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Ken Lum

Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991–2018

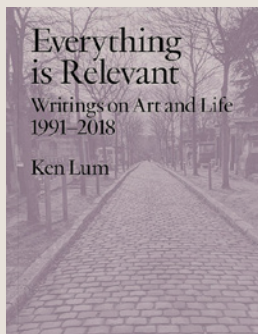
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I'll admit that I used to not get Ken Lum. Compared to the other well-known artists of his generation whose work often contained statements and phrases, the "captions" in Lum's *Portrait-Repeated Text* diptychs lacked the high moral seriousness of Edgar Heap of Birds, the didactic truth to power of Jenny Holzer, the conceptual reflexivity of Glenn Ligon, or the impossibly poetic poignancy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I now recognize that what eluded me in those texts was just as valuable a contribution to the art of multiculturalism and the culture wars as the work of his contemporaries—and furthermore, that their elusiveness was part of the point. They evince what poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong, building on the affect theory of Sianne Ngai, has recently named "minor feelings": the registering of micro-aggressive harm. Lum lays this out in one of the earliest texts in *Everything is Relevant*, "Between Art and Fact" (1995), explaining that the caption to the interracial interaction depicted in his 1993 diptych *Don't Be Silly, You're Not Ugly* should be read as an involuntary tic, akin to what literary critics like to call glossolalia.

Most likely, the most sustained reception of this collection of Lum's capacious writing practice will be by the current renaissance in Asian-North American studies, of which Lum's art career is already a key object of study. For instance, literary critic Iyko Day devotes half a chapter of *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the*



Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism (2016) to Lum's work. While her analyses of Lum's artwork advance several brilliant arguments within a largely brilliant book, like many comparative literature studies on visual art, its analyses of Lum's artwork as paraliterary artefacts are less than convincing in and of themselves. I note this because a key opportunity might have been missed by Day; while Lum writes—convincingly—in many modes (criticism, art history, curatorial essay), this volume might be most valuable as itself a paraliterary artefact. The memoir-ish impulse of Lum's many published diaries began to become a feature of most of his writing by the mid-2000s. Taken together, one can read *Everything is Relevant* in the genre of highly celebrated Asian-North American memoirs such as Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020) and Canadian art critic Amy Fung's *Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being* (2019).

The first section of *Everything is Relevant* is full of microaggressions and minor feelings, such as when Lum learned secondhand that members of the crowd at a protest for more minority representation at the Vancouver Art Gallery shouted that they no longer consider him or Stan Douglas artists of colour ("Seven Moments in the Life of a Chinese Canadian Artist," 1997). He also shows how the quotidian can intensify to a terrorizing scale, while, simultaneously, chronic severe emotional harm becomes quotidian. In the short article "The

Ambivalent Gaze of Thomas Ruff" (1998), Lum inverts the usual frame of reference for the German photographer's work, Germany's existential reckoning with the moral inheritance of Holocaust guilt. Lum prefers to read Ruff's photographs from a minority's perspective: could there remain for the groups that once had been targets of Nazi terror, he writes, "a persistent fear that the dream of the Thousand Year Reich remains, however dim, a burning ember formerly glowing amid the ruins of war—and now flickering faintly within the foundations of reconstruction?" (29). The Germans have a word for this: *Nachgeborenen*, those born after the Second World War who carry the burden of its atrocities. Though Lum doesn't drop the German term, that *nach* (after) unveils a key pivot in Lum's writerly practice, a turn also taken in his artistic career. Lum's work carries with it the inter-generational trauma of a second-generation child of immigrants; this never goes away, either in his practice or his writing. But between the lines he also suggests that the dislocation of being second-generation Canadian might have spurred his internationalism—he writes tenderly of self-discovery upon meeting expatriate Chinese artist Chen Zhen in the latter's adopted home of Paris ("Encountering Chen Zhen: A Paris Portal," 2007), and the mutual recognition of kinship between himself and US-born Cantonese-American artist Mel Chin ("Me and Mel Chin," 2018).

Section two of the volume coincides with Lum's work with curator Okwui Enwezor on the traveling exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994* (2001), though his participation as an artist in Enwezor's epochal mega-exhibition *Documenta 11* (2002) is the better signpost. It takes us to 2010, just before Lum settles down again, at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is now chair of the Department of Fine Arts. Insofar as Lum's vast career can be distilled to a moment, Lum experienced a *moment*

in the first half of the first decade of this millennium, when his work was seen through the prism of art world remapping curators such as Enwezor, Hou Hanru, and Hans Ulrich Obrist. In “The London Art Diaries” of 1999 that end section one, Lum openly questioned the centrality of Parisian modernity, around which the core methodologies of art history at the time were formed (we were still in the era of T.J. Clark, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock—and Jeff Wall)—“...that is why people like to visit [Paris] as tourists, precisely because it is irrelevant, a big ruin of modernity, but they are without the melancholia Benjamin felt about Paris. Well, the melancholia is there, if one chooses to feel such feelings, but why would one want to do that?” (62). He also rerouted art history’s itinerary “beyond the standard New York/Paris or Berlin/Moscow foldings, to places such as Vancouver/Hong Kong, Shanghai/Beijing, Nairobi/London, etc.” (77). The Lum of section two rides out this shift.

We encounter a run of writing in which Lum hits the same notes as discipline-altering texts by Piotr Piotrowski, Enwezor, Miwon Kwon, and Nicolas Bourriaud in quick succession. Whether these ideas were in the air, or whether he had perhaps had a drink with Bourriaud before the latter wrote *Postproduction* (take the causal link of influence in whichever direction you’d like), we don’t know. Such a scenario would probably not be unlikely, however; in one of the diaries, Lum narrates a dinner in Vancouver with Boris Groys and his neighbours at the time, artists Rodney Graham and the late Robert Lindsay, in which, in a conversation on Naomi Klein’s then-new *No Logo*, Lindsay throws out an idea that, by chance, would be realized half a decade later by Sianne Ngai in her groundbreaking article “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde.” By section three, Lum is working on his urban research project

Monument Lab and largely occupied with the questions pertaining to public art. These bring him to two key issues that dominate our immediate present: the right of problematic monuments to occupy public space (“Tracking Colonialism from Delhi to Toronto: Edward VII in Queen’s Park,” 2018) and autonomy protests in Hong Kong (“Eternal Glory to the People’s Heroes!: On Beijing’s *Monument to the People’s Heroes*,” 2018).

For his internationalism, Lum also has written extensively on Canada. In particular, three texts in the magazine *Canadian Art*, spanning four prime ministers, make a valuable contribution to debates on the cultural politics of multiculturalism and heritage in Canadian art. Two texts from the last decade, “Canadian Identity Debates Are Broken. Let’s Fix Them.” (2013) and “Living in America” (2016), deftly balance the superstructure of Canadian art with the bureaucratic base of funding agencies and national institutions and broadcasting. They both depend on the legwork already invested in the definitive “Canadian Cultural Policy: A Problem of Metaphysics” (1999), a tour-de-force history lesson in federal cultural policy and a diagnostic account of Canada’s art ecology that anchors both in the riddle of Canadian national identity. One does wish, however, that these perspectives could be weighed against firsthand accounts from when Lum was most actively engaged in the federal grant-writing rat race—perhaps, if they exist, exhibition texts from when he was director of the Vancouver artist-run centre Or Gallery in the mid-1980s.

Though it begs for philology, the key scholarly utility of this book ultimately might be as a first-hand artefact of the upheavals of Lum’s times, following along the career of an extremely well-informed and perspicacious exemplar who, from the vantage point of 2020, was right about absolutely everything. Or perhaps this book will instead be an artefact of 2020, when Ken Lum is still right about absolutely everything. I’m

writing this in the summer of 2020, in social isolation with my immediate family. Plane travel is ill-advised—our country’s public funding agencies will not let us use grant money for travel-related expenses—and the kind of border-hopping internationalism Lum wrote of so elegantly may not be possible for the foreseeable future. One wonders how the utopianism in Lum’s writing, which narrates his escape from the provincially of a Paris-gazing Canadian art world for appointments in Dakar, Martinique, Shanghai, and Sharjah, will look in the retrospect of COVID-19. As our collective addictions to international hub-hopping and event culture—and the cult of liveness that has now morphed into the compulsion of synchronic attention in endless livestreamed programming—are becoming plainly obvious, how will art as we know it adapt? And might we find somewhere in Lum’s extensive oeuvre that he had been right about that too? ¶

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Rachel Epp Buller, Charles Reeve (dir.)
Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design, and Maternity

Bradford, Demeter Press, 2019
395 pp. 62 ill. en noir
39,95 \$ ISBN 9781772582093

Kim Rondeau

Publié en 2019 chez Demeter Press, une maison d’édition féministe indépendante basée en Ontario se spécialisant dans les ouvrages consacrés à la maternité, le recueil *Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design and Maternity* s’inscrit dans une foule de publications et d’expositions récentes offrant