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Formal Actions

Reevaluating the “Cultural Work” of Tehching Hsieh, Byron Kim, and Simon Leung

Whatever we do, we are supposed to do [it for] the sake of “making a living.” . . . The only exception society is willing to grant is the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the “only” worker left in a laboring society.

—Hannah Arendt¹

What do artists do? What is the value of their work? Tehching Hsieh, Simon Leung, and Byron Kim do a lot in various spheres and registers. This chapter explores how select works by Hsieh, Kim, and Leung unsettle dominant modes of thinking about labor, work, the political, and the artist’s role as a cultural laborer and a cult figure of genius and alienation.

From one point of view, making art is wasting time, a means of consuming the surplus labor time of a society, and producing nothing of tangible use.² The globalization of the art market would suggest otherwise as it works overtime to mobilize desire for its products, converting an artist’s surplus labor to surplus symbolic value. While art is an unproductive expenditure with marginal utility, it now has tangible value. Moreover, while it used to be that an object’s cultural worth was determined by an artist’s skill and craft, and the value of the materials, recently an artwork’s value has also been determined by his/her ideas and ability to provide a service or offer an experience. Within the field of art history, the implications of this turn in relation to the enfolding of conceptual art into the market, correspondent with the rise of the derivative, have been amply discussed.

Within Asian American Studies, questions concerning the value of an artist’s work and the role of the Asian American artist as cultural laborer

have been engaged in part by Asian American authors and literary critics. David Mura, Shelley Wong, and Sau-ling Wong have written about the expectations of Asian American authors to “advanc[e] and engag[e] in practices of liberation and freedom,” “unlock a historical memory . . . [and] provide a basis for unity or cultivate a shared literary grammar.”³ Offering a different perspective, literary critic Mark Chiang points to how Asian American writers and literary scholars have depended on the Asian American community, especially the immigrant laborer and his/her symbolic capital, as a means to attain and accumulate their own cultural capital.

Tehching Hsieh’s *One Year Performances* and Simon Leung’s *Squatting Project* at first may seem like similar projects, iconic representations of the undocumented Asian migrant and/or low-wage immigrant laborer or guest worker, paradigmatic figures within Asian American Studies who have come to represent the gendered and racialized contradictions among the idealistic principles of the state, the discourse of U.S. citizenship, and the demands of capitalism. In this chapter I want to focus on how these artists are engaged in another form of critical labor in which their artwork acquires a different value that is not tied to any authentic representation or documentation of an Asian immigrant’s life. In this chapter, I want to play with the meaning of “occupy,” focusing on the occupation of Hsieh, Leung, and Byron Kim as cultural workers, but also on the various ways they occupy space as a mode of resistance to neoliberalism’s encroachment and abstraction of space and relations.

Much has been written about neoliberalism as market fundamentalism and its philosophy of unfettered capitalism—an endless growth of the economy vis-à-vis a free market. Foregrounding the need for austerity by limiting the role of state and public-sector activities, neoliberal policymakers have advocated for the need to dismantle social welfare programs and privatize public entities and institutions—a standard practice in an attempt to manage ongoing stagnation crises while simultaneously maximizing accumulation by removing any and all major obstructions and regulations that impede the free flow of capital and market exchange. In the 1970s, neoliberal policies guised as state reform were experimentally applied ad hoc in the Southern Cone of Latin America and New York City to deal with their bankruptcy crises, the same year Hsieh decided to embark on his “lifeworks.” Since the 1980s,

the promotion and implementation of neoliberal policies have not only led to the intensified mobility of goods, services, people, and capital across borders and an upward flow of capital and power but have also resulted in the hegemonic establishment of global oligarchic rule and the restructuring of state governance and everyday life.⁴

Recognizing that neoliberalism is not at all the sole or totalizing determining force influencing and regulating the production and reception of these artworks, and aware of the uneven developments of forms of neoliberalism contingent on history and geography, among other factors, I seek here not to posit how these artists are intervening in discussions of and scholarship about neoliberalism.⁵ Rather, I want to frame these works as aesthetic responses to neoliberalism. The ascendancy of neoliberalism serves as background against which these artworks emerged and/or took place during different stages of neoliberalism from the 1970s through the 1990s.⁶ Aware of the working conditions of their art production, I want to extend this awareness by suggesting how they are inscribed/embedded in the ideological workings of neoliberalism and globalization. Their art practice in combination with these specific works, I want to aver, serve as formal responses to this situation, in which their works resist, in multifarious ways, the regulation of social and spatial relations and the disciplinary effect of neoliberalism's reconfiguration of individual responsibility. More specifically, I want to consider how their work challenges a primitive individualism—the mandate to protect one's own interests in the marketplace—and the privileging of artificial transactions and negotiated contractual obligations between juridical individuals over human relations and alternative forms of sociality. Intrinsic in all the artwork is a gesture to acknowledge how the individual artist's autonomy and art making is contingent on others and their labor.

While these artists are not specifically focused on eluding systems of commodity exchange and the market, they have little to show in the aftermath of their art making. They produce no-thing of "value," leaving no permanent trace of their labor, nothing tangible, useful, or arguably exchangeable at all. That said, I want to argue that they are engaged in a kind of critical and disruptive labor, one that intersects with broader forces and shifts, including the protracted pursuits of social and racial justice. Rather than instrumentalizing their labor or elevating them as promoters of liberation, freedom, and autonomy, I want to highlight

what is already present in the work itself and hint at how their labor is setting up conditions of possibilities for a potential politics. I begin with an analysis of Hsieh's *Cage Piece* and *Time Piece*. Following this reading, I then look closely at Byron Kim's *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, and conclude with a reading of Simon Leung's *Squatting Project*.

Tehching Hsieh: The Labor of Art Making

Born and raised in Taiwan, Hsieh arrived in the United States in 1974 while “working as a seaman.” As in an account of an immigrant myth, Hsieh “walked down the gangplank of an oil tanker docked in the Delaware River and slipped into the United States. Hailing a taxi, Hsieh paid the driver \$150 to take him to Manhattan.”⁷ Four years after his arrival in New York City, in 1978, Hsieh announced the beginning of five year-long life performances, using as his calling card a wanted poster of himself. *Wanted by Immigration Service*, a cross between a passport and a police report, includes a photocopy of a 1974 photograph of Hsieh, his signature, and a list of statistics: his date of entry into the United States, birth date, weight, race, nationality, physical characteristics, and occupation. At the bottom of the poster, above a grid of his fingerprints and his phone number, Hsieh matter-of-factly states his violation—illegal entry, without visa.

Between September 1978 and July 1986, Hsieh produced and presented his One Year Performances, different year-long living situations each organized around and bound by a set of self-imposed rules involving endurance acts of spatial and temporal constraint. In his inaugural *One Year Performance, 1978–1979 (Cage Piece)*, Hsieh lived in a cage, measuring eleven feet six inches by nine feet, for an entire year in isolation. In that time, he spoke to no one nor did he read, write, listen to the radio, or watch TV (figure 2.1). He not only sequestered himself in solitary confinement; he also simulated prison conditions: the cell, built within his own apartment-studio, contained nothing but the barest necessities—sink, twin mattress, blanket, and light bulb—and he even wore the requisite prison uniform stitched with the semi-pseudonym “Sam Hsieh” and an “ID” number: 93078–92979.

During the period of time when the performance took place, the general public was invited to his studio on designated dates circled on the poster that publicized his piece. Now *Cage Piece* can be experienced only

through photographic documentation taken by his friend Cheng Wei Kuong. The photos depict Hsieh alone, undertaking the basic functions of everyday life—eating, excreting, and resting.⁸ But we also see images where he appears frustrated, bored, and contemplative, though these are all projections from the observer's viewpoint, as no text or audio accompanies the images. We never hear Hsieh's voice, or his take on his experience of the performance.

Accompanying all his performances were statements written in pseudo-legalese, including a terse artist statement stipulating his intentions, which in the case of *Cage Piece* includes the promise, "I shall NOT converse, read, write, listen to the radio, or watch television" between September 30, 1978, and September 29, 1979, and a letter from his attorney, Robert Projansky, certifying that Hsieh "remained within said locked cell for a period of ONE YEAR."

A year later, Hsieh again hunkered down in his studio with a stated objective to think about art twenty-four/seven. Casting himself as a blue-collar factory or industrial worker, Hsieh punched a card in a time



Figure 2.1. Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance, 1978–1979* (*Cage Piece*). Life image. Photograph by Cheng Wei Kuong, © Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

clock every hour on the hour for 365 days, in *One Year Performance, 1980–1981* (*Time Piece*). In 1982, he spent a year outdoors, wandering Manhattan, sleeping on the streets, and vowing never to enter a private space. Between 1983 and 1984, in a performance entitled *Art/Life*, he spent a year tied by an eight-foot rope to another performance artist, Linda Montano, without either touching the other. In his fifth performance in the series, Hsieh spent a year not making any kind of art or participating in any kind of art-related activities. He did not look at art, read about it, or talk about it. In 1986, Hsieh said that he would spend the next thirteen years producing art but not showing it. At the end of 1999, he announced to an audience gathered in Judson Memorial Church simply that he had kept himself alive. If the latter performances are about keeping to himself, making art, and staying alive, I want to suggest that the first two performances—*Cage Piece* and *Time Piece*—are in part about what it means to work, but also about the freedom and right to work and make art.

In his first lifework piece, Hsieh's main task in the studio was to make art: "[T]hinking was my major job." I want to suggest that he was also doing time, placing himself in detention because of his undocumented status—although Hsieh himself and other art curators and critics have denied this insofar as neither *Cage Piece* nor any of the other performances were intentionally meant to serve as mimetic representations of his undocumented status.⁹ In an impressive catalog *raisonné* (in collaboration with Hsieh), Andrew Heathfield characterizes Hsieh's one-year activities as "lifework" performances, inviting readings of his art within the context of lived duration, the "gravitational pull into the density of time's passing." By inviting us to look at Hsieh's body of work across time, not as a series of events but as a single duration, Heathfield strategically brackets the moments and contexts as a way to step away from frameworks of seeing his work in relation to identity, performance, and body art.

Foregrounding his performances as explorations on the meaning of time for an artist—what an artist does, day in and day out or, in Hsieh's own words, "the process of thinking about art in my studio"—I want to extend this interpretation but focus on the underpinnings of this process in his first two "lifeworks."¹⁰ Pursuing his task and right to "think," Hsieh's formal actions might be seen as not only about survival but also about elevating the human condition, an endeavor that requires him to

make himself “appear” legible as worker, citizen, artist, and human, a challenging task in light of his exclusion from the polis and the art world.

Hsieh’s description of the task at hand corresponds with the first item in a list of activities Hannah Arendt proposes to uplift the “human condition”—“that is of thinking about something, *Nah-denken*.”¹¹ The other activities that make up the tripartite of Arendt’s human condition are labor and action. She related “labor” to causality, specifically activities involving the body’s survival, maintenance, and subsistence. She also characterizes labor as an activity repeated continuously with no end result. In contrast to labor, which attends to life’s needs, Arendt calls “action” the privileged apex of the human condition, a singular form of expression and a way-of-being-in-the-world that has no beginning or end. Action transforms facts, events, and patterns of thought into worldly things that then get “absorbed into a web of relations setting into motion and distributing a kind of chain reaction, in which its effects are felt widely across time and space with unexpected and random consequences.”¹² Action, like art, is purposeless, political, and free. Denied the right to work for wages as an undocumented immigrant, Hsieh presents an intriguing limit situation: he is removed from the task of making a living and thus left paradoxically with time and a unique opportunity to live life without necessity, to experience freedom from want, and to attend to, in Arendt’s words, “higher and more meaningful human activities,” though at the same time his self-imposed “labor” always seems to get in the way.

Unable to work legally, Hsieh sets out to work for himself, organizing his day in the studio by assigning himself a set of tasks. In *Cage Piece*, he thinks about art nonstop, and in *Time Piece*, he does the same, but punches a time clock on the hour, every hour. Demanding sheer will power, endurance, discipline, and deprivation, his performances recall the work ethic and mindset of the persevering, hard-working immigrant, and from another perspective, his performative acts of deprivation and discipline were uncanny in their timeliness and correspondence with Reagan’s embrace and revival of the Protestant work ethic and the financial austerity measures instituted in New York City at the time.

At the brink of bankruptcy in 1975, New York City became a pioneering test case for a number of neoliberal measures, policies, and tactics to purportedly fight stagflation and save the city from bankruptcy. Forcing the city’s municipal government to use its tax revenues for bond

payments, the city's bondholders—Wall Street investment firms and bankers—pushed through a number of severe austerity measures in the guise of “fiscal discipline,” to create and secure optimal business conditions. These measures included restructuring local government, freezing wages and making cutbacks in public employment and social provisions, imposing user fees to attend the public university system (which had to that point been tuition-free), and privatizing public institutions. Stripping the power of labor unions and local government, these measures also weakened the city's social and physical infrastructure, testing the endurance and grit of its inhabitants.

An outcome of Ronald Reagan's ingenious strategic merger with the Christian Right was the revival of the Protestant work ethic and a call to save and sacrifice, a mantra that would become a familiar refrain in the promotion of neoliberal austerity measures. No longer, however, a divine call that assigned an individual “a duty, a life task, a mission, or a field to which one is supposed to devote one's best energies,” the secular manifestation of Reagan's Protestant work ethic focused instead on worldly deeds in the form of remuneration: an accumulation of money that despite its materiality becomes transcendent in the measurement of one's individual worth, seen primarily as economic value. Conjoining Christian virtues of discipline, diligence, self-sufficiency, frugality, punctuality, sobriety, and prudence with free enterprise, the Protestant work ethic also became an effective measure of individual success and a means to obscure structural inequities, conditions, and exclusions that placed one's failure to transcend one's condition on the individual. Effectively relinquishing state responsibility to protect and promote the economic and social well-being of its citizenry, Hsieh's second One Year Performance, *Time Piece*, seemed to be a timely response to this call to take action and responsibility.

Hsieh describes *Time Piece* as follows:

- 1) I shall have a witness sign each of the 365 time cards for the total one year performance . . .
- 2) With a 16mm movie camera, I shall document each time I punch the Time Clock by shooting one frame . . .
- 3) To help illustrate the time process, I shall begin the performance with my head shaved bald and allow my hair to grow back naturally.

Written in overly formal pseudo-legalese, typed and signed, the document serves as both artist statement and contract. One of a number of documents that Hsieh fastidiously generated and maintained, including 365 punched time cards, approximately 8,760 mugshot-style self-portraits, and a six-minute film, the documentation serves now, as mentioned before, as the only means to see and experience his performance. On one level, Hsieh's documentation foreshadows the neoliberal predilection for contracts, data, and information. On another level, given Hsieh's purported unfamiliarity with other conceptually based art practices that dematerialized the object and performed everyday tasks within and outside the studio, his careful documentation needs to be approached both as a recording of the event as a way to preserve the work and disseminate it to a wider audience and as the only formal means to present and certify himself at the time.¹³

The 365 time cards, the carefully recorded self-evaluations, and the documents in which he lays out a set of outcomes and rules—I will not do this, I will do this—in addition to a moral code (“to avoid any suspicion of cheating”) keep him not only occupied but also out of trouble. Generating his own rehabilitative contract with the state as compensation for working outside the law, executing and completing his self-given tasks, utilizing his body and labor power, and verifying that he actually performed the tasks not only demonstrate Hsieh's competence and industriousness but also attest to his potential to be a good worker, model citizen, and model minority. However, how might we, while remaining mindful of his artistic intentions, see Hsieh's performance not only as foreshadowing neoliberal demands of self-sufficiency, self-regulation, and investment in one's potential but also as revealing its cracks in the disciplinary effects on bodies and social relations? In contrast to the iconic image of factory workers in constant collective motion, as integral cogs in an industrial machine, we see Hsieh working alone, atomized and isolated. In contrast to the regimented Fordist schedule of shift work, we see Hsieh literally working around the clock. Over time, his simple task to think about art becomes increasingly difficult due to his inability to sleep for an extended stretch of time, throwing his circadian rhythm out of whack. Revealing not the end, but the residual spillover of Fordist work methods, which Max Horkheimer described in part as forcing the need to “dispense with memory and [a] straying imagination,” Hsieh

must concentrate on the contractually binding task of clocking in and clocking out on the hour every hour, the consequences of which Hsieh highlights in his *Super 8* film. The film opens with a clean-shaven Hsieh looking directly at the camera. The condensed montage of eight thousand photographs, however, quickly unfolds into six minutes of slapstick horror in which we see a head with a mass of hair gone wild atop a jittery body convulsing out of control. In contrast to the methodical documentation and photographing of his punching the clock, the film exposes how the mechanization of procedures dictated by neoliberalism takes on a life of its own or can take someone's life as we see Hsieh's spasmodic body move out of control and almost out of the picture frame.

His "stuplimated" condition at the end of the film reveals an intensification of Taylorist techniques to manage the body.¹⁴ But instead of a foreman regulating his schedule and structuring his production, it is Hsieh who takes on the responsibility of his own production and destruction. Unregulated and free to structure his workday, Hsieh takes control of his own production, but to the point of utter exhaustion, failing to produce anything of value. That is, the only "product" of his labor that we see is the act of him punching the clock, an obsolete gesture during an era of major economic restructuring and deindustrialization. However, given his status as an undocumented Asian immigrant, it is not what he produces that is of value but his body.

Suggesting the impossibility of a racialized subject experiencing material and spiritual uplift by way of the Protestant work ethic, Rey Chow suggests that the only way someone like Hsieh can find redemption and recognition is through his body or by becoming a Protestant ethnic.¹⁵ Appropriating Georg Lukács's tracking of the worker's awakening to his/her status and the requisite journey to class consciousness, Chow defines the Protestant ethnic as a racialized subject who becomes conscious of his/her own difference and subjection, and whose salvation is contingent on captivity.¹⁶ Aware of his/her own subordinated position but without any other alternatives except to resist and protest, the Protestant ethnic has no choice but to embark on a journey demanding recognition of his/her own injury and injustice. Interpellated within a fixed narrative of "universal justice" and the globalization of capital, the Protestant ethnic, as Chow points out, is always already captive, subjected to engaging in racialized protests that are always already circumscribed, never

demanding emancipation from capitalism, only access to “the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation.”¹⁷

While Hsieh’s *Time Piece* could be seen as part of a long history of low-wage Asian immigrant labor, a representation of the current makeup of global capital’s factory assembly lines, Hsieh’s performances, including all the documentation, do not really offer us anything about this experience. Not at all a poster child protesting in favor of Asian immigrant working rights and producing neither capital nor an object of exchange for revenue, describing his own performances as passing time, which also could be read as consuming surplus time, Hsieh manages to elude or “escape from a series of categories upon which subjectivity depends.”¹⁸ Put another way, Hsieh wastes time by producing no-thing, a reckless and counterintuitive endeavor for an undocumented Asian immigrant and future model minority, but by doing so, he breaks free from the binds of captivity.

Hsieh does not re-create or represent his “real life” situation in his first two One Year Performances, but renders a semblance of it by setting up his own rules and parameters of confinement. Engaged in a simulation of alienation, Hsieh goes through a series of “prescriptive negations” or “near-systematic negation[s] of subjectivity, staking out a position along the intersecting limits of economic, juridical, and political orders” wherein he is able to slip between the call of the law and its articulation.¹⁹ Free to make art, but in a way that is paradoxically binding, given his situation outside of the law and the art world, he produces on one level something else through his labor: the freedom to question freedom, his right/s, and the higher purpose of being an artist. Refusing the demands of the state, capital, and the art world (which I bracket and discuss in the last chapter), Hsieh creates his own version of defined contributions, pushing away the future promised to ethnic artists, and the art world’s outdated principles of individual autonomy.

While Hsieh arguably produces no-thing of exchange value, on another level, his austere and minimalist formal actions render what it means to be counted as human, a condition contingent on the interdependency of interpersonal relations and intimacy. But *Time Piece* cannot be seen as an absolute refusal of the capitalist system. His expenditure and generation of “surplus labor”—labor in excess of what is necessary to produce the means of livelihood of the worker—paradoxically rests

on another stratum of surplus labor. Financially secure and stable as owner of his own living space and studio, his everyday needs taken care of with a monetary allowance given to him by his mother and the help of his friend Cheng Wei Kuong, Hsieh reveals an indebtedness to an unseen support network that offers him sustenance to make something like *Time Piece* even possible. In *Cage Piece*, Kuong documents Hsieh undertaking the basic necessities and functions of everyday life; in these photographs, his incarceration is made palpable. They also show how Hsieh's performance was made possible: Kuong was in charge of bringing Hsieh food every day, as well as taking care of his clothing and daily refuse, and his mother took care of his other expenses. Resisting neoliberal forms of socialization as well as challenging myths of individualism and self-reliance, Hsieh's performances form a display of filial piety, evidence to his mother that he is staying out of trouble, perhaps an unspoken condition attached to receiving his monthly allowance. On another level, it is these relations that enable Hsieh to thwart the ways capitalism maximizes profit by controlling time and profit and convert the experience of alienation into one of estrangement and imagination. In *Cage Piece*, Hsieh survived his days of isolation by using his imagination, dividing his cell between "inside" and "outside," organizing his time, setting up a routine, and drawing imaginary boundaries, wherein sitting on the bed represented being inside and standing or otherwise being off the bed meant being outside. Using resources of imagination, time, and space, Hsieh occupies the nation-state but produces in his own makeshift space, one parallel to that of the art world, a schema consisting of a separate set of criteria of what it means to make art. While alienated and exhausted after *Time Piece*, Hsieh remains free from the forces that bind and seek to bind him, maintaining the right to self-possession of his body, of time (a property of the mind), and, more importantly, of his art.

Byron Kim: Shades of Labor

While sharing with Hsieh a similar quest to explore and question the vocation of the artist, the artist's work process, and the myth of the alienated modern artist, Byron Kim, in contradistinction to Hsieh, has been active in the art world as a practitioner and professor, as well as part of a growing corps of cosmopolitan, border-crossing artists who are

awarded commissions and exhibitions all around the world. Well aware of the shift in contracting artists as service providers of experiences, I want to suggest how Kim and Simon Leung, whose work I will discuss shortly, short-circuit the idea of the racialized artist as embodiment of liberation, freedom, and autonomy. This aspect of Kim's work is not the central focus of his art practice, but I see it as such in his solo commission at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris.

As discussed in chapter 1, Kim's "skin" monochromatic paintings were in part wry commentaries on race, but also on color, presenting his own oeuvre as a lofty quest to explore the question, "How much lore and beauty can a single color carry?"²⁰ Inspired by and in dialogue with artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Brice Marden, Allan McCollum, and Robert Irwin, his body of work could be approached as a series of conversations about painting and color. In the case of a 1999 solo commission at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, curator Eugenie Tsai commissioned Kim to produce a new work, a painterly response to a simple but complicated question: what is the color gray? Drawing on a longstanding personal and professional familiarity with the stakes of Kim's artwork (both were founding members of the Godzilla arts collective), Tsai formulated a question that was an ongoing query not only about color but also about abstract painting.

Kim responded to Tsai's question by creating three mural-scale wall drawings in different shades of gray, highlighting its range of hues and emotional effects while offering tribute to three canonical artists: Sol LeWitt, Mark Rothko, and Brice Marden. On the south wall of the gallery, Kim rendered a brick pattern, a playful tribute to LeWitt that combined that artist's breakthrough geometric wall drawings with "his use of brilliantly colored ink washes that were diluted and then layered in order to achieve secondary colors and shades of gray" (figure 2.2).²¹ Adjacent to this drawing, Kim painted a series of muted gray panels or columns of varying widths, illuminating the vertical features and auratic surfaces of a Rothko painting (figure 2.3). And in the largest rendering of the three, Kim suffused the wall from floor to ceiling with a diaphanous, smoky haze of differentiated shades of gray and swirling calligraphic ribbons or swirling orbs (figure 2.4). Titled *How Big Is the Moon*, the drawing was clearly an ode to Marden, a frequent point of reference for Kim and the ideal interlocutor on the subject of the color



Figure 2.2. Byron Kim, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Photo by Dennis Crowley. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.



Figure 2.3. Byron Kim, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Photo by Dennis Crowley. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

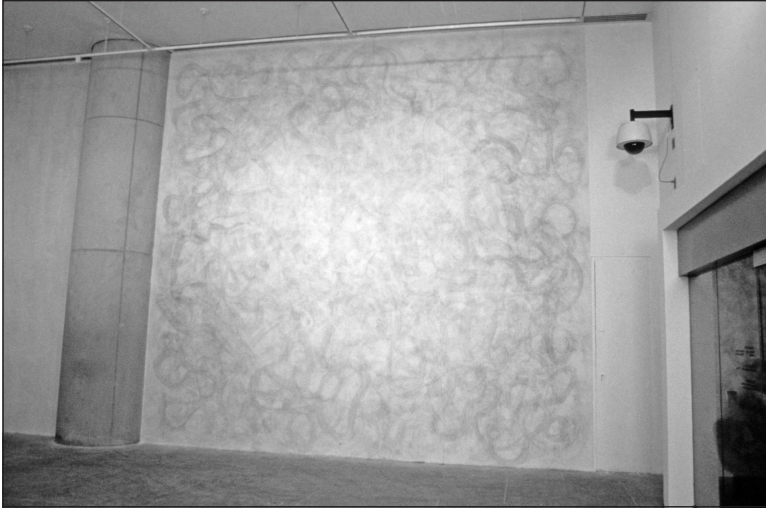


Figure 2.4. Byron Kim, *How Big Is the Moon*, part of *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. At Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Photo by Dennis Crowley. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

gray, a preoccupation Marden shared with Jasper Johns, who found both the color gray and the subject matter of identity vexing, life-long questions (figure 2.5).

Upon closer viewing, the modulations of gray that make up the looping lines around Marden's moon are splatters of sludge, strands of hair, lint, and grime. Interrupting this esoteric query on the sublime, Kim discloses under the title of the piece, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, that the translucent gray wash applied on the walls is not made up of oil or even paint, but "material vacuumed from this building"—a mix of water and collected contents of daily vacuum bags from the office building that houses the gallery (figures 2.6 and 2.7). Looking at Kim's unconventional choice of materials and the space in which the work was installed—a nine-hundred-square-foot cube gallery located within the corporate offices of Philip Morris, one of the largest tobacco companies in the world and one of the major corporate sponsors of art in the United States during this time—I approach *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings* (henceforth, *Wall Drawings*) as a site-specific installation, an



Figure 2.5. Byron Kim, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Photo by Dennis Crowley. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

exceptional case study through which to approach and understand Kim's role as a painter's painter, a service provider, and a cultural laborer.

"[T]he fascinating thing about a good abstract painting is that, content-wise, it operates at two extremes. You look at it once, and it is merely a red rectangle. You look at it again, it is the universe in red. It is nothing and everything,"²² wrote Byron Kim. "Love and an inner necessity, not ambition" motivate Kim's imperative to paint, as *Los Angeles*

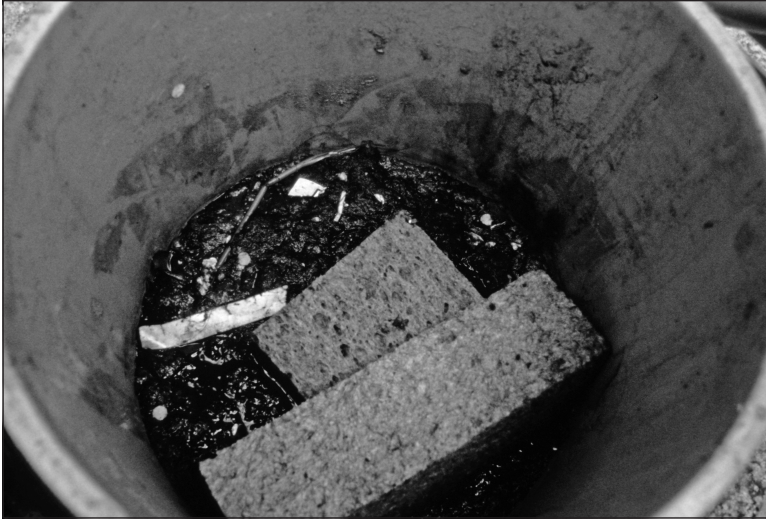


Figure 2.6. Byron Kim, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Photo by Dennis Crowley. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

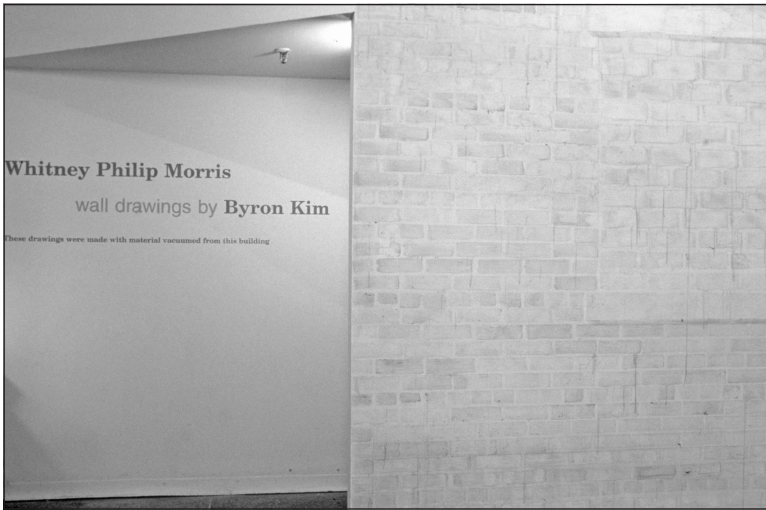


Figure 2.7. Byron Kim, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Photo by Dennis Crowley. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

Times critic Leah Ollman declares in one of the more comprehensive reviews of Kim's midcareer retrospective, *Threshold: Byron Kim, 1990–2004*. In “The Inquiring Mind of a Restless, Energetic Spirit,” Ollman describes Kim's body of work as “a sustained engagement with a lifelong process of looking ‘outward and inward.’”²³ She writes,

Kim's work emerges from a range of inquiries, some straightforwardly empirical, many of them philosophical sparklers, referring specifically to Kim's series of *Sunday Paintings* (2001–2004)—a series of 14-inch by 14-inch painted panels of the sky and clouds created every Sunday for four years, each accompanied at the bottom by a handwritten note about an event or his thoughts during that day or week.²⁴

Using Ollman's review as a point of departure, the following is a summary of Kim's art practice, a means to set up an alternative reading of his installation at Philip Morris.

* * *

“In the course of my art practice, I often find myself copying things,” wrote Byron Kim.²⁵ Since his national debut at the 1993 *Whitney Biennial*, Kim has been quite expressive about his thought and process, his methodical experimentation with materials, and the role and craft of painting, historically to the present. Aware that every utterance manifested in a work of art exists or emerges in response and relation to those who have come before and what has previously been visually articulated and experienced, Kim produces paintings that serve as both an homage to artists of the past and a contested space to examine what makes art “art.” From his painting performance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—where he obtained a copyist's permit to capture Jacques-Louis David's rendering of the gossamer tulle of chemist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier's wife's sumptuous pink dress and the satin toe of her slipper peeking out—to attempts to capture the “essence” of a Robert Irwin disc sculpture from a poor, misleading reproduction, Kim has over time simultaneously built and deconstructed an idiosyncratic and impressive repertoire of painterly techniques, as well as acquired a vast body of knowledge about the art and history of painting (figure 2.8). A close look at his body of work reveals that his paintings are not

just about contrasts in color but also studied comparisons of textured physicality, the application of paint, and the capture of hue and light.

The labor and time invested by Kim to learn how to capture the light in an Edward Hopper painting recall those of the Sunday or amateur painter. Conventionally, an amateur is someone who passionately admires and possesses an almost encyclopedic knowledge of a certain field—for example, the history of painting—and tries to achieve mastery



Figure 2.8. Kim with *Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier (1743–1794) and His Wife (Marie-Anne Pierrette Paulze, 1758–1836)* by Jacques-Louis David, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

through copying and repetition. On one hand, what makes an amateur distinct from a professional is his/her passion to paint out of love, not ambition. On the other hand, an amateur is usually viewed with derision, and his/her work is seen as derivative rather than inventive or innovative. These days we tend to distinguish amateur artists from professionals less through their skill or craft and more through their credentials and their approach to the act of creating.

It would be remiss to label Kim an amateur, given his Yale education and his enviable exhibition record and representation by several galleries around the world. His painterly experiments and reproductions of select works are less a means to gain technical proficiency than a way to highlight the gaps and contradictions in what it means today to make art. Norms about what is required to be considered an artist have shifted, and have less to do with skill, craftsmanship, or talent, and more with a notion of “creativity” that aligns it with ideas about originality and invention. Thierry de Duve, for instance, defines creativity “as an absolute and unformalized potential, a supply of energy prior to any division of labor. One has creativity, without qualification; one is creative, period.”²⁶ In other words, not everyone has talent in the traditional sense, but everyone possesses “certain degrees of creativity,” giving the illusion of a level playing field. Creativity’s conversion into novelty or innovation as a measure of added value production underscores how in determining an object’s worth, the focus is not on the quality of the craftsmanship or the materials, but rather on the artist’s capacity to attract symbolic social capital to his/her work.²⁷

Responding to this lack of symbolic capital or, in the words of art historian Darby English, to make “room in the discourse of painting for an investigation into the perceptual conditions and conventions of art that can accommodate a positioned, culturally specific subject,” Kim and his long-time peer, friend, and occasional collaborator, Glenn Ligon, have challenged, together and separately, the framework and manner by which abstract painting has been approached and reinforced. In *The Triumph of American Painting*, Ligon and Kim paint on a boxer’s punching bag Irving Sandler’s reading of Mark Rothko.²⁸ Recontextualizing and inscribing Irving Sandler’s abstract expressionist treatise on the punching bag—an object on which one can viscerally project aggressions and frustrations but also an object that tenaciously always remains intact

in shape and form—Kim and Ligon metaphorically build resistance in reading against a critic's pronouncements and power to make permissible what counts as painting and who can and who cannot paint by inaugurating a new generation of American painters.

In "An Attempt at Dogma" (1992), a play on Ad Reinhardt's manifesto of "art-as-art," Kim highlights how it matters who can be seen as creative, and ultimately who makes art, recounting the tepid response he received from art critics when he had, early on in his career, attempted "to make some large paintings exactly like Brice Marden's Grove Group."²⁹ Rather than engaging Kim's engagement with Marden's philosophy or art practice, the critic responded to his announcement by saying, "Why are you making abstract paintings?" The "you," Kim understood, was not Kim, the universal artist subject, but an "Asian-American, artist-of-color, artist-with-something to say"—an artist who was already predetermined never to be in the same league as Marden.³⁰ Having much to say through his painterly gestures, Kim's paintings are serious and poignant explorations of the role of color as a formal property and signifier, and the search for meaning in abstraction, but also conceptual inquiries concerning the delimits of such concepts as beauty and the sublime. In an interview with Phyllis Roshenweig, Kim stated, "I have developed a strong sense that beauty is a learned concept. I believe that one cannot walk in from the street uninitiated and see a Rothko painting as beautiful."

By highlighting the discourse of art history in framing a work of art as beautiful and sublime and/or divesting the exclusive connotations of abstraction and its purist grandiose intentions, Kim has consistently aimed to open a "a window toward opening up the game to others." Blurring the boundaries between abstraction and representation by indexing the quotidian and the personal—including his everyday surroundings, daily activities in the studio, and personal memories and observations—and rendering the distillation of it in profound and beautiful ways, Kim presses against art-historical notions of abstract painting as only pure and nonobjective. In addition, Kim has also tried to make art accessible through the use of interpretive and supportive materials that accompany all of his paintings—straightforward titles, clearly written artist statements, and occasional supplemental texts—all of which subtly suggest how his paintings may not be so elusive or esoteric as first perceived.³¹

Abstractions of a meaningful instance in time and space, Kim's paintings are also representations of people and places, as in the case of *Synecdoche*, presented at the 1993 *Whitney Biennial*, and of *Whorl (Ella and Emmett)* (1997). At first glance, Kim's *Whorl (Ella and Emmett)* (1997) appears to be a monochromatic study, a meditation in browns and blacks that swirl and float in different directions (figure 2.9). The gentle swirl of colors with delicate flecks that seem to form a mysterious orb of infinite depth and then transform into a cosmic underground constellation reveals upon prolonged viewing an intimate portrait, the tightly rendered images of two hair whorls from the heads of Kim's children, Ella and Emmett. Blurring the boundaries of both portraiture and abstraction, Kim presents at once in *Whorl* a cosmic world and the viewpoint of a parent looking down at the familiar and the extraordinary.

Boldly refusing both modern art history's and neoliberalism's insistence on abstracting the specificity of human relationships and relinquishing direct participation in everyday life, Kim's art practice challenges the idea of abstract painting as a pure space and a refuge from capitalism and the social. What makes him an intriguing artist, but for some frustrating, and for others confounding, is how his conceptual art practice is not only driven by the desire to challenge abstract art's rarefied stance but



Figure 2.9. Byron Kim, *Whorl (Ella and Emmett)*, 1997. Egg tempera on panel—left: 4.25" x 4"; right: 4.75" x 4.5". Copyright the artist. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

also motivated by aesthetic concerns such as finding the perfect shade of gray to express the multiple layers along a picture plane.

How might we approach *Wall Drawings*, as a set of paintings, a tribute, or a site-specific installation of something else? In *Wall Drawings* Kim overturns misperceptions about gray's noncolor status—its neutrality—while at the same time offering a wry commentary on the current idea of modern art as a refuge from capitalism, the creative economy, and on Philip Morris as a corporate entity. Converting the invisible and inert fall-out of everyday office work into a painterly force—drips of gray grime—that can be used to re-create Sol LeWitt's modular sequence of rectangular shapes, Kim shares what came before, citing recognized artists who have pondered the color gray—LeWitt, Robert Mangold, Gerhard Richter, and Marden—but then adds his own spin on the color by incorporating the gray space of Philip Morris itself as both setting and target (figure 2.10).

While Hsieh's performances occurred during a time of severe austerity in New York, Kim's site-specific installation at Philip Morris took place at the height of market expansion and corporate America's

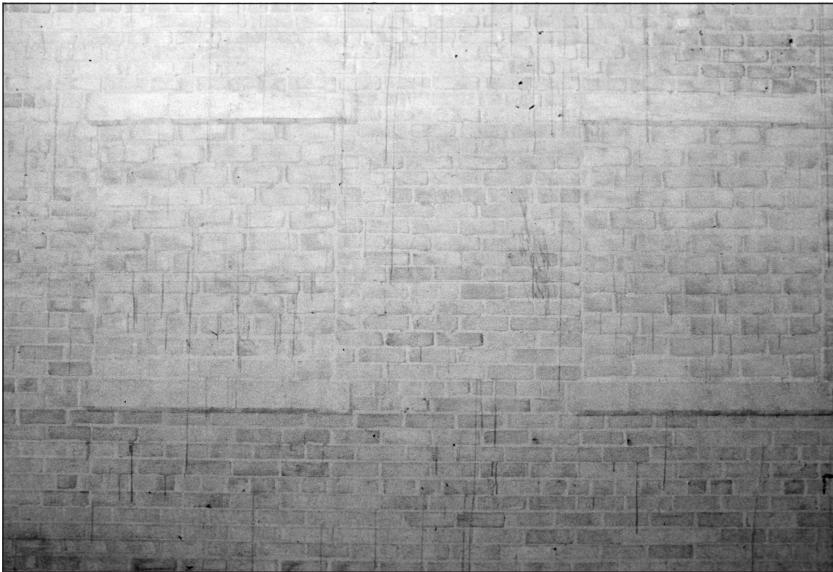


Figure 2.10. Detailed shot of Byron Kim, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York, 1999. Image courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

profligate spending. By the late 1980s, with the rise of a financial sector that drove a great deal of public policy and shifted the climate of the city to make it more hospitable to big business, Wall Street began to reinvest in New York's cultural scene as an opportunity to boost the economy. In addition to turning a quick profit, buying art created cultural capital for a rising economic class and a means to raise one's personal and professional profile. First conceived as an initiative to save public funds and reallocate tax revenues to other collective needs, the privatization of art spaces and museums in the form of public-private partnerships with major art institutions (such as Philip Morris's relationship with the Whitney Museum) became a project that radically changed the way art was not only funded but also seen.

In 1983, Philip Morris debuted its twenty-six-story, 650,000-square-foot skyscraper in the center of midtown Manhattan—on Park Avenue and Forty-second Street, across the street from Grand Central Terminal. The first of its kind, the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris (Whitney Philip Morris, for short) was a satellite gallery of the Whitney Museum. Adjacent to a fifty-two-hundred-square-foot, glass-enclosed atrium or indoor piazza (dubbed as a “sculpture court”), the gallery, while open to the public, was also seen as an integral part of Philip Morris's promotion to offer a better workplace and environment that “productively” blurred the divide between work and leisure and public and private.

During its twenty-five years of existence, the Whitney Philip Morris exemplified the growing corporate influence on the art market, naturalizing the relationships between corporations and museums.³² Its corporate sponsorship for the arts enabled the tobacco company to rebrand its image from that of purveyor of a deadly product to one of generous art patron, underlined in a slogan that accompanied the gallery's opening: “It takes art to make a company great.”³³ Between 1983 and the museum's close in 2008, a range of artists from Carolee Schneeman to E. V. Day exhibited at the gallery. Many of these artists, such as Sowon Kwon, used their commissions to comment critically on the space itself, expanding the parameters of institutional critique.

Magnanimous in its role in promoting “critical” and cutting-edge art making, the gallery space diminished or depoliticized such efforts and was seen more often than not as a ground-level means to enter into a tranquil

and contemplative space, a distraction or respite from workday drudgery and the chaos outside. Rather than reducing working hours, Philip Morris offered another perk, art, not as a means to improve skills or acquire knowledge that would then allow workers to move up in the company, but as an indirect way to “enrich” the self, presumably improve job satisfaction, and inspire and increase productivity. Kim’s *Wall Drawings* highlight this paradoxical conceit embodied by the Philip Morris site. Merging the spirit of capitalism with the spirit of Ad Reinhardt, Kim takes on the invitation to occupy and animate the space of Philip Morris, offering both visual pleasure as well as insight in which the longer an observer spent time with his wall drawings, the more they revealed. Like the work of almost all the employees of New York City’s Philip Morris office—administrators, executives, and artists commissioned to produce work for the gallery—Kim’s immaterial labor had nothing to do with the actual making of a cigarette. But in contrast to the collective act of pushing smoking, paper, and people, Kim’s muted gray drawings complement the surrounding urban architecture and, may I suggest, offer a portrait of this working world of unseen manual, temporary, and contractual workers.

While the temporary duration and site specificity of *Wall Drawings* would seem to dodge commodification, I concede how Kim’s art making is nonetheless complicit with and constituted by the art market. Without the commission and support of Philip Morris, there would have been no *Wall Drawings*. Aware of the situation and the conditions that make his production possible, Kim reveals this tacit awareness and these relations not only by including the institutional and corporate name in his title, *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, and listing his materials—the vast bags of dust and detritus, produced courtesy of Philip Morris’s corporate offices—but also through the work itself. Documenting his process during the installation of *Wall Drawings*, Kim dispels the romantic myth of the solitary artist passionately at work by humorously highlighting the mundaneness of making art. Snapshots located at the front desk of the gallery (rather than within the installation) picture Kim laboriously using a dish sponge and sheepskin to draw and inscribe his gestural abstractions and rectangular shapes onto the high walls of the gallery (figure 2.11). In contrast to Sol LeWitt, whose drawings require a team of assistants, Kim works alone. But he is not entirely alone; he enlists the custodial staff of Philip Morris to help him collect the materials



Figure 2.11. Byron Kim preparing installation of *Whitney Philip Morris: Wall Drawings*, 1999. Installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Image courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

he applies on the walls of the gallery. The collective labor of Philip Morris not only comprises Kim's materials but also in turn becomes reinscribed and embedded in the walls of Kim's installation.

Much of Kim's gray matter is dust, itself a product of time and transformation, made up of the excess of human waste and skin gathered in corners and other fugitive spaces. In *Wall Drawings*, we see Kim's transformed raw materials as suspending rather than facilitating the production of capital, as his dips and swipes of a cloth sketch a sort of group portrait, an indexical trace of the rank-and-file laboring bodies that make up Philip Morris. We can also contrast Kim's piece to a now-celebrated work by Marcel Duchamp, *Élevage de poussière* (*Dust Breeding*), a collaboration with Man Ray that consists of a photograph of Duchamp's work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*; 1915–1923) covered in dust. Kim's drawings are simply washed away with a water hose after the closing of his exhibition, his contract with Philip Morris expired, his job "done." Yet in a spirit similar to Duchamp's, Kim reveals the potential to see two different worlds within a single space, the

exalted and the hidden, and how the humblest commonplace materials can serve as a potential disruptive agent of change.³⁴

Simon Leung: Unhomely Positions

Recruited by a number of art institutions in different cities—Vienna (1998), Chicago (1997), New York (1995), and, most recently, Guangzhou, China (2008)—as a representative agent of change and a service contractor, Simon Leung has been commissioned to reproduce *Squatting Project*, iterations of which he has taken advantage of by placing his work in situ, shifting the meaning of the piece over time.³⁵ I will focus in this section on the initial iteration of *Squatting Project* that took place on the streets of Berlin. Commissioned by nGbK (New Society for Visual Arts) in 1994, *Squatting Project/Berlin* was a site-specific response to the repatriation of approximately sixty thousand Vietnamese in 1992, many of them guest workers recruited from North Vietnam beginning in the 1950s, and the second part of a trilogy Leung produced between 1992 and 1998 to explore “the residual effects of the violence of the U.S. war [in Vietnam]” (figure 2.12).³⁶

Squatting Project/Berlin consisted of two posters, mirroring the verticality of the city, placed alongside advertisements and announcements on mundane structures around the city: on brick walls, the sides of buildings and bus shelters, and utility boxes (figure 2.13). On one poster, Leung posed a set of propositions in German and English, asking viewers—Berlin’s citizens and visitors—to do the following:

Proposal:

1. Imagine a city of squatters, an entire city in which everyone created their own chairs with their own bodies.
2. When you are tired, or when you need to wait, participate in this position.
3. Observe the city again from this squatting position.

The other poster pictured, centered against a white background, a male figure squatting, wearing a grey hooded jacket, black pants, and black shoes (figures 2.13 and 2.14). Turned at a three-quarter angle, the partial profile reveals an Asian man, the artist himself.



Figure 2.12. Preparatory drawing of Simon Leung's *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.

Squatting Project/Berlin was inspired and conceived by an unsettling memory of his younger brother's, which Leung recounts in an article that he wrote about the piece in 1995:

He was probably twelve or thirteen, waiting for the bus in San Jose, California, the suburban city where we grew up, with a few other people whom he took to be Vietnamese immigrants. What struck him about this otherwise innocuous moment, and perhaps what located the foreignness [sic] of these strangers for him, was the position of their bodies while they were waiting—they were squatting. . . . Although they were not squatting to call attention to themselves, that was exactly the effect as they rested their un(der)assimilated Asian bodies in a habitual position of waiting, incongruous with the sun-bathed sidewalks of a California suburb.³⁷



Figure 2.13. Simon Leung, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2.14. Simon Leung, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.

Recalling this image, what struck Leung was his brother's calling out of the men's foreignness juxtaposed with their casual ease, the way in which their bodies were both unhomely and also so at home. The question of home has been a vexing one for the Vietnamese diaspora. Beginning in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong were forced to flee their homes in the catastrophic aftermath of the Vietnam War. Faced with a growing refugee crisis due to a number of factors, including the miscalculation of displaced refugees and a rushed and ill-conceived resettlement plan, the United States called on the world for humanitarian aid and to serve as host countries; East Germany agreed to receive nineteen thousand refugees. The influx of these refugees made the Vietnamese population the largest ethnic community in the country at that time.

Already beginning in the 1950s, Vietnamese guest workers had begun migrating to East Germany, and thus were already a familiar presence, in contrast to their arrival in the United States. To help rebuild from the devastation of World War II and make up for the country's labor shortage, the East German government, under an agreement with the North Vietnamese government, began to contract large numbers of Vietnamese. Despite the understanding that their stay would be only temporary—initially only for five years—many Vietnamese decided to remain illegal or become legal by marrying German nationals. For some, Germany was “home,” and for others returning was just not a viable option due in part to the instability of their home country, where the war for independence had become a massive effort not just against France but by 1955 against the United States as well.

Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany, the Maastricht Agreement of 1991 was adopted, with a series of neoliberal reforms that included the privatization of a number of German state companies, resulting in soaring unemployment rates. Economic unrest and a resurgence of nationalism led to scapegoating and an increase in xenophobic violence against the Vietnamese community, sending a message that the guest workers had overstayed their welcome.³⁸ As a stopgap measure against spreading economic and civil unrest, the German government negotiated a controversial multilateral agreement with the Hanoi government to repatriate thousands of guest workers to Vietnam by offering them a free flight back “home” along with two thousand dollars in compensation.³⁹

While approximately fifty thousand Vietnamese returned from Germany to Vietnam between 1992 and 1993, the German government engaged in a revolving door policy, in which thousands of Vietnamese expatriates from other Eastern European countries were allowed to enter Germany on a two-year visa as long as they already had jobs and possessed no criminal record. But, in a dramatic turnaround in 1994, the German government revoked the residence permits of all former Vietnamese contract workers, designating the entire group illegal immigrants. Released from their jobs, the Vietnamese guest workers who had made Berlin their home over decades, along with those who arrived in 1975 after the Vietnam War and the thousands of Vietnamese asylum seekers from other Eastern European nations, were forced to wait months in an occupational and residential limbo to learn about their individual status and their collective fate.

Recalling these foreign bodies who were invited to rebuild the nation-state and then quietly expelled without ceremony, Leung's *Squatting Project* posters served on one level as reminders, remnants of a daily practice in which the man in Leung's poster is neither protesting nor resisting but "merely waiting, hovering in a position between sitting and standing."⁴⁰ Underlining how squatting is a "position between pause and motion, sitting and something else" but also a signifier, coded as both language and an aesthetics of corporeality, Leung invites the observer to consider the multiple meanings and contexts of squatting: to read the squatting body as a text framed by another text, in this case, the city of Berlin.⁴¹ On one level, squatting is a form of sitting that entails anchoring one's feet to the floor, bending one's knees, and lowering the hips and lower back to a crouching position almost to the ground. Utilizing the body's own use-value by transforming it into a chair and creating a place of rest, squatting is efficient, practical, and economical. In contrast to the way squatting is humorously perceived as cool and "Asian" in Daniel Hsia's mockumentary *How to Do the Asian Squat* (2002) (figure 2.15), the sight of the Vietnamese guest worker was seen as an eyesore in the 1990s and a source of anxiety due to shifting demographics, globalization, and the multi-billion-dollar restructuring of the city of Berlin, much of it spent on remembering the Holocaust and obliterating all traces of the post-World War II East German labor force and culture.⁴² The hostility during this time against the Vietnamese transformed squatting from a "meaning without a code into an encoding of violence"⁴³ (see figures 2.14 and 2.16). Given the way Vietnamese residents

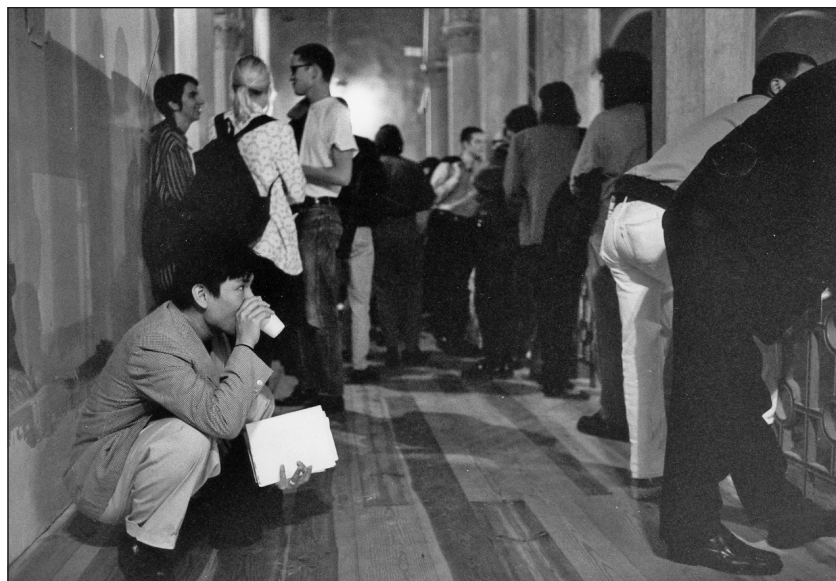


Figure 2.15. Snapshot of Simon Leung squatting. Image courtesy of the artist.

were forcibly removed from the streets either through repatriation or dispossession of home and livelihood, Leung's posters, which seemed to appear out of nowhere on the sides of buildings, utility boxes, and bus shelters, could be seen on one level as a return of the repressed, and subjected to a violence of interpretation⁴⁴ (figure 2.17).

In his essay "Squatting through Violence," Marcel Mauss mobilizes squatting as a means to organize the world between those who sit and those who squat. He characterizes squatting as a "technique" in which the body can learn to be at rest. It is a technique that Mauss notes "we" in the "west" no longer know. Describing the inability to squat as reflective of "an absurdity and an inferiority of our races, civilizations, and society," Mauss highlights that like sitting, squatting is something learned and trained, but also culturally relative.⁴⁵ Taking note of and inspiration from Mauss's call to squat, Leung conceives his propositions as a set of instructions analogous to Yoko Ono's *Instruction Pieces* but also as a readymade.

Challenging notions of taste, authorship, and the meaning of art itself, Marcel Duchamp conceived the readymade as nothing but the conditions "born out of indifference and chance encounter between an author



Figure 2.16. Simon Leung, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2.17. Simon Leung, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.

and object.”⁴⁶ A readymade is an object that is recoded into a work of art through a process of inscription, of choosing and naming, transforming an ordinary manufactured object, such as a bicycle wheel or a urinal, and isolating it from its functional context. But more than a fabricated or found object turned art object, the readymade as conceived by Duchamp is always in “perpetual oscillation between its status as a thing and as a sign,”⁴⁷ destabilizing the relation between the object and its contextual frame. It is not only the object that is altered but also its context. Integral to this process, what Duchamp characterizes as a “creative act,” is the role of the observer to inscribe and name the readymade as art.⁴⁸ He writes how “art is a product of two poles; there’s the pole of the one who makes the work and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.”

The observer’s task is to be on time for this rendezvous, but Duchamp structures the rendezvous with a number of delays—“planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date, such a minute), ‘to inscribe a readymade’—the readymade can later be looked for . . . it is a moment to come (on such a day, such a date, such a minute).”⁴⁹ The readymade’s rendezvous, as Leung underlines, always involves some lag time. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Duchamp has been and continues to be a major influence on Leung’s art practice. Appropriating and merging Duchamp’s readymade with Jacques Derrida’s conceptualization of the arrival of the other in a time and place that differs from and defers the present, Leung figures the poster not only as a readymade but also as an invitation for a future rendezvous, a deferred encounter. That is, rather than assigning the responsibility to the observer to inscribe the readymade as “art” and determine the “weight of the work on the aesthetic scale,” Leung refigures the hailing actions of the readymade as a call to an ethical relationship and the rendezvous as a metaphysics of waiting.

While current debates are often hesitant about the ethical turn in contemporary art that threatens the space of the aesthetic as a site of dissensus, I posit Leung’s ethical proposition as a call to awareness and disjunction that presses against the limits of contemporary German law, its adoption of neoliberalism’s version of “shock therapy” and rewriting of history, redrawing the boundaries and dividing the world into those who squat and those who do not. Underlining how squatting not only is

culturally relative but also operates as a signifier, coded as both language and an aesthetics of corporeality—a “position between pause and motion, sitting and something else”—Leung invites the observer to consider its multiple meanings.⁵⁰ Approaching the body as a text situated within another text, Leung invites us to read the squatting figure in the form of a sentence.⁵¹ While in some places in the world, a squatting figure is a commonplace occurrence, in multicultural San Jose, California, the ritual made strange its suburban streets. With each backdrop change in each of Leung’s *Squatting Projects*, the meaning of squatting shifts. For example, in *Squatting Project/Wien*, Leung is pictured squatting in front of a number of buildings all over Vienna, disclosing the real estate holdings and capital flow of the Generali Foundation, the arts organization that commissioned the work, and its financial sponsor, the Generali Group, one of the largest insurance companies in the world. In *Squatting Project/Berlin*, Leung squats in front of mundane places where his squatting creates a kind of counter-architecture, transforming sites in places where normally one would not be sitting and/or destabilizing the boundaries between public and private.

Leung’s poster of the squatting figure raises the question of what it means to wait for some compared to others, connoting a second reading of his propositions as a metaphysics of waiting. What does it mean to wait and take the place of the other? His invitation is not to occupy the space of the squatting figure—an impossible endeavor because to do so would mean to take the place of the other—but to occupy the text and consider one’s responsibility to the other as well as the historical and political processes that designate a once-familiar sight—the squatting Vietnamese figure—as a stranger (figure 2.18). Creating an estranged space, then and now, the weathered posters, after they are gone, remain, cutting into the urban landscape, in a way that recalls graffiti’s extralegal deployment, inviting us to see Berlin anew from a fresh perspective and read against the grain of the reigning nomos or law in order to envisage a world of squatting self-sufficient bodies along the city’s streets (figure 2.19).⁵²

Squatting also means to “surreptitiously occupy an abandoned space or building illegally or without permission.”⁵³ How might we see Leung’s propositions as revealing an ongoing occupation that reveals and reminds us of not only our rights but others’ rights to be at home, and the shared condition of being human? As a site of defiance and assertion,



Figure 2.18. Simon Leung, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2.19. Simon Leung, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.

squatting is not only a technique but also a tactical practice and a speech act, improperly occupying and claiming a space that is not one's own.

Occupying a commissioned space as a guest artist and "cosmopolitan border-crossing artist intellectual," Leung's *Squatting Project* also reverses the guest/host dynamic, complicating notions of hospitality. Hospitality is about making oneself at home, how one relates to oneself and the other's dislocation. The figure of the squatting worker sets up house, makes himself at home on the streets of Berlin, and exposes the contradictions of a world that is divided between those who squat and those who sit, and between those who squat and those who host.

While the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolized the spread of democracy and of economic and political freedom, neoliberalism's promise of access to flexible labor opportunities and flex-time arrangements has bypassed many, effectively expelling some into perpetual exile. Despite actively recruiting the Vietnamese in the 1950s to participate in training programs and rebuild the country, the German government was a poor host, contracting and assigning them to low-wage menial labor, segregating them in separate housing settlements, discouraging friendships between Vietnamese trainees and German coworkers, and allegedly preventing the settlement and formations of family.⁵⁴ After 1989, with Germany turning into an extractivist economy, the labor of the Vietnamese had not yet been full extracted. But instead of being expendable, the workers were surplus and denied both jobs and asylum. Authorities increasingly figured these model guest workers as increasingly idle, illicit, and lawless. Cigarette, flower, and food vendors were presumed to be fronts for organized crime, or part of an expanding and dangerous black market.⁵⁵ With few options to choose from—counter to neoliberalism's promise and promotion of labor flexibility and fluid mobility—the Vietnamese expatriate, unable to sell his/her labor power, becomes situated as a squatter, with a status that is neither guest nor host.⁵⁶

In "Definitive Article in View of Perpetual Peace" (1795), Immanuel Kant describes how natural law endows all human creatures with the right to share "common possession of the surface of the earth. . . . [W]e cannot be infinitely scattered, and must in the end reconcile ourselves to existence side by side. . . . No one can in principle, therefore, legitimately appropriate for himself the aforementioned surface and withhold access to another man."⁵⁷ As long as the foreigner or stranger is neither treated

as an enemy nor sent to his/her death, he/she may be told to go his/her way. Despite outlining cosmopolitan law in such a way as to encompass universal hospitality without limit, Kant's conceptualization of hospitality, as Jacques Derrida underlines, is conditional; its ties to the nation-state, economic incentives, and laws of asylum and residency limit the conditions of the right of refuge for all immigrants and newcomers.

How does a conditional hospitality preclude and rewrite the roles of guest and host? Historically and into the present, Germany's guest worker program has been an example of "conditional" hospitality. Bound to a set of rules, obligations, and laws, the guest worker program is a temporary arrangement that is supposed to be mutually beneficial. Complicating the guest/host relationship, *Squatting Project* raises the question of how the guest worker turned refugee can be denied hospitality when the guest worker is forced to live in exile in his/her own body? Describing hospitality without conditions as signifying a reckoning with the dislocation of belonging, Derrida points to how a host is also fundamentally a guest.⁵⁸ Without a guest, the host cannot take on the role of being a host, of being at home: "[T]he host is fundamentally a guest in that his or her at-home-ness in the world is always in some way derivative and dependent."⁵⁹ Outside the juridical scope of the law, an unconditional hospitality creates a potentially violent situation, a requirement that the host relinquish his/her sovereignty, transforming the host not only into a guest but almost into a hostage, as, in Derrida's words, the subject "surrenders self-identity to and for the sake of others."⁶⁰

The mechanics of the readymade are such that once someone sees Leung's poster, the encounter is always already conceived to be a missed rendezvous. But rather than seeing the poster as a missed opportunity, Leung leaves open the space of the encounter, approaching the rendezvous as a signifying deferral, a future possibility. In contrast to his brother, who saw squatting as a marker of difference and displacement, Leung draws from squatting's many meanings, and posits it here as a demarcation of belonging, being at home. That is, in correspondence with the Vietnamese guest workers whose squatting signified a sense of being-at-home-ness despite their exilic condition, Leung—a guest worker too, but in his privileged status as international nomadic artist—complicates in *Squatting Project* the precarious relationship between guest and host. By inviting the citizens of Berlin to squat beside him

as his guest, the poster, with its site-specific propositions, sets up the figure in the poster as both a host and a hostage. Pushing against the limits of representation and pure hospitality, Leung imposes a certain conditionality, and at the same time leaves it up to the viewer how to proceed and interpret this form of representation and precarious situation (figure 2.18).

Not idle at all, the selected artworks by Hsieh, Lum, Kim, and Leung are doing a lot, refusing the roles of long-suffering, alienated artist, model minority, service provider of experiences, and proxy and protestor of Asian immigrant exploitation, and in their own way resisting neoliberal attempts to stratify relations and intensify regulations of time, bodies, and events. Occupied in their respective art making, the artists are aesthetically engaged, pressing quietly against our common sensibilities of what counts as work and politics, who can work, and who can make art.

