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Pure Disruption: Sex, Death, and Postcolonial Identity in Paul Wong's Video Art

Dense, seductive, and anarchic, the virtual realm is the final frontier. Government-imposed firewalls, copyright lawsuits, and legislative acts do little to quell a perpetually self-generating onslaught of content. The beauty of the Internet is, after all, that you can always go deeper. If you go looking for something, you'll be able to find it: it is just a matter of knowing exactly how to seek it out. In this way, the Internet—like its associated forms of new media—is an ideal site for the decentralized discourse of postcolonial identity. It is a rapid, slippery medium that grants the individual ultimate agency—the power to evade power, the right to (re)invention and (in)visibility.

The immediacy and propagation of new media has proven to be irresistible to Paul Wong, a Canadian artist who has earned his cachet through risky, radical, and often self-exposing video work. Since rising to national fame in the 1970s, Wong has played an indisputable role in making issues of identity visible within Canada's cultural landscape. Awarded abundantly and collected worldwide, his formal experimentations with tactics of shock and disruption have also laid the groundwork for a new generation of media artists. Now, the question is no longer whether Paul Wong matters, but what he, having pushed himself far and his audience even farther, could possibly get up to next.

Paul Wong, *7 Day Activity*, 1977–2008, video, 8 mins., 30 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Video/video

Released in 1967, the Portapak camcorder consists of a hand-held camera and audio recording device that can be carried and operated by a single individual. It was the first of its kind in both price and portability: with its widespread distribution came the sudden ability for the general public to share and record their lives in an immediate way. Seemingly invented specifically for experimental use by artists, the Portapak has played a catalytic role in the history of video art. Armed with it, a new wave of creators documented and invented in a visual vernacular that had not previously existed outside of the prohibitively structured forms of film and television.



Wong first got his hands on a Portapak at the age of sixteen. After a lifetime of feeling misrepresented in popular culture as a Chinese-Canadian, he

finally felt able to legitimize his identity simply by turning his lens on himself. His first works were autobiographical—“selfies” that preceded the selfie as we know it today, in exposés of teenage life in his hometown of Vancouver, British Columbia. One of his earliest, *7 Day Activity* (1977), shows Wong examining his skin in a bathroom mirror. His daily grooming ritual is looped and scrutinized. It’s as much an expression of the anxiety of vanity as it is a celebration of one of the great changes brought about by the rise of the camcorder: from birthday parties to perfect days, no subject matter was too humble—or too taboo—to videotape.

The beginnings of video art mirror the current, heady nascence of Internet-based imaging practices. Video appeared as a consumer-targeted medium that, unlike painting or film, was relatively free from the burden of history. Its accessibility made the medium inherently democratic, radical in the sense that no expectations preceded it. From the mundane to the fantastic, one could videotape whatever one wanted with little concern about audience or budget. In this way, video became a medium of social and political resistance. Though video art definitely was *not* film, it was similar enough to be able to speak to the problems of film—and its kissing cousin, television—in a direct way.

Engagement with new media marks a deliberate turn away from dominant culture. Instead of following in the path of traditional hierarchical modes of communication, such as those of the television channel or the newspaper, new media thrives on multiplicity and participation. Its network is spatial and simultaneous; like a macrocosm of the culturally hybrid mind, it is constructed explicitly to simultaneously fuse together many opposing ideas.

What video art was then, and what new media are now, are perfect vehicles for postcolonial, feminist, queer, and other identity-based discourses that are founded on the idea that constant change is the default state. What better way to address the flux of contemporary life than through a medium that itself fluctuates, that itself has become the primary vessel for the generation and consumption of content, whether subversive or mass-produced?

“I was looking at interviews with transgendered people going through operations—no one had ever seen that before. There was a videotape of someone’s hippie home birth—no one had ever seen anything like that before,”¹ Wong tells me from the dim, smoky comfort of his Main Street studio in Vancouver, a reconfigured walk-up that now holds the entirety of his artistic archives in shelves, boxes, and several continuously humming computer towers. He is describing the first days of the Satellite Video Exchange Society (SVES), a Vancouver collective established in 1973 by Wong and a group of like-minded peers who together undertook the finicky work of creating a wide-ranging network of experimental video artists. “There were a lot of conceptual artists, performance artists doing things with their bodies, feminist perspectives, queer perspectives, politically leftist perspectives, American Indian Movement (A.I.M.) materials. These things were outside of the mainstream.”²

During the late seventies and early eighties, networking was trusting but slow. Wong recalls with some fondness the early days of the society, where a circulating print catalogue would list SVES members by interest and location. One could book an exhibition or find accommodations by way of these listings. The only membership dues were to submit one of your own video pieces to the Satellite Video Exchange library, and to take one away (which Wong and his associates would dutifully copy for their archives).

Paul Wong, *DisOriental*, 2014, video, 1 min., 36 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



The success of the Satellite Video Exchange Society preceded the online platforms used to connect people with similar interests across the world today. Ingrained in the structural network of the Internet are the sub-and micro-cultures that it sustains. People with similar niche interests are able to seek one another out beyond the restrictions of physical geography. Clicking and dragging himself through a new

work crafted mostly of self-portraits and Google Street View images, Wong points out the ease with which he has been able to facilitate and participate in exhibitions across the world. This work, titled *DisOriental* (2014), is destined for a screening at a new media festival in the south of France. One of the stipulations was that the work would have to be specific to a site chosen for each artist by the festival’s curatorial team. Wong was able to meet this criterion without ever having set foot in the location to which he was assigned.

Paul Wong, *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade*, 1988, video installation, 89 mins., in Chinese with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist and National Gallery of Canada.



Having earlier defined himself as being “militant” about the radical potential of video art, Wong delights in using his medium to subvert filmic expectations. Even something so subtle as subtitles can be a determining hermeneutical force, as he demonstrates in *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* (1988).

For the duration of the video, most of which was shot on-site in China,

the translated English subtitles are centred on-screen, directing viewers’ attention to the fact that, in Richard Fung’s words, “reality is mediated through the process of shooting and translation”.³ This tactic functions alongside other modes of filmic deconstruction—abrasive typographic titling, abrupt cuts, the disjointed characters and narrative—to jar viewers into not only reconsidering how we consume media, but also how we think of other, broader social structures such as those of race, sexuality, and identity.

Around the same time that Wong was working on *Ordinary Shadows*, postcolonial filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha was producing fragmentary, non-linear films whose purpose was to challenge the authority of the documentary narrative. A long visit to Senegal gave rise to her first film, *Reassemblage* (1982), about which she famously said that she wanted to “not speak about/just speak nearby” her subject.

Formally, the film is characterized by silence, both auditory and visual. There is a complete lack of narration, and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s strategic approach to composition effects a resistance to the centralized gaze of the colonizer. What isn’t a scene’s focal point becomes just as important as what is. By refusing to make work directly “about” a culture through which she is just passing, Trinh T. Minh-ha neutralizes any particular power attached to her role as filmmaker, anthropologist, and interested outsider.



Wong doesn’t go so far as to completely negate his position as videographer, but his formal use of repetition and interruption functions similarly in its rejection of dominant cultural, historical, and filmic narratives. His *Refugee Class of 2000* (2000), an ad spot commissioned by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation for the Unite Against Racism Campaign, contextualized these methods against television—the vehicle for dominant culture that *Refugee Class of 2000* intended to supersede. For

Paul Wong, *Refugee Class of 2000*, 2000, photograph. Commissioned by Canadian Race Relations Foundation for the Unite Against Racism Campaign. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Wong, *Refugee Class of 2000*, 2000, video, 4 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

the series, Wong interviewed a couple dozen students from Sir Charles Tupper Secondary, a public high school located in Mount Pleasant, one of Vancouver’s most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Each student looked into the camera and made a statement about who he or she was and would like to be. The footage of these acts—honest and hopeful—is interleaved with an alphabetized taxonomy of racism, which flashes up on the screen in lurid titling. Speaking with agency, the visible minority groups intruding upon the white landscape of television was jarring enough; Wong’s brash video aesthetic ensured that his message would not be missed. By addressing the issue of casual racism head on from within television, one of the very mediums that perpetuates it, Wong’s art leveraged realized experience as effective activism against insidious social tropes.



Paul Wong, *Refugee Class of 2000*, 2000, video, 4 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Sex Vicious

In their endless propagation, new media are libidinal. In them, sex and sexuality take on the quick-flashing texture of the impulse immediately satisfied and the darker depths of the Internet where no fetish is left unexplored. Of course, the constant cultural coursing of sexual undercurrents is nothing new. What is new are the ways in which it is presented and consumed: as rapid as it is casual, accessible to the point of being nearly demystified.

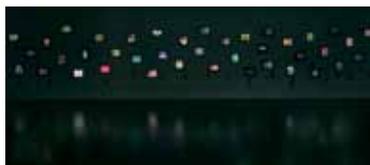
Paul Wong, *Year of GIF*, 2013, GIF video installation at Surrey Urban Screen, Surrey, B.C., 5 mins. Photo: Scott Massey. Courtesy of the artist.



Paul Wong, *Year of GIF*, 2013, GIF video installation, 5 mins. Photo: SD Holman. Courtesy of the artist and Winsor Gallery, Vancouver.



Paul Wong, *#LLL, Looking Listening Looping*, 2014, GIF, video and photography on forty 10 x 12" digital video screens. Photo: SD Holman. Courtesy of the artist and Winsor Gallery, Vancouver.



Paul Wong hasn't so much reacted to this new mode of sexual consumption as he has adopted it. In newer works such as *Year of GIF* (2013) and *#LLL, Looking Listening Looping* (2014), sexual images flash up in a manner similar to how one would encounter them online: surprising, in a certain sense, but never quite unexpected. Wilting flowers, glass towers, and blow jobs

are all given equal weight in the flickering sprawl of Wong's consciousness-on-display: each installation is made up of a year's worth of images, taken serially and compounded into small GIF-and-video vignettes. Here, video is no longer its own discrete medium, but, instead, a vernacular of new media: it co-exists with the photographic images, GIFs, screengrabs, and in-phone manipulations that Wong is producing, constantly, on the fly.

But Wong was also making work at a time when certain modes of sexuality and desire were more invisible than they are today. Under these circumstances, Wong developed *Confused: Sexual Views* (1984), a video, photographic, and sculptural installation based on interviews that Wong conducted with twenty-seven individuals. As in *Refugee Class of 2000*, his subjects face the camera and speak directly about their ideas on love, sex, friendship, pornography, abortion, and experimentation. The result is a

spliced, multivalent documentary that was exhibited as a four-channel installation: a formal manifestation of the heterogeneity of those titular sexual views.



Though *Confused* presents itself as an extended interview, it is a constructed work. As John Bentley Mays noted in his review for the *Globe and Mail*, we don't see Wong's subjects as being open and honest; for all the racy talk, their posturing is stiff, their responses contrived. "We

watch them pretending to be risky and open, while they dodge nervously in and out of undergrowths of psychological cliché potted from movies, sex manuals, group therapy sessions, lonely hearts columns, and teen romance magazines."⁴ Through Wong's constructed reality, we are made acutely aware that even sex, our most basic of desires, is socially influenced and enacted.

In the year of its release, the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) censored the exhibition *Confused: Sexual Views* by refusing to show it just weeks prior to its opening on the grounds that it had "no relation to visual art."⁵ The fact that it was video wasn't the problem. Straightforward expository works by Lisa Steele, Colin Campbell, and John Watt previously had been lauded by the Canadian art community, and video in general had been seized thirstily by artists fed up with the impotency of the art object. So why the fracas over *Confused*? Simple: *Confused* was censored because of its sole focus on sexuality. Its censorship underlined the very reason Wong decided to make the work in the first place: that there were systems larger than ignorance that ensured the invisibility of certain narratives, and that, in turn, certain (formal, social) tactics could render them visible again. Regardless of whether or not it was exhibited—and it was, much later, when the Vancouver Art Gallery acquired it for its collection in 2002—*Confused*, and its ensuing legal battle, ensured that bias of sex lingered in the minds of more than a few Canadians.



Paul Wong's aim to subvert the policing of desire and of the body has not been limited to frank sociological investigations. In *60 Unit: Bruise* (1976), he syringes up blood from the arm of best

friend and collaborator Kenneth Fletcher and injects it into himself. The video documents the slow bloom of foreign blood across Wong's shoulder; it allows us to watch, disease-anxious and horrified, as both men—here, boys—become intravenous blood brothers. Though *60 Unit* precedes the AIDS epidemic, there is no getting away from that connotation now. "The audacity of its play between youth and decadence, pleasure and danger becomes a document of irretrievable innocence," Richard Fung writes. "It evokes nostalgia for a present no longer possible."⁶

Paul Wong, *Confused: Sexual Views*, 1984, video, 52 mins. Co-directed with Gary Bourgeois, Gina Daniels, and Jeanette Reinhardt. Courtesy of the artist.

Kenneth Fletcher and Paul Wong, *60 Unit: Bruise*, 1976, video, 5 mins., 25 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

The Body Is a Politicized Area

“Getting rid of the vicious part of libidinality would also get rid of its potential for creative fervor,” writes Keti Chukhrov.⁷ In talking about sex, we can’t leave out its closely linked opposite: death. After Fletcher’s suicide in 1978, Wong created a suite of work about the personal and cultural enactment of grief. *60 Unit* itself became a profound memorial in retrospect: “This work remains long after the death of Kenneth Fletcher in 1978,” Wong said in an interview with Luis Jacob for *Art Metropole* in 2011. “Caught on tape, he lives on fresh, not just in my fading memory. He lives within my body.”⁸

Paul Wong, *in ten sity*, 1978, 5-channel video installation, 25 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



Within his work, Wong’s body is a politicized arena—a vessel used for certain statements too powerful for enactment or language. The alacrity with which he can commit small acts of violence against himself shifts viewers quickly into a state of unease. *in ten sity* (1978), a performance staged at the Vancouver Art Gallery, saw Wong flinging himself against the padded walls of a small cell fitted with

several CCTV cameras. It brought to mind the isolation of mental illness, but also the cathartic quality of the cultural act. The soundtrack to Wong’s self-destruction was punk, of course; to see him mosh, a type of violent slam-dance, alone, with no stage and no fellow concert-goers, summoned a strange conflagration of emotions. Friends and strangers at the gallery were disturbed to the point that they attempted to break the walls open and save Wong from himself.

Paul Wong, *Perfect Day*, 2007, 7 mins., 30 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



This concurrent invocation of surprise, empathy, and aggression is not an isolated experience in the breadth of Wong’s work. In *Perfect Day* (2007), Wong doses himself with enough heroin, cocaine, nicotine, and ice cream to insert a nagging sense of discomfort

alongside his visible euphoria. It’s exhibitionistic, but the shock value is dialed down by the fact that we’re in the new millennium: the arm’s length at which he holds the camera is familiar in the sense that we see it in the same online vernacular of bathroom selfies and bong-hit auto-portraits. For the duration of the video, Lou Reed’s own “Perfect Day” skips on the record player, turning Wong’s *Perfect Day* into a literal ode to the fallacy of self-construction.

Cultural Surveillance

The fallacy is that for all the control that we attempt to exert on our own enactments of identity, the margin for error—for misrepresentation—remains great. Most of Paul Wong’s works assert the same basic theme: that identity, and our ideas about it, are in constant flux. Nothing is as it appears.



Solstice (2014) reflects the aforementioned *Ordinary Shadows*, *Chinese Shade* in its investigation of a cultural enclave that has suffered from wide misrepresentation. Where *Ordinary Shadows* was a portrait of Wong's personal China, a country hardly portrayed in North America

Paul Wong, *Solstice*, 2014, video, 24 mins., 18 secs. Photo: SD Holman. Courtesy of the artist and Winsor Gallery, Vancouver.

beyond the “mystery, exotica, and politics”⁹ that pervaded popular thought at the time, *Solstice* (2014) is a stripped-down portrait of Vancouver's Downtown East Side: a neighbourhood mostly known for its poverty, drug use, and prostitution rings. But unlike *Ordinary Shadows*, wherein aesthetic tricks are employed to negate filmic expectations, *Solstice* contains no assertions of authorial power whatsoever.

At the formal centre of *Solstice* is the use of time-lapse video, a video process that is made up of still frames taken at regular intervals that characteristically render movement jaggedly, as much can be missed between shots. This method is seen most as a storytelling device in nature documentaries—flowers bloom and wither, seasons change, clouds boil across the sky. The urban Wong, however, mounted a camera on a windowsill in the heart of the Downtown East Side to document all manner of activity both legal and illicit. He left it there for twenty-four hours, returned to collect the footage, and, besides running it through a program that filled in all those between-shot blanks, did nothing more to it.

What, in light of Wong's bold career, does this step back from creative authority mean? Is *Solstice*, in its autonomy, new media's symptomatic decentralization made manifest? Travelling in smeary, computer-generated blurs, the individuals in *Solstice* retain their anonymity—and, in a way, their right to self-determination.

“I've gone from constructing realities to more and more incessantly recording, [but] my strategy has not changed,” Wong tells me. “I'm still turning the camera on myself and my environment. I don't go looking for content or stories. I'm riffing off of what's immediately around me.”¹⁰

Notes

¹ Paul Wong, interview with the author, December 10, 2013.

² *Ibid.*

³ Richard Fung, “Everyday People,” *Fuse Magazine*, no. 13 (Fall 1989), <http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php?/articles/we/>.

⁴ John Bentley Mays, “The Young and Restless Talk Sex,” *Globe and Mail*, April 1984, <http://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/paul-wong-confusedsexual-views/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Richard Fung, “Future Past,” in *Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video*, ed. Jenny Lion (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2000), 38.

⁷ Keti Chukhrov, “Sexuality in a Non-Libidinal Economy,” *e-flux journal* no. 54 (April 2014), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/sexuality-in-a-non-libidinal-economy/>.

⁸ Paul Wong, “60 Unit; Bruise,” Paul Wong Projects, <http://paulwongprojects.com/portfolio/60unitbruise/>.

⁹ Fung, “Everyday People.”

¹⁰ Wong, interview with the author, December 10, 2013.