

Ken Lum

ENTERTAINMENT FOR SURREY

At a Critical Juncture: On Ken Lum's Entertainment for Surrey

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Kristina Lee Podesva, 2011

For over three decades, Ken Lum has consistently tested and expanded the limits of contemporary art, contributing to the field principally as an artist, and also as an educator, curator, critic, and editor. Working across many roles and arenas, whether local, national, or international in scope, he has passionately pursued an ongoing and ever evolving practice, which has established him as a significant voice speaking from and to Vancouver, Canada, North America, and the wider, global sphere. Featured in high-profile exhibitions and international platforms including biennials and permanent public

Ken Lum
Entertainment for Surrey, 1978

video: 1 minute 5 seconds
SAG 1990.04.01
Gift of the Artist

screen capture from video

art commissions, his work remains an active and vital force no less today than in history. Although identified with the internationally recognized “Vancouver School” of conceptual photography (also known as Photoconceptualism) associated with artists such as Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, and Rodney Graham, Lum’s distinctive, idiosyncratic, and globally-oriented body of work exceeds the limits, geographic or otherwise, inherent in such identifications.

Coincidentally, it is identity and identification as a dynamic process rather than a static phenomenon

that the artist successfully speaks to by means of his varied works and activities. The versatility of Lum’s engagement with art speaks at once to and from many places and perspectives that highlights a position and practice of *critical juncture*. Creating proximities between spaces conventionally held apart or distinct, his work abbreviates many distances spanning poles and divides, among them, art/non art, public/private, and local/global. By using forms common to the street (e.g., commercial signage, neon lights) and others found in the home (including furniture, mirrors, and candid snapshots) Lum’s work



Ken Lum, *Entertainment for Surrey*, 1978, video: 1 min. 5 sec. (screen capture) SAG 2009.06.01 Gift of the Artist.

transports everyday experience into the space of art, both physically and conceptually. At the same time, through projects sited in zones of public movement and exchange such as subway stations and street corners, he conversely locates art into the everyday. To this mixture of mediums, formats, and audiences, the artist adds a mixture of strategies that similarly connect rather than separate spaces, utilizing the immediacy of emotional address to straddle the gap between art's more abstract character and its real life references. These strategies simultaneously narrow the expanses that, like borders, unnecessarily split and isolate cultures, languages, classes, territories, groups, and, ultimately, individuals from one another, putting forward an art that is relatively more accessible rather than less.

Whether through humorous or tragic language and imagery, and often both, Lum introduces a range of responses and relationships, among them, empathy and accusation. *Entertainment for Surrey*, one of the artist's earliest works from 1978, presents an intriguing case in point that intimates sadness and strength in equal measures. At first glance, the work appears as a single channel, black and white video documenting scenes from a performance the artist undertook while standing near a highway. Closer examinations, of course, reveal details glossed over in quicker takes, compelling more complex questions and considerations about the piece. Compiling an analytical inventory of the work, a list might take shape around the following questions: Why does he stand there specifically? For how long does he remain there? Does he say or express anything? Where is he facing and at what is he looking? Does he interact with the motorists that pass by him? Or does he stand closed off and apart from them? What does the title suggest and what qualifies as entertainment in these actions?

To arrive at some answers, let us start with what is known. For instance, it is a fact that the artist stood in one place on a particular grassy spot, between a highway and overpass near the city of Surrey, for 4 days in a row during morning commute hours. As shown in the video, he stood motionless, speechless, and expressionless for that period. And, on the fifth day at the same time, he replaced his own body with a cardboard cutout to complete the performance on a day that, presumably, coincided with the conclusion of the commuters' work week. Although a performance, the actions of the artist suggest, through muteness and stillness, the appearance of an object, pointing to a problematic aspect of any immoveable identification or identity imposed on an individual. It is this melancholic performance of non-movement that points to the tragic enactment or the conversion of people (subjects) into things (objects). In this sense, the commuters and viewers are thus witness to the dehumanizing objectification of a man, made more apparent at the moment the artist swaps



Ken Lum, *Entertainment for Surrey*, screen capture (detail)

his three-dimensional body with a two-dimensional piece of cardboard. Yet, at the same time, this man, the artist, bears witness to our participation in objectification. We are looking at him while he looks back at us in a gesture paradoxically defying and confronting us with objectification, whether intentional or accidental.



Ken Lum, *Entertainment for Surrey*, screen capture (detail)

Playing the role of a silent witness is, however, only one role among the cast of characters the artist could be performing. As the silent witness recedes within a particular interpretation, could it be possible that a sentinel advances according to a different line of thinking? Standing in a position that recalls the “at attention” pose assigned to soldiers and guards, especially at Buckingham Palace, the artist puts notions of vigilance, defense, and protection into circulation. And, circulation, or the space of movement between fixed points, designates a crucial contrast in relation to the artist’s immobility, expressing what is a complex and unlikely “fortress” to protect. Nonetheless, the in-between-site, where convergences and divergences articulate themselves as highways and overpasses, take up substantial space within the framing of the work. The artist,

therefore, shifts attention away from the idea of subjects and objects as discrete and unchanging toward the dynamic relationships that arise between them and the spaces they inhabit.

What mysterious entertainment might the witness or sentinel or other figure supply in Lum’s performance? It is hard to decode with certainty, but clues flicker in and out of sight. For the commuters en route to work, any leisure lies someplace and sometime far off, distant. Yet, despite that distance, we find here in the artist’s gesture and duration of engagement over the course of the work week, a place for art. It is a place for everyone and anyone that passes by it and find themselves at a critical juncture.

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