Marci Kwon and Ekalan Hou

Survey: Marci Kwon with Ekalan Hou

e-flux Education *Surveys continue to query arts educators about their respective practices, scholarship, and perspectives on teaching. Going forward, the featured educator will be placed in dialogue with one of their former students, or—in some cases—a colleague or collaborator. For the inaugural conversation in this new format, Marci Kwon, an assistant professor of art history at Stanford University and the co-director of the Asian American Art Initiative (AAAI) at the Cantor Arts Center, is interviewed by Ekalan Hou, a PhD student in Yale University's History of Art and American Studies programs, who studied with Kwon as an undergraduate at Stanford and worked at the AAAI. The following discussion has been adapted from an exchange that took place in December 2024.*

Ekalan Hou: Marci, I've been thinking of you a lot these past two weeks, and of the thin, slippery dash between Asians and Asian Americans. The two were never separable in the unending Korean War, but these past few days, the slash veers closer to what Han Kang calls the "thread of gold" on which candles ride from wick to wick––lit at the site of every killing but also held by people who vow never to say goodbye.[1] I would love to hear your thoughts about the K-pop lightsticks that have become the new candles, SNSD's song "Into the New World," and the nearness/distance between "Asian" and "Asian American" in this moment.

Marci Kwon: Thank you for being in conversation with me just days after your qualifying exams. Since you were an undergraduate at Stanford, I have admired your rare willingness to linger with what matters most. I am grateful for the opportunity to think with you again.

Han Kang's gold thread is love. Can the answer be so simple? In her speech, this thread emanates light. It *is* light, lightning, fire, heat, "that luminous instant" when finger presses to palm. And because this light is too often brutally extinguished, it is "the pain that links us."[2]

The women in the streets of Korea are my sisters.[3] I don't mean this as some anodyne affirmation of solidarity or ethno-nationalist assertion of shared blood. The latter is common in the Korean diaspora, my family included. And so to see these young women in the streets protesting authoritarianism and patriarchy with light sticks and K-pop and hilarious signs illuminates the gold thread of Asian/America as woven from shared struggles and joys.[4] We ride through this world in Han Kang's ambulance, "scream[ing] soundlessly through devastating nightmares and ruptures, but are together in the end."

I read Han Kang's speech in translation. Love is complicated. I have family in Korea, but we have not discussed the protests. To love another is not the same

Left: Marci Kwon. Right: Ekalan Hou (photo: Lauren Theunissen).

thing as claiming them, or claiming to know them. Perhaps true love requires one to relinquish such claims by acknowledging the unknowability of another, and perhaps this difference is the source of our commonality. When she learned she had won the Nobel Prize, Han Kang refused to hold a celebratory press conference, citing "the wars raging between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, with deaths being reported every day."[5] This is what I think about Asian/America.

EH: This is why it has been so precious knowing you, Marci. As early as undergrad, you had introduced Asian/America to me and taken it away. It's the most incredible pedagogical model: to assert with desperation when a gathering is needed and to renounce it when a redemptive thinking threatens to lose sight of collective struggle; to teach, knowing that "man is a cause,"[6] but to undermine the structures of authority that underlie the condition of that utterance, knowing that these structures betray the lessons of liberation.

Right before quals, I listened to minute 34:00–35:00 of the panel discussion "Asian American Studies in the 21st Century," hosted by the Yale Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration, as grounding.[7] During that segment, the late Professor Gary Okihiro urges Asian American Studies to "keep our eyes on the prize. The prize is not self-recovery, it is about global revolution." It has been a gift to carry people like you and Gary with me, people who ground precisely through its loosening, and who offer a model of identity/identification that is closer to individuation's unmaking and an understanding of our " deep implicancy."[8] Han Kang knew this when she experienced distance as "another component of her pain";[9] she knew Korea and Palestine have been linked since 1948 and before.

How do you sustain a subjectless pedagogy, especially as you teach courses like Asian American art, when students might have entered eager to learn about their histories on a more identitarian basis? Which artists are you finding the most helpful to think and teach with?

MK: There are so many rich questions here! The intimacies of 1948, subjectless discourse, teaching to dismantle individualism and the liberal fantasy that white supremacy may be defeated by diversity. And artists. We could spend the entire conversation on any one of them. Where to begin? As always, where we are.

Readers of this dialogue do not see the texts we are exchanging in parallel to the words we are crafting in Google Docs. Streams of emojis and gifs, deletions and additions, questions, years of knowing each other—so

much rushes beneath official, published language. My heart emojis to your last response embodied the warmth and delight of my surprise. Surprise because I don't remember giving and taking away Asian/American as you describe. If I did it wasn't deliberate, so the lesson was cocreated by you. Your sense of the back and forth likely emerged from the fact that I was asking myself these very questions, and continue to do so. I have found that enacting a lesson is more powerful than trying to teach it.

I recently coauthored a museum catalogue essay on Ruth Asawa's public sculpture with a graduate student, Jennie Yoon. It took me a while to write about Asawa, because I am frustrated by the way she has been transformed by some art historians into the model minority of modernism. But (and here I have learned from Jennie) she led me to so many others—friends, family, students, fabricators, foundry workers, and the countless people who encounter her public sculptures. She also led me to wire, bronze, dough (salt, flour, water), the street, and the sea. Every work of art, every artist, spins out an infinite web of connections to people, histories, worlds, and structures of power even as they are irreducible to any one of these things. That specificity yields multiplicity is a core principle of my scholarly practice.

When it isn't repressing its investment in the individual, art history can be so anxious about the artist. But I have noticed that to sit with the irreducible particularities of a loop of wire, a moment, a work, a life, is to experience all that is in excess of categorization. When one is genuinely curious about such things, and seeks neither to possess nor marshal them into a predetermined category or argument, what emerges is this: we are all made of each other, and make each other. My commitment to collective liberation is grounded in my felt experience of this truth. And so although I agree in spirit with Gary, the critique of the bounded self offered by "deep implicancy" suggests that global revolution and self-recovery are one and the same. There is really no difference. But unless the critique at its core remains vivid, this idea is easily co-opted by liberalism.

My teaching seeks what you describe as grounding through loosening. Loosening the compacted soil of our assumptions and attachments allows different things to take root. Practically speaking, this means I ask my students questions such as "Why do you think this?," "What do you mean?," and "Why is this important to you?" I am genuinely curious about their answers. I am always surprised by what they say. When appropriate, I share my experience, not as a path that must be followed but as an example of how someone else has navigated similar terrain. Asking and listening, we become aware of how and why we believe we know.

Ekalan, which artists are you learning from these days?

EH: That's such a beautiful way of describing Asawa's work. I can't wait to read your and Jennie's essay! In Asawa's wire sculptures, the exterior was always becoming the interior and back again—the pattern of how we are intricately woven into each other's existence, draw our breath from each other. This is another lesson I learned and continue to learn from you: that sociality precedes the valorization of the figure of the artist, but is also the place from which one derives the "specificity" that allows solidarity to be practiced.[10]

I'm never not thinking with Tiffany Sia's works. She has the most clear-eyed view of producing work in a counterinsurgent world. If images are often sorted into hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, Tiffany's works are concerned with the conditions of nonappearance––extrajudicial violence withheld from collective memory but which is part and parcel of sovereignty's enactment. This is the "legal black holes" of Guantanamo,[11] the "empty tomb of ground zero" that "issues forth unending guilt/debt as war credits,"[12] the redactions made by the PRC and the blank pieces of paper protestors used to parody the state's encryption.[13] She knows "what is essential is invisible to the eye,"[14] and rehearses performances of obfuscation to question who is disappeared or made unhearable for the securitization of states at every moment. I'd be lost without her.

I know capture and in/visibility are also concerns close to your heart. I recall your incredible slideshow on *Rückenfiguren* from the "IMU UR2" symposium at Stanford in 2022, in which you featured images of Gloria Wong's *Ngan* (2020) and Martin Wong's *Chinese New Year's Parade* (1992–94). How have you been navigating these questions, perhaps especially in relation to the initiative?

MK: I'm glad you brought up Tiffany Sia, who is utterly brilliant. In my mind, Tiffany's work lives alongside that of another filmmaker/theorist, Trinh T. Minh-ha. Minh-ha understands that language is frequently and perhaps inevitably reified––abstracted into a stereotype of knowledge and circulated as a commodity. To transform a butterfly into a specimen requires one to kill it. Deploying the indirectness of poetic language, she allows her words to escape attempts to pin them down.

I think this about the works collected by AAAI, which I codirect with Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander. Aleesa is responsible for AAAI's museum activities, which include collecting, exhibitions, and public programs. I work with Stanford Libraries on archives and research projects, and I teach out of the collections. I recognize the way this work may align with diversity management, institutionalization, and liberal visibility politics. Yet I also trust that a work of art or an artist will exceed the institutional or discursive frames that seek to corral it. Perhaps I am being naive in my trust, but I decided long ago that this was one belief I could not yield to cynicism.

The art world's epistemic racism means that much of the historical work in AAAI collections remains largely unknown to art historians and museums, and has relatively little monetary value. (I can still find works by some AAAI artists on eBay.) Consider James Leong (1929–2011), whom you once researched for me. He was born in San Francisco's Chinatown and moved to what he called the "shantytown" of Menlo Park after his father got a job as a houseboy in Atherton. When Leong was three, he was slashed across the eye with a toy gun by another child, whose mother had been yelling racial slurs at him. No local doctor would treat a Chinese child, and he lost most of his sight in that eye, leaving him with little depth perception. In 1952 he painted a mural called *One Hundred Years: History of the Chinese in America* at Ping Yuen, the first public housing project in Chinatown. The mural was pilloried by the local community, which sought to distance itself from its frank depiction of laboring bodies. Despondent, Leong moved first to Norway on a Fulbright then to Rome on a Guggenheim, where he transformed a palazzo leased from the Vatican into artist studios. Cy Twombly had a studio there from 1961 to 1966, as did Warrington Colescott and many others. All the while, Leong was making abstract paintings that sought to conjure three dimensions on two-dimensional surfaces. Until a month ago, 250 of his paintings were in a Seattle storage locker, where they had been cared for by his widow since his death. (The labor of stewarding an artist's legacy is often gendered.)

I understand acutely the concern about visibility politics. And it is imperative to remember these artists and offer their work attention and care. Not to extract knowledge, but because they hold so much––memories, emotions, survival strategies, and even the potential of their own unmaking. One cannot understand Leong's practice without seeing his work in person. Photographs flatten his paintings, transforming their meticulous compositions, material experimentation (he was among the first artists to use acrylic paint), and worked, even agonized surfaces into mere images of themselves. Works of art are material objects; they are embodied. But this means they require physical space (real estate), care (labor), and valuation (insurance), and therefore remain tethered to capital––at least until museums learn to remember differently. Leong's abstractions are also searing critiques of Asian American respectability politics as they were being codified in Chinatown at midcentury. This is what I mean by specificity as a means of unmaking.

These days, I am thinking about all that lies between the binaries of visibility/invisibility, transparency/opacity. The *Rückenfigur* is one example of how to at once acknowledge and withhold presence. Flickers, glows, shimmers,[15] and sparkles are also on my mind. How do we remember without capture?

EH: I'm grateful for your refusal of cynicism. Even in the profit-making world of the art market where nothing is safe from neoliberal incorporation and where we are, in spite of ourselves, bound to play the part of assessors of value and risk, our elders' experiments are not reducible to the spoils of the victor. Their secret heliotropism––a shimmering remainder––"have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers."[16] Perhaps this is why Leong scattered gossamer corrugations of space across his mural: he knew the racial liberalist project of inclusion is continuous with the production of fungibility. Not only was the termination of Chinese American exclusion premised on war-time alliances and the need for more productive members to labor and soldier for the US empire, but the San Francisco Housing Authority would also demolish dozens of tenements and evict more than forty-one families and 158 single men to build Ping Yuen. Leong's origami-like shapes enact the enfoldment of space-time. They undercut illusions of redemption, and show the incompleteness of every act of remembrance.

Here's a photo from when I researched Leong for you. The "repeating" shapes, nonidentical with themselves, might offer an illustration of how the past's reconfiguration in the present is never a self-same reproduction but takes the recursive shape of a spiral, where each attempt at recall introduces contingency and chance. The desubjectivized eyeball that was meant to wander in an abstract expressionist field has been slashed by racialized violence and neglect. It sees new dimensions, and suspends the fiction of universalism or the singularity of form. A furtive lawlessness tearing at the edge of what appears to be ordered accumulation––this was Leong's lesson in how we might elude capture. The commitment to study is also always a commitment to what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the incalculable rhythm of human action and the anarchy of liberation's demand.[17]

MK: This is why I love teaching. It is so much fun when our minds dance. What a beautiful reading of Leong's painting, which helps me see his geometry differently. I also learned to see his work from his widow, Dean. She explained that each of the segments is a cross section of the line of a Fibonacci spiral. There is so much to learn from encountering a work, sitting with it, talking to people, going to the archive. Simple acts of curiosity.

This winter, I'm teaching a graduate seminar called "Art History as Practice." The course asks students to take the fifteen hours per week they would usually spend reading art-historical scholarship and instead spend it practicing the art-historical work of sitting (with an archive or work of art, broadly defined), learning (reading what seems relevant), and conversing (conducting oral histories with artists). Voices in Contemporary Art will hold an oral history training workshop at Stanford in conjunction with the class and the AAAI. Our seminar time will be spent reflecting on our embodied experience of process, and the intellectual, affective, and ethical questions raised by our relationships to "our objects" of study. Artists including

Indira Allegra, Ven Qiu, and **Josh T Franco** will give workshops on non-extractive ways of learning from art and artists, and model different ways of presenting what we learn.

The class ethos is drawn from numerous sources, including Ruth Asawa's theory of education: "Doing is living. That is all that matters."[18] Asawa believed children learned best by making things, and that making must be taught by experienced artists. Enacting this simple idea has required me to relinquish my belief that my way of doing art history is the only way. What if I trust instead that students can discover how to practice art history for themselves? How might I use my scholarly experience to attune them to the unseen possibilities and pitfalls along their chosen paths, rather than prescribing a path? How can I help them bring what they find more fully into conscious awareness, allowing them to practice more skillfully? The class is an experiment. I have no idea what will happen.

EH: This sounds like an incredible class. What has been so rare and miraculous about your advising is that you trust your students to seed their own land––that trust is deep.

I thought immediately of Allen Iverson when you mentioned the course title, when he repeatedly asked journalists: "We talking about practice?"[19] He knew that practice is about the ignominious and splendorous moments of being with each other that fall by the wayside of history and capitalism's accounting of wins and losses. These conversations and gatherings feel like my first and last purpose, so thank you for practicing with me.

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Marci Kwon is assistant professor of art history at Stanford University, and co-director of the Asian American Art Initiative. Her research and teaching address a range of topics in twentieth-century art, including the intersection of fine art and vernacular practice, theories of modernism, discourses of "folk" and "self-taught" art, and Asian American/diasporic art. She is the author of essays on artists including Joan Brown, BTS, Isamu Noguchi, and Martin Wong. She is the recipient of a 2024 Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.

Ekalan Hou is a writer and researcher based in New Haven, CT. She is a PhD student in the History of Art and American Studies programs at Yale, and writes on art of the Asian Diaspora, photography and counterinsurgency, and transnational migration and labor history.

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