

Christopher K. Ho, Melissa Karmen Lee,
Godfre Leung and Holman Wang

WHAT IS HONG KONG TIME?

The title of this roundtable draws from a rhetorical question posed in GODFRE LEUNG'S curator's essay on CX 889, a public artwork created by artist CHRISTOPHER K. HO for the Vancouver Art Gallery. Drawn from memory and old photographs, CX 889 restages an iconic feature of Hong Kong's old Kai Tak airport: the double ramps of the arrivals hall, complete with a luggage cart and "no re-entry" signs. The airport was closed a year after the city's transfer from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (commonly referred to as "the Handover"). Conceived in part as a tribute to the wave of Hong Kong-to-Vancouver immigration between 1989 and 1997, CX 889 explores the emotional residue of diaspora, the nostalgic ties to one's homeland, and the "unhomeliness" of being somewhere anew. The airport, an "in between space" or transitional interlude in between homes, is what is so interestingly interrogated in HO'S artwork. Its title refers to the flight code for Cathay Pacific's recently discontinued daily flight from New York City to Hong Kong with a layover at Vancouver International Airport.

In this conversation, the four panelists, Christopher K. Ho, Melissa Karmen Lee, Godfre Leung, and Holman Wang—all with familial or citizenship ties to both North America and Asia—consider issues such as diaspora, transnational citizenship, and the imprint of the wave of Hong Kong to Vancouver immigration, from 1989 to 1997, on the city today.

MELISSA KARMEN LEE/ I want to begin by thinking about transnational crossings and in particular how the Hong Kong-to-Vancouver migrational axes affect forms of cultural identities, rendering a community's imagination and identity as transcultural. By this, I mean how the back-and-forth nature of Hong Kong and Vancouver residents through multiple generations creates a resonance of particular memories that are passed from one family member to another. This includes not only the sights and smells of both cities but also their landmarks—and here I'm thinking of Chris's restaging of Hong Kong's now defunct Kai Tak airport, which mostly lies in our collective memories.¹

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) references how collective imagination transforms the colonial into the national state, made possible by the "established skein of journeys through which each place, city, and village is experienced by its residents."² In Chris's work, I imagine a shared Chinese community (moving between Hong Kong and Vancouver) in search of new transformative expressions of identity, told through the stories of migrants, immigrants, and travelers.

GODFRE LEUNG/ I'm not sure if I'm just inflating the complexities of Vancouver because it's the place in the world I've lived the longest and know the most about, but there's a hunch I've had for a long time: in the way that people who study geography and space used to be fascinated with Los Angeles in the 1980s and '90s, and then with Singapore in the 2000s, I think Vancouver is really, really interesting. Partially, what's interesting about Vancouver stems from the reasons you so eloquently articulate, Melissa, and partially the inverse: this city is, to my knowledge, totally unique in how it's been shaped, both spatially and in its cultural imaginary, by involuntary white flight.

I'm not an academic anymore, so I'm not super invested in whether Vancouver is exemplary or paradigmatic of anything—in the way the scholarship we all read as students fetishized Paris, Vienna, and Berlin as exemplars of modernity. But if I had graduate students, I would advise them to write their dissertations on Vancouver. I'm just realizing this now: maybe this is why I invited Chris, an artist who was doing really brilliant work on Chinese diaspora, to interface his questions about mobility with Vancouver as a site (or nonsite).

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CHRISTOPHER K. HO/ Godfre’s invitation in 2018 came at a perfect moment. I was still U.S.-based, and during those first years of Trump’s presidency, transculturalism offered an antidote to the uptick of white nationalism and “long distance” nationalisms alike. To myself and other Asian immigrants to the U.S. (and perhaps Canada), imagining ourselves as belonging to additional, offshore cultures provided a psychological reprieve to an increasingly unwelcoming U.S. *CX 889*’s predecessor project, *CX 888*, named after the outbound flight from Hong Kong to New York, consisted of a mock-up of the interior of a Cathay Pacific business class cabin, and it celebrated geographic and upward class mobility (Fig. 1).

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In contrast, *CX 889*, named after the inbound flight back to Hong Kong, is unabashedly nostalgic. Indeed, in part because of Godfre’s and my conversations, I have since moved back to Hong Kong (Figs. 2 and 3).

My question is: If Anderson tasked collective imagination to progress the colonial into the national, can the intergenerational and



Figure 1.
Christopher K. Ho, CX 888 (2018), installation view. de Sarthe Gallery, Hong Kong. Photograph by Mario Bobbio.



Figure 2.
Christopher K. Ho, CX 889 (2022), installation view. Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Photograph by Joe Kramm.



Figure 3.
Christopher K. Ho, CX 889 (2022), detail view of “no re-entry” signs. Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Photograph by Joe Kramm.

intrafamilial memories that Melissa references, of being in between Hong Kong and Vancouver, move *beyond* nationalisms? The uptick in white nationalist activity in the U.S. is not quite the same as the white flight that Godfre alludes to, but I feel that they are related, and equally deleterious.

MKL/ Indeed, something that I'm interested in, regarding the context of Chris's work and my own research, is how Pacific Rim travelers/(im)migrants can not only transform their own individual identities by travel but also influence and affect collective cultural identities of both Hong Kong and Vancouver communities by their presence/absence. Holman, what are your thoughts on an evolution of collective and individual identities in the context of diaspora?

HOLMAN WANG/ Identities arise spatially, temporally, and dialogically. I think in the 1990s, Hong Kong immigrants did not so much self-express a collective cultural identity in Vancouver as have one foisted on them. The affluent and urbane arrivals forced a reckoning: an inversion of the historical trope of the contemporary, civilized West and the ancient, backward East. Hong Kongers in Vancouver were now seen as the purveyors of an unstoppable wave of destructive modernity. Against this notion, "Canadians" (read: white people) overhauled their identity, coalescing around the themes of environmentalism, preservationism, and landscape romanticism (that belied historical and even then-current realities). The local media discourse around changes in built form in the 1990s unfailingly hewed to these

narratives—including talk of immigrants living in large, unsightly "monster houses." The surface inversion of "West versus East" was ultimately necessary to maintain the underlying polarities of difference, which remained unchanged: Chinese bodies moving through Vancouver spaces were alien, unneighborly, and strange. In Vancouver in the 1990s, finer demographic distinctions such as ethnicity, language, place of origin, and socioeconomic status collapsed into overarching narratives about "race"—and we've been grappling with the consequences ever since.

GL/ Holman, your graduate work on "monster houses" and the racial politics of Vancouver housing in the '90s was incredibly formative to Chris and me as we were developing the



Figure 4. Asian representation in children's books beyond "food, festivals, folklore, and fashion." *LIBRARIAN from Great Job, Dad!* (Tundra Books / Penguin Random House Canada) ©2019 Holman Wang.

intellectual framework for *CX 889*. So when Chris arrived to install *CX 889*, the first thing I did was take him on a Vancouver geohistory tour. One of the places we visited was the first “monster house”: the gigantic lot on the northwest corner of Main and 49th. I don’t know what your memories of that house were, Holman and Melissa, but growing up in the ’80s, that house was iconic to many of us on the “East” side of outsized immigrant ambition. It was also characteristic of new kinds of immigrants, post-1976, when the immigration policy shift of the previous decade toward “skilled” labor began to take hold.

That was the family house of Ripudaman Singh Malik, who was assassinated this past July, less than a month after *CX 889* opened at Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Malik is best known as one of the two alleged co-conspirators of the 1985 Air India bombing, the deadliest act of aviation terrorism before 9/11 and still the largest act of domestic terrorism in Canadian history. The attack was in response to the genocide being waged at the time in Punjab by the Indian state, which had given rise to a Sikh nationalist movement that, as Benedict Anderson noted in *Long-Distance Nationalism* (1992), was more a phenomenon among Sikh communities in the diaspora than it was an uprising by Sikhs in Punjab.³ At the time, Vancouver was home to the largest Sikh population outside of India.

All of this is very far afield from our discussions about Hong Kong, but when we talk about the poetics of diaspora, it’s perhaps important

to remember that Anderson’s paradigmatic case was Sikh nationalism: a total belief that even when you are here you are really there. I don’t know that this is totally different from the fistfights of a few years ago in Greater Vancouver schools between second-generation Hong Kong kids and Mainland Chinese-born students over the sovereignty demonstrations in Hong Kong. I’m kind of curating out loud here, but it strikes me now that there’s a meaningful conversation between those two flights, the Cathay round trip at the center of Chris’s work and Air India Flight 182.

CKH/ This is why Anderson’s description of the immigrant’s long-distance nationalism is as problematic as white nationalism. These ethnonationalisms (not to mention the projection of racial tropes onto Asians that Holman mentions) undercut the promise of mobility to engender, in Melissa’s phrasing, “new transformative expressions of identity.” I find it suggestive that we’ve touched on Chinese diaspora, white flight, and Canadian-Sikh nationalism—or, another way of saying it, Sikh *sovereignty*—within the space of several minutes. This indicates that we are talking about transnational contexts, for which nationalism remains atavistic.

HW/ I wonder whether the involuntary white flight that Godfre speaks of, as well as the voluntary mass exodus of white people for the suburbs and the more recent phenomenon of white people slowly trickling back into ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods (as seen in Vancouver’s gentrifying Chinatown),

reinforces the social construction of “white” as being “race-neutral.” White flight may have brought a consciousness to people of color of their own racialization in Canadian society—something undesirable, to be escaped. Oppositely, white re-entry into diverse neighborhoods seems to signal an intrepidity to move into edgy, Othered urban frontiers, again leading to unwitting reinforcement of racial tropes. I’d be curious to know whether transnational, intercontinental migration by Hong Kongers shuttles them between “race-neutral” to “raced” identities, and whether such transitions are seamless or fraught.

GL/ In 2011, the Hong Kong artist Lee Kit staged an exhibition called *Henry (have you ever been this low?)* (2011) at the Vancouver

artist-run center Western Front. The conceit of the exhibition was a fictional disgraced Hong Kong plutocrat named Henry—a not so subtle nod to politician Henry Tang, who at the time was embroiled in an adultery scandal and on the cusp of announcing his candidacy for Hong Kong’s chief executive post—who dropped out of public life and moved to Vancouver to hide out in anonymity. The exhibition space was transformed into an underfurnished mansion in Shaughnessy, the old money neighborhood that the preservationism and landscape Romanticism battles Holman describes most directly concerned. For once in the arts, Vancouver was shown the image of itself from the perspective of someone overseas, and from Lee Kit’s perspective, Vancouver is a void of sorts.



Figure 5.

Lee Kit, *Henry (Have you ever been this low?)* (2011). Courtesy of Western Front. Photograph by Kevin Schmidt.

There's an interesting parallel here. Lee Kit's engagement with the Hong Kong/Vancouver dual existence also goes back to your question, Melissa, about presence/absence. The cultural landscape of Vancouver is totally shaped by either the reality or the perception of involuntary white flight, and in the last decade much of that discourse has centered on empty homes—which is a real problem within a very real housing crisis—and foreign buyers. The perception is that most of these empty homes belong to overseas Chinese investors, which the data has shown is not really true. But it's interesting to me that the *presence* of “too many” Chinese people in Vancouver created the perception of an epidemic of *absentee* Chinese real estate speculators—that is, people feeling the real, material pressures of the city are upset about a surplus of largely imaginary Chinese people being *absent* from the city. In both narratives, too present and too absent, the issue is policing Chinese people's mobility.

CKH/ The physical fluidity of Hong Kongers and semiotic unfixity (modern, edgy, desirable, and inescapable at turns) of Hong Kong-Vancouverites alike suggests a third term between race-neutral (white) and raced that

may be liberating. Can absence and invisibility scaffold another kind of identity that is endemic to East Asian diasporas and that disrupts old ethno-national and race-based versions of identity to which white people hew?

I don't want to excuse the projection of alienness onto Asian bodies. But I do want to try to embrace being-alien as a potential positive, or at least a starting point for an aptly international identity, for which Hong Kong (caught between empires) and Vancouver (with its unique admixture of inhabitants, arrivistes, and passersby) can be exemplars. Two stumbling blocks emerge. First is the persistence of ethno-nationalisms. Second, as Godfre describes, internationalism is equated with global capitalism. To disentangle identity from race and ethnicity, and to distinguish demographic migrations from financial flows, would bring forth clearer pictures of diasporic identities. For these, I suspect that mobility, flexibility, and even invisibility will constitute defining, positive features.

GL/ There's a lovely anecdote in Hua Hsu's new memoir *Stay True* (2022) about a period in his adolescence when his father was working in Taipei while the rest of the family was

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living in California. He looks at his father's abandoned collection of North American baby boomer records—Hendrix, Dylan, Neil Young, Aretha Franklin, Motown artists, and so on: "It took me a while to understand that this was our life now—that my parents had worked hard in order to have a place in both worlds. Becoming American would remain an incomplete project, and my father's record collection began to seem like relics of an unfollowed path."⁴ I wonder, thinking back to Holman's open question about transitioning between unmarked and marked identities, whether what you're describing here, Chris, is a sort of phenomenology of code-switching. Or, conversely, whether what you're characterizing by its mobility and flexibility is actually something else altogether—like Hua Hsu's father, something post-assimilation? Maybe even post-identity, in the old culture wars sense of identity?

ML/ I think what is at stake also in this discussion on identity markers, code-switching, and fluidity are themes of belonging. Who belongs? How does this cultural landscape reflect our collective identity, which consistently evolves and yet pays respect to the myriad official and unofficial histories, some conflicting, others conjoining toward a larger discourse? How can our presence be one of belonging? What agency do we have as a community or as individuals to transform the landscape to better reflect representations of transnationalism that are dialogic, open, and fluid to the new immigrant waves that continually arrive on Vancouver's shores?

GL/ Belonging, at least as it's formulated in the discourses of multiculturalism, is something I scrutinize in my work. In an article in the current issue of *C Magazine*, I discuss some ways that the question of who or what "belongs" puts pressure on artists with marked identities to narrate their stories or points of view in the limited ways that funders—and other gatekeeping institutions, including museums and galleries like the one where I work—can understand.⁵ I don't want to speak for Chris, but to me *CX 889* was profoundly aloof to the question of belonging; its project, as I understood it, was to live in a space of *not* belonging and build that out as a collectively shared culture (Figs. 6 and 7). I think we are asking essentially the same questions, Melissa, but our conversation here is maybe also a search for a different word—and framework—to describe and understand these conditions that we've lived but are still laboring to theorize.

Aside from the conversations it prompted, the thing I'm maybe most thankful for with *CX 889* is that it was hosted by an institution that for generations wrote and built itself around a cultural history of Vancouver to which Hong Kong immigrants expressly *do not* belong. Curatorially, I so valued our four's work together within the friction of dropping Chris's project there.

ML/ For me, it is important personally to interrogate the art contexts in which I studied, the Western liberal education that I received in Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom into the Asian Chinese

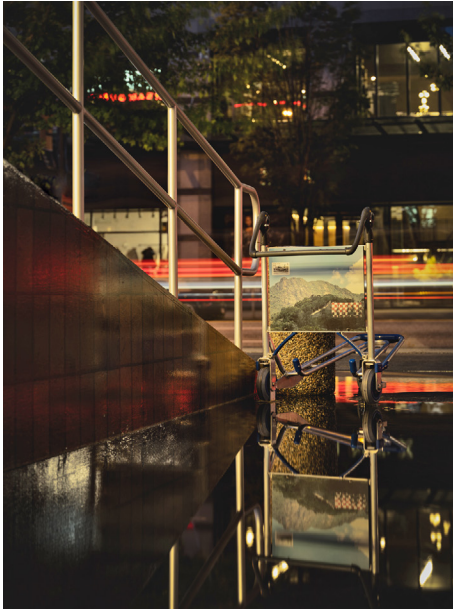


Figure 6.

Christopher K. Ho, *CX 889* (2022), detail view of luggage cart with image of Kai Tak's Checkerboard Hill. Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Photograph by Joe Kramm.



Figure 7.

Christopher K. Ho, *CX 889* (2022), detail view of pebbledash ashtray. Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Photograph by Joe Kramm.

identity that derives from Chinese diasporic flows. I am forever grateful of my return to Hong Kong for twelve years as a “reverse flow” that led me to meet all of you and participate in this conversation. I want to thank all of you, Chris, Godfre, Holman, for this wonderful discussion that I hope will continue onward in other iterations.

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¹ Kai Tak Airport was Hong Kong’s international airport from 1925 to 1998. Significantly there was a wave of Hong Kong-to-Vancouver immigration in 1997, the year of the Hong Kong

Handover from the United Kingdom back to the People’s Republic of China. The last memory that many of these immigrants remember is departing Hong Kong through Kai Tak airport before it was disbanded.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso Books, 2016), 114–15.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, 1992), 11–12.

⁴ Hua Hsu, *Stay True: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 2022), 23.

⁵ Godfre Leung, “Vancouver Photohistory and the Politics of Disappearance,” in *C Magazine*, no. 153 (Winter 2022): 46.

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CHRISTOPHER K. HO is a speculative artist based in Hong Kong. His practice encompasses making, organizing, writing, and teaching. He is known for materially exquisite objects that draw from lived encounters with otherness and with privilege. Recently, he has had solo shows at 56 Henry, the Bronx Museum, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. His multi-component projects have been exhibited at Asia Society Hong Kong, UCCA Beijing, CCS Bard Hessel Museum, and the RISD Museum, among other venues. The New York Times, Artforum, ArtAsiaPacific, Art Review, Art in America, and Frieze have featured his work. He currently serves as executive director of Asia Art Archive.

MELISSA KARMEN LEE, PhD 李林嘉敏 is a visual arts and literature scholar, curator, archivist, and storyteller with research interests in public art and social engagement. She is currently the CEO of the Chinese Canadian Museum, in Vancouver. From 2019 to 2022, she was the director of education and public programs at the Vancouver Art Gallery. From 2016 to 2019, she was on the founding team to open Tai Kwun Centre for Heritage and Art, Hong Kong—a UNESCO heritage site—serving as the education and public programs curator.

GODFRE LEUNG is a critic and curator. His writing has appeared in ArtAsiaPacific, Art in America, Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, and publications by the Museum of Modern Art and Walker Art Center. His programming includes projects by Pao Houa Her, Sun Yung Shin, Jinny Yu, and, most recently, the exhibitions TJ Shin: The Vegetarian at The Bows in Mohkinstsis (Calgary) and Offsite: Christopher K. Ho (CX 889) at the Vancouver Art Gallery, both in 2022. He is currently the curator at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and salilwətal Nations.

HOLMAN WANG is a lawyer who also writes and illustrates children's books. His work has been featured in the New York Times, People, the Guardian, and the Telegraph. His art-work has been shown at the Original Art exhibition in New York (Society of Illustrators), the Bologna Children's Book Fair, and in galleries throughout Japan. Holman wrote his master's thesis on racialized representations of urban change in Vancouver in the 1990s.