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Misfits together: Paul Wong on art, community and Vancouver in the 1970s and '80s

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Misfits Together

PAUL WONG ON ART, COMMUNITY AND VANCOUVER IN THE 1970S AND '80S

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD FUNG



PAUL WONG

Paul Wong is one of Canada's premier artists, working principally in video, installation and performance. His work has been honoured with many distinctions, including a retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada and the Bell Canada Award for outstanding contribution to video art. Like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik, Paul Wong was one of those few Asian artists who thrived in the North American avant-garde before the "multicultural" breakthrough of the 1980s. Paul Wong is also a controversial artist. In 1984, his multi-channel installation *Confused: Sexual Views* was cancelled from the Vancouver Art Gallery before it opened, sparking one of Canada's most dramatic anti-censorship battles.

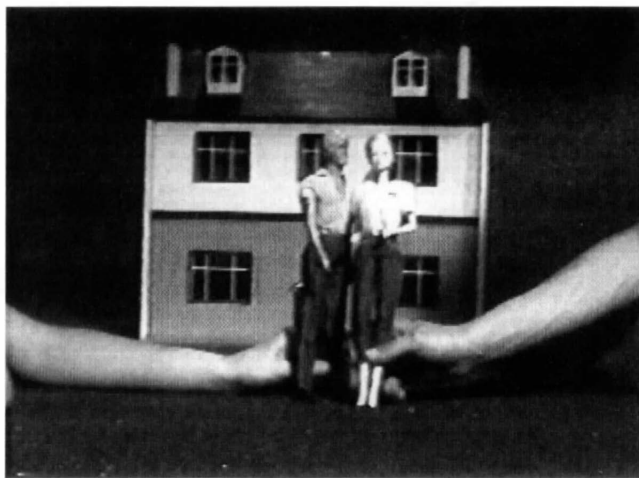
Within the art community, Paul Wong is known as an intrepid advocate for art and artists. He was a founding director of the Satellite Video Exchange Society (Video In), was a member of the ANNPAC's Minquon Panchayat, and he helped jump-start the exhibition of Asian Canadian art with two landmark group shows: "New World Asians" in 1987 and "Yellow Peril: Reconsidered," 1990–92. Wong's career continues to flourish and in 1998 he realized projects in Hong Kong and Singapore. In this telephone and e-mail

interview, videomaker and FUSE editor Richard Fung revisits Paul Wong's early career as an artist and organizer.

RICHARD FUNG: You started making video in the early '70s at a very young age. How were you introduced to the medium?

PAUL WONG: I picked up my first video camera in grade eleven. That was over twenty-five years ago during the heyday of the Trudeau Liberals. As the baby boom generation was coming of age, there was high unemployment and they instituted massive grant programs to appease the youth rebellion. These included LIP and OFY grants (Local Initiative Projects and Opportunities For Youth). In the early 1970s, the Vancouver Art Gallery had progressive educational programs out in the community. One was the Stadium Gallery, transforming an inactive baseball park into an experimental art centre. This was in my neighbourhood. I was put in charge of the OFY program and hired my arty friends from school. This was 1972. It was the summer job that turned into my artistic journey.

THIS WAS THE UTOPIAN PERIOD AT THE START OF THE ELECTRONIC REVOLUTION.



Confused: Sexual Views, 1984, video, 50 min.

At the Stadium, I met video guru Michael Goldberg who became my mentor. He was a member of EAT, the avant-garde international electronic art and technology movement in the late 1960s. He was a pioneer of video art: he started video access centres in Canada, he authored the *Accessible Portapak Manual*, and in 1975, he became the first Canada Council video officer. He has lived in Tokyo for the past eighteen years.

I had my eye on his video Portapak; he had an eye for talent and ambition. I became his apprentice and his shadow. He introduced me to electronic art, alternative politics, social activism and community television. I followed him on his travels to New York, Montreal, Toronto, Quebec, San Francisco and Tokyo.

RF: You have a reputation for helping young artists. Did your experience with Michael Goldberg foster this concern?

PW: Absolutely! I know that it ignited something in me when someone gave me the respect and the trust to succeed at something. I have no formal training in art; I learned directly by working with professionals. Both the Video In and I have created various types of mentoring, training and apprenticeship programs, not just in video production but also in activism, criticism and curating.

RF: Was your interest in infrastructure also rooted in your early experience?

PW: Video production is not an individual studio practice; it is expensive and requires working with many people. The Video In was premised on self-determination. We viewed our work as anti-establishment and oppositional to corporate culture. We wanted to create infrastructures that would support our alternative lifestyles, working co-operatively to

share skills and resources. It was important politically and artistically that we had control over our own means of production, distribution and exhibition. This was the utopian period at the start of the electronic revolution. We viewed ourselves as a guerrilla television group. For years we discussed getting our own broadcast license.

In 1975, the Video Inn bus tour trucked across the country. [Video Inn changed its name to Video In when it moved from its original Japantown home in 1986.] Affiliations included A Space, General Idea, 15 Dance Lab, Trinity Video, The Hummer Sisters/Videocabaret, Lisa Steele/Tom Sherman in Toronto, Vidéographe, Véhicule Art, NFB, Pierre Falardeau in Montreal. I was considered the West Coast whiz-kid and after the tour I returned to Toronto and set up A Space Video, which was the first artist access editing facility. Rodney Werden took over and eventually developed it into Charles Street Video.

In 1978, we started publishing the bi-monthly *Video Guide Magazine*, which continued until 1993. I learned to write and edit publications. I had an (anonymous) regular gossip column called "Tattletapes," which appeared on the inside front cover—it was my forum to adulate or write poison pen. The Vancouver Art Gallery curator Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker threatened us with a libel suit. It was the column everyone loved to hate.

RF: How did your curating get started?

PW: Video In was set up as a resource for community groups, programmers, video makers and artists. The largest area was the screening room: a funky living room setting with overstuffed couches and coffee tables. From the very beginning I was involved in developing public programming. Locally we initiated exchange shows with other artist groups, and through the International Video Exchange Directory we hosted video artists and curators.

...WE VIEWED OURSELVES AS A GUERRILLA TELEVISION GROUP.

Curating was a necessity. Very few were doing it, and even fewer were doing it well or often enough. I curate projects that are directly related to my own work. It's completely self-serving; I am developing audiences eventually for myself. For me this is much more honest than, say, those who are curating to earn a living, impress other curators, or as a career move to bigger and better projects.

RF: With "New World Asians" and "Yellow Peril" you organized two of the first Canadian exhibitions of art by Asian North Americans. How did these come about?

PW: My first visit to China in 1982 with my mother was pure "culture shock." Meeting all my relatives, seeing my past, all the tradition (and communism) was too much. It was a never-ending Chinatown with no escape. I went equipped to shoot the China in my mind, which of course did not exist. Unable to find what I came looking for, I was unable to appreciate what was in front of me. I came back with useless fragmented recordings that paralleled my sense of cultural displacement and isolation—who I was and how I had become was so separate from my heritage. I had no one to talk to and to share this state of confusion. There was no information, books, art or media works. I sought what little contemporary work was available through Asian American artists and organizations in San Francisco and New York. This research for what was to become my tape *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* (1988) evolved into the show "New World Asians" in 1987. The success of the "New World Asians" series led to producing a second show for the Chisenhale Gallery in London, and that led to "Yellow Peril: Reconsidered."

RF: These curatorial efforts were organized through the organization On Edge. How did that develop?

PW: In 1984, when the Vancouver Art Gallery banned my installation *Confused: Sexual Views*, that really sent me into a period of reassessment. I was thankful I had a well-developed artist-run community that had always supported me; I wasn't reliant on the public institutions and the establishment. But I also realized that institutions like the Video In and the Western Front were not able to respond quickly enough toward major new initiatives. I needed an entity that would allow me to organize projects quickly and efficiently. On Edge developed out of the Paul Wong versus Vancouver Art Gallery Defense Fund Committee. Elspeth Sage and I are the co-founders, and still the artistic directors.

RF: Why were Video In and Western Front not able to give you the kind of speed you wanted?

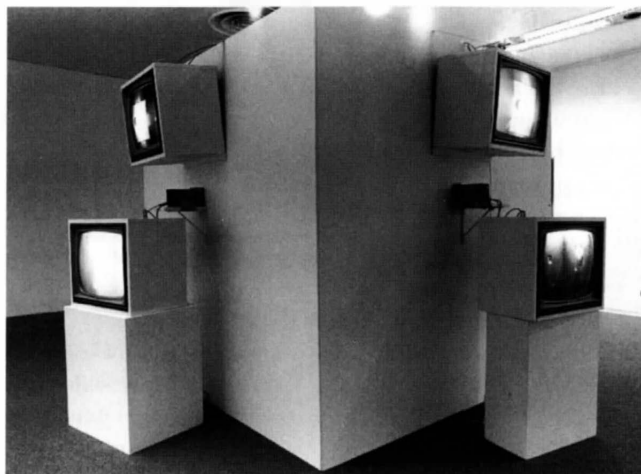
PW: By the mid-1980s they had become institutions. Budgets went toward supporting salaries, equipment, rent and programs planned well in advance. They were not able or willing to support major new initiatives, or artists that they were not familiar with. It was frustrating to have to persuade uninterested and bureaucratic committees. On Edge is a simple model. We operate on a project-by-project basis. Our monies go towards programming and not towards maintenance of facilities and staff. We are two partners, not a committee.

RF: Was On Edge conceptualized as a race-specific project?

PW: We produce and promote work from the "margins," and that often means work that is difficult in form, content and origin. As it turns out, most of that has been by artists of colour and/or by artists working from various sites of struggle.

In 1986, we invited Hanif Kureishi from Britain. His Vancouver readings and workshops attracted a diverse

in ten sity, 1978, performance/installation. Photo: Jim Gorman.



audience and, for us, South Asians for the first time. During the residency, he wrote *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which I published in *Video Guide*. It developed into his first novel and was made into a television mini-series. Another artist was JOOLZ, who came in 1985. She was a tough punk poetess covered in tattoos, piercings and flaming scarlet hair. She was a cult figure in Britain. She spoke out against poverty and the right wing, but she could also tell poignant stories and switch into a stand-up comic. We had sold out concerts which we held in a warehouse converted into an illegal club. During this visit we collaborated on a video-tape, *Homelands*, a response to race riots in her home town of Bradford. Both projects—Kureishi and JOOLZ—were co-produced with Video In and Western Front. Both of these artists inspired me and encouraged me as an artist and a programmer to speak out about racism.

We also work by request. In 1991, I curated "Kikyo: Coming Home to Powell Street," about the rebirth of the Japanese Canadian community in Vancouver. Recent projects include a video and a CD, *Jazz Slave Witness I Burn*, comprised of documents from the 1996 site-specific projects we did in Northern England. And Elspeth Sage is curating a project with First Nations artist David Neel. They want to take his thirty-foot dug-out cedar canoe to Venice and Stockholm, in full regalia with masks, songs and drums. Finally, we are doing a website that will be a retrospective of all the projects we have produced in the last twelve years.

RF: When *Ordinary Shadows*, *Chinese Shade* came out in 1988, it was often discussed as a kind of new work for you, one that dealt for the first time with your identity in racial-ethnic terms. But when you visited OCA [now the Ontario College of Art and Design] when I was a student there in the mid-'70s, among the tapes you showed was one about Chinese New Year. It was in a series of short black and white tapes and it included shots of the dragon dance.

PW: It is amazing that you know about this tape. It's not listed anywhere. I do not even have a copy. It was produced on 1/2" open reel, the classic Sony Portapak, *The Rover*. *Chinese New Year* (1974) was an in-camera edited tape. I recorded the parade and then played the tape in a storefront, a makeshift Chinese Cultural Centre. It was an exercise in shooting and instant playback. I was young and was not involved in Chinatown politics or the Chinese community. How I ended up shooting a video and presenting it there is a mystery. At that time, Chinatown was polarized between the old established guard who had Koumintang loyalties to Taiwan, and the so-called Young Maoists who supported the Peoples Republic of China, which had recently been recognized as the legitimate China. The Young Maoists were trying to democratize the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA) which had been the one official voice of the Vancouver Chinese. They were two competing groups trying to develop a Chinese Cultural



60 Unit: *Bruise*, Ken Fletcher/Paul Wong, 1976, video.

Centre (CCC). The Maoists had set up a storefront as a base of operations. The struggle for control of the CBA was nasty and violent—the storefront was attacked and had to be guarded around the clock. Eventually the CBA had democratic elections and a new board of Young Maoists did get control. That rift took a long time to heal. That is why the CCC took so long to be built and why it remains apolitical to the point of being absolutely bland in its programming.

Members of the Maoists forged cultural exchanges with Asian American activists and artists in the mid-'70s. I recall them coming to the Video In to view tapes. I attended some music concerts and literary events but was never an active member of that scene.

RF: Until the mid-'80s, you were one of the few non-white artists working in the avant-garde. Since then your work is much more associated with a community of Asian artists and artists of colour.

PW: Up until then, I had dismissed that aspect of myself. "New World Asians" and *Ordinary Shadows* was a way of reconnecting with the past and with other Chinese, Asians and with First Nations artists. When I made that shift I was vocal about it. There were a lot of people who literally took me aside and said, "You didn't need to do that, you are a good artist" and "Enough is enough. This is going to be damaging to your career and it's frankly quite boring." People told me those things, point blank. I've always done work about identity. From drug culture to sexual orientation, there's been a flow of things I've investigated. But the race card, people felt very excluded and/or threatened by it. The negative comments and resistance only fortified my determination. I work better when I am pissed off.

RF: Since the '80s, many artists get into the gallery system on a "race card" and then they hope to become "just artists." Your trajectory is quite different in that your career was built as an artist without a hyphen and you later chose to take on the issue of race and identity. What was it like in the '70s being one of the few non-white artists in the avant-garde?

PW: The 1970s were formative years for myself and the Video In. It was a time of tremendous ideological, artistic and sexual struggle. I was an angry young man with an insatiable curiosity. I had many questions, opinions and not a whole lot of patience. I transformed from adolescence to

**With a syringe,
he removes
sixty units
of his blood
and randomly
injects it
into my back.**

being a young adult: Donny and Marie to Patti Smith, disco to punk, Picasso to Chris Burden, licking pussy to sucking cock. Being non-white was the least of my problems. We were misfits together at our time of self-discovery. I was influenced by certain art trends and especially by the growing collection at Video In, which included conceptual, performance and feminist art, and particularly work about the self and the body. Early on I was acutely aware that I did not see my body or my views reflected. *The Mainstreet Tapes* (1976–80) is an autobiographical collection of recordings using myself and the Mainstreeters as the subjects. *Seven Day Activity* (1977) records a seven-day treatment for acne. This was my way of dealing

with my terrible acne problems: I push, prod and squeeze zits in close-ups with different voice-overs providing advice, my own voice talking about my feelings of inadequacy and shame.

in ten sity (1978) is the most expressive work of this period. In a custom built 8'x8' enclosure, I go through a public catharsis. Against the soundtrack of six punk anthems, I rage and violently bounce off the walls. The live performance is recorded by cameras built into all the walls and relayed to monitors watched by an audience. The work is dedicated to Kenneth Fletcher (1954–78), my collaborator and first boyfriend (our relationship was in the closet). He committed suicide as I slept. I woke up to him hanging at the foot of the bed. On the note pinned to his chest were the words "set me free"—a Patti Smith quote. It has taken me twenty years to write out and reveal these thoughts and details. What tormented him to commit suicide? What role did I play or what could I have done to prevent it? Or did my presence give him the strength to do it? I will never know and it doesn't matter. I can tell you that I loved him and I know that he loved me. The performance was done to show my rage and perhaps his. Our relationship and how he died was never revealed as part of the work. It wasn't the point.

We had gone to high school together. In 1976, Ken and I collaborated on our first work for colour video, *60 Unit: Bruise*. With a syringe, he removes sixty units of his blood and randomly injects it into my back. The different blood types results in a bruise shown in edited time. This was our blood-brother ritual. I cannot remember when we first became lovers. I think it was after this? Does it matter?

This was what it was like being a non-white avant-garde artist in the 1970s. At that time, I never thought about race:



Windows 97, Institute of Contemporary Art site installation, 1997.
neon & photo canvases, 4.2 x 3.7 m.

60 *Unit: Bruise* was not about mixed-race; I did not view myself as a Chinese "martial artist" performing in the box, and neither did the audience. Being a young man squeezing my pimples was a critique on beauty culture.

RF: Do you think that audiences today will view those works using a racial lens, and if so, how will that affect the reading?

PW: When I was curating "Yellow Peril," there were artists who did not want to be tainted as being Asian artists. Now there are artists whose entire careers are based on being "of colour." Some of those artists are working very hard at being "just artists" of no colour, meaning white.

RF: Do you think a community of misfits like that can exist again?

PW: When the artist-run movement began in the early 1970s, it was about being different, being alternative; it was about producing work that wasn't being supported by the established institutions, and commercial gallery system. The early artist-run groups developed out of a need to work collectively and to share resources. In the '80s, the big return to painting and the blue chip investment art boom influenced a new generation of artists and artist-run galleries that were developed not as an alternative, but as a bridge to getting into the commercial gallery scene. This was more acute in Montreal, Toronto and New York. Many of these galleries operated with stables of artists. They were not interested in the public, but with getting the right critics, dealers, collectors and museum directors. More often than not, conversations artists had were about their dealers and collectors. In Vancouver, galleries were started by graduate

students and directly reflected the academic curricula of the institutions.

The entire art industry has systematically excluded the appreciation and inclusion of other artistic practices from other cultural perspectives. Contemporary art has been defined by and for whites. Looking around Vancouver, there has been very little change. The institutions are the same. They have not reallocated resources, they are not willing to share power and access. The hard fight for "funding for diversity" was hijacked. Monies didn't go to new initiatives by new communities, but instead to "inclusion" in existing institutions.

It's unfortunate that society is so competitive. In order to survive, ideas—including "identity"—are reduced to black and white. Ambiguity is difficult to market. It's like bisexuality—people are confused and threatened by not knowing where you stand. We have evolved into a festival culture, conveniently programmed into separate categories: gay and lesbian, women of colour, First Nations, film, spoken word, theatre, fringe theatre. I don't see a lot of crossover, and I look. I am happy to see the many "different communities" co-exist, but I am personally interested in hybridity and cross-cultural possibilities.

I continue to make my own art and to produce other artists. I do this on a project-by-project basis. This allows me to continue exploring new possibilities for creating ways in which art can be experienced. After all, there is nothing else like a truly great art experience. It has the power to change one's perspective, to perhaps make one look, listen and understand the world just that much differently.

Richard Fung's latest video is School Bag (1998) co-directed with Tim McCaskell.