Body Talks: Art and Mobility in Postcolonial States

In this essay I would like to explore the intersections between contemporary visual art and politics on the issue of migration in the postcolonial world. It is not just social scientists and politicians that have attended to the discourse of migration, the construction of national identity and postcolonialism. Contemporary artists and art historians have also been engaged in this discussion vigorously via exploring and implementing multiple site-specific medium, experimental concepts and aesthetic languages to contribute a new genre of perspectives and methodologies to the recent studies of mobility and migration.

While seeking to offer a visualized impact through creative medium and aesthetic languages, good contemporary art projects are transnational and flexible with physical mobilization, enabling artists to transcend the geographical, cultural, national and temporal limitations and travel with time following site-specific and context-specific societal realities. The mushrooming art biennale/triennale exhibitions and international art fairs, which to a great extent is stimulated by capital-dominated, neo-liberal contemporary art market that portrays itself as a 'zone of freedom' (Stallabrass (2004:6)), have lent more channels for this critical discourse related to migration and mobility to raise public awareness and invite further debate.

Introduction

Rosalind Krauss (1979) calls for an *expanded field* of art practice to redraw the boundaries for sculpture and painting. She guided thoughts about art's cross-disciplinary and cross-medium explorations into the multiplication of site-specific societal issues (Foster 2002: 126, Fares 2004). The postwar artists turned to a wider scope of materials and styles and became open to engage with the everyday and industrial practices.

French philosopher Jacques Rancière's critique on post-modern aesthetics elucidates that both spheres - or *communities of sense* - of aesthetics and politics are never isolated, and rather, contemporary visual art combines 'both a historically specific mode of identification of art and the forms of visibility and speech in which politics is necessarily staged.' Placing *sensoriality* in the foreground, he articulates that it is the joint forces of ethics and esthetics that engage the senses and landscape derived from any political form. For Hawkins (2013), to analyze artists' shifting orientations towards geographical 'site' and a 'phenomenological critique of the body' offers new theorization to affirm the place and distinctive value of studying and practicing contemporary art's expanded discourse. In the recent essay discussing site-specific dance performance, Edensor and Bowdler (2014) claim that by highlighting 'overlooked habitual practices in familiar space', contemporary art challenges to alter the meaning, practice and feeling of urban space.

Human gesture, including movement of the hands, face, and/or other parts of the body, is a form of symbolic, non-verbal communication where the visible bodily actions put life into play and deliver metaphoric meanings. Gestures are often performed and exchanged based on shared, tacitly approved cultural and social norms. For instance, to bow, or to bend forward may suggest respectful greeting or giving consent. However, gesture should not be simply explained as body action with implanted connotations – it invites the agent of the gesture and its audience to revisit the original context (cultural, situational, socio-economic and political) where the performing body is embedded and responds to. Gesture has the potential to present something far different about the body than *bare life* does. As Agamben (1993) elucidates that, 'What characterizes gesture is that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting…and opens the sphere of ethos as the most fitting sphere of human'. He urges for possibilities of resistance to disrupt universally accepted

belief and to be free, and claims that this resistance against power be expressed and achieved by gestures.

A growing number of contemporary art projects have used gestures as site for artistic production and creative reproduction, investigating into the body's physical and socio-psychic experience with biopower exerted by modern state and socio-political codes of the embedding environment. Simon Leung, Chinese American born in Hong Kong and immigrated to North Carolina, the United States at age of 10, is a contemporary artist and professor of studio art whose projects probe into issues including border crossings, territories, the 'cosmopolitan nomad', sexuality and gender, many through the medium of psychoanalytic practices and performative gestures of the physical human body since the early 1990s (Oxford Art Online).

During 1994 and 2010, Leung has produced a series of six 'Squatting Projects' in Berlin (1994), New York (1995), Chicago (1997), Vienna (1998), Guangzhou (2008) and Hong Kong (2010), each presenting the performative gesture of squat in different forms and medium (poster, video installation, sculpture, images) tailored to the site-specific and context-specific issues embedded in the interlinked movements and circulation of people, capital, commodity and languages.

In this essay I would like to focus on two of Leung's squatting projects in Berlin (1994) and Guangzhou (2008) as they are good exemplar of using human bodies to explore the intersections between art and politics and challenge medium fixity. The commonalities between these projects lie in the consistent use of squatting gesture as the central site for artistic communications and participation. Metaphoric and metonymical expressions are embedded in both where gestures symbolized racial signifier and social classifiers.

Body talks
A. Squatting Project / Berlin (1994): The Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Germany

Migration of labor and immigration are critical subjects for discourse of contemporary art practices, and 'expanded field' theorists seek to explore new ways to dematerialize and recontextualize art by engaging with the postwar social movements (Vishmidt 2008). Simon Leung's *Squatting Project/ Berlin*, 1994, was a public poster project commissioned by the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst in Berlin for an exhibition on the "*the business of violence*". Conceived to critique on the political effects of the German reunification and the expel of the Vietnamese migrant workers in the country in the early 1990s, Leung produced and wheat-pasted one thousand bus-stop posters throughout a variety of neighborhoods in the city of Berlin, including Kreuzberg and Charlottenburg, near the Tiergarten, the Brandenburg Gate, and the former Berlin Wall, on bus stations and other public outdoor space. On the poster was an imagery depiction of an East Asian man in squatting position with his back facing towards the pedestrian, head gently tilted towards the right direction and face covered with a piece of fabric. The background in banal white created a sharp contrast against the Asian squatting body. Above the figure appeared German and English (as translation) texts providing bi-lingual narratives for the project's proposal to the passersby:

1. *Imagine a city of squatters, an entire city in which everyone created their own chairs with their own bodies.*
2. *When you are tired, or when you need to wait, participate in this position.*
3. *Observe the city again from this squatting position.*

An invitation to take the squatting gesture? What does squatting mean? What is the poster trying to advertise? What is different when observing the world from squatting position? What does the Asian man have to do with the Berliners?...The prevalence of the posters must have invoked questions similar to above and stimulated viewers to research and brainstorm for the clue of this project.

Many years ago, my younger brother told me in passing an anecdote which I remember to this day. He was probably twelve or thirteen, waiting for the bus in San Jose, California, the suburban city where we grew up, with a few other people whom he took to be Vietnamese immigrants. What struck him about this otherwise innocuous moment, and perhaps what located the foreigness (sic) of these strangers for him, was the position of their bodies while they were waiting—they were squatting…

…Although they were not squatting to call attention to themselves, that was exactly the effect as they rested their (under)assimilated Asian bodies in a habitual position of waiting, incongruous with the sun-bathed sidewalks of a California suburb.

- Leung, '*Squatting Through Violence*' (1995)

Left: Figure 1, Simon Leung, Squatting Project /Berlin, 1994, public project of one thousand posters on the streets of Berlin

Right: Figure 2, Simon Leung, Squatting Project /Berlin, 1994, public project of one thousand posters on the streets of Berlin

The visual cues of the squatting Asian male body for the poster design are rooted in the common assumption that the squatting position is primarily attached to the Asian community and acts as a racial signifier. This cultural/racial symbol is ascribed to the Asian population exclusively, and particularly in the historical context of the post-reunified Germany, to the humble Vietnamese Migrant workers many of whom were once war refugees forced to join the East German labor market working undesirable menial jobs in the 1980s, crossing into western Germany following German unification and later became subject to repatriation according to the newly unified German state in the early 1990s.

The 1993 German 'Right to Stay Regulation' where the migrant workers were allowed to extend their stay beyond the length listed in employment contracts, provided that they withdrew asylum application, together with the modification to the asylum law in the same year allowing Germany to send back asylum seekers to 'secure third countries' (i.e. Czech Republic) through which they had traveled, significantly limited the granting of Vietnamese asylum applications. The fate of these migrants and would-be-immigrants remained largely murky and was 'at heated negotiations over the shape of the repatriation agreement between German and the Vietnamese governments for much of the 1990s (Bui 2003). While deportations of thousands of Vietnamese migrant workers continued in the early 1990s as the east Germany had to catch up with the standard for a market economy, many migrant workers who remained within Germany were caught in the middle of waiting or constant delay pending clear-cut resolution.

Seeking to critique on this chain of events, Leung attempted to 'reinsert the presence of expelled Asian bodies back into the urban fabric of Berlin' using the symbol of squatting to unveil the 'historical grounding of the recurrent residual trauma of the Vietnam War" and 'a counter-technology of resistance...to the technology of wars declared in the name of sovereignty... the very terms of sovereignty imposed onto the [abdicated] squatter' (Akers 2013).

Scholars nowadays move beyond the understanding of 'sovereignty from issues of territory and external recognition by states, toward issues of internal constitution of *sovereign power* within states through the *exercise of violence over bodies and populations*' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005). A featuring intrinsic character of the squatting position is the status of waiting passively, enabling Leung's work to signal visually the xenophobic violence placed upon the immigration community in Berlin during the course of a shifting immigration policy. The migrant workers and the would-be-immigrants or would-be-asylum-seekers have always been waiting – to be granted with legality to enter and exist, to be assigned with temporary menial employment contracts, to be forcibly expelled and sent back to their country of origin, and to wait for their country of origin to be able to admit them back. The status of waiting is a common phase of an immigrant or would-be-immigrant's life trajectory as well as a metaphorical symbol for personal and collective unfortunates (Xiang, 2014).

A squatter occupies the lowest position in the vertical space compared with postures of standing on feet and seating on chair. Leung's posters were hung at the bottom of bus stands, only a few inches above the ground, purposefully inviting passersby to take a similar squatting position in order to read the content of the poster and experience a different set of temporal-spatial ordinates of the urban space of Berlin. The low position may signal the squatter's inferiority and denial of equality in citizen right within his resident country. In addition, Leung seems to draw our attention to the existing ethnic stigma imposed on the Vietnamese migrant community. A prevalent example is the heightened publicity on the Vietnamese engagement in the black-market cigarette dealings. 'There is some ethnic trait making Vietnamese particularly suitable to the illicit cigarette market…The dominant role of the Vietnamese in the contraband cigarette street market is likely to conjure up images of an ethnic mafia taking over an illicit market by force, violence and corruption' (Von Lampe 2005). The media coverage, particularly the press headlines, have obliged the Vietnamese migrants to accept a severely damaged collective reputation in the eyes of the wider public (Bui 2003).

Another issue at stake for the squatting project is related to the inhabiting space, or the notion of claiming residency in an unoccupied, improper alien place. The male squatter may refer metaphorically to a population that were not granted with legitimacy to squat in the urban space of the German territory and in fact were threatened to be abdicated from their habitual posture which forms an integral part of the construction of the cultural identity and self-image. To squat has also become a form of self-excluding performance where by committing to the familiar body language however foreign to one's Western peers in Berlin. The person who squats is making a self-conscious statement to displace the present being for a distant, remote geographical or temporal space. The displacement occurs as the squatter's posture has been 'removed from a context in which it is common practice and inserted into a context in which it is strange, out of place, alien…[with] another meaning of "squatting" in English – taking that which is not one's own – squatting a building, for instance' (Leung and Sturken 2005).

B. Squatting Project / Guangzhou (2008): The 'Floating Population' in China

Simon Leung created a fifth squatting project for the Third Triennial Exhibition in Guangzhou, China (titled 'Farewell to Post-colonialism') in 2008 (Leung 2008a). It is a two-channel video projection installation of nine variable scenes of same length using the master scene appropriated based on Stanley Kwan's 1992 award-winning film 'Center Stage' featuring the life history of China's well-liked celebrated silent movie star – RUAN Lingyu. [1] Using the squatting position as class signifier, the Guangzhou project departed it to generate multi-faceted metaphoric reflections on China's difficult history in the twentieth century and its modern self-regard after the colonial experience.

Below present the narrative texts taken from Leung's printed proposal and triennial catalogue:

The master scene begins with the early Chinese director Tsai Chusheng squatting in front of the courtyard of the Lotus Film Studio in Shanghai in the 1930s. Ruan comes to him and asks in Cantonese (Cantonese has been identified as the native dialects for both) why he is squatting.

Tsai: 'Two-third of China is squatting, waiting, subjected to the whims and abuses of the powers that be.'

Ruan: 'The Chinese also squat when they are tired and need to rest.'

Tsai: 'How long have you not been squatting?'

Ruan: 'Not since I've been a movie star.'

Tsai: 'Don't be sitting up high all the time, let me see you squat.'

*She then moves next to him, carefully folding her long cheongsam, and **squats down**. The scene closes with the two squatting side by side, looking out onto the studio's courtyard, before a black and white painted film backdrop of a (probably fictional) modern city.[2]*

Left to right: Figure 3-5, Simon Leung, Squatting Project/Guangzhou, installed at the 2008 Guangzhou Triennial, "Farewell to Postcolonialism," Guangzhou, China.

Leung's depiction of the bodily posture of squatting is aligned with the power dynamics of the physical body grasping urban residency. Although both the Berlin and Guangzhou projects used the squatting position to address and comment on migration and social mobility, Leung's Guangzhou project (figure 3) deals with a different type of migration – the 'floating population' in Guangzhou - millions of migrant workers moving from less developed regions in China to the capital city of Guangdong Province. This influx of Chinese population, among whom many are young people migrating to work in the manufacturing factories and leaving their rural hometowns behind.

To squat suggests the status of waiting – workers waiting to be called and displaced for menial, temporary employment contract in the future. With the future uncertain, they are almost forced to stand by in this pose and endure the waiting process in silence. The embedded socio-economic order is clear, of which most of the squatters are very conscious: if one's socio-economic status is elevated, he/she abandons the squatting position like Ruan did after becoming a starlet. Interestingly and not surprisingly, the politics of body connected with the squatting position remained unchanged between the pre-modern time of Ruan Lingyu and the urbanized new China seeking high level of industrialization. The latter sees no less difficulty for the migrant workers to share the economic dividend from the nation-wide market reform, or in the body language proposed by Leung, to 'sit high'.

The 'floating population', or the 'rural migrant labor' (*nongmingong*) refers to industrial and service workers with rural household registries (*hukou*) with no eligibility to enjoy equal citizenship rights and benefits with their urban peers holding urban *hukou*. Their numbers have increased drastically over the past 30 years, from about 20–30 million in the early 1980s to about 140 million by the end of 2008 and about 150 million in mid-2009 (Chan 2010). While the introduction of the *hukou* system has led to an irreversible dualistic structure for distinguish urban and rural population, it unavoidably poses threat of increasing

'social exclusion' towards the vulnerable floating population from a variety of aspects of social policy (Li 2005: 62).

The installation project is multi-lingual, where oral, visual and textual translations in Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese and English transform into each other, revealing apparent linguistic and cultural differences and thereby tension and illegibility for the audience with regards to identity construction. Such tension is made explicit by the connotative difference in Chinese and Cantonese translations enabled by Leung's purposeful derivative interpretations and plays with languages. What is constantly embodied is the intrinsic constraint and cultural constructedness embedded in languages. For instance, Leung used the word 'crouching' instead of 'squatting' in one version of the subtitle's translation. He (2008) suggests that the undertone of 'squatting' is closer to the Cantonese meaning while 'crouching', with alternative implications for 'both hunched up and "*ready*" to spring' is usually associated with the Chinese pop culture, 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.' The issue at stake with the purposeful complications of translation is the constraints of languages that unveil 'internal difference that situates one from Chinese from another [and] perform an ethos of proximity in difference' (Leung 2008b).

Anthropologists have regarded language as 'a form of social action, a cultural resource and socio-cultural practices with agency' (Schieffelin 1990: 19). The ability to speak Cantonese may help distinguish the city's local dweller and the migrant population. The multiplication of languages in Leung's Guangzhou project seeks to provide site-specificity where Cantonese acts as a medium to link to the local context where it is the mother tongue of the city hosting triennials. It potentially produces more ripples since English as an alien language in the host city of Guangzhou actually enjoys the canonical, formal status and becomes 'the standard means of communication between Chinese speakers [in the art world]' (Leung 2008b).

Leung's decision to use Cantonese for the dialogue may also have to do with the fact that it is his native tongue, who was born and brought up in Hong Kong before migrating to America. It may remind the audience of the construction of a diasporic community where heritage language plays vital roles of cultural identification and immediate bonding of people today. As language 'mediates and connects' the individual and collective identities, it signals beyond the 'affiliation' with a community, but 'all kinds of allegiance' (Tabouret-Keller 1997: 319).

Farewell to Post-colonialism

The theme of the Guangzhou Triennial in 2008, 'Farewell to Post-colonialism' is not to revisit the pre-modern colonial history, but to unveil the discussion of 'ethics of difference' in the expanded art field that steps into the pervasive discourse of societal and political issues under the context of increasing transnational exchange of culture, people and commodity: 'How do we prevent a "tyranny of the 'other'" without sacrificing the grounds already gained against the power status quo?'

While the co-curator Johnston Chang links the biennale theme to the Chinese ancient spirit of *tianxia*, which focuses on the self-abundance of the world itself and necessity to constantly supply with new possibilities[3]. Critic (Tang 2011) criticizes Chang's overtly heavy reliance on the ancient Chinese ideology to shape the theoretical framework for the discourse, whilst much of the Chinese nationalism has been 'mobilized…and emerges in racial conflicts and border disputes'. However, Chang's partner, co-curator Sarat Majaraj (2008), indicates divergence in perspectives on post-colonialism in China:

> *On whether China had colonized itself first with communism and then with global capitalism. On whether this made [China] unlike other colonial subjects of Empire. On whether China was simply swapping roles from underdog to top dog. On*

whether unease with the 'other' and the unlike was about the incapacity to recognize difference without assimilating it to 'our norms.'

Engaging with the curators' undertone to break entirely from colonialism, Leung commented on the utopian flexibility and deregulation advocated in neo-liberalism as being a new form of 'language of global capitalist expansion, unrestrained by national boundaries and ever optimistic' (Leung, 2008: 44–5). Isn't China a recently arrived colonist with the Guangzhou migrant workers being its subjects? The trans-nationalization of capital and denationalization of space and state may indicate production of new forms of centralized power and control, but not the dismiss of power (Sassen 1999).

A similar critical attack on neo-liberal order can be executed onto the art world too, which has seen ever increasing globalization and international traveling of border-crossing artists and artworks over the past thirty years. Despite the idealized notion of 'nomad artists' that are free of geographic, national or political obligations, their flexibility is preconditioned with the tendency to view the economy in aesthetic terms (Stapleton 2005: 137-8), particularly in the field of cultural production. Furthermore, Sassen (2000) draws our attention to the reality that many activities that are commonly associated with globalization and trans-national mobility are not 'hypermobile', and rather are deeply embedded in 'notably places such as global cities and export processing zones'.

Notes:
1. Ruan has worked in a series of socially-conscious 'leftist' films in the 1930s and committed suicide in the year 1935. Over three hundred thousand people attended to her last journey, on which New York Times commented as the most spectacular funeral of the century.
2. The detailed proposal can be found in the catalogue for the Guangzhou Triennial. Lam, Steven. Introduction to Simon Leung, "Can the Squatter Speak." *Printed Project: 'Farewell to Post-Colonialism,' Querying the Guangzhou Triennial* 11 (2008): 41-47. Print.
3. Chang, Johnson Tsong-Zung, Gao, Shiming, and Maharaj, Sarat, eds. *Farewell to Post-Colonialism: The Third Guangzhou Triennial*. Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2008

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