# INSIDE, OUTSIDE, UPSIDE DOWN

## In Search of Cultural Space with the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver

HENRY TSANG

What is cultural space? Is it the place of identity, where the promise of commonality beckons? Is it the banner around which individuals can rally in identification and solidarity with others? Or is it the site of subjectivity, the intervention of memory within official history, the refuge of the personal, the alternative? It offers the perception of shelter, a place to shed one's vulnerability, providing solace and nurture because it is the domain of the familiar. From this vantage-point of safety, to be inside is to occupy a cultural space that feels like home, away from the foreign outside, the alien, the different.

The meaning of culture is ambiguous and constantly shifting, reflecting, not representing those who define it; in fact, it escapes definition. (Would this be the reason why the mere utterance of the word "culture" can make some people, like the poet Heinz Johst, reach for his gun?) The space of culture is the site of social exchange and intercourse, of contest and paradox; it is the promise of democracy. Too often, cultural space is the claim of the institution – protected, controlled and so seldom shared.

Questions such as these originally drew me to the Chinese Cultural Centre (CCC) in Vancouver. As a visual artist, much of my artwork has been involved with the politics of identification, a direct result of my Chinese ancestry and growing 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. Was this the place to find cultural space? And how could an art project function in furthering this exploration? This vision developed into two separate yet distinctly linked forays into the

great unknown; *Self Not Whole* in 1991 and *Racy Sexy* in 1993.

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 towards intercultural collaboration, Racy Sexy signalled a shift in the exploration of community to the outside.

There have been many other arts projects in recent years in Vancouver employing difference as a theme: *In Visible Colours, Yellow Peril, Queer City, To Visit the Tiger,* and *First Ladies,* to name a few. Like these projects, one of our goals was to stake out territory in which to speak about culturally and/or sexually specific experiences, without fear of homophobic, racist, sexist or self-righteous liberalist dominating reaction. All of these projects were consciously positioned in relationship to perceived centres of power, aimed at empowering those who had been historically erased or marginalized, validating voices and sensibilities dismissed by the dominant cultural gaze.

## In Search of a Cultural Centre: *Self Not Whole*

Curated by community activist Lorraine Chan and myself, *Self Not Whole*





functioned as an interventionist, site-specific exhibition. In the Chinese space of the CCC, nontraditional, western art (and thus arguably non-Chinese) was presented to an audience that perhaps might not be familiar with contemporary avant-gardist art practices, but might be most likely to understand the artist's culturally specific references.

The event 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] *Self Not Whole* as a title does not translate easily into Chinese; after much deliberation, we chose *mi*, meaning "search," alluding to a journey or exploration for some thing or place that was perhaps not the self but a centre, be that existential or cultural.

In 1990, Lorraine Chan and I approached the CCC's exhibitions coordinator, Saintfield Wong, with the idea to exhibit contemporary Chinese Canadian artists whose work engaged questions of cultural identity. We 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. 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.

We were not concerned about defining some sort of Chinese Canadian aesthetic, nor about authenticating experience. The issues raised were not based on east meets west; after all, we too are the west. But if one speaks English as the language of comfort, and cooks Italian food better than Chinese, are we the east as well? Would we thereby be seen through Chinese eyes as foreign? After all, it was to the western historical avant-garde that the work showed the strongest links – the artists we found consciously investigating cultural identity were involved in this practice. Although contemporary art often alienates the non-art publics, we were hoping that the audience in the CCC would overcome this formal barrier to engage with work that spoke about experiences they could share. For the promotional campaign, two publicists were hired, one targeting the English mainstream and alternative arts media and the other the Chinese.

This approach proved to be successful. Providing a multilingual gallery attendant as well as artist's statements near each of the works in Chinese and English also helped. 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 including: the white "mainstream" arts community; regular users of the CCC such as those coming to see Chinese traditional dance who would encounter the exhibition; recent immigrants on their way to English as a Second Language classes; and Boy Scouts who would run around and through the installations during and after their meetings every Saturday afternoon.

Throughout the development of the project with the CCC, 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).





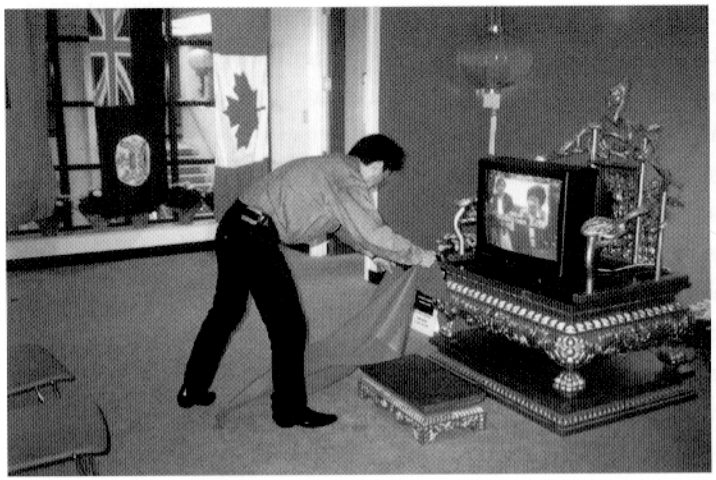
Confrontations arose over matters such as proper procedure in order to use CCC stationary, and the delegation of responsibility. In turn, some of our ideas were mystifying to the organization, such as the consideration of artists as professionals (that is, being entitled to fees for presenting their work), the curatorial process (which includes research and studio visits and the encouragement of new, especially site-specific, work) and exhibition/presentation standards. Grassroots organizations do not operate like art venues and, not surprisingly, personnel were not trained to facilitate contemporary artistic practices.

What we eventually realized was that two main factors created a gap between ourselves and the CCC. One was that we were strangers; neither Lorraine Chan nor myself 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 involved cultural difference. We were westernized, Canadianized, and just because we called ourselves Chinese did not mean we belonged to the Chinese community. Our values, our world views were not only different, they were sometimes perceived as alien. We were clearly outsiders, members of the even further marginalized nontraditional art community, no less.

So why were we drawn to this place where we felt, aside from occasional twinges of peripheral ethnic kinship, like foreign bodies? Was it the name, the promise of an authentic version of what is truly Chinese?

Ana Chang's site-specific installation *Journey Into the Centre (Beyond the Western World)* both overtly and discreetly addressed these concerns. Her interventionist text (in English) was applied onto the street-level glass windows of the CCC. The fractured narrative shifts from public to private, formal to personal, Chinese then Canadian then elsewhere. "On Location: Vancouver, Beijing, etc. 'Where are you from?' 'Canada.' 'No. Where are you really from . . .'" So successful was the installation in fusing with the existing built environment that many viewers did not perceive it to be art, or overlooked it entirely.

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



Paul Wong installing *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* (1991)

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, that there was not and could not be a singular perspective of community, that if this was indeed a cultural space, difference within difference must be tolerated.

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 the management and the board of the CCC. They were afraid that certain elements would be misinterpreted and, as a result, on the morning of the exhibition opening, the room in which his work was situated became locked.

Paul Wong's installation alluded to the idea of China as homeland, and exposes 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 offense 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. Bolder still 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 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 People's Republic draped over a footstool in front of an ornate, kitschy dragon throne supporting 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 successfully 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 – the artist, organizers and management – agreeing to changes, 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 Wong's 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 depicts Paul Wong's relationship to his ancestral village, contrasted with the ever-changing mid-1980s urban China. It found its ideal audience in the CCC, in particular the old men and women who would sit through the entire ninety minutes mesmerized by an insider's journey to Toisan.

Overall response to the exhibition was very positive, and attendance for all events was 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. However, it escaped critical recognition from the art press at the time. Perhaps its placement within a "community-based" or "ethnic" (therefore foreign?) setting was construed as amateur, notwithstanding the participation of artists with established reputations or careers that have since blossomed. However, this may be a moot point, for our intention was to reach a public beyond the art community. Of course, the art crowd came too, but they were part of a larger public that experienced the work and confronted the subject of cultural identity inside a cultural (culturally-sensitive?) space.

It was obvious that the cultural shoe was not a perfect fit, for the search for cultural space on the inside via a reinsertion of identity politics[4] had not resulted in comfort and safety. However, we had put our foot in it, and having ingratiated ourselves with the CCC, found room and grudging support to take another step in a different direction entirely. If cultural space was not to be found on the inside, then we would shift towards the outside and look in the spaces in-between.

## In Search of Community Building: *Racy Sexy*

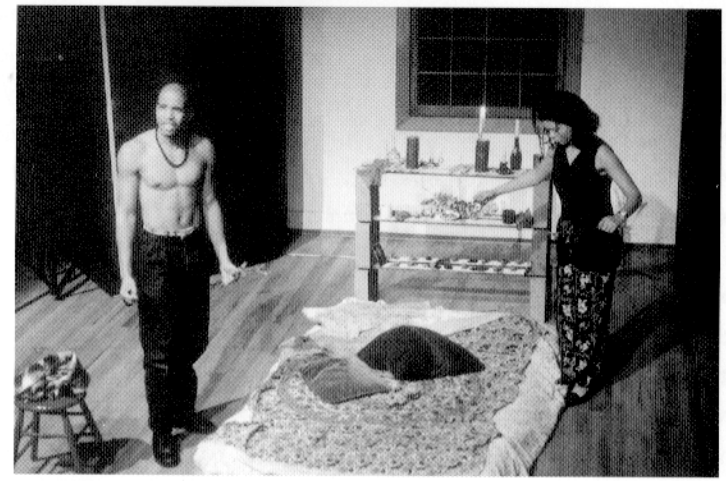
In the summer of 1991, community activist and filmmaker Karin Lee and I approached the CCC general manager about organizing another arts project. We spoke about an approach that was not ethnospecific but intercultural, with the topic of sexuality carefully raised as a way to address younger, more





diverse audiences. The intent was to open up the CCC to collaborate with other cultural groups in the city, as well as place its programming in a contemporary context. Assured that all would be done in "good taste," the general manager agreed to support the idea.

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



*Afrocentric* (1993) performance at Kitsilano Neighbourhood House

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 opposition to each other.[5]

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, 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, traditional and modern/postmodern? How do these influences function within the zone of the personal, or in relation to the dominant culture? Many of the artists in Racy Sexy reflected upon these conflicting forces as they have experienced them.

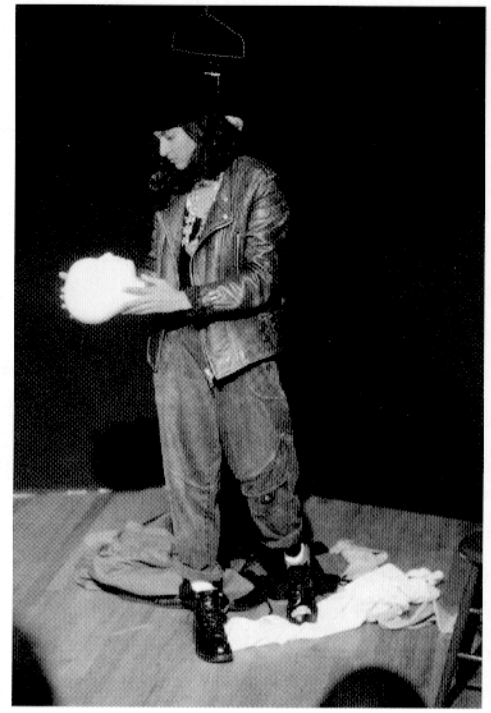
Support from the CCC for *Racy Sexy* was garnered through a process that sharply contrasted that of *Self Not Whole*. The former exhibition had been presented to the board at the last minute by CCC coordinator Saintfield Wong, which resulted in confusion about who the curators and artists were, what the theme was and, overall, what to expect. After weathering such an experience, we took great pains to ensure that with Racy Sexy, protocol was dutifully followed. By lobbying individual board members we created a safer environment when the project was formally presented and provided subsequent updates to keep 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 we detected 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"). Although Racy Sexy was only to be the working title, we could not avoid the taboo word for the official one. 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 longstanding and respected community activists on the board spoke about the project's public education function. They benevolently acknowledged a responsibility to the "younger generation" to facilitate discussion around issues such as AIDS and homosexuality.

AIDS education was indeed an important component of *Racy Sexy*. We worked with the newly formed Vancouver chapter of Asians Support AIDS Project (ASAP). On December 1, World AIDS Day, ASAP coordinator Henry Koo prefaced the performances and readings at the Carnegie Centre with an acknowledgement and tribute to those living with the disease. Then, at the







Sheila James *Sexy Straight Up* (1993) performance at Kitsilano Neighbourhood House

Trout Lake Community Centre, he and Cynthia Low led an informative and animated discussion with the audience following the screening of two documentary videotapes focusing on the effect of AIDS in the East Asian and South Asian communities: *Fighting Chance* by Richard Fung, and *Bolo! Bolo!* by Gita Saxena and Ian Iqbal Rashid.

Two other pieces focused on raising community awareness of AIDS. *Second Decade: AIDS•Community•Television* was a series of public service announcements produced by Michael Balser and various artists aimed at different cultural audiences. Kirby Hsu's three-monitor video installation, *Voices Unheard, Faces Unseen, Deaths Unknown* addressed Asians in general and Chinese in particular about living with AIDS. Situating the work at the Chinese Cultural Centre helped make the piece, in this case, site-specific.

It was important that the project involve those who could speak from and about other experiences to those within and between communities. If *Racy Sexy* was to be intercultural, it could not be perceived as "Chinese"; the CCC would need to be repositioned, decentred and, in the process, we as the Chinese Canadian organizers (Karin Lee, myself, and later, Cynthia Low) would have to share power. Therefore, the organizational structure of *Racy Sexy* needed to be changed; as a result, a steering committee and, later, a curatorial committee were formed.[6]

The steering committee was composed of artists, organizers and activists from different cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations. This group was to operate in a proactive capacity in overseeing the project, shaping the vision, managing the mechanics of the process, and selecting and providing links with participating venues. They would offer expertise in the specificities and sensitivities of cultural and political contexts of which they were a part.

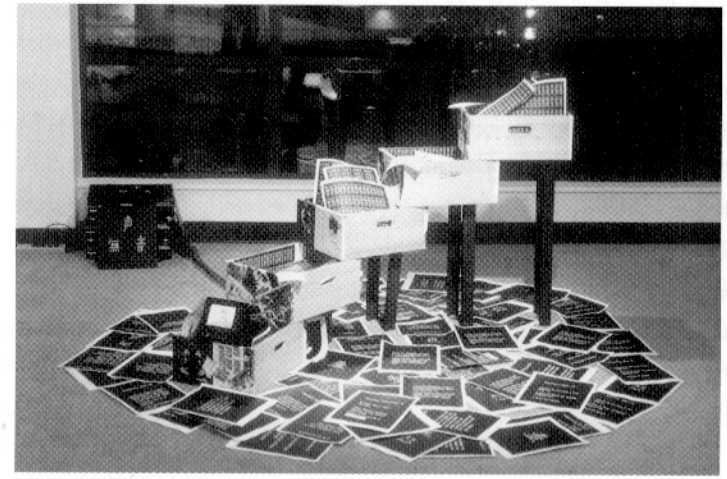
The curatorial committee grew out of the need to address the specifics of program selection as opposed to overall project direction and management. Discipline-specific subcommittees were formed, with two to three committee members each, for performance and writing (encompassing theatre, dance, performance art, music and readings), visual art, and film and video.

As a conscious ideological strategy, the sharing of power is an important and necessary goal. We did not want to replicate traditional hierarchical structures and call it a collaborative project. We discovered, however, that this was a complex task, and that our assumptions about the actual power-sharing process were constantly being challenged and redefined. For instance, we began in the hope that all participants would take on shared responsibility. After all, they were the ones who would collectively make the decisions. In practice, finding individuals able to work together proved to be a formidable task, which was one of the main reasons it required more than a year of committee meetings just to determine the mechanics of organizing *Racy Sexy*.

Equity hiring practices were also discussed. The staff for the project was hired with this in mind, in combination with required skills and competence. But by the time *Racy Sexy* was launched, this team of men and women of







Kirby Hsu *Voices Unheard, Faces Unseen, Deaths Unknown* (1993)
video installation

various ethnicities and sexual orientations had changed dramatically through staff turn-over, and the diversity was no longer so equitable.[8] Our difficulties in finding personnel suggested that few people of colour and First Nations, especially in the gay and lesbian communities, have had adequate access to experience and training in the arts, pointing to a strong need for the development of these skills.

In addition, attempts to decentralize the power were further complicated by the fact that, as instigators of the project, Karin Lee and myself were heavily implicated in its vision, making it more difficult perhaps for the other committee members to fully claim it for themselves. Even though decisions were made collectively, the proposed autonomy of the steering committee existed in tenuous territory, especially given the omnipresence of the CCC.

Inclusive projects typically employ "outreach" strategies, which attempt to foster awareness in communities outside of one's own. In our case, we began by issuing an open call for submissions to individual artists, activists and organizations, and advertised in magazines and newspapers ranging from *Fuse* magazine in Toronto to the *Micmac News* in Halifax to *Angles* magazine in

Vancouver. We also used the old curatorial technique of asking around about who might be appropriate.

The politics of representation were constantly debated throughout the development of *Racy Sexy*. 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 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.

Like in *Self Not Whole*, the majority of the works we looked at employed western avant-gardist formal strategies and, of these, most involved either issues of cultural identity or sexuality but seldom both. It was the territory in between that we were in search of. Nhan Duc Nguyen's photo-based *Primarily Yours* triptych explored how East Asian masculinity is constructed by the media and the gay white community. The centre panel, *Target* contains an image appropriated from the cover of an Asian fashion magazine, of a hyper-virile young man smirkingly cocking a gun at you the viewer. A circle of text surrounds this romanticized gangster motif: "He is a macho guy who can cope with anything sexually." In the left panel, *Label*, the text and the triangular collage of tea packages from around the world allude to the exoticization of Asians by white males. In the right panel, *Magic Square*, (in collaboration with Brice Canyon) a grid of polaroids depict the artists partaking in vigorous sexual play, an open declaration of interracial coupling.

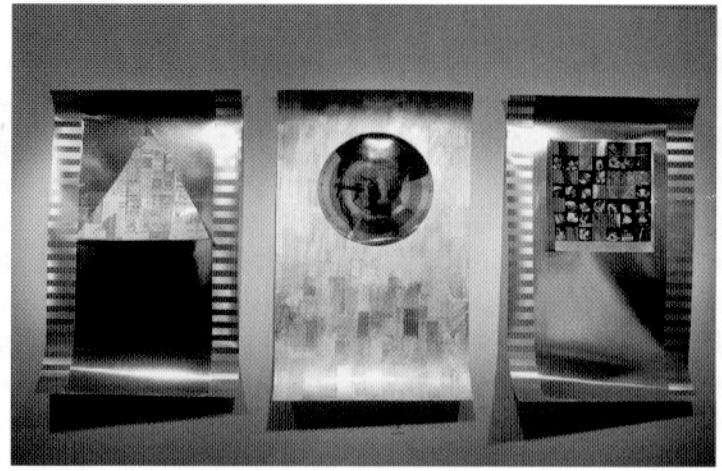
At times, inadvertent and conflicting links were perceived between different pieces. For instance, one man remarked that he was deeply moved by the subject of surviving with the AIDS virus in Kirby Hsu's video installation, but





added that he thought it was homosexual activity as depicted in Nhan Nguyen's work causing the situation.

Also dealing with the representation of sexuality but from a First Nations perspective, was the poetry of Archer Pechawis. Using humour and irony, he dissects the legacy of stereotypes in Hollywood films such as *Thunderheart* and *Dances With Wolves* that perpetuate the victimization of the First Peoples, even while they are supposedly valorized and romanticized. In each case, the



Nhan Duc Nguyen *Primarily Yours (Trilogy)*
(1993) mixed media

sexualized but powerless "Indians" play out their colonized desire in a white heterosexist male fantasy. His readings were particularly successful in reaching audiences of diverse backgrounds, for his references were mainstream, his writing articulate, and his presentation ebullient.

When planning how to reach those who do not normally go to art events, traditional spaces such as theatres and galleries seemed less and less appropriate. Instead, we decided to approach cultural, community and shopping centres.

Shopping centres were ideal venues in which to attract mainstream

audiences, but because our schedule coincided with the Christmas season, none was interested in co-sponsoring the project. In some of our negotiations, certain ideological differences became apparent. For instance, one location in particular we coveted was Metrotown Mall with its forty-eight-screen video wall that plays rock videos and advertisements. We proposed a selection of video works that included the *Second Decade: AIDS•Community• Television* public service announcements. After viewing the tapes, none of which contained any explicit imagery, the management declined. The representative told us that not only was the subject matter inappropriate, but that they did not want to promote homosexuality.

The community and cultural centres we approached did not express such homophobia. The locations of the venues ranged from upper-middle- to low-income neighbourhoods.

Of all places, the runaway success was the Carnegie Centre, which borders on the impoverished downtown east side, Skid Row, Chinatown, Japantown, and upscale touristic Gastown. Racy Sexy events at 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.

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 (would this qualify it as a cultural space?), while simultaneously an open one, that is, open to the general public, open for others (outsiders?) to partake, share, judge and question.

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-classed 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?

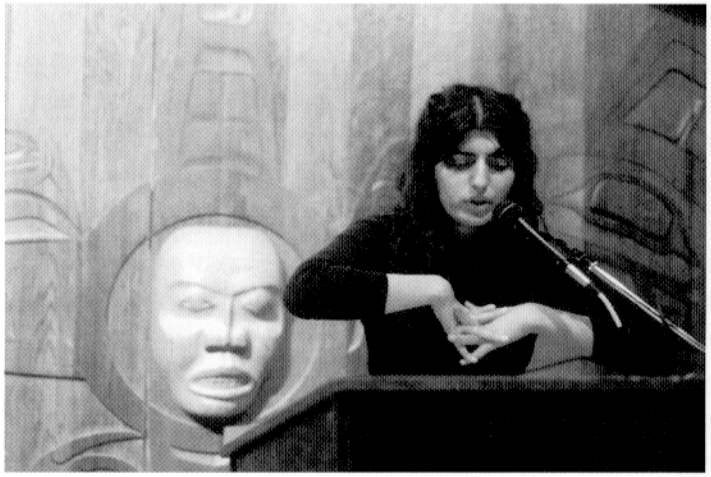
One piece that critiqued white heterosexism was *Scarlett Fever*. Directed by Diane Brown and performed by Andrew Olewine, this performance art/dance piece is a parody of the book and film, *Gone With The Wind*. Drawing upon his upbringing in the American deep south, Andrew Olewine plays the part of Scarlett O'Hara in a campy and satirical look at the ideals of feminine beauty, romance and desire espoused in a publication "second only to the Bible in sales worldwide." In tribute to the romanticization of white supremacy, he drapes himself over a scale-model southern colonial mansion and later celebrates his emancipation by dancing with an over-sized stuffed mammy doll.

No less serious, but considerably more understated was Kwoi Gin's film *Dark Sun; Bright Shade*. Set in Toronto, it depicts the complex relationship between two Chinese men – one local-born, westernized and laissez-faire, and the other a student activist from Hong Kong. The Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 provides the catalyst in exposing their cultural and political differences. By portraying a gay couple, the filmmaker does not kowtow to the essentialist political rigidity that demands he represent himself as a heterosexual Chinese Canadian male. The characters' sexuality is one of many factors including tradition, family and class that all contribute towards a sophisticated questioning of homeland and nationhood.

As in *Self Not Whole*, language was a key concern in the publicity campaign. *Racy Sexy* needed to be promoted in as many cultural and linguistic groups in Vancouver as possible, and how it would be perceived in each of them taken into account. The budget finally determined how far we could go; promotions were produced in English, Chinese, Vietnamese and Punjabi.[7] Thousands of flyers in these languages were distributed in different neighbourhoods and communities, and information disseminated through contacts in service organizations. *Racy Sexy* received a good deal of positive media attention partly because of the urgency of the title and the transparency of its

goals. Coverage was particularly strong in the English and Chinese mainstream press, as well as in the gay and lesbian, First Nations, South Asian and Japanese Canadian community-oriented media.

Of all the artists in the exhibition, however, only Lee Pui Ming presented her work in a language other than English. Cantonese was used in her performance with piano and voice, *The Butterfly Lovers – Revisited*. She



Raj Pannu reading at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre (1993)

adapts the old Chinese folk tale of a young female student disguised as a man who falls in love with her studying partner. By the time he finds out her true gender identity, she has been betrothed to another, and he dies of a broken heart. The woman then kills herself, and the star-crossed cross-dressed couple are transformed into a pair of butterflies.

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The many strategies employed in *Racy Sexy* warrant further development and analysis, and the links between different communities require continued commitment and strengthening. Initial efforts in *Self Not Whole* proved threatening





to the CCC because the politics of identity questioned Chineseness, homeland and nationhood. The exhibition was an insertion of conflicting and confronting views on Chinese Canadian culture. It was a move towards the inside that presumed that the CCC would provide a culturally safe space for Chinese Canadian artists. Ironically, both parties ended up being at risk. *Self Not Whole* was an irritant, it created discomfiture, it found itself in a dysfunctional home.

*Racy Sexy*, however, was a search for a safe space beyond the notion of home. It ventured into territories that, for each artist or organizer involved, were outside, beyond, foreign. It was an experiment to expand the sense of community, building towards a collective ownership of cultural space, with shared experiences, shared responsibilities, shared power. It looked towards a time beyond the need for current and past strategic essentialisms, when the power has shifted, when neither the centre nor the margins as we know them now are the sites of contention. *Racy Sexy* embodied an otherwise unrealistic optimism in an unwieldy collaborative process and, in so doing, mapped out new and expanding territories of what we can collectively call cultural space.

## Notes

I would like to thank the following for their generosity in providing invaluable feedback in the writing of this paper: Karin Lee, Scott MacFarlane, Rosa Ho, Beverly Yhap, Lorraine Chan, Amy Gottlieb, Amir Ali Alibhai, Mary Anne Moser.

1 *Self Not Whole* was presented from November 2 to 30, 1991. The visual artists in the exhibition included Ana Chang, Diana Li, Mary Sui-Yee Wong, Paul Wong, Kiki Yee, Sharyn Yuen and the Pender Guy Radio Collective. Readings were given by Jamila Ismael, Larissa Lai, Corinne Lee, Sky Lee and Wong Wing Siu, performances by Number One Son, Lee Su-Feh, River Sui and Sebastian Yeung, 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 Acknowledging, of course, that projects in various shapes and guises involving identity politics have a pattern of resurfacing in places that are constructed as centres of culture.

5 *Racy Sexy* took place from November 26 to December 11, 1993. The visual artists in the exhibition included Terence Anthony, Eric Bontogon, Grace Channer, Kirby Hsu, Sur Mehat, Shani Mootoo, Nhan Duc 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. The writers who participated were Mercedes Baines, Anne Jew, Larissa Lai, David Odhiambo, Raj Pannu, and Archer Pechawis. Film and video was exhibited 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.

6 The steering committee members for *Racy Sexy* were 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.

7 Our translation service, MOSAIC, recommended that we forego Spanish, citing that those who would read it were likely to comprehend English as well, whereas the same could not be said for the other, especially Asian, languages.

8 *The Racy Sexy* staff somehow ended up consisting of mostly, but not all, young East Asian heterosexual women.