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...And Yet the Devil Exists

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...And Yet the Devil Exists

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

...And Yet the Devil Exists is a project that explores the ways in which ideology determines reality. It is an installation that plots and connects the historical and personal narratives that have defined my sense of identity—narratives in which perceptions of reality shatter, mutate, or hybridize when confronted with power, opportunity, or coercion. The installation component of the project consists of three parts. The first is an infrastructure made of wooden beams upon which paintings and images are installed; I call this the lantern. In the center of this is a round table on top of which is a nonsensical board game, called the map. Installed on the walls of the exhibition space are double-sided picture frames, called portals. All together these components form a spatial timeline, a composite of imaginaries, excerpts, declarations, and remembrances associated with the reciprocating effects of evangelism, colonialism, and capitalism. The selected imagery confronts viewers with pervasive contradictions that result when tools of persuasion barter in false promises but also act as genuine containers of faith. The language of mapping is used to express a desire for cohesion. “We make maps of the world in order to change it.” But the conflation of imagery from a wide range of sources, disciplines, ideologies, and histories, makes a cohesive mapping of the installation itself impossible. What is left is an opportunity to consider each image, narrative, or statement individually and speculate, even fabricate, the connections between them. For the project itself is a quest for interiority amidst a pervasive lack. By delving into these portals of human experience, I create an inheritance, a totality, a map, with all the fears, aspirations, reasonings, and prayers that come with it. It just so happens that this map itself a labyrinth, for it is inherently fragmented and is meant for getting lost in.
Preface

In a lot of ways, the work and research I have been conducting over the past decade started because of a single moment during my undergraduate art education. It happened during a drawing class critique for an exceptionally encouraging instructor, the type who gave out the validation a nineteen-year-old art student seeks. I had made a series of drawings about a wandering mystic. The aesthetic was categorically Asian. After a few customary responses and compliments, my instructor told me, “You know you don’t have to make work in that style if you don’t want to.” I was unable to respond because I was uncertain about how I should even feel about that statement. In the moment, I became incredibly self-conscious and an embarrassing sense of performativity overwhelmed me. It wasn’t until a few years later that I developed the vocabulary to describe exactly what this professor was trying to say to me. He was trying to advise that I did not have to self-orientalize if I did not want to. I have been unpacking this moment ever since, knowing that the process of reconciling one’s identity and its representation can extend a lifetime.

...And Yet the Devil Exists is the latest iteration of research and aesthetic approaches that I have been exploring the past two years. This project has unfolded rhizomatically, spatially, and archivally. The aesthetic and the conceptual impulses behind individual works have been varied, but the intentions have always been based on a desire to encapsulate a sense of complexity, dislocation, and yearning in relation to my conception of identity. As I wrap up my MFA candidacy, it has become clear to me that the cohesion I have been seeking is impossible. Hybridity, uncertainty, ambivalence, contradiction, absence, ambiguity, performativity, self-reflexivity—my work has always contended with these concepts because they are foundational to diasporic identities. This space of in-betweeness is where the work is coming from, the practice is fragmented in its very essence. I am still uncertain about how to respond to my drawing instructor’s statement from over a decade ago, but now this uncertainty is no longer foreign to me, it is grounding.

As I write this in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, I am privileged enough to be spending this time in isolation reconsidering the purpose of my artistic practice. The surge in racism towards Asian Americans has been a painful reminder that assimilation can never fully be successful; try as I may, under this paradigm I will perpetually be foreign. Despite a resurgence of identity politics in the public discourse, there are many fields in which the conversation has not moved past a multiculturalism that simply celebrates living together-in-difference. As Ien Ang wrote nearly two decades ago, “multiculturalism has not been able to do away with racism: as a concept, it depends on the fixing of mutually exclusive identities, and therefore also on the reproduction of potentially antagonistic, dominant and subordinate others.”1 With this in mind, this project explores Asian American identity with a spherical approach, diving in and out of the personal and historical, the macro and micro, the subjective and representative.

Acknowledgments

Thank you for teaching me,


This is dedicated to my family.
Introduction

‘Who I am’ or ‘who we are’ is never a matter of free choice.
-Ien Ang

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.
-Simone Weil

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze my studio practice over the past two years in relation to my research and the work of three artists of Asian descent: Tishan Hsu, Martin Wong, and Danh Vo. The goal of this analysis is to bring clarity, to myself and to viewers, regarding the intentions and thought processes behind ...And Yet the Devil Exists, as well as to explore the diasporic artist’s role in the discourse of identity and its relation to religion, politics, and capitalism. The basis of this analysis is centered around concepts of identity construction pioneered by postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ien Ang. These theories will be expanded upon and returned to throughout the paper, looping in on themselves in order to describe the layers of self-awareness that are employed in the perennial pursuit of visibility and representation; these layers will be exemplified by pop-culture and individual artworks.

As a diasporic artist, I’m especially attuned to the difficulty of ever gaining a foothold on understanding one’s identity. The foundations supporting constructions of identity are constantly shifting and in the process of renewal. To grapple with contradiction, double consciousness, hybridization, cycles of self-orientalization, and fragmentation is a dizzying endeavor, to say the least. As Ocean Vuong states, “...cohesion is not part of my generation’s imagination, nor our language, nor our self-identity.”2 Thus, the searing lesson of our time is not to know ourselves but rather to be less foreign to ourselves.

To be a second-generation immigrant is to be witness to the complex effects that generational shifts in politics, religion, and economic pursuits have on identity. Thus, my practice combines a variety of aesthetic approaches in order to reveal interconnections that exist across multiple histories and perspectives. I hope to continue to pursue the visibility of lived experience as well as the representation of marginalized voices but with an emphasis on ambivalence, uncertainty, and plurality. As I continue to try to make sense of a multipolar reality, caught between marginalization and privilege, agency and disempowerment, ignorance and certainty, memory and erasure, I remind myself that even though hybridization is not a solution—for there is an irreducible resistance to complete dissolution within all of us3—creolization, the third space, complicated entanglement, these are meaningful locations for critically considering the question of identity.

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3 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, 17.
Key Words

Asian: This term is impossible to define for it is already overly generalized, yet it is a ubiquitous term of identification in my daily life. In lieu of a definition, I offer a short biography. I was born in the United States to ethnically Korean parents, who first immigrated to the US via Hawaii. I spent half of my upbringing in the US and the other half in South Korea. It was only when I returned to the US at eighteen to live permanently, that I began to seriously consider my position as an Asian American. When I think of the word Asian, I think of being Asian in America.

Diaspora: The word diaspora in its simplest definition describes a people dispersed from their original homeland. It is a contentious term because as an umbrella it attempts to cover vastly different conditions and experiences of migration. Within the category of Asian diaspora alone, the identification can be used to represent refugees, economic migrants, first to third-generation immigrants, and individuals whose ethnic origins range from the Indian sub-continent to the Korean peninsula. The conception of a homeland is also a contested aspect of diaspora, for an inevitable generational consequence of migration is the severing of connection to a place of origin, both unintentionally and intentionally—the most immediate example being the loss of language. Furthermore, at what point does the host-nation become “home”, and how do diasporic individuals gain the agency to claim it as such and by what terms? Over time, the unifying characteristics binding a diaspora may be common ancestry, religion, cultural traditions, and mythic stereotypes. It is an identification that imparts a powerful source of political and cultural belonging “with roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation.” Yet, as a consequence, the “assumed boundedness” of diaspora gets limited by an “inevitable tendency to stress its internal coherence and unity, logically set apart from ‘others.’” I am interested in the term precisely because it is transitional, it holds a place of contradiction and uncertainty. As Rey Chow states, “It is not so much about the transient eventually giving way to the permanent as it is about an existential condition of which ‘permanence’ itself is an ongoing fabrication.” Thus, the diasporic artist is an individual whose work is grounded in a place of in-betweenness and contradiction. Diasporic individuals are, as Jen Ang describes, “living in translation.” The work of diasporic artists emphasizes fragmentation, uncertainty, ambiguity, and plurality. “Ultimately, diaspora is a concept of sameness-in-dispersal, not of togetherness-in-difference.”

Self-orientalization: As a term, self-orientalization is rather tricky because it has a way of looping in on itself. Building off the terms double-consciousness and orientalism, self-orientalization is a form of

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representing or essentializing one’s identity in a manner that reifies, internalizes, or satisfies essentialist Western conceptions. In other words, moments in which the “orient” is complicit in its own orientalization.⁹ The term is made more complex by the fact that Western conceptions have made way to globalized conceptions in the manufacturing of cultural products. Furthermore, self-orientalization can be used as a form of empowerment, or to critically point out complexities within identity constructs, by individuals in diaspora who are caught in-between globalized fantasies perpetuated by both the occident and the orient. It is this specific positionality that this paper is most concerned with, the cyclical balance between ambivalence and yearning felt by diasporic individuals.

**Strategic essentialism:** Strategic essentialism is a term first coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It is used to describe how social groups unite around stable essentialist identifications as a strategy for collective representation in order to achieve chosen political-ends. Its practice extends beyond politics into media, entertainment, and academia, and requires a balance between the philosophical acceptance of identity being fluid and the practicality of fixed essentialization, however provisional.

**Tactics of intervention:** This term was coined by cultural critic and postcolonial theorist Rey Chow. The replacement of the term strategy with the term tactics is important here, for strategy implies the power and commitment to create new spaces or fields, and functions under “the economy of proper places.”⁹ Tactics, on the other hand, operate as calculated actions in the absence of proper places and function in relation to time rather than space. Tactical interventions are “para-sitical,” in that they do not dominate, occupy or supplant fields in their entirety.¹⁰ They try to avoid the formation of new solidarities that are based on “unquestioned ideological premises and unattested claims to oppression and victimization.”¹¹ Instead, the tactical interventionist remains in the border slowly, surreptitiously, and insidiously eroding hegemony. Through this method, cultural change is brought about “quietly, without revolutionary zeal, by ‘contaminating’ established narratives and dominant points of view.”¹²

**The third space:** The third space is the in-between place of hybridity, the interstitial space between binaries. It is attributed to postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who describes it as a space that "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.”¹³

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¹¹ Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 16.

¹² Chow, 17.

Pan-Asian aesthetics: At once self-exoticizing, in poor taste, touristy in a Chinatown sense, offensive in a Hollywood sense, ironic, coded, and just plain cool; pan-Asian aesthetics is developing into an exciting diasporic phenomenon. Fashion label Cute Fucking Gay New York, or CFGNY, frames it with the terms “vaguely Asian” in the following statement:

Founded in 2016, CFGNY began as an ongoing dialogue between Tin Nguyen and Daniel Chew on the intersection of fashion, race, identity, and sexuality. CFGNY continually returns to the term "vaguely Asian": an understanding of racial identity as a specific cultural experience combined with the experience of being perceived as other. CFGNY does not wish to represent what it means to be "Asian" in the singular; instead, it encourages the visualization of the countless ways one is able to be in the plural.

Impossible objects: Also known as impossible figures or undecidable figures, impossible objects are a form of optical illusion made famous by M.C. Escher. They are two-dimensional figures interpreted by the visual system as representing projections of three-dimensional objects. The impossibility is formed when aspects of the 2D figure contradict the representative logic of the 3D projection. I consider these objects to be effective analogies for representations of identity. We consume these representations instinctually, subconsciously, and even when the impossibility becomes apparent after careful consideration, the initial impression remains.

Non-orientable manifolds: The most well-known non-orientable manifolds are the Möbius strip and the Klein bottle. I borrow the concept of non-orientability as an abstraction for explaining the way in which one can follow a surface that curves inwards only to find oneself in the same position as before but reflected. This is an analogy for the process of “looping in on oneself” that can occur in self-orientalization.
Absence, Erasure, and Information Processing

To this day, I do not know the first names of my grandparents on both sides of my family. I can name one first name of six aunts and two uncles on my mom’s side and I don’t know any first names on my father’s side. Part of this is cultural, part of this is specific to my family dynamics, and part of it is my own fault. Even though I grew up in Seoul, Korea between the ages eight and eighteen, my Korean language skills are colloquial on the best of days and childish on the worst. This state of ignorance used to be a source of embarrassment for me, but the older I get the more I realize how common this position is. Found within all stories of migration are stories of loss. A sense of absence and erasure has become pervasive to many in our globalized world, and in consequence, so has a yearning to be rooted. How can the desire to know one’s historical subjectivity be fulfilled? How is this process mediated? To help address these questions about myself, I have found it useful to look at the work of Tishan Hsu, who, like me, explores themes of absence, erasure, and information processing.

Tishan Hsu is an artist whose work I have only recently discovered. His first US museum survey exhibition opened at the Hammer Museum in January of 2020 and includes roughly thirty works that explore his interest in the body’s evolving relationship to technology. His sculptures, drawings, and media works consider the impact that the accelerated use of technology and artificial intelligence has on the human condition. The work is prophetic and visionary in that Hsu began exploring these key ideas during the 1980s. I’m most interested in his 2019 exhibition delete, at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong which deals explicitly with his family history, or more specifically with the absence of that history during his American upbringing. Hsu began this work after his mother’s death in 2012. Around this time he discovered hundreds of letters written to his mother from her parents in China. Growing up, Hsu had never visited China because his mother had experienced a lot of trauma from the Cultural Revolution; she spoke very little about China in general. Hsu never met his grandparents, and he grew up not speaking Mandarin. His discovery of these letters was very moving to him because up until that point he had only been given a cartoonish image of his grandparents. Eventually, Hsu was able to get in contact with relatives in China and began to visit them. They shared photographs that documented his family history, a history that he had no knowledge of. This rediscovery of family history is a common experience for Asians in diaspora because of an unwillingness, and inability, to revisit trauma (both experienced and inherited) caused by revolution and civil war. By extension, there is also a withdrawal from language and tradition. These losses are not simply consequences of assimilation and globalization.

Jalal Toufic expands upon this symptom of trauma in The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster. “...whether a disaster is a surpassing one (for a community–defined by its sensibility to the immaterial withdrawal that results from such a disaster) cannot be ascertained by the number of casualties, the intensity of psychic traumas and the extent of material damage, but by whether we encounter in its aftermath symptoms of withdrawal of tradition.”14 Toufic continues, “I

have to do my best to physically preserve tradition, while knowing that what I will save physically from the surpassing disaster still needs to be resurrected—one of the limitations of history as a discipline is that the material persistence of the documents blinds it to the exigency of the resurrection... All returns to tradition in the aftermath of a surpassing disaster have to be fought because tradition has been objectively withdrawn, and hence the ‘return’ would be to a counterfeit tradition, one characterized by reduction to the exoteric and lack of subtlety. From this perspective, invoking tradition as the domain of the genuine is derisory, since in many cases tradition did at one point or another undergo a surpassing disaster.” There is an unresolvable gap between generations surpassing disaster, and what is lost in this gap can never be resurrected. This understanding is very clear to individuals in diaspora and is present in the following work by Hsu.

Tishan Hsu, *Boating Scene green 1*, 2019.
Hsu is interested in going beyond his personal erasure in order to ask the collective question of absence within our identities, or more specifically in what ways information is processed and mediated in response to erasure. Members within a diaspora become the embodied consciousness of exile, trauma, dislocation, or displacement. The artworks that result are not attempts to reclaim a history that has been erased, rather they are material manifestations of an unrepresented history.

It is within this line of thinking that I developed a work of mine called Seminario: Genre Scenes of Westerners. This work came out of a series of paintings in which I was mimicking the history of Seminario paintings from 17th century Japan. I was interested in this history as an analogy for the continued dominance of Western pedagogy in painting, but also because of my family’s history with Western missionaries. My maternal grandfather was baptized by Horace Grant Underwood, the most famous Western missionary in Korean history, and I attended an international school founded by his family in 1916.

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Peter in Denial, The Parable of the Blind Man and the Dancing Rats, Sorry St. Christopher (only Jesus can change the color of his skin), father abraham had many sons 2017

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15 Seminario paintings were made by Japanese artisans who were trained by Jesuit priests to mimic a Western-style. The resulting work is a discernable hybridization of aesthetics and techniques, a point of mutation that complicates art historical categorizations.
My research, that began with Jesuit missionaries in Nagasaki, branched out to other historical nodes like Matteo Ricci and the Ming Empire, Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Boxer Rebellions and the Opium Wars, the retraction of Catholic missionaries in East Asia and the subsequent arrival of protestant missionaries, protestant inroads to Korea by Korean Christians who were converted and trained in China, colonial infiltration to the Donghak peasant rebellion to Cheondoism, the Korean Pentecost and the Pyongyang Revival, Christianity’s connection to anti-Japanese resistance and early communist organization, the Protestant/Confucian ethic and the spirit of capitalism in post-war Korea, rapid Christian conversion and rapid economic development, the 1965 immigration act, and Korean church communities in the US. There is a map that can be made by connecting all these historical nodes. But a retelling of history is not what the work is about. All the research conducted alongside this work has been mediated through technology, accessed through an internet that is contingent upon geographic location, a Western gaze, or an English translation. At the center of this constellation of research is not a search for authenticity or truth. Rather, the research is a means of experiencing information, and the work that results is an expression of fragmented recollections that remain after a journey beyond the initial space of absence and erasure, into an endless sea of narratives and remembrances; a composite composed of collected data from an unreclaimable past.
Seminario: Genre Scenes of Westerners, 2019

Seminario: Genre Scenes of Westerners is constructed out of the following images: A Seminario screen painting of the same title as the work, made by a Japanese artisan to be used as a gift that Jesuit priests could give daimyos in order to incur favor, and a screen painting from Ming dynasty China from the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection in New York. The painting is a facsimile and the Metropolitain describes it as follows:

This fanciful painting bears a suite of false inscriptions and seals, including a fake signature of the twelfth-century court painter Zhao Boju. Zhao was famous for his blue-green landscapes, and many paintings bearing his name were produced in later centuries, some intended to fool collectors and others as charming reproductions. This painting, likely made in the seventeenth century, belongs to the latter category. The intense palette of azurite blue and malachite green, and the scalloped clouds that cling to the mountains, signals a magical, mysterious place that is difficult to access and inhabited by supernatural beings.16

16 “Sea and Sky at Sunrise,” metmuseum.org, accessed May 14, 2020,
Behind the blue-green mountains is an image of a floating asteroid, 433 Eros, which was the first near-Earth object orbited, photographed, and landed on by a man-made object. I’m interested in the imagery of space travel not only because of its continuation of the romance of exploring the unknown but also because space travel is historically considered the pinnacle of scientific achievement which by extension is a metonym for power and truth. These images are identified in the framing device for the piece, the words Seminario, 433 Eros, Genre Scenes of Westerners, and NEAR Shoemaker are carved into the wooden beams suspending the painting in air. I believe that this identification is all that is necessary, for the work is a portal, a map, an illusion of orbit and gravitational pull, keyframes on a parabolic curve of research that can be schematized but not accessed for “the historical subject is determined by a totality that is inaccessible to them except through fragmentary representations.”

The Many Clones of Bruce Lee

There is a scene in Quentin Tarantino’s 2019 film Once Upon a Time in Hollywood in which the protagonist, a fictional stuntman named Cliff Booth, played by Brad Pitt, mocks a cocky, posturing, and arrogant Bruce Lee, played by Mike Moh. The fight that ensues includes the slamming of the fictional Bruce Lee into the side of a car and his sore-loser attitude when the fight is broken up. Like all of Tarantino’s films, the scene stirred some Hollywood controversy, which was further fueled by click-bait articles targeted at Asian audiences like myself. When I saw the scene, I have to admit that I was annoyed. Bruce Lee as an icon not only represents masculine strength and fitness but also confidence and wisdom in ability, not cocky-ness or arrogance. The image of Bruce Lee is of further importance because it stands in opposition to the emasculated, perverted, duplicitous, undesirable, robotic, invisible, compensating, or self-interested portrayals of Asian men prevalent throughout American media history. Strangely though, I was bothered by Tarantino’s portrayal but I was also bothered by the instinctual need to protect this legacy. It felt silly and juvenile. This feeling of ambivalence in relation to the image of Bruce Lee is a helpful starting point for understanding the complex nuances that result when celebrity icon, stereotypical representations in media, and self-orientalization become complicatedly entangled. In order to navigate this entanglement, I will explore the work of Martin Wong in relation to a work of my own.

One of the foundational inspirations for my work over the past few years have been the paintings of Martin Wong. Wong was raised in the Chinatown district of San Francisco. He moved to New York in 1978, where he established himself as a prolific painter known primarily for “gritty urban street scenes of the Lower East Side populated by kissing firemen dressed in full gear, Latino youths in high-tops flying through the air on skateboards, [and] dark-skinned tough incarcerated men who call each other by affectionate nicknames.” His work defied what is, “typically expected, according to a


reductivist logic, of an artist who is Chinese-American.”19 The work Wong made between 1978 and 1988 would become the work he is most remembered for. Paintings from this period include *Big Heat* (1986) and *Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)* (1982–84).

In the early 1990s, many minority artists fought to transform the New York art world by bringing marginalized perspectives to the fore and confronting viewers with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Martin Wong’s work also transformed during this time—going from the vantage point of an outsider looking in to an outsider looking inwards. Curator Lydia Yee describes this shift with the following:

“Wong focused his attention on Chinatown, and at first glance, his new paintings seemed to better fit a multicultural paradigm than their Lower East Side predecessors. Images of crowded Chinatown streets, lion dancers in the Chinese New Year’s parade, and popular Chinese food products all suggest an experience that can be more readily identified as Chinese-American. On closer inspection, however, some of these images—seductively available young women in cheongsam dresses, or ghoulishly deformed characters from the Chinese opera—verge toward stereotypes and, as such, cannot be so neatly assimilated into a celebration of cultural identity. Chinatown is, for Wong, ‘an exotic Oriental extravaganza,’ and he himself ‘refuse[s] not to be Oriental.’”20

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20 Wong, 53-55.
It was during this period that Martin Wong made several paintings of Bruce Lee, such as *Clones of Bruce Lee* (1992), the title of which is based on a Bruceploitation film of the same name. There is something initially off-putting about these paintings—something questionable. Why make a painting of a movie like *Clones of Bruce Lee*, a film that is the product of an internalized stereotype harnessed for cheap capital gain—a tasteless form of self-orientalization? Why make paintings of Bruce Lee, a legitimate trail-blazing icon before his untimely death, but whose legacy by the 90s had become a seemingly insurmountable obstruction in the fight for Asian representation in film and a locker room caricature used to mock and offend Asian Americans? I believe the answers to these questions are far from straightforward. I consider these paintings to be examples of impossible objects. The self-orientalization at play within these works contradict the operational logic of both a multicultural celebration and of cynical irony, especially considering the complicated history of Bruceploitation.
Immediately after Bruce Lee’s death in 1973, opportunistic filmmakers were splicing together whatever footage they could get their hands on and profiteering off of posthumous releases. Kung fu movies continued to flourish in Hong Kong but these films did not reach most mainstream American audiences (white audiences); instead, kung fu films were beloved by black people and POC’s (kung fu would also become a major influence in early hip hop culture). The biggest mainstream kung fu success immediately following Bruce Lee’s death was the then on-going television series *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine. Carradine played Kwai Chang Caine, a half-Asian Shaolin monk who travels to the American West in search of his family roots and for his half-brother. Interestingly, around the same time, Bruce Lee was pitching a treatment for a similar show called *The Warrior* to Warner Bros. and Paramount Studios, but to no avail. Lee was allegedly passed up for the role of Kwai in favor of Carradine for fear that American audiences would not understand his accent.

Throughout the 70s, Asian filmmakers continued to exploit Bruce Lee’s legacy with an ever-increasing list of Lee knock-offs. The most cynical of these productions was *Game of Death* (1978). Bruce Lee died during production, the circumstances of which have led to a trove of conspiracy theories. Of the 100 minutes of footage Lee shot, only 11 minutes and 7 seconds ended up in the final 1 hr and 43-minute feature. The remaining 92 minutes starred two Bruce Lee look-aliases, Yuen Biao

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21 The list includes Bruce Li, Bruce Chen, Bruce Lai, Bruce Le, Bruce Lie, Bruce Liang (also known as Bruce Leung), Saro Lee, Bruce Ly, Bruce Thai, Bruce Lee, Myron Bruce Lee, Lee Bruce, and Bruce Lei/Dragon Lee. These many Bruces starred in films like Re-Enter the Dragon, Enter Three Dragons, Return of Bruce, Enter Another Dragon, Return of the Fists of Fury, Enter the Game of Death, Bruce Lee’s Secret, Exit the Dragon, Enter the Tiger, Bruce’s Fist of Vengeance, The Dragon Lives Again, Bruce Lee Fights Back from the Grave, and of course Clones of Bruce Lee.
and Korean born Billy Lo (Kim T’ai-chung). The posthumous gamble banked on the assumption that all Asians look alike and that most people either won’t be able to tell the difference or won’t care. The sleight-of-hand turned out to be quite profitable, with total worldwide revenue of approximately $31.13 million (equivalent to $122 million adjusted for inflation in 2017), a significant portion of which came from Asian box offices.

By the late 70s, films satirizing Bruceploitation itself began to be released, the most notable being *Enter the Fat Dragon* (1978); the remake was released on January 23, 2020. More recent examples include *Kung-fu Hustle* (2004) and the mockumentary *Finishing the Game* (2007). Bruce Lee inspired characters would also appear in dozens of video games and anime. A notable early satirization is *They Call Me Bruce?* (1982). The synopsis is as follows: “A goofy Korean who finds his life hopelessly complicated with people continually confusing him with Bruce Lee is tasked by mobsters to bring some bags of “flour” across the country.”

Despite the intentions of Elliot Hong and Johnny Yune, the creators of *They Call Me Bruce*, to subvert a stereotype, the end result was more or less the same. Regardless of trying to control the reasons people were laughing at him, the star Johnny Yune still positioned himself and, by extension, other “orientals,” as the butt of the joke. This is not entirely due to Yune’s ability (Yune was one of the first Asian-American comedians to perform on late-night television); his acting is so wooden and the puns so bad that the jokes occasionally deliver. The cringe-y response elicited by the film, and its more pathetic sequel *They Still Call Me Bruce*, is due to a mixture of Yune’s perpetual foreignness, despite years of accent reduction training, and a self-effacing handling of self-orientalization. To call attention
to one’s otherness is a difficult task for any minority seeking representation within a hegemonic structure, thus to call oneself an oriental is to firmly establish that “I know that you know that I am not like you.” The questions then become to what extent do I perform for the white gaze, to what extent am I constrained by it, and to what extent has it been internalized? These early attempts made by Yune, and interestingly the singer of the song used for the film’s opening credits, Mia Kim of the Kim Sisters (a musical act that came out of post-war Korea to become one of the first Asian musical groups to garner any national US attention), are important barometers for how self-orientalization has evolved in media. It is with these early examples that the full cycle of self-orientalization in American media first became explicit. Subsequent cycles have produced a sort of identitarian house of mirrors for diasporic individuals seeking platforms. But even when layers of self-awareness are added, the same contradictions, ambiguities, and uncertainties are at play.

Interestingly enough, after a notable yet spotty career in the US, Johnny Yune returned to Korea and became the “Johnny Carson of Korea”—the mystique to his celebrity there being his Americanness. Like all impossible objects, the impressiveness of the design does not enhance its resolvability. The criteria for judgment must be based on something other than qualities like solvability, authenticity, clarity, or integrity. The fact of its impossibility is what makes it interesting; in essence, it is a refusal of wholeness couched in the illusion of it, a complicated entanglement. Of course, there is an aspect of taste when it comes to impossible objects, e.g. Gangnam Style. Instinctive repulsion towards self-orientalizing representations felt by subsequent generations is often due to a mixture of projection combined with differences in taste, trends, or context. As Spivak says, “Do not follow a set pattern for later generations will diagnose you.” But I would argue that all impossible objects are
interesting because all are metaphors for the discomfort wrought by the accelerated globalization of capitalism. Self-orientalization is a condition formed at first by Western economic pressure, but is consequently repeated in order to satisfy globalized consumer fantasies.

**Impossible Objects**

It is within the framework of impossible objects, specifically in relation to Bruce Lee, that I would like to discuss an installation of mine titled *Simulations*. The initial inspiration for this work is a little known object of Martin Wong’s called *Altar to Bruce Lee*. I encountered it as an employee of P.P.O.W. Gallery which manages Wong’s estate. It has never been shown and I’m uncertain if it was ever meant to be considered an artwork, it was allegedly set up in Martin Wong’s studio. I was intrigued by the simultaneously silly yet serious idea of an altar to Bruce Lee—one to burn incense to every day. I was interested in how the altar was also a product of the absence of ritual, a whimsical mutation on the many porcelain statues of gods from the Chinese pantheon that Wong collected and also had scattered across his studio but did not worship. I decided to mutate this gesture further and to develop a pantheon of my own, but I wanted to continue to straddle this line between silliness and seriousness, traditional and commercial, authentic, and mass-produced. It is a hybridization of aesthetics and images that I feel simultaneously attracted and disconnected to. The use of four figures is a reference to
the Four Heavenly Kings, Buddhist gods that watch over the four cardinal directions of the world. Large statues of these gods guard the entrance to Buddhist temples in Korea, which I would visit on family vacations throughout my childhood. I remember being entranced by them and incredibly curious about them but I was never taught their meaning or significance. Whenever I asked my parents about them I would get in reply the usual, “we are Christians, we don’t believe in them,” or the more ominous, “these are false gods, they are demons.” The intricate and captivating temple decorations greatly informed my aesthetic upbringing, but there has always been a mixture of ignorance, curiosity, confusion, and even taboo when it comes to incorporating these aesthetics into my work. To deny myself permission would be to deny the visual influence this tradition had on me growing up but to appropriate it would be to do so from a position of ignorance.

Another aspect of the four figures is it references the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There is a long iconographic tradition of representing these four evangelists together, known as a tetramorph. Historically, each evangelist is also symbolically represented by a magical creature; for example, Mark is symbolized by a winged-lion, a symbol for courage and monarchy as well as of Christ’s resurrection. It is important to note that in my own altar, the wooden hanging device that suspends the four drawings in the air has the names of the four evangelists carved into it, one in each direction.

Installation views of Simulations, 2020
The four figures represented in my installation are Jesus, a hydralisk\textsuperscript{22}, a mobile suit from Gundam\textsuperscript{23}, and Marshall Law\textsuperscript{24}. They are representative of adolescent influences, images that defined my world view before I had the wherewithal to begin defining it for myself. I was interested in using these four figures because they were already mutated representations—I’m interested in the copycat, the knock-off, the rip-off. Each of these images is initially a collage stitched together from numerous images taken from the internet. This composite of fragmented images is then redrawn to become a synthesized image.

\textsuperscript{22} The hydralisk is from the computer strategy game \textit{Starcraft} and is a riff off of the H.R. Giger designed aliens from the \textit{Alien} franchise.

\textsuperscript{23} The Gundam franchise is one of the largest and most expansive series from the mecha genre of anime, a genre that dates back to the 1940’s.

\textsuperscript{24} A fictional character from the video game franchise \textit{Tekken} that is based on Bruce Lee.
On the other side of each image are family photographs that span four generations (these are stitched into the center back) as well as LED strip lights (which turn the whole piece into a lantern). Other important details to note are that the colorful plastic pieces dangling on strings are from Gundam hobby model kits and there is insulation foam sprayed on the second tier of the wood hanging device to burn incense sticks from. On the walls are four posters, with verses like, “It’s after the end of the world, don’t you know that yet?” from Sun Ra and “I will destroy mankynd which I haue made fro of the face of the Earth. Both man beast, worm, and foule of the ayre for it repenth me that I have made them.” - Genesis 6:7 from the Wycliffe bible, a pre-Reformation translation of the Latin bible into middle English in 1382. Past, present and future are collapsed in these verses, which is how I would like the viewer to consider these four figures. Even though a historical origin for these figures can be identified, I want to push the viewer into considering them as being timeless, cyclical, or recurrent in an archetypal manner. I also want them to be considered in terms of simulacrum. This paradoxical understanding is how I personally experience these images; they are both silly and serious, dated yet timeless. I force a synthesis of this paradox through process and material. It is important to employ my own hand as the means through which all the disparate and fragmented sources can come together. By repainting the collage with sumi ink, I can fuse figures from video games into a background from Tibetan thangka. This hybridization extends beyond the imagery to the materials. I incorporate Korean traditional decorative knotting with coiled extension cords. I use thread, plastic, wood, paper, LED lights, and 3D printed joins to emphasize this sense of multiple histories and traditions being pulled together. I consider this joining of the handmade with the digitally produced and the online sourced to be a material manifestation of history.
This handling of imagery and material is not employed simply to be a representation of history but extends to being representative of one’s self in relation to history. This question of the artist in relation to the historical connotations of the aesthetics employed is central to Martin Wong’s Chinatown paintings. “The painted surface, painstakingly crafted, synthesized the disparate parts into a whole, imparting a sense of order to the otherwise unrestrained profusion of images that figure into Wong’s glittering construction of Chinatown.”25 This series of paintings is one of willful fabrication, by painting them he actualizes his sense of connection (and disconnection) to an aesthetic heritage, a

25 Wong, Sweet Oblivion, 57.
group history, and a place of origin. I employ the same level of meticulousness, elaborate detail, and labor in my own work. I believe the instinct to do so is due to a complex desire—an amalgamated yearning. The work is a means of fabricating connections to the imagery and narratives that I'm referencing, based on the assumption, whether true or false, that the more visually generous the work, the more meaningful the manifestation. This is the intention behind the self-orientalization present in my work.

Martin Wong, *Chinese New Years Parade*, 1992

**Souvenirs and Portals**

In this next section, I transition from the cultural to the familial, focusing on how the complex dynamics between first and second-generation immigrants affect diasporic subjectivity and how this manifests in my own work. The differences in religion, politics, socio-economic status and lived experience between first and second-generation immigrants are often drastic, making the relationship between parent and child difficult. There is often a sense of foreignness between generations that is present in language and values. In spite of this, the generalization of filial piety persists because so much of the second generation’s sense of purpose is defined by the first, and vice versa— they are inextricably intertwined. As writer Bo Ren poignantly says, “My parents were tasked with the job of
survival and I with self-actualization. The immigrant generational gap is real. What a luxury it is to search for purpose, meaning, and fulfillment.”

Empowerment and agency are necessary for second-generation immigrants to create platforms with which they can become less foreign to themselves and others, but it is also a means through which first and second generations can formulate bonds indirectly. It is commonly understood that Asian parents are reluctant to share their stories, particularly those surrounding trauma. The instinct is to become invisible in order to survive and one day thrive; the focus is on the present in service to the future. Ocean Vuong, the Vietnamese-American poet and writer, lovingly frames this reluctance with the following, “What I learned from these refugee women is that you don’t have to talk it out, that’s a great western myth. The wounds are understood, and sometimes language can’t even hash them all out.” Creativity and artmaking are thus essential tools for bridging gaps. Portals into the past must be created by the children of immigrants; portals made of narratives littered with half-truths, fabricated connections, and alternative realities. Vuong says of these portals, “The story is a virtual reality into another world, out of the present, but it’s also a record of where we’ve been, and a story is an inheritance.”27 With this in mind, I begin this section with Danh Vo’s 2013 exhibition IMUUR 2 to show how these portals exist in objects. In this installation, Vo honors Martin Wong’s relationship with his mother Florence Fie Wong. I believe Vo was compelled to do this because he was touched by the intimacy that existed between Wong and his mother, despite a series of barriers.

Between the years 2015 and 2017, I worked as a preparator for P.P.O.W. Gallery. It was during my time there that I became intimate with Wong’s work and legacy. Something that used to bother me while working there was the occasional thoughtless comment about Martin’s elderly mother Florence, whom he left in charge of his estate which she managed until her death in 2017 (when Florence passed, control of the estate went to P.P.O.W.). Like many relationships between a gay second-generation Asian

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26 Bo Ren, Twitter Post, December 1 2017, 2:32 PM. https://twitter.com/bosefina/.
American and their first-generation parents, Martin’s relationship with Florence was complicated. But the tension that existed between Florence and the gallery had to do with disagreements over how central his sexuality and his death to AIDS-related illness should be in regards to his legacy. Admittedly, I was only made aware of this tension through off-hand comments and casual conversation, but I got the sense that the gallery felt Florence was homophobic and ashamed of Martin’s sexuality—and that because of this shame she refused to let the gallery show certain works. Whether this was true or not is not for me to say, but I would argue it wasn’t for the gallery to say either. What is clear is that Martin and Florence had a special relationship. He was living with his parents at 344 Ewing Terrace in San Francisco for the last five years of his life as he fought HIV/AIDS. Florence took care of Martin until his death on August 12, 1999. She cherished everything he made. Martin and Florence also shared a life-time partnership in collecting tchotchkes and souvenirs. Her home was a mini-museum of his work and their joint collection; every surface of her home was carefully utilized for display until she had to move into an assisted living facility in 2012. Julie Ault tells the following story of Florence and Martin’s collection in her essay Some Places it will always be Eureka and in Eureka, it will always be Valentine’s Day.

Florence had always gone to antique shops and bought things for fun, but it was Martin who researched and learned about objects from an early age and became a collector and connoisseur, inspiring his mother to do the same. As a kid, Martin frequently visited the Japanese and Chinese antique shops on Grant Avenue in Chinatown. He read up on everything. Impressed with so much knowledge in a young boy, the shopkeepers gave him generous discounts, thereby arousing his appetite for bargains. Martin liked to buy something he thought he could eventually sell for more, and he’d do so when the timing was right. Martin initiated Florence into collaborative collecting. Ben [Martin’s father] didn’t share their acquisitive fever but amiably drove them to countless shops. Whenever they bought something Ben just smiled and said, “More treasures?” As the family’s one-story house filled to capacity, Ben built shelves in the basement for the scores of salt and pepper shakers, creamers, figurines, and other accumulating miscellany.

Susan Stewart writes in her book On Longing, “The souvenir displaces the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative. Such a narrative cannot be generalized
to encompass the experience of anyone; it pertains only to the possessor of the object. It is a narrative that seeks to reconcile the disparity between interiority and exteriority, subject and object, signifier, and signified. It is interesting to consider this in the context of diasporic individuals and their attraction (or repulsion) towards objects that are cultural signifiers for both their ethnicity and their current cultural environment; e.g. Martin Wong’s attraction to antique Chinese porcelains as well as Americana tchotchkes. Stewart continues, “The souvenir is used most often to evoke a voluntary memory of childhood. This childhood is not a childhood as lived; it is a childhood voluntarily remembered, a collage manufactured from its material survivals. Thus it is a collage made of presents rather than a reawakening of a past. As in an album of photographs or a collection of antiquarian relics, the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces. There is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents.” From this perspective, Wong’s omnivorous collecting can be seen as a means of understanding his cultural environment as well as forming a sense of place within it.

![Danh Vo, objects from the collection of Martin Wong and Florence Fie Wong, 2015](image)

Between 2011 and 2012, Danh Vo made several trips to visit Florence at her former residence in San Francisco. During that time, Vo approached several museums in an attempt to get the collection of nearly 4,000 objects acquired—they all declined. Without a place to house the collection, Florence spoke about having a garage sale. Instead, Vo followed the advice of a curator and purchased the objects himself and turned them into an artwork titled *I M U R* 2 (2013) (the title is a tagline that Martin Wong wrote on some of his paintings and poems). “As a single entity with a recognized author, the work was subsequently purchased by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, fulfilling Vo’s desire for someone to take care of the collection in perpetuity.” To me, there is a love that is self-evident in the

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act of taking care of a collection. However Florence handled Martin Wong’s estate, it is difficult for me to believe that her decisions, maybe even if at times misguided, were coming from a place of shame. I believe that she was trying to protect Martin and his legacy as best she could. I believe that Danh Vo, an artist who consistently gets his parents involved with his art practice, was in part trying to preserve the material evidence for this love. His act of ensuring that the collection is taken care of is also a statement on the importance of this bond in diaspora in spite of ideological chasms that result from generational shifts in lived experience.

I see in Danh Vo’s acquisitional mediation an actualization of affinity, a transformation of a sense of connection towards Martin Wong into a work of art. To physically manifest one’s sense of connection (and disconnection) towards one’s parents, ethnicity, “mother tongue”, place of origin, history, religious upbringing, predecessors (artistic or otherwise), through artmaking is foundationally important for a diasporic artist. This is a form of translation, for translation is an act of defining what something is by simultaneously defining what something is not. As Ien Ang points out, this “process of cultural translation is not a straightforward and teleological one: from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’... diasporic intellectuals are ‘transitional figures’, ‘constantly translating between different languages, different worlds’. It is this condition of transitionality that characterizes the lives of migrant intellectuals, also aptly described as ‘living in translation’.” This state of translation, of in-betweenness, becomes the place of meaning. Further, to possess, revisit, or display objects representative of this state, in that they can act as props against which one can define oneself, become acts charged with significance. This can explain Wong’s obsession with oriental souvenirs, and by extension Vo’s obsession with Wong’s collection. As Stewart writes, “We cannot be proud of someone else’s souvenir unless the narrative is extended to include our relationship with the object’s owner or unless we transform the souvenir into the collection.”

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31 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, 4.
32 Stewart, On Longing, 137.
I see the souvenir as a portal—an aperture from one generation to the next, and these portals are evolving testimonials on living in translation. They appear in my own work primarily through images, phrases and aesthetic cues. In *And Yet the Devil Exists*, I have installed on the walls of the exhibition space double-sided frames that have family photographs pressed between two panes of glass. These photographs span three generations and are, to name a few: of my father during his military service; my grandfather at a factory in Manchukuo during Japanese occupation; a photo of my aunts and uncles singing in the church choir in Honolulu, Hawaii; a photo of my mother’s back as she stares into the Pacific ocean; a portrait of my great uncle—the only relative of my grandfather who managed to escape with him from North Korea before the Korean War; a photograph of my grandfather’s family home in Onyang, North Korea; a photo of my childhood home in Boulder, Colorado; and my father’s boy scout membership card.

Referring back to Susan Stewart, “As in an album of photographs or a collection of antiquarian relics, the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces. There is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises. The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself. Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss.” It is from this perspective of the nostalgic and childhood that I place the diasporic individual in relation to family history. The act of remembering is an act of creation. That is why I call these frames portals, in creating them I have created a means through which family narratives can be imagined. By placing these portals spatially in relation to each other, I weave these narratives together to create an inheritance. I enlist the participation of my parents by having them write letters on the back of these photographs to their future grandchildren describing what the photograph makes them remember. Part of the reason for

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33 Stewart, 145.
the double-sided frame is so that what is written on the back can be read, the other part is that the frames are hinged to the walls of the exhibition space and each frame is literally connected to the others with thread. Thus, when a viewer opens one frame another one closes, implicating the viewer in this process of creating a historical inheritance; it can only exist when it is engaged physically, spatially, and kinetically in the moment. The last important detail to these portals is the text carved into the wooden frames. These phrases refer to states of desire, belief, opportunity, and loss to underline that what is being evoked is not merely a historical subject but an identity defined by ideological, political, and economical forces.

First iteration views of portals for ...And Yet the Devil Exists, 2019
Non-orientable Manifolds

When considering the boundless effects that larger power structures have on determining subjectivity, the scope of considerations become too vast to frame within a single representation. Multiple objects/frames/portals are required to begin tabulating unfolding shifts in identity over time. I use impossible objects as visual analogies for self-orientalized representations because of the inherent and plentiful poetic connections, but this analogy is limited to representations of singular narratives. When it comes to curating multiple impossible objects that are sourced from distinct timelines yet orbit a common subject, I use the analogy of non-orientable manifolds. I believe they are effective visual metaphors for the dialectical reasoning that occurs over time within diasporic individuals as they contend with a network of binaries. For example, the Asian diasporic individual will continue to internalize Asian or Western categorizations, will embrace or reject orientalizing signifiers, or in mathematical terms, will assign positive or negative rotation depending on their position on the surface of a boundaryless object (illusorily composed of a binary). Like the Möbius band, the realization of non-orientability can only occur once the subject has oscillated between binaries enough to realize that chirality exists in all positions and one sense of position is contingent on the projection of orientation. Considered as a whole, the diasporic individual is non-orient-able and must occupy the ambiguous position of neither/nor, or both/and.

Moving from the Möbius band onto boundaryless non-orientable manifolds, (like the Möbius snail, the Klein bottle, and the cross-cap), the moment of self-intersection within these surfaces is a useful analogy to consider in terms of existing between binaries. This is where I believe the third space exists, this maximal point of hybridity. The diasporic individual may not be able to escape the illusion of binary but they can occupy a point within it that best expresses the wholeness of their identity, this point is precarious because it is contradictory, self-intersecting, and “impossible.” As Ien Ang warns,
“The diasporic intellectual acts as a perpetual party-pooper here because her impulse is to point to ambiguities, complexities, and contradictions, to complicate matters rather than provide formulae for solutions, to blur distinctions between colonizer and colonized, dominant and subordinate, oppressor and oppressed. The diasporic intellectual is declared suspect because her emphasis on undecidability and ambivalence leads arguably to a valuation of hybridity, which does not lend itself to the development of revolutionary strategies of structural progressive change and systematic radical resistance.”

34 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, 2.
This position is not one of stasis, for we are constantly being intersected by multiple binaries. It is the role of the diasporic artist to constantly locate and occupy intersecting points in a network of binaries for we live in a world dominated by binary systems. This is the conceptual framework within which I will further discuss the work of Danh Vo and how he locates these points of entanglement within objects and then demonstrates these manifolds through installation. I use the work of Vo to assist me in the analysis of the conceptual thinking behind *Well-Being*, a previous installation of mine, as well as that of *And Yet the Devil Exists.*
Immigration stories are often complex and they require guises, surrogates, or containers to help narrate them. One of my favorite artworks by Danh Vo is an on-going edition of letters handwritten by Vo’s father, Phung Vo. The letters are copies of a single letter written by French Catholic missionary Saint Jean-Théophane Vénard to his father on the eve of his decapitation and subsequent martyrdom. The work has an almost kaleidoscopic ability to touch on language, labor, filial intimacy, beauty, and religion. The letter is a portal that intimately connects Vo to his father, to this history, and to Vénard. I admire the way in which such a complex network of narratives can converge through a single act of copying a letter. Vo’s relationship to Catholicism requires explanation. He says,

“My father was a very big fan of Ngo Dinh Diem (the first president of South Vietnam). When the US realized that Diem was not the person to unify Vietnam, they supported a coup against him. When Diem got assassinated, my father as a silent protest converted into Catholicism (Diem was Catholic). And this becomes my entry point into history, into Catholicism, it becomes a bit abstract. It is difficult to trace historical reasons for why we do certain things or the circumstances we end up in. I mean, I barely understand my own so how can I understand other people’s? ...it’s very difficult to blame people individually for doing certain things because it might not be coherent with your own idea of how life should be lived or what would be the right things to do or whatever… I’m interested in people who are very devoted to what they are doing, beyond the ideological reason behind it...”

The letter itself contains very little of the narratives and meanings that are associated with it. Instead it acts more as a coordinate or a cue. This is why I use the term objects in translation because objects like this letter are in between meanings and require continual explanation. I’m particularly interested in the idea of how religion can be used for ideological purposes, in relation to nationalism,

35 “Danh Vo in Conversation with Bartholomew Ryan.”
and a post-colonial reality. I often use a similar framework of using both explicitly and implicitly ideological references in the images and paintings I employ within my installations. For example, the painting titled *Neo-Revelation* is based on a photograph taken by the Rosetta satellite, which was sent by the European Space Agency to the 67P/Churyumov–Gerasimenko comet. The Rosetta’s lander, Philae, landed on the comet’s surface on November 12, 2014; unfortunately, it crash-landed and was unable to take any measurements or observations, except for one moment in which it suddenly awoke, took a photo from the comet’s surface, and died down again.

![Neo-Revelation, 2019](image)

I was made aware of this specific moment in the history of space travel from one of my uncle’s sermons. My uncle is the pastor of an international church based in Taegu, Korea and translated broadcasts of his sermons are streamed to listeners across the globe every Sunday. Within this particular sermon, my uncle was explaining the miracles of science, pondering how mathematics can explain the universe, how nitrogen can be sucked from the air to create fertilizer, and how scientists can shoot a satellite to a comet millions of kilometers away. He then turns to the following verse “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him,”\(^{36}\) as a means of explaining to his congregation that the discoveries of humanity are revelations from God,

\(^{36}\) 1 Corinthians 2:9
that all of science is part of the second creation, and that all we have to do is say “Amen!” to what God has in store for us.

On the other side of this painting is another titled *103 Korean Martyrs*. With this painting, I returned to the aesthetic and conceptual frameworks of the *Seminario* paintings. The figures in the painting are taken from an illustrated book about Korean Catholic martyrs who were persecuted throughout the 19th century. Approximately 8,000 - 10,000 Koreans were killed during this period, 79 of these were beatified in 1925 and 103 of them were canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1984. It is interesting to correlate these stages to sainthood with the spread of Christianity on the peninsula. By 1984, a quarter of the South Korean population had been baptized; today the combined Protestant and Catholic populations account for about a third of the population.

![103 Korean Martyrs, 2019](image)

Like Danh Vo’s letter, my personal relationship to these images is difficult to describe and this is a consequence of a fragmented identity. The only cohesive part of the piece is the direct references of moments within the construction of a fragmented identity, but the narratives that explain how these connect are in constant flux. Like Vo’s letter, my story is an amalgamation of narratives that I have been taught. So, to represent a memory of my own life, a moment in my becoming, a snapshot of my subjectivity coming into focus, is also to replicate the representations of others and thus the fragmentation of the very self that I was trying to represent. This condition of fragmentation is also
present in my contradictory insistence on addressing each side as a separate painting, while simultaneously specifying that they must be shown together as two sides of the same work. This fragmented ambivalence will be exemplified further in the next section in which I describe how this specific work functioned in relation to other works within an installation.

Seeing Others Seeings

_Well-Being_ was an installation in which I first explored a combination of the portal, the lantern, and pan-Asian aesthetics. In many ways, this installation was the precursor to my thesis exhibition. There were three rooms in this installation: the lantern room, the sermon room, and the portal room. The lantern in this installation was an attempt at creating an object that illuminated aesthetics I am drawn to but must contend with. I wished to create a light source that was both hypnotizing and disorienting, heightening the latter sense with the overuse of incense. The selected imagery for the lantern was sourced from Tibetan Buddhist medicinal manuals. The visual language employed was intended to be representative of the highly aestheticized aspects of the “traditional East.” I was interested in appropriating the exoticization of traditional knowledge systems/practices that wield their legitimacy on the basis of being both authentic and an alternative to modern science. I was more concerned with essentialized pan-Asian aesthetics because in the installation as a whole I was trying to wrap my head around how to represent the concept of self-orientalization spatially.

Views of the lantern room, *Well-Being*, 2019
Views of the lantern room, *Well-Being*, 2019
It is important to mention that the exhibition took place in a vacant beauty supply store called Beauty Heaven, which was previously owned and operated by Korean American immigrants. I wasn’t ready at that time to tackle that subject straight on, but the psyche of the space was still considered. The lantern was a guise, a hyper-orientalization made to match the oriental wallpaper\textsuperscript{37} that was a leftover from the beauty supply business (along with the one-way mirror). These sorts of aesthetics are a performance concocted at first by Western economic pressure but are consequently repeated in order to satisfy now globalized consumer fantasies—think nail salons, massage parlors, Gangnam style, and Shangri-La City. It is an exoticization that barters economic security in exchange for perpetual foreignness, and it can hollow one out. My mother often says, “Korean people in America don’t understand anything but money.” This sort of analysis begins to essentialize in a way that I try to resist in the rest of my practice, but I believe this sort of explanation is important to consider when confronted with accusations such as the “quick march towards whiteness, model client state, and the model minority.” I believe these sorts of labels must be understood within the pressurization of capitalism and not just the dynamics of identity politics. Without real spiritual relief, this pressure becomes a disease.

\textsuperscript{37} The design of this wallpaper is mimicked in my thesis exhibition. I’m drawn to these sorts of cycles of appropriation, the details of which are expanded upon in the next section.
This is the sermon room. On loop is an hour-long English translation of a sermon from my uncle’s church (the same uncle and sermon mentioned in my Neo-Revelation description). In this particular sermon, he describes the connections between science and God’s grace. The sermon goes on to say how science and technology are proof of God’s second creation, and that all we have to do is say “Amen!” to what God has in store for us. I chose this specific sermon because it is both atypical of the American culture war’s depiction of Christian belief systems in its marrying of science and religion, but also because it exemplifies how the church acts as the mediator of cultural environments in minority communities. The church is the first to fill an absence. The replacement of symbolist self-orientalizing aesthetics with a minimal light intervention and a sound installation is meant to create a dichotomy between representations of how one is perceived, how one performatively presents, and what one actually believes.

![Views from the portal room, Well-Being, 2019](image)

This is the portal room. It was painted pitch black, so much so that the one-way mirror was not visible until one’s eyes had adjusted. Within the black paint is a mixture of charcoal and glitter. After one’s eyes adjusted further, they could see reflections of the faint cyan and violet light coming in from the sermon room. This room completes the cycle of self-orientalization; one can see others seeing. As the point of self-intersection in a non-orientable manifold, when the viewer looks through the one-way mirror, listens to the sound bleed of my uncle’s sermon and notices the shimmering reflections on the walls, the viewer enters the space of convergence between the three separate rooms. These moments of
convergence, this space of self-intersection, is what I’m searching for in images and what I seek to orchestrate in an installation setting. Looking back, there are numerous aesthetic and conceptual choices I first experimented with in *Well-Being* that have reappeared in *And Yet the Devil Exists*. In some ways, my thesis exhibition is a synthesis of the three rooms from *Well-Being* into one single space. How these conceptual and spatial choices have evolved in my thesis exhibition is expanded upon in the next section.

**Nesting Dolls**

In 2018, I was working as a preparator at the Guggenheim Museum and was fortunate enough to have helped install Danh Vo’s retrospective *Take My Breath Away*. Objects of translation were found throughout the show such as the chandeliers from the Hotel Majestic where the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, disassembled cabinet chairs used during the Kennedy administration (from Robert S. McNamara’s personal collection), a totem of four items gifted to Vo’s grandmother by the German government upon her arrival to the country as a refugee escaping post-war Vietnam, a Rolex watch, a gold lighter and a signet ring, prized possessions of Vo’s father that function as metonyms for success and reminders of how far he has come since escaping from a Singapore refugee camp. Reflected in all of these objects is Vo, and the mirror is the self-image of the US. The exhibition is built around a central paradox—“that the self is plural and inherently fluid, yet decisively shaped by larger power structures.” It is through this paradox of self that Vo simultaneously questions “the very idea that culture can be contained by national boundaries, revealing instead an entity in constant flux, subject to transformative processes of migration and exchange.”

![Nesting Dolls](image)

*Danh Vo, Installation views of Danh Vo – Take My Breath Away at the National Gallery of Denmark, 2018*

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39 “Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away.”
I was inspired by Vo’s use of objects in translation to poetically represent this paradox of selfhood. In my thesis exhibition, I endeavor to investigate similar themes with images in translation. It begins with absence and erasure as a consequence of occupation, revolution, civil war, rapid development, immigration, and then assimilation. What is left after the erasure of cultural tradition, the absence of history, and the loss of language is the material pursuit of prestige (the rules for which are set by global capitalism) and a dislocated sense of self, similar to the nostalgic and childhood. These yearnings are in a constant dance with an internalized otherness and the cultural environment that a diasporic is assimilating into. All of these forces converge at points of self-intersection—this is the third space of in-betweenness from which meaning can be created. Once enough of these points of self-intersection are discovered, a fragmented yet empowered notion of identity can be explored. This conception of self will always be fragmented because it is composed of a constellation of unstable narratives (poorly translated, indirectly shared, and spanning generations of time and geographic space). These narratives are in orbit with a sense of historical rootedness but also with insecure internalizations based on a need to compensate and perform “the quick march towards whiteness.” This is the constellation I am constructing in my thesis exhibition. It is a quest for interiority amidst a pervasive lack. The images I have brought together can tell this story of my fragmented identity, but they also contradict it, because this narrative is after all a fabrication necessitated by an unclaimable absence of the past.

The three main components of my thesis exhibition are the lantern, the maps, and the portals. The lantern is an object in translation, a surrogate for navigating the myriad complicated entanglements that define diasporic identities in a manner that chooses to define a state of transition instead of a position. I see the family photographs and the letters written on the back of them as portals, which I understand as framing devices that allow for the sharing, compiling, and imagining of family narratives that in aggregate form an inheritance. The viewer must contend with these portals installed throughout the surrounding walls of the exhibition space in relation to the images presented in the centrally positioned lantern; traversing from the familial to the global, the micro to the macro, and the intellectualized to the felt. The layout/design is meant to act as an index of representations that I must contend with during the ever-evolving formulation of identity. It is also done in a pan-Asian style that references the blue and white of French toile de jouy wallpaper designs which were originally inspired by the blue and white designs of Chinese porcelain. The images are also printed on mulberry paper as a reference to both traditional Korean interior design as well as kitschy orientalized home decor. The lantern is lit from the outside-in by rows of LED tube lights that line the outside of the wooden infrastructure. The seductive glow from the backlit images conceals a more burdensome relationship. Like the phototaxis movement that occurs in moths, these images are ones that I feel compelled to grapple with.
There are hundreds of images indexed in this installation, far too many to describe in detail. Instead, I will start with one image and connect it with all the narratives that it connects to in this constellation of images in translation. The image below is of a skull repeating into itself following in a nesting doll pattern.\footnote{Originally called Matryoshka dolls, nesting dolls are a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another.} When I think of nesting dolls I’m reminded of my grandfather. My grandfather was from Onyang-li, North Korea. During the Japanese occupation of Korea, he was working at a factory in Manchukuo. During WWII my grandfather moved to Tianjin, China to run a taxi business where he met my grandmother, who became his third wife after losing his first two to childbirth. After the Japanese defeat and the subsequent takeover of China by the communist party, my grandfather escaped China to Seoul, South Korea. He refused to return to Onyang-li because of his disdain for the communist control of North Korea. His cousin was the only other family member who was also able to relocate to South Korea before the Korean war; neither saw another member of their family from North Korea again. According to my father who heard it from his half-brother who was a decorated Korean war hero and a career soldier (he eventually died of pancreatic cancer which my father believed was brought on by his alcoholism which was brought on by his depression and PTSD) who heard it from military intelligence that their family home of Onyang-li had been converted into a hot spring resort for Kim Il-Sung. Amazingly, even within the terra incognita of North Korea on Google maps, there is a marker for Onyang, South Pyongan and it is listed as a hot spring. During the last years of my grandfather’s life, he continually talked about the need to go back to see his home before he died. But the profound loss that he had experienced manifested psychologically into hoarding and agoraphobia.
in the last few decades of his life. Because of this, he was unable to visit both his own childhood home and my suburban childhood home in Boulder, Colorado. (I was born in Boulder because my father went to Colorado University to study computer science.)

The pressure to perform academically was immense for my father. The brute force of memorization allowed him to pull his family forward, from post-war Korea towards the promises of America. In order to study, my father would use a mnemonic device called a memory palace where architectural and interior features are correlated with information one needs to memorize. For his college entrance exams he claims to have designed over fifty houses in his mind. When he failed to get into the aeronautical engineering program of Seoul National University, he had a nervous breakdown. This breakdown was a symptom of the abusive relationship my father had with my grandfather. My grandfather was determined to recuperate all that he felt was lost through my father’s academic achievement—the performance of which was guaranteed through physical abuse. In a state of shock, depression, and rebellion my father took up English instead, and eventually found himself studying absurdist theatre, reading playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. It was a window for him into how Westerners had lost faith in the transcendental being, and how the life of Americans was becoming absurd. Though he studied these writers, he could not relate since he kept his Christian faith. From his perspective, this was because his life in Korea was not as materialistic. He eventually turned to computer programming, because he wanted to invest himself in the future,
future that he believed would be controlled by computers. By studying computer languages he hoped to transcend his material circumstances and have a good job in America for life.

One of the foundational principles to software engineering, the field my father would eventually enter, is recursion—a method of problem-solving and systems engineering. A common analogy for recursion is the nesting doll. When I was eight my family moved from Boulder to Seoul, Korea. My father had been headhunted to work for Hyundai Telecommunication, a subsidiary of Hyundai Group, one of the largest chaebols in Korea (chaebols are family-owned conglomerates that dominate the Korean economy). These conglomerates are so massive that they account for 80% of the South Korean economy. When looking at diagrams that map the network of chaebol subsidiaries and the family trees of shareholder lineages, it is interesting to see how the conglomerate fractures and organizes in nesting-doll like patterns. The stringent hierarchies and unforgiving dynamics of honor capitalism responsible for South Korea’s economic miracle proved too difficult for my father to handle. He would continually end up on the losing side of the equation, boxed out and cut out. The sense of failure and disgrace he felt consumed him, leading him to familiar patterns of behavior like isolation and alcoholism—a resignation to fate he would describe as being “a family curse.” Shortly after this
time, my grandfather passed away. When my father went to help my aunts clear out my grandfather’s home, they had to finally deal with my grandfather’s hoarding. While clearing out bounded stacks of old newspapers, they found a large box, and within that box was another box, within that box another, and so on and so forth until my aunt held a palm-size box in her hand—within that box was nothing.

This chain of narratives is present in the images found throughout the exhibition; each narrative has a corresponding image. But whether to didactically map a path for the viewer to follow this narrative, by zig-zagging from image to image throughout the space, is still an aspect of the exhibition (and within my own practice in general) that is yet to be resolved. Many of these narratives became known to me because of this project—I was not surrounded by these stories growing up. The inheritance of these stories had to be orchestrated, the project is a means of sharing that which couldn’t be expressed directly. Thus, I believe that the viewer must define their relationship to these images themselves, it is a position to be considered not instructed. Further, such family stories are only one aspect of identity that is presented in the exhibition. Included in the lantern are images of the history of mapping, images of heavy industry, images representative of Black/Asian animosity, images of Asian American civil rights leaders, images of the white man in Asia, images of contemporary Korean pop culture, images of missionaries, and images of South Korean soldiers in Vietnam. As mentioned above, the index of images in relation to the family photographs are meant to create a spatial timeline that traverses from the familial to the global, the micro to the macro, and the intellectualized to the felt. The layout/design is meant to act as an index of representations that I must contend with during the ever-evolving formulation of identity. Because I want to emphasize the fluidity and multiplicity of my identity, the extent to which the narratives embedded in these images are explicitly communicated to the viewer is something I’m still grappling with. As Nancy Hartsock has said, “We need to dissolve the false ‘we’ into its true multiplicity.”

How does one construct and reveal a historical subject while simultaneously deconstructing a fixity produced by representation? Lorraine O’Grady states in her seminal text *Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity*, “self-expression is not a stage that can be bypassed. It is a discrete moment that must precede or occur simultaneously with the deconstructive act.” This undertaking is described by Spivak as being the “winning back’ of the position of the questioning Subject.” It is within these frameworks I will describe the last section of *...And Yet the Devil Exists*, the map.

**This is My War Room**

At the center of *...And Yet the Devil Exists* is a round wooden table with an inkjet-printed circular map, on top of which is a clear sheet of plexi. The map is a collage of different terrains taken from the real-time strategy computer game *Starcraft*, which were digitally stitched together. Engraved into the clear plexi-sheet is a grid. Sandwiched between the sheet of plexi and the map is a sheet of black

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text printed on clear vinyl. Placed on top of the plexi-sheet are black and white Go pieces. When the viewer enters the installation, they come upon a fantastical game of Go, the pieces have already been placed—all the territory has been claimed and the game is seemingly over. The text peeks through the cracks between pieces, and in order for the viewer to read the text beneath, they must sweep pieces aside. The text bends and warps across the map, it is purposefully difficult to read.

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42 Go is the oldest known continuously played board game in history. It is thought to have originated in China almost 4,000 years ago. Go is an abstract strategy game in which two players claim territory by placing black or white stones along a grid. It is considered one of the most challenging games to master because of the vast amount of possibilities (the number of legal board positions has been calculated to be $2 \times 10^{170}$, which is vastly greater than the known number of atoms in the observable universe, which is $10^{80}$). It is an example of the nearly infinite complexity that can form out of a binary system. In East Asia, Go has traditionally been considered a signifier of intelligence, sophistication, and strategic ability.
The “hidden” text is personal and poetic in tone. It is in part a plea, a confession, and a reminder. It touches upon topics related to self-loathing, love for the other, and love for oneself. Interspersed between verses of my own writing are comments taken from social media. The comments range from calls for solidarity to remonstrations of past offenses. The text is not excerpted here because I believe it is important that it functions materially. This text is the emotional center of the installation, the grounding that reminds the viewer that the historical, the political, the ideological, and the social are not just intellectualized but are things we feel. These feelings are capricious. As you uncover one emotion, you hide another. I want to confront the viewer first and foremost with the binary of pieces that obstruct communication. The viewer must sweep pieces aside or remove them from the board (there are two bowls in stands to the side of the table where pieces can be collected or retrieved) in order to read what is underneath, but they also have the agency to rebury what they just read. This act of intervening in a binary system is a means of focusing the work not just on the text but on the audience’s complicity in communication. By selectively adding or removing pieces, I wish for the viewer to ask questions such as how are they reinforcing or undoing moves that have been placed before their arrival? When is it necessary to claim/reclaim/unclaim territory? What sort of rhetoric needs to be dampened, confronted, or celebrated?
I use the visual cues of Go and the language of a war room, (a map, a grid, a terrain) to convey the contradictions, complications, and the simultaneity of tasks that are at play in identity politics. The diasporic artist must think strategically and tactically. Lorraine O’Grady quotes Spivak in the following excerpt:

This inherent dilemma of the critique of binarism may be seen in Spivak’s often amusing ducking and feinting. To justify apparent theoretical inconsistencies, Spivak once explained her position to an interviewer as follows: “Rather than define myself as specific rather than universal, I should see what in the universalizing discourse could be useful and then go on to see where that discourse meets its limits and its challenge within that field. I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse. I think that since a deconstructivist—see, I just took a label upon myself—I cannot in fact clean my hands and say, ‘I’m specific.’ In fact, I must say I am an essentialist from time to time.”

Spivak uses the term, strategic essentialism to describe how social groups unite around stable essentialist identifications as a strategy for collective representation in order to achieve chosen political-ends. Its practice extends beyond politics into media, entertainment, and academia, and requires a balance between the philosophical acceptance of identity being fluid and the practicality of fixed essentialization, however provisional. Since introducing the term in the 1980s, Spivak has disavowed it in interviews because it has been used to promote essentialism itself, but she has not deserted the concept. The key is to use essentialism as a tool, not as an ideal. Feminist author bell hooks welcomes a critique on essentialism while simultaneously warning of its dismissal. The concept is approached in a different manner than Spivak but with a similar effect:

“[T]his critique should not become a means to dismiss difference or an excuse for the ignoring of experience. It is often evoked in a manner which suggests that all the ways black people think of ourselves as ‘different’ from whites are really essentialist, and therefore without concrete ground. This way of thinking threatens the very foundation that makes resistance to domination possible.”

Postcolonial theorist Rey Chow pivots from the word strategy to tactics in her term tactical intervention. Chow believes that an unstable and ambivalent positionality is the place from which one can enact, “A specific kind of social power.” The power to interrupt, to trouble, to intervene tactically rather than strategically in the interrogation of dominant discourses. Tactical interventions do not make counter-hegemonic claims with alternative truths but focus instead on exposing contradictions and violence inherent in a posited truth. The question is not about intellectuals obtaining hegemony, which to Rey positions them “in an oppositional light against dominant power and neglects their share of that power through literacy, through the culture of words,” but rather the task is about struggling against a hegemony that includes them. Thus, the importance of the term tactics over strategy, for

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43 O’Grady, The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader, 181.
44 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 2015), 130
45 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, 2.
46 Chow, Writing Diaspora, 15.
strategy implies the power and commitment to supplant or create new fields and functions under “the economy of proper places.” Tactics, on the other hand, operate as calculated actions in the absence of proper places and function in relation to time rather than space. The tactical interventionist remains within the borders, para-sites that do not take over but rather slowly, surreptitiously, and insidiously erode hegemony. Tactical interventions are “para-sitical,” in that they do not dominate, occupy or supplant fields in their entirety.47 They try to avoid the formation of new solidarities that are based on “unquestioned ideological premises and unattested claims to oppression and victimization.”48 Through this method, cultural change is brought about “quietly, without revolutionary zeal, by ‘contaminating’ established narratives and dominant points of view.”49 It is important to note that Chow warns of a strategic and tactical mindset with the following:

We need to remember as intellectuals that the battles we fight are battles of words. Those who argue the oppositional standpoint are not doing anything different from their enemies and are most certainly not directly changing the downtrodden lives of those who seek their survival in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan spaces alike. What academic intellectuals must confront is thus not their “victimization” by society at large (or their victimization-in-solidarity-with-the-oppressed), but the power, wealth, and privilege that ironically accumulate from their “oppositional” viewpoint, and the widening gap between the professed contents of their words and the upward mobility they gain from such words.50

The war room is central to my thesis exhibition as both the emotional core but also as a metaphor for the sense of quandary that must be continually addressed as an artist dealing with questions of identity and representation. There is an unresolvable ambivalence to this work, which requires a simultaneity to one’s modes of operation and thinking. Lorraine O’Grady pushes this point further with her incisive observation, “It is cruelly ironic, of course, that just as the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world becomes most dire, the idea of subjectivity itself has become ‘problematized.’” I believe this irony extends from theorizing subjectivity in art to the ethics of participation in the contemporary art world in general. This is not to say that self-reflexivity is not necessary or that it is overly burdensome for the marginalized artist but rather to merely state how it makes the task at hand that much more difficult. This sense of complicity is faintly alluded to in ...And Yet the Devil Exists through phrases taken from pyramid scheme slogans such as Amway’s “Absolute Quality, Absolute Price,” Amway’s “We Are Listening,” and Mary Kay’s “Let it be me,” which are carved into the wooden beams throughout the installation.

The heartbreaking dedication to succeeding within established parameters despite knowing that the game is rigged, that the odds are stacked against you, and that your efforts are in service to a system that oppresses other minorities is a position well-known to immigrants. The obvious question becomes can one afford not to play these games? Perhaps this question needs to be asked more

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47 Chow, Writing Diaspora, 16.
48 Chow, 17.
49 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, 2.
50 Chow, Writing Diaspora, 17.
forcefully. In my own practice, I feel a need to address ethical problems within the field but the question of what strategies or tactics to deploy remains unanswered. When you move some pieces on the board in order to reveal what is underneath, you inevitably cover other areas, when you open one portal, you close another; this sense of unavoidable consequence and unresolvable ambivalence is the extent to which the ethics of participation in our current system are addressed in my thesis exhibition. I sincerely hope that as my art practice develops, my ability to address a plurality of concerns in a manner that strategically and tactically counters hegemony while resisting essentialization will gradually become more skillful and fluid.

Postscript

This written thesis was composed over the course of eight weeks, between the middle of March and the early weeks of May 2020. During this period, the Coronavirus pandemic shifted epicenters from Wuhan to Lombardy to the Tri-State Area. It goes without saying that the pandemic has had a disastrous effect on billions of lives across the globe. It has exposed just how insufficient and unjust the US healthcare system is and how vulnerable to crises the global economy is. As a student in good health living in a metropolitan area with a relatively low number of cases, I’ve been sheltered from the worse effects of the pandemic. I’m not in a position to comment on the crises in ways other than to state the obvious (the most constant state for me these past few months has been one of not knowing.) With that said, this crisis has been a rude reminder that this country was built on racism. As I finish writing this thesis, the number of reported hate crimes against Asian Americans across the country has reached 1,500 in a little over a month. The daily headlines and viral posts have validated some of my worst suspicions as well as reaffirmed my conviction that there is yet so much work that needs to be done. The month of May is Asian and Pacific Islander American Heritage Month. A celebration of the contributions of Asian Americans will be an important and welcome response to the current climate of xenophobia and hate targeted towards Asian people across the globe. But it is also a vitally important time to unpack and define the complexity of the task before us, especially for us individuals living in diaspora.

Chantel Mouffe’s essay Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? is a useful lens through which to approach some of the concerning dynamics that have resurfaced during the COVID-19 crisis. In it she states, “Political practice in a democratic society does not consist in defending the rights of preconstituted identities, but rather in constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain.”51 Unfortunately, in the United States otherness is most often defined through conflict and oppression, and these definitions most often fall along racial lines. It takes a pandemic for some individuals to realize that Asian Americans face discrimination and xenophobic attacks—it takes a pandemic for some Asian Americans to sympathize with the injustice of being

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considered a threat based on the color of your skin. This is the unfortunate order of operations within race-based identity politics especially common to the social media landscape of the United States. I focus on social media during this crisis because the consequences of mediation have become incredibly apparent. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have been important platforms for political mobilization for minorities but are also the platforms through which virulent forms of essentialism are proliferated. From tweet to post during the current crisis, the general pulse between Blacks and Asians specifically seems to rapidly oscillate between a resurgence of animosity to a rededication towards allyship.

An emphasis on pluralism and multiplicity are a potential means through which a “chain of equivalence” could form between differently marginalized groups. In an interview, Mouffe expands on this establishing of a collective will as being about, “mobilizing people together through their different struggles—we call this a convergence of struggles… creating a bond between those struggles in a way that recognizes the specificities of different struggles but also fiercely recognizing the commonalities and solidarities among the various struggles.”52 But even within the collective mobilization oriented terminology of solidarity, allyship, and coalitions, factional identification is inadvertently reinforced. The conflict between particularism and universalism of lived experience as it is racially framed and witnessed in the US, especially via social media, creates a political environment in which the voicing of commonalities are often dismissed and differences in lived experience are seemingly irreconcilable. Ironically, this comes at a time in which the ability and need to give witness to experiences of marginalization has become easier and more important than ever. Thankfully, layers of plurality within minority groups themselves exist, but these layers can be obfuscated during times of crisis—it is in moments succeeding violence that individuals are potentially click-baited into choosing sides.

Mouffe offers the term agonistic pluralism as a theorization of how democratic societies cannot reach consensus through rational discussion but rather must embrace antagonism between adversaries as an ongoing necessity. If it is the case that when adversarial political entities engage agonistically they release political tension and through dissent they potentially arrive at conflictual consensus, then how does race function within this sort of adversarial struggle? What are the social ramifications when pluralist identifications are drawn along racial lines? Further, I question whether social media is a form of agonistic pluralism, in which different racial groups feel free to struggle within and amongst each other without fear of reprisal from an authoritarian governing body. Or, if the agonistic model is incompatible with the racialized identity politics of the US, where it is clear how online racial prejudice is a social phenomenon with material consequences—the path between the troll to the dead body is easy enough to trace. Without a vision towards reconciliation between seemingly irreducible factions, Mouffe’s offer of the following remedy for post-democratic societies (composed of the diversity and history of racial violence found in the US) feels lacking. Agonistic pluralism does not account for the racial dimension of political participation such as the spectrums between risk and privilege associated with the color of one’s skin. It does not provide a vision for overcoming barriers formed by mediated

particularisms and essentialization in order to establish the sort of chain of equivalence that could lead to something like universal healthcare.

The last point I want to make is quite obvious. How we treat each other in crisis will affect how we perceive each other in times of so-called normalcy. The decisions we make now will affect the capacity in which we can imagine a more inclusive and equitable democracy that facilitates consensus because of, not in spite of, racial and cultural differences. It is in times like these that we need to be vigilant, wary, mindful, and intentional of the stories we tell and the representations we proliferate. Plurality and multiplicity of self must be insisted upon for ourselves and advocated for others.
Works Cited


