

Asian American Artists

Cross-Cultural

Voices

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University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
University at Stony Brook

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Kip Fulbeck
Wenda Gu
Zarina Hashmi
Do-Ho Suh
Lynne Yamamoto

Curated by: Young M. Park

Curatorial assistance: Rhonda Cooper
Ann Gibson
Robert Lee

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Panel Discussion

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University Art Gallery, Staller Center for the Arts

Moderator: Ann Gibson

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Asian American Artists: Cross-Cultural Voices

by Young M. Park

The demographic and phenomenological impact of minorities and migrants within the West may be crucial in conceiving of the transnational character of contemporary culture.

-Frederic Jamesonⁱ

As a hapaⁱⁱ, sometimes you get the best of both worlds, and you can draw from both, yet sometimes both sides see you as the 'other.'

-Kip Fulbeckⁱⁱⁱ

When the springs dry up and the fish are left stranded on the ground, they spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit- but it would be much better if they could forget each other in the rivers and lakes.

-Chuang Tzu^{iv}

Caught in the colonial assumption of Orientalism, the confrontational responses of many earlier exhibitions of Asian American art^v inadvertently tended to perpetuate the stereotypical images of Asian Americans and ignore other instances of social and cultural differences. In this exhibition, I intend to emphasize the differences of the intercultural experiences of Asian American artists that play a significant role in the emergence of contemporary Asian art in the international art world. As the exhibition title, *Cross-Cultural Voices*, indicates, curatorial focus is put on how distinctively and fruitfully the migratory and diasporic experiences of Asian American artists are reflected in their diverse symbolic structures. Each of the six Asian American artists in the exhibition has lived on the borderline of different cultures for more than seven years.

One of the major interests of the contemporary art world has been "how the emerging globalist mentality has come to inform what is experienced in one's proverbial backyard and how the two ends of this spectrum might most fruitfully inform each other."^{vi} In this context, how to succeed in integrating one's local realities with those of the world at large and projecting an international space on the trace of a decentered, fragmented subject has become "the only sure way to maintain a community's standing in the race for global relevance."^{vii} As this contemporary interest in globalization emphasizes "enjoining the local and the global,"^{viii} the issues such as transnational experiences, diasporic communities, and intercultural processes of mediation have been considered. Along with this trend, Asian American art, which can substantially deal with the intercultural experiences of the Asian migrant artists in the United States, has offered new directions to contemporary Asian art, and the diverse visions of Asian American artists have been one of the decisive factors for the success of contemporary Asian art exhibitions.^{ix}

The postcolonial theme of migration and displacement, one of the major postmodern issues that helped inspire the rise of contemporary Asian art, also makes the role of Asian American artists significant in the development of contemporary Asian art. Given the situation of Asian immigrants to the West, which is governed by an unequal relationship of political and economic power, the point of the issue is the displacement of Asians into the West, rather than the displacement of Asians in their homeland. In this context, Asian American artists in migration can be considered the more significant of the two for the emergence of contemporary Asian art. Situated between the stressful world of the Asian immigrants and America and, in a broader context, between demographic plurality and cultural specificity, Asian American artists have the opportunity to fulfill their potential and may be expected to create particularly useful and diverse visions for the borderline negotiations of cultural translation.

Nevertheless, Asian American art and its contribution to contemporary Asian art has been understated under the designation of Asian art or as the non-official or avant-garde art in China. The presence of a China-centered world view has been one of the major obstacles in recognizing the meaningful role of Asian American art. One might argue that another major hindrance has been the existence of a stereotypical understanding of Asian American art. Since Asian American art emerged as a distinctive field in the mid 1980s^x, a great effort has been made to make it more visible by its community. Since the early 1990s, however, as the expression of anger and confrontation against racist practices in the United States has become a visible trend in the Asian American art community, any art by Asian American artists that is based on pure aesthetics and philosophical understandings or on traditional Asian philosophies has been regarded as non-Asian American art by many people in the Asian American community and in the mainstream art world. As a result, a number of internationally recognized artists, including Isamu Noguchi, Arakawa, Yayoi Kusama, Nam June Paik, Tony Wong, Xu Bing, Ik Joong Kang, and Wenda Gu, have not been considered to be Asian American artists. As a major paradigm shift has been made in most areas of ethnic studies, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora rather than identity politics. It is time to move beyond any arbitrary barrier to an understanding of Asian American art and to give critical attention to its heterogeneity. People are different. "Choices and trials are imposed on all humanity that different cultures make operative in different ways."^{xi}

Recent exhibitions featuring Asian American artists have begun to deal with new concerns. Since exhibiting *Huang Yong Ping and Chen Zen* (1994), the first major museum exhibition in New York City of contemporary works by Asian artists in the West, the New Museum has had an exhibition for an Asian American artist, Martin Wong, and is currently presenting another exhibition for another Asian American artist, Xu Bing. Although the aesthetic standard of the museum has been worthy of critical acclaim, one might suggest that one important criterion for mounting these shows of cultural difference needs to be added. The postcolonial art and cultural critic Homi Bhabha believes that a show of cultural difference must be able to explain the transformation of aesthetic values and cultural practices that are produced through individual political histories and the broader pattern of cultural conflict, appropriation, and resistance to domination.^{xii}

Guided by these issues, two major curatorial perspectives were applied in selecting the six artists and their artwork for this exhibition. First, along with the increasing interest in globalization discourse, how to apply the issues of considering differences and diasporic experiences to this project has been considered. Secondly, though the issues of memory, gender, history, and identity, which are indispensable parts of Asian American art, have been explored, the more important consideration was how aesthetically these politically charged issues are reflected by each artist's unique vision.

Born in Shanghai in 1955, Wenda Gu came to the United States in 1987. Included in many important international biennials and exhibitions, his art has been widely discussed and reviewed in more than one hundred important international newspapers.^{xiii} Last April, Wenda Gu did a performance which succinctly summarizes his vision. He was dressed up in a specially designed red costume that symmetrically combined the classical Confucian scholar's robe with a western tuxedo. Accompanied by a donkey, which both Confucius and Jesus used in their religious pilgrimages, the artist walked around the streets of Vancouver for an entire day and interviewed people. This grandiose gesture of embracing all races and

Wenda Gu
Confucius Diary, 1998: a world-wide touring art performance. This performance was a collaboration with the Vancouver Film School; Western Front, Vancouver; and Record the Essence of Culture, NY. Courtesy Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia and Anne Wong Art Foundation, Vancouver Photo credit: © Yumiko Kuromiya



harmonizing east and west, gets persuasive when viewers carefully look at his installation pieces of *United Nations*. In 1993, Wenda began his ten-year on-going art project entitled *United Nations*, which is based on his global perspective. In this project, Wenda Gu intends to explore a new global space in which each country's historical and cultural context is specifically dealt with. At the core of this exploration is his intercultural experience which helped him witness the imperialistic side of liberal and multicultural America and its double standard of exoticism. Treated as an outsider by the mainstream art world, he has come to sympathize with other ethnic people's conflicts and came up with the idea for the *United Nations*. Other cultural issues such as human rights, AIDS, and homosexuality that he has been exposed to since he came to the United States also helped him gain a concrete global perspective. Human hairs of different races are used to symbolize cultural differences and the historical background of their political struggles. He is planning to produce 25 monuments of different countries and unite them together in the project's final ceremony early in the next century.^{xiv} In *Post-national Flag of the United States of America*, the installation piece in this exhibition, Wenda places a shape of a big star in a field of five horizontal strips made of mixed Native-American, Caucasian-American, African-American, Hispanic-American, and Asian-American hairs.^{xv}

Bing Hu is a Chinese artist working in Brooklyn. Born in Shanghai in 1960, she came to the United States in 1986. She received a merit scholarship at the Art Students League of New York and later obtained her MFA from the State University of New York at Purchase in 1995. She was commissioned by the Public Art Fund to investigate sites in New York City to propose a temporary public-art project and has had solo exhibitions sponsored by the Bronx Museum of the Arts and the Chinese American Arts Council. Bing Hu's work has appeared in group shows at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the World Bank in Washington, D.C., and the American Museum of Natural History. In June 1998, she participated in *Chinese Women*, an exhibition at the Frauen Museum in Bonn, Germany. Bing Hu creates installations with industrial materials such as water containers and the remains of cars and their smashed windshields. In *Disfunctional*, in which shattered windshield materials are suspended from coat hangers, destroyed and discarded materials are turned into beautiful objects and installations that convey her private emotions and philosophy. Bing Hu's diasporic experience in liberal America has encouraged her spirit to freely move around her work surroundings and helped her master the relationship between herself and the materials that she uses. The strategy for her work that she has found in the United States seems to be ironically based on Taoist philosophy, one of the major traditional Asian philosophies which has been sanctioned in Mainland China for many decades. Bing Hu describes her work as follows:

"When I turn my eyes to shattered windshields, the nature of the smashed glass suggests that I am not dominant in the relationship between myself and the materials-rather the found materials take the lead. This revelation causes me to be more spontaneous and allows me to introduce movement and other gestures that stem from my interest in the sculptural process."^{xvi}

In *The Pregnant and the Aborted*,^{xvii} Bing Hu's installation in this exhibition, which is stretched with latex-painted water containers that are connected with electrical cords that look like umbilical cords and are imbued with the warm color of electrical lights, one of the most painful moments of female experience is transformed into a scene of unexpected beauty. Bing Hu intends to expand the scope of feminine identity and its aesthetics by dealing with pregnancy and abortion, potential processes affecting women's bodies, which are not romantic at all and which people do



Bing Hu
Disfunctional, 1995
 Smashed windshields and metal coat
 hangers.
 Installation view: 192 x 228 x 168"

not want to look at directly. With this bold and organic installation piece, she resists stereotypical feminine images and succeeds in creating a unique view of femininity.

Based in Southern California, Kip Fulbeck is one of the earliest artists who explores multiracial and hapa identity.^{xviii} His personal narrative work combines installation, performance, photography, video, and writing to explore the transforming Asian American experience. His monologues and multimedia shows combine stand-up comedy with a powerful and politically charged edge. Through his autobiographical tales, Fulbeck exposes sources of racism, sexism, and symbolic domination within suburban America. Taking the viewer through childhood fights and adult dilemmas, he questions ethnic dating patterns and the media depiction of Asian men.

Currently, Fulbeck is an Associate Professor of Studio Art and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Fulbeck's first solo performance, *Banana Split & Other Mix Ups*, premiered at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego and was performed nationwide, including the 1993 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial in New York. His videos have aired on PBS and earned several awards, including Best Narrative Short at the 1995 Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival. His work has also been shown in various world-wide video and film festivals. This exhibition includes the videos *Some Questions for 28 Kisses* and *Nine Fish*. In *Some Questions for 28 Kisses*, Fulbeck uses his own Cantonese, English, Irish, and Welsh background as a springboard to confront media imagery of Asian men, interracial dating patterns, and icons of race and sex in the United States, constantly questioning where hapas "fit in" in a country that ignores multiracial identity. *Nine Fish* addresses conflicting family responses to Confucian ideology, respect for elders, and euthanasia.

Born in Korea, Do-Ho Suh came to the United States in 1991.^{xix} He received a Painting and Sculpture Fellowship from the Skowhegan School and the Rebecca Taylor Porter Award from Yale University and later obtained his MFA from Yale University in 1997. This year, he was commissioned by the Public Art Fund to install a public sculpture for the Metrotech Commons in Brooklyn. He has also had solo exhibitions presented by Pacaembu Stadium in Brazil, Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, and Shiseido Gallery in Japan. Do-Ho Suh's work has appeared in group shows at the Cooper Union, Woods-Gerry Gallery, Kiev City Museum in Ukraine, and Arcos da Lapa in Brazil. In his works, Do-Ho Suh



Do-Ho Suh
Floor, 1995 (detail)
Cast plastic figures and
glass plate, dimensions
variable

questions the notions of space, especially the relationship between the individual space and the collective space. At the center of this inquiry into space is his own personal experience of a transcultural displacement from Korea to the United States. He explains that, displaced in a different culture since coming to the United States, he has kept asking himself, "how much space do I carry with myself? What is the size of my personal space? Or my public space?"

The most conspicuous feature in his work is his attempt to subvert the illusion of self-asserting individuality and to re-articulate the relationship between individuality and collectivity. Respecting anonymity is perhaps his best credo, and the little anonymous figures under a huge column or a pair of shoes that appear to rise up from the earth with the purest strength look like the most essential power of our world. In this postmodern era, when any insistence on class category or individual authority is easily criticized and loses its own ontological priority, his subversive approach looks timely. For our exhibition, Do-Ho Suh exhibits three works: *Doormat*, the wallpaper piece *Who Am We?*, and *Public Figures*. One of the exemplary structures of encounter between the individual and the public is the erection of statues of illustrious figures in public squares. In *Public Figures*, Do-Ho Suh radically displaces the site of the individual. He takes the figure from above to

below the pedestal, reduces its size, makes it anonymous, and multiplies it. In this sculpture, a large stone pedestal is placed over thousands of small 12.5" high bronze figures of both sexes and of different races and costumes. The entire piece is movable and designed to travel gradually from one end of the site to the other during the exhibition period. By this transporting of the piece, the artist seeks to comment on the fundamental act of displacement. This reflects this artist's interest in the notion of site-specificity and transportability of spaces. By making highly movable site-specific installations, Do-Ho Suh questions the concept not only of specificity but also of the site itself implied within the notion of site-specificity. *Who Am We?* is one of these movable site specific installations in that it corresponds to the physical space of the installation and, at the same time, is infinitely movable and replaceable. Do-Ho Suh's wallpaper is a transposable and transportable space in a roll.

Born and raised in Honolulu, Lynne Yamamoto lives in New York City. Her work has been exhibited at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu. She currently has a student-curated web site sponsored by P.S. 1 (<http://www.ps1.org/yamamoto>). Much of her work originates from a narrative about the life history of her grandmother, who traveled from Japan to Hawaii as a picture bride and was a laundress on a sugar plantation in Hawaii. The two installation pieces in this exhibition were included in previous exhibitions shown in New York City. In *Ringaroundarose*, dozens of starch-stiffened shirt sleeves project out from the wall. In *Untitled*, a long horizontal row of 280 nails, all hammered in at eye level and each with a tiny word pasted to its head, invokes the repetitive labor and tragic life of a laundress.^{xx} Although Lynne Yamamoto develops the themes of transit, loss, and mourning and tries to invoke characteristics of the kind of work her grandmother did through her process and choice of materials, she maintains an intellectual distance and artistic simplicity. This simplicity is generally effective and poetic enough to inform the hardship of other immigrant people who have been identified as outsiders or obliterated from their societies.

Zarina Hashmi was born in India and moved to New York in the mid 1970s. Her work has been exhibited internationally and in the United States at such venues as The Queens Museum, The Bronx Museum, The Asia Society Galleries, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, and June Kelly Gallery in New York City. Zarina Hashmi has lived and worked in many places. As a citizen of the world, an artist, and a feminist, she has tried to maintain a great sense of intellectual freedom and personal autonomy. Since moving to New York, she has materialized the process of her assimilation and a query for personal sustenance into a formal language.^{xxi} The artist says, "Now I feel at home wherever I am. The years of total isolation and panic from being away from everything I knew made me create my own homes...I work in small scale. I know the work has density of emotion and it will create its own space around it."^{xxii} This enlightened experience, which resulted from the encounters and experiences of forty years of her nomadic existence, led her to develop a series of tiny forms of a house-on-wheels. For the two installations in this exhibition, the artist has put together hundreds of houses-on-wheels made of cast aluminum. These minimal forms, which are visually stripped of any description and emotional association, were the result of a personal choice from her own experience. She believes in the wisdom that "less is more."^{xxiii} This wisdom gives her freedom to change houses, live her own life, and express her self.^{xxiv}

Although this exhibition focuses on Asian American artists, I tried to make it a concrete event resulting from a major paradigm shift that has occurred in ethnic studies. This exhibition sets a general perspective and represents the first part of a special project I am working on that will

consist of an on-going series of seven exhibitions. Perhaps, in some part, my perspective still sounds simply theoretical. I am looking forward to continuing my investigations to specify it.

Notes

ⁱ Cited by Homi K. Bhabha in his article, "How Newness Enters the World," in the *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 214.

ⁱⁱ Hapa: adj. 1. Slang, mixed racial heritage with partial roots in Asian and/or Pacific Islander ancestry. 2. Slang, a person of such heritage.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Say What Kip Fulbeck," photocopied information sheet, collection of the artist.

^{vi} *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, Burton Watson (tran.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 76.

^v In his article, "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies," King-Kok Cheung defines Asian American Literature as works by people of Asian descent who were either born in or who have migrated to North America. King-Kok Cheung, "Reviewing Asian American Studies," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1. I believe Asian-American art can also be defined as art by people of Asian descent who were born in or who have migrated to North America.

^{vi} Dan Cameron, "Glocal Warming," in *Artforum* (December 1997): 17.

^{vii} Dan Cameron, *Ibid.*

^{viii} Homi K. Bhabha, 216. Related to these words, Homi Bhabha mentions that "Jameson perceives a new international culture in the perplexed passing of modernity into postmodernity, emphasizing the transnational attenuation of 'local' space." *Ibid.*

^{ix} As the recent exhibition *Inside Out* at the Asia Society and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center reveals, without the wide range of various works by Chinese American artists or Chinese artists who had the experience of staying or being educated in the United States or Europe for some years, the exhibition might lose its flavor. In an interview that was done on October 7, 1998, Gao Minglu, the curator of this exhibition mentioned that, although he tried not to choose many immigrant artists since the exhibition is about Chinese art, he had to depend on Asian American artists such as Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, Cai Guo-qiang, Lin Tian-miao, and Wang Peng for the major installation projects. In addition, of the sixty artists participating in the exhibition, seventeen artists reside in or were educated in the West; nine among these seventeen artists are Asian Americans.

^x Many generations of artists of Asian descent were active before this time; however, the term 'Asian American' was not coined until 1969. Though exhibitions for Asian American artists took place in the late 1970s on the East Coast and, perhaps earlier on the West Coast, public recognition for such artists' work as constituting a field of study did not occur until 1984. (Source: Robert Lee, Curator of The Asian American Arts Centre, NYC.)

^{xi} Etienne Baibar, "Critical Reflections," *Artforum* (November 1997): 130.

^{xii} Homi Bhabha argues this throughout his article "Postmodern/ Postcolonialism," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

^{xiii} Information about materials used in his works and his ideas here and throughout is from Wenda Gu, "United Nations, an Ongoing Global Art Project for the Twenty-First Century since 1993," photocopied information sheet, collection of the artist.

^{xiv} So far, he has completed the monuments of Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, America, Israel, Sweden, Russia, Britain, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Africa, Canada, and China.

^{xv} See Ann Gibson's essay in this catalogue for more on the artist's intention on this piece.

^{xvi} Statement by Bing Hu in Charlotta Kotik, *Scattered Petals, Fallen Leaves, Shards of Glass: the Work of Bing Hu*, poster-pamphlet of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1997.

^{xvii} Following information on the the artist's intention on this piece and my interpretation are based on the interview with the artist that was done in June, 1998.

^{xviii} Information on this artist and his work is based on the artist's resume and his unpublished writing.

^{xix} *Ibid.*

^{xx} Information on this artist and her work is from photocopied information sheet, collection of Lynne Yamamoto.

^{xxi} Lisa Liebman, "Zarina's Balm," *Artforum* (January 1998), 76.

^{xxii} Quoted in Lisa Liebman, *Ibid.*

^{xxiii} Dr. Akbar Naqvi, "The House that Zarina Built," *The Herald* (September 1993): 124-25.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 124.

Asian American Cross-Cultural Vision: The Task at Hand

by Ann Gibson

In the last sentence of her contribution to the Fall 1993 issue of *Godzilla*, the late scholar and curator Alice Yang wrote: "The task at hand is not to hegemonize the category of race but to decenter it."ⁱ Her essay questioned the effect of exhibitions open to Asian Americans only, with themes primarily based on the issues raised by their ethnicity. Yang concluded that even though the exposure was welcome, such exhibitions tended also to maintain the force of stereotypes that handicap Asians and Asian Americans and their productions in the United States. Her contention was that when exhibitions privilege artists' responses to negativity rather than such issues as "how different symbolic structures, ritual practices, and even conceptions of modernist and postmodernist languages have informed the production of visual culture in different communities and by different artists," they tend to promote the same lowered expectations the artists and curators wished to dissipate.ⁱⁱ

The work of the six artists that Young Park has chosen for this exhibition moves importantly beyond, or, better, through, the narrowness that troubled Yang, without sacrificing the specificity of their transcultural experiences. The works do refer to aspects of their makers' backgrounds: both to their own recollections and, in some cases, to U.S. responses to them. Many Americans, for instance, are ignorant of the deep cultural and political divisions among Asian Americans from different places and cultures and have not realized that artists from different social and economic situations in the same culture experience being "Asian" and "Asian American" in the United States in radically different ways. The artists in this exhibition incorporate what may be seen as their reaction to the category of race but do not present it as the main focus of their work. They acknowledge the starting place of those who may see the work through a haze of stereotypes but provide the powerful lenses of their vision of desires, insights, and struggles that take place across cultural boundaries, both within and between ethnic groups. In this way, these artists push their audiences, both Asian and not, to see through their preconceptions, to decenter but continue negotiation with the category of race, as they concentrate on other controversial matters: the status of unborn children, our intimate involvement in international relations, the differences between compulsory and voluntary life choices, how cultural attitudes direct the processes of ageing and dating, and the constitution of a home.

Lynne Yamamoto's installation of starched shirt sleeves, stretching out to viewers from the wall, and the row of nails on whose heads a word is written--"arrive, marry, cook, clean, boil, scrub, weep, bleach, iron, drown"--evokes the image of the tireless laundress, cleaning shirts that return again and again. Shirts like these were a part of a network of connections among the processes of immigration, life-changing experiences, and a devastating form of labor which trapped Yamamoto's grandmother, a Japanese mail-order bride who became a laundress on a sugar plantation in Hawaii and finally committed suicide by drowning herself in a wooden tub. Once this is known, those specifics haunt the installation but are broadened - through the nails for instance - to evoke other aspects of "Asian" history such as the labor that built America's transcontinental railroad. These images that the imagination supplies in response to Yamamoto's narrative certainly do provide what David Leiwei Li has called "the parent node," an image that creates a sense of cohesive kinship.ⁱⁱⁱ But this parent node is magnified by the desperate supplication of the wall of Yamamoto's shirt sleeves and the reticence of the small words that persist, despite the violent stasis of nailing, to refer



Lynne Yamamoto
Untitled, 1992/95 (detail)
From installation of *Absent* at
Steinbaum-Krauss Gallery,
NYC

Synthetic hair, cast glass,
clay pots, soil, grass, and
photograph, dimensions
variable

to the daily deaths of many--whether they are recent immigrants or not, and no matter what their cultural derivation--whose economic, educational, and social position leaves them only suicide as an alternative to enduring the stultifying effects of overwhelmingly repetitive labor.

Do-Ho Suh's *Project for Metrotech Commons* also employs repetition, but his thousands of foot-high male and female figures of different races, whose clothes further differentiate their cultural identities, stands not for mind and body-numbing labor but for diversity within "public" consciousness. Suh here investigates his own experience of the relation of personal to public space in terms of his move from Korea to the United States, which prompted him to ask, "What is the size of my personal space? Or my public space?"^{iv}

For Suh, statues of illustrious figures erected in public places exemplify structures of encounters between the individual and the public. To reexamine the convention in which a moving stream of people look up to a single larger-than-life size figure on an immobile pedestal, he removes that figure, makes it anonymous, reduces its size, multiplies and diversifies it, and places it below a large stone pedestal that can be moved during the exhibition, along with the crowd on which it stands, from one place to another. Instead of seeing an effigy of a public figure, viewers will see only a void atop the pedestal, and experience, if they come back, a displacement akin to Suh's.

In expressing his feeling of displacement in terms of such a traditional and politically loaded image as public statuary of illustrious figures, however, Suh evokes iconoclastic responses to repressive regimes, especially those imposed from the outside, such as Japan's over Korea from 1915 to 1945, but including more recent, non-Korean incidents such as the notorious Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. But societies regulate the relation between autonomy of their citizens' individual identity versus the security and connectedness of their collectivity not only by laws but, perhaps more effectively, through their costume, architecture, and social customs as well. Suh's employment of figures whose skin tones and clothing indicate their various origins and who are moved during the course of the exhibition to represent a "public" that has only a void instead of an illustrious figure to regard suggests that the absence of a single collective consciousness is experienced most vividly by transcultural travellers. More sedentary viewers may realize that they, too, have experienced this effect of dislocation, but in a more metaphoric sense.

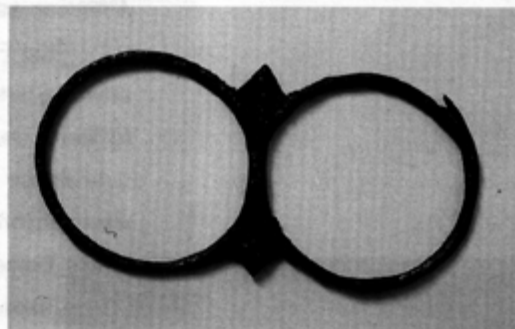
Wenda Gu's *United Nations U.S.A. Monument 1: Cmoellotiniinagploistm* is made of hair from the heads of Native-, Caucasian-, Latino-, and Asian Americans. In most nations, hair - its texture, color, and the way it is worn - reveals much about an individual's position within the society as well as among people from other cultures.^v The mixture of hair as well as the title of this work evokes not only the intercultural cooperation that the United Nations is supposed to foster but also certain aspects of the history of that project in the United States: "Cmoellotiniinagploistm" is a nonsensical synthesis of "melting pot" and "colonialism."^{vi} *U.S.A. Monument 1* is one of over a dozen installations around the world in Gu's ongoing United Nations project. All of them use human hair of people whom Gu understands to be representative of the populations in each country to construct an image whose title suggests the relation of those populations to aspects (often troublesome) of its historical relation to populations of other countries. Thus Gu's installation at the Kroller-Muller Museum for *Heart of Darkness*, which featured a carpet made of "pure Dutch hair" and the ripped pages of Dutch colonial history books, was subtitled *V.O.C.-W.I.C.* (These acronyms were the names of Dutch East Indian and West Indian shipping companies during Dutch colonial periods). These two works, whose meaning depends so heavily on the interaction of the image and words that literally cannot be read, echo Gu's earlier use of distorted Chinese characters whose unreadability he intended "to combine and mock ancient poems, public slogans, and traffic signs."

vii By taking texts from before and after the Cultural Revolution that aimed to regulate human desires and behavior out of their normal contexts, Gu demonstrates the extent to which place and history determine the meaning of both words and images.

"I believe that knowledge belongs to the category of history," Gu told art historian Peter Selz. A reader of Western as well as Eastern thinkers (Gu's interest in Nietzsche, Freud, and Wittgenstein are frequently cited), Gu understands history as having a materialist basis that includes, for artistic production, talent, a receptive social environment, and political and economic factors. "Instinct is a part of creativity," he said in 1989, "but in my view the most lofty force is also a potent support." By introducing such loaded signifiers as human hair and references to the forced submission of people to countries whose flags and furnishings are understood by their citizens as representations of self-determination, the artist introduces the repressed, the historical, where it is not supposed to be: in the present.^{viii} This brings to the surface a conflict of thinking that is due not only to the difference between East and West but from a clash between the belief that the cultural present of a nation is generated by its "origin" and the observation that, on the contrary, the present situation of most modern nations has been determined by a multicultural population, producing a transitional history composed of many origins.^{ix} Although one of the orientations Gu brings to this displays a debt to a highly-modified element of Marxist thinking, the struggle between past and present is being played out on every continent in nations where the specifics of the drama are as diverse as the hair he has gathered.

If Wenda Gu raises the power of the past to disturb the present, Zarina gathers the past, giving it a home in the present. Married to an Indian diplomat, she studied printmaking in Thailand, Paris, West Germany, and Japan. Her portfolio of prints, *Homes I Have Made*, and her *Crawling House*, a tiny wall sculpture multiplied into legions, suggest only a few of the strategies she has employed to avoid being "a woman cracked by multiple migrations."^x Zarina left India in 1958 and must now obtain a passport to visit her family, who have been in Pakistan since the partition.^{xi} She knows that the form of her series of houses on wheels, of which *Crawling House* is an example, echoes not only the Mohenjo-daro Bullock Cart but also Giacometti's attenuated sculpture of a man on two wheels, bringing together icons from two eras, two cultures, in the image of a shelter whose wheels mark its occupant's vagrancy.^{xii} The reference to Indian carts and wheels as mandalas of change links her wheeled houses to India; but the sparseness of the design permits other references to seep in: the pointed form above a circular opening recalls also Gothic spires and Puritan steeples. Her own history, in dialectic with emblems of nomadism, yields to images of other histories, other journeys. While they are stripped of anecdote, the aura of life's stories lingers about her wheeled houses in ways not dissimilar to sculptor Louise Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons*, video artist Ho Siu-Kee's *Walking on Two Balls*, and Joel Shapiro's tiny post-minimal houses.

Smudged images of ground plans in *Homes I Have Made* witness the difficulty of remembering the proportions and relations of the spaces that Zarina reclaims in order to fold the receding past of her nomadic years into her lived present. "The years of total isolation and panic from being away from everything I knew made me create my own homes, my spaces to hide," the artist remarked. [But] "now I feel at home wherever I am."^{xiii} Zarina told critic Lisa Liebman that she admires the work of Richard Serra, whose larger drawings and sculptures are like hers in their minimal form and tactile attention to media. As Liebman noted, however, Serra's suggest confrontation, while Zarina's purpose is assimilation. In her case this means the reconciliation of differences over time and space.^{xiv} Although the nature of both change and place are unavoidably



Zarina Hashmi
House That Flew Away,
1996
Bronze with patina, 10 x 21 x
1/2"

conditioned by one's first home, the tensions between moving and rootedness are faced at one time or another not only by Indians or Asians, but by most people in the contemporary world.

While Akbar Nakvi has said that each of Zarina's houses has a "frozen narrative," Bing Hu says that "Visual art is one kind of language to me, my way of freezing a fleeting moment from ordinary life."^{xv} In both of these observations, "freezing" suggests a forced stasis--a kind of escape--perhaps from pressure on foreigners here (Hu came to the United States from Shanghai in 1986) to tell in their art the details of their personal history. Charlotta Kotik has commented on two aspects of Hu's talent: the first is her ability to create sculptures in which the bleak and the homelike, the dangerous and the comforting, not only co-exist but are actually generated from the same object (a crushed car windshield hung as a café curtain, for instance). The second, which Kotik relates to a tradition in Chinese painting, is her ability to suggest complex ideas with a single image.

In Hu's provocatively titled *The Pregnant and Aborted*, gauzily draped translucent ribbed cylinders with empty red insides are interspersed with a pair of drooping, rounded forms that belly out from the wall. The hazy contents of the bellies, as well as the vacant interiors of the cylinders, are lit by a series of light bulbs linked to each other and to an outlet by lumpy electric placentas. But Hu does not provide autobiographical information. Silent about whether this is about an experience she had with childbirth or, indeed, even what her views about abortion and childbearing are, she provides an unexpectedly glowing presentation of aspects of the female body's swelling and emptying that are seldom so graphically celebrated.^{xvi} Is there a relation between this scene and China's giving baby girls to Westerners for adoption? What is the relation of this phenomenon to the conflicted status of legislation regarding abortion in the United States? This installation rouses such controversial concerns along with what could be called its assertion of the aesthetics of reproduction but does not explicitly address either, a strategy that runs counter to the Anglo-American assumption that equates silence with submissiveness.^{xvii}

Kip Fulbeck's monologues in *Nine Fish* and *Some Questions for 28 Kisses* seems at first anything but silent. His rapid-fire observations move from metaphor to metonymy, from exclamation to literal description in cadences whose swift clip demands concentration and even then can outdistance first-timers. Interestingly, this produces a response akin to Hu's silence: the viewer/listener is thrown back on her or his own response to the images. But unlike Hu and Zarina,

Fulbeck employs a full arsenal of autobiographical detail. Fulbeck describes himself as hapa, or mixed-race, born to a Cantonese mother and an English-Irish father. His work is about the insights to which that position in American society exposes him. In *Nine Fish* he shows and tells the story of his grandmother's situation: on life-support in a state nursing home, she wanted to be released, to die, but one of her four children's strict interpretation of Buddhist beliefs would not permit it. The video shows Fulbeck's family negotiating this collision of American technology and traditional Asian values in a work of art that is definitively about Chinese culture in the United States but is also, at the same time, about the relationships between the dying and the living.

Some Questions for 28 Kisses places Fulbeck on the crest of the second wave of Asian American thinking that includes but does not center exclusively on race or assume a heterosexual masculine norm. Instead, it revolves around the multiple axes of class, gender, and sexuality, as well as ethnicity. In this video, Fulbeck catalogues stereotypes of Asian identity, which we see through his eyes in their blatant artificiality but which also permits us to understand some of the sources of their continued appeal. In these and other performances and videos, Fulbeck



Some Questions for 28 Kisses

NTSC video, TRT 8:30 mins
Seaweed Productions. Copyright 1994

undermines not only racism but also gender binarism by treating issues such as the "emasculatation" of Asian American men, his responses to simultaneous multiple oppressions, and by using words and images to disrupt gender norms. Besides his keen insight, Fulbeck's best tools are his humor and irony, modes of address that are risky because they depend for their success on audience response. When they succeed as his so frequently do, however, they are nearly impossible to ignore.

The artists in this exhibition stress the breadth and heterogeneity of their diasporic experience without denying their ethnic identities. In this way, they are participating in a major paradigm shift occurring not only in Asian American Studies but also in other areas such as American Studies and African American Studies, that moves away from an earlier emphasis on a unifying cultural nationalism to an insistence on working through ethnicity to focus on what makes their experience distinctive as well as the ways that specific elements of their cultural heritage has become interwoven with that of others.

Notes

- ⁱ Alice Yang, untitled statement in *Godzilla*, Asian American Art Network 3:2 (Fall 1993): 5; substantially revised and extended as "Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered" in *Why Asia: Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, ed. Jonathan and Mimi Young (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 98.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* It might seem that Yang's assertion mirrored pre-1960 desires of newly arrived immigrants to "claim America" by submerging their ethnic roots. Her argument differs from that strategy in that her goal encourages recognizable references to artists' national and cultural origins as elements in broader projects.
- ⁱⁱⁱ David Leiwai Li, "Filiative and Affiliative Textualization in Chinese American Literature," *Understanding Others: Cultural and Cross-Cultural Studies and the Teaching of Literature*, ed. Joseph Trimmer (Urbana Ill., National Council of Teachers of English, 1992), 178.
- ^{iv} Do-So Suh, "Project Proposal for the Metrotech Commons," unpublished, collection of the artist.
- ^v As noted by the author of a press release from the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery for a related exhibition in 1996 by Wenda Gu, *Dreamaerica*, "Hair is a signifier. It signifies ethnicity, age, confirmity, mourning, rebellion, punishment, sevitude and sexuality."
- ^{vi} Facts about the materials and titles here and throughout are from Wenda Gu, "United Nations, an Ongoing Global Art Project for the Twenty-First Century since 1993," photocopied information sheet, collection of the artist.
- ^{vii} Gu, quoted in Peter Selz, "Mice Temples, Audience, an Interview with Gu Wenda," *Arts Magazine* vol. 63 (September 1989), 37. Subsequent quotations are from this source.
- ^{viii} This is one thing we can do, suggests Hayden White, to disturb the boundary between fact and fiction that "history" is supposed to maintain. Hayden White, *The Content of Form, Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 342-343.
- ^{ix} Homi K. Bhabha demonstrates this throughout *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- ^x Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 2-3.
- ^{xi} Lisa Liebman, "Zarina's Balm," *Artforum* vol. 35 (January 1998): 75, 76.
- ^{xii} Dr. Akbar Naqvi, "The House that Zarina Built," *The Herald* (September 1993): 124.
- ^{xiii} Zarina quoted in Liebman, "Zarina's Balm," 76.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xv} Naqvi, "The House that Zarina Built," 125; statement by Bing Hu in Charlotta Kotik, *Scattered Petals, Fallen Leaves, Shards of Glass: the Work of Bing Hu*, poster-pamphlet of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1997. Further references to Kotik are from this source.
- ^{xvi} See the essay of Young Park in this catalogue for more on the artist's intention in this piece.
- ^{xvii} Cheung, "Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies," 12.

Kip Fulbeck

Nine Fish (detail)

NTSC video, TRT 23:45 mins
Seaweed Productions. Copyright 1996



Ancestral Weddings #1 (detail)

Silver gelatin print & assemblage
16" x 20" (print 1987)
1998





United Nations-Temple Heaven

A site specific installation commissioned by The Asia Society for an exhibition *Inside Out*.

Human-hair made temple of pseudo-English, Hindi, Arabic, Chinese (4 walls) and synthesized English-Chinese (ceiling) hair. The hair is collected from over three hundred twenty five barbershops and hair salons in Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, the United States of America, Israel, Russia, Sweden, England, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Africa, Canada, Japan, Korea, France, and China.

A meditation setting of Chinese Ming dynasty's furniture: naked tv monitors on 12 lamp chairs, 8 spring stools, 2 tea tables: made of huang ha li wood and a video film of heaven.

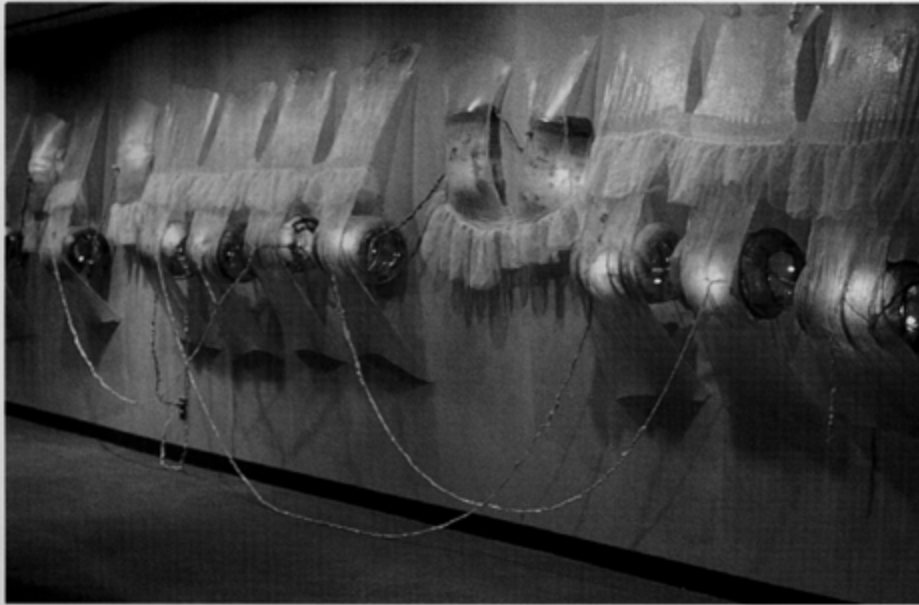
Courtesy of Asia Society and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center.



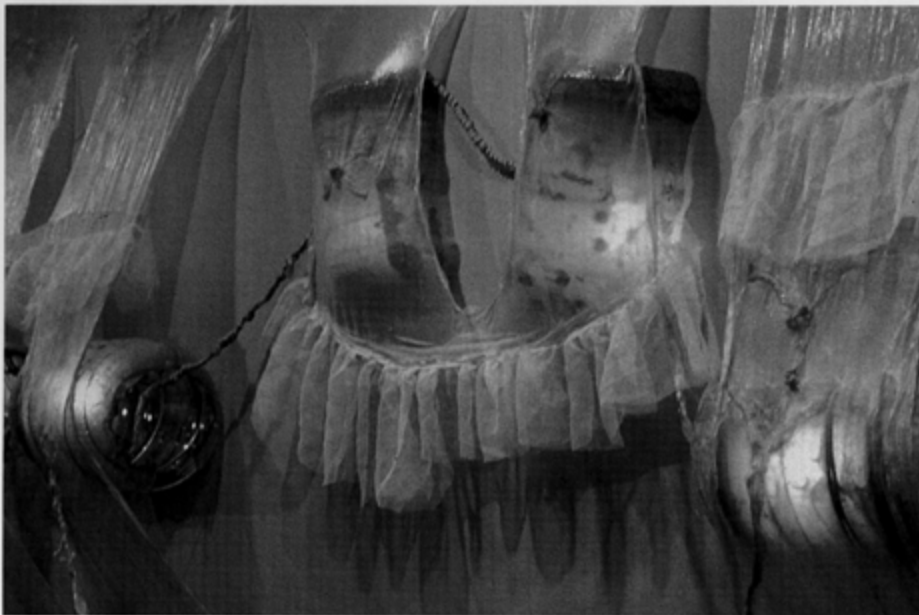
Post-National Flag of America, 1996

Caucasian-, African-, Hispanic-, Native-, and Asian-American hair, and Elmer's glue, 240 x 148." The hair was collected in San Francisco, Rhode Island, Minnesota, Harlem, Park Avenue, Chinatown, Washington Heights, SoHo, and Williamsburg, NYC.

Bing Hu



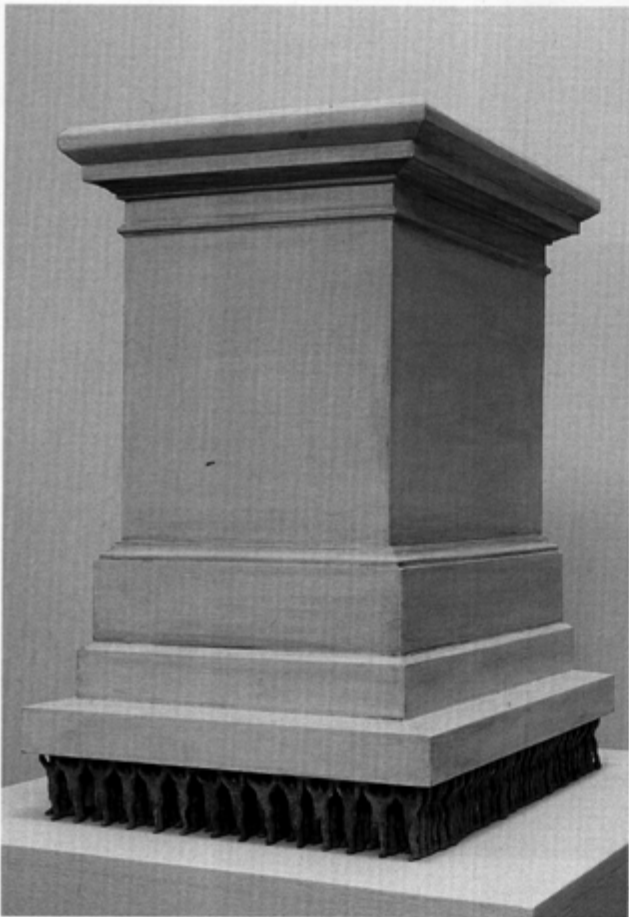
The Pregnant and the Aborted, 1995
Casting latex, water bottles, wire, and
night light bulbs, 96 x 168 x 18"



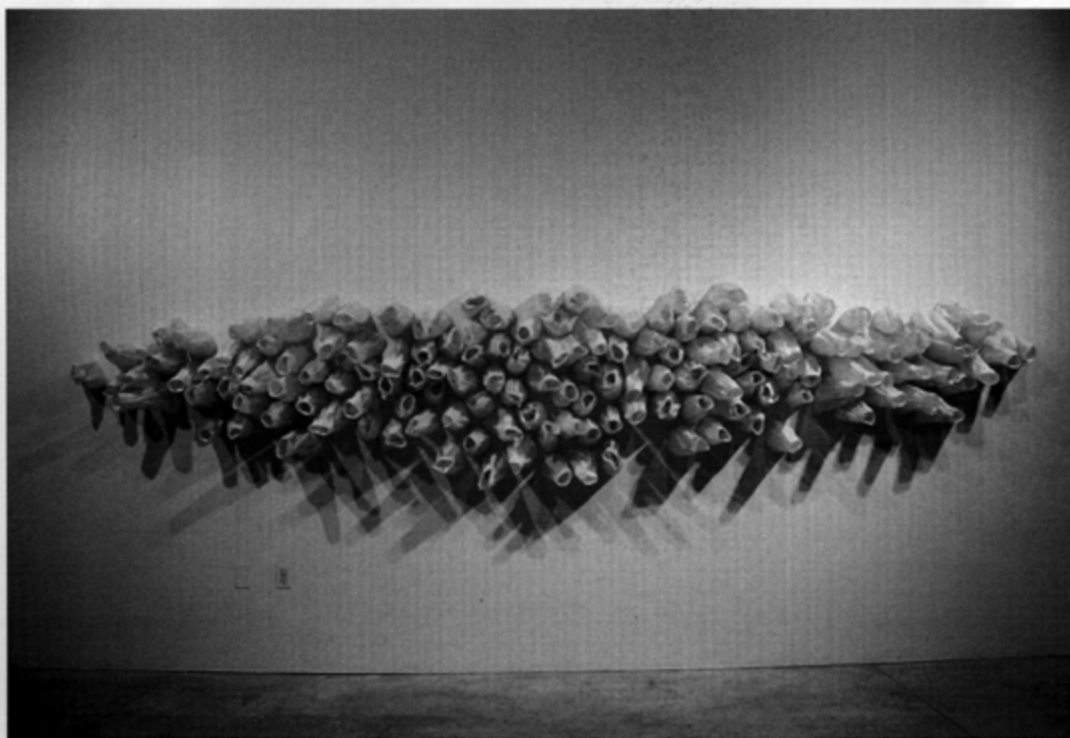
The Pregnant and the Aborted, 1995 (detail)



Floor, 1995 (detail)



Public Figures, 1998
Polyurethane resin, bass wood, and paint,
11 x 15 x 17-1/4"



Ringaroundarosie, 1997
Starched shirt sleeves, cigarette burns,
36 x 174 x 24"



Ringaroundarosie, 1997 (detail)

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Rhonda Cooper
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