

2020 Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange Aotearoa:
Ngā Tai o te Ao: the global tides

St Paul St Gallery AUT -- Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU
Editors: Janine Randerson, Charlotte Huddleston & Alexandra Chang



*susan pui san lok and Léuli Esbrāghi respond
to the experience of the GAX Aotearoa symposium.*

Tiohtià:ke, Tāmaki Makaurau, somewhere
over the under, beneath the between

susan pui san lok

After Tiohtià:ke, 2019

Time and place fold in, fold together. One year and three months ago: I am sitting in the lobby of Concordia University, Montreal – Tiohtià:ke.

For the last five days, Concordia has hosted the Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange (GAX), a gathering of variously positioned and dispositioned artists, curators, and academics, in complex and ambivalent relation to the terms ‘Asian’ and ‘Indigenous’, and to each other.¹

Every day has begun by acknowledging that “I/We [are] located on unceded Indigenous lands.” Every day, “The Kanien’kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather today.” Territorial acknowledgement asserts and demands an awareness of Indigenous presence and land rights in everyday life. This daily ritual-recitation-repetition invites and declares, “respect [for] the continued connections with the past, present and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community.”²

This daily ritual-repetition unsettles the ground beneath our feet – a compacted palimpsest of paths and criss-crossing currents, coursing between islands and oceans.

We gather to listen, to venture ‘Asian Indigenous relations in contemporary art’, to examine the heterogeneity and “particularity of conjunctions.”³

We make cautious contact.

We test ideas of caring, curating, and hospitality.

We stay in a former hospice, haunted by colonial Catholic missionary nuns.

We sleep badly, share food and dream-visions.

We hear the testimonies of those displaced by climate change, witness imaginings of reclaimed futures, and struggle with the ethics of return.

I am back.

‘Back’?

Back ‘home’?

Jetlagged; perpetually lagging, dragging selves and heels; or else tripping the light, flipping the fight.

What everyday acknowledgements do I/we/you need to make, here and now, in this... what is this place? To complicate binaristic and reductive ‘black/white’, ‘host/immigrant’ and ‘settler/colonial’ narratives? To recognise that Western imperialism and colonialism continue to deny and negate Indigenous peoples and their relations to the land the world over; to deny and negate the histories and experiences of former enslaved and indentured communities; and those of past and living generations of immigrant, racialised and displaced communities?

1. ‘Tiohtià:ke (Montreal): Asian Indigenous Relations in Contemporary Art’, Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange (GAX) 2019, co-convened by Alice Ming Wai Jim and Alexandra Chang. Montreal: Concordia University, 10–16 June 2019.

2. ‘Territorial acknowledgement’, Concordia University, website, accessed 16 June 2019.

3. Margo Machida, GAX 2019, conference keynote.

What everyday acknowledgements do we need to make, here and now, in this – what is this place? To recognise the enduring systemic and structural discrimination of laws and institutions and pedagogies and practices – and their annihilating affects? To recognise our shifting positions and privileges, relations of power, and our wilful or accidental complicity? To recognise the specific histories and pervasive legacies of British colonialism, imperialism, domination and exploitation? To recognise, for example, the particular conjunctions, affinities and alignments that might compel a twenty-four-year-old British-born second-generation mainland Chinese Hakka emigrant and Hong Kong Chinese immigrant in mid-1990s Britain, to tongue-in-cheek identify as a ‘YBBAACYRWBWA’ (Young Black British Anglo Asian Chinese Yellow Red White and Blue Woman Artist), while her father dances ballroom and her mother wins local allotment prizes.

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Ambalavaner Sivanandan said, “We are here because you were there.”<sup>4</sup>

When my grandmother left Kuala Lumpur in 1924, there was no going back.

When she and my mother left Guangzhou in 1948, there was no going back.

When my mother left Hong Kong in 1971, there was no going back.

When I go ‘back’ to Hong Kong in 1985, I realise that there is no going back.

When I go back to Hong Kong in 1997, and Hong Kong goes back to China, I realise again, there is no going back.

No settling; no returns.

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To Tiohtià:ke, we bring archives with our bodies – heavy with the weight of accumulated silences. Whose archives? Whose bodies? ‘After Empire’, our “national archives [...] are always already colonial and imperial, always already white supremacist.”⁵ Archives embody relations of power; bodies exist in relation.

We are figuring out our conjunctural positions, our terms and conditions.

After five days together, we seem to breathe differently.

Noelani Arista says, “I have to travel 12,000 miles to be able to speak without also having to fight.”⁶

We are reeling, always reeling to some degree, with the wha-a-a-a-t!?! of everyday sexism meets racism meets classism meets ableism meets age-ism meets ism-ism, in their relentless, predictable, and unexpected forms.

We are a family of four leaving a restaurant.
A man approaches my partner to say, “Your kids are well-behaved. How long have you had your Asian wife? I’ve done 15 years.”⁷

Apparently, the ‘colonial matrix of power’ imprisons him, too.⁸

4. Ambalavaner Sivanandan, *Catching history on the wing*, London: Institute of Race Relations (IRR), 2018, speech given at IRR’s 15th Birthday Celebration Conference, accessed 16 June 2019.

5. J. J. Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell, “‘To go beyond’: Towards a decolonial archival praxis”, *Archival Science*, no. 19, 2019. 71–85.

6. Noelani Aristano, GAX 2019, in conversation.

7. This happened in London a week after GAX 2019.

8. Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America’, *Nepantla*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000. 533-580. Cited in Walter Mignolo, ‘Introduction’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007. 155-167, and reprinted in the same issue.

We share stories and expletives to gear up and galvanise, return to the field/room/street, which may not be openly hostile – but watch out for open-armed welcomes with tacit conditions, or knives taped to the back.

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My ‘anarchivery’ praxis resides somewhere over the under, beneath the between.

The prefix an- suggests ‘lack’, a state of being ‘without’, a negation. What is the archive *lacking* or missing, and who are the [ones] situated without or outside it?... Of course, the... archive is incomplete, always already an-archive – lacking, missing, without – *an-archive-not-archive*.

I rather like the idea of the archive as a sleeping, mountainous entity, that looms over and ahead, rather than beneath or behind the museum. The archive whose surface stillness may suddenly break, its shadows finding form, spewing smouldering debris and setting alight (both in the sense of burning and firing up) the ideas constructed at its foothills. Perhaps the curating of archives as the ‘taking care’ of objects should also carry the sense of a warning, a precaution – ‘take care’ – beware of histories erupting.<sup>9</sup>

The mountain peak is a tip  
A tip is also a clue  
A clue to the archive’s archipelagic relations  
No archive is an island

The body of the archive is a vaporous phantom, phantasmatic, haunting and taunting the bodies it buries and denies.

Julietta Singh says, “No archive will not restore you.”<sup>10</sup>

I say, if an archive can destroy us, it can also invent us.  
And we can invent our archives and ourselves.

She says, an archive may hold an “entirely imagined auditory event,” and others, “fabricated through repetitive maternal narrations.”<sup>11</sup>

I say, let us gather a chorus, bring out the dead, and summon alternate pasts and futures.

An Ambush of Amys  
An Army of Annes  
A Drift of Janes  
A Murder of Margarets  
A Rake of Rebeccas  
A Rush of Roses  
A Siege of Susans<sup>12</sup>

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To/from Tāmaki Makaurau, 2020

One year later, GAX gathers again, this time online. It is early morning and late afternoon and night all at once – all shades of light and dark, all together, all alone. A strangely emotional and muted re/union, old and new friends, newly estranged. We gather ourselves, preparing to wade through waters and tides, contaminated and rising with the heat.

9. susan pui san lok, ‘Through the Gate / an(g) archivery’, *Deviant Practice*, ed. Nick Aikens. Eindhoven, NL: Van Abbemuseum, 2018. 176-209.

10. Julietta Singh, *No archive will restore you*. Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018. Thanks to John Tain for the reference.

11. Ibid. 79 and 96.

12. susan pui san lok, chorus from *Seven Sisters*, 2019. 7-channel audio installation as part of the solo exhibition *A COVENANT GROVE A STAND*. Colchester, England: Firstsite, 8 February – 22 April 2019.

Valance Smith's karakia invites us to "bring [our] mountains and oceans into this space."¹³

Stay home. Stay safe. Stay distanced. Separated by seas and fears for the very air we breathe. Yet the global pandemic brings fragile glimmers of hope for averting climate catastrophe. Brighter skies, clearer waters.

How quickly we seem to have adjusted to this separated way of being, of being with, and yet without. A grid of faces belie shared embodied memories, of heat and sweat, and rain and tears – no two tears are the same...

Xin Cheng and Kerry Ann Lee take us through the movements of bad waters and backwaters, the mingling of sewer and storm...

We follow and weave with artist-writer-curator hosts and guides, de-centring the planet as earth, re-orientating towards the ocean; remembering ancestral sites and bones, above and below; navigating macro and microscopic sights, smells and sounds, of waters as physical, mythical and legally contested bodies; tracing passages and trade routes, flight paths and bridges; churning up rivers, stirring up jet streams, hunkering down against ever stronger hurricanes...

We pause with Rosanna Raymond, heralding ambivalent forces with body, voice and words:

Stones smooth and strike against one another

Hands clap – like thunder – inhale and exhale

A shaking, jangling, rattling HIISSSSSSSSSS

How do we want to go or be taken?

All that will be left will be the smell of the sea¹⁴

13. Valance Smith, karakia for 'Aotearoa: Ngā Tai o te Ao (Global Tides)', Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange (GAX) 2020, co-convened by Janine Randerson and Alexandra Chang. Auckland: Auckland University of Technology (AUT), 23–24 June 2020.

14. The last line from Rosanna Raymond's spoken word performance at the close of GAX 2020 day one at AUT.

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Co-editors ----- *Janine Randerson, Charlotte Huddleston & Alexandra Chang*

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