A BETTER LIFEWORLD
HISTORY, IDENTITY, AND DIFFERENCE
IN THE ART OF KEN LUM

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Ken Lum's artistic practice explores how texts and images shape our understanding of identity, culture, and social structures. It draws on methods from cultural studies, social theory, semiology, psychoanalysis, and political philosophy. His artworks make plain that things gain meaning not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting of relations of difference that they establish with other entities in a signifying field. Meaning, Lum's art repeatedly insists, is fundamentally socio-historical and cultural. It cannot be fixed independently, outside of specific historical and cultural contexts and their array of signifying practices. Moreover, it is relational and positional, and in a constant process of redefinition. As contexts and practices change, the meanings of things do too.

Lum's investigations of human subjectivity follow a similar logic. They start from a premise that identity is a series of temporary attachments to subject positions that are constructed for individuals and communities through discursive practices. As the artist revealed in an interview in 1998, he has long strived to create artworks that make spectators conscious of their in-between states: "[W]hat constitutes the subject...has been a recurrent theme in all my work. I insist that the subject itself is something in-between... it's a hybrid, always in the process of transformation."[1] The products of Lum's artistic practice present meaning and subjectivity discursively as processes of positioning rather than fixed constructs, as things that happen over time, that are never stable, and that are subject to the play of social history and cultural difference.[2]

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The photo-text montages Lum began to produce in the early 1980s explore the tension between images and words in the construction, dissemination, and subversion of signification. These artworks leverage the methods deployed by the advertising industry to attract attention and create meaning; they juxtapose photographs with laconic language in ways that evoke the graphic vocabulary, colour-coding patterns, and signifying techniques of adverts. Advertisements, however, have never been the vehicle of Lum's work. Instead, the artist has long appropriated the aesthetic and semantic techniques of advertising to construct his art. Furthermore, unlike promotional notices with a conspicuous purpose, Lum's artworks create tension between obvious interpretation and lack of clarity. Their exploration of the relationship between visual and written elements and the interplay between images and words grapple with the complex ways in which sign systems shape understandings. They challenge and disrupt stereotypes and dominant narratives, encourage critical engagement with issues of class, race, gender, and ethnicity, and highlight the need for diverse and inclusive representations.

Much of Lum's artistic production addresses the relationship of text to image and vice-versa, prompting spectators to question whether the figures represented in the photographs correspond to the accompanying texts or whether the texts endow the figures with meaning. Take the large public project the artist designed for Vienna's Museum-in-Progress in 2000, for example. Lum initially proposed a portrait consisting of a photographic image accompanied by text on a coloured panel that would project on the many info screens

installation view of *There is no place like home* (2000) billboards at Vienna Kunsthalle's temporary venue in Vienna, Austria, 2000
photograph courtesy Museum-in-Progress

controlled by the city government in downtown Vienna. The municipal board, then led by members of the rightwing Austrian Freedom Party (FPO), rejected the initial project, claiming it did not present a satisfactory image of the Viennese body politic. The Museum-in-Progress protested the cancellation, as did the Vienna-based Austrian League of Human Rights. Although the protests did not change the municipality's opinion, the scandal came to the attention of the administrators of the Vienna Kunsthalle, who proposed that Lum realize the project along the 540-square-metre façade of their institution's temporary exhibition space. Lum, in turn, produced a large-scale digitally-printed vinyl sheet that included not one but six image-text portraits showing people with accompanying captions about home and titled the new piece *There is no place like home* (2000, pp. 138–144). He also instructed the museum to disseminate multi-page spreads of the artwork in the daily newspaper *Der Standard* and on video screens in the city's train and subway stations.[3]

There is no place like home consists of twelve rectangles arranged in a grid pattern, with giant photographic portraits alternating with direct-address text panels. Lum designed the artwork following typical advertising techniques. He situated photographs alongside clear, simple sentences in easy-to-read fonts on monochromatic backgrounds. The way in which the work was produced and installed—as a billboard-sized banner—similarly borrows from established conventions for advertisements in public space. Lum suspended it on a major traffic circle in the city center at a height that made it visually accessible to many commuters at once. The massive mural's lack of contact information, however, and the fact that it did not seem to market anything indicated to passersby that it was something other than publicity. The artist's rerouting of product promotion procedures led those who encountered the brilliantly colored image-text ensemble to reexamine it in search of meaning.[4]

Along with advertising techniques, Lum's artworks rely on the spectators' familiarity with stereotypes for their legibility and coherence, specifically, stereotypes that encode cultural differences between groups as symbolic positions. The photographic portraits featured in *There is no place like home* show many figures in the process of speaking: their open mouths suggest that they are mid-sentence. The work nudges viewers to read the written language as thought bubbles, or as statements by the subjects pictured. The sentiments expressed in the text seemingly reflect the individuals' ethnicity and the emotions their facial expressions communicate. Some texts are controversial and discomforting, while others are more contemplative, providing glimpses of less anxious mindscapes.

As occurs in many of Lum's artworks that place photographs next to written statements, the scenarios in *There is no place like home* fluctuate semantically. Viewers are called upon to conceptually connect the portraits with the adjacent language, and the artwork requires them to draw on their pre-existing stock of racial, ethnic, gender, and class stereotypes to decipher the relations between texts and images. The photographs do not set up relays or codes between what they picture (signifiers) and cognitive content (signifieds). They are essentially meaningless, what semiotic theorist Roland Barthes describes as "messages without codes."[5] Viewers must mobilize supplementary protocols to anchor the signs and make sense of the photographs. The written texts in *There is no place like home* provide possible codes. Yet, the way in which these codes are applied to the pictures is an act of translation. The image-text combinations are necessarily social and historical. Viewers arrive at them from their particular cultural, or, if preferred, from their ideological backgrounds. For instance, the photograph of the troubled working-class woman of European ancestry immediately below the text "You call this home? This ain't no goddam home" could plausibly pair with the text adjacent to the photo "I'm sick of your views about immigrants. This is our home too!" and the image of the angry young man of East Asian heritage immediately above the text "I'm sick of your views about immigrants. This is our home too!" might relate to the text immediately to its right, "I'm never made to feel at home here. I don't feel at home here." In short, the ambivalent relationship of text to image in *There is no place like home* implicates viewers' presumptions. The correspondence of signifiers to meanings relies on their conventional understandings of ethnic and racial stereotypes. The artwork leaves them to wonder why they correlate the photographic portraits and the written statements the way they do. Why do they

ground the polyvalent signifying material at particular caption points?[6] These questions not only highlight the arbitrariness of signifiers but also raise the prospect that the viewers' interpretations betray disturbing aspects about their particular points of view. To understand or "decode" the piece, to fix its meaning, viewers must draw on the store of opinions, differentiations, and clichés they have already consciously or unconsciously internalized before viewing it.

In other words, Lum's *There is no place like home* presents viewers with their pre-formed ideas of identity and belonging. It raises questions about prejudicial generalizations and commonsensical notions of identity at the turn of the millennium. It unhinges and dislodges naturalized understandings of race, ethnicity, and nation, suggesting we comprehend these concepts as discursive constructs instead. Culture, the realm of shared languages, specific customs, traditions, and beliefs, constitutes the terrain for producing identity and identifications. It creates the signifying chains that place human subjects in social and historical relations. This process is one of the reasons social institutions strive for fixity. But culture is also the condition by which subjects can open up new possibilities for defining themselves and the collective identities, the "imagined communities" in historian Benedict Anderson's sense, with which they identify.[7] By interrupting the dominant signifying chains of race, gender, class, and ethnicity and leaving them in a state of ambivalence and strategic irresolution, Lum's artworks set in motion a process capable of creating alternatives in which it becomes possible to rearticulate social reality more equitably and to imagine a more democratic lifeworld.

Throughout Lum's exploration of words and images, or words as images, tidy communication is skewed. We see examples of this with the artist's *Language Paintings*, *Poem Paintings*, and *Rorschach Shopkeeper* works. In these artworks, which observers link to the sound, phonetic, and concrete poetry of Futurism, Dada, and Lettrism, recognizable fonts spell out invented words.[8] The groupings of letters Lum designed and painted in works such as *Untitled (Language Painting)* (1986–1987) are legible on one level as visual or even concrete poetry. They are syntactically familiar but incomprehensible. They defer semantic meaning.

But the artworks by Lum that most call attention to the contemporary formations of identity and difference are those that combine photographic portraits with words. Works from the *Portrait Logo* (pp. 17–31), *Portrait Attribution* (pp. 32–71), and *Portrait/Repeated Text* (pp. 72–121) series suggest social commentary and ethnographic analysis. Their conjunction of language and images generates meaning. The featured texts can be understood as logotypes or captions that communicate the drama of everyday life, often through the internal dialogue of those represented in the accompanying photographs. The artist chose each typographic style to fit the pictured scene and match the ethnographic type framed in each shot.
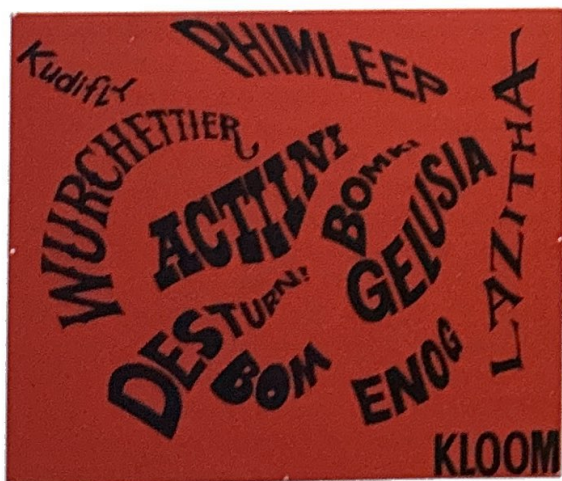
Untitled (Language Painting), 1986

Untitled (Language Painting), 1987

meanings of the works: the artist presents information that viewers decipher by drawing on their personal histories. The viewers' subjectivity is central to the artworks, which are activated by viewers' interpretations.

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The techniques used to create the artworks in Lum's *Portrait/Repeated Text* series (1993–present, pp. 72–121)—large-scale diptychs with colour photographs depicting people in scenarios of distress or intensified emotion on one half and simple texts ascribed to those people on the other—situates them once again within the aesthetic of manufactured signage. The pristine gloss of the surfaces, many of which Lum created using powder-coated aluminum or shiny Plexiglas panels, indicates the works' mechanical production. But the lack of information typical of the advertising medium and the fact that Lum exhibits most of these objects on the walls of galleries, museums, and collectors' homes makes them signify as art.[12]

These works continue Lum's longstanding interest in exploring human subjectivity and subject formation. The colour, style, and size of the font all contribute to establishing links between the depicted figures in the image half of these works and the written statements. The photographic images show readily identifiable, mostly visible minority or working-class people. Lum directs the actors' every gesture to meet his conceived dramatic effect. He arranges the figures to represent types. The texts are placed on intensely coloured monochromatic grounds, and the colours of the letters seem keyed to the palette of the pictures. The texts repeat or have repetitive elements and suggest narrative possibilities. However, the images do not entirely absorb the written language, and the pictures do not fully account for the text; each only partially modulates meaning in relation to the other. The ensuing dissonance creates an oscillation between texts and images that augments the duration of the viewing time.

More than any of Lum's previous productions, the works that comprise his *Portrait/Repeated Text* series represent what appear to be dislocated or fragmented figures. Lum seems to catch many of the works' protagonists in a mini-crisis or an intensified moment of emotion that could abruptly take a different turn. The purported speech of the protagonists in compositions such as *Fuck you! You asshole!* (1993, p. 73), *What am I doing here?* (1994, p. 77), and *I can't believe I'm in Paris!* (1995, p. 99), stumbles into mantra- or incantation-like utterances. The people pictured seem to be at a loss for words. The verbal expressions hover at the edge of meaning and the circularity of the statements complicates the visible situations. They also throw the centeredness of the figures' identities into question as they represent moments when language threatens to betray its speakers. But the relationships the artworks establish between the photographs, the texts, and the spectators makes identification more difficult. Viewers might ascribe the written language to the adjoining pictures, yet their own "emotional depths, superficial concerns, passing worries, and self-deprecating thoughts" triangulate with the texts and images.[13]

Lum's more recent works in this series tend to feature photographic portraits of people on the street in the midst of an internal crisis related to the workplace. Their titles encapsulate this mood: *I lost my job* (2021, p. 107), *They have no idea how much I work* (2021, pp. 104–105), *I know I'm lucky* (2021, p. 106), *Always waiting for a call to work* (2021, p. 103), *What am I going to do with my kids while I work?* (2021, p. 102). The artworks depict anxieties or frustrations many spectators can relate to, creating a dialectic between the personal and the shared. The figures' utterances again test the limits of language's capacity to express; the protagonists can barely articulate their feelings. Lum casts language not as a code individuals can master but as an apparatus, what philosopher Michel Foucault would refer to as a *dispositive*, within which they struggle to define themselves.[14]

The texts in these artworks have minimal word counts, and their syntax is uncomplicated. Many of the words and lines repeat. In *Always waiting for a call to work*, the term "waiting" appears eight times, "always" four times, and "work" twice. Each iteration is slightly different and modifies those that precede and follow it. The modifications give spectators insight into other facets of the figure's state of mind. The repetition of a single word or line highlights how insufficient language is to articulate the social circumstances the pictured individuals inhabit or those individuals' needs. Lum invites spectators to move between image and

text repeatedly, in apprehension, thereby making the artworks' duration evident. This oscillation attenuates the engagement of those who experience the work. Reading the texts, viewers come to feel a mix of emotions ranging from humour to empathy and even possibly guilt. For instance, in the photograph featured in *I lost my job*, a man stands in an urban greenspace with his patient dog. To the right of this image, the words "I lost my job. What am I going to do? I lost my job. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" appear in grass-green text over an orange ground. They read as inner monologue, but their repetition shifts the anxiety level. By the time one reads the question the third time, it becomes a measure of desperation, a sense of almost impossibility, and the text is further dramatized.

Like most of Lum's portraits with written language, the works in the *Portrait/Repeated Text* series encourage viewer response. While the texts relate to the pictures and the pictures to the texts, the picture-text combinations beckon to the public. This triangulation places viewers in positions of identification with the depicted scenes. The artist constructs the scenarios as mini-dramas in order to solicit spectators to project their identities and daily circumstances onto them. He composes photographs and texts to create loaded images documenting everyday moments filled with emotion. The artworks are at once personal, local, and intimate and anonymous, global, and public. They convey the predicament of everyday life in today's postindustrial societies while enhancing the spectator's empathy toward the plight of the individuals portrayed.

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The sculptural reliefs that comprise the *Shopkeeper Sign* series that Lum began in 2000 also portray personal reflections and anxieties. Instead of using elaborately staged photographs, the artist draws images from a vocabulary of signage motifs typically found in front of small, family-owned businesses in North America. The artworks take the form of signs for fictitious businesses, with each sign divided into two sections, one permanently printed and the other comprised of texts in plastic moveable type. The fixed information—the firm's name, the service it offers, and contact details—adheres to the dominant codes of business advertisements. This information is screen printed on Plexiglas panels using three or four colours. The spaces reserved for the adjustable letters are used to present various narratives that may be read as relating to the adjacent permanently printed information.

The *Shopkeeper Signs* bear a degree of frustration that summons up a world of difference and alterity. Indeed, much of the information the plastic letters communicates breaks the conventional boundaries between public and private speech. This rupture disrupts the sign and throws the techniques of advertising into disarray. For instance, an embarrassingly personal plea, "SUE, I AM SORRY. PLEASE COME BACK," complicates the public notice for Jim and Susan's Motel that advertises "CLEAN & COMFY RMS." A sign that purportedly advertises Paul's Auto Repair shop features text that boldly announces, "HELLO WORLD. NO MORE LIES. I AM GAY!", and one for McGill & Son has the message "TO MY VALUED CUSTOMERS: MY SON IS NO LONGER MY SON"—both messages that clearly exceed that which is normally seen on storefront signage. The *Shopkeeper Signs* break the taboo of communicating private messages and public declarations on commercial placards. The implied but absent small business proprietors are cast as desperate to expose their intimate lives and opinions. Each sign is a portrait of ownership set against a background in which business transactions butt up against human subjectivity and social relations.

Some of the signs in this series contain overt political statements. The *Shopkeeper Sign* that references Taj Kebab Palace, at first sight, looks like an authentic advert for a local grill joint. But the adjustable text upends the stereotype of the apolitical open-all-hours immigrant small business. It reads "PEACE IN KASHMIR. END CONFLICT INDIA & PAKISTAN." An advertisement for Danny's SHOE RENU promises quality "while you wait" service, while its plastic letters solicit the public to "HELP FREE [Native American activist] LEONARD PELTIER." A sign for Mondo Nudo XXX All Nude Revue, bears the imperative "SAY NO TO RACISM & HOMOPHOBIA." Viewers are left to conjure an anonymous strip club owner who is concerned with social rights but not sexism, pointing to the unevenness of social struggles.

The *Shopkeeper Signs* and many of the shops they evoke dramatize the failures of multicultural mosaics in countries like Canada. As curator Grant Arnold observes about this series, "assorted narratives of displacement and migration can be read in the combination of names, products, motifs, and texts."[15] A financial consultant referenced in one sign, Grace Chung, for instance, seems to use the moveable text on her company's advertisement to stand up to ominous threats: "PLEASE LEAVE MY FAMILY ALONE WHOEVER YOU ARE. DEAL WITH ME." In others, Sandhu's souvenir shop, Maple Leaf, which advertises "All Canadian Products. 100% Canadian. 100% Quality," posts that it is "CLOSING DOORS FOREVER," followed by "DROP DEAD CANADA," and the Amir Watch, Jewelry, and Shoe Repair and Thrift Shop promulgates a "CLOSING OUT SALE. EVERYTHING MUST GO," because the proprietor is "MOVING BACK 2 ERITREA." Transposing the preposition "to" into a red foregrounded "2" hints at imagined owner Amir's difficulties with assimilation. And, needless-to-say, repatriation to Eritrea, one of the world's most impoverished countries with a government that has a terrible human rights record, accentuates the failure of Canada's promised multicultural utopia

Similar to Lum's *Shopkeeper Signs* series, the artist's *Strip Mall* works (2009 to present) feature signage boards for imaginary shopping centers. The large panels in this series present a cacophonous collage of fictitious placards advertising the names, services, and contact information of small businesses operating out of mini-mall complexes. But unlike the confessions and declarations that characterize Lum's *Shopkeeper Signs*, the artist restricts the information the *Strip Mall* works showcase to that which promotes sales, profit, and visibility.

The signage boards encourage spectators to recognize the many real human hopes and worries lurking behind the public face of struggling shops and contemplate the historical factors that led the owners to open them. Lum highly codes the mall signs, and their references often exceed what is normally communicated by commercial enterprises. A case in point is *Midway Shopping Plaza* (2014), whose imagined setting is a Vietnamese-American mall on the outskirts of Philadelphia. The mundane banality of what seems to be a plain-looking shopping plaza notice board shifts as spectators discover that Lum inserted the names of many important historical moments, places, and people related to the Vietnam War onto the noticeboard. For instance, the address that tops the board, 8669 Midway Avenue, refers to June 8, 1969, when U.S. President Richard Nixon met his South Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Van Thieu, on Midway Island to discuss the first increment of redeployment. From that point on, the U.S. military withdrawal never eased. Thích Quang Dúc, written in white letters on an orange background on one sign, references the Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk who, in 1963, self-immolated at a busy Saigon intersection to protest the persecution of Buddhists by the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese regime of President Ngô Dinh Diêm, a staunch Roman Catholic, and the name of Phan Thi Kim Phúc Pharmacy, that can be seen on a notice at the top-right-hand corner of the board, is that of the terrified Vietnamese girl running naked on the road after being severely burned by U.S. napalm who appears in the famous picture photojournalist Nick Ut took for the Associated Press in 1972.

Lum's *Strip Mall* works also register the provisionality and tenuousness of the small business communities they evoke by presenting many boards with empty sign slots. The blanks and for rent notices in works such as *Plaza 88* (2009), *King's Mall* (2009), *Drake's Plaza* (2009), and *117 Dwight Eisenhower Blvd.* (2009) indicate strip malls that are less than fully occupied. The implication is that the companies that once advertised in these spaces were unable to succeed. The boards in some works, such as *117 Dwight Eisenhower Blvd.*, are topped not by the name of the mini-mall or its street address but by a "space-for-rent" notice and phone number, evoking a dire commercial situation. Too many blank sign slots on a concourse's public-facing noticeboard suggest that it is failing. The individual shopkeepers' success directly relates to that of their neighbours in the concourse, a factor that, in turn, builds a form of camaraderie. Accordingly, the *Strip Mall* works draw attention to the benefits of building and nurturing local communities with shared concerns, even if those advantages are primarily commercial.

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Grace Chung Financial, 2001 and Amir, 2000 from the *Shopkeeper Signs* series

Lum's *Shopkeeper Signs* and *Strip Mall* sculptures share his earlier works' need for an institutional context, such as an art gallery or museum exhibition space, to be recognized as art. This requirement does not apply to much of the artist's recent production, which functions as public art in urban space instead. Indeed, *There is no place like home* is the first in a now considerable body of public artworks Lum has made in the twenty-first century. Many of these projects highlight migration, ethnicity, and belonging. However, Lum's artworks do not champion the liberal multicultural discourse of cultural pluralism that deflects attention from the structural inequalities many migrants face. Instead, if the artworks venerate hyphenated identities, it is because the difference that those identities articulate contradicts multicultural narratives that advocate yielding particularistic attachments in favour of civic rationality based on universalist principles.

The momentous movement of people across the globe in recent years is an epochal phenomenon in its scale, composition, direction, and diversity. More people are crossing national borders than ever in modern history.[16] Numerous factors drive this mass migration: the destruction of indigenous economies, the pricing out of crops through international and regional agreements, the crippling weight of debt and persistent poverty, pandemics, ecological devastation, and warfare. The cities of the relatively wealthy global North exercise a magnetic pull over this human tide, reversing the historic flows associated with the imperial metropolises of past centuries. An important aspect of public artworks such as *There is no place like home* is the way in which it seeks to address the far-reaching consequences of this global movement. To the extent that national identity is dependent on coordinates of space and time to create a sense of location—a sense of having a symbolic "home"—the numbers of people migrating across borders today results in a massive dislocation of points that secure processes of collective identification. Diasporas are composed of cultural formations that cut across and interrupt the settled contours of race, ethnos, and nation. Their subjects are the products of several histories, cultures, and narratives. They must learn to inhabit more than one identity, dwell in more than one culture, and speak more than one language. The traces at play in forming such identities are never singular but always multiple. Angry populations often blame diasporic subjects for the ensuing disruption of grounding points within the symbolic order of culture. The ensuing bigotry relies on narratives representing cultural differences between groups as incompatible with closed conceptions of national belonging.

installation views of *Across Time and Space: Two Children of Toronto Meet* (1997)

Like much of Lum's twenty-first-century production, *There is no place like home* takes cultural differences seriously. It recognizes how the new migration patterns have shifted the notion of "home" and troubled the liberal multicultural dream of a symbolic collective. The large public artwork directly addresses questions of identity and belonging, as well as what curator Kitty Scott refers to as "the anxiety, confusion, and contradictions" that today often lead to xenophobic forms of group closure.[17] But Lum's artwork also proposes that diaspora formations that arise with the scattering of people from their place of origin carry the promise of other ways of dealing with difference. Subjects forced to migrate from one cultural context to another not only have to speak several different languages to ensure their survival but are also obliged to translate between them—a process that creates hybridity. There is always something that resists capture in translation. But instead of being a handicap, that which eludes translation enlivens what prevailing conventions fail to code, and these uncoded elements ensure that the dialogue of what constitutes identity remains open and subject to change. In short, Lum's *There is no place like home* touches on the tensions multiculturalism's diasporas generate but also suggests that by seizing opportunities, people can learn something from diasporic survival about how to live with others and otherness. The artwork presents the multicultural public sphere as powerful enough to realize new forms of identity and develop more equitable societies.

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Lum brings what Enwezor describes as a "penetrating gaze into the network of social relations that describes global systems of exchange and signifiers of difference" to his public art production of the twenty-first century.[18] Projects such as *Across Time and Space: Two Children of Toronto Meet* (2007, above), *January 1, 1960* (2011, opposite), *The River Between Us: Homer Plessy and Dred Scott* (2013, p. 157), and *Monument Lab* (2012 to present, p. 158) investigate identity and community, and elevate the marginalized and underserved. The works develop counter-hegemonic narratives that draw attention to the codes, conflicts, and histories that structure public space and shape human subjects. They do not so much attempt to narrate wholly new histories but to renarrate the past from a richer array of perspectives. They also seek to open the public sphere to accommodate the participation of voices that modern societies have long neglected and that are increasingly audible.

Across Time and Space features two slightly more-than-life-size bronze sculptures of anonymous children sitting on concrete plinths several metres apart and looking across at one another in downtown Toronto. As with his other public art, Lum installed this project in a highly traversed area of the urban metropolis where much everyday interaction takes place. The artist depicted the two children naturalistically. He carefully

chose their outfits, with the boy in traditional Chinese clothing, including a six-paneled hat and a tunic with a mandarin collar and frog buttons popular during the late-Qing Dynasty, and the girl in a simple, collared, long-sleeve dress with a bandana tying her hair, relating her to sartorial customs common in Eastern Europe in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The area around Toronto City Hall was home to Toronto's first Chinatown, long ago razed, and a quarter where many Eastern European immigrants also resided. It was also the site of the city's first Synagogue. The children comfortably lean on their arms and cross their legs. Yet their muscles are engaged and they gaze contemplatively into the distance, which indicates a glimmer of anxiety. It is as if the children are waiting or searching for something. A slightly elevated area of greenery stretches between the bases of the plinths and subtly demarcates the space between the children as part of the artwork. A cast-iron plaque on a nearby wall bears the words "Across time and space, two children of Toronto meet...."

By facing the children toward one another in this public monument, Lum articulates the plight of ethnically Chinese and Eastern European, predominantly Jewish, immigrants and relates the intersecting settler histories in this part of the world. Articulation here indicates both giving expression to things and joining different things up. Articulated hierarchies often comprise social histories. They present ensembles of relations and structures of connection between them. For instance, while Toronto's Chinese community first settled in the city's downtown core in the late 1800s, most contemporary residents are unaware of this community's

installation view of *January 1, 1960* (2011) at MFA Nieuw Welgelegen, Utrecht, The Netherlands

significant displacements throughout the twentieth century. A fire destroyed Toronto's original Chinatown in 1904, forcing massive relocation. Several decades later, in the mid-twentieth century, the city's Chinatown was once again eradicated as municipal governments led by the ancestors of Anglo-Saxon settlers ruthlessly expropriated the land on which it stood to build a new City Hall and what is now a large commercial center. Lum's placement of *Across Time and Space* on the territory of the initial Chinatown is a physical reminder of the neglected immigrant community that has faced such incredible hardship over the years in Toronto. The piece also commemorates the plight of the many Europeans who settled in the city following the great migrations at the turn of the twentieth century through the figure of the little girl and assists its public in recollecting that Canada's official philosophy of itself is that of a liberal pluralist nation that respects the heterogeneous ethnic composition and ethnically shaped interests of all its people.

Lum's *January 1, 1960*, a permanent art commission for the city of Utrecht, The Netherlands, both evokes the histories of colonization and population displacement that have been fundamental to modernity and profoundly disturbs the settled self-conception of Dutch national culture. The piece consists of a large, three-dimensional globe with a topographical map of the world as it looked at the onset of the 1960s. The artist situated the sphere in the atrium of a large community centre in the mid-twentieth-century district of Kanaleland, where many of the neighbourhood's immigrants would encounter it. Most of these immigrants settled in Utrecht in the 1960s and 1970s, when many of Holland's foreign holdings gained independence. By coincidence, the Dutch Colonial Office coordinating the dealings between Holland and its territorial holdings was previously located in Utrecht, though it was closed midway through 1960. The function of the community centre is to provide recreational and educational resources to the children of immigrants.

Lum's public sculpture reminds those who come across it that The Netherlands' considerable colonial possessions generated much of the relatively small Northern European country's wealth. The map reveals that at the beginning of 1960, Holland still held several resource-rich territories, though most of these colonies gained independence soon afterward. The waning colonial power's changing relationships with its former colonies resulted in new migration flows. Many people from the East and West Indies and Surinam, whose minerals, forests, water, and fertile land the Dutch government and companies had long exploited, now settled in Holland's cities. These people are the products of the new multicultural diasporas created by postcolonial migrations. As is typical of the multicultural dynamic, they come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit without simply assimilating into them and completely losing their previous cultural identities. They migrate to the new cultures by different routes, with different conventions, traditions, languages, histories, and senses of the self than people who have lived in these cultures longer. Accordingly, they bear the traces of their cultural difference. They are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories, belonging simultaneously to several "homes" and no one particular "home," and hence find it difficult, if not impossible, to unify their new subject positions and cultural identities. They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, speak two languages, and translate and negotiate between them. Translations, of course, are never total or complete. But they do not leave the translated identities exactly as they were either. *January 1, 1960* hints at this complexity and multiculturalism's attempt to manage the problems created by new historical conjunctures. It provides an image of the historical factors that led to the settlement of immigrants in the Kanaleland neighbourhood and raises what, for many in The Netherlands, was until recently an unthinkable question: is it possible to be of colour and Dutch? It stresses the real differences generated by migration and the need to find ways to negotiate them. It also asks viewers to question why the district's residents continue to have such low employment, health, and education levels.

Lum installed *The River Between Us* in St. Louis, Missouri, and New Orleans, Louisiana. The permanently standing public monument features two identical pairs of sculptures facing one another: one on a garden path in St. Louis's Laumeier Sculpture Park and the other in New Orleans' historic Longue Vue Gardens. The sculptures consist of the busts of two important nineteenth-century civil rights activists that challenged racist laws in U.S. courts, Dred Scott and Homer Plessy.

installation view of *The River Between Us* (2013)

Dred Scott was an enslaved African-American man who, along with his wife Harriet, unsuccessfully sued for freedom for themselves and their two daughters in 1857. The Scotts claimed the government should grant them freedom because Dred's enslaver had taken him to live in Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory for four years, where slavery was illegal. Laws in those jurisdictions decreed that slaveholders gave up their rights to their enslaved possessions if they stayed for extended periods. In a landmark case, the U.S. Supreme Court decided against Scott, finding that neither he nor any other person of African ancestry could claim citizenship in the U.S. Therefore, Scott could not bring suit in federal court under diversity of citizenship rules. Moreover, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Scott's temporary residence in a territory where slavery was illegal did not bring about his emancipation because the Missouri Compromise, which made that territory free by prohibiting slavery north of the 26th parallel, "deprive[d] citizens of their [slave] property without due process of law" and was therefore unconstitutional. The Court's decision aroused public outrage, deepened sectional tensions between the northern and southern U.S. states, and hastened the eventual explosion of their differences into the U.S. Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the post-Civil War Reconstruction Amendments – the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—nullified the decision.

Homer Plessy was a New Orleans shoemaker who committed an act of civil disobedience in 1882 to challenge one of Louisiana's racial segregation laws, the Separate Car Act, which required black and white people to sit in different railcars. Plessy, who was African-American, purchased a ticket for a "whites only" train coach, boarded the train, and was promptly arrested. He challenged the arrest in a Louisiana state criminal district court where Judge John Ferguson ruled against him, upholding the law because the state had the right to regulate railroads within its borders. Plessy appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court to force it to rule on the constitutionality of the segregation laws. In 1896, the Court decided against Plessy. The resulting "separate but equal" legal doctrine determined that state-mandated segregation did not violate the U.S. Constitution's
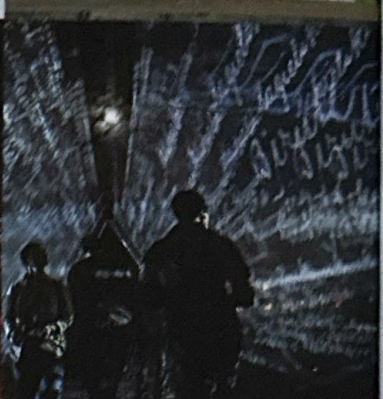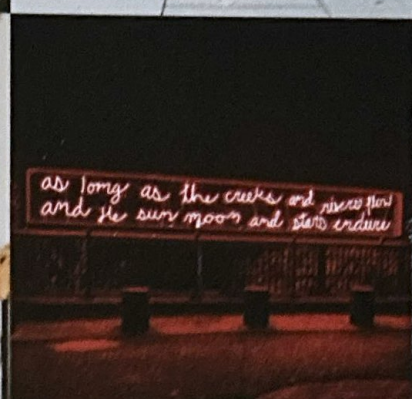
This doctrine provided the legal basis for the Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation that remained in effect in the U.S. into the late-1960s. Lum mobilized the narrative flow of the Mississippi River to produce a public artwork that joined Plessy and Scott's struggles for civil rights and commemorated both figures in turn. Representing two individuals who embody past hopes that went unfulfilled during their lives but were never fully extinguished and ultimately contributed to progressive change, Lum's *The River Between Us* confronts those who encounter it with the demand for new futures in which past struggles for social justice are made good.

Lum's commemoration of marginalized and underserved communities through public artworks in the early twenty-first century anticipated the extensive public art initiative he and urban geographer Paul Farber spearheaded in Philadelphia in 2012. Their project, titled *Monument Lab*, featured the interactive and historically-based art of over twenty artists, most from the Philadelphia area. Inspired by the nearly complete absence of official statuary of women, African-Americans, and other people of color anywhere in the city, *Monument Lab* addressed specific questions relating to "the complex narratives of Philadelphia's memorial landscape."[19] It sought to uncover histories that city officials have negated or chosen not to acknowledge over the years – histories that the artist argues "remain palpable as an absence."[20] But it also took up issues concerning the very nature of monuments and the assumptions of shared values that they embody.

Setting out to recalibrate public art so that it more democratically serves the public it ostensibly represents, Lum and Farber initiated a series of conversations with a broad array of communities in Philadelphia to determine which histories, places, and people they wanted public artworks in their districts to remember and honour. They also sought to resituate public art "in the service of activating public space."[21] "Monuments," Lum writes in an outline of the project, "tend to render their sites incontestable, where different readings of space are not permitted and where it is assumed that one system of values is shared unequivocally by all. We wanted to make an exhibition about monuments that challenged these assumptions."[22] To develop the *Monument Lab* project, Lum and Farber commissioned artists to site public sculptures throughout the city, including many neighborhoods long devoid of civic attention. They set up "laboratories" that encouraged discussion of public space and various forms and degrees of community participation at many of these sites.

Lum's large public sculptures and initiatives opened new and effective ways to satisfy his long-term goal of mobilizing art to develop a more democratic public sphere. Like much of his earlier production, predicated on a semiotic model in which the generation of meaning and identity is inherently social and historical, and in which the products of signifying materials are intrinsically polyvalent, the artist's recent public interventions explore how representations in public space play constitutive roles. They reveal the extent to which public culture is a formative, not merely an expressive, component of social and political life. The complex exchanges these public projects prompt between their material, experiential, and contextual dimensions draw attention to how history, like cultural identity and difference, exists in an incompletable condition and encourage spectators to imagine a better, more inclusive, more just lifeworld.

Installation views of *Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia* (2017), including projects by (left to right, top to bottom): Marisa Williamson, *Sweet Chariot: The Long Journey to Freedom Through Time*; Shira Walinsky and Southeast by Southeast, *Free Speech*; Hank Willis Thomas, *All Power to All People*; Jamel Shabazz, *Love is the Message*; Alexander Rosenberg, *The Built/Unbuilt Square*; RAIR–Recycled Artist in Residency, *Plainsight is 20/20*; Kaitlin Pomerantz, *On the Threshold (Salvaged Stoops, Philadelphia)*; Michelle Angela Ortiz, *Seguimos Caminando (We Keep Walking)*; Karyn Olivier, *The Battle Is Joined*; Emeka Ogboh featuring Ursula Rucker, *Logan Squared: Ode to Philly*; Duane Linklater, *In Perpetuity*; Klip Collective, *Passage: Migration*; Sharon Hayes, *If They Should Ask*; David Hartt, *for everyone a garden VIII*; Hans Haacke, *Digging (Archaeology of the Vacant Lot)*; Tyree Guyton, *THE TIMES*; Kara Crombie, *Sample Philly*; Mel Chin, *Two Me*; Tania Bruguera, *Monument to New Immigrants*; and King Britt and Joshua Mays, *Dreams, Diaspora, and Destiny*.

NOTES

1. Ken Lum, in Lisa Gabrielle Mark, "Reflections on the Mirror: An Interview with Ken Lum," *Ken Lum: Photo-Mirrors* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1998), 11–12.

2. By "discourse," I refer to those figures or tropes that have real effects because of the "regimes of truth" they institute. On "regime of truth," see Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Colin Gordon, ed. and trans., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109-133.

3. Different configurations of *There is no place like home* subsequently traveled to Innsbruck, Austria; Ottawa, Canada; Montreal, Canada; Venice, Italy; Ljubljana, Slovenia; Kabelvag, Norway; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Brussels, Belgium; Duisburg, Germany; and Warsaw, Poland.

4. On Lum's "apparent misuse of the advertising medium ... to capture the viewer's attention," see Cynthia Foo, "Portrait of a Globalized Canadian: Ken Lum's *There is no place like home*," RACAR: *revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 30:1/2 (2005), 41.

5. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 17.

6. On whether the photographs "correspond to the texts beside them" or spectators read "existing assumptions about these social categories back into the portraits," see Jeff Derksen, "Fixed City & Mobile World: Urban Facts & Global Forces in Ken Lum's Art," in Kitty Scott and Martha Hanna, eds., *Ken Lum Works with Photography*, exh. cat. (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2002), 30.

7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 2006).

8. See, for instance, Jeff Wall, "Four Essays on Ken Lum," eds. Jon Tupper and Chris Dercon, *Ken Lum*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam and Winnipeg: Witte de With and Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1990), 9–76.

9. Okwui Enwezor, "Social Mirrors: On the Dialectic of the Abstract and Figural in Ken Lum's Work," in Grant Arnold, ed., *Ken Lum*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011), 89.

10. In a recent interview, Lum speaks of how a serendipitous encounter with Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Adam and Eve* (1510) in a European museum solved his question of how to make an artwork that represents "the complexities of an economy that relies on forestry." See Ken Lum, in "Shaped and Shaping: The Cultural Influence of Ken Lum," *Bordercrossings* 161 (March 2023), 34-48.

11. Enwezor, "Social Mirrors," 85.

12. Note that Lum's *You so smart* and *What an idiot!* were paired to comprise *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona* (2005), a public artwork located in Vancouver's Strathcona neighborhood.

13. Shepherd Steiner, "Mirror on the Wall: Photography, *Logos*, and the Problem of Writing in Ken Lum," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas*, 2 (2016), 222.

14. See Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," in Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 194-196.

15. Grant Arnold, "Ken Lum: The Subject in Question," in Arnold, ed., *Ken Lum*, 45.

16. Citing an International Organization for Migration report, Peggy Levitt reports that "one out of every seven people in the world today is on the move." Peggy Levitt, "Worlds that Make Worlds," in Ruth Erickson and Eva Respini, eds., *When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 214.

17. Kitty Scott, "Ken Lum Works With Photography," in Scott and Hanna, eds., *Ken Lum Works with Photography*, 13.

18. Enwezor, "Social Mirrors," 89.

19. Ken Lum, "On Monument Lab," in Ken Lum, *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life 1991-2018* (Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2020), 265.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 267.

22. Ibid., 266.

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