



EITHER / OR

Tendrils of text climb up the stone wall on the east side of the Vancouver Art Gallery, like English ivy, an aesthetic common in British architecture. Hedera helix can climb up to thirty metres, as the organic forms in Tsang Kin-Wah's site-specific installation, *EITHER / OR*, do. An invasive species, ivy came here from perhaps northern Africa or western Asia, but more likely the British Isles, along with those who came to colonize and settle in this part of the world. The building the artwork has attached itself to was constructed to house the Vancouver Courthouse. Neoclassical design motifs such as this have been popular in Western societies to represent authority and power, conjuring the ancient empires of the Greeks and Romans in association with institutions such as banking, higher education, and in this case, the judiciary.

Three blocks to the west is Tsang's complementary *EITHER / OR*, at Offsite, located in the plaza of the Shangri-La Hotel, Vancouver's tallest building. Here, his texts take on the forms of floral, butterfly and dragon patterns, common themes in Chinese decorative arts. It is fitting then, that the luxury brand hotel chain is based in Hong Kong, named after the utopian lamasery in James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*. If one is predisposed towards comparing East and West, then the two installations can be considered—as the buildings are and their functions as well—as yin and yang. But they are not opposite, nor opposing; they are more either or, neither and nor. Although distinct and different, both share a similar historical antecedent for the land on which they sit, that of British colonization.

The texts at both sites also display a dialectical process that exposes a nervousity that borders on distress. They have been mined from online forums such as Reddit and in commentary following

reports on any topic that may invoke anti-Asian sentiment. In person, they are whispered, or expressed aloud if the speaker deems their social environment sympathetic to their concerns.

Theirs is a voicing of displeasure and distrust of others, those perceived to be invading this land. These voices reflect the values of those who wrote legislation to keep out Asians and Blacks, and the Indigenous peoples apart from their land, resulting in their disenfranchisement. They echo those that sparked the first anti-Chinese riot in Vancouver of 1887, months after the city's incorporation, as part of the "white Canada" movement that preceded British Columbia's entry into Canadian confederation. They enacted the Chinese Head Tax from 1885 to 1923, and the Chinese Exclusion Act from 1926 to 1947. These voices incited the 1907 Anti-Asian riot organized by the Asiatic Exclusion League that attacked Chinatown and Powell Street/ Japantown, followed by the Hayashi-Lemieux Agreement of 1908 which limited the number of Japanese migrants. They drafted the 1908 "continuous journey regulation," prohibiting the arrival of migrants from India as the law required one to travel directly from their country of citizenship. In 1914, the SS Komagata Maru was denied entry to Vancouver because it carried passengers of Indian descent, all British subjects, who were attempting to immigrate to Canada. They passed a federal Order-in-Council to ban Blacks in 1911. These voices dispossessed, forcibly relocated and interned Japanese Canadians from their homes from 1942 to 1949.

In 1967, a "points" system was incorporated into Canada's Immigration Act—now known as the Comprehensive Ranking System—that was used to assess potential immigrants for eligibility. Nationality and race were no longer factors as main considerations were based on education levels, work skills and language fluency in English or French. With the emphasis shifting towards those with more skills and capital, direct racial discrimination

was reduced significantly. Canada has since become more cosmopolitan and globally connected. People move more freely between countries, as can their money, especially if it is invested in real estate. This was not always the case; in 1884, the provincial government enacted legislation denying Chinese people the right to buy, lease, or preempt Crown lands. Race-based covenants were common, excluding Asians, Blacks and Jews from owning or renting a home in many towns and cities across the province until they were nullified in an amendment to the BC Land Titles Act in 1978.

This is the cultural and institutional legacy invoked by these voices when they continue to rail against those who buy our homes, or come to also settle on our land. They did not decry the purchase of lands by the British, Irish, Germans and "white" Americans from the time of Vancouver's incorporation until present. But they did after 1982, when Hong Kong emigration to Canada increased dramatically, with Vancouver receiving the majority of the newcomers. This was the year Margaret Thatcher was televised falling down the steps of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing during her visit with Deng Xiaoping. Interpreted as a sign that the British Empire's power and influence was waning and China's was on the rise, apprehension, anxiety and fear of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 rose. The initial local backlash was swift but more verbal than violent; the mainstream

media labelled the city's changing demographics "Hongcouver," and locals derisively referred to the University of British Columbia as the "University of a Billion Chinese." After 1997, Mainland China replaced Hong Kong as the largest source of immigrants, and through the Federal Immigrant Investor Program, significant numbers of wealthy new nouveau riche Canadians.

Since 2001, the price of a detached house in Vancouver has more than quadrupled, facilitated by historic low interest rates, accelerated movement of offshore capital and the city's transformation into a playground for the international elite. It is no wonder that issues of affordability, foreign ownership and the spectre of yet another wave of "Asian invasion" are subjects of constant debate. The writing on the walls in Tsang's two-part installation act as a very public reminder of this city's struggle with its colonial past.

Henry Tsang
September, 2017

Henry Tsang is a visual and media artist based in Vancouver, BC. His artworks incorporate digital media, video, photography, language and sculptural elements that follow the relationship between the public, community and identity through global flows of people, culture and capital. Henry is an Associate Professor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.



About the Artist

Tsang Kin-Wah (曾建華) was born in 1976 in Shantou, Guangdong Province in China, and moved with his family to Hong Kong in 1984. While pursuing a BA Honours in Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he became fascinated with the book form and the relationships between text, image and narration. In 2003, he travelled to the United Kingdom to pursue a master's in Book Arts at Camberwell College of Arts in London. His interest in creating floral-patterned paintings and wallpaper designs began during these years. He made his first wallpaper installation by covering a public floor with pages from a book. This was also the beginning of his ongoing interest in the relationship between public art and its audience.

Tsang's immersive vinyl text installations have covered the walls and floors of galleries and museums around the world. In the early 2000s his work evolved from static vinyl installations to multimedia video projections that would reverberate with philosophical concepts and religious symbolism, covering walls, floors and visitors with moving texts.

He has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout Europe, Asia and the United States, including representing Hong Kong at the 2015 Venice Biennale, and a major solo exhibition that launched the M+ Pavilion in Hong Kong in 2016. This is his first exhibition in Canada.

IMAGES:

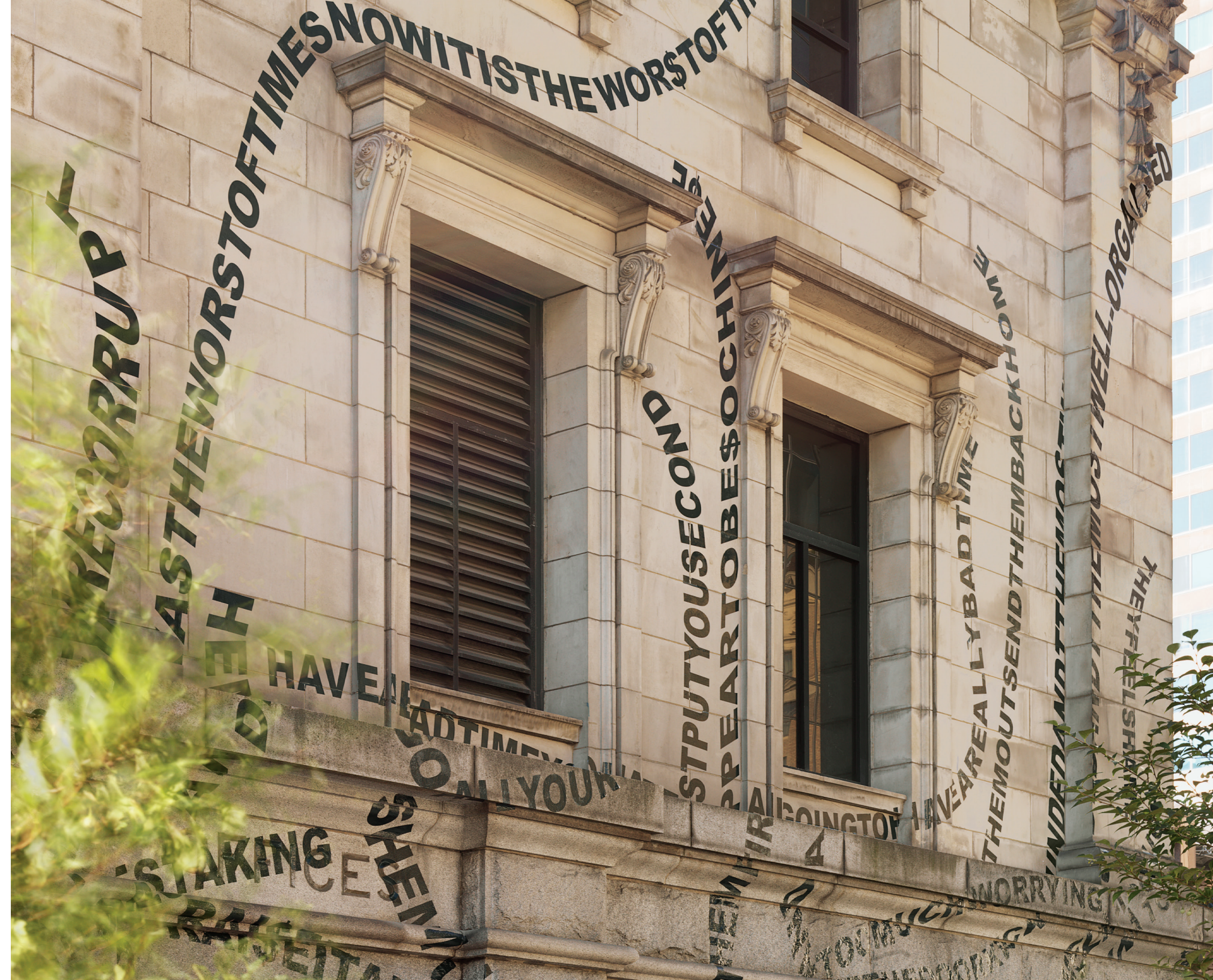
Tsang Kin-Wah

EITHER / OR, 2017, *EITHER / OR*, 2017
site-specific installation
Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite

EITHER / OR, 2017
site-specific installation
on the Vancouver Art Gallery
Howe Street façade

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OFFSITE May 4 to October 15, 2017
 ONSITE Late Summer to Early Winter

Offsite is the Vancouver Art Gallery's outdoor public art space in the heart of the city. Presenting an innovative program of temporary projects twice a year, it is a site for local and international contemporary artists to exhibit works related to the surrounding urban context. Featured artists consider the site-specific potential of art within the public realm and respond to the changing social and cultural conditions of our contemporary world.



LOCATED in Vancouver on West Georgia Street, between Thurlow and Bute Streets

Onsite is a temporary outdoor installation on the Howe Street side of the Vancouver Art Gallery's building façade.

Offsite / Onsite is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and funded by the City of Vancouver through the Public Art Program.



The Gallery recognizes Ian Gillespie, President, Westbank; Ben Yeung, President, Peterson Investment Group; and residents at the Shangri-La for their support of this space.

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CURATOR: Diana Freundl, Associate Curator,
Asian Art, Vancouver Art Gallery

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Artgallery

750 Hornby Street
Vancouver BC V6Z 2H7 Canada
604 662 4700 www.vanartgallery.bc.ca

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