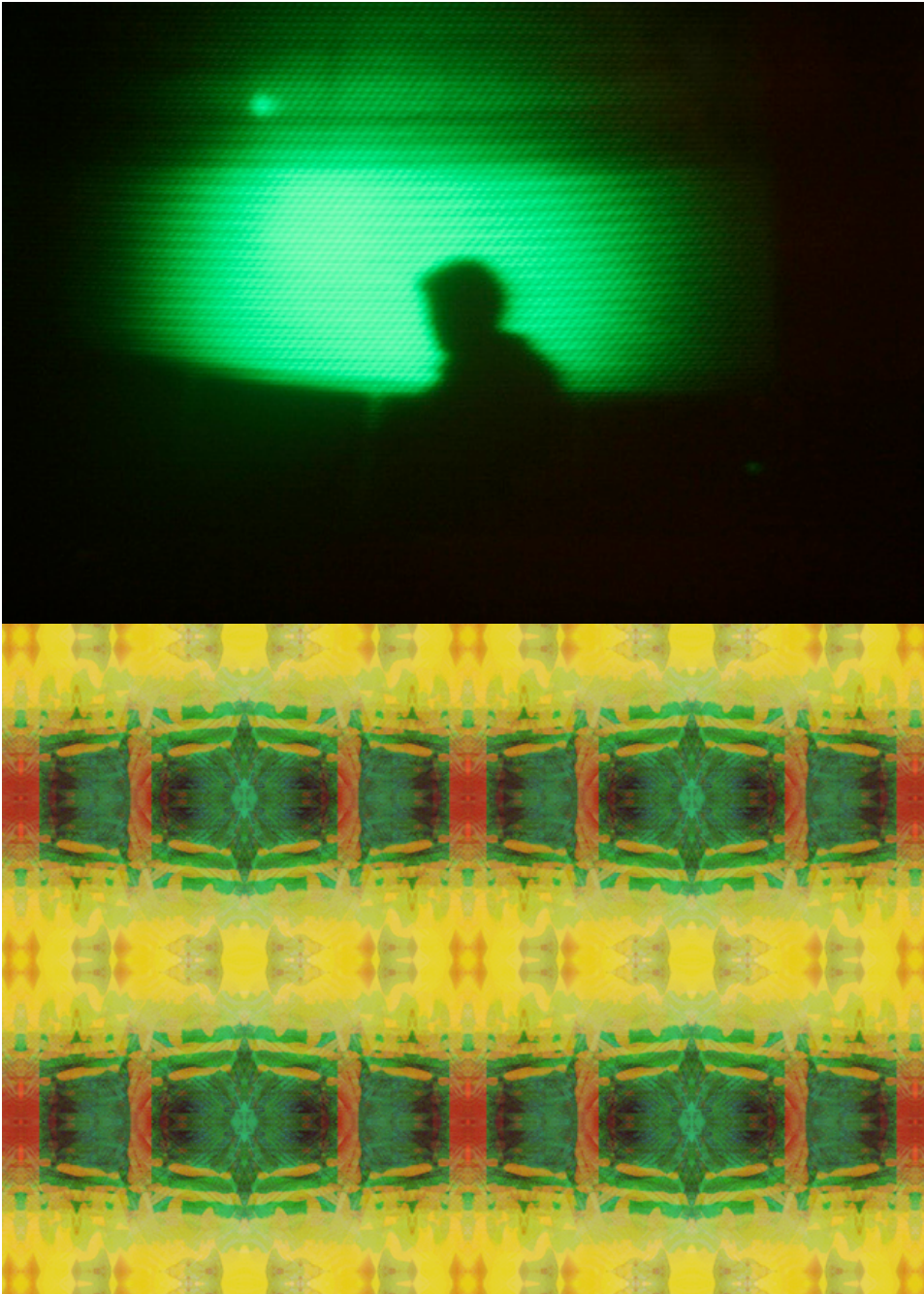


SPLITTING SCREENS

Chinatown & Contemporary Art

An analysis of the immune system of retail art



The Chinatown Los Angeles district is one of the most distinctive cultural destinations in the city. The district's history is, as was indicated in my previous paper and presentation, intertwined in the colorful and sometimes gritty history of LA, arguably in an emblematic way. In this section of the presentation, I hope to discuss how contemporary art can apply the power of the emblem or symbol in a structural sense, processing shared historical experience into both singular *and* shared aesthetic experience, much as a lightning rod attracts and focuses the force and power of lightning bolts.



Rarely are art galleries, especially retail contemporary art galleries, considered in terms of free speech. The exception generally entails some offense to community sensibilities. The national media mostly will only cover shocking, abject or grotesque stories of the controversy-percolating sort, aside from the rare stammering bluster over a museum opening or renovation like MoMA recent redo or a Blockbuster art star exhibit, like Van Gogh's.

The most recent art shock story involves a female Yale student who did or did not undertake and terminate pregnancies (whether the pregnancies were real or not is in question) as content for her aesthetic studies. Such stories routinely provide pundits with fodder for hand wringing about the decadent society and sustain arguments that art is a generally incomprehensible endeavor practiced by and for urban or international elites.



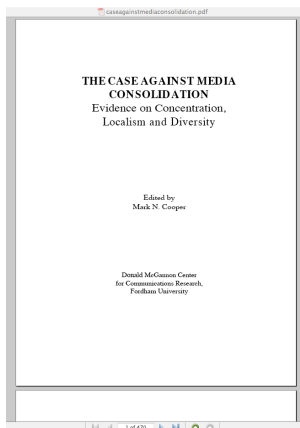
YDN/

In her studio on Thursday, art major Aliza Shvarts '08 — whose senior project ignited an uproar on campus and across the country — shared footage that she says shows her inducing miscarriages and bleeding into a cup.

I gave an example in Chinatown of an instance of censorship I personally witnessed that involved what are the common circumstances of free speech issues (Peres Projects and the poster) in the previous section. I would like to suggest in this paper that there are other, more important, speech issues at play in these spaces that hardly ever get the glamour treatment, generate media attention or even generate conversation among stakeholders.



Locally, in the few vital art markets that exist or persist in the US such as LA's, media, at least print media, still does offer more substantive news on visual arts, including both features and reviews that consider the content and context of the art and the artist back story. Although, as the landmark Berkeley study indicated, media consolidation has exerted significant and oppressive pressure on editors of corporate-owned papers to reduce local arts stories, along with the rest of their local arts coverage. Combined with massive resources driving ad dollars for consumable packaged culture (music, movies and games), a powerful redefinition of art occurs in the arena of ideas.



The relevance of ideas and how we discuss them is fundamental to representative democracy. Visual art serves that purpose by instigating a pantomime that some call “artspeak.” One of my fondest moments as an art pro occurred in front of a big painting by a Southwest artist I will not name here, on the entry wall of Elaine Horwitch Gallery in Santa Fe in the early 90’s or late 80’s. Nick Sealey, John Guernsey and I spent three minutes fabricating intoxicating narratives for the painting. We invented symbolic meaning for each hack brushstroke and paint spillage on the canvas. Every stupid scrawl was transformed by our oral dissertations into a transcendent gesture. By the time we were through, this mediocre painting by a good regional painter had arrived at a status competitive with the Sistine Chapel, just in time for us to de-install it and hustle it into a back bin in storage off the gallery floor.

Two guys can and do conduct similar pantomimes over trucks, stocks, fast food hamburgers (Pulp Fiction’s burger scene, for instance, with Samuel Jackson and John Travolta). This is an everyday occurrence in a vital and free democracy. It is essential to nurturing discernment. It is the key to comparative judgments. Why we should consider it so important should be obvious to anyone who engages in the process of electing representatives for government service. In art, we elevate these discussions to an art form, as the saying goes.



I have argued often that art is both oral tradition and indicator of the health of free speech in a community of society for these reasons, and others. Thugs, or sophisticated enemies of representative democracy, historically have correctly determined that an effective, inexpensive means to weaken or attack representative democracy in pursuit of power entails an overt, public and direct assault on free speech, and more specifically, art. My preferred examples from the past century are the Decadent Art practices of German Nazis and the NEA-dismantling efforts of social conservatives like Jesse Helms in the 80’s and 90’s. A successful campaign of oppression on individual freedoms - especially as they pertain to freedom of choice and the protections granted by, say, our Constitution - initiated within a democratic or semi-democratic political, will start with attacks on public forms of art. Why and how this is still possible is a structural issue and important to recognize in the interests of self-preservation, if one happens to be a citizen in a democracy and wishes to remain one.

It is my contention that when societal police, courts and other mechanisms are sufficiently in order, and strong enough to weather mob outbursts like the one described in play classmate Camille Brown supplied me [working title “THE CHINESE MASSACRE (ANNOTATED)”] for this paper, forces intent on subverting free speech in order to implement some other method of social exchange or control must resort to a proscribed system of aggressive tactics. These include an array of psychological operations or in the abbreviated military “psy ops,” such as public expressions of outrage against addictive behaviors, sexual indecencies, social aberrations, or any social deviance that has accumulated the patina of private shame through the mixed signals of legal consumer behavior conjugated with moral fault.

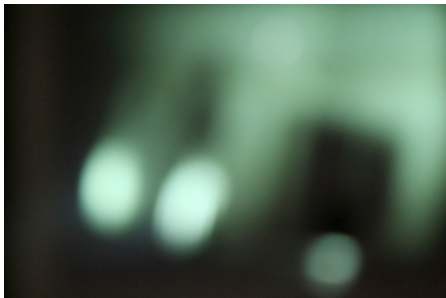
Most of the 20th Century avant garde art tradition falls into the category clunkily outlined above. Therefore, one might argue, any potential oppressor has a readymade target, a handy “Piss Christ” or dastardly Mapplethorpe available to rail against. Unfortunately, an entire subculture and wealthy industry has emerged to muddy the waters of this art world phenomenon. Many academic institutions equate the production of deviant or decadent art as a mode of making attached to social issues ranging from gender to race to sexuality to identity to body to geography and so on. Essentially, through a complex series of mutations the sensations inculcating the process of identifying, attacking, rejecting, protecting, embracing and celebrating deviant or decadent art has become an effective political practice itself. I submit that this is not only unfortunate for the democracy, from a structural or pragmatic perspective, because an indicative feature of the form is made – one could argue, intentionally – less effective as a reveal for the forces of oppression. Another collateral problem is that the political agents who subvert the other functions of art, including appreciation of beauty, authorship, craftsmanship, etc., in order to elevate the stature of those agendas for which they advocate, throw the baby out with the bathwater. Recent MoCA exhibit “Wack!” is a prime example. That is, they deprive the democracy of the stimulation that makes the process fun, unless your notion of fun is specific to the politics on display. Again, this is where the artificial de- or re-definition of art fails the reality test, and no matter how hard they try, they can’t put art back together with a broad democratic constituency, any more than the fabulists could put Humpty Dumpty back together. Whether that is ok with academics and satisfied social agents, it is not ok for the future of the democracy that protects and provides for their existence.



These are the battle lines of the so-called Culture Wars, which have been waged throughout my lifetime in America. My artwork and the artwork of several generations of American artists have been impacted profoundly by this destructive dynamic. To

understand nearly any measure of the country's cultural policy, one must be willing to confront these issues. It is absolutely necessary to identify constituencies for the various narratives described. If one is an artist, art historian, art academic, culture advocate collector and one wishes to enter the "Serious" discourse, one will be judged by the stance one takes on these issues. Success in institutions and industries that deal in art and its public presentation usually hinges on one's affiliations, unless one is wealthy enough to circumvent the minefield or considered insignificant enough to not matter, should your fate include stepping on one of those art bombs.

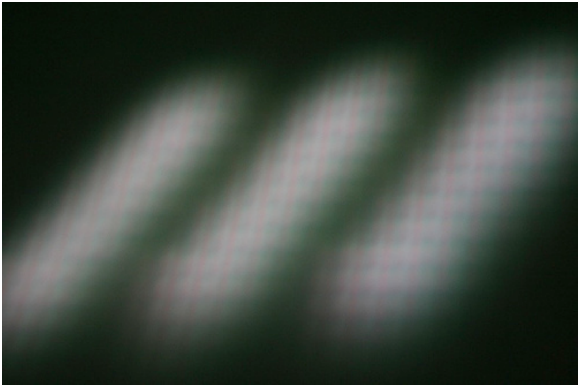
For the purposes of this paper, I have to stop there. I have written and lectured on this particular topic extensively and will continue to do so. What is relevant here and what a concerned viewer should know is, visual arts remain central to free society not because of the success of whatever forces tug at it, but because of its various values. The question we'll address here is How did Chinatown LA evolve, apparently overnight, into one of the world's most prestigious contemporary art enclaves? I think the answer resides in the structure of the White Cube, the contemporary art gallery as we know it today, and the networks that have evolved since the 1980s that enable a local venue to do a global business. The second question is, what does that mean for the neighborhood?



The retail architecture of contemporary art is commonly referred to as the White Cube. Today the WC relies on a network of information networks the end with user devices like PDAs, cell phones and personal computers both portable and desktop. Connectivity through email is at least as important as telephonic connectivity. Gallery location once was considered of paramount importance. The adage goes: Location, location, location. Walk-through traffic and the physicality of exhibit made or broke reputations. This is no longer true in the contemporary art market, because of electronics and satellite, wireless and broadband technologies. The backbone infrastructure for the Internet has been appropriated for commercial usage for decades, now. It can be argued that these revolutionary communication developments have completely redefined the art market.

Other developments have impacted the field or industry, which until recently could never be defined as such. Only the huge amounts of treasure that have come to be attached to the value of contemporary art has encouraged such big terms, outside the academy or budget comparisons between artist studios and film studios. Art has become a commodity of the highest magnitude. When a painting's value is determined to progress into the millions of dollars in a span of a few years, then speculation is bound to evolve. Certainly the coverage in international art trade magazines like ArtForum on this topic indicated as

much. Pundits like Charlie Finch and Jerry Saltz commented extensively on the phenomenon just prior to the financial collapse of 2007-8. The most sophisticated financial models emerged in conjunction with meteoric career trajectories. Jeffrey Deitch of Deitch Projects is probably the most obvious example: an ivy MBA with powerful NYC art world connections leverages both to basically create a new investment sub-industry. Hedge funds are now generated to purchase and sell art. None of this would be possible without sophisticated and stable communication networks that permit the very few individuals around the globe who possess the wealth to participate in this tiny facet of the market, to do so in real time from wherever they are. All one has to do is observe a major art auction to understand that never before has the infrastructure of the retail art market been so facile, effective and successful.



However, the tech solution has not supplanted or replaced art's value as social experience. The evolution of the retail art market housed in the white cube still must rely on some formalities. These include the artist opening, the press listing, the artist (if living), the dealer, the critic's review and so on. The preparator and curator still matter, because show pieces are objects chosen, arranged and installed. Invitations still matter, and exclusivity is a factor.

The retail underpinnings, usually made as invisible as possible in the WC, are still a form of social realism there. One only has to talk with dealers in social settings for any length of time to realize that in general, art galleries are still high-risk endeavors prone to financial collapse. Rent and overhead, the stress of speculation and lack of basic support from government agencies cause most dealers to regard clients and art content and artists the way a dowser regards earthbound water. This, for better and worse, is the aspect of the art business that most directly links Chinatown since the mid-90s to its place in the art market of today, at least in transition.

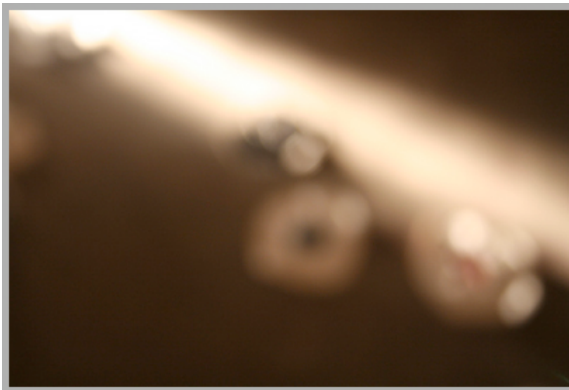
Attracted by inexpensive rents and proximity to MoCA and the freeways, a few intrepid entrepreneurs sited their art businesses in Chinatown over the past couple of decades (See Appendix 4). Developers, as is commonly the case recognized the opportunity to gentrify the area simultaneously. As discussed in the study of governmental intervention I presented last week, the reformation of downtown LA into a residential district of the Florida creative class variety has since been undertaken in earnest by several key players such as Goodwin Gaw. These circumstances do not explain the remarkable good fortunes

of the Chinatown art market either. Further, the good fortune of the Chinatown art market does not inherently speak to the success of the district as a medium or arena of free speech.

If anything, the free market development of the area is not causally relative to the discussion at all, although ownership does generally encourage pride. This is one reason why the Chinatown district is so unusual. It is in many ways a very strange hybrid of clan-rooted village, pioneer town, shopping mall and tourist trap.

As has been mentioned previously, Chinese property owners are development resistant. Many of the art businesses in Chinatown still rent their spaces from Chinese landlords. Ownership is a complexity of these syndicates, responsive to oppressive government policy prejudiced against property ownership by Asians. Chinatown in a number of ways is resistant to gentrification. The collective is driven by notions of success not necessarily related to notions of success identified with the Big Time Developer. A big house for a small family and circle of successful people is not inherently similar to Chinese custom, at least not in the sense that success means isolation from community.

Another factor might be described as civic pride in the traditional American sense of it. Some Chinese landlords exhibit a social investment that would appear to have roots in a historical connection with Chinatown LA, now spanning generations and more than a century of common history. Civil rights, a place in the free society, racial tolerance are all aspects of the Chinatown LA commons, hard-earned with blood, sweat and tears. In Floridian terms, this is called authenticity.



Lastly, in terms of free speech as objectified in artwork, a discussion of the dimensional nature of art galleries is germane to this discussion. One cannot embark on such a discussion without considering the dealer. My study or portrait of the dealer here is somewhat modified for content. This is, in a certain way, an idealized version. Anyone who has worked as gallery staff or consigned art to a gallery will probably have an anecdote at hand to dismantle any romantic view of the seller of art. I wish to focus on the role of dealer in the animated free speech environment, which is another thing.



The dealer of contemporary art is, in context, a quixotic sort of character. Much of the following will be based on one or two characters in Chinatown who are in some ways definitive of the breed, especially as pertinent to this discussion of the contemporary art market. A list of relevant factors can again be helpful. At the top tier, in-demand artists generally produce a very limited number of artworks. Typically, such artists do business with a few reputable dealers, or a single dealer, if that dealer is a Gagosian, which is the prototype for the field. These dealers compete for the few paintings (let's limit the discussion for the sake of simplicity to painters of a type). The collectors compete for those paintings. The dealer in this situation is quite a ringleader. He is a very tough negotiator. He must be able to work a sale of tremendous complexity. It is difficult to convey the number of variables at play, or the intensity of the drama. I have nothing to compare it to. People who are Fortune 500 CEOs will beg for a painting. Sometimes, the ugly side of art is on display. Such clients may not care about art at all. They may not care one whit about artist, except as it affects the investment. In such cases the competition is with other collectors.

These negotiations often take place within a narrative that involves an exhibit, either at the gallery or a museum nearby. Sometimes a purchaser will be buying as a donating proxy for the museum, or some other such arrangement is in play. One sale, deal or negotiation between collector, dealer and institution may be leveraged against the relationship or exchange in general. At such times, an artist's future may be at stake. The historical placement of the artist in the contemporary canon may be at stake. Certain levels of advocacy may be at stake. As I said, there is drama in this business.

Exclusivity is one of the premium fuels for such exchange. Information is critical. I once sat at a table for a NY "it" magazine with a pleasant editor who identified every major player who passed by (including Saltz, whom I had the great pleasure to meet, and Storr and David Byrne, etc.). Knowing to whom one is speaking is critical. Pecking orders are not only a superficial function of ego. They intricately define the allotment of artworks at this level.

Now, I'll return to the WC structure. Now the gallery is the home base. It is the place where exhibits are done. It is also informative of the identity of the dealer's operation and the dealer himself. Is one a New York dealer? Santa Fe? LA? Chicago? Miami? London? Paris? Stockholm? Tokyo? Bangkok? Each has its own branding. In LA, there are a handful of districts, again each with its own branding. Chinatown is hot and new and authentic. This brand is international, reinforced by magazines, art world consensus and through the medium of the art fair. It is also only a few years old.

Art fairs as they exist today, as a circuit of gatherings for commerce and culture in international hotspots, are less than ten years old. While Documenta and some Biennials form anchors for travel or destination shopping for contemporary art and growing prestige for the medium's elite, the art fair of 2000 amounted to little more than sloppily arranged affairs more akin to urban versions of state fairs than the prestigious Whitney. Now a whole stratum of art galleries does most of its business at art fairs. Chinatown is an art district that largely is so defined.



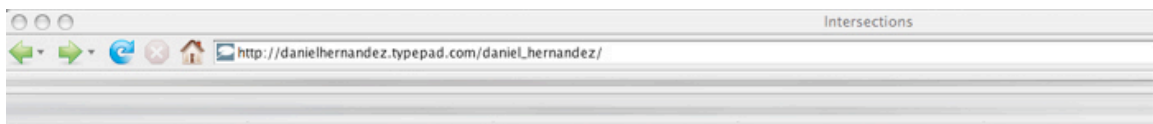
To bring the discussion to a close, I need to point out why these various anecdotes are significant together. First, they explain in more depth why the culture inherent in the Chinatown galleries is so divergent from the culture on display and inherent in the typical Chinatown Chinese-owned shops like Fong's. The combination of the two forms produces an astoundingly powerful triangulation when contextualized in the 4D free speech, or dimensional model. The problem of colonial history is solved like a slice by Accam's Razor, at least in the abstract, or emblematically. Finally, the extrusion of policy, or more pointedly, politics is nearly perfect in this modality. All one has to do is pay rent, cover the windows at turn off the lights and send everyone home at 11.



Can this model be improved upon? Yes. Can Chinatown become more integrated? Yes. The adjustments are minor. Gallery owners must concede to open when Chinese shops are open. One show a year should honor some facet of Chinese or Chinese-American culture. All gallery employees should attend Chinese neighborhood cultural events. Business meeting should be attended by all.

Chinese businesses should provide the art businesses more stable lease arrangements and more clarity regarding community displays or collective production. Mary Goldman's prohibitive efforts in assembling the neighborhood for procuring joint advertising are

revealing of problems endemic to shared identity. Setting aside one day of the month on which all galleries have openings and all Chinese businesses are open and cultural events take place is really the next step. Like herding cats and softening the focus on a history of intolerance, cruelty and greed.



Mexicali Chinatown alive in Chinatown Los Angeles



Fresh off [explorations of the true rainbow](#) that is Mexican ethnic heritage, there's an interesting show up at [Art for Humans](#) on Chung King Road in Chinatown devoted to work from or related to [Mexicali](#), a Chinese city on the U.S.-Mexico border. Over the weekend, Art for Humans hosted Mexicali [art collective Bezando](#) and artist [Armando Rascon](#) for what looked like an intense [multimedia performance](#). Check out the [Flickr shots](#).

Included is a documentary about Mexicali, the [most Chinese city](#) in Mexico and some say all of Latin America because it was [founded as a Chinese settlement](#). The video has an interview with a young guy who basically looks as Chinese as can be but is speaking the most perfectly pitched Spanish in the Baja California dialect I grew up listening to on the border, describing the life around him. The effect is a really incredible and welcome dose of cognitive dissonance.

Mexicali is a couple hours east of Tijuana. When you cross the border from Calexico, you are greeted by a huge pagoda. The old city center, the "Chinesca," is filled corner to corner with Mexican Chinese restaurants. Just the same in [Calexico](#), the much smaller village on the U.S. side next-door. Sadly, Art for Humans told me Monday the show remains up only till Wednesday.

Tijuana is pretty Chinese, too. My new brother-in-law's surname is Cerda Wong,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/artforhumans/sets/72157601244725014/>