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Godfre Leung

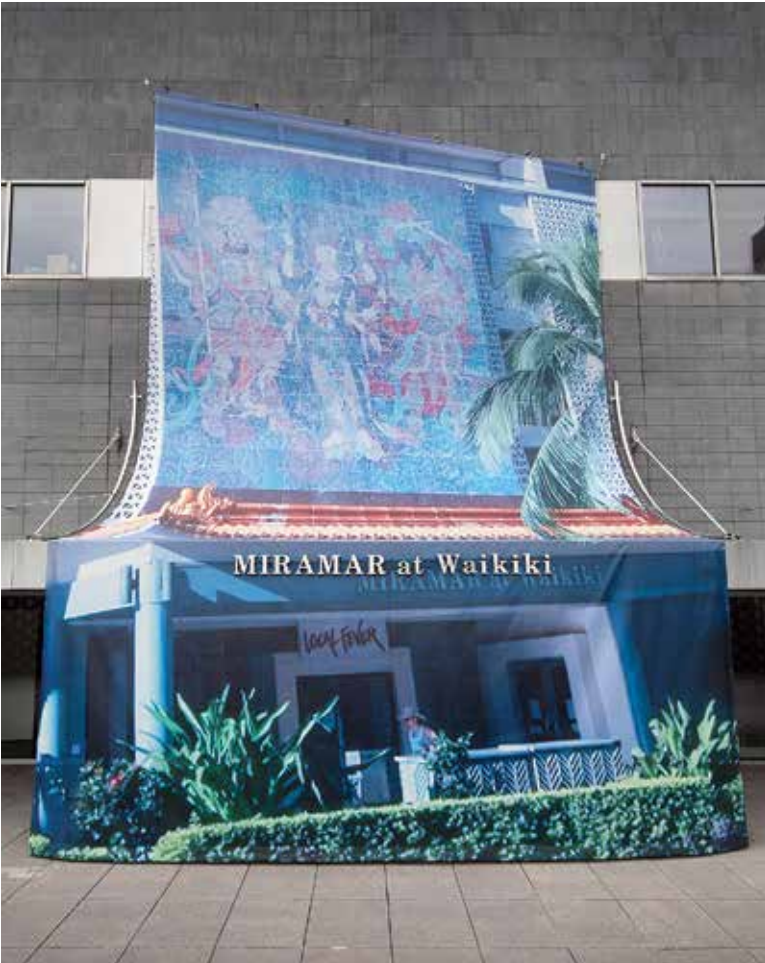
Airplanes over the Pacific: Christopher K. Ho in Conversation



Christopher K. Ho, *CX 888*, 2018, deck chairs, 2 single-channel videos, 28 mins., 1 sec., and 24 mins., 14 secs., monitors, carpet, plane ticket, coffee stain, model Boeing 777ER. Photo: Mario Bobbio. Courtesy of the artist and de Sarthe Gallery, Hong Kong.

Christopher K. Ho began his career in New York twenty years ago as, in his own words, “an inheritor of the long tradition of institutional critique.” Born in Hong Kong, raised in California, and trained in New York, he currently finds himself in limbo between his longtime homes of New York and Telluride, Colorado, in the United States, and Hong Kong. His 2018 exhibition *CX 888* at de Sarthe Gallery, Hong Kong, narrated his anticipated homecoming, in medias res. The exhibition, named after Cathay Pacific’s daily Hong Kong–Vancouver–New York flight, centred around an installation that mimicked the interior of an airplane, with two bays of seats facing a pair of screens blinking the logo colours of Cathay Pacific and its subsidiary, Cathay Dragon, in the rhythm of *The Odyssey*, the ancient Greek epic poem of homecoming.

A series of stills depicting reconciliation between a father and son was interspersed with the flashing colours on *CX 888*’s screens. This follows



Christopher K. Ho, *Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace* (exterior view, Bronx Museum), 2018, double-sided banner, sign letters. Photo: Joe Kramm. Courtesy of the artist.

Christopher K. Ho's earlier exhibition *Grown Up Art*, which looked to parenthood as a corrective to the critical art tradition that had been at the core of his training, from the European avant-garde to institutional critique. In our conversation, he muses, looking back at *Grown Up Art*: "Can advanced political art practice remain available to those invested, through the accident of parenthood, in educational, social, healthcare, and legal systems? Can the pragmatics of parenthood be a viable paradigm for making art? Might institutional critique continue as a prospective institution *building* for future generations?"

Outside the purview of his US-based interlocutors, the key tensions that dominate Christopher K. Ho's work appear quite different. In this conversation, the artist discusses the challenge posed to political art and its critical vocabularies when considering them from the opposite side of the Pacific. What do expertise, institutions, and infrastructure look like from a global Asian perspective? In this vein, and in the real and imagined community of fellow artists such as Patty Chang, Cindy Ji Hye Kim, Margaret Lee, Candice Lin, and Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin, he also reconsiders the terms of Asian-American diaspora, including multiculturalism, the model minority, the "bamboo ceiling," and the phenomenon of reverse diaspora. At the centre of this shifting of terrain lies the motif of air travel as an allegory for global mobility, as seen in *CX 888* and another recent exhibition, *Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace* (Bronx Museum, New York, 2018), to be continued in an upcoming sequel, *CX 889*.

Godfre Leung: With half a decade's distance from your 2013 exhibition *Privileged White People*, the world seems like a very different

place. How would you reflect on that work and your theorizing of the “Clinton Crew”?

Christopher K. Ho: The Clinton Crew referred to a group of young artists, many friends and several former students, who were making modest abstract paintings in the first decade of the 2000s. I was steeped in the French critical theory that emerged around 1968, so their work befuddled me. It was neither political, in the manner of institutional critique, nor a rigorous return to formalism à la Clement Greenberg. I wondered: was political art, or, rather, the *modes* of political art that I was familiar with, outmoded? Painters like Joshua Abelow, Josh Smith, and Roger White didn’t seem intent on social transformation or involved with strident politics. Born during prolonged economic prosperity, well-educated, and relatively commercially successful, their practices were based on quiet virtuosity and collegial community building. Looking back, I think *Privileged White People* accurately registered a broad, generational shift from politics to ethics.

Christopher K. Ho, *First Black President*, 2012, from *Privileged White People*, 2013, digital print of President Clinton manipulated with early '90s version of Photoshop, pink frame, 264.1 x 264.1 cm. Photo: Mike Garten. Courtesy of the artist.



Godfre Leung: The exhibition and your accompanying essay, “The Clinton Crew: Privileged White Art,” were hopeful. You ended the essay: “The task remaining for the Clinton Crew is to motivate ethics into action, to self-diagnose and test its own strengths and weaknesses, and to prove its art is more than merely good. I believe it is up to the task.”¹ Does this hopefulness—for younger artists, for art’s ability to meaningfully act in the world, for the United States—remain?

Christopher K. Ho: No, it doesn’t. Who would have thought that Bill Clinton’s presidency was America’s high noon, and that the era’s prosperity

was really a note of deferment? We are currently repaying it. In retrospect, the Clinton Crew was complacent, and the United States' apparent hegemony, hubris. This has manifested in art in various ways. At a time when China is economically ascendant and increasingly ideologically persuasive, what does it mean for artists as respected as Omer Fast and Kai Althoff, both backed by experienced gallerists no less, to stage ugly stereotypes of squalid Chinese retail, and traffic in the image of its imminent displacement? More broadly, artists' collective responses to political turns have seemed ineffective and uncoordinated. Too few during the lull of the past two decades pushed the parameters of political art. As a result, our tools and tactics harken from the 1960s and '70s.

Godfre Leung: It's interesting that you mention institutional critique of the 1960s and '70s generation. I'm completely unfamiliar with the painters that you mention, partially because in grad school I was—I'm exaggerating only slightly—doctrinally prevented from knowing about them. I bring this up because in her recent article on your work in *Frieze*, Hera Chan goes out of her way to mention that you were a student of Hal Foster's, then Rosalind Krauss's.²

Christopher K. Ho: At Cornell University in the '90s, where Foster led revelatory seminars, I was pointed in the direction of the then-still radical—that is, not yet commodified—practice of site-specificity, posed against the strawman of painting. Ironically, I later taught in multiple painting departments. My undergraduate majors, in architecture and in the history of architecture and urbanism, facilitated this trajectory. The bias against commercial galleries at that time inhibited me (and possibly an entire generation of artists) from having a robust, sustainable career. Without later pushback from my own students, who rightfully demanded I take their diverse studio work seriously, I undoubtedly would have remained ignorant of myriad emergent practices and still be producing post-minimalist, neo-conceptual, site-specific work.

Godfre Leung: In your 2010 exhibition *Regional Painting*, you upend your relationship to that theoretical and pedagogical legacy by way of painting and fiction. You absconded to a small mountain town to become a regional painter, fictionally chronicled in a novella published with the exhibition, *Hirsch E. P. Rothko by Hirsch E. P. Rothko*, in which a disillusioned conceptual artist who shows in single-iteration Asian biennials and no commercial galleries has his earlier love of painting resuscitated by local ski bums, hippies, and artists. Was fiction necessary as a support, given that there is a critical-turned-art historical universe where the kind of ruling class art that you mention—what we now might call Zombie Formalism—doesn't even exist?

Christopher K. Ho: *Regional Painting* rebelled against my own education, and was done in sympathy with my students' work, which from one perspective seemed self-indulgent and apolitical. So, yes, the exhibition imagines a world untarnished by critical theory, or at least one in which the gloss of critical theory peels away. Fiction also functioned as a bulwark

Christopher K. Ho, *Hirsch E. P. Rothko* by Hirsch E. P. Rothko, from *Regional Painting*, 2009, paperback book with 96 green newsprint pages, 11.4 x 15.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Christopher K. Ho, *Untitled no. 21*, from *Regional Painting*, 2009, acrylic paint, watercolour, graphite, and colour pencil on linen, 30.4 x 40.6 cm. Photo: Mike Garten. Courtesy of the artist.



against regionalism’s pitfall: myopia. The exhibition’s backdrop was the Great Recession. It was a period of slow food, tiny houses, and emphasis on the local. Its state-sponsored extreme, unfolding today, is protectionism. Fiction, in contrast, seemed complex, expansive, and ambitious. Of course, at that time, I couldn’t have predicted that fiction would devolve into “fake news” and that regionalism was an advance-guard of nativism.

Godfre Leung: There seems to be a clear arc here, from the practices that in *Regional Painting* you call “seemingly self-indulgent and apolitical” to your optimism in *Privileged White People* that that kind of art can meaningfully act, to your 2016 exhibition *Grown Up Art*, which shifts the tone from optimistic to pragmatic. *Grown Up Art* also marks the point in the arc where Asian-American identity becomes a foregrounded part of the work, as opposed to being an unspoken term opposite white privilege—I think there were just two passing mentions in *Hirsch E. P. Rothko* of its protagonist being Asian. In *Hyperallergic*, you described “grown-up art” as “the art of the B+ student who falls between the genius’ A and the gentleman’s C. It is effortful and determined. Or, more poignantly, it is the art of an immigrant like me, for whom B+ is the highest grade achievable, having never been bestowed the code to success nor felt privileged enough not to care.”³

Christopher K. Ho: I remember thinking in high school that I was not particularly smart, especially compared to those who knew how to study,



Christopher K. Ho, *Untitled* works from *Regional Painting*, 2009, acrylic paint, colour pencil, gouache, graphite, marble dust, oil, watercolour and wax on linen, 30.4 x 40.6 cm. Photo: Mike Garten. Courtesy of the artist.

and how to act. I compensated by working harder, and have done so since. *Grown Up Art* presented diligence as a positive value, and as an alternative to the effortlessness that culture takes as indicative of genius. As an adult, I have come to recognize that “not particularly smart” is also structural and contextual. The recent lawsuit accusing Harvard’s admissions process of penalizing Asian-Americans for indefinable reasons dramatizes this point, and I look forward to addressing it—and similar incidents involving other elite Northeastern institutions—in future projects.

Godfre Leung: In *Privileged White People*, you seem to use the character Dawson from the TV show *Dawson’s Creek* as an avatar for a vision of the world ruled by one-dimensional white decency. With the film *Crazy Rich Asians* out recently, and potentially a very different image of privilege (and power) entering North American pop culture, is Dawson now dead?



Christopher K. Ho, *Art Dads* from *Grown Up Art*, 2016, animated video projection loop of portraits from Facebook of artist friends who are also fathers, 25 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Present Co., Brooklyn.

Christopher K. Ho, *Young White Person*, 2012, from *Privileged White People*, 2013, digital print of James van der Beek manipulated with early '90s version of Photoshop, Nantucket red frame, 129.5 x 129.5 cm. Photo: Mike Garten. Courtesy of the artist.



Christopher K. Ho: In the United States, not only is ethnicity pitched, but class-consciousness also becomes class-*self*-consciousness. The latter ranges from manic (the Vanderbilts during the Gilded Age or the Kardashians today) to depressive (the New England puritanism at the heart of the Clinton Crew). In the world of

Crazy Rich Asians—in Singapore, Hong Kong, and proxies like Vancouver and Sydney—everyone wears their yellow skin comfortably, and those who come from such means do so with refreshing, and possibly instructive, ease. Taking a cue, can artists of privilege, in whatever economic, ethnic, and educational combination, be easeful with that privilege *and* make socially progressive art?

To put it in Marx and Engels's terms rather than *Crazy Rich Asians* author Kevin Kwan and director Jon M. Chu's: "the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force."⁴ If we take Marx and Engels at face value, the intelligentsia—and in this privileged status class I include many artists—would be irretrievably complicit with capitalism. Rather than optimistically fighting for or claiming affinity with the proletariat and its correlates, might the task of contemporary artists be to make political art realistically, as leftist members of the ruling class?

Godfre Leung: This loops back to where we began, with your diagnosis that certain strands of politically engaged art haven't been updated in decades. What might be interesting, though, is to look back at that classic Whitney Independent Study Program and *October* generation that came up in the late 1980s and '90s, and the way that they reformulated institutional critique after they "grew up." Those artists and scholars largely came to acknowledge their positions of power and privilege as a key part of their practice, whether it's Andrea Fraser writing in *Artforum* in 2005 "We are the institution," or T. J. Demos playing himself in the context of Renzo Martens's *Institute for Human Activities* in 2012.⁵

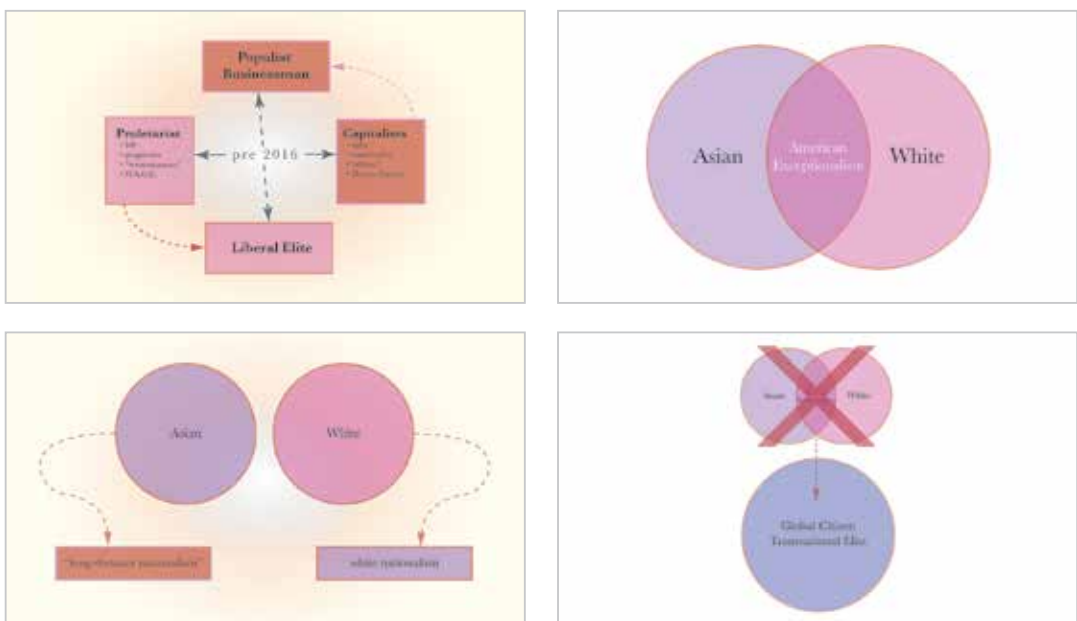
Here is a recent exchange between Helen Molesworth and Andrea Fraser, discussing Fraser's project to track the political campaign donations of American museum board members:

Molesworth: [The] identification between the moneyed class and everyday people has been one of the biggest challenges for me. I am still struggling to counter the charges of elitism that are being levied against those who stand up for and lay claim to their (or my!) expertise.

Fraser: That’s how the right won the election. They identified elitism and class power with expertise and education—with cultural capital rather than economic capital—and mobilized economically precarious whites against cosmopolitan liberals. . . . The left failed to recognize cultural capital as a real form of power that produces real forms of domination—and not just in its colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, or white-supremacist forms. We’ve also failed to defend expertise and competence as a broadly shared social value rather than a form of power.⁶

I’m intrigued to hear where you think privilege could be mobilized to productive political-artistic ends, given that the scale of plutocracy and wealth inequality now feels so enormous that even artists of the millionaire class have no truck with the kinds of people who sit on museum boards or who determine who gets a fair shake at the Democratic National Convention.

Christopher K. Ho: In 2016, a paramount capitalist ran for the US presidency as a populist (the proletariat’s right-wing American cousin),



and accused the left of elitism. It’s an odd turn that Molesworth and Fraser register astutely, if belatedly (as I also did).

Christopher K. Ho, *Diagrams for CX 889*, 2019, computer screen shots. Courtesy of the artist.

But their exchange misses the mark for me. The 2016 election was not just about “economically precarious whites against cosmopolitan liberals.” It concerned immigrants of all stripes, for whom American exceptionalism long presented a bridge and beacon. Hadn’t my parents moved because the US granted freedoms that were in doubt after the 1997 Hong Kong handover, and because it is a decent, moderately taxed place to accumulate capital? By studying and getting into good schools, and joining the professional classes, the myth goes, immigrants could assimilate and participate in the American dream. But Trump’s

unwelcoming of immigrants foreclosed this option. The right lurched towards white nationalism, exacerbating the parallel rise among immigrants or even second and third generation US-born citizens of “long-distance nationalism,” which is Benedict Anderson’s term for members of a diaspora feeling more, say, Chinese than American.⁷

Godfre Leung: ...which brings us to your recent exhibition *CX 888* and your planned return to Hong Kong.

Christopher K. Ho: My goal in *CX 888* was to explore alternatives to both white and long-distance nationalism. One intriguing suggestion came from Mimi Wong: to become a global, rather than a national, citizen—in a sense to join the transnational elite. Here, airplanes and hotels would provide the *mises-en-scène* for the circulation of people, not—or not only—for the purposes of domination and subjugation, but for the pursuit of leisure and of more “modern” lives. Another interlocutor, Brian Kuan Wood, pointed out that it’s about how you move through the world, rather than who you are. Mobility became the guidepost of *CX 888* and the exhibition following, *Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace*, which reproduced in low-resolution the



Christopher K. Ho, *Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace* (interior view, Bronx Museum), 2018, signage mimicking the Bronx Museum’s signage and renaming their terrace the Don Ho Terrace, imitation granite, coral rock speakers, audio. Photo: Joe Kramm. Courtesy of the artist.

facade of a dismantled hotel in Hawaii, a US state that served through the ’80s as a re-fueling stop between flights from the West Coast to Asia.

The accelerated global dissemination of bio-capital, as well as the parallel and paradoxical renewal of nationalisms, have foregrounded identity. The logic runs something like: “Who Am I?” → Ethnicity → Identity. In contrast, hotels, with their transient populations, and which often proliferate across geographies and cultures (Hilton hotels, because of their number and their standardization, once served as *de facto* US missions in far-flung places), highlight the notion of movement through the world, and the interaction between peoples: what we *do* rather than who we *are*. Ideally, the logic becomes: “How Do I Move Through the World?” → Ethics → Deeds.



Christopher K. Ho, *CX 888* (detail), 2018, plane ticket, coffee stain. Photo: Mario Bobbio. Courtesy of the artist and de Sarthe Gallery, Hong Kong.

Godfre Leung: The way you just described diaspora, as the “global dissemination of bio-capital,” seems relevant to Aihwa Ong’s discussion of ecologies of expertise, especially Singapore’s model since the 1990s of attracting skilled foreign workers, regardless of national origin.⁸ In the Hong Kong context its inverse, the so-called “brain drain,” was such a large phenomenon in the pre-1997 period that it gave birth to an entire genre of film wishfully imagining its remediation, which the film scholar Lisa Funnell calls “repatriation narratives.”⁹ I’m interested in where Vancouver would fit in this, especially given that it is the intermediary point between Hong Kong and New York on the CX 888 flight—like Hawaii’s former function. Canadian immigration reform in the 1970s was based on the “skilled workers” model that we now associate with Singapore; previously, it had been explicitly based on ethnicity and country of origin. But these cities—also including Toronto, Sydney, and dare I say, even London—seem to have shifted so quickly in the global imagination from multicultural utopias to unlivable money pits.

Christopher K. Ho: My return to Hong Kong calls the bluff of “Go Home Foreigner!,” which hovers over so many hostile encounters in the West. It also “smells of money,” to paraphrase a poignant and pointed description of Hong Kong from James Clavell’s novel *Noble House*. To be blunt, my return bespeaks privilege; I have the economic means and educational background. I am a member of Funnell’s “new overseas Chinese”: disengaged from the classic nation-state by circumstance, part of global creative networks by choice, and buoyed by flows of ideas and capital.

I find it humorous that on the CX 888 flight, passengers disembark late at night between New York, the postwar West’s financial capital, and Hong Kong, the Far East’s, into a holding pen at Vancouver International Airport. Regardless of whether they are in first, business, premium economy, or economy class, they are in limbo, with only a closed Tim Horton’s doughnut

cart to indicate the country nominally occupied. The no-place of the elusive doughnut hole is perhaps a fitting metaphor for a city with immigration policies that encourage a model of belonging that is flexible, pragmatic, and even instrumental, and with its different conceptions of privilege and very real problems of displacement—perhaps what you mean by “unlivable money pits.”

This is why airplanes fascinate me. On board, cabins are unabashedly classed, and serviced by senior pursers and junior attendants. Pilots, engineers, ground crew, and air traffic controllers facilitate the globetrotter’s path. They may be ethnically diverse—as of 2016, Cathay Pacific claims pilots from forty-eight countries and crew representing thirty nationalities—but hierarchies abound in the combinations and configurations of different kinds of labour, from menial to affective to skilled. In the microcosm of the airplane, lines of power are transparent, and this seems useful.

Godfre Leung: It strikes me that if *CX 888* and *Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace* aimed to accurately and acutely capture your (real or imagined) return to Hong Kong, in all its futility and yearning, its incompleteness and internal contradictions, then the new project, *CX 889*, is about the lived experiences of and interactions between individuals that pockmark abstract flows of capital.

Christopher K. Ho: Asians, as David Xu Borgonjon recently pointed out in his roving essay “Continental Drift: Notes on Asian Art,” are the global ethnic majority—though not rulers, per se—even if our lived experiences of being Asian and belonging to polyglot Asia are diverse, messy, and contingent.¹⁰ The new project is named after *CX 888*’s sister flight, which returns, like a boomerang, from New York to Vancouver to Hong Kong.¹¹ The flight acts as a narrative spine. Exchanges and incidents along the way—a conversation with a seat neighbour, a vegetarian meal, a French-language video-on-demand program, a seatbelt glitch, and turbulence—transform into material ensembles that point to identities, communities, and, yes, capital.

Godfre Leung: There was a beautifully simple line in Borgonjon’s essay that to me crystallized a lot of things: “You can only be Asian outside of Asia.” Would you be willing to share your reasons for returning to Hong Kong—why now, and what was it like to live in the US post-2016? In the spirit of reciprocity, I’ll say that I ask this as a Canadian-born person with parents from Hong Kong who in 2017 left a tenured position at an American university to move back to Vancouver. When people ask if we left because of the 2016 election, I say that it wasn’t the reason my family decided to uproot our life, but I add that it didn’t exactly give us a reason to stay.

Christopher K. Ho: There is the forced mobility of refugees, and the elected mobility of the global traveler; the immobility of citizens ruled by authoritarian regimes and those who are otherwise unable or uncurious; the aspirational mobility of the immigrant to the “first world,” and the

future-nostalgic-oriented mobility of reverse diaspora. Why have I have imagined my own return to Hong Kong, where my parents emigrated *from* not so long ago, when it was still a Crown colony? In twenty-three years of North American education (eleven of those at institutions of higher learning), I had a total of zero ethnically Asian, much less culturally Han Chinese, teachers. More recently, as a nearly twenty-year veteran instructor myself at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), I encountered both institutional and internalized racism. To return to Hong Kong is to pursue for once in my adult life being in the majority.

Being a minority is exhausting; being a model minority is exhausting and annoying. One reason that *Crazy Rich Asians* was a box office failure in China was that an all-Asian cast—its main selling point in the West—was not novel. What a luxury! Trump brought to the fore my immigrant status. I felt uncomfortable moving in areas of the US that I once considered safe—whether the danger was real or projected is another question. What for me had been innocuous, even admirable, in *Privileged White People* had turned hostile and inhospitable. Simultaneously, I parted ways with RISD, where I had taught since graduate school, and which I'd long considered my “home institution”—it turns out they were looking for other kinds of diversity. Several works also went up for auction in Hong Kong and, to my surprise, sold. Signs pointed East.

Still, a tangle of questions remains, and their answers are complicated by ambivalence and impeded by logistics: Are there ways of being in the majority that Asia can offer, and offer differently? What would a model majority look like? What kind of art would it produce? By leaving, am I shirking civic responsibility as a US citizen? Is moving a folding of the cards or self-care? Does acknowledging the need for acceptance show weakness or maturity? What does it mean to be in the majority—or to want to?

Notes

1. Christopher K. Ho, “The Clinton Crew: Privileged White Art,” *Wow Huh* (Fall 2012), wowhuh.com/posts/023.html/.
2. Hera Chan, “Who Really is Christopher K. Ho?,” *Frieze* (October 31, 2018), frieze.com/article/who-really-christopher-k-ho/.
3. Danni Shen, “Christopher K. Ho on Confucianism, White Privilege, and Art Dads,” *Hyperallergic* (June 22, 2016), hyperallergic.com/306633/christopher-k-ho-on-confucianism-white-privilege-and-art-dads/.
4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Germany Ideology, Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three and Supplementary Texts*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 2004), 64. Emphases in the original.
5. Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005), 283. T. J. Demos participated as the critical art historian in the Opening Seminar to inaugurate Renzo Martens’s *Institute for Human Activities* in 2012. A recording of Richard Florida’s Skyped-in keynote address, the seminar’s most high-profile event, has subsequently been exhibited as a work of art.
6. Andrea Fraser and Helen Molesworth, untitled conversation, *BOMB* 145 (Fall 2018), 95. Ellipses added.
7. Benedict Anderson, *Long Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam, 1992).
8. Aihwa Ong, “Ecologies of Expertise: Assembling Flows, Managing Citizenship,” in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (London: Blackwell, 2008), 237–53.
9. Lisa Funnell, “Repatriation of Overseas Chinese Stars in Post-1997 Hong Kong Cinema: Daniel Wu, a Case Study,” *Transnational Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2012), 163–78.
10. David Xu Borgonjon, “Continental Drift: Notes on ‘Asian’ Art,” *Rhizome* (September 5, 2018), rhizome.org/editorial/2018/sep/05/continental-drift-notes-on-asian-art/.
11. Cathay Pacific’s CX 889 flight was renumbered CX 865 in June 2018.