

INTEL: PODCAST SERIES

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Elena Knox, Beholder, video façade, ICC Hong Kong, 2016



Speaker 1 (00:12):

You're listening to the Australia Council's INTEL: Podcast Series. In this series we speak to artists and arts organisations working across borders to discuss best practice, tips and their experiences navigating the impacts of COVID-19 on international mobility. We're broadcasting from Gadigal country in Sydney.

Speaker 2 (00:41):

For me, I feel a lot of affinity with the shanzhai object in the way that it's seen as being inauthentic or always imitating something or being parasitic, or trying to fit into something, but not quite.

My name is Rainbow Chan, Chinese name is Chun Yin, and I am an interdisciplinary artist working across popular music, experimental club music, as well as visual arts, that takes on the form of video and sculpture and live performance.

I'm currently based in Sydney and have grown up in Australia for pretty much the last two decades, but I'm originally from Hong Kong and have a lot of family still there, so I actively travel back to Hong Kong quite often for my research, but also for my own personal enjoyment.

So this year in 2020, I was supposed to go on two research and performance residencies in Hong Kong, one of them was the Art Central in collaboration with 4A [Centre for Contemporary Asian Art], to do a performance residency for a week. And the other one was with Performance Space and West Kowloon [Cultural District]. And so these two residencies were a really integral part to my project development because I would have spent more time with the [Weitou] community elders first hand learning the songs and the practices and the craft and the embroidery work and all those, sort of lived experiences, that are so necessary to my practice, which is not only personal, but very social.

[MUSIC: Rainbow Chan, Oblivion]

I would say that the crisis that we're in at the moment with COVID-19 has elicited a sense of solidarity amongst practitioners and thinkers, and institutions. Sometimes when I think about it, it's quite uncanny that no matter who you are on this earth right now, you're stuck indoors. You could be the Queen, and we're all kind of going through this very unprecedented time in

history where we're extremely sort of, I guess, I don't know, sensitive to the way that globalisation is unfolding and the pressures and the limits of late capitalism, I think is being really manifested in this pandemic. So for me it's actually about sort of going in the reverse direction, rather than looking outwards, is to do a lot of looking inwards and taking things a bit slower.

I mean, as horrible and devastating as this crisis is, at the same time, it's almost a bit of a wake up call for us to kind of slow down as a capitalist society and to also really know what care means as well, and I think one positive thing out of this crisis is, a real shift in our understanding of how privileged we are as able bodied people, and being able to look, look at the needs of the people who are more vulnerable in our society.

[MUSIC: Rainbow Chan, Oblivion]

So I've been lucky enough to work across different cities, particularly in North Asia, such as Taiwan, Japan, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, a lot of really amazing places and it's been eye opening to see the amount of local and global forces that create these hybrid pockets of creative expressions I guess, and coming into contact with those.

I think one strategy to traverse the landscape across different cultures is recognising that it is so nuanced and things can have meanings that are beyond verbal sort of expressions. So it's important to almost be an observer and listener first and foremost. And then, when you do speak or express yourself, I feel like it's always sort of in response to something or as a collaboration with something. I feel like it would be not such a good strategy to go into a place and just express yourself as though you are the universal. I think that's a good attitude to adopt in, no matter what space you're in.

My own practice has such diverse creative outcomes, in the form of like experimental installation performances, as well as more DJ sets and club music, live performance sets, and within those different practices, audiences react differently. So with the club culture, I think it's a lot more united in the fact that underground music tends to take on sort of similar aesthetics. You know, if you're into techno, no matter if you're in Japan or Berlin, or Australia, there's still that sort of techno underground that's accessed online. And also it's, you know, in a sense it's also quite a commercial form, popular music essentially is a commercial form. So that speaks to people globally.

But at the same time, within those formats, I think it's really nuanced because there's a really different experience of my music if I'm singing in Mandarin or speaking in Weitou instead of English. And I always end up having really interesting, rich conversations with people and audiences after they sort of see the breadth of what I do, not only just linguistically, but performance-wise as well, and the gestures that I adopt, and the costumes that I adopt, I sort of try to adapt them across different contexts, but at the same time, I try to also read the room a bit and see what that local culture is interested in, and I try to go off that.

[MUSIC: Rainbow Chan, Oblivion]

My research into shanzhai culture, which is the Chinese counterfeiting of Western brands, stem from my personal sort of experiences of buying a lot of counterfeit things as a kid and then realising when I moved to Australia that that was a bad thing. And what I'm interested in

is the supposed 'Western' and 'Chinese' or 'Asian' notions of what creativity and ownership means, and that is so much manifested in the brand. But ultimately I think, while some people are like, oh, Chinese people love to copy because their language is based on memorisation and copying literary classics, I think that these philosophical arguments are actually quite essentialist and doesn't take into consideration the global economy that we're in, which China is the biggest manufacturer, they're also making a lot of the real things as well as the fake things, and the discourse of copyright is very much a Western-centric one. So of course all these alternative markets are going to pop up.

So my inquiry now is sort of looking at this shanzhai phenomena, not only for its innate humour, creativity and irreverence, but also as a really complex sign of this sort of globalised milieu we're in. But also, perhaps, that it could be a symbol of the diasporic experience.

Across different countries, they've... audiences, have responded quite differently because I think, at first they see the object as only the object. And so, in Beijing, for example, when I performed this work, which I call *Gloss Chanel No. 5*, named after a found object that I discovered in a two dollar store, which is a 'Chanel' perfume bottle. In Beijing, audiences were quite confused because they were like, oh, this is a national shame. Why would anyone be celebrating this counterfeiting industry when it's such a shameful part of our national identity? Whereas in other places, particularly Western-centric institutions, they see it as a very punkish, Marxist sort of class action. But I'm saying it's neither of those or it's all of those things. It is parasitic. It is trying to be exploitative. But it's also not denying that.

[MUSIC: Rainbow Chan, Oblivion]

I'm lucky in the sense that there are elements of my practice which can be done on a screen. So I can still make music and upload that and, and share it with the world. I guess not being able to perform and not being able to do sort of the more live aspects of my practice has made me, I guess, reconsider, or at least feel a lot luckier, when I do get to do those things. I think sometimes the pressures of traveling and touring and meeting people and all those things, face-to-face interactions, can get quite overwhelming. But now, I guess I really treasure those face-to-face interactions I'm not getting to have right now, particularly in the sense of learning from people firsthand, that's very, very necessary I think, in particular crafts.

So I'm trying my best to adapt to that as well as I can, but when I'm back in Hong Kong again, hopefully in 2021, and if you were to come on a trip with me, the first place I'd probably take you is to a traditional-style Hong Kong diner called a cha chaan teng, which is sort of I guess like a tea house, and it's in a suburb called Yau Ma Tei and the restaurant is called Mido Cafe. It's décor literally looks like a Wong Kar-wai film. It still has the tiles from the mid-century, and the booths, the really cute sort of diner-style booths, very nostalgic Hong Kong imagery. And they do just really basic, delicious Hong Kong-style diner fusion meals, where you'll see things like, hot Ovaltine served with two-minute noodles and a piece of spam, as well as, French toast that's covered and deep fried, covered in condensed milk and peanut butter.

Another place I'd take you would be [to] whatever Hong Kong Community Radio are putting on. So they... usually a lot of the international DJs will travel through and do a live DJ set on their online radio. But they also often hold gigs in warehouses and secret spaces, and they also have a studio in Wan Chai, so I would take you there and see what they're up to.

And in terms of galleries, I particularly like Para Site and also Tai Kwun, which is a new-ish gallery that has turned the old Hong Kong police station, Central Police Station, into a new institution slash gallery slash museum space, and the tension in terms of the architecture is really, really interesting I think.

[MUSIC: Rainbow Chan, Oblivion]

I think Hong Kong has, I guess culturally, until recently, has been quite politically apathetic in a certain sense, because it was in such a liminal space, and I think people couldn't conceptualise what local identity looked like. And so I think works that are about local identity will resonate increasingly so in Hong Kong.

And so I think that the works of First Nations communities, even though the context is completely different, I think Hong Kong artists can actually learn so much from the dialogue that is happening, you know, in Australia and New Zealand, across the Pacific, about First Nations communities. Again, the context is completely different, but I think there's a lot of catching up to do in a lot of Asian societies, from my experiences, about these sort of really important conversations about post-colonial identity and reclaiming, you know, your voice, under that. And so, yeah, I think that that is definitely a sort of thread, a political and artistic thread, that Hong Kong people will really increasingly grow to appreciate and understand as they sort of deal with their uncertain future.

For me, it was definitely, taking a step back from always trying to think about my career as moving upwards, as you know, our neo-liberal capitalist society would want us to, you know, adhere to, but to look laterally or look horizontally instead of always looking vertically up. So how is that manifested as leadership? I think for me it's about empowering other young women with the skills or the ideas or the tools necessary to make their voices heard and to also celebrate their diversity.

Yeah, I think that's what it requires, is actually to actively listen, to look around you, and to realise that you're always perpetually learning.

[MUSIC: Rainbow Chan, Oblivion]

Speaker 1 (17:25):

You've been listening to INTEL: Podcast Series. Produced by the Australia Council for the Arts, April 2020. On the next Australia Council INTEL podcast: *Showing up for each other*, with community-engaged theatre-maker Samara Hersch. Samara examines questions of distance, proximity, presence and absence in her practice, collaborating with young people using digital tools between Amsterdam, Melbourne and Singapore.