

The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts - 2005

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Paul Wong – Essay

by Elspeth Sage

Paul Wong is a multidisciplinary artist best known for his video and live art projects. He is self-taught and has been exhibiting videotapes, installations, photographs and performances since the 1970s. He is an extraordinary artist and visionary whose ideas and works have influenced an entire generation. He has paved the way for his art form from being referred to as 'not TV', to a respected practice on the national and international stage. Born in Prince Rupert, B.C., Wong has produced works that often reflect his cross-cultural influences of being Chinese and Canadian.

Wong's early works were troubling, and alienated more conventional audiences. Yet they proved magnetic to the burgeoning and disgruntled youth movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The angst and hopelessness of that generation (late 70s punk, early 80s void culture) were encapsulated by Wong in stark works like *60 Unit Bruise* (1976) and *in ten sity* (1978), and in lavish nothingness pieces like *Prime Cuts* (1981), *Confused: Sexual Views* (1984) and *Body Fluid* (1986), a portrayal of 1980s glamour transformed into proletarian chic. Vacuity was in, and Wong embraced it. Later, he began to explore his Chinese heritage with *Ordinary Shadows*, *Chinese Shade* (1989) and *Chinaman's Peak: Walking The Mountain* (1992). Once again he mirrored his times in reflecting the shift toward inclusion, multiculturalism, and an interest in and acceptance of the 'other.'

Wong's work is influenced by, and critical of, mass media and pop culture. He vacillates between fiction and nonfiction, positioning biographical portrayals of his friends with ostensibly autobiographical portrayals of himself. He uses a vast array of elements, from the organic (roses, incense, earth, candles, fire, cedar trees, oranges, bottles of Scotch) to products that characterize the 20th century (mirrors, motorized devices, M16 rifles, Harley Davidson motorcycles, welding kits and state-of-the art digital technologies).

His work has been shown around the world, starting in 1974. He has represented Canada, or been exhibited, at: international festivals such as Edge 88 in London, England (1988); The Museum of Modern Art in New York (1978-); *Life/Live* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1996); and *Journey to the East*, an experimental performance festival in Hong Kong (1998). His work has also been presented at many non-gallery sites – abandoned warehouses, malls, cabarets, deconsecrated churches and carparks – from Belfast, Shenzhen, Regina, Taipei, Halifax and Newcastle to Venice.

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He received national recognition with a solo show, *On Becoming A Man*, at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 1995. In 2002 the Vancouver Art Gallery presented *Paul Wong: From The Collection*. This exhibition of photoworks, videotapes and installations included *Confused: Sexual Views*, originally banned by the VAG in 1984. His seminal work, *Hungry Ghosts*, was presented in Extra 50 at the Venice Biennale in 2003.

Hungry Ghosts, a five-channel video installation and large-format laser prints, included new and remixed materials from projects on death that spanned two decades. The video installation provided an ephemeral form of interdisciplinary elements configured with fleeting moments, manipulated images, visual clips, photographs, text, narrative stories, home movies, sound bites, edited fiction and real-time documents digitally projected onto transparent surfaces. There were elements from previous works such as: *Murder Research* (1977), an investigation of a murder; *in ten sity* (1978), a performance about the suicide of a friend; *Dave* (1991), a funeral for a murdered Hell's Angels enforcer; and *Chinaman's Peak: Walking The Mountain* (1992), about ancestral worship and feeding the "hungry ghosts" (defined as "those in the spirit world who are cared for by the living; a main principle of ancestral worship, where hungry ghosts are fed so they will not come back and disrupt the lives of the living").

The video projections were shown on a moving vaporetto (sea bus) that transported the work and audience on a journey. *Hungry Ghosts* was a transformative work, constantly moving, providing a site for remembering the past while sailing in the present. It was a novel medium for dealing with such intensely personal and emotional subjects as death and loss. Wong described it as a site of memory where the very private becomes public, a virtual 'walking the mountain,' a way to honour and remember those who had gone before.

Parallel to his outstanding contributions in the field of video and media art, Wong has consistently had a strong local, national and international commitment to developing new avenues for production, exhibition and distribution. From his early days in the 1970s he lobbied the Canada Council for equipment and support for his field, made public appeals for access to the television media and broadcasting at the CRTC and produced groundbreaking exhibitions like *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990), a national touring exhibition of 25 Asian Canadian artists working in film, video and photography. This was the first exhibition to feature Asian Canadian work with such prominence, and led to the development of a community identity that resulted in numerous subsequent shows.

Paul Wong is a media arts pioneer and the recipient of the 1992 Bell Canada Award in Video Art (administered by the Canada Council). In 2002, he also received the Asian Heritage Transforming Art Award for his role as a mentor, and, in 2003, the NFB-CHUM-TV Expression Award in recognition of his role as a "trailblazer" in the area of cultural diversity.

Wong is well known for his curatorial and cultural consultancy and

community art projects. He is a regular and vocal participant at national symposia and international conferences on art and culture. He is a past member of the Canada Council's media arts advisory committee and a co-founder of two Vancouver-based artist-run centres: the Satellite Video Exchange (Video In), in 1973, one of Canada's first and longest-running media production centres, and On Edge, in 1985, an organization dedicated to producing and exhibiting work previously marginalized by conventional definitions of 'art.'

Wong has produced, created, presented and performed his art for over 30 years. When others left the field because they tired of the poverty and alienation, he stuck it out. When others became co-opted by the systems they had earlier railed against, Wong stuck it out. He has survived countless incidents of censorship and controversy. He has somehow managed to be a working artist since he was 18 years old. He has had no other career.

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