Jamie Hilder

Looking and Laughing: Ken Lum at the Vancouver Art Gallery

An uncomfortable kind of looking is required of visitors to Ken Lum's survey exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It begins before they enter the gallery space proper, as they walk up the stairs of the rotunda, where they encounter *Four French Deaths in Western Canada* (2011), a piece Lum made specifically for this show. The work consists of a collection of enlarged death notices printed onto the gallery walls describing lives of people born in France who died in western Canada. The obituaries are in English and do not immediately announce themselves as connected by anything but their genre; each maintains a fidelity to the charge-by-the-word brevity of the form, the banal descriptions of a life expressed in a hundred words or less.

The discomfort for the reader arrives in the same way it would if he or she were to read the obituaries in a newspaper, where the eye scans involuntarily for familiar names and cannot help imagine how her or his own life would read: which relationships warrant mention? Which accomplishments best represent a life lived? To whom would the task of composing the notice fall, and could that person be trusted to get things right? Is it possible to get things right? The discomfort is magnified by the uncertainty around whether or not these texts were found or written by Lum. If they are found texts, they are morbid. If they are composed by Lum to mimic death notices, they are still morbid, but with a dark humour that is typical of Lum's work. Found or composed, they offer an appropriate physical and thematic entrance to a challenging body of work spanning more than three decades, one that emphasizes awkward encounters with text and image and the production of identities and anxieties in a historical moment in which lives can begin in one national context and end in another and still be considered so commonplace as to border on the unnoticeable.

But the uncomfortable looking that Lum's work demands is also a pleasurable looking: it provides the viewer with a problem, but one that he or she feels might be solvable. Of course the problems are not in the strictest terms solvable, and in most cases not even concretely identifiable. Lum is very good at productively harnessing the discomfort of his audiences. It is the sustained puzzling that captures the viewer and prolongs the moment of surprise and possibility. The uncomfortable looking initiates a critical position that functions well in a gallery environment, where the space acts to encourage efforts at social engagement that might be discouraged in other situations. In this way the social consciousness in Lum's work—issues of class, race, national and cultural identity are foregrounded throughout—draws the audience into ideas that do not operate in the same manner that they do in the dominant, media-driven political discourse, where cynicism and panic trump history and complexity.

This play between uncomfortable looking as/and pleasurable looking comes out in the relationship between Lum's public projects and his gallery-based work. Included in the exhibition are two performance pieces from early in Lum's career, both of

Published in *Yishu: Contemporary Chinese Art* (November / December 2011): 97-105.

which depend on witnesses recognizing repetitions that confound explanation. In *Entertainment for Surrey* (1978), Lum stood on a slope by an overpass on a highway between Vancouver and one of its suburbs for an hour each morning for the duration of a work week. Cars passed him, and those who kept a regular commuting schedule recognized a pattern, expecting him to be there each morning. The highway commute is difficult and strange, temporally and spatially, since the distance between subjects is increased in relation to other spaces of everyday life. There is no opportunity for interaction or intimacy beyond the car horn, mouthed obscenities, and hand gestures that arise only when something threatens the flow of traffic. On the fifth and final day of the performance, Lum replaced his body with a life-sized cut-out image of himself, perhaps a lamentation of the impossibility of connecting with his audience (beyond the waves and honks he received), but perhaps also as a mark of jealousy for the relationship commuters have to images on billboards or buildings as they drive past. The strangeness of seeing a man, stone-faced and in the same clothes in the same spot every morning for four days—a scene that suggested a threat to the pedestrian in a high-speed space, but also potentially a person suffering from mental illness or instability—could have only become more bizarre with that split-second realization that he was only a two-dimensional representation. Then the questions come: Was the figure always two dimensional? Was I the crazy one? Why would anyone do such a thing?

Witnesses of Lum's other early performance, *Walk Piece* (1978), might have faced a similar perplexity. For this work Lum paced back and forth on a fifteen-foot path positioned between two buildings at Simon Fraser University for the duration of one work day. The piece was visible from a walkway connecting buildings; observers who passed by only once might have seen Lum walking, or turning and pacing. Those who returned some time later and saw him again might have experienced a feeling of the uncanny, and their scrutiny of the pacing figure would have been rewarded by further confusion springing from Lum's metronomic pace. When documentation of the work is shown in a video and accompanied by a text panel within a gallery, the discomfort of the live performance dissipates. Gallery viewers imagine an art labour that, through a long tradition of performance, often entails redundant or non-productive activities, but those who saw the work in its immediate context would not have had the privilege of such categorization. The question then becomes: How can the tools of critical art function within and affect everyday life? To the extent that Lum requires his audiences—both the retrospective, gallery audience, and the immediate, situated witnesses of the performance—to imagine different kinds of labour, he also challenges them to consider how work is collectively imagined at different scales. How do we account for the invisibility of certain labour in a globalized economy (where do our products come from? How many of us work in manufacturing?), as well as that of class divisions, which often also possess a racialized character, a character Lum's work carries as a result of his being a Canadian of Chinese descent living in a time and space (Vancouver and its suburbs over the past thirty years) of sometimes quiet, sometimes loud xenophobia and racism?

Published in *Yishu: Contemporary Chinese Art* (November / December 2011): 97-105.

It is that space that Lum's work operates in—that space both inside and outside the gallery—that provides so much of the energy in the current exhibition. The furniture sculptures on display operate within a disjunctive space: they are obviously mass-produced and therefore not on display for their design qualities, but they are arranged in a way that shifts their meaning. Instead of being in a showroom or bulk flyer that represents the ideal domesticity for a family striving to achieve a kind of commercial normalcy, sculptures like *Red Circle* (1986) and *Corner Bed* (1990) present closed-off spaces or impossible arrangements. There is a sense of domestic exclusion or awkwardness to the work, as if the codes of living had been short-circuited by the movers. The furniture's larger cultural function—as a way to quickly gauge the social standing of the occupants of a space—has been rejected. In this way, the idea of "homeness" becomes complicated; the furniture on display appears to come from those stores that can furnish an entire home, so there is a homogeneity of style that is the mark of a new life in a new place, where there has not been the opportunity to accumulate goods, or to pass things down from generation to generation. The furniture signals a subjectivity that comes out of newness, rooted in objects, distributed in the mass circuits that carry both goods and people around the globe.

Lum's series of *Portrait-Logos* complement the furniture sculptures in that they use the domestic genre of professional family photography, in combination with the vernacular of corporate design and sign production, to represent an economy of identity, one that operates in an unfree market of culture. *Amrita and Mrs. Sondhi* (1986), which on the right shows a young woman seated above and resting her hands on the shoulders of a person who appears to be her mother, and which on the left displays a yellow and green logo that uses the surname SONDHI to bisect a globe, serves to match the idea of the family as enterprise with that of the enterprise as family. As Michel Foucault argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, with the rise of neoliberalism came the dissolution of borders between the domestic and commercial spaces. Economic theory inserted itself into the everyday; relationships became networks and families became micro-enterprises, with contracts between spouses and parents and children operating as they would between manufacturers and distributers. All immigrants became entrepreneurs who invested their human capital in the risk-heavy undertaking of living in a new space, with new people, and without access to full national or familial infrastructure. *Amrita and Mrs. Sondhi* alludes to that condition, with the idea of the younger generation pushing itself up from the shoulders of the previous. Amrita's shortly cropped hair, in contrast to her mother's, suggests a rejection of traditional roles not only for women, but for much of what defines the old world. The background of the portrait also implies a domestic space that takes its design cues from waiting rooms, with a muted abstract print in an unassuming gold frame hung between a hotel-style lamp and the ubiquitous fern, all in front of a wall papered in a beige pattern doing its best to go unnoticed.

The *Shopkeeper Signs* series uses the dissolution of the public and the private to again question how each bleeds into the other. Using the movable plastic letters that

Published in *Yishu: Contemporary Chinese Art* (November / December 2011): 97-105.

allow for the composition of specific messages within the semi-permanent tablet of a shop sign visible to passing foot and vehicle traffic, Lum presents a narrative in which the personal inserts itself into the public through the insufficiency of commercial dialogue to satisfy the emotional needs of the proprietors. The jarring effect of the work comes out of the appearance of a specific voice in a space that is designed for marketing, for the announcements that complement a business's operations: sales, promotions, new products. When personal messages appear in the same textual format, using the same limited space and style, questions about how language operates in the landscape of the urban and suburban everyday move to the foreground. That Lum uses mostly small businesses that have a visible link to immigrant or minority communities—the sign for Taj Kabab Palace includes a statement about the conflict in Kashmir, the sign for Hanoi Travel includes a reference to the "people's war," and Ebony Eyes Beauty Salon adds "All Power to the People!" to theirs—again points to the ways in which subjectivities are produced within and, at times, against contemporary business structures.

A similar concern for the coming into being of contemporary global subjects is behind Lum's work using mirrors, several of which are included in the current exhibition. In *Photo Mirrors* (1998), where small, snapshot photographs are placed on the inside of larger, wood-framed mirrors that would not be out of place in bedrooms or foyers, the viewer feels as if s/he is looking into someone's personal mirror. There is a discomfort in seeing one's reflection in a gallery, where visitors go to look at things produced at a remove from their daily lives. Finding one's self at the centre of a mirror while looking at its periphery, with one's face becoming larger and more detailed the closer one peers at the small photographs, is a different experience than catching a glimpse of one's self in the reflection of a glass-framed painting or photograph. The latter reflection carries a pleasure of affirmation, like the smooth and casual narcissism produced by the glossy surfaces of Apple computer and mobile devices screens. It has always been part of Lum's project, however, to provide ways for viewers to uncomfortably encounter themselves. This is most pronounced in *House of Realization* (2007–11), where a text by the thirteenth-century Turkish poet Yunus Emre is printed backwards on a wall opposite a large mirror. Viewers have to read the text via the mirror, meaning that they have to read through or past themselves; they are forced to see themselves as a part of the text and to perceive themselves reading. But the "realization" of Lum's title, to which Emre refers in his poem in the line "we witnessed the body," comes when the viewer moves past the text and mirror and is guided down a corridor and around a corner into a large space behind the mirror. The mirror is in fact a two-way mirror—the tool of interrogators, witnesses, psychologists, and focus groups. Upon entering this space behind the mirror, the visitor realizes that s/he was being watched while s/he watched herself in the act of reading, and that s/he is now watching other visitors study the work in a performance of critical investigation. The viewer is forced into a voyeuristic relationship with other viewers, having first been an unwitting victim of involuntary scrutiny, and must experience a bizarre complicit shame when having to face the person s/he has been watching as they pass each other at the entrance/exit to the viewing chamber.

Published in *Yishu: Contemporary Chinese Art* (November / December 2011): 97-105.

This is the uncomfortable looking that is also a pleasurable looking. The disruptive power of Lum's work to acclimate visitors to the uneasiness inherent to problems of racism, class barriers, exploitation, and commercial subjectivity functions as a primer for the social necessities beyond the gallery. The shocks and surprising laughter—there are a lot of laughs in this exhibition—are designed to spur questions about the role of the social in everyday life. How do our rituals and habits depend on ignoring other people in the name of privacy or politeness? What voices are present in logos and signs? Which voices are excluded? What are we allowed to represent, and what resists our attempts to categorize or understand? Why do we laugh and then feel bad for laughing, then laugh again and feel bad again? Why does feeling bad feel so good? These are the questions Lum's exhibition leaves us with, and they are to be taken seriously, even when they are funny.

Published in *Yishu: Contemporary Chinese Art* (November / December 2011): 97-105.