

# SURREY ART GALLERY PRESENTS

Paul Wong

YEAR OF GIF



## Digital Vagrants: Paul Wong's *Year of Gif*

JONI LOW

### Exhibition Statement

PAUL WONG

ALISON RAJAH

### Biographies

JONI LOW

PAUL WONG

Paul Wong  
*Year of Gif*, 2013

Video installation and social network  
project, UrbanScreen

Photograph by Scott Massey

## *Digital Vagrants: Paul Wong's Year of Gif* by Joni Low

There's a definite, if disturbing, rhythm to it. Against a backdrop of pulsing RGB colour bars, a mob of images take over the building's exterior side. Surveillance cameras, digitally manipulated selfies, and smart phone screen-grabs flicker silently alongside images of everyday life. Iterations of the eye and orifice masquerade within architecture and other psychedelic symbols, reminding us of the complicit and murky relationship between technological innovation, eroticism and desire. A person sleeps, sharing a soft pillow with a family of screened devices. Bodies, youth and transgression pulse simultaneously within

a digital galaxy that reveals so much, yet infers so much more beyond the visible. Projected at night for encounters of different velocities, Paul Wong's *year of gif* is our contemporary, media-saturated, and increasingly screen-based existence writ large.

*year of gif* simulates the constant barrage of images in our emergent interactions with digital media. Culled from a year's worth of GIFs created spontaneously on his smartphone, the resulting composite—120 feet long and 35 feet high—captures the provocative spirit for which Wong is best known, and a mind that has been filtering and exploring the artistic possibilities of new media for over 40 years. Animated GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format), first invented in the 1980s, offer mere snippets of moving imagery and sparse narrative, leaving much to the unguided imagination. In 2012 The Oxford Dictionary declared GIF their Word of the Year,



Paul Wong circa mid 1970s at Video Inn, 261 Powell Street. Image courtesy Paul Wong and VIVO media arts centre.

and officially a verb.<sup>1</sup> Now used widely across the web and messaging platforms, GIFs have become shorthand visual expressions for a range of human experiences.<sup>2</sup> Their humorous distortions, memes and titillation offer pleasure and relief: they bounce along the aether as we connect across space and time, as the impermanent icons and impulses of our continually shifting moods.

Wong's experimentations with new media began in the 1970s as a member of the Mainstreeters, a self-described 'art gang' of teenagers on Vancouver's east side whose activities included large-scale community art events, exploratory video workshops, and recording their lives as raw material for art.<sup>3</sup> A self-taught and prolific media artist, Wong utilized the energy of youth angst and rebellion—of being misunderstood—to create screen-based works that captured the world from his own perspective. Early video works demonstrate his appetite for risky self-exposure, and in pushing the boundaries of what can be recorded and shared to raise questions about performativity, cultural diversity and representation, and the construction of identity. *7 Day Activity* (1977) captures Wong scrutinizing his own facial acne in a bathroom mirror, honest gestures much more vulnerable than the self-display exhibited in today's social media. *Confused: Sexual Views* (1984)—a highly controversial photo and video installation of individuals sharing intimate sexual experiences—reveals participants' uncomfortable transgressions beyond the invisible yet undeniably felt thresholds of socially-acceptable conversation.<sup>4</sup>

The thresholds have since shifted. Ten years ago, Wong re-emerged from behind the camera, re-activating his media savvy now through digital forms. Composing accelerated versions of our engagement with digital technologies, rather than pontificate he creates a



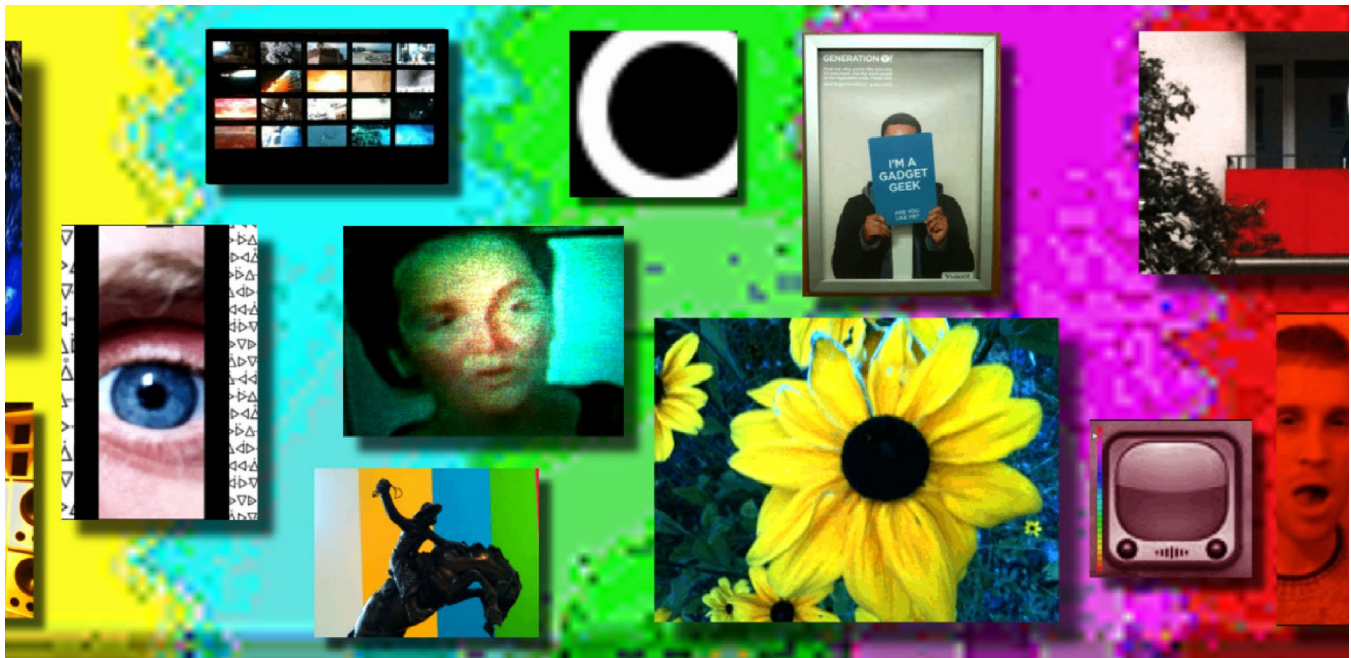
Still from *7 Day Activity*, 1977. Image courtesy Paul Wong.

space for us to sort through potentials and pitfalls of incessant media production and consumption. *Flash Memory* (2010-2015), a video installation and image chronology of Wong's everyday life (over 27,000 digital images played at 15 images per second) and *#LLL Looking Listening Looping* (2014)—350 GIFs, Vine videos, and Instagram clips presented on an array of small screens across a gallery wall—call attention to the sheer volume, and particularly how personal content is becoming increasingly public and shared. No longer censored by or excluded from mainstream media, these new waves of micro media—and the shift towards personal channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram—have created plural networks of interaction and, one would hope, more diverse representations of society. Media, in many ways, has caught up to his vision of what is possible. However, Wong warns that it's too early to draw conclusions about its full impact on art and contemporary life, particularly in dissolving the persistent hierarchies of representation: "We are very much in the early, primitive years of digital culture and its possibilities, the democratization of media and its expansion around creative, artistic endeavours: how it's made, how it's shared, how it is commodified, how it is distributed."<sup>5</sup>

Today, space is fraught and difficult to define. The boundaries between virtual and physical reality, and our sense of public and private, have increasingly blurred. While the privatization of much public good accelerates—land, natural resources, the social welfare, our personal data—we are deliberately distracted by projections of our virtual selves, seduced by the screen.

Yet the screen is *also* contested space: it is a key source for global breaking news, politics and revolutions, opinions, and the dispute of truths. It is frequently the primary interface for the flow of subjective desires, raw emotion and political allegiances. Messages travel at lightning speed, faster than any major media corporation.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite the Internet's potential for freedom, activism, and subversion, digital communications are still owned by the world's most powerful corporations. These companies collect reams of personal data, and can shut down these electronic superhighways at will. Many forsake the ownership of personal content for the immediacy of self-expression, asserting what personal agency we can within regulated virtual zones (we know not where the algorithms will take us). There is a need to shield ourselves from this flow, while accepting our immersion and need to live with it. The screen connects us, sometimes to too much. In this playground of desire, Wong reminds us that we are but digital vagrants: "We are renters of virtual space without Tenants Rights Agreements. Yet we continue to pay a subscription; it's still very privileged access."<sup>7</sup>

In our networked present, the poor image—appropriated, re-edited, and compressed, ranked far below its high-definition relatives, and deteriorating as it accelerates throughout the globe—willingly sacrifices quality for accessibility. Much like the



Video still from *Year of Gif*, 2013. Image courtesy Paul Wong.

images of Wong's *year of gif*, their errant, amateur status permits them certain freedoms. The abundance of the poor image today communicates something beyond aesthetic criteria, towards circulation and persistent affect. Images are gathering places for digital vagrants, even if at different times; they mark shared experiences, whether personal or political, and they can gain traction. Artist Hito Steyerl describes how poor images move under-radar as political agents and carriers of non-conformist and political visual material.<sup>9</sup> To fully understand their value, she urges us to examine their ability to disrupt the logic of global information capitalism, and their potential to connect:

"The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This

aura is no longer based on the permanence of the 'original,' but on the transience of the copy."<sup>9</sup>

With the explosion of images in the 20th and 21st centuries, the value of the digital circulating image is premised less on quality than idea. Writing on the current ambiguous status of art, art historian David Joselit similarly describes how "the reverberations of images as they spread... as well as the patterns of circulations that emerge *after* images enter networks... *change* the potentialities and behaviours of art. [emphasis added]"<sup>10</sup> If, as he suggests, we are in a situation *after art*, where the image no longer serves modern art's purpose as vanguard in the production of grand narratives, utopian promises or knowledge of self and of others, we must look at the reverberations of images within networks—their immaterial traces—to understand their full impact. Wong's *year of gif* sits at the crux of this shift, allowing us to become awash in the uncertainties that our future—and the future of art—holds.

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Notes

1. <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/11/us-word-of-the-year-2012/>, accessed July 25, 2016.
  2. Current popular applications include Gifboom, Cinemagram, Giffer, Gifcamera, and Vine.
  3. The widespread availability of the Portapak camcorder in the 1960s and 1970s allowed individual users to turn the cameras on themselves, establishing alternative personal narratives beyond those in mainstream television and film. For more information, see the the catalogue essay and website for the exhibition, "Mainstreeters: Taking Advantage, 1972 – 1982," co-curated by Allison Collins and Michael Turner: <http://www.takingadvantage.ca/>.
  4. *Confused Sexual Views* was banned from exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery and escalated to a national, albeit unsuccessful, court case. For a recent analysis of this work, see Alex Quicho, "Pure Disruption: Sex, Death and Postcolonial Identity in Paul Wong's Video Art," *Yishu* 13:5 (Fall 2014), 85-92.
  5. Studio visit with Paul Wong, July 8, 2016.
  6. The role of social media in the Arab Spring, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and other global grassroots movements are key examples. The live personal media footage of recent police brutalities in the United States, particularly the video capturing the shooting of Philando Castile, is another instance of this media's power to seek justice in representation and communicate expediently to a broad public. However, this raises questions around Facebook or other corporations' transparency in maintaining or censoring content. For more information, see: <http://www.wired.com/2016/07/philando-castile-social-media-911/>.
  7. Studio visit with Paul Wong, July 8, 2016.
  8. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *Wretched of the Screen* (e-flux and Sternberg Press, Berlin: 2012), 31-45. Also, see full essay online: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.
  9. *Ibid.*, 42.
  10. David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey: 2013), 88 (and corresponding footnote 83).
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## *Exhibition Statement*

**Paul Wong and Alison Rajah**



Pixelated colours projected on a wall over 30 metres wide create the shimmering backdrop for a spectrum of GIFs in Paul Wong's video work *Year of Gif* at the Surrey UrbanScreen.

GIFs – a small sized, easy to share image file, standing for Graphics Interchange Format – animate images the artist created documenting what he sees around him. His collection of over 300 smartphone GIFs made over the year of 2012 were featured in this artwork. Scattered across the UrbanScreen's colourful façade, these fast paced, continually changing GIFs flicker like rectangular digital flipbooks.

*Year of Gif* is also a social network project, with even more of the artist's prolific GIF production available

on Tumblr. New GIFs were posted on [Year of Gif](#) and Paul Wong Projects Tumblr pages throughout the exhibition.

Paul Wong brings his relationship with the camera, and his practice developed over a period of 40 years, to his GIF art. *Year of Gif* energetically moves through themes of technology, architecture, nature, family and friends, and self-portraits. At one moment the viewer may have simultaneously seen GIFs of tube TVs, portapaks, smartphone screen gabs, and colour bars beside up-close flowers, clouds from an airplane, art in exhibition spaces, dancing friends, and even the artist in the process of 'giffing' a GIF.

Paul Wong's artist talk *Now + Then (Mobile Media: Video Portapak to Smart Phone)* was presented as part of the Gallery's Transpacific Transect Speaker Series on January 23, 2013, in partnership with Kwantlen Polytechnic University Fine Arts. Photograph by Enrico Bargados.

### ***About the Artist***

Born in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, in 1954, Paul Wong is an award-winning artist and curator known for pioneering early visual and media art in Canada, founding several artist-run groups, leading public arts policy and organizing events, festivals, conferences and public interventions since the 1970s. He has shown and produced projects throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. His works have been presented in solo exhibitions at Le Mirage, Montreal (2016); Presentation House Gallery, Grunt Gallery, Satellite Gallery, Vancouver (2015); Winsor Gallery, Vancouver (2014); Surrey Art Gallery (2013); Richmond International Film and Media Arts Festival (2011); CODE at the Vancouver Winter Olympics (2010); Glenbow Museum, Calgary (2009); Vtape Video Salon, Toronto (2008); Vancouver Art Gallery (2002); and National Gallery of Canada (1995). He has participated in an extensive list of group exhibitions locally, nationally and internationally.

Wong is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Audain Prize for Lifetime Achievement (2016), Best Canadian Film or Video at the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival (2008), Canada's Governor General Awards in Visual and Media Art (2005), and the Trailblazer Expressions Award, from Heritage Canada, the National Film Board, and CHUM Limited (2003). Wong's works are in many public collections including the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Canada Council Art Bank (Ottawa), and the Vancouver Art Gallery, as well as numerous private collections and public commissions.

<http://paulwongprojects.com/>

### ***About the Writer***

Joni Low is a writer and curator from Vancouver, presently curator-in-residence at the Or Gallery. Recent exhibitions include *Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: 5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)* (2016: Or Gallery), *Hank Bull: Connexion* (2015-2017: national tour organized by Confederation Centre Art Gallery), and *Fountain: the source or origin of anything*, a public artwork by Laiwan (2014: CBC Plaza). She has written critical essays for exhibition catalogues and for publications including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Fillip*, *The Capilano Review*, and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. A member of the Doryphore Independent Curators Society, she has previously held positions at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Long March Space Beijing, and Centre A, where she developed a specialized public-access library on contemporary Asian art.

All weblinks in this document were up-to-date as of April 27, 2017.



#### About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey's UrbanScreen is Canada's largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset, and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming. UrbanScreen's 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

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