Paul Wong
EastVan John (2008)

The “East Van” in Paul Wong's “EastVan John” is more than an abbreviation of East Vancouver, historic landing pad for Chinese, Italian, Portuguese and South Asian immigrant families and de facto home to leftist and counter-culture politics. As someone who grew up on the wealthier Anglo-centric west side (known as “the west side”), East Van was defined through difference: everything the west side was not. It was only during trips to the PNE, Canucks hockey games and rock concerts did I begin to appreciate East Van's autonomy - distinct from, yet structurally akin to, what was happening west of Main Street.

Enlightenment began with that ubiquitous bit of cruciform graffito (EAST on the vertical axis, VAN horizontal, sharing the A), followed by a memorable visit with a friend's grandfather, a tradesman who immigrated to Canada and started a home and business in East Van -- how instead of investing in resource stocks, like the “west side” fathers I grew up with, this man bought and renovated houses, converting them to rental properties, which he and his children managed. Here, autonomy is represented symbolically, through a distinct (yet repurposed) religious iconography, but also materially, where landlords and tenants often lived on the same block, patronizing each other's services, looking after each other's kids. That my friend's grandfather invested in local real estate, as opposed to remote forestry and mining operations, made him (according to the logic of the fathers I grew up with) the better businessman. For it is real estate, more than any other speculative endeavour, that defines success in Vancouver -- a city obsessed with arriving at the future early.

“EastVan John” begins with the artist interviewing a middle-aged couple outside their new home -- a burned-out East Van house - on July 1st, the day they took possession. Right away we learn that the pair are getting more than a run-down 'fixer-upper', for lurking inside is the previous owner, someone whom the couple are acquainted with (and sympathetic to), a man named John Jeffery.

Like the couple, John is middle-aged. All three grew up on in East Van. But from there the similarities diminish. For the next thirty-eight minutes we follow John, a dual-diagnosis crack-addict/schizophrenic, as he winds his way through a house half destroyed by fire, half reorganized by someone unsure whether they are coming or going.

Of course in following John we learn something of his life, the house functioning as a script through which that life is told - to the point where one wonders that if in the absence of this house John's story might be lost to him, forever. The effect, for this viewer, is not unlike watching a ghost - the subject hovering between cash-poor title-owner and cash-rich homeless man - a status that can only be conferred through the vagaries of property transfer.

EastVan John is one of a number of new portrait-oriented videos by Wong, works whose production and proliferation have been accelerated by recent innovations in computer digital technology. These changes have allowed the artist to work at an accelerated rate, independent of editing and transfer stations such as the one he co-founded in the early-1970s, Video-In. As a result, Wong is now producing videos on pace with Vancouver's material transformation, making works such as EastVan John topical documentaries, as opposed to historical ones. The distinction is important, not unlike the 'topical song' movement that enlivened the Greenwich Village folk scene fifty years earlier, allowing for new voices, but also the promotion of new issues, like American foreign policy, racism, sexism and union busting.

Social (and psychological) activism has always played a part in Wong's videos, photo-collages and performances, and EastVan John is among his most important works to date. However, what struck me most about this video was not the sociological commentary but Wong's camera work, his ability to create gorgeous tableaux, both pictorial and abstract, always with an awareness of where the light is and how it can be employed - or ignored -- to effect. In EastVan John, Wong follows the irrational path of an intelligent and insightful man, one that takes the artist through his subject's former home during a series of impossibly long takes, each one a continuous line drawing (the camera is rarely turned off). Wong is expert at anticipating his subject's movements, and in doing so proves that, as much as he is influencing those movements, he is also in tune with those beyond his control. The relationship is not unlike the one I spoke of earlier - the difference (and similarities) between the two Vancouvers.

Wong's mastery of the video camera is unparalleled in Vancouver art, making him to video what Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt were to painting, or Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall to photomontage. That he is rarely considered among these artists - nor mentioned when discussing the development of a Vancouver art -- owes something to video's historically uneven relationship with the museum, but also to Wong's desire to reach beyond the constraints of gallery display, as evidenced by his use of titles and credits, a device which owes more to broadcast media than the installation work of contemporaries Stan Douglas and Rodney Graham. Current re-interest in long-form, socially-active documentarian video by emerging local artists Alex Morrison, Jeremy Shaw and Althea Thauberger could change that, allowing for a re-examination of Wong's work in relation to a city whose preoccupation with real estate has influenced the way we think of words like 'value' and 'appreciation'.

Michael Turner