



one way or another

ASIAN AMERICAN
ART NOW

THE LAST ASIAN AMERICAN EXHIBITION IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE WORLD

Susette S. Min

Blocks of bright red and green color in *Peking Inn, Memphis, Tennessee* (2004–05), transform the façade of a former roadside haunt into a place that is at once desolate and comfortingly familiar (fig. 14). Situated along cross-country and interstate highways, in between gas stations and fast food franchises, the architectural and cultural presence of Chinese restaurants has become a ubiquitous sight in the American landscape. These restaurants are an Asian American phenomenon that Indigo Som, the photographer of *Peking Inn*, describes as “the most pervasive manifestation of Chinese American presence in this country.”¹ Som’s road trip through the South is quintessentially American; a journey of alienation and loneliness interspersed with rare moments of joy, like the one shared with Taft Wong, a youth from Greenville, Mississippi. Som writes that it is while standing on the bank of the Mississippi with Taft that “. . . I get my sweetest glimpse of the essential beauty in that slowness.”² It’s not clear which slowness she is referring to—that of the river or of life—but keeping in mind her larger project, perhaps the “that” can be apprehended as an encounter with a person whom Som does not have much in common with, but experiences simply as a kind of being-with.



Fig. 14. Indigo Som, *Peking Inn, Memphis, Tennessee* [from the series *Mostly Mississippi: Chinese Restaurants of the South*], 2004–05. Digital pigment print, 34 x 34 inches.



Fig. 15. Sarah Sze, *Hidden Relief*, 2001. Mixed media. 168 x 60 x 12 inches. Collection of Nancy and Stanley Singer, New York. Installation view at the Asia Society, New York.



Fig. 16. Sarah Sze, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, 1999. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Collection of Fondation Cartier pour l'art Contemporain. Installation view at Fondation Cartier pour l'art Contemporain.

Nikki Lee, Do-Ho Suh, Paul Pfeiffer, Sarah Sze, and Rirkrit Tiravanija share unlikely artistic affinities, but all prominently belong to the contemporary art scene or art world (a nexus made up of art historians, gallerists, artists, curators, dealers, collectors, administrators, and art historians) (figs. 15, 16). Their works are frequently cited as examples in relation to art historical criticism on matters ranging from site-specificity to relational aesthetics. They are described as either "American" or cosmopolitan, or simply addressed as "artists." The high visibility of these Asian American artists within mainstream art venues inflects the need for exhibitions organized around Asian American identity and raises the following questions: If "One Way or Another" was the last specifically Asian American exhibition in the entire world, what might that mean? Would it mean that the era called multiculturalism is over? Would it mean that the art world has finally reached an understanding of "difference?" The idea of the Asian American artist transcending the specificities of his or her race and being treated with the same consideration as other artists whose work is supposedly evaluated by a universal set of criteria in a post-identity world, is not only premature, but a misguided ideal. Were this truly a post-multicultural

world could we really see Asian American art with fresh and untainted eyes?

There is a desire, a wish to sidestep the sour effects of multiculturalism. To unmoor art from race is alluring. The desire to go beyond identity politics has been articulated since the early 1990s, but it has yet to happen. What follows are some thoughts on the critical labor of organizing exhibitions around identity; the phenomenon of identity-based survey exhibitions; and how "One Way or Another" fits in with these kinds of multicultural survey exhibitions. These thoughts are presented as an exercise that highlights the urgency, shortcomings, and possibilities of this model of curating.

Emerging out of the Asian American Movement, the naming or categorizing of art as Asian American began as a historical and sociopolitical project to challenge racial oppression, secure parity of representation, and represent the specificities and contributions of the Asian American experience. This project gained critical mass as it became visible on the national scene in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s with a series of exhibitions including "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s," "1993 Whitney Biennial,"

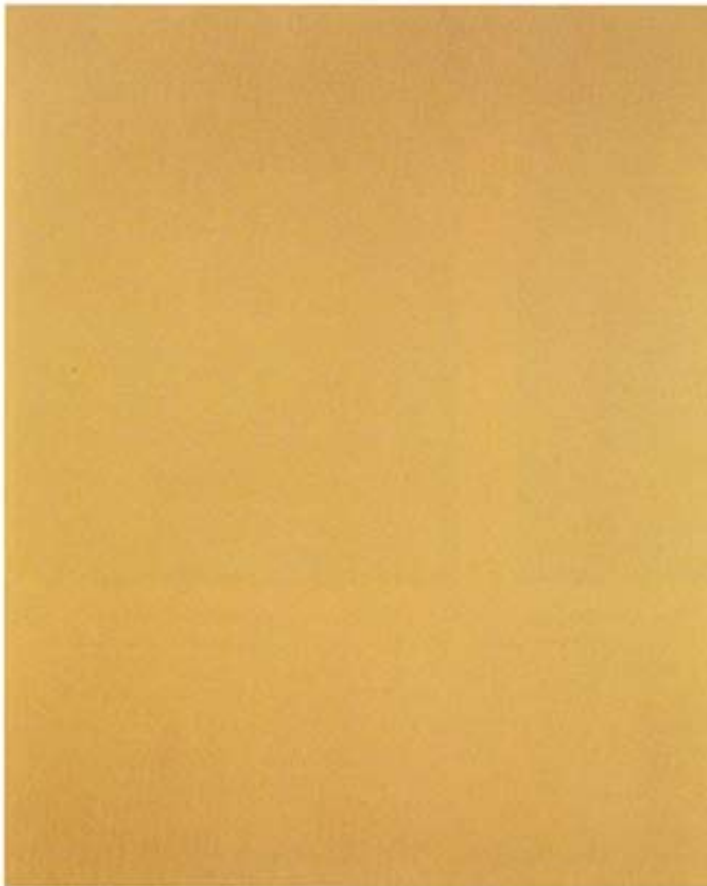


Fig. 17. Byron Kim, *Mom*, 1991. Oil and wax on canvas. 50 x 40 inches. Collection of the artist.

"The Curio Shop," and "Asia/America: Identities in Asian American Art,"³ during a period that is now being referred to as the "multicultural" years.⁴

As a response to the Reagan-Bush years of the 1980s, which turned back some of the gains from the social movements of the 1960s, multiculturalism became the umbrella term under which various modes of discourse and culture highlighted the systemic discrimination by cultural institutions against women, artists of color, and queer artists. As a political force and strategy, multiculturalism mobilized those who were underrepresented to expose, confront, and unsettle structures and networks of power.

Art history will mark multiculturalism and identity politics as major influences on art and curatorial practice in the early 1990s, because it was during this time that a flurry of exhibitions focused on different aspects of the interlocking forces of race, sexuality, and

gender, specifically, introducing to the art world as well as to the larger public a number of issues and artists previously excluded from major institutions and highly visible galleries.⁵ For a very brief moment in time, multiculturalism became a meaningful category of analysis to explain the exclusion of artists of color as well as a motivation to interpret works of art beyond a prescriptive formalism.

The underside of exposing so many "new" artists whose work had never been seen led inevitably to the sustained acceptance of only a few Asian American artists into mainstream art venues and discourses. For some, this recognition came with a toll, as it not only foreclosed readings of the work aside from those focusing on race, but also required the artist to become a spokesperson or surrogate representative for an entire racial or ethnic community. For example, in the case of Byron Kim, whose monochromatic paintings (in particular portraits of his friends and family that cleverly alluded to the impossibility of rendering skin color) brought him to national attention, the aftermath was stifling (fig. 17). Despite attempts at presenting different kinds of artwork over the years, Kim described in his own words in 2003 that the 1990s chapter of his career was finally closed: "It is only recently that I don't think of myself as the skin-painting guy. So it has taken all this time, ten years, to get to that point."⁶

For others, the spotlight on race as the sole determining factor in considering Asian American art fixed that art within a representational economy, understood as a transparent portal into the social realities of the Asian American experience, and racialized it to such a degree that the category itself has provoked in many, but especially in Asian American artists, a range of public and private sentiments—from ambivalence to disenchantment to disavowal. Since the mid-1990s, some Asian American artists have felt the need to evade the dogged shadow of the label; for others, if this were the last Asian American exhibition on earth, their reaction I am sure would spell relief.

Many of the artists in "One Way or Another" have for the most part bypassed such preoccupations of identity to focus on their individual projects in which they have at their disposal, a wide array of art historical practices, popular cultural references, and local influences. What characterizes much of their art, as distinguished from its predecessors in the 1990s, is a *freedom* to pick, choose, manipulate, and reinvent different kinds of languages and issues, both formal and political. For example, Kaz Oshiro's *trompe l'oeil* reproductions of amplifiers, trashbins, and domestic objects constructed out of canvas and paint, evoke a kitschy nostalgia that on the one hand engages a sustained conversation about painting in relation to pop art and photo realism, and on the other hand, presents an allegory of commodified objects that come alive and bear witness to a certain time and place (fig. 18, 19). The requirements

and expectations placed on work such as Oshiro's as "Asian American" do not have to be ideological. The impulse to critically examine or comment on U.S. imperialism, for example, remains a sustained pursuit in some Asian American artwork such as the poignant portraits of fallen American soldiers by Binh Danh, Mike Arcega's intricate over-the-top sculptural remnants of the Spanish occupation of the Philippines, the pointed satiric wasli paintings of Muslim-Western relations by Saira Wasim and by other artists not in the exhibition, including Paul Chan's work with the political action group Downtown for Democracy and An-My Lê's photographs of Iraq and Afghanistan-bound troops training in a remote outpost in the California desert (fig. 20). The manifold artistic approaches, formal aspects, and focal interests of the artists in "One Way or Another" underscore the idiosyncratic landscape of Asian American art. Its indebtedness to a certain kind of multiculturalism which "endorsed racially based identities and antiessentialism at the same time" has enabled these artists to cultivate their art practice unimpeded.⁷

In contrast to the institutionalization of Asian American literature where, for example, one can go to a Barnes and Noble and see a section (well, a shelf or two) reserved for books about Asian America, Asian American art lacks the uniformity implied by an Asian American shelf, and this is both its strength and its weakness. Asian American art remains a nascent field, understudied even within the

field of Asian American Studies. Its paradox consists in its lack of coherency, and more often than not, the lack of easily recognizable visual markers that identify it as Asian American. On the one hand, the survey exhibition seems to be the ideal mode in which to curate such a multivisual grouping in a capacious way. On the other hand, a survey exhibition seems to connote a beginning, an introduction. Despite the consistent programming and contributions of such venues as the Asian American Arts Centre in New York City's Chinatown (which most recently presented "DETAINED," a 2006 exhibition that focused on the impact of 9/11 on Asian Americans) and major exhibitions such as "Asia/America" and now "One Way or Another," there is a familiar kind of scenario that develops and is reproduced in and through identity-based survey exhibitions.

Initially promoted as a protest and contestable response against exclusion from major art institutions, such exhibitions as "One Way or Another" and "Asia/America" are historically necessary as a way to present work that otherwise may be difficult to see, especially in a market-driven art economy. The value of these exhibitions in introducing a set of exciting, emerging artists is important curatorially and institutionally, but such an emphasis on the new and emerging has the potential also to foreclose and undermine the forward movement of an emancipative politics. In other words, focusing on the new gives the impression of trying to start over again and



Fig. 18. Kaz Oshiro, *Combo Washer/Dryer #1*, 2005. Acrylic and bondo on stretched canvas. 71 1/2 x 24 x 26 1/2 inches. Private collection of Diana Zlotnick, Los Angeles.



Fig. 19. Kaz Oshiro, *Washer/Dryer #2*, 2005. Acrylic and bondo on stretched canvas, 2-part. Dryer: 43 x 27 x 28 inches; Washer: 43 x 27 1/2 x 28 1/2 inches. Collection of Nora Eccles Harrison Museum, Logan, Utah.

recalls Kobena Mercer's salient comment about a similar sense of urgency surrounding exhibitions with work created by black artists in Great Britain during the 1980s: "... expectations [like these] would not arise in a situation where such [exhibitions] could be taken for granted and normalized. But . . . because they are not—because our access to such spaces is rationalized by the effects of racism . . . and, what is worse, because there is no continuity of context, we seem to be constantly reinventing the wheel when it comes to black arts criticism."⁸

At the end of the day, multiculturalism was less about a comprehensive analysis of race and racism and more about a question of belonging, diverting deep analysis about race and racism into debates of political correctness and common core values. In the art world, multiculturalism became a Band-Aid solution, retrofitted to what Avery Gordon has called "diversity management": a phenomenon where diversity does not subvert the status quo, "does not demand assimilation quite as we have known it, nor does it require undifferentiated social control."⁹ Rather, the management of racial and gender differences for example requires recognition of an institution's encouragement and practice of diversity and inclusion within the work environment. Race is among many interlocking factors of difference (class, gender, sexuality), multiple positionalities (transnational affiliations), relations of power, and historical forma-

tions and conditions (national origins, U.S. interventions) that impact the subject formation, the subjectivity, and the marginalization of artists of color. This resonant version or strain of multiculturalism, as reductive or liberal pluralism, levels out difference. It also creates an environment of tolerance in the ambiguous, double-edged sense that it promotes a taken-for-granted attitude that such issues of difference were never significant, but just a "trend" that has now fallen out of fashion.

Race matters. Collection acquisition, critical reviews, exhibition programming, dissertations, and course syllabi serve as barometers to measure how far we've come. Still today Asian American representation is not commensurate with the number of recent acquisitions in permanent collections of major museums, or in the curatorial selections of highly visible exhibitions that range from the Whitney Biennial to major retrospectives to thematic exhibitions on conceptual art, the end of painting, and so forth. This is not simply a numbers game. Through a supposed objective institutional policy of neutrality and color-blindness, compounded by a market-driven art world, a neo-conservative turn in national politics, and a complacent sensibility in society (not an exhaustive list by all means), the status quo has remained the same. Consistent with this notion of a flexible management strategy, the performative call of multiculturalism imposes an ideological limit, contains and compartmentalizes questions about

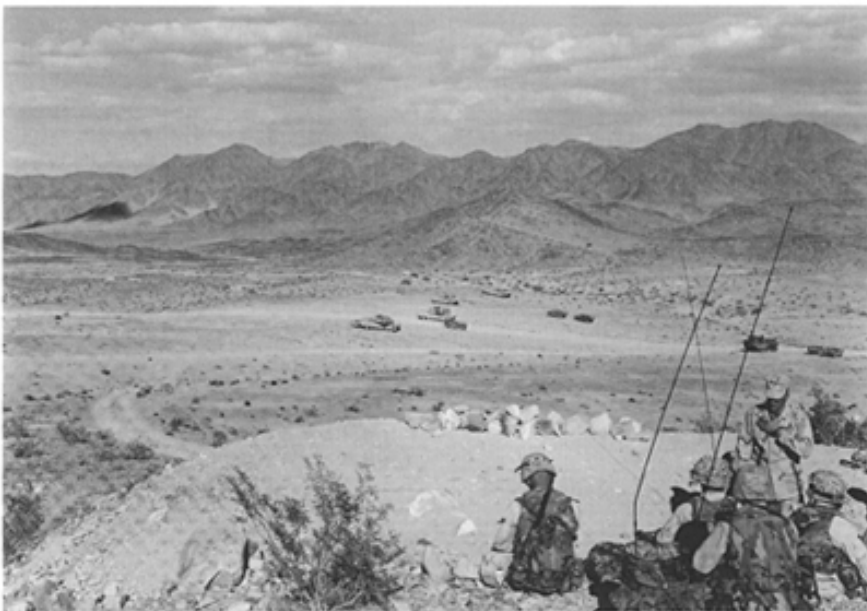


Fig. 20. *An-My lê, 29 Palms*: Captain Folsom, 2003–04. Gelatin silver print. 26 x 37½ inches. Edition of 5.

race and identity to be raised and dealt with by only those who are marginalized, as if to say, "it's their problem and not ours."

Representation matters. Indeed, "One Way or Another" has the potential, within the framework of identity politics, to serve as a catalyst to bring these unresolved issues of the 1990s—race and multiculturalism—to the foreground beyond the intellectual and cultural circles of those who remain marginalized. Yet the works selected in the exhibition do not address these issues directly, let alone confrontationally. In order to move forward, the pronoun "we" needs to be addressed, to bridge the growing disjunction between this collective need and the approaches by which to meet it.

Despite the overdetermination and homogenization of difference, I agree with Kandice Chuh when she says that we continue "to mobilize and deploy the term 'Asian American' in light and in spite of contemporary critiques of its limitations."¹⁰ Underlying the field of Asian American Studies lies a necessary commitment to envisioning and promoting Asian American art not as an antidote leading to social justice, but as a way to shift the frame of reference through which the disavowed or obscured experiences and contributions of Asian Americans to the history and culture of the United States can be recognized and made visible. Yet a large number of Asian American artists, including many of those selected for "One Way or Another," do not identify as Asian American. In contrast to the resurgent interest in collective social practices which includes democratizing art through outreach programs, communicating information about political issues, or serving as a clearinghouse or support-service for fellow artists (for example, the collective Instant Coffee, based in Vancouver), there is little to no activism or collaborative effort committed to creating a critical space for Asian American artists, as there was, for example, with the 1990s Asian American arts organization, Godzilla.¹¹ Globalization, the changing demographics of Asian America, and the market interest in Asia, especially in Asian pop culture, have triggered a paradigm shift within Asian American Studies. Asian American Studies has always been invested in the transnational as a result of U.S. global expansion. But now there is an overwhelming pressure to see the Asian American experience through a diasporic lens rather than from a cultural national perspective; the goals of "claiming America" and of being recognized as "American" are no longer priorities as they once were.

This breach from a still ongoing political project cannot be explained by a mere generational divide or a simple dichotomy between aesthetics and politics. The multiple demands on Asian American art, constituted out of a politics of representation compounded by individual circumstances make this disjunction much more complicated and messy. On one hand, recognition by the nation-state, the art establishment, and the market are all forms of

legitimization "which we cannot not want."¹² On the other hand, the need to build a critical mass of politically engaged artists seems crucial, especially post-9/11. But as Margo Machida warns, "It is important for the group [in this case Godzilla] not to be restricted to 'a singular idea of community' or to be vested in any one agenda."¹³

It is more important as ever to curate identity-based exhibitions. At the same time the current curatorial frameworks of such exhibitions delimit the ways to deeply examine or push forward a politics of representation. In other words, it is important to think about what part of this curatorial framework or strategy is outmoded and how, for example, identity-based exhibitions invariably serve ad hoc as an effective strategy, a regulatory mechanism for promoting difference so long as the parameters and values remain the same. Ten years ago, scholars from Gayatri Spivak to Jose Muñoz underscored the shortcomings of using identity as a framework. No matter how much emphasis is placed on difference, the use of identity as an organizing trope ultimately collapses into a communal uniformity and sameness-in-difference. But such practices are not easy to let go, and to do so seems counterproductive, even irresponsible, in this day and age, when resources and cultural capital are increasingly inaccessible and unequally distributed.

The number of Asian American artists producing and presenting visually compelling work today affirms the variants of multiculturalism and identity politics from the 1990s. But at the same time, the current version of multiculturalism is a thinly veiled strategy of assimilation that impinges to different degrees on the creative license of Asian American artists, imparting a strange practice of freedom. It is not the work that needs to "change" or move in certain directions (although some current work that purports to be politically edgy is so nuanced that the message is at times indiscernible). We (curators in this case) need to think about a different framework or perhaps a place outside the exhibition and institutional space as we know it. Rather than question our belonging to some canon or nation, perhaps we need to ask ourselves "what it means to be in common"—a question posed by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his salient text *The Inoperative Community*.¹⁴

How can we build a community of singularities where affiliations, attachments, and bonds are unmarked, absent any shared value (of citizenship, say) or experience (for example of oppression)? Such thinking seems curatorially counterintuitive especially when it is generally understood that exhibitions—whether major retrospectives or thematic explorations—have some kind of common thread or narrative running through each selected work that underlies the curatorial premise, thus holding an exhibition together. At the same time, the most interesting exhibitions—those that are fraught with visually disparate works, uncomfortable or unanticipated viewing situations,

and/or a true reliance on the contingent nature and multiple factors that activate an exhibition space—highlight the potential to transcend the “boundedness” of an identity-based framework in order to rethink this community of not belonging. The task of curating such an exhibition is not an easy one, nor perhaps even possible, but we can begin, at least for this exhibition, with **Jean Shin**’s installation *Unraveling* (2006) which literally does “unravel” the presumed distinctions and boundaries of what constitutes the Asian American community. Known for her colorful installations made up of refabricated everyday objects collected from members of her various communities, Shin’s *Unraveling* begins with the exhibition curators’ donated sweaters, and their friends’ and colleagues’ sweaters, exposing a diverse network of people from all walks of life not utterly contingent or determined by chance. Shin’s *Unraveling* juxtaposed with Mika Tajima’s multi-sensory installation, evokes an ambivalent and intriguing visual manifestation of this alternative community. Informed by variant minimalist art practices and discourses, Tajima’s use of repetition in her performances (a mix of live music with sample remixes) and mirrored sculptures complicates both minimalism’s prohibition against subjectivity and the inability of identity politics to address difference.

The young artists in “One Way or Another” are very conscious of their audience and of what is at stake in their art making. They are savvy and poised and some are armed with a wry sense of humor, as in Anna Sew Hoy’s *Haiku* (2005) [fig. 21]. A two-toned yellowish-gray and jade-colored boulder made of polyurethane-based foam sits anchored to a tinted and colored mirror, the dimensions of which are slightly larger than the rock. Into the jade-green boulder, whose surface is flat and slightly tilted, Sew Hoy has inserted an array of knives including steak knives and cleavers. The composition of the knives, the Styrofoam, and the mirror is a clever take on the strictures of haiku and possibly, identity; the rock serves as a warning, perhaps, concerning the danger and impossibility of trying to discover a whole self. In a similar vein, the video performances of Laurel Nakadate and Patty Chang highlight through humor, self-exposure, and some discomfort the underlying absurdity and anxiety of their own or others’ desires and projections of the other. They let loose in a way that reminds us of what art can offer: an open-ended imagining of another place, or being in someone else’s place.

In a previous essay on Asian Canadian artist Jin-Me Yoon, I explored how through art, one could summon a politics of empathy and community, a mutual accommodation of difference, of caring about the other and the self that cut through indifference and ignorance especially when one was still entangled with issues of being unrecognized and marginalized. The title “The Last Asian American Exhibition in the Whole Entire World” derives from the title of a



Fig. 21. Anna Sew Hoy, *Haiku*, 2006. Polyurethane foam, mirror, knives, wood, plastic. Approx. 36 x 36 x 36 inches. Collection of the artist.

play by Suzan-Lori Parks.¹⁵ Many of her early plays are wonderfully wicked riffs on the politics of representation. She sums up best in her own words the quagmire in which African Americans find themselves caught, a paradox that corresponds well with what I have been trying to articulate partially:

We have for so long been an ‘oppressed’ people, but are Black people only blue? . . . There are many ways of defining blackness . . . The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature . . . As there is no single ‘Black Experience,’ there is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’ and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. As African-Americans we should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being. We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerful infinite variety.¹⁶

In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, the play’s protagonist, Black Man With Watermelon, is “caught between the periphery and the center, caught between being written out of History yet trapped within the metaphoric parentheses of the

stereotype that transcends (linear) Time as History.¹⁷ Using a strategy of repetition and revision as a foil to being entangled in the fray, Parks uses a refrain about writing history in which a character named Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread repeats throughout the play: "You should write that down and you should hide it under a rock."¹⁸ And then towards the end of the play, he admonishes, "You will write it down because if you don't write it down then we will come along and tell the future that we did not exist."¹⁹

"One Way or Another" is underwritten in part by many different kinds of politics and investments. This essay may serve as a short history, a cautionary tale (not a coda) about an exhibition that exemplifies a future-yet-to-come. At the same time, the selected works by an exciting array of artists demand a willing attentiveness that calls for nothing short of a complete presentness of experience.

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1. Indigo Som, "Introduction to Chinese Restaurant Project," 2002, <http://www.well.com/user/indigo/crpintr.html>.

2. Indigo Som, "The River Itself," *Mostly Mississippi: Chinese Restaurants of the South* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 2005), 4.

3. "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s," 1990, co-organized by and presented with the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem; "1993 Whitney Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; "The Curio Shop," 1993, organized by Godzilla at Artists Space, New York; "Asia/America: Identities in Asian American Art," 1994, Asia Society, New York.

4. This essay engages a number of interlocutors and is an attempt to extend conversations already pushed forward by the likes of Alice Yang, Kandice Chuh, Kobena Mercer, Luis Camnitzer, Margo Machida, Elaine Kim, Holland Cotter, and Olu Oguibe among others.

5. Other forces that shaped the formation and emergence of Asian American art include the theoretical discourses of poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism, but my focus for this essay is primarily on multiculturalism and its effects on Asian American art from a curatorial perspective.

6. Constance M. Lewallen, "Generosity: A Conversation with Byron Kim, Janine Antoni, and Glenn Ligon," *Threshold: Byron Kim 1990–2004* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2004), 49.

7. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, "Multiculturalism's Unfinished Business," *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 104.

8. Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 235–6.

9. Avery Gordon, "The Work of Corporate Culture: Diversity Management" *Social Text* no. 44 (autumn–winter 1995), 3. See also *Mapping Multiculturalism*, eds. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

10. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), x.

11. The Asian American Arts Centre in New York City's Chinatown run by Robert Lee and Asian American Arts Alliance are notable exceptions.

12. Gayatri Spivak, "Bonding in Difference: Interview with Alfred Arteaga," *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 28. See also Kandice Chuh, "Nikkei Internment: Determined Identities/Undecidable Meanings," *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 75, 150.

13. Quoted in Alice Yang, "Godzilla: The Anarchistic Lizard," *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 92.

14. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), x.

15. The title of the essay also recalls Screen's "The Last 'Special Issue' on Race" edited by Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien which featured their seminal essay "De Margin and De Centre." Special thanks to literary scholar Cynthia Tolentino for bringing this to my attention.

16. Suzan-Lori Parks, "An Equation for Black People Onstage," *The America Play, and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 19–22.

17. Louise Bernard, "The musicality of language: redefining history in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*," *African American Review* (winter 1997), http://72.14.203.104/search?q=cache:S1QzKeVhdQs:www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n4_v31/ai_20425714+death+of+last+black+man+suzan+lori+parks+what+is+it+about&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=6.

18. Suzan-Lori Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, in The America Play, and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 104.

19. *Ibid.*, 130–31.



Jean Shin, *Projects 87 (Cut Outs and Suspended Seams)*, 2004. Cut fabric (clothes from MoMA staff), starch, and thread. 624 x 228 x 192 inches. Installation view at The Museum of Modern Art, Queens, New York.

JEAN SHIN



Jean Shin, *Projects 81 (Cut Outs and Suspended Seams)*, 2004. Cut fabric (clothes from MoMA staff), starch, and thread. 624 x 228 x 192 inches. Installation view at The Museum of Modern Art, Queens, New York.

Jean Shin's large scale installations are made of small materials, collected from particular groups of people, places, or communities. Often concentrating on things that would otherwise go unnoticed and discarded, Shin extracts from those small inanimate objects commonalities and differences all at once. Her meticulous process of production with obsessively accumulated materials often results in organic compositions that integrate the nature and context of each display space.

In *Project 81 (Cut Outs and Suspended Seams)*, created in 2004 at the temporary Queens location of The Museum of Modern Art, Shin collected worn work clothes from the museum staff and deconstructed them into patches of colors that resemble a mosaic of Matisse-like cutouts. Starched onto the walls of a passage way to the galleries, various shades of colors, facing each other, silently cohabited the space. The cut fabrics flattened the institutional hierarchy often indicative in work clothes. Seams sewn together and hung

over the walls, then, became suspension bridges, connecting the walls physically and the staff figuratively.

In her new installation for the current exhibition, Shin collected used knit sweaters from people who consider themselves a part of the Asian American community. Inspired by Italo Calvino's description of the city Ersilia in his novel *Invisible Cities* (1972), she then unraveled the sweaters and connected loosened yarns to give life to "spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form."¹ The initiating point of this networking project was the three curators of this exhibition, who each gave their sweaters to the artist. They then contacted their acquaintances and colleagues, who in turn contacted their circle of friends for their contribution to and participation in the project. The link continued until Shin gathered enough materials to create the present installation. For each traveling venue of the exhibition, Shin plans to continue soliciting sweaters so that the scope of

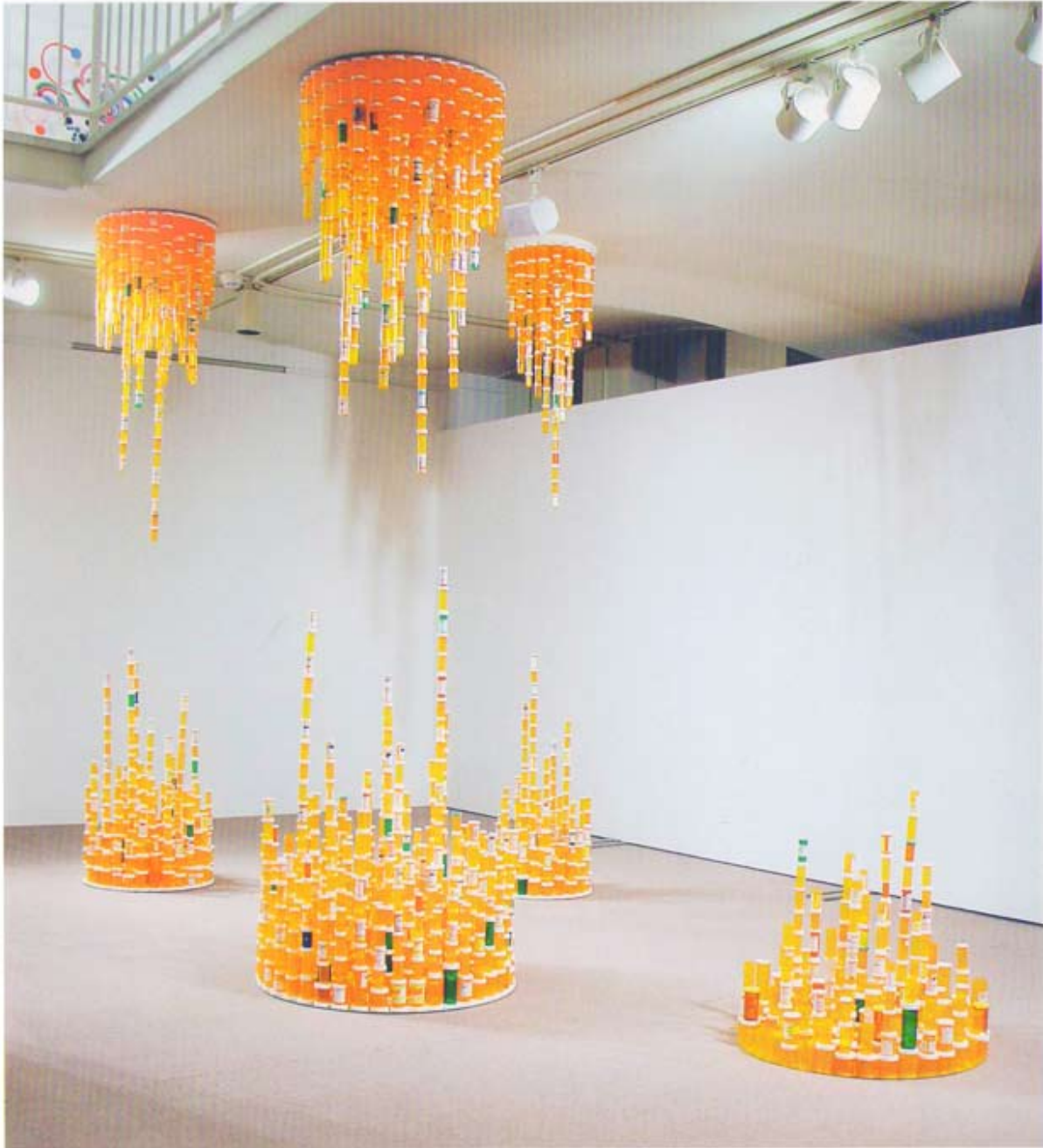
her installation gradually expands with increasing participation from various members of the Asian American community.

In contrast to the community becoming tightly knit through this project, the participants' sweaters were unraveled and loosened; yarn began spreading out of their original form into a larger space. In the form of an intricate three-dimensional line drawing, the deconstructed sweaters were conflated and reconfigured, mapping out varying densities of human connection and veins of association. As a process, *Unraveling* (2006–) shows the cooperative existence of a community that continues to grow and expand. As a material object, the entire installation reflects the flexibility in how identity is determined as each contributor has a particular reason for participating in the project, and thus, identifying with the Asian American community. **MT**

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 77.



Jean Shin, *Penumbra*, 2003. Fabric (broken umbrellas) and thread. 864 x 540 inches (variable height). Installation view at Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York.



Jean Shin, *Chemical Balance 2*, 2005. Prescription bottles, mirror, and epoxy. Dimensions variable. Installation view of University Art Museum

JEAN SHIN

Born in 1971, Seoul, Korea; Lives and works in New York, New York

EDUCATION: 1999, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine; 1996, Master of Science, Pratt Institute, New York, New York; 1994, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Pratt Institute, New York, New York; **SOLO EXHIBITIONS:** 2005, "Accumulations," University Art Museum, University at Albany, State University of New York; 2004, "Ulrich Project Series: Jean Shin," Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Kansas; 2004, "Projects 81: Jean Shin," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York; 1999, "444," Apex Art, New York, New York; **GROUP EXHIBITIONS:** 2005, "Make it Now: New Sculpture in

New York," SculptureCenter, New York, New York; 2005, "Chinatown In/Flux," Asian Arts Initiative, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 2005, "Harlem Postcards," Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, New York; 2004, "Counter Culture," New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, New York; 2004, "Open House: Working in Brooklyn," Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; 2004, "Troy Story," Hasfelt Gallery, San Francisco, California; **AWARDS AND HONORS:** 2004, National Endowment for the Arts in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 2003, Fellowship Award in Sculpture, New York Foundation for the Arts; 2001, The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Art Award; 2001, Asian Cultural Council Fellowship



Jean Shin, *Alterations*, 1999 Fabric (pant scraps) and wax Dimensions variable, approx. 132 x 264 inches Collection of Peter Norton



Jean Shin, *Chance City*, 2001–04. \$21,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets, 72 x 96 x 96 inches. Installation view at Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.



Jean Shin, *Chance City* (detail).