennon’s wife/widow, Ono has been an accomplished artist and musician since the early 1960s and continues to push boundaries in film, music, and performance. Lennon once described her as “the world’s most famous unknown artist: everybody knows her name, but nobody knows what she does.”<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 9. Yoko Ono, Blueprint for a Sunrise, Album cover, 2001.  
Source: Imagine Peace, imaginepeace.com, Web, 6 Feb 2009.

However, even before her notoriety as Lennon’s wife, Ono was aware of the problems associated with being an Asian woman: “In the '60s, ... I think the fact that I was an Asian woman ... had a lot to do with the kind of attitude I received in the art world.”<sup>50</sup> In 1966, she met John Lennon at her own art show opening in London. He left his wife and soon afterwards the Beatles also broke up. Andrew Smith noted in The Observer: “Her notoriety is ascribed to her being not only a woman, but an Asian woman (not long after Pearl Harbor and Korea and during the war in Vietnam) and, worst of all, an avant-garde artist who'd snagged one of the most blindly revered men in the world.” Fans of the famous Beatle musician were outraged and the liaison was not popular – Yoko Ono soon acquired the nickname Dragon Lady or Japanese Witch. In an interview with Michael Bracewell in 1996, Yoko Ono said: “What happened to me, being called Dragon Lady and being attacked by – I was going to say the whole of society – by a very large group of people, mainly Beatles fans ... It must have been very hurtful that they saw their hero standing next to this person who's not only a woman but also an Oriental.” Ono was also hurt by many vicious statements from the press, but never reacted aggressively. Instead, she often implemented a reverse strategy to transform the criticisms into positive statements. For example, in an interview with Scarlett Cheng for the Los Angeles Times in 2001, she mentioned that the first dragon lady was the Chinese empress dowager Cixi, who was

<sup>49</sup> See Lisa Takeuchi Cullen’s “Yoko Ono: Rebirth of a Renaissance Rebel” (2003).

<sup>50</sup> See Egg’s “Interview with Yoko Ono” (2008).

vilified by the British press because she wanted to protect China from Britain's colonization efforts and stated: "I'm kind of honored to be a dragon lady. The dragon is a very powerful mythic animal—well, probably they think I'm powerful, thank you very much!" Moreover, she occasionally used this representation of her notoriety in her music and albums. For example, the album cover of Blueprint for a Sunrise (2001) used a picture of Yoko Ono's face superimposed on the body of the Chinese empress dowager Cixi (see fig. 9). Similarly, while describing her inspiration for her latest album, Yes I'm a Witch (2007), she declared: "At the time, everyone thought of me as a witch, as a dragon lady, and so I turned it around and said, 'Great.'"<sup>51</sup>

Yoko Ono was born in 1933 in Tokyo, Japan to a wealthy aristocratic family, but spent six years of her life in the United States before the age of twelve. Her family had returned to Japan in 1941 less than a year before the USA declared war on Japan. In Japan, other children shunned her because of her time abroad. When she turned eighteen, she and her family moved to New York where she quickly became involved with Fluxus.<sup>52</sup> In 1960, she and La Monte Young, a composer, organized several legendary conceptual art events at her loft on Chambers Street. Strongly influenced by John Cage, Yoko Ono's work often demanded the viewers' participation and forced them to get involved. Painting to See a Room Through (1961) was a canvas with a small hole through which the viewer could see the room. In the mid-1960s, Yoko Ono published Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings which had a selection of short performative instructions, such as "Painting to Hammer a Nail Piece: Hammer a nail in the centre of a piece of glass. Send each fragment to an arbitrary address." She also began to make experimental films which she showed in the Fluxus film programme of 1966. In No. 4 "Bottoms" (1966, 80 minutes), sequences of walking naked people were filmed from a fixed distance from behind so that the buttocks filled the screen. These were combined with interviews with the people who were walking.

One of Ono's most famous works is the performance Cut Piece, which she performed in Kyoto (1964), New York (1965) (see fig. 10), London (1966) and more recently Paris (2003). Sitting motionless on the stage, Yoko Ono invited the audience to come up and cut away her clothes, covering her breasts in the end. In her Artist Statement from 1971, she wrote: "People went on cutting the parts they do not like of me, finally there was only the stone remained of me that was in me, but they were still not satisfied and wanted to know what it's like in the stone" (qtd. in Warr 74). For Ono, the performance is a spiritual act inspired by Buddha and a form of giving which involves trust between the performer and the audience. She has also written about her own perspective while performing the piece: "I felt kind of like I was praying. I also felt that I was willingly sacrificing myself" (qtd. in Concannon 89).

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<sup>51</sup> See "Yoko Remixed: Diverse Bands Play Homage to the 'Witch'" (2007).

<sup>52</sup> Fluxus was an art movement during the 1960s which, similar to Dada, criticized ideas of high art. It often involved the viewer and elements of chance in order to shape the piece. Heavily influenced by John Cage, Fluxus emphasized the process of creation rather than the finished product.





Fig. 10. Yoko Ono, Cut Piece (Carnegie Hall, New York), Performance, 1965.  
Source: [Walker Art Center, walkerart.org](http://Walker Art Center, walkerart.org), Web, 6 Feb 2009.

Cut Piece is one of the few pieces where Yoko Ono's own body played a role. Instead of being an aggressive statement, Cut Piece achieved a feeling of ambiguity, violence with self-sacrifice, a questioning of victim and perpetrator. Art historian Kevin Concannon wrote: "Cut Piece is an incredibly rich and poetic work that raises questions about the nature of the artist-audience relationship, and in so doing, deliberately offers its performers, audiences, and critics an opportunity to project their own 'meaning' into the work" (85-90). Nevertheless, Yoko Ono has never asserted that this piece was intended to be a comment on being an Asian woman. For her, it was more important that the audience play a role in the piece; the representation of the performer was insignificant. In fact, in her 1971 paperback edition of her book Grapefruit, she included a description of Cut Piece with the statement that: "the performer, however, does not have to be a woman" (qtd. in Concannon 82). However, once Kim Gordon (from the band Sonic Youth) asked if she had realized what kind of powerful sexual, cultural image about woman was contained in her piece and Ono answered: "Well, it's kind of artistic narcissism, but when I get inspired with a piece I always think, 'Wow! This is great!' But in those days I never thought that it would be experienced again later or be talked about. I always thought that my work was like improvisation: You do it and never look back."<sup>53</sup>

Many other artists have performed Cut Piece. In 1993, Lynn Hershman made a video entitled: Cut Piece: A Video Homage to Yoko Ono (1993, 15 minutes) which spliced together three performances of three different women followed by a discussion between art historians Moira Roth and Whitney Chadwick. Ken Little, an artist in Texas, also performed Cut Piece as part of a Yoko Ono retrospective in 2007 (see fig. 11). In 2003, Yoko Ono repeated her performance of Cut Piece in Paris (see fig. 12). I contend that the content of each performance varied depending on who performed it, as well as when and where it was performed. Haraway's ideas of "situated knowledge" would apply to the audience

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<sup>53</sup> See Kim Gordon's interview with Yoko Ono (2001).

and the context, including where, when, and under what circumstances, it was performed. Hershman made a feminist interpretation of the piece, but Little's performance as a white male had different connotations. Finally, even the recent Paris performance with Yoko Ono herself was different from the original, because she is now a well-known celebrity.



Fig. 11. Ken Little, Cut Piece, Performance, 2007.  
Source: Ken Little, kenlittle.com, Web, 6 Feb 2009.

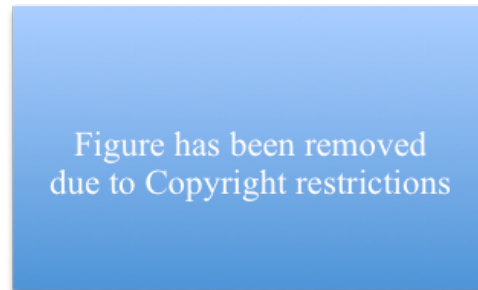


Fig. 12. Yoko Ono, Cut Piece, Performance, 2003.  
Source: Imagine Peace, imaginepeace.com, Web, 2 Apr 2011.

Although Ono's artistic practice is recognized as primarily conceptual and influenced by Fluxus, Cut Piece has been mostly read as a feminist commentary on sexual aggression.<sup>54</sup> For example, curator and writer Tracey Warr writes: "Deconstructing the supposedly neutral subject/object relationship between the viewer and the art object, Ono presented a situation in which the viewer implicated him/herself in the potentially aggressive act of unveiling the passive body. This was further loaded with gender issues by the fact that that body was female" (74). Similarly, I contend, that the performance with Yoko Ono also invariably involved racial issues as that body was Asian. Although Yoko Ono's Asian female identity was always an integral part of her public persona and her musical career, it has never been an intention for her to explore these issues in her visual art. However, referring to the audience reactions to the performances in Japan versus New York and London, art historian Jieun Rhee argues in his essay "Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's Cut Piece": "Making use of her idiosyncratic position of dual identity – Japanese artist in the West and New York avant-gardist in Japan – Ono played an 'exotic body' in both settings. Cut Piece ... claims its pivotal position in Ono's oeuvre expressing the issue of 'otherness'" (98). In my reading, this performance with Yoko Ono could also suggest a submissive act of self-sacrifice reminiscent of a Madame Butterfly figure, one of Tajima's stereotypes of Asian women. As mentioned earlier, 1965, the year of the original US performance, was also the

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Barbara Haskell and John G. Hanhardt's book Yoko Ono: Objects and Arias (1991), Marcia Tanner's catalogue essay for the Bad Girls exhibition (1994), or Thomas Crow's book The Rise of the Sixties (1996).

year that the restrictive quotas for Chinese and Asians to the USA were finally abolished. Thus, these stereotypes about Asian women were firmly in place and still unquestioned. Because of Ono's passivity and the violence imposed onto her Asian female body from the mostly white male audience, this performance also had racial as well as sexual implications. Therefore, I argue, that her representation in this performance not only revealed the power and dynamics of gender, but also racialized gender.

In comparison, Patty Chang (b. 1972) comes from a less notorious background and has a very different type of artistic practice. Born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrant parents, Chang originally studied painting, but is primarily known for videos and photography documenting her own performances. Often using her body, she intentionally challenges popular images and stereotypes of racialized sexuality. For example, in *Gong Li With the Wind* (1995),<sup>55</sup> performed at the New York University Film Center, Chang gorged on beans and defecated onstage from under a hoop skirt. A further example is the film *Paradise* (1996), a denunciation of the international sex trade in Asia where she plays a prostitute servicing a customer.



Fig. 13. Patty Chang, *Candies*, Performance series, 1998.  
Source: [Patty Chang](http://PattyChang.com), pattychang.com, Web, 15 May 2009.



Fig. 14. Patty Chang, *Untitled (Eels)*, Video, 16 min., 2001.  
Source: [Patty Chang](http://PattyChang.com), pattychang.com, Web, 15 May 2009.

In the performance series *Candies* (1997), Chang stood still for hours with her mouth held open by a piece of dental equipment and stuffed with peppermint candies in a critique of female passivity. Pink saliva would drip onto her grey suit, which had the sleeves sewn to the jacket; the pantyhose legs were sewn together as well (see fig. 13). Other works include the photographic *Contortion* series (2000-

<sup>55</sup>The title is a parody combining the name of the internationally prominent Chinese actress Gong Li with the famous Southern epic novel *Gone With the Wind* from Margaret Mitchell.

2001) which mocks exoticized images of Asia women in popular culture by faking impossible physical positions or the video performance Eels (2001) where she sits on the ground with live eels in her shirt (see fig. 14).

In many of these works, Chang chose to use her own body in order to express the trapped female condition and, similar to Ono's Cut Piece performance implicated the audience as well. Art critic Eve Oishi noted in 2003 in Camera Obscura: "Unlike many performance artists who recreate images of their own exploitation and abuse as a ritual, a way of purging and sharing the experience with an audience made complicit in the trauma, Chang's scenes of self-inflicted torture maintain a quality of critical distance, of detached reflection, even of campy humour, without losing their powerful emotional edge" (121). Furthermore, because she is in control, she appears powerful rather than submissive. As Rachel Swan contended in the East Bay Express: "Many theorists write about stereotypes of Asian women and attempt to subvert them, but Chang goes to the absolute extreme ends of masochism and self-immolation to prove her point. She seizes upon the stuff that makes her vulnerable, and violates herself before anyone else can do it to her. And in a weird, twisted way, her work comes across as, well, enabling." Similar to Margaret Cho's comedy routines, Chang's absurd performances often parody her sexuality and her ethnicity, but her confidence and clear actions transforms the situation into one of empowerment.

Chang also frequently addresses the genre of popular culture in her work. One of her more recent pieces involved her research about Anna May Wong, who is described earlier in this chapter. The video A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West (2006) intersperses footage of three different people who simultaneously translate a German magazine article from 1928 about Anna May Wong written by the influential German art theorist Walter Benjamin into English. Benjamin's writings included the 1936 seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" which examined the shift in the arts with the presence of technical reproduction and mass media from questions of authenticity to practices of politics. In light of my research, it is significant that even Benjamin made observations about Anna May Wong which resembled Tajima's stereotypical lotus flower imagery. Asian American Art theorist Lisa Leong explains: "One reader trips over the language and haltingly comes up with 'Anna May Wong, the name sounds colourful ... small letters like those in a cup of tea that open themselves up to like, a full moon flower.' Chang captures the failure of translation to expose Benjamin's description of Anna May Wong as empty nonsense."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Lisa Leong's article "One of These Things Is Not Like the Other" (2007).



Fig. 15. Patty Chang, from Melons (At a Loss), Video, 3' 44 min., 1998.  
Source: Patty Chang, pattychang.com, Web, 15 May 2009.

However, for this dissertation, I concentrate on Chang's video performance Melons (At a Loss) (1998, 3' 44 minutes) for a comparison with Ono's Cut Piece (1965) in order to examine the shift 33 years after Ono's performance in representations of Asian women in visual art. In the referred video, Chang first places two melons into the bra of her corset. While telling a story about inheriting a commemorative plate at the death of her aunt, she slices into one of her breasts with a large kitchen knife, scoops out the fruit, and then uses a spoon to dig into the melon and eats some fruit while putting some on a plate balanced on her head (see fig. 15). In this piece, Chang personifies the hypersexuality of a dragon lady and makes it into a caricature. Although the viewer sees the melons being positioned, the absurd display of Chang first cutting herself and then consuming herself is both repellent and compelling.



Fig. 16. Yoko Ono, Cut Piece (Carnegie Hall, New York), Performance, 1965.  
Source: Walker Art Center, walkerart.org, Web, 6 Feb 2009.



Fig. 17. Patty Chang, from Melons (At a Loss), Video 3' 44 min., 1998.  
Source: Patty Chang, pattychang.com, Web, 15 May 2009.

An analysis of the two performances with my suggested categories of artistic strategies (*literary device, reappropriation, anamorphic situation, theoretical correlation*) shows that although the two performances have some similarities, they are very different (see figs. 16 & 17). Both explore issues of power with an Asian woman's body and a sharp object (scissors or knife) which has the potential to harm that body. Questions of passivity, violence against women as well as representations of Asian women are posed in both art performances. However, in Cut Piece (1965), the role of the audience is active and performs the cutting on a passive performer, while in Melons (1998) this situation is reversed, as the performance is filmed, the audience is passive and the artist has the active role of cutting herself.

Cut Piece uses the *literary devices*<sup>57</sup> of allegory<sup>58</sup> and ambiguity<sup>59</sup> with its tenuous and tacit contract between the performer and the public, a contract which creates an atmosphere of ritual violence and self-sacrifice, but which remains open to many interpretations. Furthermore, the unpredictable actions of the audience create the meaning and the potential danger to Ono. Melons, on the other hand, uses parody<sup>60</sup> and humour when Chang matter-of-factly and decisively slashes into her bra with a knife and then eats the melon that is exposed by the cut. *Reappropriation* of concepts of power and violence against (Asian) women are seen in both performances. Whereas Ono's performance reclaims power through her submission to the audience who, therefore, expose themselves, Chang demonstrates her own power with her control over the situation and also thus reclaims and transforms the "Dragon Lady" stereotype. The *anamorphic situations* are also different. As I have only viewed documentary footage of the Cut Piece 1965 performance, my identification has been with Yoko Ono instead of with participants from the audience. Each time a man approached the stage to cut off clothing from Ono, I flinched, felt uncomfortable and was fearful for what might happen. Nevertheless, the role of the live audience during this performance is as perpetrator and each member is complicit in the act of cutting and possibly violating the performer. In Melons, however, I imagine the pain of slicing my breast with a knife, but afterwards the guilty almost sexual pleasure of discovering a ripe melon to be eaten. Furthermore, because Chang performs her incongruous actions in a determined but matter-of-fact manner, stereotypical ideas of racialized sexuality are completely distorted. In addition, I believe that both performances have *theoretical correlations* to Tajima's stereotypes of Asian women. Cut Piece's representation of an Asian woman has associations of the self-sacrificial "Lotus Blossom Baby" image while Melons has connections to a self-consuming "Dragon Lady". Both performances reveal cultural connotations about racialized sexuality; however, whereas Ono's performance stimulates reflections

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<sup>57</sup> For the definitions of the various literary devices and terms, I have consulted the The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (2008) by Chris Baldick and the online resource compiled by Dr. K. Wheeler from Carson-Newman College. See "Literary Vocabulary" from Dr Wheeler's website.

<sup>58</sup> Allegory is a literary device in which characters or events represent or symbolize ideas and concepts.

<sup>59</sup> Ambiguity is used in art and literature when the meaning may be understood in diverse ways and is open to different interpretations.

<sup>60</sup> Artists and writers frequently use parody or an imitation that is meant for ridicule to make the audience perceive common or familiar entities as unfamiliar or strange.

and interpretations of how power is used, Chang's performance reclaims the power of the stereotype by mocking it.

## Conclusions

The history of Asian women in America is less than two hundred years old but has faced challenges with racialized sexuality from the beginning. Although the pan-ethnic identification "Asian American" is highly contested, the Asian American Movement has had historical significance in mobilizing awareness about stereotypes of Asians, including references to Asian women in Hollywood films. Despite many changes since the 1920s, representations of Asian women in American popular culture are still limited; however, one can see that roles for Asian women in film and television have shifted, especially in the last five years. The film stars, Anna May Wong and Lucy Liu have been immortalized in their screen roles as "Lotus Flowers" and "Dragon Ladies", and often perpetuated images of hypersexuality and *Otherness* in their respective roles. Whereas Wong was limited to these roles, Liu's image as a modern dragon lady has recently started to decline. The contemporary comedian and media personality Margaret Cho also directly experienced the distorted expectations of Western cultural media representations of Asian women but has incorporated these struggles into an empowering critique of these and other racial or sexual discriminatory practices.

In visual art, the performances of Yoko Ono and Patty Chang reveal the power dynamics involved in cultural meanings about representations of Asian women through performances of racialized sexuality. To a certain extent, I would claim that all these women (Wong, Liu, Cho, Ono and Chang) support Shimizu's idea of "productive perversity" and included critical modifications in their roles and performances to resist cultural and social norms. As a celebrity, Ono suffered from a notoriety that made her into a popular culture icon, the ultimate "Dragon Lady". However, my interpretation of her famous Cut Piece performance is that it connoted the other known stereotype of Asian women, the self-sacrificing "Lotus Blossom Baby" and thus exposed the racial and sexual power issues involved. In comparison, Chang's Melons (At a Loss) video performance parodied the "Dragon Lady" stereotype in order to deconstruct it. Whereas Cut Piece was performed in 1965, when the cultural connotations from Anna May Wong's film roles were still pervasive; Melons was created in 1998, when Lucy Liu was in the midst of establishing and promoting her dragon lady image. Thus, both these performances had correlations to developments in popular culture and exposed prevailing cultural stereotypes about Asian women. Women with Asian diasporic backgrounds (myself included) have often been confronted with similar assumptions. Margaret Cho has reappropriated these experiences into her stand-up comedy routines and transformed them into a source of productive energy in order to challenge cultural constructions about race or sexuality. Through the historical comparisons between Anna May Wong and Lucy Liu, as well as Yoko Ono and Patty Chang, some

insights into the representational discourse about Asian women in a Western context have been presented where both popular culture and visual art are seen as possible sites of intervention and resistance. In the next chapter, I examine further strategic approaches to race and gender in visual art with concepts of “reading the body” and within the contexts of identity politics and post-identity.



## Chapter 2. “Reading the Body” and the *Self*: Representations of Race and Gender in the Artistic Strategies of Lorna Simpson and Nikki S. Lee

### Introduction

*The body is like a text and we are all readers of it. We are readers of race and difference. That obviousness of visibility of race functions because in our minds, it is signifying something, it is a text we can read.*<sup>61</sup>

Stuart Hall, 1997

Stuart Hall has consistently argued against the biological interpretation of racial identification or the ‘natural’ linking of certain physical body attributes of people to other characteristics such as intelligence or personality. Although several of his seminal essays that analyse issues of race, ethnicity and identity in connection with representation and culture were written in the 1980s and 1990s, many of his ideas and theories still resonate today. For example, Linda Martin Alcoff contended recently in 2006, “The reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them” (*Visible Identities* 5). The visibility of identities has not abated, nor have the perceptions or the effects of interpretations of difference been resolved. Despite the rapid process of globalization with increasing flows of people, trade, and culture throughout the world, it still is a highly volatile issue for modern society with an intensification of various cultural identifications including religious, national, and ethnic, often resulting in violent confrontations.

In this chapter, I focus on the visual practices of “reading the body” by comparing the artistic approaches of Lorna Simpson’s earlier photographic works from the mid-1980s to early 1990s with Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* (1997-2001) in order to show how representations of race and gender in visual art can undermine social and historical assumptions about identities and identifications. As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, my discovery of a catalogue of Lorna Simpson’s work in the late 1990s was a significant moment for the development of my interest in issues about *Otherness* as well as in the potential of art and photography to challenge racism and sexism. When I heard about Lee’s *Projects* series, it immediately captivated my attention because of Lee’s fascinating transformations.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, by comparing Simpson’s iconic works with Nikki S. Lee’s series, I not only examine the different strategic approaches used, but also invariably the transition from the 1980s and 1990s conceptions of multiculturalism and identity politics to more current discussions

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<sup>61</sup> From *Race, the Floating Signifier*, a filmed lecture at Goldsmith’s College by Stuart Hall directed by Sut Jhully, Media Education Foundation, 1997.

<sup>62</sup> Neither Lorna Simpson nor Nikki S. Lee have exhibited in Switzerland until now (2014); however, through catalogues and art fairs such as Art Basel, I have seen and been informed about their works.

about post-identity, especially in a US context. There are also several similarities between the artists – they are both contemporary artists who work in New York with the medium of photography and are themselves women of colour: Simpson is an African American and Lee is a Korean American. In Simpson’s earlier iconic works, she would often have often an image of a single dark-skinned female figure, usually viewed from the back or cropped, and combined with phrases or words. Lee’s photographs from Projects also concentrated on a female figure (Lee herself) documenting her inclusion as a member of different subcultures and ethnic groups of society. Whereas Simpson’s strategy incorporated many concepts related to the semiotic construction of representation and meaning, Lee’s work was more connected to performative gender theory from Judith Butler<sup>63</sup> and the American tradition of ‘passing’ or ‘racial passing’ where people who were classified as “Black”<sup>64</sup> passed for or were accepted as ‘White’ in order to avoid persecution or oppression. While Simpson’s work represented a major reference position for the US art world’s exploration of multiculturalism and identity politics of the 1980s and early 1990s, Lee’s Projects (1997-2001) can be interpreted as an example of the resulting backlash to these ideas and is frequently used to support post-identity and color-blind art discourses. Thus, an attempt at understanding identity politics and more recent discussions about post-identity and color-blindness as well as how these issues have affected art discourse will be reviewed. In the next section, I begin by presenting a brief overview about the emergence of identity politics (which has some overlap with the discussion in chapter one about the development of the Asian American Movement) as well as its effect on art discourse.

### **Identity and Identity Politics: The Politics of Representation**

As is commonly known, many political movements emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA including the previously discussed Asian American Movement, Black civil rights, gay and lesbian rights, and ‘second-wave’ feminism, which contested the prevailing ideas of social justice for marginalized or oppressed social groups. ‘Consciousness raising’ or the process of social groups evaluating their oppression and their political options, emerged as an empowering force for political mobilization. Identity-based academic programs such as Women’s Studies, Black Studies, or Asian American studies were established, which presented a multitude of subjective viewpoints outside of the mainstream in an academic structure. Concepts of multiculturalism which promoted ideas of cultural diversity were a main area of discussion and debate and were connected to the development of similar ideas which would be associated with identity politics and the ‘politics of recognition’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

<sup>64</sup> According to the “one-drop rule” in the USA, one drop of ‘Black’ blood from African ancestry would be classified as “Black” regardless of the physical markers of the body.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor’s essay “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition” (1994) is a reference work for discussions about recognition and its importance to identity or “a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental characteristics

At the same time, feminists were concerned about making women more visible within art history and art practice. For example, in 1971, the art historian Linda Nochlin published her pioneering essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” examining reasons why women artists remained unrecognized and excluded from art history. In the same year, the first feminist art program was established at California Institute of Arts. Moreover, women artists began to create art from their own experiences or their own bodies like Hannah Wilke’s “vulval” terracotta sculptures, exhibited in the late 1960s, which are often referred to as the first explicit vaginal imagery in visual art, or Carolee Schneemann’s performance Interior Scroll (1975) where she extracted a scroll from her vagina while reading from it. Further examples include Martha Rosler’s video Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975), where she presented herself in a parody cooking demonstration in a kitchen full of utensils, or Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party (1979) installation with a table and settings which honoured historically significant women in Western civilization. Other women artists explored various identities such as Adrian Piper’s Mythic Being performance and photo series (1972-1976) where Piper disguised herself as a stereotypical black man, Martha Wilson’s performance and photo series Posturing (1973) exploring various gender constructions, and Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills (1977-1980) where she posed in different stereotypical female roles.

The 1980s were politically conservative with President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) dominating the US political scene. Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter one, women of colour (e.g. Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins or Mitsuye Yamada) were increasingly critical of earlier feminist claims about the universality of gender as well as its orientation to upper-middle-class white women. Amidst the conservative political environment and criticism from feminists of colour emerged the idea of identity politics which claimed that recognition and then transformation of common oppressive experiences had the potential to create political power for change.

The impact of identity politics and multiculturalism was also strongly felt in the art world. Women artists, gay artists, or artists of colour explored histories of oppression and examined their subjective positions within a new sphere of socially and politically conscious art. Many artists working in the 1980s and early 1990s in the USA became known for their work that explored various collective identifications. Their critical practices brought the art world new perspectives and forms for meaning and content and shifted the types of creative approaches to racial and body politics. Some important examples include Adrian Piper who continued her exploration of racism and racial stereotyping with various conceptual artworks, performances and installations, Faith Ringgold’s first painted story quilt Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima (1983) exploring racial stereotypes of black women, Carrie Mae Weems’ photographic series such as Family Pictures and Stories (1983), Ain’t Jokin (1988), and

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as a human being” (25) as well as the development of this demand from the political activities of feminism, civil rights, and multiculturalism.

American Icons (1989) all focused on African American experiences with racism, and Glenn Ligon's first solo show in 1989 "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" with large, text-based paintings exploring race and sexuality. Further examples of artists who were active at this time like Lorna Simpson, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Yong Soon Min will be examined in this and later chapters in more detail. By the early 1990s, multiculturalism dominated art discourse in the USA and several exhibitions exploring multiculturalism and the politics of identity were presented.<sup>66</sup> Many of these exhibitions featured work from Lorna Simpson, a prominent example of a woman artist with an African American perspective.

### **Floating Signifiers: The Artistic Strategies of Lorna Simpson in the 1980s and 1990s**



Fig. 18. Lorna Simpson, Waterbearer, Gelatin silver print, 55 x 77 in., 1986.  
Source: Lorna Simpson Studio, lsimpsonstudio.com, Web, 2 Sep 2011.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Lorna Simpson (b. 1960) established herself as a pioneer in conceptual photography with her approach to presenting race as a dynamic and socially constructed process by juxtaposing contradictory visual elements and references and encouraging active viewing and interpreting. Her large-scale photographic works with associative text often revealed the viewer's unconscious assumptions about race and gender. Initially using a documentary street photography style, Simpson moved her work to the studio and began cropping images of simply attired dark-skinned women and men and combining them with text fragments that did not directly explain the image, but left the meaning enigmatic and open for interpretation. References external to the image played a role in interpreting and producing new meanings for each piece. Her formal elegant images were not directly confrontational but resisted and contested dominant representations of race and

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<sup>66</sup> Among them were "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s" in New York (1990), "Mistaken Identities" in Santa Barbara, California (1992), "Dirt and Domesticity" in New York (1992), "Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic" in Portland, Oregon (1992), "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism" in Irvine, California (1993). All of the above mentioned shows included work from Lorna Simpson.

gender as well as conventional ways of reading and understanding art. By creating a disparity between the visual elements and the accompanying text, she encouraged the viewer to construct his or her own meaning, thus also establishing ideas about active and critical viewing. In the next section, I focus on a few of these earlier works, where Simpson concentrated on the black female figure.

One of these earlier photographs, Waterbearer (1986), shows a formally simple image of a woman and her gesture of pouring which is reminiscent of a classical figure or fountain (see fig. 18). However, several details disturb the viewer's expectations: the female figure is dark-skinned, only viewed from the back, and pouring water from two different types of containers. Thus, a narrative is suggested but not completed. Furthermore, the text for Waterbearer is also quite thought provoking. Because of the image of a black female figure, the possibly violent situation described in the text is racially charged. Who disappeared by the river and what happened? According to these sentences, the female observer's attempt to explain what occurred is ignored. This text can be correlated to Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In that essay, Spivak examined the historical and ideological factors that prevent oppressed or marginalized groups from voicing their resistance. Because all communication occurs within the dominant discourse and its linguistic and conceptual framework, the subaltern has only the dominant language through which he or she can be heard. Thus, Simpson's text reiterates Spivak's conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak". In any case, while trying to understand the work, the viewer attempts to bring the text and the image together and only succeeds in questioning the meaning further. The piece does not explain racial or gender inequalities; instead, it suggests various scenarios so that the viewer is compelled to reconsider his or her assumptions about race and gender.



Fig. 19. Lorna Simpson, You're Fine, 4 colour Polaroid prints, 40 x 103 in., 1988.  
Source: [Lorna Simpson Studio](http://Lorna Simpson Studio), [lsimpsonstudio.com](http://lsimpsonstudio.com), Web, 2 Sep 2011.

In another early piece, You're Fine (1988), Simpson again displays the back of a similarly clothed black woman reclining on her side on a white surface (see fig. 19). However, in this case, the image of the body is separated into four sections by the white frames of the photographs. The pose is reminiscent of a classical odalisque female slave figure, except that she does not look at the viewer and seems to be waiting to be inspected. One has both the associations of an examination table and that of a 'casting couch' where women trade sexual favours for employment. Various words and phrases surround the image in addition to a list of clinical medical terms. In this way, the viewer is activated to put the various visual and textual clues together in order to understand the meaning.

For her work entitled Guarded Conditions (1989), Simpson uses repeated images of a woman's back (see fig. 20). The body of each woman is composed of three separate pictures cropped close to the body and separated by a white frame. Again, the viewer does not see the face or the front of the woman who seems to be standing and waiting for something. The images are very similar but are not quite identical, with slight differences in the position of the feet, arms or body. Perhaps, if the viewer could see the images of the woman from the front, the poses would seem open and inviting. Instead, a somewhat guarded position of the arms and hands protect the back from the viewer. With both the text "guarded conditions" and the repeated text "sex attacks, skin attacks", Simpson implies a menacing violence. By alternating the words "sex" and "skin", issues of gender and race are also evident. The quiet, composed images of the woman become laden with ambiguity and danger. Simpson presents a simple scenario but makes the viewer uncomfortable through the juxtaposition of image and text. The interpretation or the construction of the meaning is open to each viewer, but a feeling of unease about the social conditions of black women lingers.



Fig. 20. Lorna Simpson, Guarded Conditions, 18 colour Polaroids, 231 x 333 cm, 1989.  
Source: Lorna Simpson Studio, [lsimpsonstudio.com](http://lsimpsonstudio.com), Web, 2 Sep 2011.

Similar semiotic and associative strategies are used in Untitled (2 necklines) (1989) although the image of the female body itself is no longer as visible. This photographic work depicts two circularly cropped images of a dark-skinned woman's mouth and collarbone (see fig. 21). The neckline of her white shirt emphasizes the shape of her mouth and chin in addition to accentuating the abstractness of the black and white images. Between the two pictures is a list of words: ring, surround, lasso, noose, eye, areola, halo cuffs, collar, loop, ending with the phrase "feel the ground sliding from under you". The combination of this phrase with the word "noose" together with pictures of the neck of a black woman communicates a sense of danger and menace. This wordplay on the theme of circular objects together with the circular photographs make the viewer aware of the slippage of language and image as Simpson reveals how tenuous the associations between words and images and their constructed meanings can be.



Fig. 21. Lorna Simpson, *Untitled (2 Necklines)*, 101.6 x 265 cm, 1989.  
Source: [National Gallery of Art](http://www.nga.gov), www.nga.gov, Web, 2 Sep 2011.

Simpson's artistic practice exposes the cultural connotations that give meaning to racial and gender signifiers of the body and demonstrates many concepts that Stuart Hall explored in several of his essays, books and lectures. According to Hall (as seen from the quote at the beginning of this chapter) the practice of "reading" specific visible physical characteristics of the body to determine genetic characteristics such as personality or intelligence is the play of the signifier at work. In his filmed lecture *Race, the Floating Signifier* (1997), Hall presented various examples from the history of the concept of race, and showed how the meanings of racial signifiers have changed in different historical moments and cultures. Racial classification based on certain body signifiers (e.g. skin colour, facial form or eye shape) has been a popular method for maintaining order or regulating society and was often used in the nineteenth century to support ideas of social Darwinism.<sup>67</sup> For Hall, the meaning of a signifier in language or another semiotic system is influenced by relations of power; thus, as power shifts in society, meanings can also change. Whilst Saussure saw the relationship between the signifier and the signified as arbitrary, many postmodern theorists (such as Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Lacan, or Derrida) "postulate a complete disconnection of the signifier and signified" where "an 'empty' or 'floating signifier' is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified" (Chandler, 78). Thus, race can thus be seen as a 'floating signifier' where the meaning can never be fixed but can be linked to other signifiers in representation. Simpson's artistic practice exemplifies this concept by using contradictory visual elements juxtaposed with disparate references and reveals how "reading the body" incorporates a set of floating signifiers constructed through cultural context or 'knowledge'. The enigmatic and shifting meanings of Simpson's works are generated by viewers who are implicated by their own historical and cultural

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<sup>67</sup> The application of Darwinism to the study of human society, specifically a theory in sociology that individuals or groups achieve advantage over others as a result of genetic or biological superiority ("Social Darwinism" def.) While racial dualisms have been criticized for being scientifically invalid, they persist today and still have significant effects in contemporary society. For example, a famous controversial book was *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein which scientifically 'proved' correlations between intelligence and race. Other more recent books that continue to scientifically explore similar correlations include Vincent Sarich and Frank Miele's *Race: The Reality of Human Differences* (2005) and Richard Lynn's *Race Differences in Intelligence: An Evolutionary Analysis* (2006) as well as the peer-reviewed journal *Mankind Quarterly* ([www.mankindquarterly.org](http://www.mankindquarterly.org)).

assumptions or 'knowledge' about racial difference. With the combination of images and simple text, Simpson also exposes language as a discursive and culturally defined process.

In effect, Simpson uses a semiotic approach to photography where photographs communicate meaning through their connection with implicit or hidden texts rather than being an unmediated reproduction of an object or event in the real world. Roland Barthes wrote extensively about how photography presents itself as natural and real, but is a sign system that creates and confirms dominant culture and ideologies. Barthes contended in his seminal essay "The Rhetoric of the Image" that photography "seems to find in nature the signs of culture ... masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning" (45-6). According to Barthes, there are two types of messages in a photograph: denotation, the literal meaning or reference of a sign (object, person or event) and connotation, the meanings that are suggested or implied by the sign. Connotation is social or historical in that what an image connotes is dependent on the conventions and expectations of the society where that image appears. Furthermore, Barthes defined two forms of interaction between text and image: in the first, the "image illustrate[s] the text" and in the second, "the texts loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination" ("The Photographic Message" 26). Correspondingly, the text fragments found in Simpson's earlier works do not explain the image; instead, they add another connotative dimension to the images dependent on the viewer's cultural experiences. Following Barthes, artist and writer Coco Fusco noted in her essay "Uncanny Dissonance: The Work of Lorna Simpson" that Simpson deconstructs photography's fundamental assumption of "referent = image = text/caption" which confronts the viewer with questions of not only how her work should be read, but also how viewers have a learned and ingrained way of constructing meaning (97). For example, because her pictures invariably have models with their backs to the camera or cropped at the neck, conventional readings of pictures of people are disrupted. Simpson explained her intentions in a 1988 interview with Trevor Fairbrother: "The viewer wants so much to see a face to read 'the look in the eyes' or the expression on the mouth. I want viewers to realize that that is one of the mechanisms which they use to read a photograph. If they think, 'How am I supposed to read this, if I don't see the face?' they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps see that it is not a given." Moreover, by using a recognizably black female figure, but without an identifiable face, Simpson replaces the individual in her images with an abstract figure that symbolizes a black female subject, thereby compelling the viewer to focus on the issues of gender and race instead of a specific person.

In the 1980s, ideas of subjectivity and non-essential identity construction as well as the processes of intersectional and relational identities and identifications were pioneering and innovative. In this context, Lorna Simpson's work critically engaged questions of positionality, subjectivity, and



institutional critique and was well represented in the many identity-related exhibitions of that time.<sup>68</sup> However, in the mid-1990s, Simpson radically changed her artistic strategy and began producing images printed on felt of urban landscapes without any human figures. In an interview with Thelma Golden in 2002, Simpson said: “I made a decision not to use the figure with the text in the way that I had before ... There was a feeling of discomfort that the audience immediately recognizes the way that the work operates and has a particular expectation of what they're going to see. The whole premise of the work was to engage with the audience in a way they wouldn't be used to – to put them off balance” (16). Moreover, at the same time, a post-identity art discourse had emerged as a reaction against ideas about identity politics and artists producing socially and politically conscious art which had developed a reputation as being didactic and moralistic. Although Simpson's work was open to various interpretations, this shift may have affected her decision to discontinue use of the human figure that had clear references to gender and race.

### **Shifting Discourses: From Identity to Post-identity**

Throughout the 1980s, issues of identity and multiculturalism were extremely prominent in both intellectual and art discourse. However, in the 1990s, criticism of identity politics became increasingly prevalent, and many theorists challenged the simplistic and essentialist nature of categorizing people based on certain identifications. Critics like Todd Gitlin (1995), Eric Hobsbawm (1996), Nancy Fraser (1997), Betty Friedan (1996), Richard Rorty (1998, 1999), Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) argued that the affirmation of difference further marginalized minorities and other subgroups rather than integrating them into mainstream culture. Moreover, for many of the Marxist-based intellectuals, politics of identity or “politics of recognition”<sup>69</sup> directed attention away from more essential problems of class and economic oppression. For example, theorist and philosopher Nancy Fraser argued in her book Redistribution or Recognition (co-authored with Axel Honneth) that “the rise of ‘identity politics’ in both its fundamentalist and progressive forms” was an important factor “to decenter, if not to extinguish, claims for egalitarian distribution” (8). Thus, despite the legitimate concerns and many useful and positive developments influenced by the politics of identity, many of these critics attempted to discredit all identity-based movements. Although the existence of different subjective perspectives was finally acknowledged and accepted, it became unpopular to be identified by one's gender, race, class or sexual orientation as any group identification was found to be confining and narrow.

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<sup>68</sup> For example, Simpson was the first black woman exhibited at the Venice Biennale in Italy (1990) and her works were featured at many prestigious US institutions including New York's Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art.

<sup>69</sup> See Charles Taylor's essay “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition” (1994).

The reaction against identity politics and multiculturalism in America gave rise to the ideology of ‘color-blindness’<sup>70</sup> which asserts that all differences based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or class have (presumably as a result of the various identity-related movements from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s) been eliminated from current society. Color-blindness emphasizes individual agency rather than collective political action and does not acknowledge historical racial power imbalances or systematic racial oppression. For example, color-blind arguments are often used in legal discussions to attack rectifying historical discriminatory practices such as ‘affirmative action’<sup>71</sup> in the USA. With a color-blind perspective, we no longer see or need to consider race, as it no longer exists. According to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the social construction of race needs racial ideologies that reinforce and maintain the dominant social order. Using color-blind claims, many predominantly ‘White’ Americans insist that race no longer matters in the post-civil rights, post-identity era, and insist that current racial inequality is a consequence of other aspects of society such as market dynamics or the cultural deficiency of certain minority groups (Racism Without Racists 2).

At the same time, the contemporary US art world was experiencing a similar reaction against art that explored political issues based on specific identifications as well as the implicit criticism of how some perceived identifications might condition art world values. The 1993 Whitney Biennial<sup>72</sup> is often cited as a landmark exhibition<sup>73</sup> in debates about the role of identity in the art world and was highly controversial for showing overtly political art made by a significant number of artists who were members of groups were normally underrepresented in mainstream art exhibitions. Six years earlier, the feminist performance group Guerrilla Girls<sup>74</sup> had revealed the enormous inequality in numbers of women or non-white artists compared to white, male artists who had participated in previous Whitney Biennials. The 1993 curators<sup>75</sup> wanted the exhibition to participate in the larger discourse on issues of race and cultural identity that were prevalent in USA at the time. Thus, the majority of the 82 artists<sup>76</sup> who were selected included Asian American, Hispanic American, and African American as well as women and gays; however, the response to this show’s focus on art that addressed identity-related issues was overwhelmingly negative. Example work in the 1993 Whitney Biennial included admission buttons designed by Daniel Martinez where each button contained a single word from the sentence: “I Can’t / Imagine/ Ever Wanting/ To Be/ White” which, according to Jones, set the “tone of the show

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<sup>70</sup> For a good overview about ‘color-blindness’, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s book Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States (2003).

<sup>71</sup> US American laws which endeavour to increase representation of groups that are often underrepresented because of historical discriminatory practices (e.g. women or minorities) in education and employment.

<sup>72</sup> The Whitney Biennial is an important showcase of contemporary art exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City every two years.

<sup>73</sup> See Amelia Jones’s discussion about the 1993 Whitney Biennial in Seeing Differently (2012), pp. 119-138 or Cherise Smith’s in Enacting Others (2011), pp. 144-150.

<sup>74</sup> Guerrilla Girls are a group of feminist artists formed in New York City in 1985 dedicated to fighting sexism and racism in the art world and who remain anonymous with gorilla masks. For more information, see website.

<sup>75</sup> Curators of the 1993 Whitney Biennial were Elisabeth Sussman, John Hanhardt, Thelma Golden, and Lisa Phillips.

<sup>76</sup> Some of the artists included who are mentioned in this dissertation were: Guillermo Gómez-Peña & Coco Fusco, Glenn Ligon, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cindy Sherman, and Faith Ringgold.

for many” (120). Although this work could be seen as reinforcing binary models of racial identity as white vs. non-white, it also opened up other meanings for subject identification. Thus, as Jones points out, the possibility of a visitor who might be identified as black could just as well be wearing the tag “White” as a white visitor which together with various other words from the sentence created various shifting possibilities for potential phrases. Other works included a large-scale photomural of five black youths sitting and staring aggressively at viewers in front of a wall with the graffiti “What You Lookn At?” by African American photographer Pat Ward Williams. New York art critic Eleanor Heartney claimed in Art in America, that this work reduced racism “to a matter of relationships between individuals ... best countered by a tactic of reciprocal intimidation” (45). The most controversial work was the inclusion of the amateur video of Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles police officers filmed by local witness George Holliday.<sup>77</sup> Robert Hughes’ review for Time, entitled “A Fiesta of Whining” designated Holliday’s video as the “key to the show” for establishing “the Artist as Victim, or as Victim’s Representative” and lambasted the show as “a saturnalia of political correctness” and “a long-winded immersion course in marginality” with art emphasizing “grievance and moral rhetoric” but lacking “aesthetic quality” (qtd. in Jones 122). Other critical voices included Roberta Smith, the art critic for The New York Times, who called it “a pious, often arid show that frequently substitutes didactic moralizing for genuine visual communication.” Art historian Rosalind Krauss similarly criticized the lack of aesthetic form including materials and composition and how the meaning of the artworks merged with the politics of the artists’ perceived identification in the 1993 article “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial”. For Krauss and many others the true meaning of art should transcend the identity of the artist, reminiscent of formalist forms of artist expression. Consequently, the 1993 Whitney Biennial was a convenient target for denouncing the appearance of identity politics in the supposedly ‘neutral’ area of art.

With the hostile reaction to the Whitney Biennial as well as other criticisms concerning identity and multiculturalism in the art world, a ‘post-identity’ art discourse emerged, heralding the return of aesthetics and the true value of the “object itself”.<sup>78</sup> Similar to color-blind ideology, post-identity art claimed that the identity of the artist should be irrelevant in discussions about the meaning of the work. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, other terms using the prefix ‘post’ also appeared which gave the impression that either identity-related issues were no longer relevant or that artistic approaches to these concerns had progressed. For example, the paradoxical term “post-black” was introduced by curator Thelma Golden (one of the curators for the 1993 Whitney Biennial) for describing artists with an African American background who explored their experiences or background but who attempted to avoid the negative connotations of previous identity-related art. The

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<sup>77</sup> Rodney King, an African-American man, was stopped for speeding in Los Angeles on March 3, 1991 and was filmed by bystander George Holliday being brutally beaten by the arresting police officers. The footage was broadcast around the world and raised public outrage and concern for racial abuse by police and became a symbol of US racial tensions.

<sup>78</sup> See Amelia Jones’ discussion about post-identity art discourses in Seeing Differently (2012), pp. 136-140.

term post-black was eagerly embraced by conservative art critics who saw the show as evidence that art finally was “beyond identity” (Jones 140-142). Although problems of sexism or racism had not disappeared, it was becoming increasingly popular to distance oneself from former identifications and art strategies of the 1980s and early 1990s and offer other strategies that appeared less politically or socially conscious. One example was the young photography student, Nikki S. Lee, who began in 1997 to make various photographs entitled Projects by depicting herself in extremely diverse social situations.

### **Performative Passing: The Artistic Strategies of Nikki S. Lee in her Projects Series**

Nikki S. Lee (b. 1970) was born Lee Seung-Hee in Korea and chose her new name from a fashion magazine when she came to New York in 1994. Her ability to adapt herself to new environments became even more evident with her series of works entitled Projects (1997-2001) where she mingled with various ethnic and social communities and was photographed as a member.<sup>79</sup> Transforming her physical appearance with clothing, make-up, body and facial expressions, her visual integration into communities like punks, lesbians, yuppies, Hispanics, senior citizens, drag queens, or trailer park residents was remarkably convincing. The resulting photographs resemble typical amateur snap shots of groups of friends hanging out or doing things together; however, the conceptual construction behind the series is revealed with the discovery of Lee in each new and different environment. Her fluid transformations of social and cultural identities challenge the viewer’s assumptions about the *Self* and the *Other*, and document her simultaneously as a ‘member’ as well as an outsider. Contrary to Lorna Simpson’s solitary and faceless black female figures, Lee is usually recognizable, although somewhat altered, and invariably with other members of a specific subculture group. The viewer “reads” Lee’s body in the context in which she is portrayed. Lee herself embodies ‘every-woman’ and is identifiable by the other people in the picture as well as the title of the photograph. Similar to Simpson, Lee’s various images in the Projects often reveal the viewer’s unconscious assumptions about race, ethnicity, class or gender in her appropriation of cultural stereotypes; however, these stereotypes are not only undermined, they are reinforced as well. Whereas Simpson’s images and text use semiotic strategies of photography to reveal how representations of race are culturally constructed, Lee photographically documented her performative strategy of ‘passing’ or blending in with various diverse groups.

The viewer perceives Lee as a member of a group not solely because of Lee’s physical body, but because of her performing the role as one of ‘them’. She defined her character or role and acted out the unwritten script of belonging to a specific sub-group thus incorporating concepts from Judith Butler’s

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<sup>79</sup> The various Projects from Nikki S. Lee include: The Punk Project (1997), The Lesbian Project (1997), Young Japanese (East Village) Project (1997), The Tourist Project (1997), The Drag Queen Project (1997), The Hispanic Project (1998), The Yuppie Project (1998), The Ohio Project (1999), The Swingers Project (1999), The Seniors Project (1999), The Exotic Dancers Project (2000), The Schoolgirls Project (2000), The Skateboarders Project (2000), and The Hip Hop Project (2001).

widely cited theory of performativity of gender.<sup>80</sup> According to Butler, bodies are discursively constructed: race, sex and sexuality are shifting categories of identity created and defined by power and discourse where cultural norms regulate how we embody or perform our raced and gendered identities. To focus initially on Butler's 1990 formulation of gender identities in *Gender Trouble*, gender identity is simply "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Thus, gender is not something fixed or natural, but rather a performed role that is constantly created by our interactions with other people. Butler's concept that gender identity is performative and not connected to a biological core essence has allowed for new interpretations and possible strategies that could unsettle conventional beliefs about identities, gender and otherwise. In a similar manner, the analysis of artistic strategies that examine notions of *Otherness* in this dissertation might inspire other cultural producers to consider related methods for offering alternative perspectives about the *Other*. Furthermore, Butler suggested that subversive action ("gender trouble") for mobilizing gender identity or confusion through parody (such as cross-dressing or the practice of drag) can reveal assumptions about gender identity. By presenting various identities as a set of socially recognizable behaviours and actions, Lee's *Projects* supports Butler's subversive concept for destabilizing the illusion of a natural or stable identity. Thus, similar to Simpson's ambiguous texts and semiotic use of photographic images described earlier, Lee reveals the constructed nature of representations of the *Other* because she can be identified in each project both as herself and as a member of a different subgroup.

A further perspective on Lee's series is the idea of 'passing' or 'racial passing' which has historically been a subversion of racial identification in the United States. Because of America's history of slavery and legal definition of any individual with 'one drop of Black blood' as 'Black', 'passing as White' was a significant strategy to cross defined racial barriers in order to escape oppression or persecution. Extending this idea, 'passing' has also been applied to concealing other features of a person's presumed 'natural' or 'essential' identity or identification, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality as well as gender. Several authors such as Werner Sollors or Elaine K. Ginsberg as well as Judith Butler or more recently Marcia Alesan Dawkins have explored this phenomenon in American culture and literature, emphasizing the role of power and social inequality in crossing borders of identification. As mentioned earlier, several women artists in the early 1970s and 1980s such as Adrian Piper or Martha Wilson employed artistic strategies of 'passing' in order to explore different identifications. In particular, Adrian Piper, who was a light-skinned African American, had personal knowledge and experience about 'passing for White' and created several different artworks exploring race and gender identifications. The aforementioned *Mythic Being* performance and photo series where Piper disguised herself as a stereotypical black man in the early 1970s was particularly significant. Lee's performative

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<sup>80</sup> See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993).

‘passing’ for diverse subcultures and ethnicities can thus be seen as part of this legacy of ‘passing’ performances in art that demonstrated how identity is connected to performance and representation. Furthermore, by crossing culturally constructed borders of identification, they are also revealed as permeable.



Fig. 22. Nikki S. Lee, Young Japanese (East Village) Project, Fujiflex print, 1997.  
Source: Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, tonkonow.com, Web, 2 Dec 2010.

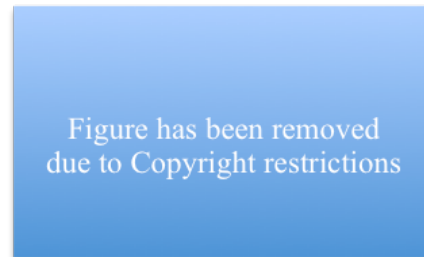


Fig. 23. Nikki S. Lee, The Hispanic Project, Fujiflex print, 1998.  
Source: Museum of Contemporary Photography, mocp.org, Web, 8 Dec 2010.



Fig. 24. Nikki S. Lee, The Hip Hop Project, Fujiflex print, 2001.  
Source: Sikkema Jenkins & Co., sikkemajenkinsco.com, Web, 8 Dec 2010.

Within the Projects by Lee, I identify two broad categories of ethnicity for her performative passing: ‘ethnic minority’ and ‘ethnic White’. In Young Japanese (East Village) Project (1997) (see fig. 22), The Hispanic Project (1998) (see fig. 23), and The Hip Hop Project (2001) (see fig. 24) Lee ‘passes’ for a different ‘ethnic minority’. Here the emphasis is on being accepted as a particular ethnicity with

identifying visual characteristics including clothing, accessories, and body or facial expressions. As in all her project titles, the simple labels clearly describe which ethnicity Lee is portraying, thus indicating and confirming the viewer's expectations. Lee seemingly effortlessly moves from the cool, urban bohemian style of the 'Young Japanese' (where she remains Asian), to the form-fitting clothes, frizzy hair and sassy 'Hispanic' woman and finally portrays herself as a heavily made-up, extravagantly accessorized, and slightly hostile member of the New York 'Hip Hop' (mostly 'Black') scene. In each of the photographs, she is recognizable, but convincingly blends in with other members of the group.

The second 'ethnic passing' category for Lee's documented performances include groups that I would describe as 'ethnic White'. In her passing for 'ethnic White', Lee subtly subverts cultural norms and even reveals subcategories of 'Whiteness' as age or social class differences. Because White is considered normal and 'unraced', the racial classification of Whiteness is usually overlooked. Artist and theorist Coco Fusco summarized it as follows: "Racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American and so on, they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it" ("Fantasies of Oppositionality" 72). In fact, artists who work with non-white bodies are often perceived as presenting a marginalized perspective. Lorna Simpson, for example, made similar observations concerning her own work. In an interview with Barbara Pollack in 2002, she stated: "the specter of race looms so large because this is a culture where using the black figure takes on very particular meanings, even stereotypes. But if I was a white artist using Caucasian models, then the work would be read as completely universalist" (139).

By 'passing for White', Lee crosses racial barriers and exposes visual social constructions for identifying ethnicities, both White and otherwise. In fact, as art critic and curator Maurice Berger observed in his essay "Picturing Whiteness", "Lee's ability to make whiteness visible represents an important strategy in contemporary American culture" (55). However, Lee's works are ambiguous, as the theme of Whiteness is not specifically addressed or critically presented. Although Lee's 'ethnic White' projects alert some viewers that an artist of colour was 'passing for White', for the most part, the theme of Whiteness is still not visible as most viewers concentrate on the hobby, age or social class of the group portrayed. In these 'ethnic White' projects, Lee chose subcultural social groups whose members are predominantly White and are thus not associated with an ethnic identification, but are involved in various activities or who are of different social or age classes. Thus, Lee is often the only person of colour depicted in these photographs. For example, in The Swingers Project (1999) (see fig. 25) or The Skateboarders Project (1999) (see fig. 26), Lee learned and participated in the activities of swing dancing or skateboarding, both usually 'White' activities. Culturally coded clothing and accessories support the identification of members of these groups who are identified by a common interest, but are considered ethnically unmarked or White.



Fig. 25. Nikki S. Lee, The Swingers Project, Fujiflex print, 1999.

Source: Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, tonkonow.com, Web, 8 Dec 2010.

Fig. 26. Nikki S. Lee, The Skateboarders Project, Fujiflex print, 1999

Source: Museum of Contemporary Photography, mocc.org, Web, 10 Dec 2010.

Furthermore, in The Punk Project (1997), The Seniors Project (1999), The Yuppie Project (1998), and The Ohio Project (1999), Lee transformed herself into various age and social classes of ‘ethnic White’. For example, in The Punk Project (1997) Lee is seen wearing ripped net stockings, studded black leather jacket, spiked chain and purple hair in various scenarios with other young people. As the punk subculture involves mostly White youth with anti-establishment views and is characterized by specific forms of fashion and music, her associates in the photographs are all White. In comparison, for The Seniors Project (1999), although her companions are again White, they are presumed to be conservative or pro-establishment, almost all older women, and Lee is portrayed as a dowdy and frumpy elderly woman among them. In The Yuppie Project (1998) Lee appears professional and sophisticated in the world of white Wall Street professionals (see fig. 27). Viewers’ expectations are again confirmed in what yuppies<sup>81</sup> wore (dark suits, pearls, designer shopping bags), what they did (shop, work, dine), or where they went (office, boutiques or fine restaurants). In contrast, the visually striking The Ohio Project (1999) series documents Lee’s association with a group of white lower-class residents of a trailer park (see fig. 28). With bleached blonde hair, wearing old T-shirts or a tube top with jeans shorts and flip-flops, she is photographed in a variety of scenarios looking somewhat downtrodden or even destitute. These projects are particularly interesting because Lee’s own ethnic identification, her Asianness, becomes secondary and less visible than the group identification she is

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<sup>81</sup> The acronym ‘yuppie’ stands for Young Urban Professional and contains no racial markers (White being understood); yuppies of colour are called ‘buppie’ or ‘juppie’ (for Black or Japanese urban professionals), thus being racially identified (Berger 55).



depicting. This subversion of her Asian ethnicity to ‘pass’ as both ethnic White or ethnic minority demonstrates how viewers “read” numerous other visible factors about a person besides the typical racial signifiers like skin colour, hair colour or eye shape. In fact, in a specific context, clothing, accessories, body and facial expressions can be more significant than the actual physical or racial markers of the body in identifying a person.

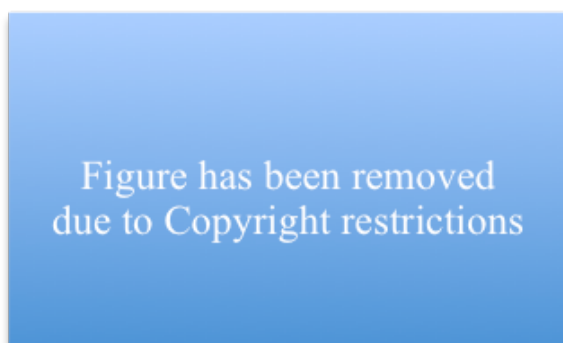


Fig. 27. Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project*, Fujiflex print, 1998.  
Source: [Museum of Contemporary Photography, mocp.org](http://Museum of Contemporary Photography, mocp.org), Web, 9 Nov 2010.

Fig. 28. Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project*, Fujiflex print, 1999.  
Source: [Sikkema Jenkins & Co, sikkemajenkinsco.com](http://Sikkema Jenkins & Co, sikkemajenkinsco.com), Web, 2 Dec 2010.

A further aspect of Lee’s artistic strategy is her use of visual stereotypes to depict diverse groups and ethnicities. Art critic and curator Russell Ferguson noted in his essay “Let’s Be Nikki” that Lee “makes use of certain common stereotypes. Her various identities, although they are quite specific, are at the same time dependent on the recognizability of particular sub-cultures. The visual markers of the stereotype are the means by which each successive photograph is quickly identified as part of its respective series” (13). Stereotyping<sup>82</sup> is a method of classification that uses extremely simplified definitions of difference. Cultural stereotypes are used by dominant groups in order to classify and exclude what they view as the *Other*. By naturalizing the link between racial signifiers and other attributes, racial or cultural differences are ‘fixed’. Stereotyping supports this naturalization process by selecting, exaggerating, and simplifying certain traits and reducing a person or group to these characteristics. In Lee’s *Projects*, one can visually identify which subculture is being depicted even before being confirmed by the explanatory title. Similar to Lorna Simpson, Lee’s work is dependent

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<sup>82</sup> See Stuart Hall’s discussion of stereotypes in “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’” in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997).

on the viewer's cultural knowledge about diverse subculture groups or ethnicities. In Lee's case, where she is simultaneously recognized as both herself and the *Other*, the viewer may be motivated to reconsider his or her own assumptions and re-evaluate cultural readings. However, whereas Simpson's photograph and text work critically stimulate viewers to question and then reveal their own racial assumptions, Lee's intentions are more ambiguous and could also be seen as affirming cultural stereotypes already in place. Nevertheless, by Lee's presence in each of these subculture groups, the cultural stereotype is demarcated and revealed. Thus, by reinforcing and at the same time undermining fixed cultural stereotypes, Lee presents the constructed and ambivalent nature of representation.

In Lee's case, color-blind arguments and the backlash against political art from a marginalized viewpoint was favourable for her work where identifications were not critically examined or possibly inspirational for political action. For example, visual artist and writer Jennifer Dalton pointed out in her essay "Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography after Cindy Sherman" that although Lee's Projects have a 'Where's Waldo'<sup>83</sup> effect, where "the immediate appeal ... is the one-liner of spotting Lee and decoding her masquerade", it also presents "fresh and energetic spirit to what is often a deadly serious debate over assimilation and 'passing'" (47). In the contemporary post-identity art world, artistic strategies that communicate critical identity-related content are viewed with misgiving. Instead, with subtle humour and irony, Lee's pictures expose and indicate how physical visual signifiers of the body are often "read" in context. Similar to Simpson, the ambivalence of these signifiers and the possibility of transforming them is Lee's method to reveal how the meanings that correspond to these visual cues are assigned and constructed by social conditioning.

Although Lee's performative passing for various social and ethnic communities can be situated in a history of subversive artistic strategies, several critics have pointed out the superficial nature of the identifications that are displayed without any political, social, or historical background. Instead, Lee's work can support color-blind arguments that individual agency combined with suitable clothing and accessories has the potential to transcend historical and institutional hierarchies based on race or gender. Cherise Smith further argues in her book Enacting Others that the various groups which are shown in leisure and recreational activities "embody the postmodern notion of the commoditized identity" and are "represented as though they are participating in the branding, marketing and consumption of their culture... which then leads to the understanding that identification is merely a matter of choice" (209). Nevertheless, Smith still affirms Lee's artistic influence and agency in revealing the ambivalence between identity formation and subversion of persistent identity-based hierarchies (231). For curator and art history professor Miwon Kwon, Lee's Projects not only reduce subcultures and identities to "fashion tableaux" or "costume change" (85), but also contributes to both

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<sup>83</sup> Originally known as 'Where's Wally' in Britain, this was a popular series of US children's books by Martin Handford which depicted groups of people in amusing situations. In each of the illustrations, the readers were supposed to find the character Wally/Waldo hidden in the group.

the reinforcement of ethnographic authority as well as the alleged authenticity of Lee's experiences with members of the communities. Kwon contends that "rather than disturbing or complicating the voyeuristic desire and primitivist expectations that fuel ethnography and tourism, Lee fulfils them by objectifying herself, collapsing herself into the other *as* an other, serving happily as a 'native' tour guide" (87, emphasis in original). Thus, according to Kwon, because Lee is recognised as being from a subcultural group herself, her authority as *Other* appears authentic and convincing. Furthermore, unlike Simpson or even Adrian Piper, Lee's own intentions are vague, and most of her comments in interviews on this work appear naïve. For example, in an article by Russell Ferguson, she stated: "I don't think about race or nationality. ... I don't need to bring up that issue because other people will." Or in the Projects catalogue, she offered this explanation for her work: "I always feel like I have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things. I wanted to see some sort of evidence that I could be all those different things. ... Other people make me a certain kind of person. It's about inner relationship and how those really address the idea of identity." She has also based her explanation of her work on what she sees as the difference between "East" and "West". For example, she mentioned in a New York Times article by William Hamilton: "In Western culture, identity is about 'me'. In Eastern culture, the identity is 'we'. Identity is awareness of others."

Thus, although I claim that Lee's Projects subverted and challenged fixed identification boundaries, Lee's own intentions are unclear and there are many other valid criticisms. Furthermore, her other more recent works are less convincing; her series of Projects, which was completed in 2001, is still her most significant work to date. It is not my intention to assert that artistic work must be theoretically informed or obviously critical of dominant ideology in order to challenge assumptions about the *Other*; however, an informed perspective not only has the potential to be a valuable source of inspiration, but can also offer multiple levels of meaning which can impact viewers' understanding of society and culture.

## Conclusions

Inasmuch as Lorna Simpson and Nikki S. Lee have both created ambiguous and subversive artworks that incorporate strategies of "reading the body" in order to reveal how identities are influenced by representation, there are also many differences. By applying my suggested categories of strategic approaches (*literary device, reappropriation, anamorphic situation, theoretical correlation*) to Simpson's artworks of the 1980s and 1990s and Lee's Projects, I determine several relevant aspects. Simpson's approach incorporates the *literary devices* of juxtaposition,<sup>84</sup> connotation,<sup>85</sup> ambiguity and allegory. Simpson juxtaposes image and text and reveals the semiotic differences between signifier

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<sup>84</sup> Juxtaposition is a literary device with an arrangement of two or more characters, ideas, or themes in parallel in order to compare and contrast them.

<sup>85</sup> Connotation is also literary device where the intended meaning is not stated clearly but conveyed indirectly.

and signified as well as the resulting cultural associations or connotations. Furthermore, this discrepancy allows multiple interpretations and highlights the ambiguous nature of her work and also presents an allegorical interpretation of representations of black women. In comparison, Lee's Projects series uses the literary devices of juxtaposition and irony<sup>86</sup>. By juxtaposing images of herself as a member of diverse subcultures, the viewer can compare and contrast the different visual identities of Lee. Because it is clear that she cannot be a member of all the groups, another meaning or the irony of the situation becomes apparent. Furthermore, works from Simpson and Lee indicate *reappropriations* of images of race and gender. Simpson's photographs reclaim meanings indicated by culturally coded text references and classical female poses of black women and are analogous to Lee's use of various visual cultural stereotypes. However, the *anamorphic situations* created are different although both activate viewers to question cultural readings about race and gender. Simpson creates a dissonant *anamorphic situation* so that the viewer is obliged to actively construct meaning. By recognizing the connections between the image of a racially marked female body and certain words or phrases, we realize that certain assumptions and connotations are cultural readings. Comparatively, Lee creates a 'Where's Waldo' *anamorphic situation* where the viewer is encouraged to actively search for the artist in all of the pictures. Because we recognize Lee in all the diverse 'ethnic minority' and 'ethnic White' communities, identification borders are revealed to be permeable. Furthermore, we realize the signification of context as well as our own unconscious cultural assumptions in recognizing the visual cues of specific social and ethnic stereotypes. Finally, significant *theoretical correlations* for Simpson's work which reveal critical ideas about race and gender involve her semiotic use of photography, described by Barthes, as well as an interrogation of race as a floating signifier, presented by Hall. Comparatively, critical *theoretical correlations* for Lee is her use of performativity and racial passing, theoretical and historical methods of crossing constructed social borders of race or gender in order to visually adapt to a dominant cultural group.

Both Lorna Simpson and Nikki S. Lee depict women of colour in photo-based artworks which make viewers conscious of the constructed nature of racial and gender specific signifiers and reveal that belonging and difference are related and negotiable concepts. Simpson's solitary black female figures are usually shown from the back and combined with words and phrases in order to show the correlations between representation (what is denoted) and meaning (what is connoted) especially in the social construction of race. In comparison, Lee's Projects also feature a woman of colour (herself) but she is rarely seen alone, as the photographs document her membership in diverse subcultures and ethnic groups and demonstrate the porous nature of identification boundaries. Whereas Simpson's semiotic approach corresponds to Stuart Hall's contentions that representations of difference are determined by cultural context and historical discourse, Lee's Projects are related more to Butler's performative gender theory and the American tradition of racial 'passing'. Visual identities and

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<sup>86</sup> Irony is used so that the meaning implied is different from (and often the exact opposite) of what it appears to be.

identifications, especially physical markers of race and gender, are thus shown to be floating signifiers by Simpson and to possess both performative and transformative aspects by Lee. Both artists incorporate visual stereotypes that indicate the cultural context as well as the unconscious assumptions of the viewers. However, Simpson's intentions are more informed by theoretical discourse, while Lee's aims are more connected to the history of passing where an individual tries to belong to another group for various subjective reasons. Moreover, the strategies of Simpson and Lee are situated in their respective contexts. Whereas Simpson is considered an important reference for issues about race and gender during the height of multiculturalism in art discourse, Lee's Projects are situated during the shift to a post-identity art discourse where identity-related artwork is frequently seen as didactic or moralizing. Thus, Lee's uncritical, straightforward and humorous approach has been popular for a wide audience. Despite having 'Asian' ethnic markers, Lee is convincing in her 'passing for' other ethnicities, including 'ethnic White'; however, at the same time, the work can support color-blind identity concepts of the 1990s by making identifications and identities seem dependent on personal agency, friends, and fashion choices.

Whereas it may be arguable that some identity-related artwork during the 1980s and 1990s reduced aspects of identity to essentialist constructions, I do not believe that we can ever be post-identity. Not only is all art dependent on the subjective experiences, perspectives, and historical conditions of the artist, but also critical interrogation of these identity-related issues are still essential for modern society. I claim that both Simpson's works from the 1980s and 1990s and Lee's Projects (1997-2001) offer alternative perspectives about the cultural connotations of a racially marked body and reveal how culture and context influence and affect the meanings of representations of race and gender. In the next chapter, I will concentrate on another aspect of these representations by examining the power relations involved in producing knowledge about the *Other*, especially in connection to identification and classification of people.

## Chapter 3. Identifying and Categorizing: Power, Knowledge, Truth and the Artistic Strategies of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Fiona Tan

### Introduction

*In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics.*<sup>87</sup>

Ien Ang, 2001

Cultural theorist Ien Ang's quote affirms the personal and the political power in defining and identifying ethnic or racial difference and echoes the significance of ideas about the politics of identity. As mentioned in the introduction, Alcoff's "public identity" or "how we are socially located in public, what is on our identification papers, how we must identify ourselves on Census and application forms and the everyday interpolations of social interaction" (92) is an important factor in our subjective positioning of ourselves. Following Foucault, Hall has repeatedly emphasized the significance of hierarchies of power for defining or controlling knowledge or truth about who is different and why.<sup>88</sup> The principal method for the classification of people is based on physiognomic factors where particular ethnic and racial signifiers are correlated to a set of meanings from specific social and historical contexts. As these definitions of difference are subject to power relations, one group with particular ethnic or racial signifiers has typically received more advantages than another. While the previous chapter concentrated on "visible identities" and aspects of "reading the body", this chapter will focus on the related issue of categorising or identifying people.

In this chapter, I examine and compare the artistic practices of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Fiona Tan in order to reveal the correlations between power, knowledge and truth inherent in historical ethnographic practices which classified people. Both artists were influences on this dissertation: Gómez-Peña's books were invaluable sources of political and cultural theory from the viewpoint of a practicing artist and many of Tan's works, including her installation at the 2009 Venice Biennial, have been inspiring for my own artistic practice. Furthermore, although at first glance, Gómez-Peña and Tan seem to have little in common, both critically challenge historical assumptions and consequences within the discipline of anthropology and its ethnographic methodologies. In fact, I claim that although the contexts of these two artists as well as the strategic approaches and aesthetics employed are radically different, they have several similarities in intention and content. While Gómez-Peña incorporates a strategy of "reverse anthropology" in his installative performances in order to expose the unconscious and invisible nature of stereotypes, Tan interrogates the 'objectivity' of categorization

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<sup>87</sup> Ien Ang from her essay "Can One Say No to Chineseness?" (2001), p. 36.

<sup>88</sup> For example, see Stuart Hall's filmed lecture Race, the Floating Signifier (1997) or his book Representations (1997).

and depictions of people and cultures in documentary film and photography in her work. I believe that these artists challenge the assumptions which establish how people have been historically categorized and identified in order to stimulate us to reflect on and potentially reject these classifications, as well as their representations.

### **Anthropology: Colonialist Heritage and Ethnographic Displays**

Because the artistic approaches of Gómez-Peña and Tan are both influenced by the history of anthropology, it may be valuable to provide some historical background to this discipline and its ethnographic practices. The discipline of anthropology as a study of humans and society emerged during the European colonialist expansion in the mid-nineteenth century. At this time, unilineal evolutionary theories were popular and explained societal development in terms of cultural evolution, where societies began in a 'primitive' state and gradually progressed to a 'civilized' one. As each society in the world was believed to have progressed through similar stages of culture,<sup>89</sup> Western culture was seen as the high point of social evolution and non-European people (particularly Africans) were positioned between the great apes and human beings of European descent. Charles Darwin's theories about evolution and natural selection reinforced this idea. Correspondingly, British social anthropology concentrated on the exotic *Other* in the British colonial territories in order to discover 'facts' about these cultures and "liked to present itself as a science which could be useful in colonial administration" (Kuper 100). This perspective also prompted Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who studied and taught in London during the early twentieth century, to pioneer a methodology based on "participant observation" which still forms the basis for modern ethnographic practice. The assumption was that observation by a neutral, detached scientific expert would produce objective knowledge about other 'exotic' societies and cultures.

Representing 'exotic' cultures with displays of live non-white bodies for public entertainment in circuses, zoos and museums, as well as World Expositions, also became very popular in Europe and America during the nineteenth century. In these ethnographic exhibitions, the 'natives' would often live in 'authentic' villages and present ceremonies, dances, and tasks of their supposedly daily life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 406). The people would be classified based on the geography of the exhibition, or according to the prevailing common beliefs of their evolutionary condition.<sup>90</sup> The absurd and contemptible social evolutionary ideas of the time claimed that non-Western humans were inferior and closer to an earlier stage of human evolution than Western civilized societies. For example, in 1906,

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<sup>89</sup> For more information about unilineal evolution, see Sheldon Smith's and Philip Young's "The Early History of Anthropological Thought: Unilineal Evolution and Diffusion" (1997).

<sup>90</sup> For more details about the various live exhibitions of humans, including many based on unilineal evolutionary ideas, see Peter Greenhalgh's *Ephemeral Vistas: Great Exhibitions and World Fairs, 1851-1939* (1988).

the Congolese ‘pygmy’<sup>91</sup> Ota Benga was put on display at the Bronx Zoo in New York City in a cage with an orangutan and labelled “The Missing Link”. Displaying live human specimens was not the only form of human spectacle at this time; often the dissected and embalmed remains of the ‘native’ body, particularly the skull, and sexual organs, were also publicly exhibited. In fact, many Western museums including the British Museum and le Musée de l’Homme, France still have various body remains in their collections, which has also caused much public debate.<sup>92</sup> Cultural differences were visually observed on the ‘native’ body, whether in live human exhibitions or in dissected body parts on public display. Both forms of spectacle served to confirm the fallacious view of Western culture’s superiority by presenting non-white cultures as being inferior and ‘primitive’. Whereas both Fiona Tan and Guillermo Gómez-Peña have created artwork that examines anthropology’s problematic history, Gómez-Peña established his key strategic approach to art by parodying and undermining the concept of ethnographic displays.

### “Reverse Anthropology”: The Artistic Strategies of Guillermo Gómez-Peña

*In performance, impersonating other cultures and problematizing the very process of impersonation can be an effective strategy of what I term ‘reverse anthropology’. By ‘reverse anthropology’ I mean pushing the dominant culture to the margins and treating it as exotic and unfamiliar. Whether conscious or not, performance challenges and critiques the ideological products of anthropology and its fraudulent history and yet still utilizes parts of the discipline’s methodologies.*<sup>93</sup>

Gómez-Peña, 2005

In the above quote, Gómez-Peña describes his main artistic strategy for his performances from the last twenty years. What was historically seen as the ‘neutral’ standpoint of anthropologists observing ethnographic subjects is called into question and found to be highly subjective. Foucauldian power hierarchies or Hall’s argument of racial discourse and the cultural hegemonic ‘norms’ of the dominant culture influence and define the knowledge or the beliefs and values of the anthropologist himself, a profession that has been historically masculine and Eurocentric. Through an imitation of the ethnographic method of participant observation, where the ‘objective’ observer actually has subjective ‘knowledge’ of the *Other* he/she is observing, Gómez-Peña ‘reverses’ the awareness of what these

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<sup>91</sup> Pygmy is an English word indicating shortness of stature that was applied to indigenous ethnic groups, particularly in Central Africa, who were on average less than 150 cm tall.

<sup>92</sup> A well-documented case concerns Saartje Baartman also known as “Hottentot Venus”, an African woman who was exhibited semi-naked in a cage at various freak shows in England and France during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her “native” body had the enlarged buttocks characteristic for certain peoples of South Africa and confirmed ideas about the “primitive sexuality” of non-European women. After her early death in 1815, “scientists” dissected her body and displayed her preserved genitals and skeleton at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974. Her remains were finally returned to South Africa in 2002.

<sup>93</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña in his book *Ethno-Techno* (2005), p. 25.



fantasies are – they are no longer unseen, unconscious and mutually accepted categories of the dominant society, but instead they become clear, concrete, absurd realities acted out by Gómez-Peña and his colleagues in their performance installations. Therefore, his intention for his strategy of “reverse anthropology” is to reveal the dominant culture’s cultural projections as well as its problems in relating to other cultures rather than to represent the Latino *Other* (*Ethno-Techno* 34).



Fig. 29. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, The Couple in a Cage: Undiscovered Amerindians, Performance installation, 1992.

Source: Courtesy Pocha Nostra Archives.

For example, in one of his earlier significant performance installations, The Couple in a Cage: Undiscovered Amerindians (1992), Gómez-Peña together with Coco Fusco re-enacted colonial ethnographic display methods by dressing up as exotic tribal figures and presenting themselves in a cage as “specimens representative of the Guatinaui people” in several major cities (see fig. 29). Using established museum presentation methods (explanatory texts, maps, etc.), Gómez-Peña and Fusco staged their own display by wearing absurd costumes and performing bizarre ‘native’ rituals. Gómez-Peña wore an Aztec style breastplate, and a leopard-skin wrestler’s face mask. Fusco was often dressed in a grass skirt, leopard-skin bra, baseball cap, and sneakers. Similar to the live human displays of the past, Fusco and Gómez-Peña performed the role of the cultural *Other* for the museum audience. They presented exotic ‘native traditions’ such as sewing voodoo dolls or watching television. Museum guards from local institutions provided visitors with further (fictitious) information about the couple, passed bananas to the artists during “feeding time”, and escorted them to the bathroom on leashes. For a small fee, they would also pose for pictures.<sup>94</sup> Some of the visitors in London, Madrid, and New York saw the irony, but more than half of them believed that the fictitious Guatinaui identities were real.<sup>95</sup> Gómez-Peña had discovered a provocative strategy through his parody of ethnographic display

<sup>94</sup> For more detailed descriptions of this piece, see Miles Orvell and Gabriella Ibieta’s “Introduction” in Inventing America: Readings in Identity and Culture (1996).

<sup>95</sup> See Coco Fusco’s essay “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” (1994).

methods in a performance which he continued to use for many of his next major performance works.

Gómez-Peña's next important project was the participatory performance, installation and exhibition The Temple of Confessions which he produced in collaboration with Roberto Sifuentes. According to Gómez-Peña, they re-enacted the narrative of “two living santos [saints]” searching for sanctuary in the United States where “[p]eople were invited to experience this ‘pagan temple’ and confess to the saints their intercultural fears and desires” (Dangerous Border Crossers 35).

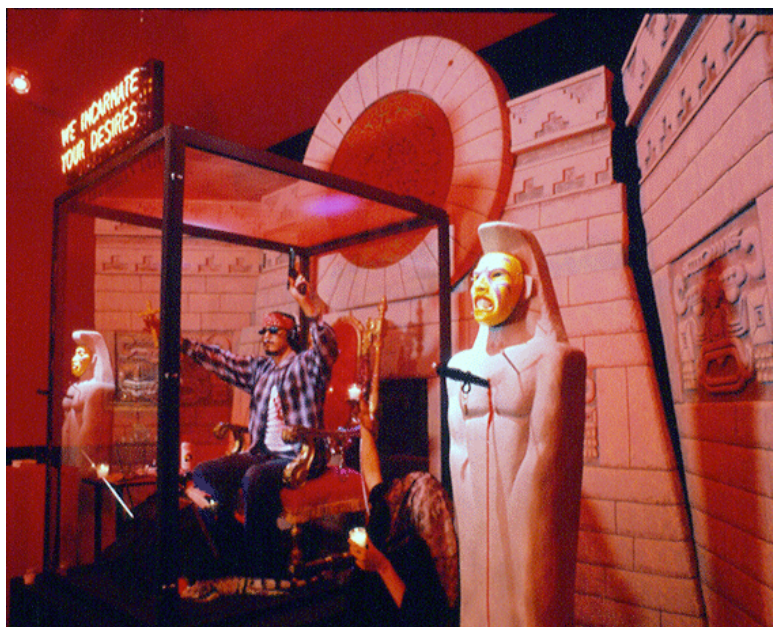


Fig. 30. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Robert Sifuentes, The Temple of Confessions, Performance installation, 1994-96. Source: Courtesy Pocha Nostra Archives.

The installation had three separate areas: the Chapel of Desires, the Chapel of Fears and a “sort of mortuary chamber in the middle”. In the Chapel of Desires, Sifuentes sat in a Plexiglas box posing as a “holy gang member”, the “El Pre-Columbian Vato”.<sup>96</sup> His arms and face were covered with pre-Columbian tattoos and he wore a bloodstained shirt and held a gun that he occasionally cleaned with an American flag (see fig. 30). Opposite the Chapel of Desires was another Plexiglas box, the Chapel of Fears, where Gómez-Peña sat on a toilet bowl or in a wheelchair dressed in a “Tex-Mex Aztec outfit” as a futuristic shaman “San Pocho Aztlaneca”<sup>97</sup> under a neon sign that read: “We incarnate your fears.” In the middle gallery, the visitor saw a wooden cigar store Indian figure, a female mannequin wrapped in fake leopard skin, and a black plastic body bag with INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) stamped on it. Several velvet paintings hung on the wall depicting other hybrid saints, and throughout the room were candles, tables, and other symbolic objects. Two “chola/nuns” performed the role of caretakers. One was obviously pregnant and had two tattooed tears<sup>98</sup> under her left eye. The other was dressed as a “dominatrix/nun”, with a moustache and goatee and wearing black lace

<sup>96</sup> The word “vato” is Chicano slang for guy or dude.

<sup>97</sup> Roughly translated means “The Holy Americanized Mexican from Aztlan”.

<sup>98</sup> In Chicano prison culture, each tattooed tear stood for a murder committed.

undergarments and a garter belt under her habit. They would chant religious texts, use their veils to clean the installation or the shoes of the visitors, and occasionally approach visitors and encourage them to ‘confess’. Wooden church kneelers and microphones were located in front of the Plexiglas boxes with the ‘santos’ for recording the viewer confessions about their intercultural fears and desires. Those who were too shy to speak into the microphone could either write their confessions and deposit them in an urn or call a toll-free number after they left the installation. Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes would later choose the most revealing ones to be included on the soundtrack for future performances (Border Crossers 35-41).

There was an overwhelming, often very emotional, response to The Temple performances. The range of confessions included assertions of extreme violence and racism to expressions of solidarity or guilt. By confronting viewers with a variety of powerful cultural stereotypes in an exaggerated theatrical and religious setting, the artists triggered memories of buried stereotypes from the viewers. Shock, shame, anger, and resentment were expressed in the ‘confessions’ and the reality of embedded fears and thoughts, desires and misunderstandings towards Mexicans, Chicanos, and people of other cultures was revealed. Some examples were:

“Please don’t shoot me. I’m afraid of getting shot ... by Mexicans, simply for being white.”

“Chicanos scare me. The men, they scream at me. When I see them, I think ‘rape.’ I feel this is wrong, but I can’t help it.”

“I am afraid that we will soon be outnumbered citizens.”

“I hate you precisely because I understand you.”

“Why the voodoo in your work? Many things in your culture scare people visually. Can’t you be more positive, more sensitive towards us?”

“I confess to listening to the real lives of Mexicans as if they were movies because they are so foreign to me that they don’t seem real.”

“I desire to fall in love with a Hispanic and be mistreated.”

(Border Crossers 41-43).

A related website was created where users could fill out a pseudo-anthropological questionnaire and “confess” their fears about the *Other* online. In the first year, they received over 20,000 hits and the information collected provided Gómez-Peña with inspirational material for subsequent major performance installations including The Mexterminator Project (1997-99).

In their following performance installation, The Mexterminator Project (1997-1999), Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes designed visual and performative representations of fantasy Mexican and Chicano of the

'90's or “ethno-cyborgs” based on descriptions from the “confessions”. Since a majority of the responses saw Mexicans and Chicanos as threatening *Others*, Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes used the name Mexterminator, in reference to the Schwarzenegger movies<sup>99</sup> and their superhuman robotic assassins (see fig. 31). Gómez-Peña writes:

Our goal was to incarnate the intercultural fantasies and nightmares of our audiences, refracting fetishized constructs of identity through the spectacle of our “primitive”, eroticized bodies on display. The composite personae we created were stylized representations of a non-existent, phantasmatic Mexican/Chicano identity, projections of people’s own psychological and cultural monsters – an army of Mexican Frankensteins ready to rebel against their Anglo creators (Border Crossers 49).



Fig. 31. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Robert Sifuentes, The Mexterminator Project, Performance installation, 1997-99. Source: Courtesy Pocha Nostra Archives.

Here, the performance space was dramatically lit and filled with fog “to suggest a Blade Runner-in-Tijuana type of world, inhabited by hyper-racialized replicants and ethno-cyborgs” (Border Crossers 52). Dead feathered chickens hung from the ceiling accompanied by loud music ranging from border

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<sup>99</sup> The Terminator films are a series of popular science fiction movies where the human race struggles to survive against an artificially intelligent machine network. Arnold Schwarzenegger portrayed the original “Terminator” character in 1984, a cyborg robotic assassin who is sent to terminate or destroy the future leader of the human resistance. He also starred in the sequels Terminator 2: Judgement Day (1991), and Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (2003) and is currently supposed to return for Terminator 5 which begins filming in 2014.

rap, house music, and Spanish rock as well as recorded texts. Fake documentary films about a Second US/Mexico war combined with filmed images of Mexican stereotypes on American television were projected in the performance space. Live human “ethno-cyborgs” were displayed on platforms with special gadgets and objects. Sifuentes and Gómez-Peña played roles similar to those they portrayed in The Temple performance. Other “ethno-cyborgs” played by members of La Pocha Nostra included: “La Cultural Transvestite”, reflecting fantasies about “romantic Mexico” and dressed as a “pop mariachi diva with a fake mustache and sequined-embroidered mini-skirt”; “La Supreme Chicana”, a feminist heroine defending rights of sex workers; “La Morra Diabolica”, a crazy schoolgirl torturing blond dolls, pissing on stage and using hypodermic needles; and “El True Illegal Alien”, a nude green extraterrestrial representing fears of invasion from alien cultures (Border Crossers 54).

Gómez-Peña and his performance group La Pocha Nostra (roughly translated to mean ‘Our Impurities’<sup>100</sup>) have had a pioneering role in the realm of performance/installation with their creation of interactive ‘living museums’ that parody colonial practices of representation including ethnographic dioramas and freak shows. These works were particularly powerful in America during the 1990s, when concepts of identity politics were still being encouraged in art discourse.<sup>101</sup> In fact, his performance installation with Coco Fusco, The Couple in a Cage: Undiscovered Amerindians (1992), was also included in the aforementioned highly controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial which had concentrated on overtly political art. His various activities that include performance, video, installation, poetry, and cultural theory have focused on the border cultures between North and South (Mexico and the USA) and are often based on his own personal experiences. In fact, in his book Dangerous Border Crossers (2000), Gómez-Peña, a prolific writer and charismatic culture figure and artist, stated: “I only write or make art about myself when I am completely sure that the biographical paradigm intersects with larger social and cultural issues” (8). Furthermore, he described the historical and political context of his work as: “the militarization of the US/Mexico border, the savage globalization of economy and culture, the millennial culture of apocalypse and despair, and the resurgence of virulent neonationalisms, parochial moralities and spiritual fundamentalism”(8). Moreover, through these experiences and circumstances, Gómez-Peña has consistently and publicly positioned his artistic practice as politically activist with the aim to achieve political and social change through his work.

Gómez-Peña’s primary method for resisting fixed identification categories has been his incorporation of over-exaggerated cultural stereotypes about natives, primitives, traditions, etc. in his performance installations. As mentioned in chapter two, stereotyping is a method of classification by dominant

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<sup>100</sup> According to Gómez-Peña, the term La Pocha Nostra is a “Spanglish neologism” meaning either “our impurities” or “the cartel of cultural bastards” (Ethno-techno 78). A Pocho or pocha, originally describing a fruit that is discoloured or rotting, is Americanised Mexican. The term is often used disparagingly for describing someone who has lost his/her Mexican cultural roots.

<sup>101</sup> See chapter two of this dissertation.

groups that uses extremely simplified definitions of difference. In his essay “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’”, Stuart Hall referred to film theorist Richard Dyer’s distinction between “typing” and “stereotyping”. According to Dyer, “typing” is where “a few traits are foregrounded and change or ‘development’ is kept to a minimum” (qtd. in Hall 258). In comparison, “stereotyping” first exaggerates and simplifies these traits and then reduces an individual or group to them, without any possibility of change (258). When the link between ethnic or racial signifiers and other attributes appears natural and unconscious, racial or cultural differences are ‘fixed’. Dyer asserted that stereotypes function as “mechanisms of boundary maintenance, are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, and unalterable” (qtd. in Hall 258). Hall extended Dyer’s argument and contended that stereotypes create “a symbolic frontier between ... the ‘accepted’ and the ‘unacceptable,’ what ‘belongs’ and what is ‘other,’ between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ Us and Them” (258). Therefore, stereotypes are used by the dominant group to classify and exclude what is viewed as the *Other*. According to Dyer, hegemony or the establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as ‘normal’) uses stereotypes to construct an *Other* and make power inequalities appear natural and inevitable (qtd. in Hall 258). In this way, dominant Western representations of the *Other* are often stereotypes which continue to support and maintain unequal power relations.

In art, both Stuart Hall and Lucy Lippard have noted that artists frequently incorporate stereotypes as a strategy to counter fixed assumptions; however, they have also both warned that this usage could also have the opposite effect.<sup>102</sup> Unlike Nikki S. Lee’s usage of stereotypes<sup>103</sup> which could be argued as not only undermining these connotations, but also confirming them, Gómez-Peña’s parody of stereotypes is so extreme and exaggerated that the unconscious cultural associations are clearly made absurd and ridiculous for the viewer. Through a compilation of cultural projections, Gómez-Peña created absurd and grotesque *Others*, and thus exposed the existence of these views in the collective unconscious of Anglo-American society. Furthermore, Gómez-Peña’s criticism of the “fraudulent history” of anthropology popularized the problems and debates within anthropology at this time, which had culminated in the “crisis of representation” in the late 1980s.

### **Anthropology and “Crisis of Representation”**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, anthropology’s duplicitous search for objective knowledge within a colonial power structure began to be denounced in several critical essays.<sup>104</sup> The critique culminated in the seminal work *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* edited by Talal Asad. Following Foucault’s assertions about truth as a historical condition embedded within a given power structure,

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<sup>102</sup> See references to suggested artistic strategies from Stuart Hall and Lucy Lippard in the introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>103</sup> See discussion about Nikki S. Lee in chapter two.

<sup>104</sup> Examples include Kathleen Gough’s “Anthropology: Child of Imperialism” (1968) and Diane Lewis’ “Anthropology and Colonialism” (1973).



Asad and others argued that anthropology was deeply intertwined with the politics of imperialism and colonial practices and, in effect, helped maintain power relationships between the colonial regime and indigenous populations by representing them as inferior and *Other*. Similar to Edward Said's claims in *Orientalism*, Asad criticized the constructed Western views of *Others* and the unquestioned acceptance of Western domination. By producing knowledge based on gender and racial power inequalities, Western hegemonic views of the *Other* were reaffirmed. These critiques about anthropology were a precursor to the "crisis of representation" of the mid to late 1980s that has since affected many social sciences, and still continues to haunt the discipline of anthropology today. The paradigm crisis, which Marcus and Fischer referred to in their book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* as the "crisis of representation" (7), forced anthropologists to become aware of the power structures involved in representing various cultures as well as issues of race, gender and class. Many anthropologists and cultural theorists during this time critically examined questions of authenticity, truth, and objectivity embedded in the discipline of anthropology and its ethnographic representations.<sup>105</sup>

For example, filmmaker and postcolonial feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha in her influential book *Women, Native, Other* (1989), challenged the objective truths of anthropology and the "speaking for" or representation of other societies through the subjective racial and gendered lens of the Western male. Trinh pointed out that all discussions about native societies were limited to "mainly a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them,' of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature man ... in which 'them' is silenced" (65-67). The "primitive" *Other* does not speak; the anthropologist speaks for him. In a chapter entitled "The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man", Trinh criticized many of the ethnographic writings of Malinowski, whom she refers to as "The Great Master". The anthropological "master" not only made assumptions, but also drew conclusions about the lives of other humans and societies based on his own experience and his own subjective world view. That what was considered an objective and universal truth was a subjective view was a new concept for many anthropologists at the time.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's work in ethnography and film led her to challenge the prevalent concepts of ethnography. Was it possible to be an objective observer? Did there exist one truth? Is authenticity represented or invented? Trinh challenged the concept of a single viewpoint with an ultimate vision of the world. There are instead multiple realities, multiple standpoints, multiple meanings for the concept 'Woman'. She argued that ethnographic filmmaking did not objectively represent the Third World subject, and vehemently denounced the validity of "objective truth". In her book, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, she argued: "There is no real – reality is something already classified by men, a ready made code" (136). Using this code allowed writers and filmmakers to produce work that seems 'real'

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<sup>105</sup> Further examples of the anthropologist's concern with this issue include: *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986) edited by George Marcus and Michael Fischer, or Paul Rabinow's essay "Discourse and Power: On the Limits of Ethnographic Texts" (1985).

because they followed the rules and expectations about what the ‘real’ should be or look like. Trinh’s first film *Reassemblage* (1982, 40 minutes) contests these conventions and is both a commentary and a critique of ethnographic film practices. This film is the result of a three-year ethnographic research project in Senegal and contained a collage of images, sound and poetic narration which evoke sensuous impressions. The occasional narrative statements by Trinh do not explain or present expected meanings to the visual sequences; instead her intention was “not to speak about/Just speak near by”, a radical change to conventional ethnographic documentary film. In an interview with Nancy Chen in 1992, Trinh stated that her aim was “to make a film in which the viewer – where visually present or not – is inscribed in the way the film is scripted and shot ... Through a number of creative strategies, this process is made visible and audible to the audience who is thus solicited to interact and to retrace it in viewing the film” (90). Trinh demanded the audience construct “their own film” from the film they have seen (91) in order to create new meanings and experiences for the film beyond what the filmmaker may have intended. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s writings and films were important in including ideas of self-reflection to the discipline of anthropology where multiple perspectives and the subjective role of the observer should be taken into account. Moreover, other artists explored similar ideas in their work, such as Fiona Tan.

### **Interrogating ‘Objectivity’: The Artistic Strategies of Fiona Tan**

*Type, archetype, stereotype. An irrational desire for order; or at least for the illusion thereof. However I am constantly reminded that all my attempts at systematic order must be arbitrary, idiosyncratic and – quite simply – doomed to fail.*

Fiona Tan (Voice-over from *Countenance*, 2002)

Similar to Gómez-Peña, Tan comes from a mobile and culturally mixed background. She was born in 1966 in Indonesia to a Chinese father and an Australian mother, but due to racist policies against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, she grew up in Melbourne, Australia. She moved to the Netherlands in 1988 in order to study art and currently lives in Amsterdam. Because of her personal background and her context, her focus is concerned with ‘East-West’ themes rather than ‘North-South’ border issues like Gómez-Peña. However, similar to Gómez-Peña, Tan’s critical interrogation of “objectivity” in classifying or representing people or cultures has been an important theme throughout her work.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, her mediums are photography and film, and she has an interest in the roles of history and memory on the present and the future. In fact, I claim that much of her art is an extension of many of the concerns and concepts Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote about in the 1990s and discussed previously. In the

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<sup>106</sup> According to her gallery, “Fiona Tan works within the contested territory of representation: how we represent ourselves and the mechanisms that determine how we interpret the representation of others.” See Frith Street Gallery website.



next few sections, I will present five artistic pieces from Fiona Tan in order to analyse related strategies and ideas and compare these with work from Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

Tan has described herself as “a professional foreigner, whose identity is defined by that which I am not.”<sup>107</sup> For an early film, a TV documentary called May You Live in Interesting Times<sup>108</sup> (1997, 60 minutes), she visited various Chinese relatives, who all live in different places around the world in order to question ideas of origin and “cultural identity”.<sup>109</sup> By using images and footage such as photographs of family members or extracts from her diary or video footage that the viewer had seen before, she revealed the contrived nature of her search and the genre of documentary film itself, which correlated to Trinh’s films and writings. For example, in a voice-over to the film, Tan declares: “It started off as a search – now it feels like I’m in search of my search”, and the viewer is prompted to recognize the constructed constitution of both identity and the genre of documentary film. In one of the final scenes in China, she visits the village of her ancestors where everyone has the family name “Tan”. In the resulting filmed “family portrait”, the artist smiles into the camera in the middle of all the other Tans, but still does not seem to “belong” (see fig. 32).



Fig. 32. Fiona Tan, May You Live in Interesting Times, Documentary film 60 min., 1997. Source: Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

This work revealed her personal quest to understand her own cultural origins as well as how knowledge or truth is often itself an illusion. Although this work was pivotal in establishing Tan’s cultural and post-colonial artistic concerns, in retrospect, she feels that she has moved beyond her own personal search for individual identity. In a conversation in 2009 with Saskia Bos, she stated: “It was over ten years since I had made May You Live in Interesting Times and I felt I had left ‘all that’ –

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> The title of the work has many layers and meanings. What sounds like a pleasant wish “May You Live in Interesting Times” is supposedly an ancient Chinese curse, as Chinese people always want to have a very quiet life. However, no authentic Chinese saying like this has been found, leading many to believe that it actually originated from the English or the Americans themselves in the 1930’s.

<sup>109</sup> For a complete description of this piece, see Beatrice von Bismarck’s essay: “Of All the Images in the World, Which Am I then Left With?” (2002).

meaning my post-colonial roots/routes – behind me” (23). She continued later: “I have since realized ... that it is a relatively common reflex to go through an identity crisis and to seek answers to the personal question of ‘Who am I and where do I come from?’ at that age” (25).

In another important earlier work, *Facing Forward* (1999, 11 minutes), Tan appropriated original early twentieth-century film footage from the Amsterdam Filmmuseum Archives. The footage had been filmed in various non-Western locations such as rain forests in Papua New Guinea or cities in Japan and Southeast Asia. Tan’s film opens with a filmed colonial group picture, showing military officers sitting in front and Papua New Guineans standing behind them. Images of tribes-people from various regions, East Asian women and men, and another view of the officers follow this portrait.<sup>110</sup>



Fig. 33. Fiona Tan, *Facing Forward*, Video projection, 11 min., 1999.

Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.



Fig. 34. Fiona Tan, *Facing Forward*, Video projection, 11 min., 1999.

Source: Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

During the film, Tan has inserted two scenes of a cameraman (see fig. 33), from other archival footage. Most of the imagery is problematic, because it appears to be made for people who would find the subjects ‘exotic’, and in some cases, it is also clear, the films were made to survey, classify, and control the people in front of the camera. For example, tribes-people are often instructed to line up, face forward (also the title of the work), or turn around to present their sides and backs to the camera (see fig. 34). Tan’s montage makes the viewer aware of the different aesthetics of filming and also manages to make the viewer quite uncomfortable at times. In her essay “Re-Take”, Lynne Cooke divides Tan’s found footage into three categories: “objective” footage for historical purposes (e.g. groups of soldiers); “objective” footage for scientific anthropological records (e.g. groups of tribes-people); and subjective tourist images (e.g. city views) (27-31). The inserted footage of the cameraman with his camera are used in order to reveal another level to the filming process – who is filming, why is he filming, what do those feathers in his hair mean? With much of this material, one experiences a certain tension between the idea of observation and that of being observed as well as the power

<sup>110</sup> For more information and complete descriptions of this film, see Lynne Cooke’s essay “Fiona Tan: Re-Take” in *Fiona Tan – Scenario* or Mark Godfrey’s essay “Facing Forward: Backwards into the Future” in *Memorials of Identity – New Media from the Rubell Family Collection*.

relationship involved. However, her critical approach also reveals poetic moments like two young girls who smile and laugh at the end of the film. Although the archival footage was originally silent, Tan weaves a multi-layered soundtrack into her film. Sometimes she adds natural sounds like animal or insect noises in the rainforest or instrumental music for atmosphere. Additionally, there are two sections with voice-overs extracted from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, narrating a hypothetical conversation between the Venetian explorer Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan:

Marco Polo said that the more he was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more he understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive at. At this point Kublai Khan interrupted him to ask him: 'You advance always with your head turned back?' or 'Is what you see always behind you?' or 'Does your journey take place only in the past?' And Marco Polo explained that what he sought was always something lying ahead, even if it was a matter of the past. Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his, that he did not know he had.

The voice-overs illustrate Tan's interest in the crucial roles of history and memory of the past on the present and the future. With her editing of found archival film footage together with a soundtrack and voice-overs, Tan critically examines ethnographic film practices and documentary film's authoritative voice and creates a complex, critical and yet personal view of the colonial practices of categorization and identification. In this way, Tan's editing process also implements a type of "reverse anthropology" strategy, similar to Gómez-Peña. Both artists make the viewer aware of the power imbalances involved in colonial ethnographic practices – the "objective" ethnographic observer cannot and does not exist. Unlike Gómez-Peña, Tan's method is not immediately confrontational or exaggerated; instead she uses poetic, subtle imagery and film editing and sound to engage viewers to critically reflect on documentary filmings of a cultural *Other* in a colonialist framework as well as on the relationship between the present and the past.

For her installation *Countenance*, Tan collected over ninety minutes of filmed portraits of approximately 250 people living in Berlin. Three large screens were hung in the large space and the films were projected in a loop, with three portraits being shown simultaneously in black and white. The pictures are categorized according to the professions of the subjects and filmed in static poses so that the images seemed more like a series of photographs; however, the people's slight movements suddenly brought the images to life and communicated a personal or human aspect of the subject to the observer.<sup>111</sup> The black and white film is a conscious reference to August Sander's portfolio work "People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" where he tried to categorize and photograph all the types of people living

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<sup>111</sup> This installation was first shown at the Documenta 11 in 2002. For more detailed description, see Suzanne Cotter's and Andrew Nairne's "Preface" in *Fiona Tan: Countenance* (2005) or Andrea Wiarda's article "Seeing, Observing, Thinking: On Time and Place in the Work of Fiona Tan" (2002).

at that time in Germany.<sup>112</sup> Sander's long-term project began at the turn of the century and continued until the 1950's, and consisted of more than 40,000 images. He attempted to record and archive all of German life and created his own pseudo-ethnographic categories based on his view of society's hierarchy and its "portfolio of archetypes" including: The Skilled Tradesman, The Woman, Classes and Professions and, his final category, The Last People (the sick, the insane). Related to Hall's distinction between "types" and "stereotypes", archetypes are "types" of people with unlimited variation and differences but with some fundamental role or function. Sander's endeavour was to determine a universal hierarchy of occupations and roles in German society.

By transforming this investigation into a sociological study of people in Berlin, Tan also references a specific historical period where east and west Berliners were readapting to each other. Tan recognises that her project, like Sander's, is impossible, but she consciously creates a tension between the supposed objectivity of Sander's project and her own subjective approach. Her filmed portraits of people (individually, in groups, in families) roughly follow Sander's categories, except for her last category called "Others" which included pensioners, the unemployed, drug addicts, politicians, curators and artists. However, the personal moments, the details, the passing of time, and the intimacy of the portraits are more important than the categories. In addition, Tan's voice-over to this work which was quoted as an introduction to this section – "Type, archetype, stereotype. An irrational desire for order; or at least for the illusion thereof. However I am constantly reminded that all my attempts at systematic order must be arbitrary, idiosyncratic and – quite simply – doomed to fail." – clarifies her position and reveals her conviction that all attempts for systematic ordering are invariably subjective and can never be successful. It is also reminiscent of Trinh T. Minh-ha's remark: "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak" (Women, Native, Other 94). Tan exposes the non-objective nature of categorization while Gómez-Peña exaggerates the collective unconscious ethnic stereotypes of many Anglo-Americans: the concerns and intentions involved are quite similar, but the aesthetics and the outcomes are very different.

In another work entitled Lapse of Memory (2007, 25 minutes), Tan further examines questions of truth and fiction and how post-colonial history influences perceptions of the present and future. Tan constructs the identity of a fictional person: a confused, old man – Henry – who is living alone in a beautiful historical building which he has not left for a long time (see fig. 35). In the film, the camera follows his simple daily routine and his eccentric rituals. Though his appearance is that of a European, he has somewhat Asian habits (drinking tea, Tai Chi exercises). The voice-over speculates about his background: "Presumably, he travelled extensively in his early years." Various other scenarios and possible biographical stories are offered to explain who he might be. At one point, the voice-over makes an observation: "He feels lost within his various selves; his possible biographies." The voice-

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<sup>112</sup> For more information, see Susanne Lange's Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts: August Sander: Studienband (2002).

over also recites the action of the written script: “Scene one: morning. Long opening shot. Henry lies motionless, asleep on the floor. Some slight background movement. Close-up on feet.” By describing the action happening in the film as a voice-over, the contrived nature of the situation and the character is emphasized.

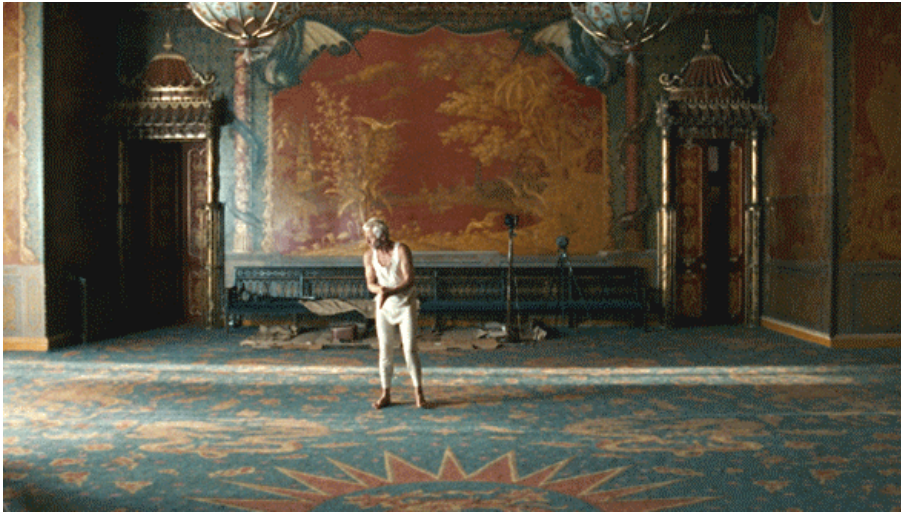


Fig. 35. Fiona Tan, *Lapse of Memory*, HD installation, 25 min., 2007.  
Source: Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

In addition to Henry, the viewer also sees fragments of a previously opulent interior décor which is actually the Royal Pavilion in Brighton (UK), a strange colonial building with a classical Indian facade and interiors decorated in Chinese and Japanese style. Built in 1815 by King George IV, it is one of the best-preserved examples of Chinoise architecture and design in the world. However, neither the king nor his architect were ever in Asia and the pavilion is a colonial fantasy, built completely on cultural projections of the ‘Orient’. Tan’s fictional character is a reflection of this strange building. Offered a variety of possible truths and possible fictions, the viewer must decide what has happened and who this person could be. In fact, with the layers between reality and fiction and the combination of voice-overs and images, the viewer is allowed to discover strange sequences and discrepancies. In this piece, Tan examines the colonial situation, and reveals the role of fantasy which has constructed the exotic *Other*. There are clear similarities to the performance works of Gómez-Peña as he also explores and exposes ethnic cultural projections. However, Gómez-Peña seeks an emotional and cathartic effect with his confrontational manner and extreme exaggerations of stereotypes, while Tan gently prompts the viewer into questioning what could be involved in constructing cultural identities, hoping that each individual can recognize the history of colonial representation and the effects of colonial fantasy and imagination on the present as well as the future.

One of Fiona Tan’s recent works is a video installation entitled *Disorient* (2009), first shown at the Dutch pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, and composed of two screens facing each other. One large screen shows images from the interior of an apparently expensive and exotic showroom where rows of objects are displayed including animals in formaldehyde, spices and foods, Asian decorations and



other ‘Oriental’ looking items (see fig. 36). The other smaller screen located on the opposite side of the hall presents contemporary images from various Asian countries including their inhabitants. Thus, Tan contrasts the alluring illusion of exotic merchandise where culture is commercial production with more documentary footage of poverty, pollution, landscape, and urban development. Also on the smaller screen, edited together with the contemporary documentary footage, are images of the exotic showroom space being dismantled. Whilst watching this film, it is revealed that the exotic ‘Oriental’ storage area is actually an illusion, a stage set-up in the Dutch pavilion itself, with the closing shot a view of all the exotic objects, looking more like cheap junk, deposited outside the Dutch pavilion. A voice-over consisting solely of quotes from The Travels of Marco Polo accompanies the two videos describing his impressions from his journeys. In a previous work, Facing Forward, Tan references Marco Polo by quoting Italo Calvino’s texts that described his travels. In the press release about Disorient,<sup>113</sup> Tan admits to finding Marco Polo both fascinating and irritating. Not only does she think he represents the “ideal traveler”, but the seven-centuries-old descriptions attributed to him have greatly influenced how the West thinks about the East. Furthermore, my interpretation of the title “Disorient” is that it also contains several layers of meaning. The root “orient” refers to direction, position or orientation, but Tan is also clearly referring to the ‘Orient’. With the prefix “dis-“ preceding “orient”, the ‘Orient’ as well as orientation is negated, revealing Tan’s intention to expose the distortion of Western cultural projections of the ‘Orient’.



Fig. 36. Fiona Tan, Disorient, HD Video installation, 2009.  
Source: Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London and Wako Works of Art, Tokyo.

In a conversation between Fiona Tan and Saskia Bos, the curator of the Dutch Pavilion for the Venice Biennial, Tan describes her aim to: “continue to experiment and develop a filmic language that could perhaps be described as simultaneously constructing and deconstructing – employing the tricks of the trade and at the same time exposing them, laying them bare. I am interested in the juxtaposition of

<sup>113</sup> See “Fiona Tan” on re-title.com website.

word and image, in conflicting and contradictory relationships between the two and between fact and fiction, in the displacement of text and image. I am also interested in the slipperiness of truth or truths and the many versions of Marco's account" (23). Tan's quote echoes many of Trinh T. Minh-ha's intentions and ideas in filmmaking. Both use various editing techniques in order to present multiple perspectives and views, as well as to expose the subjective nature of what could be real or true. Accordingly, Tan continues in the interview with Bos: "I want to empower the subject, empower the viewer, and to bring aspects to the surface, to create a certain visibility, if you like, to foster awareness of our interpretation of the images that surround us" (25). Similar to Trinh, Tan deconstructs the filmmaking process in order to expose the relationship between truth and fiction. Furthermore, analogous to both Trinh and Lorna Simpson discussed in chapter two, Tan also challenges the viewer to construct the meaning from what he or she sees.

## Conclusions

Both Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Fiona Tan have been influenced by the problematic history of anthropology in their work; however, there are still several significant and obvious differences in their artistic strategies. A comparative analysis with my suggested framework of strategies (*literary device, reappropriation, anamorphic situation, and theoretical correlation*) can help clarify these divisions. With reference to *literary devices*, Gómez-Peña extensively uses parody for exaggerating and magnifying cultural projections of the *Other* in order to make them visible and to subvert their power. Tan uses the *literary devices* of irony and ambiguity where the discrepancies from her film editing reveal the meaning of her works. Both use *reappropriation* strategies for reclaiming the unconscious and subjective 'knowledge' of the *Other* based on anthropology and ethnography methodology previously used to maintain power relationships in colonialist hierarchies. In order to reveal multiple perspectives and to deconstruct ideas of objectivity, Gómez-Peña uses ideas of ethnographic displays and notions of participant observation, while Tan reframes ethnographic film footage or documentary film techniques. Furthermore, Gómez-Peña also *reappropriates* stereotypes (e.g. Mexicans or Chicanos) and popular culture (e.g. Terminator for Mexterminator) to give them new meanings, Tan *reappropriates* visual references referring to Western images of the 'Orient' (e.g. Chinese architecture at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton) or literary references (e.g. Marco Polo) in her works and thus inserts new connotations for these concepts. The *anamorphic situation* strategies are influenced by the artists' respective mediums. Gómez-Peña's performance installations are connected to his medium of live performance and his direct interaction with the public: we experience a live production of our fears and thus recognize how absurd these fears and assumptions are. In comparison, by combining existing material with new text, sounds and images, Tan's films displace previous meanings about 'objective' knowledge about the *Other* and often focus our attention on the act of looking. Moreover, she reveals the constructed nature of film in order to activate reflection on the

relationship of the viewer to the viewed as well as the role of history and memory. In terms of *theoretical correlation*, Gómez-Peña's artistic strategy of "reverse anthropology" specifically aims to reverse concepts from anthropology and ethnographic methodology that previously defined 'objective' knowledge of the *Other*. Tan's approach to similar concerns corresponds to anthropology's "crisis of representation" where ideas of authenticity, truth and objectivity were questioned and power structures in representations of cultures were revealed. In particular, Tan's work has significant connections to writings from Trinh T. Minh-ha which emphasized ideas of self-reflection and the subjective role of the observer as well as the active role of the audience.

Moreover, the different contexts and backgrounds of Gómez-Peña and Tan also influence their artistic practices. Despite their similar interest in borders, their references reflect the hemispheres in which they locate themselves: Tan considers the relationship between East and West, whereas Gómez-Peña's concern is mostly between North and South. Gómez-Peña's experiences are connected to his Mexican background and the USA's immigration issues with Mexico. Furthermore, as an artist, he was influenced by the political and cultural atmosphere during the 1980s and 1990s when activist art and resistance to criticisms concerning identity politics were important issues. Tan's background is quite different: she was formed by a European and less politically confrontational environment, and her aesthetics and artistic approach seem to be more compatible to a mediation of the contemporary global situation. Gómez-Peña is involved in an impressive variety of interdisciplinary cultural production activities, but mostly in North America, while Tan's work is connected to more conventional 'art world' exhibitions, albeit international ones. Tan's artistic strategies are inspired by the mediums of film and photography, and she often challenges the truth of images and representations. Although her work could be seen as political in nature, it is also poetic and her intention is not specifically an activist one. In comparison, Gómez-Peña sees himself as a political activist, with highly charged, provocative performances and a myriad of other controversial activities. His performance installations are an extension of his own extravagant and extroverted personality, and are immediately recognizable as his strategy is simple and direct: presenting over-exaggerated stereotypes based on cultural projections, he often provokes viewers to react emotionally. Because his parodies of cultural stereotypes are so absurd, most viewers have little difficulty in understanding his intentions. Tan's works, however, are complex and involve the viewer intellectually; she interrogates concepts of objective truth and reality in order to expose subjective and historical connections between power and knowledge. Nevertheless, because of the relatively subtle nuances of her critique, some viewers may not recognize the ideas behind her works.

In this chapter, I examined the connection between Foucault's concepts about power/knowledge and anthropology's colonial heritage and ethnographic practices of producing 'knowledge' about the exotic *Other* by comparing the strategic approaches of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Fiona Tan, two artists who have interrogated the history of anthropology in their art. The spectacle of exhibiting



'native' people in ethnographic displays in order to establish Western culture's delusions of superiority motivated Gómez-Peña to create and produce several significant performance installations during the 1990s. Likewise, the "crisis of representation" where anthropologists became aware of the power structures involved in representing various cultures inspired Tan to critically examine questions of authenticity, truth, and objectivity embedded in the act of classifying people as well as their representations in film and photography. Thus, through their respective artistic practices, both artists expose the subjectivity inherent in ethnological practices and reveal the correlations between power, knowledge and truth in discourses about the *Other*. For the next chapter, I examine strategic approaches to *Otherness* from another perspective: artistic practices that examine conventional concepts of origin and belonging.

## Chapter 4: Origin and Belonging: History and Dislocation in the Artistic Strategies of Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum

### Introduction

*Is it possible to have authentic attachments to a place and develop a form of cultural identity that is influenced by movement?*<sup>114</sup>

Nikos Papastergiadis, 2005

Due to global shifts in production and distribution which have fostered new patterns of transnational migration, traditional views of culture, identification, stability, and home have become more complicated. As this quote from art and cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis indicates, there is a growing conviction that ‘cultural identity’, which has traditionally been assumed as dependent on ethnic or cultural origin, requires reassessment of conventional concepts of belonging in the modern world. We are no longer fixed to a place, but are often in a perpetual state of movement. Thus ideas of cultural identity including concepts of belonging and home need to reflect this change; in fact, as Papastergiadis states in his recent book *Spatial Aesthetics*, “the contemporary home gains its identity from the oscillation between arrival and departure, integration and fragmentation ... The meaning of home now combines the place of origin with the struggle for destiny” (26). Home is no longer a nostalgic place for coherent and homogeneous communities from the past, it needs to be redefined as a progressive place for mixing, fragmentation, and disruption in the present as well as for the future. Consequently, the main question for this chapter arises: How do visual artists who explore ideas about origin and belonging in their art affect the perceptions of selves and others with regards to a sense of place?

In this chapter, I compare the strategic approaches of Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum, two contemporary artists whose personal history of war, exile and displacement have influenced their production of art. Furthermore, while Yong Soon Min’s experiences as an Asian American woman artist reflect similar developments with my own artistic process, Mona Hatoum’s well-known and exceptional life and work have inspired and stimulated my research for this dissertation. Both artists have created art that investigates the concept of home as a place where one belongs rather than a place of origin, and thus offers new perspectives about who we are in relation to others. Whereas Hatoum often uses ambiguity and connotation in order to transform what initially seems familiar into something foreign and dangerous, Min positions herself as a cultural activist exploring history and memory in order to determine her own sense of belonging and self-identity as an Asian American

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<sup>114</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis from his essay “Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture” (2005), p. 40.

woman. By comparing and analysing several artworks, I suggest that although their artistic practices developed simultaneously and interrogate similar issues about origin and belonging, they have very different approaches. In order to contextualize their works, in the next section, I first examine various perspectives about belonging in relationship to theoretical concepts about place, planetarity and diaspora.

### **Home and Belonging: Place, Planetarity, Diaspora**

Although in popular discourse, space and place are often regarded as synonyms, geographers differentiate between them. With the development of humanist geography<sup>115</sup> in the 1970s, the ways people experienced and lived in the world started to be incorporated into conceptual analyses of ‘place’. According to humanist geography, ‘place’ is conceptualized as a space that has meaning and fosters a sense of belonging. ‘Place’ has traditionally been a static concept concentrating on borders and rootedness where people and things were either ‘in place’ or ‘out of place,’ encouraging exclusionary practices. However, more recent theories examine ‘place’ as a process especially in connection with increased mobility.<sup>116</sup> For example, in her seminal essay first published in 1991 “A Global Sense of Place”, feminist geographer Doreen Massey argues for the need of a “progressive” or a “global sense of place” against essentialist and static ideas of ‘place’. In contrast to criticisms of globalization where supposedly authentic place-based communities are being replaced by industrialization and urbanization,<sup>117</sup> Massey's conception of place emphasizes “open and porous networks of social relations” (121) rather than “some long internalized history” (154). According to Massey, ‘places’ have always been dynamic processes constructed from networks of social interactions encompassing both local and global influences. Her arguments for open, progressive and connected aspects of ‘place’ in a globalized world were in opposition to the static and conservative notions of ‘place’ often associated with preservation and nostalgia. In fact, in her influential essay “A Place Called Home”,<sup>118</sup> Massey also critically analyses the sentimentalized associations between ‘place’ and ‘home’ “as a source of belonging, identity and security” (171). For Massey, nostalgic ideas about ‘home’ that are dependent on “a recourse to a past, a seamless coherence of character, of an apparently comforting bounded enclosure” (168) can be problematic. The emotional and nostalgic associations of a safe and secure refuge from external aggressive forces can also endorse notions of nationalism maintained by borders and separating geographic territories. Massey argues that such reactionary ideas of ‘place’ were problematic and could lead to exclusionary practices. Instead, she

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<sup>115</sup> Humanist geography is a branch of geography that studies how humans interact with space and their physical and social environments. The Chinese American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's seminal book *Space and Place* written in 1977 was particularly influential.

<sup>116</sup> For a good introduction to the concept of ‘place’, see Tim Cresswell's book *An Introduction to Place* (2004).

<sup>117</sup> For example, see Edward Relph's influential book *Place and Placelessness* (1976).

<sup>118</sup> Another association from popular culture is from the film classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) where Dorothy states: “There's no place like home.”

claims that “the place called home was never an unmediated experience”, but a dynamic process constantly in transformation through multiple interactions with others (164). Correspondingly, artists such as Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum have also interrogated and challenged the narrow conventional definitions of home, place and cultural belonging in their artistic practice. As I will describe later in this chapter, many of Min’s works have attempted to redefine the boundaries of what ‘home’ means. Similarly, Hatoum has also investigated and questioned the meanings of ‘home’, especially as a stable or secure haven.

Another theoretical perspective about home and belonging which offers an alternative to globalization is Gayatri Spivak’s utopian “planetary” concept. In her book Death of a Discipline, Spivak critically examines her discipline, Comparative Literature, and especially the tendency in many US academic institutions to separate Comparative Literature from Area Studies (i.e. Asian Studies, African Studies, etc.). By crossing boundaries between humanities and social sciences and combining studies of literary traditions and close reading of texts with studies of linguistic and political knowledge of the *Other*, Spivak contends that such an interchange could contribute further to understanding and viewing the *Other* in the new postcolonial and globalized era. Similarly, I attempt in this dissertation to show that a systematic analysis and comparison of visual artistic strategies combined with theoretical background from cultural studies, philosophy, and post-colonial theory could also have similar potential benefits. For Spivak, “planetary” recognizes and encourages our inherent alterity and differences as well as emphasizes our communal responsibility and is an alternative to globalization’s system of assimilation and unified economic domination of difference: “I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. ... The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (72). Instead of defining ourselves as global agents who exist in terms of our opposition to the *Other*, Spivak argues for our collective responsibility as planetary subjects in order to emphasize our commonalities rather than our differences. We are dependent on each other in our interactions with the planet, which is only “on loan” or temporarily ours. Spivak claims that the planet’s “alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous – an experience of the impossible” (102). In Freud’s renowned 1919 essay “Das Unheimliche”, the notion of “uncanny” or something both familiar and threatening was presented.<sup>119</sup> By contrasting the original German words “heimlich” meaning friendly, familiar, home-like with “unheimlich” meaning unfriendly, secretive, unfamiliar, un-homelike or uncanny, Freud explored how certain themes in literature are both familiar and strange and thus can be especially terrifying in order to show how unconscious processes affect us and our behaviours. Following Freud, Spivak’s concept of planetary reveals a “defamiliarization of familiar

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<sup>119</sup> There are also correlations between Freud’s concept of “das Unheimliche” and Viktor Schklovsky’s concept of *ostranenie*, discussed briefly in the introduction of this dissertation, as both can be translated to “defamiliarization”. However, whereas Freud’s main interest was how the unconscious works and how it affects our behaviours, Schklovsky’s emphasis was on the artistic technique used to enhance perceptions of familiar experiences.

space” or “home” where alterity or *Otherness* is inherent in humanity rather than an external adversary: “To be human is to be intended towards the other” (73). Thus, Spivak maintains the significance of the “Heimlich/Unheimlich” correlation to indicate the interrelation between ourselves and conceptions of people deemed “other”. Furthermore, her concept of planetarity could “displace this historical alibi” in discussions of Postcolonialism which are often constructed within persistent nationalist and colonialist tendencies (81). Although both Min and Hatoum deconstruct traditional conceptions of home in their work, later in this chapter I show how Hatoum’s art resonates with Spivak’s concept of planetarity because of her defamiliarization approach which communicates a communal sense of unease through common and recognizable elements rather than presentation of a specific geo-political situation or history.

Other cultural and social theorists approach themes about belonging and origin by examining ideas surrounding diaspora. The concept of diaspora has been historically important in describing transnational migration and relocation. The term diaspora originated from the Greek word *diasperien*: *dia* means “across” and *sperien* means “to sow or scatter seeds”. Diaspora theories are concerned with dispersed populations that are no longer located in their original homeland. Contemporary cultural theorists such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have argued that diaspora can be useful in developing a new type of non-national cultural formation. According to Gilroy: “Diaspora is a valuable idea because (it is) ... an alternative to the metaphysics of ‘race’, nation and bonded culture coded into the body,” and puts “emphasis on contingency, indeterminacy and conflict” (“Diaspora” 328 and 334). Hall further argues: “The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (“Cultural Identity” 235, emphasis in original). This use of diaspora as a conceptual framework can also be applied to the artistic practices of both Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum who both experienced exile and displacement from their respective places of national origin and have fragmented and disrupted backgrounds and identifications. As I discuss in the following sections, Min has often directly incorporated her diasporic experiences into her work, while Hatoum has been more ambiguous.

Furthermore, Gilroy and historian and anthropologist James Clifford have suggested an approach that examines the interaction between notions about place and issues about mobility. Using the homonyms “roots” and “routes”, both theorists argue for the equal or greater importance of the concept of “routes” compared to its homonym “roots”. Gilroy proposes “[d]ealing equally with the significance of roots and routes” as a method to undermine the essentialist ideas of authentic roots, as well as the European pluralist notion of multiculturalism which he also views as problematic (Black Atlantic 190). Similarly, by criticizing common assumptions about ideas about “dwelling” (what Massey might

refer to as “home”) where “roots always precede routes” (Routes 3), Clifford argues for a re-examination of culture in terms of travel. In fact, Nikos Papastergiadis’ quote at the beginning of this chapter is also analogous to these concepts proposed by Gilroy and Clifford and shows the continuing significance of these ideas. Thus, artistic practices that emerge from personal experiences with “roots” and “routes”, such as those from Min and Hatoum, can extend theoretical investigations about correlations between place, attachment and mobility into an embodied experience. Min, in particular, often interrogates the consequences of history and displacement on her personal biography in her art. Furthermore, her identification as an Asian American woman has been crucial to her development as an artist. In the next section, I continue from the discussion in chapter one about the pan-ethnic ‘Asian American identity’ and add some background about Asian American art, as this is the context in which Min has primarily worked.

### **Asian American: A Positional Framework**

As mentioned in chapter one, the concept of an ‘Asian American identity’ has been very controversial in its relatively short history. Although there exist many problems (including the slippery definition of what area of Asia is referenced), there have also been significant contributions to discussions about racism and political agency for Asians in America. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identities are “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” which are “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (“Cultural Identity” 225). Following Hall, Lisa Lowe<sup>120</sup> has also stressed “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity in the characterization of Asian American culture” in order to emphasize the shifting relationship between “dominant” and “minority” positions (428). Similarly, I would argue that the articulation of an Asian American identity has been a significant way to position Asian immigrants within the narrative of their relationship to dominant Western US society. Moreover, according to Asian American arts scholar and curator Margo Machida, it is important to have a “framing device for Asianness in the American context” for a “set of historically formed relationships to the dominant culture that both are imposed and constitute primary sites of symbolic intervention” (Unsettled Visions 39). Thus, cultural production that examines and challenges the social and historical knowledge about the Asian *Other* in the USA (like Yong Soon Min) has been important for revealing preconceptions and assumptions about belonging and difference.

In comparison, Asians who did not grow up in a Western society may have a different frame of reference. For example, Machida mentions in her book a situation with the Chinese avant-garde

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<sup>120</sup> Lowe also points out that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony “does not refer exclusively to the process by which a dominant group exercises its influence but refers equally to the process by which emergent groups organize and contest any specific hegemony” (430). Thus both “dominant” and “minority” positions are unstable and constantly shifting, which allows for fluctuations between and within these viewpoints.

performance artist Zhang Huan<sup>121</sup> who was invited to lecture at her course on contemporary Asian and Asian American art at New York University in 2000. When a student asked whether Huan's performances might reinforce exoticized, Orientalist notions of Asian culture, Huan did not seem to understand the question and could not respond. As a result, Machida offers the observation: "[w]hereas (counter) Orientalism has been a major axis of critique for Asians in this country, it does not necessarily occupy the same strategic position for artists coming from non-Western societies" (45). Perhaps, Asians who were born or grew up in America or Europe may have more of a need to challenge and deconstruct Western cultural hegemonic norms, than Asians from a non-Western background who might not necessarily recognize these stereotypes or realize that they exist. Nevertheless, because perceived identifications from external influences profoundly affect an individual's sense of *Self* or inner subjectivity, artists who have personally experienced cultural differences are more likely to be interested in reflecting on representations of the *Other* in their artistic practices.

Parallel to the rise of the concept of 'Asian American', was the establishment of various associated community arts movements<sup>122</sup> that directly impacted the emergence of the discourse of Asian American art. These grassroots organizations were interested in combining community-based activism with a broader social and cultural mission for the recognition and understanding of an Asian American culture. Artists active in these organizations considered themselves cultural activists and saw the role of the artist as a social actor for political change in society. However, debates concerning 'Asian American art' were also always present. What does Asian American art actually mean? Today, there are two major perspectives that are still being heatedly debated: firstly, whether the reference means the artist's origins (i.e. art made by someone of Asian descent who lived in America), or secondly, if it pertains to a particular subject matter (i.e. work that addressed an aspect of the Asian American experience) (Machida 29). Yong Soon Min is an important example of an artist who explored her personal history and multiple identities as a Korean American woman, and is thus positioned clearly in the second category.<sup>123</sup> Min was profoundly influenced by the Asian American movement and its concerns, and was active in several early community arts organizations. In the next section, I examine Min's artistic practice and describe some of her most compelling works that were done in the early to mid-1990s when art discourse was engaged with concepts of multiculturalism and identity politics, which also inspired an Asian American perspective.

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<sup>121</sup> Zhang Huan is best known for photographs of his provocative performances that subjected his own body to endure extreme physically demanding situations. See his website.

<sup>122</sup> Early Asian American cultural organizations included Basement Workshop, Asian Cinevision, Asian American Arts Centre in New York and the Kearny Street Workshop and Japantown Arts and Media in San Francisco. Other important organizations active in the 1980s were Asian American Art Alliance and Godzilla, both in New York.

<sup>123</sup> Asian American artists who arguably fit in the first category might include both Yoko Ono (although as I argued in chapter one, her live performance *Cut Piece* (1965) could be read as feminist commentary on racial and sexual aggression) as well as the renowned Korean American media artist Nam June Paik (1932-2006).

## Retelling History: The Artistic Strategies of Yong Soon Min

*To us, already,*

*a birthplace is*

*no longer our home.*

*The place we were brought up is not either.*

*Our history, rushing to us*

*Through fields and hills, is our home ...*<sup>124</sup>

“Home” by Korean American poet Won Ko

Yong Soon Min is an artist, curator, writer, and cultural activist. Her artistic practice communicates her critical views about social, cultural, and historical events in Korea and America and examines the intersections between history, memory, and cultural identities. Her life and her artistic practice are closely intertwined and have been profoundly affected by forces of history, the Korean War, and her diasporic identity as an Asian American woman. Thus her biography and personal history are important for understanding and interpreting her artistic strategies.

Yong Soon Min was born in 1953 in South Korea a few months before the end of the Korean War and immigrated to America at the age of seven. The 1970s were a turbulent time in the United States, where increasing awareness about civil rights and identity politics were extremely important especially at UC Berkeley, where Min completed both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Fine Arts, graduating in 1979. She participated in protests and various conscious-raising activist functions and developed her artistic practice of using her experiences as a Korean immigrant in the United States to create large multimedia installations. She moved to New York in the early 1980s and became very active in promoting Asian American concerns and making Asian American artists more visible. She was an early member of the Asian American Art Alliance in the mid-1980s, a New York based non-profit organization that still continues to represent and promote the Asian American arts community. Later she joined the Godzilla Asian American Art Network (1990-2001), an important Asian American artist collective that fostered networking and information exchange for Asian American visual artists. Her early involvement and identification with these cultural activist organizations had a formative influence on her artistic practice and concerns. Her more significant pieces are positioned in the controversial political situation of Korea and American as well as a growing awareness of a Korean American woman's various identities and identifications. Exploring her own personal experiences as a Korean immigrant to America as well as the political context of Korea's relationship

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<sup>124</sup> Used by Yong Soon Min in the mixed media installation deColonization (1991). Qtd. in “About Yong Soon Min” from Finding Family Stories: Japanese American National Museum.



to the United States, she has often used an artistic approach which combined texts, archival imagery, and historical information with direct references to herself or her body.



Fig. 37. Yong Soon Min, Half Home, Multi-media installation, 1986.  
Source: Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com, Web, 12 Sep 2012.

Min's personal history and her sense of displacement and inner division were always important aspects in her artistic production. Her migration to the United States, a country that actively contributed to the division of her original homeland, had invariably caused conflicting emotions in her views of herself and where she belonged. Furthermore, in a lecture at Parsons School of Design in 1989, she noted how she felt at first "like a tourist" when she returned to Korea as an adult after living in America. Min saw herself with "half home as an American and half home as Korean" but desired "a place of belonging, wholeness and rootedness" (qtd. in Machida 151). Many of these issues are communicated in her installation Half Home (1986) which combined images, objects and text to question and comment on conventional ideas about home (see fig. 37). On the right side of the installation was the title "half home" written vertically, but the word "half" was only half visible. On the left side was the vertical word "heartland",<sup>125</sup> separated by a circular form that was similar to the Asian philosophical Yin Yang symbol, except instead of two opposing sides, Min depicted three. Four areas were visually presented using the words "memory", "mother / tongue", "history" and "real estate", each covered by a long piece of tracing paper. In order to read the words and discern the images, the viewer had to press down on the transparent paper. By using a multi-media approach of combining text and images with historical documents and objects, Min explored how history can

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<sup>125</sup> The word "heartland" was used by Min in many of her artworks and was also the title of a poem that she wrote in 1997. Although the meaning remains ambiguous and seems to refer to homeland or land of the heart, I believe that Min is also referring to the geopolitical paradigm "Heartland Theory" of Sir Halfor Mackinder from 1904 which stated that the power that controls Central Asia, the great pivot of the world, would emerge as the most powerful state in international politics. This theory is considered critical in forming the US foreign policy of containment especially during the Cold War. For example, according to British-American strategic thinker and professor Colin S. Gray: "From Harry S. Truman to George Bush, the overarching vision of US national security was explicitly geopolitical and directly traceable to the heartland theory of Mackinder" (258).

determine one's feelings of belonging and home. She reiterated this technique of incorporating archival materials with her own personal narrative in order to create many of her later works.



Fig. 38. Yong Soon Min, Talking Herstory, Lithograph with collé, 30 x 22 in., 1990.  
Source: Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com, Web, 12 Sep 2012.

In the collage Talking Herstory (1990), Min includes a portrait of herself with family photographs and official documentary images in order to expose the relationship between her own personal experiences and the larger political situation. At the bottom edge of the picture is Min's partial profile with a slightly opened mouth giving the impression that the images were growing out of her mouth (see fig. 38). The photos of her family from the 1940s and 1950s seem to hang from a celadon<sup>126</sup> green tree structure (formed from a collage of ripped fragments of a map of Korea) and surrounded by greyish archival images of WWII Allied leaders<sup>127</sup> at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences reorganizing parts of Europe and Asia (including Korea). Here she visually depicts the real connections between the socio-political history between Korea and the USA and her own family's subsequent fate due to the effects of the Korean War. Her artistic strategy for this lithograph and other later works has an affinity to the famous feminist rallying cry "The personal is political"<sup>128</sup> used in the 1960s and 1970s to call attention to women's personal lives and the political consequences of laws that were unfair to women. Indeed, as she stated in a 1990 interview with Margo Machida: "I have always tried to put the image of myself out there ... to personalize it ... (thereby) suggesting the connection between the personal and the

<sup>126</sup> Celadon is a style of pottery produced in Korea and known for its pale sea-green colour.

<sup>127</sup> Including Roosevelt, Stalin, Truman, Nixon, and Khrushchev. See Elaine Kim's essay "Bad Women" (1996), p. 595.

<sup>128</sup> Carol Hanisch wrote an essay in 1969 entitled "The Personal Is Political" but the exact origin of this phrase is unknown. Similar to Min, many feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s created art from their own experiences or their own bodies, see chapter two for discussion.

political” (Machida 153). By constructing a visual narrative of her own personal situation, she makes the effects of seemingly remote political and historical events more accessible for the viewer, and shows that history is an essential part of her own identity.



Fig. 39. Yong Soon Min, deColonization, Multi-media installation, 1991.  
Source: Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com, Web, 12 Sep 2012.

Another project was the room installation deColonization (1991) where various objects in different groupings came together with the word “colonize” diagonally taped on the floor (see fig. 39). Min has stated that this work was a critique of a packet that she received from the United Nations which had declared the 1990s as the “Decade of De-colonization”.<sup>129</sup> An important element was a tree branch propped up by volumes of the Encyclopedia Americana and leaning against a large vinyl sheet (half black with white words, and half white with black words) where binary colonizing concepts and code names for colonizing events were listed, like: Salvaged Savage; Civilized Benevolence; Free Trade Zone; Team Spirit; Master Canon; Right Might; Empire of Signs; Just Cause; Desert Storm; Over Determine; Black Face, White Mask. On another side of the room were four wall panels with texts and photographs, including a photograph of Min’s mother and other Korean women working at a US army base. These were covered by transparent paper with pairs of letters cut out to spell the word “occupied” and viewers were invited to press down these overlays in order to reveal images and text about the experiences of various women living in Korea under US occupation. One text read: “OK, GI Joe, Check-point Charlie, I’m your first, your second, your third world girl, your mama-san, geisha, ayah, Miss Saigon, war bride, mail order bride, I’m yours.” As Elaine Kim, professor of Asian American studies, noted in her essay “Bad Women”, a Korean woman’s association with the US military typically suggested “prostitution, economic need, betrayal of nation” (598). Min handwrote the Korean characters to the poem “Home” by the Korean American poet Won Ko on the front of a traditional Korean dress (symbolizing Korean women) which hung in the middle of the installation.

<sup>129</sup> See interview with curator Sarah Lee: “About Yong Soon Min” from Finding Family Stories: Japanese American National Museum.

On the back of the dress was the English translation of the poem (which introduced this section) that ascribed one's sense of belonging or home as being located within one's history rather than in one's place of birth or residence. In an interview with curator Sarah Lee at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, Min admitted that this "historical understanding ... was very important for me in making sense of my identity here in the US and understanding Korean American women, Third World women, and the many different kinds of identities I could talk about." Min's installation with multiple objects, photographs, and text showed how both memory and history construct one's sense of home, belonging, and cultural and gendered identity.



Fig. 40. Yong Soon Min, *Defining Moments*, Six part black and white photographs, each 20 x 16 in., 1992.  
Source: [Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com](http://Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com), Web, 12 Sep 2012.

A further significant work from Min that combined historical events with personal memories is her photographic work *Defining Moments* (1992). For this series of six black and white photographs, Min links specific political and historical incidents in Korea and the United States with important personal dates from her life and projects these dates and accompanying images on her body (see fig. 40). The first photograph is a negative image and shows Min's cropped nude body with "occupied territory" written on her arms and four dates circularly swirling out of her navel: 1953; April 19, 1960; May 18, 1980; and April 29, 1992. She describes the meaning of the dates in a handwritten text presented after the last picture:

#### Defining Moments

1953 – End of the Korean War, year of my birth; 4/19/60 – witnessed this popular uprising which toppled the Syngman Rhee government and emigrated later that year to the US; 5/18/80 – the Kwangju uprising and massacre indelibly politicized me; 4/29/92 – watched LA burn on my birthday; – we stand together on Mt. Paektu overlooking our Lake of Heaven.

The next five images all contain appropriated imagery from the above-mentioned events projected onto her face together with the word "DMZ"<sup>130</sup> referring to the Korean Demilitarized Zone on her forehead and the word "heartland" on her chest. All of these images are historically and politically significant. The first image shows soldiers in rice fields and refers to the end of the Korean War and

<sup>130</sup> The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is a buffer zone between North and South Korea created in 1953 at the end of the Korean War. It is the most heavily militarized border in the world.

the year of Min's birth (1953). The second image corresponds to the student demonstrations called *sa-il-gu* (April 19, 1960)<sup>131</sup> which resulted in the overthrow of the dictatorial and corrupt Rhee government. For Koreans, this insurgence is seen as a symbol of the power of people fighting for democracy. Min witnessed this movement and also immigrated to America the same year, 1960. The third picture shows soldiers running on a street and refers to a popular uprising in the city of Kwangju, South Korea where many citizens rebelled against the *coup d'état* of General Chun Doo-Hwan and were brutally crushed by the military. The fourth image presents newspaper clippings on the 1992 riots in Koreatown, Los Angeles which resulted after the verdict in the Rodney King case.<sup>132</sup> The last image in the series visualizes a possible reunification between North and South Korea, depicting Paektu mountain, the mythical birthplace of the Korean people as well as the symbol of hope for reunification.

This piece literally transforms Min's body to the contested site on which Korean American memory and history were mediated. By depicting her own body as a divided or even multiply occupied territory, she makes a deliberate reference to the Korean nation separated by the DMZ as well as her own personal alienation from the country of her birth due to war and upheaval. The explanatory text on the last photograph not only helps viewers who were unfamiliar with Korean and Korean American historical events, but also offers insight into Min's personal defining moments of identification. Furthermore, as Margo Machida argues in her book, Min's use of the female body is also significant because gender "is the foundation on which Min's art stands" (154). Min is decidedly opposed to Confucian values, the traditional Asian doctrine that idealized antiquity, harmony and respect for age and authority, and established rules of conduct for all social relationships including the subservient role of women. In addition, according to Elaine Kim, Min is concerned with many themes and images that were traditionally concealed from the Korean American community and this piece exposes "not only the notion that women are central to history and nation, with images of the naked female body as the site of nationhood and global politics but also anti-imperialist politics" (595). Defining Moments reveals how the complex socio-political history between Korea and the USA is directly connected to her life and body. By retelling the past from her perspective she produces new insights into her own history and identifications and communicates the significance of politics and history on the personal lives of individuals.

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<sup>131</sup> "Sa-il-gu" is Korean for 4-1-9 meaning April 19<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>132</sup> The Los Angeles Riots in 1992 started after a trial jury acquitted the police officers who had been filmed brutally beating Rodney King, an African-American man, after stopping him for speeding. Koreatown, a neighbourhood in Los Angeles with a large concentration of Korean Americans, experienced the most crime and destruction in the ordeal which lasted for 6 days until the National Guard and the US Marines managed to restore order. Hundreds of Korean-owned businesses were looted, damaged, or burnt down, and an unknown number of Koreans were physically attacked. This experience left many Korean Americans shaken and stimulated a wave of political activism against racial scapegoating and institutional racism. See also page 67, footnote 77.



Fig. 41. Yong Soon Min, DMZ-XING, Multi-media installation, 1994.  
Source: Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com, Web, 12 Sep 2012.



Fig. 42. Yong Soon Min, DMZ-XING, Multi-media installation, 1994.  
Source: Yong Soon Min, yongsoonmin.com, Web, 12 Sep 2012.

Consequently, in her installation DMZ-XING (1994), Min included perspectives from other dislocated people together with her own history. Commissioned by Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut to explore the backgrounds of Southeastern Asian refugees who had relocated there, Min interviewed five families from the Laotian, Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Amerasian communities and related their memories of war, displacement and current bicultural realities to her own personal experiences.<sup>133</sup> The title combined DMZ (referring to the imposed demilitarized zones that separated both Korea and Vietnam) with XING<sup>134</sup> (used for pedestrian crosswalks common in the USA) and expressed the trans-historic parallels between the various Asian groups whose lives were completely altered by the various violent East and Southeast Asian conflicts related to the Cold War. Min spent several months in 1993 interviewing local Southeast Asian refugees and, with the help of translators and a photographer, produced a significant body of textual and visual material. For the presentation of these texts, images, and other historical references about these conflicts, she constructed a large eight ft. (2.43 m) tall circular structure (see fig. 41). A sloping ramp led to a gap in the dark coloured imposing structure. Once inside, extremely intense white light blazed from above, and at timed intervals, bursts of red light flashed from underneath the metal grates of the floor. Min's desire to subject the visitor to a level of physical and mental stress was made in order to communicate a type of experience similar to those whose lives had been directly affected. In her description of the piece, she stated: "I hoped the viewers might not only apprehend the narratives but also physically negotiate the experience of the 'past imperfect' and the 'present conditional'" (134). Sixteen vertical glass panels displaying groups of framed photographs of the various refugee families were placed sequentially around the enclosure. Each panel focused on a different theme and was overlaid with text etched in its surface, incorporating excerpts from the life stories of local refugee families, Min's personal thoughts on the violent conflicts in East and Southeast Asia because of the Cold War, as well as historical

<sup>133</sup> See Yong Soon Min's essay "DMZ XING" (1997).

<sup>134</sup> XING is a US abbreviation for crossing.

material on the division of Korea and Vietnam and statistics about war casualties and recent Southeast Asian migration. In the centre of the structure was a freestanding octagonal pillar of mirrors, allowing visitors to see their own images within the installation (see fig. 42) and suggesting their own implication in these histories (Machida, 164). With this installation, Min again critically examined the complex social and political situation of the United States in East Asia during the Cold War. Moreover, by presenting the dramatic personal narratives of five families who migrated to America in addition to her own, Min made the consequences of war and displacement direct and personal rather than abstract and theoretical. Emotionally stirring as well as politically and historically informative, DMZ-XING presented a critical analysis of the experiences of various Asian refugees and showed similar memories and experiences despite the diversity in cultures and backgrounds.

Influenced by her cultural activist background as well as the prevailing environment of identity politics in art, Min produced compelling installations during the 1980s and 1990s that can be seen as a critical re-articulation of history in defiance of a dominant national culture that exoticized and ‘orientalized’ Asians. According to Stuart Hall, cultural practice is a powerful and creative force in the post-colonial struggle of marginalised peoples: not by the rediscovery or the revealing of the past, but by the production of identity in the “*re-telling* of the past” (“Cultural Identity” 224, italics in original). Thus, cultural production such as visual arts or literature which uses narratives in order to retell history from another perspective can be an effective way not only to describe belonging and difference but also to confront cultural hegemonic assumptions about the *Other*. Following Hall’s concept of cultural production as a position for resisting dominant signifying practices, Lisa Lowe wrote: “Asian American culture also includes the practices that emerge in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian American cultures as ‘other’” (427).

Min’s artistic strategies reflect these theoretical issues about cultural identities as well as previously discussed concepts about ‘place’ as a network of dynamic processes and “home” as being in constant transformation. Furthermore, her artistic practice demonstrates the continuous interaction between her “roots” and “routes” or how diasporic experiences necessarily reflect heterogeneity and diversity. By presenting the connections between socio-political history and her personal experiences, Min interrogates issues about origin, memory, and history in her work. In the next section, I examine another contemporary visual artist, Mona Hatoum, who experienced similar displacement issues in her life and also has made work that questions conventional notions of home and belonging; however, her approach for making art about these issues has been very different.

## The Entire World as a Foreign Land: The Artistic Strategies of Mona Hatoum

*Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision ... this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions ...*<sup>135</sup>

Edward Said, 1984

Like Yong Soon Min, Mona Hatoum has a complex biography which included forced displacement issues due to political conflicts and circumstances that compelled her to become a dual-exile. She was born in 1952 in Beirut, Lebanon to Palestinian parents who had been forced to live in exile by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Her father worked at the British embassy (after being a British civil servant in Palestine) which allowed the family to have British passports, since their Palestinian national identity cards were no longer recognized and they were refused Lebanese identity cards. While travelling in Great Britain in 1975, the Lebanese Civil War began which prevented her from returning home. Because of the situation, Hatoum stayed in London and began her studies at art school. As the civil war worsened, Hatoum's exile from where she grew up became a permanent decision for her.

Although her work has included references to herself and her body, she has often expressed her reluctance to be over-identified with her biography. For example, she stated in an interview with Michael Archer in 1997: "Most people who interview me seem to have this journalistic attitude that wants to explain or validate my work specifically in relation to my background." However, it is impossible to find any writing about Mona Hatoum without mention of her complex life story. Seen through the lens of her biography, Hatoum's ambiguous works take on added meaning, offering a parallel commentary to what is seen. Moreover, Hatoum admitted in a 1996 interview with Claudia Spinelli: "But the fact that I grew up in a war-torn country; the fact that my family was displaced, a Palestinian family that ended up living in exile in Lebanon, has obviously shaped the way I perceive the world. It comes into my work as a feeling of unsettledness. The feeling of not being able to take anything for granted, even doubting the solidity of the ground you walk on" (134). Nonetheless, Hatoum's reluctance to be labelled or defined by her background has been advantageous for her presence in conventional art world venues as her position parallels art discourse's post-identity perspective where the identity and background of the artist is allegedly irrelevant. In the next section, I examine a few of her art works which show Hatoum's artistic development and strategy to communicate the condition of exile by creating unsettling and disturbing moments where home becomes perilous and where the familiar becomes foreign.

Hatoum's early performance works were confrontational and overtly political. They included Under Siege (1982) where, naked and covered in mud, she struggled to stand up in a glass container (see fig.

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<sup>135</sup> Edward Said's seminal essay "Reflections on Exile" was originally published in 1984. Quoted in Sheena Wagstaff's essay "Uncharted Territory" in the catalogue to Mona Hatoum's retrospective exhibition at Tate Modern in 2000.



43). For seven hours, she slipped and fell, leaving traces of mud on the glass from her body. At the same time, a soundtrack with revolutionary songs in Arabic, French and English, news reports and statements was heard relating to the political situation in the Middle East. Hatoum also prepared a written statement about the performance:

As a Palestinian woman this work was my first attempt at making a statement about a persistent struggle to survive in a continuous state of siege ... As a person from the 'Third World', living in the West, existing on the margin of European society and alienated from my own ... this action represented an act of separation ... stepping out of an acquired frame of reference and into a space which acted as a point of reconnection and reconciliation with my own background and the bloody history of my own people (qtd. in Archer 122).

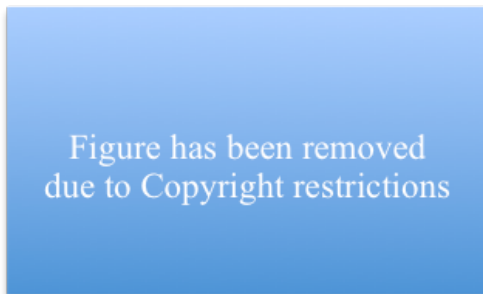


Fig. 43. Mona Hatoum, Under Siege, Performance, 1982.  
Source: Art Asia Pacific Magazine, [artasiapacific.com](http://artasiapacific.com), Web, 5 Sep 2012.

Similar to Yong Soon Min's artistic approach, this early piece not only explicitly commented on a specific political situation, it also incorporated Hatoum directly. Although more disruptive or aggressive than Min, this work referenced the volatile situation in the Middle East as well as Hatoum's own feelings of alienation and helplessness. However, rather than Min's approach which used a poetic collage of information, images, and objects, Hatoum's physical ordeal was disturbing and voyeuristic, creating a sense of unease in the viewers.



Fig. 44. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, Video, 15 min., 1988.  
Source: [Tate Britain, tate.org.uk](http://Tate Britain, tate.org.uk), Web, 4 Oct 2012.

A further early work which combined Hatoum's personal history with a political situation was entitled Measures of Distance (1988, 15 minutes), an autobiographical video which explores the consequences of war and loss and shows Hatoum's pain of separation from her own family, especially from her mother. The work presents the Arabic text of her mother's letters superimposed on photographs of her mother taking a shower (see fig. 44), and is accompanied by a soundtrack which montaged Hatoum's voice reading her mother's letters translated into English with recorded phone conversations between them in Arabic. The Arabic script resembles a veil of barbed wire on Hatoum's mother's body, visually making her a captive. The video's narrative is told from the mother's perspective and includes the situation where Hatoum's father walked into the shower to find Mona taking pictures of her mother, both naked. His outrage and subsequent dismissal of the incident as "women's nonsense" as well as her mother's interpretation of his reaction "as if you [Mona] had trespassed on his property" are included in the piece, in addition to descriptions of an increasingly difficult living situation and the mother's feelings of anguish and loss in war-torn Lebanon. Hatoum believes that "it spoke of the complexities of exile, displacement, the sense of loss and separation caused by war ... [and] contextualized the image, or this person, 'my mother,' with a social-political context" ("Interview with Janine Antoni", 1998). Comparable to art from Min, this work reveals a personal perspective of Hatoum and her family in order to communicate the consequences of war and politics.



Fig. 45. Mona Hatoum, Light at the End, Installation, 1989.  
Source: Domus, domusweb.it, Web, 5 Oct 2012.

In the late 1980s, however, Hatoum became less interested in being overtly political and shifted to subtle installations and ambiguous objects. She adopted a more minimalist aesthetic including grid-like formations similar to Sol Le Witt. For example, Light at the End (1989) was an installation with six electric heating rods arranged in a grid and resembling prison bars at the end of a corridor (see fig. 45). From a distance, the heating elements' orange glow was seductive and inviting, attracting the viewer to approach closer only to be repelled by the threatening heat. The physicality of the work was obvious: the danger was real if the viewer were to touch it. The installation was a minimal structure and formally simple and beautiful; yet at the same time, there were associations of torture, pain, prison and violence. The meaning was open and could be interpreted in multiple ways without need of any further information. In this work, Hatoum no longer addressed a specific political issue or presented a particular cultural viewpoint, she articulated a more universal perspective. Moreover, she became more interested in arousing contradictory emotions of attraction and repulsion in order to stimulate the viewer to experience a psychological and emotional reaction of uncertainty and apprehension. By creating sense of dislocation or unease through a combination of specific materials with a simple form, Hatoum discovered a simple approach that appealed to a general public but with many possibilities for individual interpretation. Furthermore, she was able to both avoid marginalization based on her cultural background and history and to conform to post-identity art discourse's endorsement for formalism and materials.



Fig. 46. Mona Hatoum, Socle du Monde, Installation, 1992-93.  
Source: White Cube, whitecube.com, Web, 5 Oct 2012.

In another minimalist work entitled Socle du Monde<sup>136</sup> (1992-93) which employs a more self-referential approach, Hatoum created an enormous cube with a black textured surface that seems organic and alive with patterns that resembles intestines or entrails (see fig. 46). The unusual surface is created by millions of iron filings held in place by powerful magnets inside the sculpture. The work is a tribute to Piero Manzoni, an Italian artist, whose Socle du Monde Hommage à Galilei (1961) was a large iron cube with the words “Socle du Monde” written upside down, and humorously suggesting that the entire world was actually a sculpture held on this base. In comparison, Hatoum’s cube, a form that she called “the minimalist form par excellence,” undermines the formal concerns of minimalist art with a bodily reference “by covering it with something that not only looks very organic, but is almost frightening because you don’t immediately recognize what the texture is made of” (“Interview with Janine Antoni”, 1998). Viewers are attracted to the tactile fur-like material, but are also repulsed by the corporeal associations of the entrails pattern. Images of entrails<sup>137</sup> scattered on a surface have an immediate repellent effect as only war or other large-scale human carnage would create such a pattern. Thus, like Light at the End (1989), the minimalistic structure is imbued with violent and physical connotations. Moreover, because of the nature of magnets, the polarity fields that form the organic patterns also cause the iron fillings to be in constant fluctuation: providing the work a temporal quality and implying instability and disruption. Hatoum’s ability to create a work that compels visitors to experience physical and emotional feelings of disorientation and alienation as well as implying political conflict is very effective and often stimulates different reactions and associations from each individual. Compared to Min, whose aim was to raise awareness about a specific perspective or history, Hatoum’s approach is more general and open to interpretation.

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<sup>136</sup> “Socle du Monde” translated in English means “Base of the World”.

<sup>137</sup> Hatoum used the imagery of entrails again in her piece Entrails Carpet (1995), which was a floor piece made of silicone rubber with a raised pattern of interweaving entrails similar to Socle du Monde.

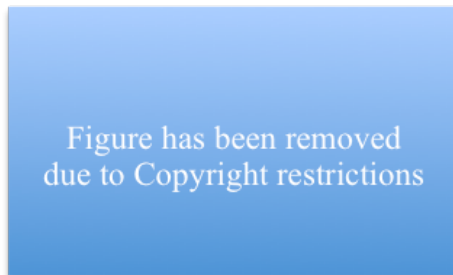


Fig. 47. Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger*, Installation, 1994.

Source: [Darat al Funun: The Khalid Shoman Foundation](http://Darat al Funun: The Khalid Shoman Foundation), [daratalfunun.org](http://daratalfunun.org), Web, 14 Oct 2012.

The references to the physical body often found in Hatoum's work culminated in her seminal video installation *Corps étranger* (1994) produced for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (see fig. 47). The title translates to "Foreign Body" and refers to both the unsettling and unusual viewing perspective of Hatoum's own body, making the body unrecognizable and "foreign", as well as the method of execution: the use and insertion of a tiny endoscopic camera, a "foreign body," inside her. The video is projected onto the floor of a white imposing circular structure with a narrow entrance (with some formal similarities to Min's installation *DMZ XING* (see fig. 41)) and shows highly magnified views from the camera passing over Hatoum's skin and body before entering into various moist and pulsating orifices. The visual imagery is fascinating and makes familiar body parts such as hair, teeth, or pupils strange and monstrous – in fact, uncanny. Accompanying the film traversal outside of the body is the sound of Hatoum's breathing; while inside the body, the viewer would hear the sound of her heart. The complete visualization of the exterior and interior of a woman's body is a disturbing and engulfing experience and as Hatoum has said "it activate[d] all sorts of fears and insecurities about the devouring womb, the vagina dentata,<sup>138</sup> the castration complex" ("Interview with Janine Antoni", 1998). Although the intimate images are from Hatoum's body, the views are neither erotic nor personal. Instead, her body is defamiliarized into a foreign entity.

Similar to Min's complex relationship to 'home' or where she belonged, Hatoum's existence as a dual-exile gave her "the feeling of in-betweenness that comes from not being able to identify totally with my own culture or the one in which I am living" (Brett 36). Conventional notions about home do not apply to displaced individuals like Min or Hatoum because they did not experience the stability and

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<sup>138</sup> 'Vagina dentata' is Latin for 'toothed vagina' and refers to the folk tale in which a woman's vagina is said to contain teeth, with the association that sexual intercourse would result in castration for the man: the term was popularized by Sigmund Freud.

security normally associated with home. However, instead of creating art that retold history to locate oneself as in Min's case, Hatoum destabilized and deconstructed assumptions of home as safe and nurturing and made it uncanny, both familiar yet menacing and potentially harmful.



Fig. 48. Mona Hatoum, Homebound, Installation, 2000.  
Source: Art Asia Pacific Magazine, [artasiapacific.com](http://artasiapacific.com), Web, 2 Oct 2012.

In the 1999 installation Home and the later variation Homebound (2000), she presented threatening domestic environments that were separated from the viewer with a wire barrier (see fig. 48). Both works featured a large kitchen table where various metal kitchen utensils such as scissors, graters, or colanders with some elements containing light bulbs were connected by electrical wires. Homebound included chairs, a bed and other furnishings that were also wired to the other objects. At irregular intervals, an electrical current, made audible through speakers, was conducted through the wires which illuminated the small lights in various locations. The tension created from the controlled, but threatening environment suggested hazardous confinement rather than a welcoming haven or sanctuary. Hatoum succeeded in creating disruptive installations which seemed familiar but conveyed feelings of danger. This back and forth ambivalence disturbed and contradicted expectations of home and created an experience of alienation or estrangement for the viewers.

The late postcolonial theorist Edward W. Said, another noted Palestinian exile, described this experience in his essay about Hatoum's work as articulating dislocation where "[f]amiliarity and strangeness are locked together in the oddest way, adjacent and irreconcilable at the same time" (17). It is not surprising to discover that Said was an important influence on Hatoum, especially his seminal essay "Reflections on Exile," originally published in 1984, where his description of home could easily apply to her installations Home and Homebound: "The exile knows that in a secular and contingent

world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons” (qtd. in Wagstaff 36). Similar to Massey’s examination of home where nostalgic associations of a secure sanctuary can lead to exclusionary practices, Said believed that an exile would be more likely not to be deceived by the emotional illusions of home. Indeed, Said’s quotation at the beginning of this section is particularly appropriate for his observation that while most people are only aware of one culture or home, an exile sees “the entire world as a foreign land” (148) which allows for additional insight and understanding about society and culture. Similarly, although Hatoum’s art depicts something familiar and recognizable, it offers multiple perspectives and interpretations. Said also respected Hatoum’s work highly and wrote in his essay “The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum’s Logic of Irreconcilables”<sup>139</sup> that she expressed the exile experience and the Palestinian condition in her work more vividly than any other artist (109).

In addition, further correlations can be made between theoretical concepts discussed earlier in this chapter and to Hatoum’s artistic practice. Like Min, Hatoum’s work reflects Massey’s non-essentialist sense of ‘place’ and her criticism of nostalgic memories of home. Furthermore, Hatoum also incorporates elements of her diasporic background, mostly in her earlier works. Her later works relate more to Freud’s ideas of the “uncanny” and Spivak’s planetarity concept where she defamiliarizes familiar space or home. Accordingly, Hatoum contrasts “Heimlich/Unheimlich” elements in order to in order to reveal that what is ultimately foreign and strange is not the *Other*, but ourselves.

## Conclusions

Despite some similarities in their backgrounds and interests, there are distinct differences in Min’s and Hatoum’s artistic approaches which can be clarified through a comparison using my proposed categories (*literary device, reappropriation, anamorphic situation, theoretical correlation*). Whereas Min’s artistic practice incorporates the *literary devices* juxtaposition and allegory, Hatoum’s practice emphasizes the *literary devices* of juxtaposition with ambiguity and connotation. Through a juxtaposition of her personal autobiography or her body with references to documented historical events, Min creates an allegory between the personal and the political and criticizes socio-political histories especially of Korean and US relations or the violent conflicts in East and Southeast Asia such as the Korean War or the Vietnam War. Hatoum, in contrast, engages viewers through the juxtaposition of “Heimlich/Unheimlich” or familiar and strange, the connotation of unsettling or dangerous materials to activate various associations, and her use of ambiguity where the meaning is open to many different interpretations. Furthermore, both artists use completely different *reappropriation* strategies. Min *reappropriates* documented political and historical events, especially

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<sup>139</sup> In fact, this essay was the introduction for the catalogue to Hatoum’s solo exhibition at the re-opening of Tate Modern in London in 2000 which was also entitled “The Entire World as a Foreign Land”.

in connection with Korea and the United States, in order to expose an alternative and personal narrative. This personal narrative is, in turn, her *anamorphic situation*. As viewers, we are encouraged to recognize and identify ourselves with individuals whose existence has been decisively affected by politics and history. We see how significant socio-political situations can completely alter the lives and futures of ordinary people. In comparison, Hatoum has a reverse *reappropriation* approach. Instead of reclaiming or reappropriating a previously negative concept, she transforms formerly positive notions of home and the familiar into threatening and strange experiences. By emphasizing the connections between “Heimlich / Unheimlich”, she creates a visceral experience that reveals the uncanny and the strange as existing in our own homes or our own bodies, instead of an external or alien *Other*. Correspondingly, Hatoum’s *anamorphic situation* activates a physical sense of dislocation or unease in addition to a psychological response by being simultaneously attractive as well as repulsive or threatening. This visceral reaction often results from the potentially dangerous situation but also her use of scale and space. Finally, Min’s and Hatoum’s art practices have several overlapping *theoretical correlations* such as Doreen Massey’s concept of ‘place’ as a dynamic process or the interrogations of ‘home’ as a nostalgic memory. In addition, Min directly uses her diaspora experiences and the interaction between her “roots” and “routes” as her main artistic approach, and Hatoum has also included elements of her diasporic background, particularly in some of her earlier works. Furthermore, Min’s approach which connects history and memory as well as examines belonging and identification also have *theoretical correlations* to Stuart Hall’s claims about cultural identities or Lisa Lowe’s arguments about Asian American cultural practices. In comparison, Hatoum’s installations where the familiar and known is transformed into something strange and foreign have a stronger connection to Edward Said’s reflections on exile or Gayatri Spivak’s concept of planetarity based on Freud’s ideas of the uncanny.

Although Min and Hatoum were both affected by forced exile and displacement issues that influenced them to examine traditional notions about home and belonging in their respective art practices, their situations were different. Min’s inner conflict about where she ‘belonged’ was further complicated by her situation in the United States: a country that not only had a history of racism against Asians, but which had also played an active role in the division of Korea that had led to her family’s displacement. In comparison, Hatoum’s situation in Britain, although politically complex, was not as directly contentious as Min’s. Furthermore, Min’s experiences in the United States during the prevalence of identity politics and multiculturalism in art discourse and her activist background within the Asian American movement were significant for her personal as well as her artistic development and influenced her interest in re-telling history in order to establish her own sense of location and self-identity. Whereas Min deliberately positions herself and her work as an Asian American woman, Hatoum is hesitant to have her work explained or validated by her complex cultural background. Because a viewer has the option to read Hatoum’s art as a general commentary on war, exile or displacement, her work has resonance and power for many different people, as compared to several of



Min's works which refer to specific historical and political events that a more limited group of viewers might understand. Despite earlier work that was directly political, Hatoum's later work seems more inspired by aesthetic approaches such as Minimalism or Surrealism to create critical feminist and political content through ambiguity. Min's work activates viewers to reconsider and reflect on politics and history from a personal perspective while Hatoum's work elicits a more visceral response, where viewers imagine or respond to a potentially dangerous situation. Moreover, Hatoum's strategies and positioning which are not obviously political or critical (but could be interpreted that way) coincided with the emergence of a post-identity art discourse that emphasized the alleged insignificance of an artist's perceived identification. Like Hatoum, many contemporary artists downplay their cultural backgrounds as they fear marginalization or being perceived as a spokesperson or representative of a specific group through their art. Nevertheless, as I have consistently argued in this dissertation, I believe that art can never be defined only as the "object itself" without taking into account the subjective viewpoint of the artist as well as our beliefs of who he or she is and why he or she created the work. In this way, I contend that not only is Hatoum necessarily influenced by her complex biography in order to make art; but, we, the viewers, also interpret her art based on her previous works and our knowledge about her personal background.

In this chapter, concepts of place, planetarity and diaspora were presented which revealed how 'home' or belonging to a place or a culture have always been dynamic processes that continuously develop and change through movement and mobility. Further background about Asian American cultural practices was also included in order to provide the framework of Min's artistic approach and her background as a cultural activist. With a comparative analysis of Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum, I presented a range of possible artistic approaches that interrogated traditional concepts about origin and belonging which can inspire us to recognize our own circumstances and experiences. Although these two artists employed completely different strategies, both reflected on their diasporic identities and experiences in order to offer alternative perspectives on place and *Self* within contemporary culture and reveal the dynamic processes involved in concepts about home and belonging and the human condition. In the next section, I combine and summarise the findings of chapters one, two, three and four which investigated various strategies used by visual artists to resist dominant beliefs about the *Other*.

## Conclusion of Dissertation

The purpose of this research was to understand what types of artistic approaches are used in order to make visual art that articulates relational processes of identification and undermines socially constructed meanings about *Otherness* as well as reveals cultural and historical experiences involved in viewing and understanding art. This investigation began as a way to extend my own practice by examining how other artists create work that could be seen as a means of resistance against dominant ideologies. A further aim was to situate these artistic practices and correlate them with theoretical discourse. Because of my personal perspective, I was also specifically interested in the artistic practices from women artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds, but I wished to locate these practices within a larger context and thus included other American or European artists of mixed cultural backgrounds. My methodology was the examination of themes of *Otherness* through a comparative analysis of selected pairs of artists and artworks, at least one of which was a woman artist of Asian diasporic background, using a proposed set of categories. With this comparative framework, I analysed the historical and personal background, theoretical context, and artistic strategies of the following artists and artworks: Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1965), Patty Chang's Melons (at a Loss) (1998), Lorna Simpsons works from 1980s and 1990s, Nikki S. Lee's Projects (1997-2001), Guilllermo Gómez-Peña, Fiona Tan, Yong Soon Min, and Mona Hatoum.

The first chapter presented a historical overview about representations of Asian women in America and included background on the contested concept of 'Asian American'. Despite the controversies that surround this identification, there have been many valuable contributions from Asian American theorists concerning Asian diasporic cultural production and representations of Asians in American popular culture. I established that historical presumptions characterized Asian women as excessively sexual; thus, their representations in popular culture and visual art have often been hypersexual. By making historical comparisons between two Asian Hollywood film actresses (Anna May Wong and Lucy Liu) and two art performances from Asian women in America (Yoko Ono and Patty Chang), I examined how depictions of Asian women in popular media (film) and visual art have shifted since, respectively, the 1920s and the 1960s. Although assumptions of hypersexuality still persist, I claimed that developments have occurred in film and television and could be correlated to similar changes in visual art. The characters that Anna May Wong (active 1920s-1940s) played were limited to either of the two main types identified by Renee E. Tajima as "Lotus Blossom Baby" (the delicate, feminine and passive, yet exotic love interest to the white hero) or "Dragon Lady" (the sexually seductive but devious and manipulative female miscreant) and usually perished (in either case) by the end of the film. In comparison, although Lucy Liu (active 1990s-present) generally lived through the end of the film, many of her roles depicted a modern "Dragon Lady". However, more recently, she has been playing more complex characters. In order to examine the changes in representations of Asian women in the visual arts, another comparison was made between a live performance by Yoko Ono in 1965 and

a video performance by Patty Chang in 1998. Whereas Ono's performance Cut Piece (1965) could suggest a "Lotus Blossom Baby" self-sacrificial act, Chang's video performance Melons (at a Loss) (1998) indicates more a parody of a self-devouring "Dragon Lady". Both these performances reveal prevailing cultural stereotypes about Asian women that were outlined in the beginning of the chapter and correspond to developments in popular culture. Thus, Ono and Chang's strategic approaches interrogate and expose the dominant social assumptions of their respective time periods.

In the next chapter, I explored artistic strategies that indicated practices of "reading the body" by revealing the presence of cultural connotations in representations of the *Other* with a comparison between Lorna Simpson's artworks from the 1980s and 1990s with Nikki S. Lee's Projects (1997-2001). As I have argued, art is always situated within a specific culture and belief system and from a specific subject position. Because this position has traditionally been Euro-American, white, heterosexual, Christian, and male, these characteristics are unconsciously recognized as the universal view. Both Simpson and Lee make viewers aware of the constructed nature of racial and gender signifiers in depictions of women of colour. Whereas Simpson uses semiotic strategies of photography to highlight connotations about the black female body, Lee's 'Asianness' is submerged by her performative strategy of 'racial passing' which makes viewers realize the permeability of identification borders. Furthermore, I indicated the significance of Simpson's work during the 1980s and 1990s when concepts of identity politics were popular in art discourse. However, with the advent of post-identity and color-blind racism and the backlash against political art from a marginalized viewpoint, these perspectives were often regarded as moralizing or didactic. This context was favourable for Lee's Projects and her depictions of in 'ethnic minority' and 'ethnic White' situations because it suggested that identities and identifications are primarily defined by fashion accessories and self-motivation.

The following chapter presented the correlations between knowledge, power and truth in ethnographic practices of categorization and identification by comparing Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Fiona Tan. Both artists use methods of deconstruction for revealing the *Self* and to create artworks that potentially shift historical and cultural reflections of the viewer. Gómez-Peña's artistic strategy of "reverse anthropology" deconstructs and parodies anthropological methodology by performing exaggerated stereotypes to highlight preconceptions which could lead to greater self-reflection for the viewer. His area of concentration is on North-South borders. In comparison, Tan's strategic approach is often concerned with East-West issues and expose deep-rooted European beliefs about the 'Orient', many of which emerged from writings attributed to Marco Polo. Through her emphasis on a subjective view, Tan subverts ideas of authenticity and 'objectivity' as well as deconstructs the mediums of film and photography. Through their respective artistic approaches, Gómez-Peña and Tan demonstrate the subjectivity inherent in ethnological practices and the role of power in knowledge about the *Other*.

The final body chapter concentrated on “diaspora identities” and issues of origin and belonging by comparing Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum. Moreover, theoretical positions about place, planetarity, and diaspora were presented in order to indicate the dynamic processes involved in concepts about belonging. Both artists challenge conventional notions of ‘cultural identity’ and place of origin so that viewers are inspired to reflect on their own backgrounds, associations and conditions. In addition, they investigate the concept of home as a ‘place’ as well as the interaction between “roots” and “routes” and offer new perspectives about who we are in relation to others. Whereas Yong Soon Min uses personal history and narrative to stimulate reflection about historical and political events, Mona Hatoum incorporates Freud’s concept of the uncanny by juxtaposing “Unheimlich/Heimlich” to make the familiar unfamiliar and dangerous and to create feelings of dislocation. Furthermore, while Min consciously locates herself as an Asian American woman, Hatoum is hesitant about connecting her work to her biography. However, I also argued that because of the historical, cultural, and social conditions that situate an artist and viewers’ perceptions of artistic intention, it is not possible to disregard Hatoum’s personal background in interpretations of her work.

The findings of this study suggested that various artistic strategies which explore alternative perspectives of *Otherness* have the potential to reveal and undermine culturally constructed meanings of difference. I argued that visual art can be effective for understanding the intersectional, hybrid, and relational processes involved in the construction of identities. For the examination of various themes of *Otherness*, I made a comparative analysis of the strategies used by the aforementioned pairs of artists using four categories: *literary device*, *reappropriation*, *anamorphic situation* and *theoretical correlation*. In the following paragraphs, I review the similarities and differences between the strategic approaches used by the visual artists presented in this dissertation within each category.

The category *literary device* describes strategic approaches used by visual artists to indicate an alternative view to mainstream values and communicate another level of meaning to the depicted visual experience. Both Lucy Lippard who suggests strategies of “irony, humour and subversion” and Griselda Pollock who proposes “distanciation” strategies contributed to the idea of this category. Many artists use combinations of various literary devices. For example, Chang and Gómez-Peña incorporate the *literary devices* of humour and parody and in their approaches which mock visual cultural stereotypes of the exotic *Other*. In comparison, Lee and Tan use the *literary device* irony to show the incongruity between the literal and the implied meaning of the images. Lee’s approach also includes humour and the *literary device* juxtaposition, where multiple ideas or themes are offered in order to make a comparison, by presenting various images of Lee as a member of diverse group situations. Tan’s works use irony together with the *literary device* ambiguity, where the meaning may be understood in diverse ways and is open to various interpretations, in order to reveal the subjective nature of reality and truth in film and images. Ono’s live performance of *Cut Piece* (1965) also utilizes ambiguity for reflection on the boundaries between performer and audience as well as power and

violence. Juxtaposition and the *literary device* connotation, where the intended meaning is not stated clearly but conveyed indirectly, are used by Simpson to reveal the semiotic relationship between text and image and the unconscious cultural connotations or associations about race and gender. Min juxtaposes her personal situation with socio-political events to critically present an alternate view of history. Hatoum's artistic approach engages viewers through the juxtaposition of "Heimlich/Unheimlich" or familiar and strange, the connotation of specific materials to activate various associations, and her use of ambiguity where the meaning may be understood in diverse ways. Furthermore, in order to communicate another symbolic level of meaning, several artists employ the *literary device* allegory in their work. Using allegory, Ono's performance reveals the power dynamics of racialized gender, Simpson's large-scale photographic texts explore the semiotic construction of representations of black women, Tan exposes Western assumptions of the 'Orient' as well as questions authenticity as represented in literature or film, Min personifies significant political and historical events, and Hatoum creates feelings of dislocation or alienation through her visual works.

The category of *reappropriation* explored artistic approaches that reclaimed or reappropriated previously negative concepts in order to transform their meanings. Following Stuart Hall's "trans-coding strategies" and Celine Shimizu's concept of "productive perversity", I examined how art can expose unconscious cultural assumptions about the *Other*, but also how these notions can be destabilized and potentially shifted. By incorporating imagery or references from art history, literature, or popular culture about the *Other*, cultural references are marked and presented for the viewer. The types of *reappropriations* from the discussed artists are varied: visual cultural stereotypes from popular culture or art (Ono, Chang, Lee, Simpson, Gómez-Peña, Tan), historical imagery or film footage (Tan, Min, Hatoum), and literary or text references (Tan, Simpson) are used in order to reveal culturally constructed meanings of markers of difference and to demonstrate the role of fantasy and cultural projections in constructing an exotic *Other*. Some artists combine *reappropriation* strategies with *literary devices*. For example, Chang and Gómez-Peña *reappropriate* and transform visual cultural stereotypes of the exotic *Other* through parody and humour. Similarly, Lee's *reappropriation* of 'ethnic minority' and 'ethnic White' stereotypes is accomplished through a juxtaposition of her diverse visual transformations which are humorous and ironic. In comparison, Tan *reappropriates* Western images of the 'Orient' with visual references to both cultural and literary sources through her film techniques and narration structure, while Min *reappropriates* documented political and historical events, especially in connection with Korea and the United States, in order to expose an alternative and personal narrative. Hatoum has a reverse *reappropriation* approach in which she transforms typically positive notions of home and the familiar into threatening and strange experiences to reveal that we ourselves are alien and strange rather than an external *Other*.

A third category was *anamorphic situation* which examined the specific viewing position or bodily experience created by the artist. Through the *anamorphic situation* or distortion of the dominant world

picture, we become aware of being knowing and embodied viewers. Furthermore, the process of identification is emphasized instead of a reinforcement of binary models of difference. This category was related to Amelia Jones' idea of anamorphic strategies as well as Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" and also can be connected to Victor Schklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* or "defamiliarization". In this dissertation, the *anamorphic situations* are varied and often connected to the medium used – performance (Ono, Chang, Gómez-Peña), film (Tan), photography (Simpson, Lee), or installation (Min, Hatoum). With their live performances, Ono and Gómez-Peña directly interact with the audience and create an *anamorphic situation* where the viewer is accountable or partially responsible for what happens during the performance. While Ono's performance in 1965 reveals the power and dynamics of racialized gender by submitting herself to the actions of a mostly white male audience, Gómez-Peña's dramatic performance installations enact a live production of Western society's fears of the *Other* and thus also exposes these unconscious cultural associations as ridiculous and absurd. Chang's performance is not live, but for a camera, but also creates an *anamorphic situation* which distorts stereotypical ideas of racialized sexuality with the depiction of her cutting and consuming herself as a bizarre bodily experience for viewers to watch. Tan's films, in comparison, are more subtle and need time from the viewer to understand what is happening. She questions concepts of objectivity and truth in classifying or representing people or cultures and reveals the constructed and subjective nature of film through her film editing, narration and voice-overs. In this way, she stimulates viewers to be active in order to understand the meaning of her work. Similarly, Simpson also activates viewers to construct the meaning through the dissonance or incongruity produced with images of a cropped, racially marked female body combined together with text elements. Lee's Projects create a 'Where's Waldo?' *anamorphic situation* where the viewer searches for the artist in each photograph. Because we recognize Lee in all the diverse 'ethnic minority' and 'ethnic White' communities, identification borders are thus revealed to be permeable. In comparison, Min's works create a personal narrative in order to interest the viewer in the effects of socio-political history, while Hatoum's objects and installations are both seductive and repulsive and often create an *anamorphic situation* which makes the familiar threatening. Moreover, I found that many *anamorphic situations* also incorporate ideas of *ostranenie* to disrupt or "make strange" typical perceptions of the world for the viewer. For example, Chang and Gómez-Peña magnify familiar cultural stereotypes until they are almost unrecognizable. Tan uses conventional film techniques, but then exposes the subjective perspective inherent in film or in classifying people. Lee's snapshot aesthetic is also familiar, but the presentation of herself as a member of various subcultures reveals that identification borders are invariably permeable. Simpson juxtaposes staged images with simple text to indicate the semiotic differences between signifier and signified as well as the resulting cultural associations or connotations. Min presents known historical events, but reclaims this history as her own to show the significance of politics and history on the personal lives of individuals.

The fourth and last category *theoretical correlation* was presented in order to explore correlations between artistic practice and theory in this dissertation. I argued that Yoko Ono's Cut Piece and Patty Chang's Melons (at a Loss) could correlate to Renee E. Tajima's identification of Asian women stereotypes in Hollywood films: "Lotus Blossom Baby" and "Dragon Lady". Lorna Simpson's approach for her artworks from the 1980s and 1990s have connections to Roland Barthes' semiotic theories about photography. Nikki S. Lee's Projects suggests Judith Butler's influential performative gender theory as well as the American tradition of 'racial passing'. Guillermo Gómez-Peña's strategy of "reverse anthropology" subverts historical anthropological methodology and critically examines colonial practices of representation, especially ethnographic dioramas. Extending theoretical concepts from Trinh T. Minh-ha, Fiona Tan's work interrogates anthropological practices of classification and identification of people as well as deconstructs the mediums of film and photography. Both Yong Soon Min and Mona Hatoum produce work that supports Massey's arguments for a permeable, non-essentialist 'place' and her criticism of sentimental nostalgic memories of 'home'. Min and Hatoum also incorporate elements of their diasporic background, as described by Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, which emphasize heterogeneity and diversity in cultural formation as well as the interaction between "roots" and "routes" in their artworks. Furthermore, Min's work can be connected to the contention that cultural production which retells history from an alternative viewpoint has the potential to resist dominant signifying practices as suggested by Stuart Hall and Lisa Lowe. In comparison, Hatoum's art suggests the commonalities of the human condition in experiences of dislocation and exile as theorized by Edward Said as well as ideas about planetarity as proposed by Gayatri Spivak which is also based on Freud's concept of the "uncanny".

I contend that these proposed categories for artistic strategies (*literary device*, *reappropriation*, *anamorphic situation* and *theoretical correlation*) offer a new model for comparison and analysis of artistic approaches. These categories were established in the introduction of this dissertation by distilling and combining descriptions of artistic strategies by various art and cultural theorists, such as Lucy Lippard, Griselda Pollock, Celine Shimizu, Stuart Hall, Amelia Jones, Viktor Schklowsky and Donna Haraway, that could challenge how we think about prevailing ideas about constructions of identity. I attempted to make some of these theoretical concepts more tangible from a practice-oriented perspective that resulted in the suggested categories. My framework allows for a deeper cross comparison amongst the various artist case studies and could possibly be useful for other artists and theorists. The comparative approach with these categories offered illuminating insights about how artists make work which potentially "make a difference" and "shift dispositions of power" (Hall, "What is this 'Black'" 468) and demonstrated the impressive range of possibilities for an embodied experience which revealed identities as intersectional, hybrid and relational processes. However, there could be possibilities for refining or extending this framework to include other critical areas for analysis. For example, although I emphasized how process and thus time affect the construction of identities, I did not have a specific category of comparison for analysis of each artist in this area. It

might have been interesting to look at the durational or process-oriented aspects more in detail for comparison and analysis of the strategic approaches.

Nevertheless, this research reinforced the view that art is a subjective expression of an artist and dependent on both the personal background of the artist and the historical and cultural circumstances of the production and reception of the work. Despite legitimate critical observations that some earlier identity-related art tended to reduce complex concepts to essentialist constructions of identity and thereby perpetuate binary distinctions, I believe it is more beneficial to examine how certain artistic strategies which emphasize an embodied experience and recognize that the nature of objectivity as being from a specific cultural and biological position can be enabling and transformative. Furthermore, although I understand the desire to distinguish between the artistic strategies popular during the height of ‘identity politics’ in USA in the 1980s and 1990s and now – by referring to the latter as ‘post-identity’ – I argued in this dissertation against current post-identity rhetoric in art discourse because it implies that art should transcend the perceived identification of the artist. Moreover, I contend that several artists from this controversial time in USA, including Simpson, Gómez-Peña and Min, incorporated effective approaches which challenged representations of race and gender as well as conventional ways of reading and understanding art.

Whereas the artistic interests and intentions of art which challenges assumptions of *Otherness* are often influenced and determined by the cultural, historical, and geographic position of the artist, the findings of this dissertation indicated that the artistic strategies for making these works are analogous. My previously described review of the strategies within the four categories revealed that approaches to communicate critical meaning about issues about belonging had similarities and differences independent of the artist’s cultural background. There were no indications that women artists of Asian diasporic background used different strategic approaches from artists of other cultural backgrounds. Instead, there were many common elements, including the use of self-references, either directly or indirectly. These self-references take various forms: some are directly performed or on video (Ono, Chang, Gómez-Peña), some use self-imagery (Lee, Min, Tan) or images that could represent themselves (Simpson), and others include direct or indirect autobiographical elements (Tan, Min, Hatoum). Both Gómez-Peña’s and Chang’s parody performances about stereotypes are clearly related to their respective diasporic backgrounds: Gómez-Peña often criticizes preconceptions about the Latino *Other* while Chang challenges cultural assumptions about Asian women. Although Ono may have had other intentions, I argued that the use of her own body in the conceptual performance Cut Piece in 1965 also revealed prevailing stereotypes about Asian women and power issues about racialized gender. Similarly, Simpson challenges the cultural connotations connected to a black female body, although she does not incorporate images of herself. Lee’s self-images document her performative ‘racial passing’ which both references her ‘Asianness’ and reveals how identification borders are not necessarily fixed. Tan’s various films which often reference deep-rooted Eurocentric



assumptions about the 'Orient' also includes an early autobiographical search for her origins. Min's artistic practice is based on examining history and memory and her identification as an Asian American woman; she frequently incorporates self-references to her body and to her own history. Finally, earlier works from Hatoum include performance, autobiographical information, and use of images of her own body.

The research for this dissertation originated from my personal interest to understand how artists make visual art that can undermine meanings of difference and also reveal the historical and cultural processes and experiences involved in viewing and understanding art. Because I hoped to contribute to an understanding of Asian diasporic cultural production in a Euro-American context, it was important for me to include other American and European artists with various cultural backgrounds in my research. Moreover, I wished to connect the work of women artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds with a more wide-ranging investigation of artistic approaches exploring themes of *Otherness*. However, after completion of my chapters, I realized that although I did include artists with diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences, most of the examples in this dissertation were well-documented artists based in USA. This choice was based primarily on my own background and interest, but also due to more restricted accessibility to other artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds based in Europe. An examination of more artists based in Europe would have provided other interesting comparisons as well as a deeper awareness of Asian diasporic cultural production in Europe. Furthermore, it might have been interesting to investigate contemporary artists based in my geographic Swiss location, such as Elodie Pong and Mai-Thu Perret, Swiss artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds who do not directly examine themes of racial or gender inequality in their work, or Cat Tuong Nguyen and Quynh Dong, Swiss artists who examine their own Vietnamese cultural background in their work.<sup>140</sup> As the demographic information has shown, this group is increasing; thus, more artists with this background are emerging in Switzerland and Europe. Although this research did locate artistic practices from women with Asian diasporic backgrounds within a larger context than many previous studies, it would be interesting to continue further with inquiries similar to this with other lesser-known visual artists based in Europe.

Finally, a number of other important limitations need to be considered. First, all discussions about cultural differences or identifications are highly complex and contested. While I locate these artists with respect to their cultural or diasporic backgrounds and gender, I do not claim that they only represent their gender and/or ethnicity. This study examined one axis of identification, but many others exist. It is not my intention to argue that an artist with such a background inevitably includes autobiographical references or is required to address concerns about the *Other* in his or her work. There are countless artists with similar cultural backgrounds whose artistic practices are not concerned

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<sup>140</sup> See page 4, footnote 7, in the Introduction.

with aspects of *Otherness*. Nevertheless, I contend that every artist incorporates subjective experiences and visions into his or her work; for some, this can lead to expressions about cultural differences or articulations about issues about belonging. Furthermore, I am fully aware that there exists a paradoxical situation in trying to shift meanings about difference by calling attention to these differences. I have argued for artistic practices that provide an embodied experience and emphasize intersectional and relational processes of identification rather than essentialist ideas based on binary logic; however, it is not possible to escape binary logic completely. There are no easy answers or theories that can bring together the complexity and solve the problems of these issues. In any case, I claim that as long as certain physical markers of difference indicate meanings that reflect hegemonic power imbalances, there will continue to be a need for artists to create work that offers alternative perspectives about *Otherness* and issues of differences.

As a visual artist with similar concerns, this research began as a way to extend my own artistic practice by exploring how artists could shift meanings about difference in visual culture. Because of my own personal background, the focus was on women artists with Asian diasporic backgrounds but artists with other cultural backgrounds were included because I wished to emphasize the universality of *Otherness*. My extended comparative study of strategic approaches that articulate and interrogate ideas about *Otherness* can be useful as a framework for other artists or theorists. Moreover, I believe that an informed perspective can be beneficial for visual artists and their work. Not only can theoretical discourse be a significant source of inspiration, it also can contribute multiple dimensions of meaning in artistic expressions. Thus, I hope my research about artistic strategies that reveal the process-oriented and relational nature of identities offers both a model for future analyses, as well as a new practice-oriented perspective about how visual artists can influence culture and society.

## Visual Appendix

In this visual appendix, I present some of my more recent works which were produced after I started this dissertation: the photographic series Projections (2007), the video it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS (2007-2009), the installation Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality (2012) and finally, the concept and works for my latest exhibition “Death of a Butterfly” (2013).

### Projections (2007)

*Series of 14 C-Prints on Aluminium, je 60 x 90 cm or 90 x 60 cm.*

This photographic series was inspired by a quote from Stuart Hall (discussed previously in chapter two): “The body is a text and we are all readers of it.”<sup>141</sup> The images depict the body of my four-year-old daughter with text projected onto its surface (see figs. 49, 50, 51 & 52). The title referred not only to the use of a projector for making the text appear on her body, but also to the idea of people “projecting” preconceived notions about *Otherness* based on one’s appearance as well as parents “projecting” their aspirations and concerns onto their children. Similar to my earlier work, the photographs were ambiguous and emphasized the vulnerability of the body. The projected text also could also be interpreted as tattooed onto the skin and had possible implications of violence.<sup>142</sup> For my daughter, who is not necessarily recognizable as Asian, these thoughts were primarily my own concerns and projections for her future in Switzerland. The texts were my own interpretations of significant texts from various theorists such as Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois or Ien Ang.

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<sup>141</sup> From Race, the Floating Signifier, a filmed lecture at Goldsmith’s College by Stuart Hall directed by Sut Jhully, Media Education Foundation, 1997.

<sup>142</sup> In the press release text for this exhibition, the gallery director Ruth Littman referred to the implied violence to the young skin as if a tattoo had been inscribed onto the child’s body.



Fig. 49. Teresa Chen, from the series Projections, C-Print, 60 x 90 cm, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

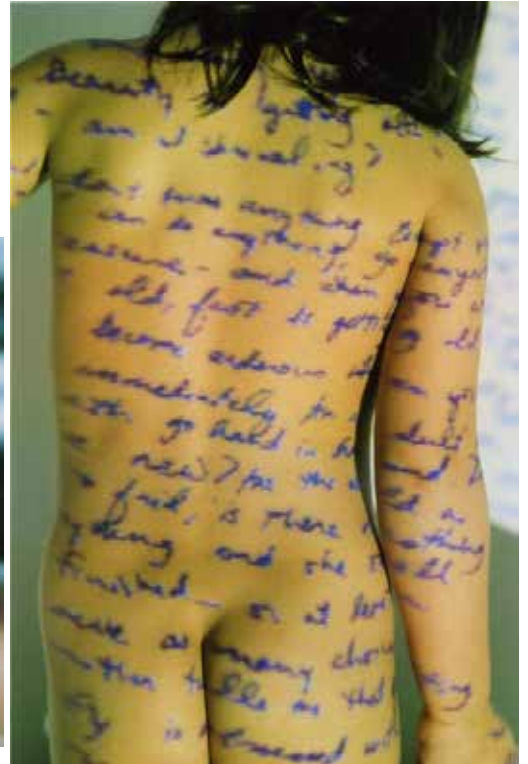


Fig. 50. Teresa Chen, from the series Projections, C-Print, 60 x 90 cm, 2007. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 51. Teresa Chen, from the series Projections, C-Print, 60 x 90 cm, 2007.



Fig. 52. Teresa Chen, from the series Projections, C-Print, 60 x 90 cm, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

**it ain't where you're from, its where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS (2007-09)**

*Video essay, 21 min.*

This video essay presented stories and comments by Swiss naturalized citizens in order to reveal my own mixed feelings of “becoming Swiss”. Nine people from different countries (China, Czechoslovakia (currently Czech Republic), Morocco, Peru, Tunisia, Turkey, USA, Yugoslavia (currently Croatia) and Zaire (currently Congo)) explain about their experiences and their feelings of home, belonging and *Otherness* in Switzerland (see figs. 54 & 57). Similar to the photographic series Projections (2007) as well as this written dissertation, theoretical quotations were important and directly used to preface each of the six themes (see fig. 53). The thoughts and comments in both German and English were edited together from the individual interviews in order to give one narrative flow from various perspectives rather than an exploration of each person’s specific story. My own ambivalent feelings about becoming a naturalized Swiss citizen are revealed through other people’s stories and thoughts on their feelings of *Otherness* in Switzerland. Interspersed between the remarks are filmed sequences from, for example, a moving vehicle in Switzerland or other images of Swiss mountains, fields, and lakes (see fig. 58). Also included were film clips from a derogatory online animated game from the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)<sup>143</sup> called “Zottel Rettet die Schweiz”<sup>144</sup> (trans. “Zottel saves Switzerland”) in order to promote SVP’s opposition to immigration in Switzerland (see figs. 55 & 56). The title “it ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at” originates from the lyrics of the song “In the Ghetto”<sup>145</sup> by the American rapper Rakim and was also used by theorist Paul Gilroy as the title of his influential essay about diasporic identification.<sup>146</sup> The music soundtrack which accompanies the filmed intervals of movement or driving is also primarily from this title song.

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<sup>143</sup> Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) is a Swiss right-wing populist party which is known for its opposition to immigration.

<sup>144</sup> “Zottel Rettet die Schweiz” was an animated online game used during the 2007 election campaign to communicate SVP’s stance on immigration. The goal of the game was to get the SVP mascot, a goat named “Zottel”, to kick out as many left-wing radicals and foreigners who want a Swiss passport as possible. It was very controversial and is no longer available online.

<sup>145</sup> Performed by Eric B. & Rakim, published by MCA Records, 1990.

<sup>146</sup> Paul Gilroy’s essay was called “It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At: The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification” (1991).





Fig. 53. Teresa Chen, Introductory quote from *it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS*, Video, 21 min., 2007-09. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 54. Teresa Chen, Almir in *it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS*, Video, 21 min., 2007-09. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 55. Teresa Chen, Online game "Zottel rettet die Schweiz" in *it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS*, Video, 21 min., 2007-09. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 56. Teresa Chen, Online game "Zottel rettet die Schweiz" in *it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS*, Video, 21 min., 2007-09. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 57. Teresa Chen, Saida in *it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS*, Video, 21 min., 2007-09. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 58. Teresa Chen, Still from *it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: BE(COM)ING SWISS*, Video, 21 min., 2007-09. Courtesy the artist.

## **Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality (2012)**

### *Multi-media installation*

Cat Tuong Nguyen, a fellow former photography student of the Zurich University of the Arts who originally came from Vietnam, and I had collaborated in Paris on a work entitled The ‘Yellow Peril’ (2001)<sup>147</sup>. In 2012, we had the opportunity to work together again and named our exhibition project “The Return of the ‘Yellow Peril’”<sup>148</sup>. Included in this show was my multi-media installation Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality (2012) that had been motivated by the packaging of various soup mixes for “Fondue chinoise”<sup>149</sup> found in the Swiss supermarket Migros<sup>150</sup>. On the soup package of “Chinoise Mix”, a stereotypical image of a “Dragon Lady” Asian woman is depicted, while on the package of “Mongole Mix”, an evil “Fu Manchu” Asian man is portrayed (see fig. 59). In this work, photographs of seventy Swiss men and women with Asian diasporic background were attached to wooden chopsticks to create a hanging mobile (see fig. 60). On one side of the double sided laminated print was the stereotypical image found on the soup mix printed on a yellow background, and on the other side the face of a man or woman. The installation also included two photographs of Cat Tuong and me with a transparent overlay of the soup mix image which the viewer was encouraged to lift up and look (see figs. 61 & 62).



Fig. 59. Teresa Chen, Original soup mix packages in Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality, Multi-media installation, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

<sup>147</sup> A former teacher in our photography department had jokingly referred to us (Cat Tuong and I) as “The ‘Yellow Peril’”. In 2001, we had independently won grants from the City and Canton of Zurich for a studio at the Cité des Arts in Paris. As two artists of Asian diasporic background, who were both “representing” Zurich, we occasionally received ‘raised eyebrows’ or even questions about the supposedly large Asian diasporic art community in Zurich. We took this opportunity to make a work where we photographed ourselves in front of something yellow in Paris. With over 500 pictures, we showed this piece both as a room installation with four carousel slide projectors or as cheap inkjet prints collaged onto a wall.

<sup>148</sup> The Return of the ‘Yellow Peril’ (2012) was an exhibition project which took place in an independent art space in Zurich and an art work which projected slide presentation of photographs of Cat Tuong and I together with random other Asian tourists in various Swiss tourist locations.

<sup>149</sup> “Fondue chinoise” is a popular dish in Switzerland where meat and vegetables are cooked in a shared pot of soup broth.

<sup>150</sup> Migros is Switzerland’s largest retailing company and its largest supermarket chain. Migros is based on a cooperative society and only carries its own line of products.



Fig. 60. Teresa Chen, Detail of hanging mobile in Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality, Multi-media installation, 2012.

Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 61. Teresa Chen, Cat Tuong and Teresa in Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality, Multi-media installation, each photograph 20 x 30 cm, 2012. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 62. Teresa Chen, Cat Tuong and Teresa in Asian Faces of Switzerland: Fantasy and Reality, Multi-media installation, each photograph 20 x 30 cm, 2012. Courtesy the artist.



## Exhibition “Death of a Butterfly”, 2013

*Solo exhibition at Galerie Bob Gysin, Zurich (7 June – 25. July 2013)*

Concurrent with the completion of this written dissertation in 2013, I prepared a solo exhibition entitled “Death of a Butterfly” for a gallery in Zurich (see figs. 63, 64 & 65). A significant source of inspiration was the (in)famous opera Madama Butterfly<sup>151</sup> with music by Giacomo Puccini which premiered in 1904 in Milan, Italy. As discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, one main stereotype of Asian women identified by film theorist Renee Tajima is the “Lotus Blossom Baby” and is embodied by the figure Madame Butterfly. The depiction of Cio-Cio San (Madame Butterfly) is characterized by her self-sacrificial femininity and passivity as an exotic love interest to the white hero, Lieutenant Pinkerton, and demonstrates many of the popular European Orientalist tendencies of late nineteenth century. Despite its misrepresentations of both Japanese culture and Asian women, Madama Butterfly is still one of the most performed and well-known operas in the world. There have also been numerous adaptations of this story including the previously mentioned film Toll of the Sea (1922) starring Anna May Wong and the popular Broadway musical Miss Saigon (1989).<sup>152</sup> Another play, M. Butterfly (1988), by David Henry Hwang undermined and exposed racial and gender stereotypes through its ironic reversal of the story of Madama Butterfly.<sup>153</sup>



Fig. 63. Teresa Chen, Installation overview of “Death of a Butterfly” exhibition, Galerie Bob Gysin, Zurich.

<sup>151</sup> Madama Butterfly is an opera in three acts by Giacomo Puccini with an Italian libretto from Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. It premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1904. The plot follows the tragic relationship between Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, an American naval officer stationed in Nagasaki in 1904, and a young Japanese woman named Cio-Cio San (Japanese word for butterfly sounds like Cio-cio). After they ‘marry’, Pinkerton returns to America and Cio-Cio San waits patiently for his return and bears their child. When Pinkerton finally does return to claim the child, he has remarried, and the story ends as Cio-Cio San kills herself with a dagger.

<sup>152</sup> Miss Saigon is a musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil with lyrics by Boublil and Richard Maltby, Jr. Although the basic plot of Madama Butterfly is retained, the story was relocated to Saigon in the 1970s during the Vietnam War and the tragic love story between an American GI and a Vietnamese bar girl. It premiered in London in 1989 and is still currently playing on Broadway in New York.

<sup>153</sup> M. Butterfly (1988) by David Henry Hwang follows the story of a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, who looks back on his relationship with a beautiful Chinese stage performer. For over twenty years they enjoyed a passionate sexual relationship. However, the Chinese performer is actually a female impersonator and is stealing secrets for the Chinese communist party. When the secret is revealed, Gallimard is convicted of treason and imprisoned. He still cannot come to terms with the fact that the woman he loved was actually a man and commits suicide. This play was also made into a film with the same title by David Cronenberg in 1993.



Fig. 64. Teresa Chen, Installation view (left wall) of “Death of a Butterfly” exhibition, Galerie Bob Gysin, Zurich. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 65. Teresa Chen, Installation view (right wall) of “Death of a Butterfly” exhibition, Galerie Bob Gysin, Zurich. Courtesy the artist.

**“Death of a Butterfly”: Un bel di vedremo<sup>154</sup> (2013)**

*Video, DVD 5' 30 minutes*

This video was exhibited at the entrance to the gallery (see fig. 66) and showed the simultaneous English translation of Puccini's famous Italian aria from Madama Butterfly while listening to a historical recording from the American opera singer Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967) who starred in the US premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907.

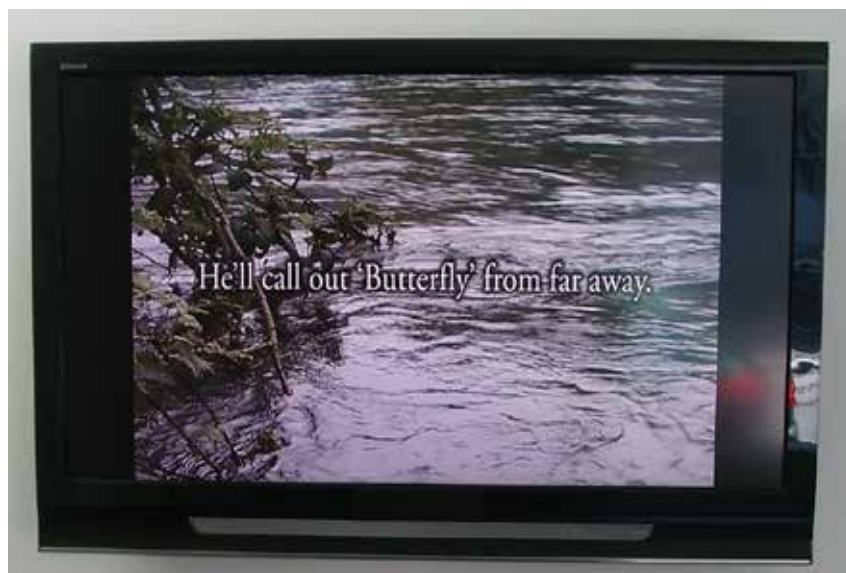


Fig. 66. Teresa Chen, Un bel di vedremo, Video, 5' 30 min., 2013. Courtesy the artist.

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<sup>154</sup> “Un bel di vedremo” translates in English to “One beautiful day, we will see” and is the most famous and popular aria from Puccini's opera sung by Cio-Cio San as she patiently waits for Pinkerton to return.

**“Death of a Butterfly”: Bleeding Butterfly (2013)**

*a series of 3, C-Print Diasec, 80 x 120 cm*

This series depicts the imaginary bloody death of different butterflies in nature or as a close-up of the pin which has violated the body of the butterfly (see figs. 67 & 68).



Fig. 67. Teresa Chen, from the series Bleeding Butterfly, C-print, 80 x 120 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 68. Teresa Chen, from the series Bleeding Butterfly, C-print, 80 x 120 cm, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.



**“Death of a Butterfly”: Caligo (2013)**

*a series of 3: C-Print Diasec, 120 x 180 cm or 60 x 90 cm*

I also have close-up macro pictures of butterflies which depict the monstrosity of these insects, especially through the large-scale size of the photographs (see figs. 69 & 70). In addition, there were some other images of details exploring the fragility and intensity of butterflies (see fig. 71).



Fig. 69. Teresa Chen, from the series Caligo, C-print, 120 x 180 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 70. Teresa Chen, from the series Caligo, C-print, 60 x 90 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

**“Death of a Butterfly”: Self-Portrait with Butterfly (2013)**

*a series of 3: C-Print Diasec, 60 x 90 cm or 90 x 60 cm*

This series consists of images of butterflies enlarged or superimposed onto my face or body (see figs. 72 & 73).



Fig. 71. Teresa Chen, from the series Butterfly Detail, C-print, 90 x 60 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

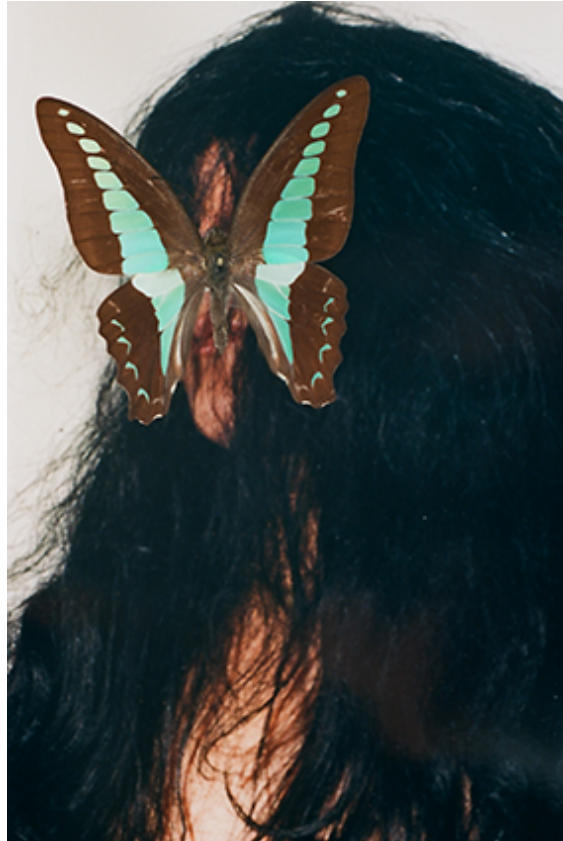


Fig. 72. Teresa Chen, from the series Self-Portrait with Butterfly, C-print, 90 x 60 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 73. Teresa Chen, from the series Self-Portrait with Butterfly, C-print, 60 x 90 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

**“Death of a Butterfly”: Historical Butterfly Boxes (2013)**

*a series of 12: Lambda C-Print, Butterfly, Frame, 30 x 40 cm*

These display boxes present archival photographs from various historical performances of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (see fig. 74). The photographs include three images with the aforementioned Geraldine Farrar (see fig. 75), two images with Rosina Storchio (1876-1945), an Italian opera singer who starred in the world premiere of *Madama Butterfly* in La Scala, Milano, Italy in 1904 (see fig. 76), and six photographs from early performances in the Zurich Opera House (from the years 1937, 1945, 1954) which I found while doing research in the Zurich City Archives (see figs. 77 & 78). Each display box has a genuine butterfly primarily used in displays of butterfly collections pinned onto the face of the figure Madame Butterfly. Although the butterfly covers her features when viewed frontally, because of the depth of the display box, the observant viewer can see from an angle the face of the original American or European singer dressed in a Japanese kimono.



Fig. 74. Teresa Chen, Installation view (butterfly boxes) of “Death of a Butterfly” exhibition, Galerie Bob Gysin, Zurich. Courtesy the artist.





Fig. 75. Teresa Chen, Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967) #2, Framed Lambda C-print with butterfly, 30 x 40 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., LC-USZ62-55294. Photograph: A. Dupont, New York, 1908.



Fig. 76. Teresa Chen, Renata Storchio 1876-1945) #2, Framed Lambda C-print with butterfly, 30 x 40 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Lebrecht Music and Arts Photo Library. Photograph: Unknown, Milano, 1904.



Fig. 77. Teresa Chen, Zurich Opera House 1945 #2, Framed Lambda C-print with butterfly, 30 x 40 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist and City of Zurich Archives, VII.12.23.1.1.257. Photograph: Peter Zimmermann, Zurich, 1945.



Fig. 78. Teresa Chen, Zurich Opera House 1954 #2, Framed Lambda C-print with butterfly, 30 x 40 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist and City of Zurich Archives, VII.23.12.1.1.500. Photograph: Edi Bauer, Zurich, 1954.



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