
Ken Lum

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

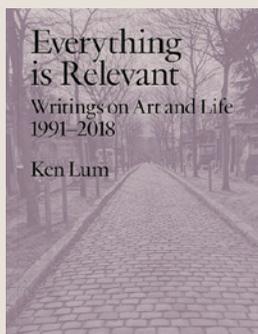
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Godfre Leung

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*