

Playful Impressions

by

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--Abstract

The goal of this exhibition was to set up an engaging atmosphere that lent itself to the artist's desire to find and cultivate relationships that occur between community and the game of mahjong. Researching play theory, immigration studies, and contemporary art practices, while also collaborating with Saskatoon-based artist Xiao Han, this thesis investigates play and community. How can play serve as a vehicle for community, how does community enable play, and what can this activate in public spaces such as art galleries?

Keywords: Play, Community, Mahjong, Culture, Engagement, Participation, COVID-19, Immigration Studies, Accessibility

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-- Curatorial Essay --

INTRODUCTION | PLAYFUL IMPRESSIONS

The sound of tiles being shuffled greets the audience as they enter the room, a light yet persistent sound that softly intermingles with an even, melodic voice echoing throughout the space. This voice comes from a film projected onto the far side of the room, a slow and atmospheric performance of an old ghost story told around a mahjong table. Its narration compels its audience to come closer and listen to the tale as it unfolds. Each *click* of a tile blends together with the actor's speech, soothing and almost hypnotic, but turning away from the film one can see another mahjong table has been set with a game for three, mirroring the players in the film. Mahjong tiles rest on the board, delicate pieces of white and green beckoning the viewer to sit down, to touch and to play. Over time others join in: tiles are dealt, conversation builds, and a new game begins. Using the classic board game, Xiao Han's latest project *Mahjong House* introduces a long-standing tradition of play into the gallery space. Combining performance and photography with the artist's research into the histories and dialogues of her Saskatoon community, Han invites her audience to gather around the mahjong table and play together in an effort to expand the range of communities who can engage with these stories. Xiao Han is a Saskatoon-based artist and curator originally from Wuhan, China. Using photography and stage design, Han's research-creation projects investigate gender issues, diasporic identities, and decolonial practices through the aesthetic lens of community relationships. *Playful Impressions* is an exploration into community, and how it forms the basis from which play and connection can begin.



Figure 1. Playful Impressions Installation View, *Mahjong House Recreation*, 2022, Artist Xiao Han, Photo by Avery Creed

A CULTURE FOR PLAY

Xiao Han's artwork often relates to emotion, engagement, and identity. Her most recent body of work delves into both of her cultural backgrounds, Chinese and Canadian, and the potential conversations that can occur between them. Having grown up in Wuhan, a city with a strong culture of mahjong, Han can easily recall how every afternoon her grandparents would go out to spend time with friends and neighbors at the local mahjong house, and shares that since moving to Canada, she now hosts her own weekly dinners and mahjong sessions within her Saskatoon social circle. A popular pastime across Asia and North America Han refers to mahjong as "a game of connections and dialogues." A host to a thriving community of players rooted in entertainment and culture, this game is "fit for chatting during the holiday when family

and friends visit,” but in 2020 this familiar routine was disrupted with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Han 2022)

Entering the new year in lockdown to comply with necessary public health measures, our society had to learn to live with distance: online video conferences became the norm; our schools, work, and social gatherings were filtered through the lens of a camera, and in-person gatherings were limited to those who resided within the same household. Two years later we have made strides to get our daily lives back to some semblance of “normal,” but Han explains that she still remembers how her family had to deal with the pandemic in the beginning of 2020, and the disconnect within her Saskatoon social circle. Taking time to come together with friends and family to reconnect over a game of mahjong became difficult, yet this disruption sparked a curiosity within the artist about how *exactly* this board game traveled to Canada, and how the communities and traditions tethered to it continue to prevail today. Where did they play when mahjong clubs had yet to be established on the Canadian frontier? What would they talk about? These questions formed the basis of her explorations into Saskatoon’s mahjong community and, inspired by the clubs that her grandparents frequented, Han transformed the residency gallery space of Saskatoon’s Bridge Art Movement (BAM) into a mahjong room, which has been recreated in OCAD U’s Grad Gallery Space for *Playful Impressions*. Upon entering the space, the audience is given an opportunity to play a game of Mahjong together, but also to walk through an archive of a performance that has—by that point—passed.



Figure 2. Playful Impressions Installation View, 2022, Photo by Avery Creed

TRANSFORMING THE GALLERY SPACE

Set against a backdrop of vibrant red and green walls, a table with three chairs waits at one end of the gallery, its surface covered in vivid green and white mahjong tiles. A canvas circle, much like a sun, is centered behind the dealer's chair, flanked by small bronze door knockers resembling lions. (Fig.1) This staging is positioned to face the opposite side of the room, where the short film is being projected. This positioning allows visitors to watch and listen to the film as their game progresses, and mirrors the artist's original 2021 performance so that participants in Toronto can engage with the space like those in Saskatoon did. The aforementioned performance, the basis for this exhibit, is documented in pictures hung on a wall between the film and the stage. Following along like you would with a timeline, viewers can shift through snapshots of the artist and her fellow players: we see moments of contemplation as

the group studies the tiles before them, friendly banter across the table, and in one instance, a player triumphantly posing amidst a pile of mahjong tiles. The candid interactions in these photographs have a spontaneous quality to them, which contrasts with the more dramatic portrait hung next to them, *Staged Mahjong Playing with Self-directed Performance*. (Fig. 3) In this performative self-portrait, the artist assumes the role of three personae seated around a mahjong table. The two women seated across from one another are locked in a staring match as they contemplate the tiles before them while the third player, the dealer, faces the camera and meets our gaze head-on. Only she wears protective gear, the face-mask and goggles that she wears are emphasized by the lack of protective gear on the other women.



Figure 3. Playful Impressions Installation View, Photo Archive by Xiao Han, 2022, Photos by Avery Creed

One can wonder what each persona played by the artist means to her, are they fictional or do they represent someone or something in her life? As part of her artistic practice Han frequently places her own body in front of the camera, taking on multiple roles or characters in a

single scene to create a complex narrative, be it historical or autobiographical. (Han 2017) The final piece of this exhibition rests to the right of the photos, an eight minute short film titled *Atmosphere Storytelling on Mahjong Table - The Painted Skin*. Directing this piece in the performance style of Noh theater, Han once again steps in front of the camera to take on the role of narrator. However, instead of playing every role like she did in her self-portrait, Han is now joined by two other women. Gathering with her fellow actors and donning masks, costumes and sound props, Han tells the story of “The Painted Skin,” a Chinese ghost story written in 1740 by writer Pu Songling that has been adapted numerous times in modern popular media. (Grand Audiobooks 2020) In a synopsis of the short film, Han explains that mahjong scenes have been essential in Chinese cinema as a narrative device: delivering narration amongst intense conversation, or encoding hidden messages for the film’s characters and audience to decipher. Mahjong’s history in cinema emphasizes the dialogue’s importance to the game, and Han’s inclusion of this inside the gallery space reflects her own interests in storytelling and history.

Separately, the props used to recreate the artist’s room in Saskatoon are objects that are familiar to the public: a table, set of chairs, and board game. However, because traditional gallery experiences follow the rules of “look, but don’t touch,” a subtle shift in the way we approach said objects can be expected. While the vibrant walls framing the mahjong play area are eye-catching and designed to draw visitors inside, steps needed to be taken to ensure that this space wouldn’t be treated like a diorama, but a room that is meant to be moved through and inhabited by the public. Han’s short film offers ambiance and sparks intrigue, drawing visitors further inside, but the inclusion of instructional materials and the use of photographic documentation was a key influence inside the space. By offering an archive of the original performance and a guide to the game of mahjong in the form of written instructions and a

seasoned player, a frame of reference is given to help Han's audience understand the intention behind the recreated performance space; active visitor participation through playing the game of mahjong. Combining performance, photography and play, this exhibition asks if it is possible to create an event that speaks to its home community, while also inviting those from outside that community inside.

BUILDING A BRIDGE

During her residency at BAM in 2021, Han found that the public was curious and enthusiastic about the game of mahjong. Han set up *Mahjong House* inside Saskatoon's historical Drinkle Building located in the heart of the shopping district. Amidst summertime art festivals and vendors, Han met with players ranging from friends to strangers, novices to experts, who all entered the space excited about the chance to play. "I was shocked," Han remarks in an interview, thinking back on the festival participants and other locals who became frequent visitors of her space "some of them played a little bit of mahjong, but they really wanted this to happen for a long time...they wanted me to be there every weekend!" (Han 2022). Interest from the public was expected, but the desire for a permanent installation within the Drinkle Building was a pleasant surprise to Han, though "not a miracle." By offering a means to connect with others based on playing the game of mahjong, the space offered the opportunity for exploration of shared cultural experience. Reflecting back on her experiences in the residency, Han stated that bringing mahjong out to the public helped her realize that "we don't isolate from each other. We need connection, we need to build" (Han 2022)—a sentiment that carried over to the Toronto installation.

Saskatoon was a great success for Han, as it allowed her to meet and engage with a broad community of players, and the Toronto exhibit produced similar success. There were challenges

in replicating the exhibit in Toronto because the location, OCAD U's Grad Gallery in the graduate studies building, was not less accessible than the Saskatoon venue and public health protocols were still in place. A more concerted effort had to be made in bringing attention and access to the exhibit. Invitations and social media outreach, along with limiting the number of visitors allowed in the space at one time were design elements in the production of the exhibit. Included in the gallery printout was a basic set of instructions for the game to help encourage visitor engagement, and as the night went on, visitors lingered for a chance to play a round. The public health protections didn't deter the audience from taking the opportunity to explore the room: watching the film, looking through the photographs and holding discussions about the original performance, and most importantly staying and playing the game of mahjong, which was the artist's intention. The Toronto installation received comments from visitors who had personal histories with mahjong saying that the space "reminded them of home." For these individuals, "home" meant afternoons of gatherings with friends and family around the mahjong table, and late nights filled with the sounds of shuffled tiles.

Younger participants commented that they were more familiar with the online version of the game, but were happy to sit and compare the physical experience of mahjong to the digital one they learned from. When visitors who entered the space without this kind of background first viewed the mahjong tiles and the set-up for the game, some admitted that it was a little intimidating. To cope with this, a live demonstration and explanation on how to play the game was given by the curator, breaking down the suits, the strategy, and the pattern-building. Offering these players a way to relate this game to others that they were more familiar with, we broke down a barrier preventing these visitors from engaging more with the space. By giving people from different communities or cultural backgrounds a chance to try to find connections between

the rules of play and the dynamics between each player, a bridge is formed, and by successfully creating a space that invites public play and participation this exhibition connects two communities that are provinces apart.



Figure 4. Playful Impressions Installation View, Mahjong Tiles, 2022, Photo by Avery Creed

CONCLUSION | LOOKING FORWARD

This exhibition presented a number of challenges, one of which was recreating a performance art piece without the artist present while achieving a similar audience interaction. Despite the obstacles we had to work around when designing and installing the space, Toronto's opening night proved to be a success. Visitors entered the space with a curiosity that mirrored Han's experience in Saskatoon: they asked questions about the game's history, the artist's choice to use mahjong in the short film, her relationship with the game, and her decisions in designing the artwork. The most important outcome of the night though was that there were people who

were eager to sit down and play mahjong. Beginners would gather around the table and dive into a game, while more experienced players would step in to offer extra guidance and instruction. The fact that *Playful Impressions* both replicated the artist's performance space and prompted a similar response from the public shows that a key part of this exhibition was how the design of the space motivated people to engage with the exhibit. By having active players inside the space—a “live performance” one could say—curiosity is sparked from the public outside. The participation of a knowledgeable person inside of the space not only provides extra guidance, but also introduces human interactions, which is the heart of this thesis exhibition.

Xiao Han used play as a catalyst for her performance piece *Mahjong House*, bridging the gap between passive viewing experiences and active engagement from the public by literally playing a game and building a community. This thesis exhibition was a means to explore the potential in combining acts of play and curatorial design and how it can enhance public engagement with the space and artworks inside. The focus on the game of mahjong also had the effect of community building, bridging those familiar with the game and culture and those who had a curiosity to learn and participate. Looking forward, there is a great potential to expand on the successes of *Playful Impressions*, to further explore the concepts of inclusion and community through play which could be brought to other venues.

-- Supporting Paper --

-- Introduction --

The concept of play is a wonderfully versatile thing. It's an activity centered on enjoyment and recreation, and it's also a means to understand the world around us by offering a way to engage with others. Artists and curators alike have embraced the element of play across an array of art forms, such as dance, photography, film, and even online web events. Spontaneous public dances like flash mobs entertain and offer dynamic public engagement for a brief moment in time, while web-based projects such as *Learning to Love You More* by artists Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher offer playful public engagement through sharing prompts that encourage the participants to create their own works of art. The common thread between these practices is public engagement. I started out emphasizing "play" in my research; exploring the possibilities of what can happen when play is incorporated into art and curation as one of the key driving factors, but on reflection and in light of the exhibition experience, the concept of play has become intermixed with the idea of "community." How can play, experienced through toys, digital games, and group interactions, serve as a vehicle for community? Mahjong is an activity that helps communities find their roots; groups can come together, re-establish connections, and grow new friendships with every tile played. In this pandemic age of anxiety and isolation, we need play now more than ever to keep our communities strong and engaged, which is what this thesis exhibition works to emulate in collaboration with Saskatoon-based artist Xiao Han and her performance art piece *Mahjong House*.

-- Theme --

Social and Aesthetic Context

The themes present in this thesis exhibition of Xiao Han's *Mahjong House* are Play, Covid-19 impacts, Immigration Studies and Decolonial Curation. Each of these themes has affected the design and methodology that serve as the framework of the exhibition, but play holds a powerful role in this project because it moves between the social and aesthetic contexts. Play is both a core part of the artist's performance piece, and is situated within society today; Xiao Han's *Mahjong House* touches upon the history that resides between the artist's family and the game of mahjong, while also exploring immigration, familiarity (i.e., ways you can stay connected with your home country), and the importance of community.

"I hope this project can make the Chinese immigrant history more impactful and complete by cultivating stories within the community" < **artist statement excerpt.**

Traditional, colonial-centric ways of understanding are deeply embedded in our Western culture and institutions, but museums and gallery spaces hold a unique position where they can disrupt such views. One can define decolonial curation as curatorial methods that work to challenge existing acceptance of cultural stereotypes to create an environment where the artist's personal narratives can foster a greater understanding of race, gender and identity. *Playful Impressions* takes steps to extend the community of mahjong beyond what the game is usually associated with by those outside. Han intended to explore the histories and dialogues within her Saskatoon community, and my intent with this playful exhibition is to bring this community and their stories to Toronto, sharing and preserving the culture found within the history of Saskatoon's Chinese Canadian community through the game of mahjong. Han's

performance—hosted in the Drinkle Building in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan—invited the public into the space to play mahjong with her, for however long or short they desired. For the exhibition created and hosted within OCAD U’s Grad Gallery space in Toronto, Ontario, I re-created the original performance space and encouraged visitors to sit down and play mahjong with each other.

The stage is set with painted walls of vibrant red and green, a mahjong table set for three, a projector, and an array of photographs. Leading down the side of the room, the photographs create an archive of the community and relationships Han has generated through the game of mahjong. Moving through the space, viewers can shift through snapshots of the artist and her fellow players engrossed in conversation, moments of contemplation as the group studies the tiles before them, and in one instance, a player triumphantly posing amidst a pile of mahjong tiles. On the wall opposite to the players' table, a projector screens an atmospheric short film centered around a Chinese folk story; sitting around a table, Han and her fellow actors gather with masks, costumes and sound props to tell the story of “The Painted Skin.” Directed in the theatrical performance style of Noh (Rich 2020), Han’s film references how mahjong has also been used as a narrative device in Chinese cinema, simultaneously setting the mood of the exhibition space and sharing her knowledge of mahjong’s history. A compelling blend of documentation and theater, Han’s use of photography and video is framed by the artist’s desire to create a dialogue centered on being inside the gallery space with the visitors and having the kind of engagement that “listens to the community, listens to the visitor” (Han 2022). By sharing so much of herself, you no longer look at the artist and immediately compare her cultural background to yours. Instead, you see her as an individual who is telling you a story and sharing things with you, the viewer. The participation of the public is a driving force for such a socially

engaged artwork. However, while it is important to document the artwork so there is a means to ‘reconstruct’ the event, Han’s photographs and video installation serve yet another purpose; working together they shape how the public understands the performance while also building a space where visitors can feel comfortable enough to play and engage with one another.

As the most recent addition to Xiao Han’s investigation into community relationships found through visual art, *Mahjong House* introduces a long-standing tradition of play into public spaces by inviting her audience to come and gather around the mahjong table. Han’s artwork often relates to emotion, engagement, and identity, and her most recent work focuses both her cultural backgrounds and the potential conversations that can occur between them. During her residency at Bridge Art Movement in 2021, Han found that the public held a lot of curiosity for the game of mahjong. Players ranging from novices to experts would enter the space with excitement and anticipation of a chance to play. This excitement, this eagerness to sit down and play with one another because of the daily anxieties we now live with resonated with the artist. Han stated in an interview that bringing mahjong out to the public helped her realize that “we don’t isolate from each other. We need connection, we need to build” (Han 2022).

-- Methodology --

This exhibition explores creative ways of presenting artworks and media in an effort to elicit playful interactions from the audience, but as a *curator*, not an artist. Through the process and in collaboration with the artist it has become apparent that community forms the basis from which play and connection begins.

Rationale

Tactile experiences can evoke a powerful response within an individual, and if given the chance to poke, prod, touch and simply *feel*, people are more than happy to take a few seconds out of their busy days to engage in a playful moment. Play—in art, education or therapy—can change the player from their current state to a more positive one. It can foster feelings of joy, humor and curiosity, which are good for you because they are proven to be beneficial for mental health. Research, which I elaborate upon further in the literature review, indicates that play promotes healthy brain development by developing dexterity, cognitive skills, as well as emotional and physical strengths. It is said to be essential for healthy relationships, and play is also a powerful means to create and sustain communities.

The extenuating circumstances created by COVID-19 including health mandates, sanitization protocols and social distancing requirements affected the design conception of Xiao Han's *Mahjong House*, the artwork hosted in the exhibition.¹ Han was unable to travel from Saskatoon to Toronto to install and recreate her performance in person and so it was necessary for the curator to recreate the space without the artist present. Photographs were taken of the original performance to help build context and serve as an archive for future audiences. Video conferences were also held to discuss the design of the physical exhibition space. Traveling to Toronto I would tour and document potential rooms, considering size, location and multimedia use. We eventually settled on a room within OCAD's Grad Gallery Space, and by sending photos and videos of the room to Han in Saskatoon a floor plan was devised. Early on in this project, questions were asked about how galleries and museums would look and feel post-pandemic and what it means to have "active engagement" from the public, but soon my inquiries into "playful

¹ *Playful Impressions* was designed to be a solo show because I placed so much emphasis on play and public interactions. By focusing on one artist's work, I was able to thoroughly explore my interest in play in the gallery space. Based on the results of my exhibition, I feel that this kind of model is scalable for future shows/explorations.

curation” were narrowed down into a study of “play.” In an interview, the artist discussed her background, methodologies, and artistic practice to help examine how play factors into her artwork and what she was aiming to achieve with her performance. Of all the elements within *Mahjong House*, Han felt that it was the invitation to play the game, not only with herself, but with others, that was the most impactful piece of this exhibit.

-- Exhibition Review --

Installation concept and design

One of the key parts of this show’s design concept was that the exhibition space would mirror the artist’s original performance space. Upon entering the room, visitors are given an opportunity to walk through an archive of a performance that has—by that point—passed, but also a chance to play a game of mahjong together, creating a “new” performance and following in the artist’s footsteps if they so desire. By designing an exhibition where the public not only can walk into the performance space, but also touch and take part in it, my goal was to set up a playful, engaging atmosphere that lends itself to the artwork and the artist’s desire to find and cultivate relationships that occur between communities through the game of mahjong.

As stated above, COVID mandates and restrictions made it necessary to work remotely with the artist on the construction of this exhibition space. There were setbacks in the design execution that required me to consider certain aspects of the project in a new light, because of the long-distance nature of the collaboration. While the exhibition space is meant to mirror the one in Saskatoon, there are limitations that prevent it from being a perfect replica: Han’s installation was set up in a mall where foot traffic was common providing more opportunity for engagement with the public, whereas the Toronto installation resides in a gallery area that is

primarily used by students. The challenge in presenting a socially engaged artwork in the gallery space was trying to engage with the public in a less accessible environment. The formality of the gallery could affect how the public understands and approaches the artwork inside. Because of this, the storytelling component of Han's performance was emphasized in the layout of the gallery, working as the basis for further exploration and interaction within the space.

-- Literature Review --

The goal of this literature review is to draw a map of my research development- a comprehensive overview of the academic studies, books, articles, and lectures that have informed my work in *Playful Impressions*, while also laying out the various conversations it participates in.

Art and Creative Accessibility

Play is a huge part of life. Throughout history you can find evidence of humans playing for various reasons. It is a means for self-expression, critical thinking, and even community building. When building the proposal for this thesis exhibition, I focused on learning what goes into designing inclusive spaces for active engagement—how the composition of an exhibition and use of media can help the public connect with the works within on multiple levels: cognitively, emotionally and, in some cases, physically. I wanted to explore the potential collaborations between acts of play and curatorial design, displaying the ways in which museums and galleries can serve as places of interconnectivity.

In a 2014 museum studies publication, MoMA Directors Carrie McGee and Francesca Rosenberg presented a series of case studies from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)

highlighting the museum's long history of linking art and education using experimental hands-on learning within its educational programs, to show how multisensory museum experiences can enable deeper connections through social, emotional, physical, and intellectual participation (McGee and Rosenberg 2014). In the same publication, by tracing the shift from early museums, which catered each visitors' tactile needs, to our modern touch-less institutions, Francesca Bacci and Francesco Pavani advocate for the multisensory museum experience, stating that it would not only increase awareness for the diverse needs of our visitors, but the utilization of all the senses would lead to “more effective nonvisual communication” of the artworks on display (Bacci and Pavani 2014). Both articles demonstrated how using all the senses can greatly influence the audience's understanding of the objects housed in each exhibition and raise awareness about how to reach out to those of the public who are sensorially impaired. A hands-on approach in art is not always the answer, as some pieces are designed to be appraised visually and need particular care that touch could endanger, but as there is a spectrum of learning and communication, there too is a spectrum for art and engagement. Active engagement is hinged upon the viewer's ability to understand what is before them, yet in some cases, a curator will need to utilize more than one of the five senses.

Another key factor in active engagement is creating an environment where the viewer can *connect* with an artwork in a meaningful way. Elaborating on a previous article published in 2016, Graham Black argues that to remain relevant with our 21st century audiences and their growing expectations, museums must shift their focus towards *participatory* experiences, something that involves creating “new and more meaningful opportunities for engagement,” and placing our emphasis on the *process* of learning instead of the outcomes of each visit (Black 2018). Drawing upon *Who Cares?* (Froggett et al. 1970) a research program aimed to make a

museum's collection more available to individuals with physical and mental health problems, Lynn Froggett applies a psychosocial lens towards museum engagement (Froggett and Trustram 2014). Using a variation of psychoanalytic theory called object relations theory, Froggett explains that thanks to the museum's unique nature as a "cultural container," visitors can establish a personal relationship to objects housed within and that this new relationship—which can be based on a social, cultural, or emotional response—can help shift a viewer's perspective from indifference to engagement.

The bonds we form with certain objects can reflect a lot about our personal selves and the society that we live in, as do the games we play. In a 2010 TED Talk, Mary Flanagan introduced the design methodology *Critical Play*, by walking us through her explorations of the ways play has been used to reflect social values and norms, and how we could go about consciously designing games to challenge and reshape these same values and norms (Flanagan 2010). Consider what can happen when an artist introduces play into their creative practice, using puzzles, games and modern digital media to explore alternative topics and share personal experiences, something we can see in the work of game developer Jenny Jiao Hsia. Jenny Jiao Hsia—working under the pseudonym Q Dork—crafts games that are bold, bright and unusual, but also incredibly charming in how experimental and inviting they are. Diving into the vein of "personal games"—a loose term used to describe experimental games that are built around autobiographical experiences—Jiao Hsia's latest game in development is *Consume Me*, a darkly humorous game regarding the developer's relationship with food and past experiences with dieting and eating disorders (Jiao Hsia and Thompson 2020). Tackling such a sensitive topic in a way that's fun and engaging yet not trivializing can be difficult, but Jiao Hsia's use of puzzles, humor, and honesty tempers her representation of dieting and calorie counting. Games like this

can inspire empathy from the public, resonating with those who have gone through a similar experience and offering those who have not a means to understand, creating a community through shared experiences and an alternative means to engage such sensitive topics.

Play in the gallery space can help the audience engage with the artworks in non-conventional ways, breaking down traditional expectations of the gallery experience and reinventing them to reveal something new or unexpected, as shown in the work of curators Marie Foulston, Lizzie Muller and Caroline Langill. Marie Foulston is a self-proclaimed “playful curator.” Leader of the experimental gaming collective *Wild Rumpus* and acting curator of video games for the V&A Museum, Foulston specializes in video games, play and digital culture, and has spent years injecting the art of play into public spaces as a trans-spatial designer; that is, bringing virtual spaces into the physical world. Collaborating with artists and game designers across the globe to celebrate all that is bizarre, playful, and mischievous in video games today, Foulston has become a champion for the ideals of subversive gameplay. Breaking the intended rules and playing against the design of a game or program challenges the expectations of play and, while the outcome of subversive gameplay can range from wildly chaotic to simplistic, exploring outside the lines of a game's intentions can empower its players because they have—if only for a moment—participated in something new. Hosting a house party on a Google spreadsheet, (Foulston 2021) or curating a keynote speech over the hit video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, (D. 2020) Foulston encourages her audience to engage with their surroundings and each other in the act of playing a game. Curators Lizzie Muller and Caroline Langill have crafted experiences that are fun, interactive, and educational using digital media and interactive design, as seen in *Lively Objects*, an exhibition which introduced new media and

technologies into the Museum of Vancouver, highlighting both the artworks and the building's architecture while also transforming them (Lively Objects 2015).

Communities of Play versus Covid-19

Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga advocated for play as a principal element within culture and society (Huizinga 2022). Over 80 years old yet still referenced today, Huizinga's work *Homo Ludens* teaches us about something called the “play element”—a concept that is key in the development of our society as it serves to define and bind together the communities born within. There have been thorough explorations and experimentations into why we play. We look at animals playing in nature and the games of the past to help us understand what role it fills in our society, and in recent years we have become concerned with what health benefits play may provide. Journalist Tolu Ajiboye delves into the science behind play and stress relief. Citing studies from developmental psychology and neuroscience, Ajiboye advocates for play, stating that it is crucial for adults to allocate playtime into their daily routines to maintain mental and physical health (Ajiboye 2018). Dr. Lynne Kostiuk echoes this sentiment in a collaborative article written by Paula Kehoe for Lumino Health, (Kehoe and Kostiuk 2021), and Rene Proyer et al. recently found that play interventions increased playfulness within their subjects, which resulted in positive short-term effects on their well-being, as well as an alleviation of depressive symptoms (Proyer et al. 2020). There have also been observations on how the brain functions when detecting patterns (Ohio State University 2018) and how play can enhance learning, collaboration and empathy within corporate environments.

In collaboration with Danish international toy company LEGO, Ann Charlotte Thorsted introduces the term ‘community of play’ in her research paper *Communities of play- a collective*

unfolding. When a group of people are deeply engaged in play, they create a unique space where enhanced learning, empathy, and collaboration within the “community” can be found (Thorsted 2016). Children and youth are typically the targeted audiences for playful interactive spaces, but in this study, LEGO shows us how play can be a powerful conduit for learning, communication and collaboration, regardless of age, culture or belief, both *inside* and *outside* business environments. While there will always be a distinction between work and play—a necessary thing for productivity and one's mental health—this research shows that work doesn't have to be completely without play, and adults can also enjoy and benefit from these moments of fun and creativity.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been forced to change our daily lives and routines to comply with necessary public health measures. This loss of connection as a result of isolation has impacted many. Diane Frey authored an article on play therapy and how it can be used to address issues in self-esteem, cognitive functions, and coping skills for clients of all ages. Citing literature and case studies from fields such as neurophysiology to CBPT (Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy) Frey draws a map of the clinical applications of play, which range from developing empathy, increasing physical health, and coping with isolation and anxiety (Frey et al. 2016). In an interview held by The Strong, an educational interactive museum devoted to play, resident curators gathered to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on play and the museum's preservation efforts (The Strong 2022). There may be new anxieties rooted in health and social distancing, but simultaneously there has been a surge in the public craving for comfort in the forms of food, play, and social media. The bonds we forge through play give a sense of belonging, for we have now become part of a larger community, and these

communities serve as a crucial lifeline to help us navigate the isolation and fear we have been living with throughout the past two years.

Cultures Connected Through Play

It has been established that play serves many distinct roles within our society, acting as a model of cultural memory and a means to communicate, learn and to heal. But play can also share and preserve important aspects of one's culture, which we can see in games such as Mahjong, Backgammon, and Dominoes. Combining the physical act of playing Mahjong and the artist's own research into entertainment in the Chinese community, *Mahjong House* is an ongoing project combining performance, photography and community engagement that aims to cultivate the stories within Han's community and make them more accessible (B.A.M 2022). When you learn more about a certain culture, then you can know more about the people and the communities within it. Mahjong is a game of connections and dialogues, and Han's work teaches us that communities of play are worth cultivating. I was unfamiliar with the game of mahjong, and I cannot speak to the artist's own experiences as an Asian-Canadian citizen, but I can empathize with her desire to share and explore such a rich culture of community and play. With assistance from Han, this closing section of the literature review outlines my own research into Canada's history of Chinese immigration and Mahjong culture.

Mahjong is a tile-based puzzle game that was developed in the mid-to-late 1800s in China and brought to the American public in the early 1920s (Merriam-Webster 2022). Utilizing interviews and archived resources, Annelise Heinz narrates how this iconic game traveled across the globe in her book *Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture* (Heinz 2021). Heinz discusses the impact mahjong has had on American and Chinese American

culture, and how for years it has helped foster long-lasting communities of play. Producer Christopher DeWolf and journalist Zoe Li ask the question “can mahjong survive the era of video and online gaming?” To answer this, the filmmaker reaches out to citizens of Hong Kong, young and old, asking what the game of Mahjong means to them, and where they see it going (DeWolf and Li 2009). They found that the community of play inherent to mahjong transcends age and medium. A popular pastime within Chinese, Jewish and American households, mahjong is a game that has adapted with the 21st century and is host to a thriving community of players. There are videogames and online forums, built to teach newcomers about the game and create a virtual community of players across the globe, (Mahjong Time 2022) and there are mahjong clubs spread throughout North America, in vistas such as Panama (C.P.N 2008), Niagara (Houghton 2019) and Saskatoon (I.M.R.C 2022). Toronto’s community arts collective Tea Base hosts a recurring program Mahjong Monday. Featured in a short film titled *Mahjong Monday Memories* (Tea Base and Cheng 2021) created by Hannia Cheng, the film is centered around footage of Cheng’s father perfectly predicting every mahjong tile he draws, overlaid with members of the community sharing memories of mahjong. This game has a long and rich history and holds strong themes of community and perseverance, yet to understand and honor the stories Han is cultivating, one must look back at Canada’s history of Chinese immigration and the communities that have been built.

Using photography and stage design, Xiao Han investigates issues of gender, diaspora and decolonial practices, and she is not alone in her efforts. Vancouver based artist Jīn-me Yoon uses her art to examine notions of belonging within her Canadian national identity, as an Asian-Canadian woman of Korean descent who immigrated to Canada at an early age. With the

assistance of the Walker Philips Gallery in Banff, Alberta, Yoon created *Souvenirs of the Self*, a photography series that balances humor and irony while offering up the question “What is identity, and who or what defines it?” (MacKenzie Art 2022). Vancouver-based artist and writer Ken Lum has held a long-standing interest in the intersection between ethnicity, immigration, class and labor. Using photography, text, performance and sculpture, Lum has spent years creating art that engages with the public and contemporary life. Part of Lum’s Portrait-Logo series, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* has been installed on the outer walls of the Kunstinstituut Melly in Rotterdam—formally named the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art—since 1990 and has amassed a cult following over the years (Lum 2022). Posted up on a large billboard, a portrait of a friendly looking woman at work stares out at the public, with the words “Melly Shum HATES Her Job” being the only accompanying text. Juxtaposing the tired smile of Miss Shum and the aggressive voice of the text beside her, Lum’s artwork evokes a flurry of emotions from the public, transforming the individual into something larger than life: we don’t know who Melly Shum is, we may or may not share her background, her job, or her worries, and in some cases, we may question whether the individual we see is a real person, but we can empathize with her regardless. Lum’s clever use of language and visuals challenges traditional expectations and assumptions, creating stories that are simultaneously universal and personal in their ambiguousness. Chinese-Canadian artists Shellie Zhang and Respectfulchild hosted *Friendship Conversation*, a two-part discussion centered around heritage, memory, and identity (Zhang and R. 2021). During one of these conversations Zhang and Respectfulchild talk about a historic site they visited called the Tunnels of Moose Jaw: a complex underground system of tunnels dug in the early 1900s in Saskatoon. In their first conversation, Zhang and Respectfulchild go into their experience with one of the two tours open to the public called

“Passage to Fortune,” which presents a fictionalized account of the conditions early Chinese settlers potentially worked through as they made their journey to Canada’s prairie lands. The two discussed their opinions on how educating the public on the history of these early settlers was handled. The anecdote of the Moose Jaw tunnels was a point of inspiration for Han during the conception of *Mahjong House*, as was Alison Marshall’s book *Cultivating Connections*.

Comprising over 300 interviews, *Cultivating Connections* is an archive of the journey Canada’s Chinese immigrants undertook to make a home on prairie lands: the lives they lived and the ways in which they worked to navigate significant obstacles and issues of race, gender, identity, and cultural diaspora (Marshall 2015). *Self Not Whole* was an exhibition of contemporary Chinese Canadian artists held in Vancouver, 1991, which was curated by Henry Tsang and Lorraine Chan. Artists engaged in issues of cultural identity, race and heritage, building artworks and performances based on their explorations into community, traditions, and the possibilities held within “dynamic, hybrid identities” (Tsang et al. 1991). In an essay introducing the show Tsang wrote that the “fracturing, the opening of more space in the search for a ‘community’” was a goal for this exhibition. Employing language, lived experiences, and traditional and contemporary artistic practices, *Self Not Whole* prompts a reevaluation of ‘community’ and a celebration of the contemporary artworks born within. Professor Erika Lee is a historian who challenges the standard narratives surrounding race and immigration, and testifies against anti-Asian discrimination and violence. In an article for MIA (Minneapolis Institute of Art) Lee discusses how American institutions have struggled to teach the darker chapters of the story of immigration. Touching upon her own family's history and the trauma they endured from laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act, she states that the perception of immigration “ultimately depend(s) on how it is framed” (Gihring 2020). As director of The

University of Minnesota's Immigration History Research Center, Lee has also launched projects such as *Immigrant Stories*, a collaborative archive hosting more than 375 stories to educate the public and empower immigrant and refugee families by sharing their stories digitally (University of Minnesota 2021).

On the more traditional side of the arts spectrum, artist Marlene Yuen utilizes comics, letterpress prints and handmade books to frame the carefully researched stories and oral histories of Chinese Canadians (Xi and Grunt 2020). Yuen's most recent subject matter has been the history of Chinese Canadian labor and the preservation of Vancouver's historic Chinatown. In the 2020 exhibition *Cheap! Diligent! Faithful!* Yuen pays homage to historic labor practices and the local industries that supported the community, one of which was the Ho Sun Hing Print Shop—which in 2014 closed after 106 years, making it the oldest Chinese-English printshop in Canada at the time. In a collaborative effort between the artist and WePress Community Arts Collective (WePress 2021) to preserve pieces of Chinatown's history, Yuen created a book through traditional letterpress printing techniques and utilizing equipment sourced from Ho Sun Hing Printers, to document translations from youths and elders within the community (Gallery G 2022). Art can resonate deeply with its audience and can present difficult knowledge and histories that the public could potentially struggle with or shy away from. The works and collaborative practices of these individuals show that an understanding of history, culture and identity can be achieved through art, and that exposing the public to these stories can produce desire and opportunities for the public to learn more.

-- Conclusion --

Play is critical to our daily lives. It can serve as a means for self-expression, critical thinking, and even community building. Including play as part of curatorial design can go far in creating spaces that enable deeper connections and challenge expectations. Connection and community through the medium of play can't be overstated. Communities of play, like those celebrated by Xiao Han, preserve a piece of culture that can be shared through every game and player. Looking forward I want to continue researching and finding different ways to work with artists to create engaging spaces that not only emphasize, but *utilize* play, promoting collaboration and audience engagement through performance and guided play.

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