HENRY TSANG

Community Building and the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver

I was involved in two projects recently in Vancouver that were concerned with local knowledge. Organized through the Chinese Cultural Centre (CCC), *Self Not Whole* (1991) and *Racy Sexy* (1993) both raised important questions of community. Before describing these events I would like to mention some differences between community-based centres, such as the ones where these events were held, and art spaces, where events like this are normally seen.

The purpose of cultural or community centres has always been predicated on the notion of access to either services or facilities that can be shared among a wide membership. Such centres generally offer space and/or support for activities such as meetings, conferences, sports and recreation, workshops, classes, counselling, skills training, and so on. Often the arts are an integral part of the overall programming, usually categorized as a leisure activity.

The image of community-based arts is seldom given much credence by the so-called professional arts communities: generally, community arts are seen as amateur, in terms of the work and also the conditions and expectations surrounding its production and presentation. Community-based arts are not considered serious, sophisticated or critical; practitioners are Sunday painters or spare-time actors who are not concerned about ideological questions, issues of representation, or artists' rights to remuneration for their work (unless someone wants to actually purchase an artwork). Certainly this image is not always inaccurate; users of such centres are seldom professional artists, for artists who perceive themselves as being serious have traditionally shunned sites that cater to

the general public, the masses, the lowest common denominator.

The professional arts communities have created a huge buffer zone around themselves for very concrete reasons, one being the need for work to be produced and presented in an arena of safety, without fear of censorship or public reprimand. Those who attend events in professional communities tend to be one's peers, other artists, writers, critics, close friends and family.

Another factor contributing to insularity of these arts communities is the active support of funding agencies. For example, the Canada Council has been instrumental in creating an environment for contemporary experimental work that draws from western and primarily Eurocentric avant-gardist traditions. Analogies have been drawn (by the Council itself) between the artist-run centre model that developed in the early 1970s, and the scientific model of the laboratory, in which the role of artists is likened to that of scientists in the research and development of culture. Emphasis is on artistic production, less on presentation, and even less on public education (although recently all this has been changing). From small collectively run spaces to larger institutions such as museums and civic theatres, art has been presented within a context constructed to place it within a specific tradition. Consequently, the audience such work addresses and attracts should of course be conversant with such a history.

Cultural and community centres, on the other hand, rarely if ever receive funding by arts agencies or private foundations. Like non-commercial organizations, usually they are formed to serve a specific group of people, described by either geography or ethnic or religious affiliation. They depend on their constituents for support, most often in the form of volunteer labour and to a lesser extent programming. Private sector fund-raising, donation drives, revenue from classes and bazaars contribute to the operating budget. They tend to serve people from various backgrounds (such as class, age, nationality, language) with a variety of needs and interests, although it may be argued that such centres always reflect those who first set it up and then, later, those who staff them.

* * *

Considerations such as these originally drew me to the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver. As a visual artist, much of my artwork has been involved with the politics of identification, a direct result of my being of Chinese descent and having grown up in Canada. Therefore, as I learned about this organization, it became apparent that the CCC was a very strategic site in which to investigate ideas of community and representation. This vision developed into *Self Not Whole* and *Racy Sexy,* two separate yet distinctly linked forays into an unexplored realm of curatorial practice for me.

The mandate of the CCC is to promote Chinese language and culture. Activities range from language classes to conferences, workshops, exhibitions, Tai Chi Chuan and Cantonese opera. For the most part, Chinese culture there has been interpreted as traditional culture.

What is traditional culture anyway? Is this a way of life from another land in the past, a nostalgic status quo? Does this mean Chinese art consists of ink-on-paper landscapes and calligraphy? What is Chinese, as opposed to Chinese Canadian, as opposed to Canadian? For that matter, what is a Chinese cultural centre? Is that where one goes to find cultural space, Chinese space?

Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver was an ethno-specific exhibition that explored ideas of heritage and authenticity. It was both a celebration and critique of identity politics from the *inside*, addressing issues of displacement, otherness and racism. Out of this experience developed *Racy Sexy*, a multidisciplinary series involving coalition-building with other community and cultural centres in Greater Vancouver. Artists of diverse backgrounds from across Canada were presented within a framework that focused on the intersection of race, culture and sexuality. As an attempt at intercultural collaboration, *Racy Sexy* signalled a shift in the exploration of community to the *outside*.

* * *

Self Not Whole consisted of a month-long visual art exhibition including installation, video, painting and photo-based work, with a program of

readings, performances, an arts educators' workshop and a panel discussion. In all, the work of sixteen artists and collectives was presented. The bilingual catalogue (in English and Chinese) contained commissioned essays discussing ideas about community, identity and identification, and provided a social and historical context for cultural production by Chinese Canadians in Vancouver.[1]

In 1990, Lorraine Chan and I approached the CCC's exhibitions coordinator, Saintfield Wong, with the idea of exhibiting contemporary Chinese-Canadian artists whose work engaged questions of cultural identity. Lorraine Chan and I were interested in presenting artists situated outside of the canons of Chinese art, artists who had not been represented in *In Transitions*, a local survey show of mostly traditional Chinese art[2] organized by Saintfield Wong in 1989. Wong saw that our proposed project would take the next step beyond *In Transitions*, and agreed to host the exhibition at the CCC. As guest curators, we would conduct the research and apply for the funding.

In many ways, the CCC was the ideal site for staging *Self Not Whole*. If we were to address notions of identity and difference from a Chinese-Canadian perspective, where better to do this than in a space that by location (in the heart of Chinatown) and by name (the Chinese Cultural Centre) claimed to be the centre of Chinese culture? First and foremost, the CCC provided a highly desirable audience for the work, that is, Chinese Canadians. Second, it gave the promise of *home*, of acceptance – temporary or artificial as it may be. The artists in *Self Not Whole* were validated, their ethnicity, or difference due to ethnicity, suddenly made invisible. Exhibiting at the CCC was entry into their *own* community.

Would we be seen through Chinese eyes as foreign? After all, it was to the western historical avant-garde that the work had the strongest links – the artists we found consciously investigating cultural identity were involved in this practice. Given that contemporary art often alienates the non-art publics, we were hoping that at the CCC the audience would overcome this formal barrier to engage with work that spoke about experiences they could share.

This approach proved to be successful. Providing a multilingual

gallery attendant and artists' statements near each of the works in Chinese and English were helpful. On more than one occasion, I observed people reading the Chinese and English texts separately, then engaging in a dialogue about the work. *Self Not Whole* attracted viewers ranging from the "mainstream" arts community who were mostly white to regular users of the CCC such as those coming to see Chinese traditional dance who would encounter the exhibition, to recent immigrants on their way to English as a Second Language classes, to Boy Scouts who would run around and through the installations during and after their meetings every Saturday afternoon.

For the promotional campaign, two publicists were hired, one targeting the English mainstream and alternative arts media, and the other the Chinese. However, the linguistic bias for the project was obvious – the overwhelming majority of the artists were primarily anglophone, and the performances, readings and the artists' tour of the exhibition reflected this.

Throughout the development of the project with the CCC, Lorraine Chan and I were confronted by conflicting ideas around art and organizational procedure. We were not familiar with the CCC's working methodology and decision-making process; at times, we could not understand its logic (and vice versa). Confrontations arose over matters such as the proper procedure for using CCC stationery, and the delegation of responsibility. In turn, some of our ideas were mystifying to the CCC board members, such as our consideration of artists as professionals (that is, being entitled to fees for presenting their work), our curatorial process (which includes research and studio visits and the encouragement of new, especially site-specific, work), and our exhibition/presentation standards. Grassroots organizations do not operate like art venues and, not surprisingly, staff members were not trained to facilitate contemporary artistic practices.

What we eventually realized was that there were two main factors that created a gap between ourselves and the CCC. One was that we were strangers; neither of us had had much previous contact with the CCC, and our families were not prominent members of the community with a long history of involvement with the organization. The other factor was cultural

difference. We were westernized, Canadianized, and just because we called ourselves Chinese did not mean we were one of *them*. Our values, our world view was not only not the same, it was sometimes perceived as alien. We were clearly outsiders, members of the even further marginalized contemporary arts community, no less.

We received some criticism from viewers that issues around identity did not represent everyone's experiences. The suggestion was that *Self Not Whole* comprised a special interest group (of nontraditional artists). What this more accurately reflected was the marginalization of these artists from mainstream Chinese-Canadian cultural values. The artists were confronting the idea of a monolithic Chinese tradition by speaking of contradictions within Chinese-Canadian experience, suggesting that there was not and could not be a singular perspective of community.

Paul Wong's video installation *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* spoke about such contradictions in an eloquent and matter-of-fact manner. His approach touched upon nerves still raw for many, and drew attention from individuals in management and on the board of the CCC. They were afraid that certain elements would be misinterpreted and, as a result, on the morning of the opening, the room in which his work was situated had been locked.

Paul Wong's installation alluded to the idea of China as homeland, and exposed a sensitivity to specific local community politics, in particular, communism. Given the CCC's aims and alliances in its formative days in the early 1970s, it was no longer deemed desirable to raise these nationalistic red lanterns once again. One component of the installation consisted of flags of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Canada hanging next to each other. The CCC requested that three of the four be taken down (guess which?) for fear that offence would be taken by such juxtaposition. Near the flags were windows in front of which curtains were hung. The curtains were made up of repeating portraits of former People's Republic of China leader Zhou En-Lai, a moderate during the Cultural Revolution. A bolder gesture was a large image of Mao Zedong overlooking the central courtyard from the second floor windows of the Multipurpose Hall. For an organization that had, over time, declared itself "apolitical," the

Paul Wong, *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade*, outdoor component of installation, *Self Not Whole*, Chinese Cultural Centre, Vancouver

appearance of the Great Helmsman was indeed an ironic reminder of the CCC's socialist-informed past. The final and most contentious element was a flag of the Peoples' Republic draped over a footstool in front of an ornate, kitschy dragon throne on which sat the video monitor. The flag could be construed as lying on the floor, a sign of disrespect and, worse yet, could potentially be stepped on, an insult beyond repair. Hours of negotiation with the chairman of the board and the general manager prior to the opening reception resulted in a compromise. The irreverent flag of China on the footstool was eventually replaced with a red cloth. The other questionably offensive elements were allowed to remain. In this manner, with all sides agreeing to changes – the artist, organizers and management – face was saved.

In hindsight, the risk that the CCC took in exhibiting Paul Wong's work was minor, but the concerns raised were very real. They feared offending what they called their "grassroots" constituency.[3] As organizers,

we were either too wary or too indifferent to the CCC's possible reaction to the exhibition and, if proper protocol had been followed, the subject matter of this work as well as the other artists' works could have been discussed in advance, although the censorship issue would not necessarily have been averted entirely. In our desire to urge the artists to create new work and to claim the space as best they could, to see if such *outsiders* would find comfort in such an environment, we neglected to inform our host, the CCC, what the artists were planning. Our project could be interpreted as an act of cultural imperialism, an imposition of cultural values alien to many of those of Chinese descent, or at least those of the CCC. After all, we were their guests – guest curators, guest artists, guest organizers – and guests have responsibilities.

It was interesting to note that *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* proved to be one of the more successful and popular works in the show, for the videotape component depicted Paul's relationship to his ancestral village, contrasted by the ever-changing mid-1980s urban China. It found its ideal audience in the CCC, in particular with old men and women who would sit through the entire ninety minutes mesmerized by an *insider's* journey to Toisan.

Response overall to the exhibition was extremely positive, and attendance for all events was very high, bolstered by the strong press coverage we received in English and Chinese media. Many Chinese and other Canadians made their first visits to the CCC. *Self Not Whole* succeeded in traversing cultural, linguistic and generational boundaries among diverse Chinese communities.

* * *

Racy Sexy was a multidisciplinary series of performances, films, videos, readings, visual art and public discussions that examined how issues of race, culture and sexuality are interwoven in contemporary experience. The work of thirty-three artists from across Canada was presented in nine different cultural and community-based centres in Greater Vancouver. Diverse audiences were brought together in creating cultural space that was

safe yet open, inclusive and supportive of views and voices that were not only different but perhaps in contradiction and opposed to each other.[4]

The theme of race, culture and sexuality was intended to create dialogue about the complex cultural and sexualized realities in contemporary society. We were looking for the space of intercultural contact and, in particular, the politicized realm of desire. Who desires whom and why? Perhaps more importantly, who does not desire whom and why not? What are the power relationships in each case? How does sexual orientation as an issue shift from one cultural context to the next? How are the ideals of beauty and gender constructed and perceived, especially by specific communities, from the inside and outside, from traditional and modern/postmodern perspectives?

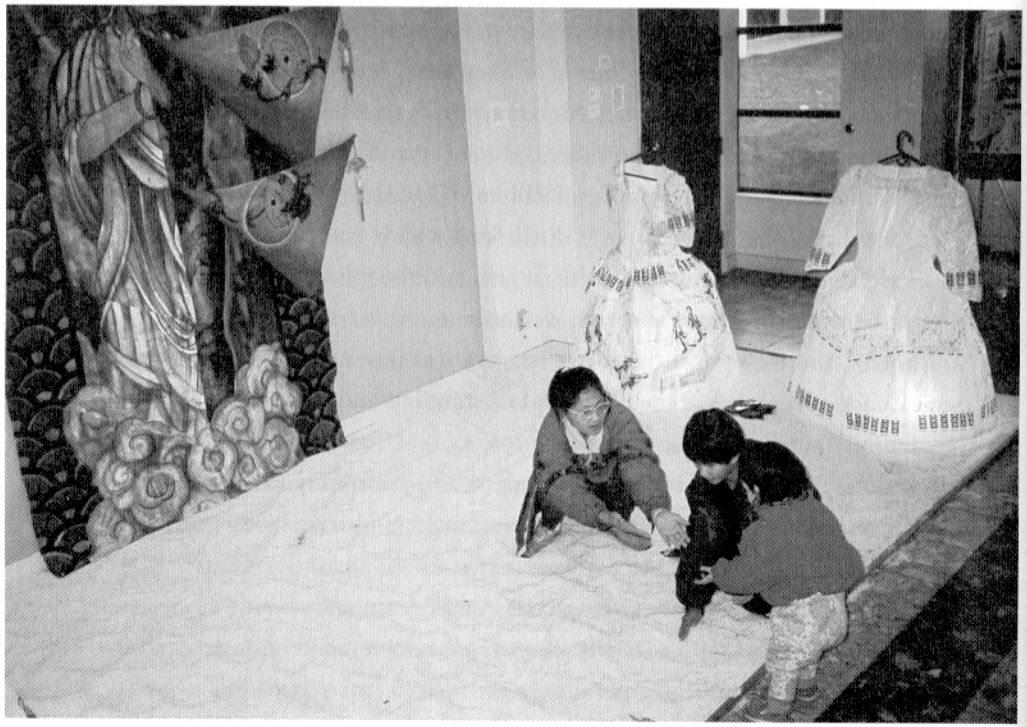
Support from the CCC for *Racy Sexy* was garnered through a process that sharply contrasted that of *Self Not Whole*. After weathering the experience of the earlier show, we took great pains to ensure that protocol was dutifully followed. Lobbying individual board members created a safer environment when the project was formally presented and subsequent updates kept the project alive at the board level.

Due to the nature of the theme of *Racy Sexy*, references to sexuality were inescapable. To compensate for conservative sensibilities evident in our dealings with the CCC and other community and cultural centres, the word *sexuality* was downplayed, sometimes replaced by "desire" or "relationships" (but never "love"). *Racy Sexy* was at first only to be a working title, but it became the official one, and the taboo word could no longer be avoided. To our surprise, we encountered very little opposition to our theme and the topic of offensive imagery was never actually brought up. In fact, certain board members, as longstanding and respected community activists, spoke about the project's function as public education. They benevolently acknowledged a responsibility to the "younger generation" in facilitating discussion around issues such as AIDS and homosexuality.

In order to involve those who could speak from and about other experiences to those *within* as well as to *between* communities, a steering committee and a curatorial committee were formed.[5]

When planning how to reach those who do not normally go to art events, traditional spaces such as theatres and galleries seemed inappropriate. Instead, we decided to approach cultural, community and shopping centres. This shift toward popular spaces and away from the art sanctum was intended to raise questions about the site of production of cultural meaning. The specialized and mystifying role of art institutions was inconsistent with our search for safe and unsanitized cultural space. At the same time, like in *Self Not Whole*, the majority of the work we looked at employed western avant-gardist formal strategies and, of these, most involved either issues of cultural identity or sexuality (but, to our surprise, seldom both).

Of all the community-based venues that participated in *Racy Sexy*, the runaway success was the Carnegie Community Centre, which borders on the impoverished downtown east side, Skid Row, Chinatown, Japantown, and upscale touristic Gastown. Events at the Carnegie consistently sold out and its central location drew crowds that encouraged the



redefinition of community, wherein art/political partisans rubbed shoulders with those who normally would never have come down to that part of town at night, and with Carnegie regulars who were on their way to the toilet and were drawn in by the commotion.

During the course of *Racy Sexy*, it became obvious that a certain core following attended many of the presentations. This is not unusual, for most arts events are attended primarily by the arts community. At *Racy Sexy*, however, there was a noticeably larger proportion of unfamiliar faces. In fact, there were various individuals, regulars of the community centres who seldom if ever frequented art events, who became part of this core following, by originally "stumbling" into one of the presentations. As for those *within* the art scene, *Racy Sexy* provided a situation where different communities came together, many with exclusionist or separatist ideologies. This signalled that, somehow, a safe space had been created, one in which differences could be concomitantly celebrated and critiqued.

Especially noteworthy was the perception by some that *Racy Sexy* was by, and for, people of colour and First Nations exclusively. Certainly in the past, strategies to create safe spaces have by and large created conditions necessarily apart from the white, heterosexual, male and/or middle-class domain. In the discourse of race and sexuality, those who are directly implicated (that is, non-white/Anglo, non-heterosexual) tend to be those most engaged. However, in discussing issues of race and sexuality and how they overlap, are there not also white and/or heterosexual perspectives that are also relevant?

The politics of representation were constantly debated throughout the development of this project. We learned that sometimes ideals simply cannot be attained or, more accurately, representations cannot be forced. For example, the artists we chose came from only three cities: Vancouver, Toronto and Edmonton. At first, we were alarmed by this limited cross-section of cultural production in Canada, but eventually realized that perhaps this reflected the loci of artists engaged in these issues. Another example was the lack of Latina/Latino artists, which led some curators at

OPPOSITE: Haruko Okano, *GRAD-UA-TION* and *The Hands of the Compassionate One*, *Racy Sexy*, Chinese Cultural Centre, Vancouver

one point to seriously consider including an artist whose work did not fit within the theme, but whose cultural background was obviously lacking in the programming. In the end, we decided that such an inclusion would be tokenistic and would undermine the curatorial mandate.

* * *

A feeling of community, of groups working together developed out of *Racy Sexy*, as it had with *Self Not Whole*. It felt to me as if there was a yearning for such a connection. After the project, the need for connection felt even greater. What this signalled to me was that there is a strong need for the facilitation of future activities. However, without infrastructure and support, this can be onerous indeed. As independent organizers, we worked with extremely limited resources. To continue on in this manner is masochistic. However, an institutional framework is not necessarily the answer either: such a structure may not provide the most effective foundation for such interventionist projects. But perhaps local knowledge and internationalism can be fostered through coalition-building in the grey space between organizations, cultural centres and art spaces, in order to redefine the role of each of those structures in relation to the changing needs of their constituents, their communities.

Notes

Portions of this text were first published in *Questions of Community: Artists, Audiences, Coalitions* (Banff: The Banff Centre Press, 1995).

1 *Self Not Whole* was presented from November 2 to 30, 1991. The visual artists included Ana Chang, Diana Li, Mary Sui-Yee Wong, Paul Wong, Kiki Yee, Sharyn Yuen and the Pender Guy Radio Collective. Readings were performed by Jamila Ismael, Larissa Lai, Corinne Lee, Sky Lee and Wong Wing Siu. Performances were presented by Number One Son, Lee Su-Feh, River Sui and Sebastian Yeung and coordinated by Lance Lim. Catalogue essays were written by Heesok Chang, Rosa Ho and Karin Lee. CCC exhibition coordinator was Saintfield Wong.

2 The term "traditional Chinese art" used here is unavoidably problematic but I use it to refer to work that is situated within the art historical traditions of Chinese formal and aesthetic strategies. Calligraphy and watercolours dominated *In Transitions*, although some oil and acrylic paintings, sculptures and a few installation and photo-based works were included.

3 I have yet to understand what this ambiguous and unidentified term means, in this and other cases.

4 *Racy Sexy* took place from November 26 to December 11, 1993. The visual artists included Terence Anthony, Eric Bontogon, Grace Channer, Kirby Hsu, Sur Mehat, Shani Mootoo, Nhan Nguyen and Brice Canyon, Haruko Okano and Paul Wong. Performers included Sheila James, Lee Pui Ming, Michelle LaFlamme, Denise Lonewalker, Andrew Olewine, Mark Poyser and Wayne Yung. Writers included Mercedes Baines, Anne Jew, Larissa Lai, David Odhiambo, Raj Pannu and Archer Pechawis. Film and video was screened by Jennifer Abbott and David Odhiambo, Dionne Brand, David Findlay, Richard Fung, Kwoi Gin, Brenda Joy Lem, Zachary Longboy and Paul Lang, Michelle Mohabeer, Shani Mootoo, Gita Saxena and Ian Iqbal Rashid, and Second Decade (Michael Balser, producer). Co-sponsoring organizations included the Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Carnegie Community Centre, Kitsilano Neighbourhood House, Richmond Cultural Centre, Sunset Community Centre, Trout Lake Community Centre, Vancouver Public Library and West End Community Centre.

5 The Steering Committee members for *Racy Sexy* included Amir Ali Alibhai, Karin Lee, Cynthia Low, Viola Thomas, Zara Suleman and Henry Tsang. The Curatorial Committee consisted of Persimmon Blackbridge, Nick Boston, Andrea Fatona, Celeste Insell, Karin Lee, Paul Lee, Cynthia Low, Zara Suleman and Henry Tsang.

Discussion

MATTHEW TEITELBAUM I have a question for Jamelie and Henry about the relationship between authority and responsibility. How do you make decisions about the artists you show, and how do you talk about your authority in relation to often delicate definitions of community?

JAMELIE HASSAN I want to use examples here. In the beginning at the Embassy Cultural House we didn't want to be like Forest City, the artist-run gallery, and we didn't want to get entangled in bureaucratic applications and all of that. So one of our ideas was that we would program from a particular existing space, which was the restaurant in the Embassy Hotel. We knew there were a number of groups in the city who did not have a cultural space so we went to them and told them that if they needed a space they could use our space. The first group that came to us was the El Salvadoran community. We said put up whatever you want and they did. But we recognized that was a mistake. We felt we were abdicating a relationship with them. We didn't try to interpret with them. We thought the next time we do this, let's make sure we have a dialogue about how the work is presented, what is presented and that we actually participate in that process. This also involved recognizing where we differed and finding a way to negotiate.

With *The Body and Society* it was very complicated. The Embassy is a residential hotel in the east end and because of this location there's a lot of policing going on. There was prostitution and drug trafficking, so the issues of the project were acted out in and around the hotel. One of the things we had to deal with was how the residents, mostly elderly male pensioners, were going to feel about AIDS being openly discussed in the hotel. This was 1988. We also had to deal with the hotel, which was scared of what the regulars might feel. We didn't go to the management and tell them what we were showing and then let them say, well, you can't show that, and then fight it out. We basically worked with the circumstances in the hotel but it was crucial that as artists we had control over what went on there. The issues weren't fixed. They were in a process of being defined. We also discovered that while we wanted to exercise power as a board

within that site, we didn't want to exercise power as it related to specific communities. There was a differentiation going on. We couldn't let a certain kind of dynamic, which involved pragmatic issues of running a hotel, intervene in the way we would proceed with our programs with artists. So it was very complicated. We were down there as a board daily to fight out issues. At the same time, we worked with the University of Western Ontario. The institution in its mandate was really different than us and it didn't want to acknowledge the way our ideas were feeding that program. So the institution exercised more authority than we ever could have; it edited in ways we never could have conceived of. It was interesting because it placed us in an antagonistic position to all the institutions in the city. It got to a point where, compared to what we were seeing in the city, I don't think "authority" functioned within our collective.

HENRY TSANG Authority was the crux of many of the problems that we encountered with both projects. With *Self Not Whole*, it was between us as organizers and the Chinese Cultural Centre because it was about control over subject matter and the topic. There were questions of censorship. That was resolved through negotiation and strategic tactics. With *Racy Sexy*, the problem was the dilemma we found ourselves in being an intercultural project that was attempting to build coalition. Karin Lee, the other co-organizer, and myself wanted to share the power; but if you want to share power, who are you going to get who's going to feel comfortable enough to actually take part in that power because it comes with a lot of responsibility. It wasn't a very easy task. In the end we settled on a bunch of people who were committed enough. But you also have problems of representation because we're dealing with these ideals. We're constructing this ideal of representing everybody that doesn't really connect with the reality that you're confronted with. And everything functions through the work of certain individuals. It's easy to criticize that an idealistic structure wasn't fully actualized. There were similar issues with staff where, again, the attempt to hire this Noah's Ark (two of each type or kind) was incredibly difficult. None of this we're proud of but I think it's very important to acknowledge, given certain ideals. I don't think they should be dismissed but what it really does is expose the current situation in which you find yourself working.

With *Racy Sexy*, everything curatorial was done by committee because one

perspective was not enough. Specifics of cultural experience had to be enlarged and expanded. I won't speak about it much more except to say that a certain distaste for consensus models developed. It was almost impossible to keep together. In terms of authority there was the paradox that while everything was invested within the stream of the curatorial committee, the project was still associated with the Chinese Cultural Centre. So there were dilemmas that we had throughout the project that are still not resolved.

SARA DIAMOND I'm uncomfortable about the way we use the word institution and a kind of opposition that seems to get set up around institutions that have a particular history, site, structure and relationship to the state and which function to validate a certain practice. Artist organizations are also institutions and, in a sense, coalitions operate as institutions. In some of the models you presented there is the idea of new structures which begin to create a history for themselves, a *modus operandi*, but are not necessarily site-specific. What you constitute as a successful exhibition seems to be less the work than the sort of activities surrounding the work. I wonder if it's not valuable as a way of validating practice that's not institutional in the sense of the museum or gallery to understand forms that are not necessarily site-specific, are networked, are less stable or have to do with a particular or temporary conjuncture as having an institutional framework? I find this set of separations between institutions and non-institutional practice disturbing and not necessarily useful. Each situation needs its own analysis about how it functions.

SYLVIE GILBERT Henry pinned down the notion that wherever your work is situated, when you curate, organize exhibitions and when you select and present and interpret, you still have to deal with the question of authority. Practice is also institutional. I think that's what we're all trying to make a connection with. My question is that if we share authority do we dissolve it or is it important to dissolve?

KEITH WALLACE Authority is a real dilemma in the curatorial field. What I am thinking about is shifting the idea of authority to a sense of responsibility so that you can look at what you're doing in a different way without taking on that burden of authority and the oppositions it immediately sets up.

BRUCE GRENVILLE Henry, could you talk about how you sense questions of responsibility and authority differ in your situation from those that would exist inside an institution which has an ongoing presence like the Art Gallery of Ontario or the Vancouver Art Gallery?

HENRY TSANG I'm not connected to any place that would be called an institution and that includes the Chinese Cultural Centre.

BRUCE GRENVILLE No, I think every time you organize an exhibition you become an institution.

HENRY TSANG Doing these projects is an attempt to reevaluate the idea of institution. It's a positioning that takes into account the inadequacies of the existing institutions as I see them. Otherwise, why embark on them? I don't see any other place that would be adequate for these kinds of endeavours so we have to form our own context. But it's an experiment. One step at a time.

BRUCE GRENVILLE I think we are imagining institutions as monoliths that are static, but they're not. In my institution we reformulate ourselves every time we develop something. I think we are establishing polarities that aren't necessarily there and I'm a bit frustrated by the fact that it's easy to nail an institution, the so-called monolith, without understanding that in fact there are many similarities in what we all go through. While I think you have talked about responsibility, I believe the question of authority is still open because you do establish a certain authority – who's invited, who's not asked, what's going to be represented.

RICHARD FUNG I think there are the same series of questions about authority and responsibility whether or not an organized event is attached to a specific institution or a particular history. The question of those differences in antagonistic contradiction is always there. I think *Racy Sexy* alludes to some of that but we still have to make sure our process is accountable, a word that hasn't been used yet. But when we organize an event like *Racy Sexy* people relate to us in terms of personal histories perhaps whereas with an institution like the Art Gallery of Ontario you have to deal with a whole history of responsibility that is in the minds of the

people that may have nothing to do with you as an organizer or curator. What's interesting about some of the protest from the black community about the Barnes exhibit is that it's symptomatic of the fact that the AGO historically has not had a strong relationship with black Torontonians.

JOHANNE LAMOUREUX I would like to come back to the need or the desire to dissolve authority. We live in a society where there is a strong crisis of representation in the political sense. How am I entitled to speak in another's name? At the moment curatorial practice becomes involved in difference then the question of the legitimacy of the curator's voice to speak for others is in question. Interaction in communities in this sense is very important but we should always be careful that it dissolves authority because I don't think interaction and the targetting of the audience we want always works to destabilize the authority of the curator or curatorial voice. Sometimes it functions as a mere buttressing or it creates new instances of legitimation, which ultimately reinforce the authoritative stance of curators.

MATTHEW TEITELBAUM I don't think the question of cultural difference need always be linked to the issue of authority. Of course, authority often goes beyond cultural difference. There's a huge question out there about who speaks – that is, who is invited to speak and by whom? Who frames that speech?

FRANCE GASCON My concern has to do with how you work with communities whose histories have been lost or eradicated, communities that don't have a sense they are communities. I think this is important because local knowledge is crucial. It is what has changed the relationships between museums and their community. In a small place like Joliette, which is very homogenous, I ask how you stage this sense of identity because I think it could be the role of the museum to make it possible for this history to emerge.

WAYNE BAERWALDT (to Matthew Teitelbaum) Which voices do you identify with, which ones have representation in the museum? I'm sure it's something you and others at the Art Gallery of Ontario are grappling with because of the cosmopolitan make-up of Toronto. There is an authority there that allows these voices to come in.

MATTHEW TEITELBAUM I don't think we have an imperative to represent any particular point of view over another as much as we are responsive to proposals that have about them a certain critical thinking. Inevitably there are some caveats, but in the end the strongest proposals have the stronger conceptual structure. We have to think about the way in which a proposal rethinks the development of audience, sustainable programming and a process of evaluation. There will always be the complaint that the large institutions are not responsive. At the Art Gallery of Ontario we carved the name of the gallery in Mandarin on the front of the building and actually got complaints that we were recognizing the Asian community instead of other communities.

SARA DIAMOND I want to say that I'm not sure how long different communities, coalitions or other kinds of institutions will endure if we don't also find ways of fully recognizing and restructuring in ways that bring into the centre the authority and power of those voices. It has to do with the exchange of power. The process of negotiation, building and shifting meanings can't just be measured exhibition by exhibition but by all of the work that structurally goes into who is empowered and that very difficult process of work being shown. I think it's very complicated. Those links have to be made but also differences represented.

SUNIL GUPTA I'm trying not to get agitated about all this. I have to keep it at some humorous ironic level. It's no accident that the Hispanics, for example, are possibly teaming up with Jessie Helms to challenge the formation of an African-American museum in the Smithsonian at this very moment. By giving Henry his Chinese area, Jamelie her Arab area and me a South Asian area...

SARA DIAMOND I think that's what I'm arguing against.

SUNIL GUPTA I'm trying to articulate that part of the problem is this notion of white authority with a diversity of specializations that are in competition with each other. It isn't working.

JAMELIE HASSAN I want to question the use of the word "allow." I think what part of my presentation and Henry's was about was that engaging in these

collective and collaborative activities is specifically not about this question of being allowed into or being given permission to perform in what are called mainstream institutions. That in fact they're not appealing at this particular moment unless there is a very clearly articulated position and honesty about why the institutional staff at that particular moment decides that's what they're going to do. Then you can believe that there's a dialogue that's going to be maintained and ongoing. There has to be a recognition that all the new things we have learned along the way, in the ways we have learned them, whatever place we have come from, have to be equally recognized. That's part of the question around power. It's very different than, say, being allowed in the doors to do your thing. So I'm not saying I'm against institutions as such. I don't think there is necessarily a polarity there. I just think there are different places for the production of knowledge and learning and what we're doing is trying to figure out how that can move around.

BARBARA FISCHER I want to ask Henry, when you do exhibitions at a place like the Chinese Cultural Centre that involve contemporary idioms or contemporary ways of speaking through art, how much can the audience get into it? What is the level of communication with people who have no background in contemporary art and those practices? Are there clashes? In my own experience I find that contemporary art is often not accessible to those audiences.

HENRY TSANG Those are the reasons we did it. We didn't say let's get really strange contemporary art to throw in these people's faces. But we also didn't say we need to be accessible so that people can understand. It wasn't that kind of attitude. One response from the first show was that some of the Chinese artists who don't work in that way didn't like it. They didn't like the form. They didn't like what we were trying to do. Some other people were saying this doesn't represent us. What we were trying to show was difference upon difference. We were talking about cultural difference from within. We chose a very specific theme. We didn't talk about colour theory. It wasn't about abstraction. It was about something else that was specific, a specific audience. With *Racy Sexy*, again, a theme carried the message and whatever form people chose was their decision.

SHARON BROOKS I want to ask about the use of the term community which, like institution, power and authority, is a difficult term. There is a way in which this term is still being deployed by funding agencies and similar bodies to suggest that communities can be addressed as homogeneous.

JAMELIE HASSAN Certainly the notion that I can speak for an Arab community in Ontario or that I can speak for an Islamic position in mainstream culture is completely impossible. I never functioned within the Arabic community that I grew up in as a spokesperson nor was I designated as such. I think this is a good question because it invokes who we are in dialogue with, who we have affinities with, who we choose to make affiliations with as opposed to what group you are born into, which therefore locates you in the politics and dynamics of that community.