

14 Thinking archivally: curating *WOMEN* 我們

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In her gloss on the archive as a concept, Massachusetts Institute of Technology librarian Marlene Manoff notes that historically some scholars distinguished between archives as repositories of documents, manuscripts, and images; libraries as repositories of published books, journals, and other media; and museums as repositories of yet other kinds of cultural objects.¹ Drawing on the work of Robert Martin, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, Manoff also describes how distinctions between libraries, museums, and archives have always been ambiguous; she notes that Paul Otlet, one of the founders of the documentation movement, redefined the term ‘document’ in the 1930s to include a wide range of objects and artifacts. Otlet claimed that documents were simply objects that conveyed information and thus the term could refer to anything.²

Queer feminist art historian Tirza True Latimer shifts the attention from what archives are or constitute – which per the above is anything that conveys information – to what they *do*. She writes that ‘[m]ore than a repository of objects or texts, the archive is the very process of selecting, ordering, and preserving the past – in short, of making history.’³ She further writes that archives are performative: they ‘constitute that which they purport to document ... [which] ... opens up questions about how archives shape and reshape belief systems and power structures.’⁴ Archives, then, are neither stable nor reservoirs of inviolable truths: they are in fact active agents in ‘making history.’ What kinds of archives ‘shape and reshape’ the discipline of *art* history? Museum collections, exhibitions, high school textbooks, scholarly books like this one, blogs, lecture series, and websites – to name a few – could all be considered part of what constitutes art history.

I hone in on the exhibition as an important agent in ‘making [art] history’ in order to think about the question of what might constitute a queer feminist curatorial or archival strategy.⁵ In particular, I am concerned with what it means to ‘think archivally’ while curating. I want to argue that to actively consider how the works in an exhibition might be historicized as part of one’s curatorial practice might be in itself a queer feminist strategy. More

specifically, this chapter pivots around the relationship between curating – which I define as the act of constructing constellations of artworks and other ephemera – and the making of a specifically Chinese queer feminist art history. Indeed, artworks exploring feminism, gender, and sexuality in China remain marginalized in art's histories: from the unmarked (Euro-American) as well as Chinese narratives of art history, to feminist and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) histories of art.⁶ Thinking archivally, I argue, is a queer feminist curatorial or archival strategy in that it helps produce art histories that avoid such marginalization.

To be clear, though, curating an exhibition and actively thinking about how it might impact the historicization of Chinese queer feminist art is *not* simply aimed at serving as a critique of – or as a supplement to – the aforementioned art histories. To expand on this point, Ann Cvetkovich's essay 'The Queer Art of the Counterarchive' is instructive. She notes that the mainstreaming of LGBTQ culture does not necessarily mean that counterarchives – she is referring to physical archives which house assorted materials including artworks connected to LGBTQ lives – have to relinquish their 'radical potential.'⁷ Drawing on Alex Juhasz's conceptualization of 'queer archive activism,' Cvetkovich notes that a counterarchive's 'radical potential' can be activated by taking 'an activist relation to the archive that remains alert to its absences and that uses it to create new kinds of knowledge and new kinds of collectivities.'⁸ For instance, she describes how Onya Hogan-Finlay, as part of her MFA thesis exhibition at the University of Southern California in March 2011, which drew on materials from USC's ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives and was cheekily titled *My Taste in Men*, foregrounded not only queer feminist political paraphernalia but also the predominance of gay male homoerotic material from the archive. Jack Halberstam makes a related argument about Hogan-Finlay's foray into the archive, and both scholars stress the radical potential of the artist's display, which stressed the absence of materials by lesbians in this supposedly broad-based archive.⁹

Through this example we can see that queer archive activism is decidedly feminist in its attention to the lived experience of lesbians while simultaneously conjoined with a queer relation to gay male sexuality. More specifically, I mobilize queer feminism as a destabilizing force that cuts across various categories of identification but still in relation to woman's sexualities and sexual identification. Thinking archivally as an act of what I might provisionally describe as 'queer feminist archive activism' can maintain the 'radical potential' of an exhibition exploring Chinese queer feminist art by bringing into being the aforementioned 'new kinds of collectivities' – specifically ones not based entirely on social construction of identity, on genealogy (family lineage or ancestry), or on nationalism. Moreover, Cvetkovich argues that queer archive activism insists that an archive act is a resource that "comes

out” into the world to perform public interventions.¹⁰ It is worth noting she refers to the exhibition format as particularly adept in enabling such ‘public interventions.’

In an essay written to accompany an exhibition exploring queer feminist art, Mathias Danbolt makes the important point that the ‘official approval and recognition of feminist and queer material’ seems to come at the cost of being ‘written off as history.’¹¹ Some of the artworks explored in this chapter will trouble what Danbolt refers to as ‘chronopolitics’ – the cleaving of ‘the queer feminist “past” from the “present” – the “then” from the “now.”’¹² Indeed, to think archivally while curating is to produce an exhibition now or in the present with an eye toward shaping the future during which the past will be historicized: past, present, and future are all blurred. As Jacques Derrida, too, notes in his seminal *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, the archive is as much about the past as it is the present and future.¹³ Moreover, given that I am also concerned here with an exhibition that traveled to different locations, what is of interest is to trouble not only chronopolitics but also geopolitics, which (further extrapolating from Danbolt) cleaves ‘here’ from ‘there.’¹⁴

As a case study, I examine the curatorial frameworks of – and objects and materials included in – the exhibition *WOMEN 我們*, conceived by Abby Chen and curated by her in Shanghai (2011) and San Francisco (2012); and by myself with the assistance of Brittini Winkler in Miami Beach (2013).¹⁵ I consider how thinking archivally – as an act of queer feminist archive activism through curating an exhibition – can create new kinds of knowledge and collectivities (per Cvetkovich), can blur both past and present (per Danbolt and Derrida), and the geopolitical division of here from there, re-configuring the local as already transnational and global. I note that this activism is especially evidenced through the chosen artworks. As an important coda, I examine the limitations of thinking archivally by sharing my personal experiences of curating the exhibition in Miami Beach. By providing personal narrative as ‘data’ or evidence I do not mean to indicate it supersedes other evidence because it is autobiographical ‘fact’ or singularly *authentic*; nor do I mean to imply that this personal take is any less mediated than other kinds of evidence. I present it, rather, through the concept of ‘self-fictions’ as articulated by feminist literary scholar Nancy K. Miller, joining the queer archive to the feminist strategy of self-narration.¹⁶ Finally, I critically examine the exhibition’s programming and promotional materials to call attention to the stakes involved in thinking archivally as a means of reimagining art history otherwise, and to the difficulty of making visible Chinese queer feminist political concerns—even within an exhibition partially dedicated to them.

Genealogy, art history, and *WOMEN* 我們

WOMEN 我們 was initially an exploration of feminist issues by women artists of Chinese descent who were based in China. It began to morph to include work by artists based outside of China and not biologically female. The exhibition also grew to include LGBTQ and feminist activist material, and even work by artists who had no genealogical connection to China. In this way, the curatorial framework aimed to disrupt multiple kinds of art histories – those based on work by Asian American artists, those based on LGBTQ-identified artists, and those based on Latino artists; ultimately the aim was to produce the aforementioned new kinds of collectivities not based on nationality, genealogy, or social constructions of identity. Indeed, it is instructive to note that the exhibition title is a play on the English–Mandarin homophone meaning ‘women’ and ‘we’; and it succinctly reveals the crux of the exhibition’s curatorial conceit: to examine issues relating to women in China while shifting and stretching the very terms of what the categories of ‘women’ and ‘China’ signify.

I met the curator of *WOME* 我們, Abby Chen, during the summer of 2012 when we both participated in a National Endowment of Humanities Summer Institute entitled ‘Re-envisioning American Art History: Asian American Art, Research, and Teaching’ at New York University’s Asian/Pacific/American Institute. Alexandra Chang, director of the institute’s Global Arts Program, and Margo Machida, art historian and curator, organized a three-week intensive seminar that brought together art historians, ethnic and cultural studies scholars, curators, and artists.¹⁷ One conversation that continually came up among some of the participants, which included Chen and me, concerned the restrictions that categories based on genealogy and nationalism confer on an exploration of Asian American art history. This was not surprising, of course, given that most of us had been trained in poststructuralist approaches to art history and cultural studies that are suspicious of such categories and the logic of binaries posing norm versus ‘other’ identifications. At the same time, I was mindful that the summer institute largely focused on *East* Asian American art history and therefore a history of artworks by artists of South Asian descent based in the US – a South Asian American art history, if you will – had yet to be put together.¹⁸

These twin concerns – hanging on to the importance and legitimacy of Asian American art history while troubling its basis in racial and nationalistic categorizations – are the underlying forces that shape this chapter and more broadly my practice as an art historian. The importance of producing a Chinese queer feminist art history while being suspicious of what this new category itself represents is also embedded in Chen’s exhibition rationale, which began to take shape in 2010 when she organized the ‘Gender Identity Symposium’

in Guangzhou in collaboration with Sun Yat-Sen University's Sex/Gender Education Forum.¹⁹ As part of the symposium, she met a number of scholars, feminists, and artists. She was inspired by the artwork she saw and the women artists she met, but was startled that neither had enjoyed any visibility.²⁰ Indeed, the exploration of feminism in contemporary Chinese art and visual culture remains woefully unexamined.²¹ Motivated by this experience, Chen put together an exhibition that focused on the 'exploration and expression of feminism in Chinese visual culture.'²² It opened as part of the 2011 International Conference on Chinese Women and Visual Representation in Shanghai, which was organized jointly by the University of Michigan and the Fudan University Journalism School.²³ In the catalogue's foreword accompanying the exhibition, Wang Zhang, the director of the University of Michigan-Fudan Joint Institute for Gender Studies, underscores *WOMEN 我們*'s importance when she writes that 'Chinese society is saturated with sexist visual representations of women. But feminist critical studies of visual culture has yet to enter the academic fields let alone [intervene] in visual representation of women.'²⁴

Blurring gender but not abstracting bodies: *WOMEN 我們* in Shanghai

The final exhibition included works by ten artists and two artist collectives – both established and emerging – as well as by the members of five NGOs focusing on feminist issues in China.²⁵ As I alluded to earlier, Chen did not showcase a group of female artists as a category or a theme but rather focused on work exploring gender identity in Chinese visual culture. This allowed Chen to include the work of Shanghai-based Mu Xi, who is not biologically female and prefers not to be identified with any gender label.²⁶ Mu's work explores the ambiguity and slipperiness of gender identity. The video installation *Moth* (2011) depicts a graceful, semi-naked, and androgynous dancer on to whose back digital drawings of corsets as well as a caterpillar becoming the titular lepidopteron are superimposed (Figure 14.1). While caterpillars do not have morphological characteristics that distinguish males from females, moths do: usually female moths are larger than their male counterparts, even though the genetic blueprints dictating development and growth are the same for both.²⁷ However, by juxtaposing the equally ambiguously gendered caterpillar and dancer with the supposedly mature and gendered moth – whether male or female is beside the point – the work suggests that sexual dimorphism is as natural as the fluidity of gender.

Juxtaposed with the artwork was a broad range of activist materials, the inclusion of which I argue kept the exhibition from drowning out the embodied politics and sited-ness of the project. Posters were included from NGOs such as Shanghai Nvni, which promotes rights for lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender subjects; Aishang LGBT, a Shanghai-based group

Still from Mu Xi, *Moth*, 2011, video.

14.1

that promotes the advocacy and visibility of gay men; and PFLAG Guangzhou, an organization founded in 2008 that works in eight regions across China and connects parents, friends, and supporters of lesbians and gays. All of these NGOs operate under the radar to avoid scrutiny and are creative about getting their messages across – often through what Chen refers to as ‘guerrilla tactics’ that are more synonymous with performance art.²⁸ Overall, the posters connected to specific locales and ensured that the artworks and the queer and feminist bodies to which they are attached did not become too abstracted.

China as transnational: *WOMEN* 我們 in San Francisco

In 2012 *WOMEN* 我們 traveled to the Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco, where Chen is the chief curator and deputy director.²⁹ In Shanghai, Chen had already included the works of two California-based artists, Beijing-born Stella Zhang and Hong Kong-born Man Yee Lam. In San Francisco, she included more work by artists of Chinese descent working in the United States. Chen has noted that this decision was partially to prevent the exhibition from becoming a signifier of feminism and sexuality only relevant ‘over there’ (in China).

To this end, Lam’s installation *Cocooning – Self-Combing Woman* (2011) is instructive because it instantiates (rather than depicts) the transnational character of China. The work concerns her ancestral hometown of Shunde, the workforce of which was dominated by women for hundreds of years. Silk production is the chief industry of Shunde, and women who tended the silkworms not only wielded significant economic power but also reshaped the

prevailing feudal social structure. Instead of marriage, a woman of Shunde could choose to become a *zishunü*, or a 'self-combed woman'.³⁰ Traditionally, families hired married women with many children to recomb a bride's hair into a matronly bun – to signify her transition from girl to woman and daughter to wife; on the other hand, a *zishunü* would comb her own hair to signify her commitment to a life of self-reliance. Man Yee Lam's performance, however, involves her literally weaving herself into a cocoon with white pigtail yarn to foreground the sobering truth that although the women of Shunde could choose a role outside of that of a housewife, it was in exchange for a life-long vow of chastity taken in front of family members and other women as part of the self-combing ceremony.

Lam's installation is accompanied by two video monitors, one of which includes interviews with the few surviving self-combing women (the society of self-combing women faded away after the era of the Chinese Republic, 1912–49); the other depicts Man Yee Lam herself in high-heel shoes, a business suit, and her hair pulled up, which seems to imply her own ability to be self-reliant. In an artist's statement on the wall of the exhibition, she notes that she has a greater range of choices than her ancestors did, but also that she considers herself to be emblematic of a contemporary variant of the predicament of the 'Shunde spinsters' (Lam's term).³¹ That is, despite the opportunities available to her, the fact that she is unmarried at her age effectively renders moot her professional accomplishments in the context of Chinese and Chinese American cultures. In this way, her performance, in which she weaves herself into a cocoon, is metaphorically autobiographical, too. Interestingly, CNN Hong Kong referred in an article to unmarried wealthy women as 'golden spinsters'.³² The subtitle of the article – 'Look at all these gorgeous, successful Chinese women: Somebody marry them already' – indicates the article is not necessarily mean-spirited. However, the use of the word spinster to refer to women in their mid-thirties suggests that Lam's connection of the predicament of the Shunde spinsters with her contemporary life is not entirely far-fetched. Indeed, Lam's work not only produces a transnational connection between China and the United States but also a transtemporal one between the Shunde spinsters and herself. Lam effectively blurs past and present by connecting her plight to that of the *zishunü* whose historical predicament she makes contemporary.

The video *Ice Queen* (2011) by Mexico-born, US-based Ana Teresa Fernandez was one of the new additions to the exhibition in San Francisco. Though she has no explicit familial connection to China, her work's content connects quite strongly with the themes of *WOMEN* 我們. The work is a looped, five-minute video of her standing on a grate wearing form-fitting stilettos made out of ice – only her legs from the knees down are visible – on International Boulevard, a seven-and-a-half-mile-long strip in West Oakland,

California which is notorious for being ‘an open-air sex market for young children,’ especially Asian American girls, who are in high demand.³³ The pain involved in wearing high heels made out of ice is evident; the artist’s legs shiver and from time to time she pours water down her legs to speed the process of the melting of the ice.³⁴ Fernandez’s icy shoes look perversely like fairy tale glass slippers; as they become pools of water, any economic value they signified literally goes down the drain and the subject wearing them is metaphorically and literally freed from a seemingly interminable labor of waiting – one with no necessarily inherent economic value in and of itself – for a morally dubious ‘prince.’

The strategic placement of a poster produced by the China Sex Worker Organization Network Forum next to Fernandez’s work allows for a consideration of sex work in a transnational context (Figure 14.2). Established in 2009, the Forum connects sex worker advocacy groups from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and fifteen other sex worker organizations in mainland China. The text on the organization’s 2011 poster, ‘Chinese Sex Workers Say No To Violence and Crackdown,’ sits above a drawing by an unknown artist of a chain link fence, the center of which is broken by a ruby red stiletto; flourishes of red behind the shoe look as much like lipstick as they do blood. This poster had been banned and was shown for the first time in the Shanghai exhibition.



Installation view, Chinese Culture Center, San Francisco, 2012: China Sex Worker Organization Network Forum, ‘Say NO to Violence & Crackdown!’ poster, 2011 and Ana Teresa Fernandez, *Ice Queen*, 2011, video.

14.2

This curatorial intervention allowed for visual and affective overlaps regarding sex work in vastly different geographical contexts and thereby suggested an alternative mapping of sexual geographies beyond the global, local, or national – articulating what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have termed ‘minor transnationalism.’ Here, the transnational is understood as connections neither between dominant, Western metropolitan locations nor through a vertical relationship of power between dominant and minority cultures. Instead, for Lionnet and Shih, the connections occur through minor to minor engagements that avoid the center, the dominant, and the metropole.³⁵ While the exhibition certainly does not explore what a comparison of sex work among cities like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Oakland might yield, it does begin to build connections among them affectively. To explain, I had an opportunity to visit the San Francisco exhibition in the fall of 2012; the installation of the poster with Fernandez’s work was particularly powerful in that it immediately made the experiences of women in China more palpable.³⁶ The strong affect of pain connected to Fernandez’s work migrated over to the nearby sex worker poster and suddenly it no longer seemed to represent abstract bodies.

Moving beyond but not away from China: *WOMEN* 我們 in Miami

While in San Francisco, Chen and I discussed the possibility of bringing the exhibition to Miami Beach Urban Studios (MBUS) Gallery, part of Florida International University, where I teach. She was eager to have me rethink the exhibition to keep it performative and dynamic. Chen suggested that I consider including the activist artwork of Sphere, an LBT collective of South Asian women based in Manchester, England with whom I had worked in 2008.³⁷ I had told her about Sphere when we first had met and she was intrigued by the subject matter and the potential for productive discussions among the work of Sphere and those in *WOMEN* 我們. It was an interesting idea especially since I had been wanting to write more about Sphere’s work, but I was concerned that their inclusion would potentially be confusing for the population of South Florida, which is not composed of large numbers of subjects of either Chinese or South Asian descent. (According to the 2013 US Census Bureau, just 1.67 percent of the residents of Miami-Dade County are of Asian descent – this is lower than the percentage of residents of Asian origin in the entire state of Florida – in comparison to San Francisco where people of Asian descent comprise 33 percent of the population.)³⁸ In the worst-case scenario, including Sphere’s work could have drowned out the site-specific politics of Miami-Dade County, as well as those of Chen’s exhibition as she had conceived it.

Perhaps emboldened by Chen’s own inclusion of the work of Fernandez, which incorporated Oakland, California into her exhibition, I thought it would

make sense to incorporate the site of Miami in some productive way without losing the core theme of Chen's exhibition.³⁹ Eventually I decided to include Miami-based documentarian Daniela Montoya's work, specifically her multimedia project exploring the underground Miami ball scene and the dance style of voguing – an identity-affirming practice for queers of color, which can be traced back to Harlem in New York City.⁴⁰ In her 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, lesbian-identified filmmaker Jennie Livingston brought mainstream attention to the largely disenfranchised queer of color community of Harlem who used ballroom competitions as a way to reimagine their identities into everything from Wall Street executives to fashion models typically found on the pages of *Vogue* magazine – in other words into subject-positions that are predominantly white, upper class, and heteronormative ideals and thereby largely unattainable.⁴¹

Montoya spent several months getting to know the various individuals associated with the voguing scene of Miami.⁴² She produced an artist's book, which interwove theory, sound, and image, as an embodied portrait of the kinship system – not based on bloodlines – of the Miami ball scene. In addition to the book, her photographs of some of the scene's major figures were installed between a monitor of the aforementioned Mu Xi's work and various queer activist materials from China. Voguing involves producing clean lines with the body. Many of the angular movements of the androgynous subject of Mu's video seemed to be in sync with the voguing movements captured in Montoya's photography as in *Arms Control (Angel Montage)*, 2013 and *The Click (Victor M. Lords contortion)*, 2013. At those moments of overlap, the installation of these photographs, Mu's work and the activist material connected LGBTQ communities across ethnic, racial, and national lines. That is to say, the site of Miami and the inclusion of Montoya's work in this iteration of the exhibition become not a simple token of the local but a specifically orchestrated site of where the local, global, and national collide. This collision occurred through my efforts as a curator – and produced a new archive, as it were, of queer feminist urban creative practice. As with the installation of the sex poster in juxtaposition with Fernandez's work, this curatorial decision suggests a mapping of sexual subjectivities articulated through dynamic minor to minor engagements.

Structure of the institution and its relationship to the archive

To return to the notion of 'thinking archivally,' the decision to include works by artists who are not necessarily women, LGBTQ-identified, or of Chinese descent across all three venues was aimed at bringing into being a specifically queer feminist Chinese art history (while not fixing these identities in relation to the works or the artists). If the exhibitions were successful in achieving

this bringing into being, it is in no small part due to the mundane rules and protocols – the logistical and administrative structure – of institutions such as MBUS Gallery that housed them. To explain, the length of time from when Chen introduced the exhibition to me to when it opened at MBUS Gallery was only a year and a half. At a major institution, the programming of which is often done years in advance, it would not have been possible to put up an exhibition in such a short time (if at all). I want to assert that the manner in which the curatorial framework of *WOMEN 我們* – that of thinking archivally – unfolded over time (2011 to 2013) and space (from Shanghai to San Francisco and to Miami) is directly linked to this basic, almost procedural fact. Indeed, as Derrida explains, the structure of the archive determines what can be archived.⁴³ In this case, the structure of the exhibition as an archive is tied to the institution that housed it. Moreover, Derrida explores how technological advances transform discourses; in the context of the history and development of psychoanalysis, he looks at how email, for instance, would have altered not only psychoanalysis's 'very coming into existence' but also 'its relationship to the future.'⁴⁴ In relation to this point, we might say that the flexible programming protocols of MBUS Gallery, in particular, enabled the curatorial practice of thinking archivally to manifest in the present as well as making possible a queer feminist Chinese art history into the future.

As a foil for the above, I want to discuss how other aspects of the functioning of the MBUS Gallery, in contrast, worked *against* the production of a Chinese queer feminist art history. In particular, the production of digital flyers used to advertise the exhibition reinforced stereotypes rather than creating open possibilities for the future. Per protocol at Florida International University (FIU), all flyers for exhibitions had to be approved at several different levels prior to their dissemination. MBUS Gallery is part of a much larger college – the College of Architecture and Arts (CARTA) – that is itself part of FIU in Miami. The poster delivered to CARTA's marketing team for review was based on a poster from the San Francisco exhibition: it included an upside-down pink triangle, which I thought was especially important in calling attention to the queer and feminist content of the exhibition; shaped like a woman's pubis and coloured pink, it could be a signifier for a woman just as much as it could be a reference to ACT UP's appropriation of the pink triangle used by the Nazis to mark male homosexuals (female homosexual prisoners were not marked). The poster also had the word 'WOMAN 我們' in pink on a gray field.

The poster emailed back to me had been re-designed by the marketing team. The word 'WOMAN 我們' was no longer pink but a bold yellow color on a field of red; and the triangle and text 'Art + Activism Exploring Feminism + Sexuality in Trans-national China' was completely removed. In effect, the color scheme emphasized the colors of the Chinese flag and the deletions

PechaKucha NightTM

Signifiers in Queer/Feminist Contemporary Art in Asia and Miami
20 slides x 20 seconds

The program compliments themes of the *WOMEN* 我們 exhibit currently on view

6PM RECEPTION 7PM PROGRAM

8 PRESENTERS

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Alpesh Kantilal Patel Assistant Professor, Contemporary Art and Theory; Affiliate Faculty, Women's and Gender Studies; and Director, MFA Program in the Visual Arts
Robin Haines Merrill Artist and Missionary from Manila
Neil De La Flor and José A. Villar-Portela Reading Queer
Sarah Walker Rupert Girls' Club
Houston Cypress Miccosukee Producer
Emery Grant Stonewall National Museum and Achieves
Daniela Montoya Master of Arts, Visual Anthropology and Mixed Media Artist
Angel Camacho Vogue Demo

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Mis-designed poster for Pecha Kucha event, Miami, Florida, November 2013.

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turned the exhibition into one on Chinese nationalism rather than one on queer feminist Chinese art. Indeed, the goal of making visible Chinese queer feminist political concerns – particularly in the face of American ideas about China – proved to be more difficult to realize than I had imagined. I underestimated the degree to which the relocation of the exhibition could lead to misconstrued, almost absurd oversimplifications of Chinese queer feminism.⁴⁵

In another example, an outside graphic designer produced a poster for an event connected to the exhibition. The first draft of the poster did not have the exhibition title 'WOMAN 我們' and depicted two chopsticks pinching a pink triangle that the designer had turned clockwise 45 degrees; the pink triangle was effectively turned into a 'wonton' of sorts (Figure 14.3). Surprisingly, a queer-identified administrator and colleague of mine praised the poster design in an email communication into which I was cc'd. I do not mean to vilify, but to point out that even those whose politics overlap with those of the exhibition were susceptible to misreading the exhibition.

Fortunately, both posters were re-designed. In the first example, which I like to refer to as the Maoist poster, the designers re-inserted the triangle and removed the red field and yellow text. In the second poster, the chopsticks were removed, the word 'WOMAN 我們' was re-inserted, and the pink triangle was returned to its upside-down orientation. Whereas above I write that the flexible programming at MBUS Gallery allowed for thinking archivally, the peculiarities of the vetting process of these flyers – also an integral part of how the institution functions – could have, in a worst-case scenario, appeared to empty the exhibition of anything queer and feminist. Indeed, as Derrida notes, 'the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content.'⁴⁶

Signifiers: slipping and sliding out of control?

Given the anecdotes I share above, playing around too loosely with the content of the exhibition began to concern me: signifiers meant to productively slip and slide were dangerously close to slipping and sliding out of control. That is, I began to wonder – more accurately to become paranoid about – whether or not the addition of Montoya's work would push the exhibition to its limit point. In the San Francisco exhibition the work of Fernandez, who, like Montoya, is not of Chinese descent, was included, but the content of her work, unlike that of Montoya's, still dealt with Asian subject matter. Moreover, Fernandez's video depicts her only from the knees down, making her own ethnicity less apparent in the work. One could pass by the work and perhaps not even realize that the work was by an artist who was not of Chinese descent.⁴⁷ This would not necessarily be the case for Montoya's work.

The anxiety that I register here is at least partially connected to my authorship, which remained implicit in the context of the exhibition. I am queer-identified – and therefore my politics overlapped with that aspect of the exhibition's remit – but I am neither a woman nor of Chinese descent as Chen is. I have laid bare my stakes in this project here, but I did not make these stakes visible as an explicit part of the curatorial framework in any meaningful way.⁴⁸ Admittedly, this line of thinking leads to the very sort of essentialism I

have carefully avoided thus far. To put it another way, the issue is not necessarily who should and should not deal with certain kinds of subject matter – this implies there are coherent subjects, queer feminist or otherwise – but that curators must interrogate and make explicit how their political identifications inform the meanings of the works and exhibitions they organize.

I did have the opportunity to discuss how the exhibition connected to my research interests – if only briefly – as part of the Pecha Kucha event on 20 November 2013, held at MBUS Gallery, which I describe in these closing paragraphs. Pecha Kucha is a style of presentation in which each person is given the opportunity to present a topic through 20 slides with the restriction that each slide is up for 20 seconds. Carl Hildebrand, who organizes Pecha Kucha events in Miami, put one together in connection to *WOMEN* 我們.⁴⁹ Unfortunately neither the artists of Chinese descent nor Abby Chen were able to come to Miami. Partially because of this, Hildebrand invited a number of speakers whose contributions were tangential to queer Chinese feminism. The title of the event – ‘Signifiers in Queer/Feminist Contemporary Art in Asia and Miami’ – reflects this fact.

I gave the first presentation, which focussed on the themes of the *WOMEN* 我們 exhibition in Shanghai, San Francisco, and in Miami; and Daniela Montoya, the only artist in the exhibition able to attend the event, was to give the final presentation on her voguing project. The other presentations delivered on the night of the Pecha Kucha maintained a queer archival activist approach to the exhibition that was consistent with Chen’s and my visions, but that neither of us could have imagined.⁵⁰ For instance, Miccosukee Native American Houston Cypress gave an emotionally charged presentation on the complex genealogy of ‘two-spirit,’ which in its contemporary usage has become associated with LGBT members of the Native American community.⁵¹ He showed compelling examples of historical ‘transgender’ figures serving a variety of roles within their communities as well as his own experiences coming out. Sarah Michelle Rupert, the director of the non-profit private foundation Girls’ Club, created to support contemporary women artists, focused her presentation on the artwork of one of the artists represented in its collection: Shanghai-born, US-based Su-en Wong. Her paintings, which were not in the exhibition but certainly could have been had I known of them, explore feminism and homoeroticism through the lens of the often-fetishized demure Asian woman. She often uses herself as a model. Another speaker, Emery Grant, director of community engagement for the Stonewall National Museum & Archives in nearby Fort Lauderdale, discussed the origins of the institution and described ambitious plans for it to become the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender museum in the US.

The final presentation circled back to *WOMEN* 我們. Daniela Montoya spoke of her project and ended her presentation – and thereby the entire

event – by having representatives from the various houses of the Miami ball scene vogue in the gallery space. One especially powerful moment for me was witnessing Ruby Ninja, who is transitioning from male to female, voguing in front of the Chinese sex worker poster and Fernandez’s work, both of which were installed together as in San Francisco. Ruby’s stilettos mirrored those on the poster and from time-to-time the melting iced stilettos of Fernandez’s work would project on her body – which from the waist up was naked. Ruby was proud to show off her newly grown breasts. For a brief moment the queer corporeal and representational bodies from Oakland, Shanghai, and Miami aligned. At its best, the exhibition seemed to bring into being a Chinese queer feminist art history capacious enough to include all of these.

Notes

- 1 Marlene Manoff, ‘Theories of the Archive from across Disciplines,’ *Libraries and the Academy* 4.1 (2004), 10.
- 2 Ibid.; Robert Martin, ‘Sharing the Wealth,’ RLG Members’ Forum, Washington, DC, 18 October 2003; cited in *ibid.*, 22 and available online at: <http://www.rlg.org/events/sharingthewealth2002/martin.html> (accessed 14 October 2003).
- 3 Tirza True Latimer, ‘Conversations on Queer Affect and Queer Archives,’ *Art Journal* 72.2 (2013), 34.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a good working definition for exhibition as ‘a public display of works of art or items of interest, held in an art gallery or museum.’ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘exhibition,’ available online at <http://dictionary.oed.com/> (accessed 18 June 2014).
- 6 I use ‘LGBTQ’ to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning subject-positions. The acronym is imperfect, of course: not only could it be appended *ad infinitum*, but also the horizontal listing of these identities masks the vertical power dynamics among them. Moreover, there would be complications in supplementing it with *tongzhi*, the term often used to refer to homosexuals in China where LGBTQ is seen as a Western construct or import. Indeed, identity labels are overdetermined and vague, too specific and yet too broad. At the same time, the fact that the definition of *tongzhi* as homosexual was omitted from a Chinese dictionary in 2012 points to why they remain important on an activist level if not a theoretical one. See Viv Marsh, ‘New Chinese dictionary in row over “gay” omission,’ *BBC News China*, 21 July 2012, available online at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-18920096> (accessed 26 May 2014).
- 7 Ann Cvetkovich, ‘Queer Art of the Counterarchive,’ in *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945–1980*, ed. Sarah Kessler and Mia

- Locks (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archive, 2011), 32.
- 8 Ibid. and see Alex Juhász's 'Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12.2 (2006), 319–28.
 - 9 Cvetkovich, 'Queer Art of the Counterarchive,' 32; see also Jack Halberstam, 'Unfound,' in Kessler and Locks, eds., *Cruising the Archive*, 158.
 - 10 Cvetkovich, 'Queer Art of the Counterarchive,' 32.
 - 11 Mathias Danbolt, 'Not Not Over: Archival Engagements in Queer Feminist Art,' in *Make an Effort to Remember. Or, Failing That, Invent* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quiros (Paris: Bétonsalon, 2013), 4; available online at: http://betonsalon.net/PDF/BS14_FINALOK_PAGESDOUBLES.pdf (accessed 9 July 2014).
 - 12 Referring to artworks by Renée Green, Cheryl Dunye, Zoe Leonard and others, Danbolt writes that their works 'put pressure on the balance act between the desire for having a history, and the anxiety for being historicized, in the sense of being cut off – metaphorically, practically, systemically – from the present.' Ibid., 5.
 - 13 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29. Based on a lecture delivered in 1994, *Archive Fever* was first published in French in 1995 as *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne* by Éditions Galilée. In the same year, it was translated and published in the American journal *Diacritics* and then as a separate English-language monograph in 1996. Derrida's work focuses on the impossibility of archival practice, which of course runs counter to what I am attempting to do. As Ann Cvetkovich notes, 'this same lesson is also available from the archives of colonialism, slavery, and other histories of violence in which absences are not just a theoretical conundrum but also a very practical reality'; see her article 'Queer Archival Futures: Case Study Los Angeles,' *e-misférica: The Journal of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics (New York University)* 9.1 and 2 (2011), from special issue on 'On the subject of archives,' guest edited by Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor, available online at: <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-91/cvetkovich> (accessed 2 June 2014). She is referring to Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 271–313; and Diana Taylor. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). Cvetkovich's own book belongs to this list: *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

- 14 Danbolt, 'Not Not Over: Archival Engagements in Queer Feminist Art,' 4.
- 15 Winkler is an inaugural student in the MFA in Visual Arts: Curatorial Practice degree program, the curriculum of which I designed, at Florida International University, Miami.
- 16 Nancy K. Miller, 'Getting Personal: Autobiography as Cultural Criticism,' in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1–30.
- 17 For a brief description of the summer institute, please see NEH's website, <http://www.neh.gov/divisions/education/other-opportunities/2012/re-envisioning-asian-american-art-history> (accessed 25 May 2014).
- 18 In chapter two of my doctoral thesis I explore the complexities of what it means to map out a 'South Asian American art history.' See Alpesh Patel, 'Queer Desi Visual Culture across the "Brown Atlantic": US/UK,' PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 2009, 38–78.
- 19 See 'Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun-Yat University,' available online at: <http://genders.sysu.edu.cn> (accessed 13 August 2014).
- 20 Abby Chen, email communication with author, 12 August 2014. Chen also saw artworks by artists such as by Yang Meiyang and Liang Liting as early as 2009 when she was doing research in China for the 2009 *Present Tense Biennial: Chinese Character* exhibition at Chinese Culture Center, San Francisco. Both of the artists's works ended up in at least two of the venues of *WOMEN 我們*.
- 21 Many thanks to the editors of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* for bringing to my attention Saha Su-ling Welland's 'Cruel/Loving Bodies' exhibition of work by Chinese, Hong Kong, and Chinese British feminist artists which traveled to Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Beijing. See Welland's article 'On Curating "Cruel/Loving Bodies,"' *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3.2 (DATE?), [AQ] 17–36. As communicated to me by Abby Chen in an email on 12 August 2014, curator Hou Hanru in a Skype interview with Chen on 28 January 2013 mobilized the metaphor of a contagion to speculate about the dearth of exhibitions on gender identity. Hanru said that the contemporary Chinese art world is 'contaminated and driven by commercial success' and that its 'disengagement of political and social issues' is tantamount to a 'generalized disease.'
- 22 Abby Chen, 'WOMEN 我們, Chinese Culture Center, San Francisco,' press release, September 2012.
- 23 The exhibition was held at EMG Shanghai from 16 December 2011–10 January 2012.
- 24 Wang Zhang, foreword to exhibition catalogue *WOMEN 我們* (Shanghai EMG & Gender Identity Forum, 2011), 13. She also writes on the same page, '[t]he conference intends to promote visual culture studies as a new field of feminist engagement with the contemporary Chinese mainstream culture

- as well as a new field of intellectual inquiry of gender and sexuality in the history of visual culture.’
- 25 A full list of the artists whose works were in the show includes Eagle Ho/Li Zhe, Gao Ling/Comma, Gao Zhan, He Chengyao, Liang Liting, Luo Le, Man Yee Lam, Mu Xi, Yang Meiyan, Yang Qing, Stella Zhang, Zhang Xiaojing, and the following NGOs: Shanghai Nvai, Aishang LGBT, The China Sex Worker Organization Network Forum, PFLAG Guangzhou, and China Rural Bank Project.
 - 26 Queer Chinese studies is burgeoning, as evidenced most recently in book reviews of four publications each on the topic in back-to-back issues of *GLQ: Gay & Lesbian Quarterly*. See Howard Chiang, ‘Queering China: A New Synthesis,’ *GLQ: Gay & Lesbian Quarterly* 20.3 (2014), 353–78; and James Welker, ‘(Re)positioning (Asian) Queer Studies,’ *GLQ: Gay & Lesbian Quarterly* 20.1–2 (2014), 181–98. See also Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, eds., ‘Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics,’ special issue, *positions: east asia culture critique* 18.2 (2010), 291–320.
 - 27 University of Arizona, ‘Why female moths are big and beautiful,’ *Science Daily*, 12 March 2010, available online at: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/03/100311141218.htm> (accessed 26 May 2014).
 - 28 Abby Chen, ‘*WOMEN* 我們,’ Chinese Culture Center, San Francisco, press release, 30 July 2012.
 - 29 The exhibition was on view from 15 September–30 November 2012. Works of several artists not shown in Shanghai were included. These artists are Bay area-based husband and wife team Rae Chang and Adam Tow; and US-based Ana Teresa Fernandez. These artists’ works were not included in the San Francisco exhibition: Luo Le, Yang Qing, Zhang Xiaojing, and 10 Feminists’ Voice-Shout Group. Chen’s title was accurate as of July 2014.
 - 30 Tania Branigan, ‘No Regrets, Say the Chinese Women Who Chose Independence over Marriage,’ *The Guardian*, 3 July 2014, available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/03/survivors-ancient-chinese-custom-self-combed-women> (accessed 13 August 2014).
 - 31 See artist’s website ‘ManYee Lam,’ available online at: http://manyeelam.net/section/327701_Self_Combing_Women.html (accessed 13 August 2014).
 - 32 Zoe Li and Hiufu Wong, *CNN Hong Kong*, ‘Everything But The Man: Chinese “Golden Spinsters” Just Can’t Get Hitched,’ 24 June 2011, available online at: <http://travel.cnn.com/hong-kong/life/everything-boy-hong-kongs-golden-spinsters-just-cant-get-hitched-241756> (accessed 26 May 2014).
 - 33 This is a quote from Sharmin Bock, assistant in charge of special operations for the district attorney’s office in Alameda County, where Oakland is. See Patricia Leigh Brown, ‘In Oakland, Redefining Sex Trade Workers as Abuse Victims,’ *New York Times*, 23 May 2011, available online at: <http://>

- www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/us/24oakland.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 26 May 2014). See also Barbara Grady, 'A Night on the Track: On Oakland's International Boulevard Young Girls Abound after Nightfall,' *Oakland Local*, 25 May 2010, available online at: <http://blog.sfgate.com/inoakland/2010/05/26/a-night-on-the-track-on-oaklands-international-boulevard-young-girls-abound-after-nightfall/> (accessed 26 May 2014).
- 34 In preparation for her video performance, Fernandez constructed molds of stilettos to fit her feet; she then filled the molds with water and put them in the freezer.
- 35 See Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 36 For an extended review of the San Francisco installation, see Alpesh Kantilal Patel, 'WOMEN 我們' *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 12.2 (2013), 60–7; it was also translated into Chinese for *Yishu's* biannual Chinese-language journal (November/December 2013), 50–8. Descriptions of artworks, which appear in both the review and this chapter, are largely the same.
- 37 Musician and artist Jaheda Choudhury, multi-media artist Shanaz Gulzar, and writer Maya Chowdhry led the collective, which was largely comprised of women who did not identify as artists. For more information on Sphere and the project to which I refer, please see the legacy blog, 'Mixing It Up Manchester,' available online at: <http://mixingitupmanchester.blogspot.com> (accessed 2 June 2014). See also Patel, 'Queer Desi Visual Culture across the "Brown Atlantic": US/UK,' 164–97.
- 38 To be clear, data indicating what percentage of this population was comprised of East Asians etc. was not available. See Miami-Dade County Planning Research, Department of Regulatory Economic Issues Data Flash, 'Asian Population Growth in Miami Dade,' issue 20 (2013); available online at: <http://www.miamidade.gov/planning/library/reports/data-flash/2013-asian-population.pdf> (accessed 29 May 2014); Bay Area Census, San Francisco City and County, available online at: <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/counties/SanFranciscoCounty.htm> (accessed 29 May 2014); Elaine Chen, 'What the Lack of Asian Americans Says about Miami,' WLRN, 11 July 2013, available online at: <http://wlrn.org/post/what-lack-asian-americans-says-about-miami> (accessed 29 May 2014).
- 39 The exhibition was on display from 15 November–20 December 2013. It included a mixture of works shown in both Shanghai and San Francisco. Full list of artists: Gao Ling/Comma, He Chengyao, Man Yee Lam, Mu Xi, Yang Meiyan, Stella Zhang, Rae Chang + Adam Tow, Daniela Montoya, and Ana Teresa Fernandez. Activist material from the China Sex Worker Organization Network Forum and other NGOs focused on feminism and LGBTQ issues in China, such as Shanghai Nvai LBT, were also included.

- 40 I want to thank Brittini Winkler for introducing me to Montoya's work. Winkler is Florida International University's first MFA in Curatorial Practice student and as part of her coursework helped install the *WOMEN* 我們 exhibition in Miami.
- 41 bell hooks critiques Livingston's documentary from several angles in her important essay 'Is Paris Burning?' in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1999), 145–56. hooks is skeptical that the desire to become a 'ruling class white woman' is progressive (148). I partially agree with hooks; however, this line of thinking seems to lead to one unsettling conclusion: that one should foreclose the possibility for this disenfranchised black and Latino queer community to become that which is already out of their reach.
- 42 Montoya's project was part of her master's thesis in visual anthropology at the University of Manchester in England, where, coincidentally, I was enrolled in the PhD program in Art History and Visual Studies from 2005 to 2008. Our programs did not overlap and I was not aware of Montoya's affiliation with the university until after we selected her work to be a part of the exhibition.
- 43 Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 17.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Many thanks to Abby Chen for her help in thinking through the complex layers of my initial reactions to these posters.
- 46 Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 17; emphases in original.
- 47 It is worth noting that a number of Miami residents of East Asian descent have recently discussed being visually mistaken as Latino (and enjoying it!). As an American of South Asian descent living in Miami, I have had similar experiences. See Elaine Chen, 'What the Lack of Asian Americans Says about Miami,' WLRN, 11 July 2013, available online at: <http://wlrn.org/post/what-lack-asian-americans-says-about-miami> (accessed 29 May 2014).
- 48 To underscore why exploring my authorship is important, it is worth noting that bell hooks famously criticized Jennie Livingston for not interrogating the politics of her whiteness and class privileges in the making of her documentary, *Paris is Burning* (see n. 41). Livingston's absence from the film 'makes it easy,' according to hooks, 'for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay "natives" and not recognize that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston.' See 'Is Paris Burning?,' 151.
- 49 This mode of presenting was conceived in Japan where many architects were finding that speakers would not get to the point quickly enough. See <http://www.pechakucha.org/faq> (accessed 9 July 2014).

- 50 The *WOMEN* 我們 Pecha Kucha event is archived here: <http://www.pechakucha.org/cities/miami/events/5255a59f4f5c2978fe000001> (accessed 9 July 2014).
- 51 Cypress's presentation (ibid.) makes clear that the genealogy of 'two-spirit' is complex and tribe-specific; part of his presentation is unfortunately missing from this archive.