

chinatown **INF|lux**

Asian Arts Initiative

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Tomie Arai

Skowmon Hastanan

Mei-ling Hom

Hirokazu Kosaka

Jihyun Park

Jean Shin

Steve Wong

Chinatown In/flux is a community-wide art exhibition created by seven artists, investigating multiple layers of change within Philadelphia's Chinatown—the changing demographics of the community, the expanding geographic borders of the neighborhood, and the shifting of perspectives among residents and tourists alike.

Chinatown In/flux happened in sites throughout Chinatown—storefront installations, woodblock prints in community and educational institutions, redesigned dinnerware in restaurants, public sculpture—giving viewers a chance to see art in everyday places, and to examine the community with new eyes, as a place inexorably In/flux.

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Asian American Specificity, A New Curatorial Hybrid

by Edwin Ramoran, *Curatorial Advisor*

Artists who identify themselves as Asian American challenge the notion of a homogenous 'American' culture. Exploring subjectivity in all its complexities and contradictions is not necessarily a clichéd descent into identity politics. It could also constitute a critical contestation of the kinds of sameness global capitalism is creating as it transforms people and communities around the globe to suit the needs of transnational corporate interests. People create culture to express their thoughts and feelings in complex, mediated responses to diverse historical circumstances, which in turn are shaped as their consciousness shifts in an ongoing mutual relationship between ideas and material conditions.

— Elaine H. Kim

Sometimes it almost feels like home. Other times it is still exotic. Can there be sameness without difference, foreign without familiar, xenophobia without comfort, amnesia without self, the curator without the artist? Are these the new hybrids that dare to characterize 21st-century art making and new identity politics?

Traditionally, the ideas of “curatorial practice” and “community-based” have been at odds and even exclusively separated for many reasons most likely related to the historic division of art and life in the United States. These strict oppositions are still based on the classic separations and condescension along categories of difference such as race, class, gender, age, disability, etcetera—the splits between the *everyday* and the *aesthetic*; home and museum; between high (*fine art*) and low (*popular culture*); and even more

tellingly the distance between the Western and Eastern and the ever widening gap between the wealthy elite and the poor, the working class. Curators, at times regarded as purveyors of taste and fashion, are perceived as coming from a privileged class, while the general public is stereotyped as the uncultured masses needing enlightenment. Many times, members of these groups over-emphasize such simplistic expectations, which merely serves to reinforce superior conceits or inferior insecurities.

Philadelphia’s Asian Arts Initiative’s inauguration of *Chinatown In/flux* is part of a radical challenge to established curatorial practices. An addition to the more recent development of outdoor exhibitions focused on Chinatowns, this project is similar to past exhibitions that include the groundbreaking *Sites of Chinatown*, organized by Lydia Yee for the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in New York in 1996, and *A Chinatown Banquet*, arranged by Mike Blockstein with the Asian Community Development Corporation and other organizations in Boston in 2001. Like the Boston project, *Chinatown In/flux* was realized through a pan-Asian non-profit organization. Like the New York project, *Chinatown In/flux* brought in artists to work with local businesses and to integrate projects within the Chinatown fabric. However, what is particularly unique to *Chinatown In/flux* is the extraordinary undertaking of a community-based curatorial practice led primarily by a progressive non-profit arts organization instead of a single individual.

Other site-specific curatorial projects—for example, *inSITE*, Tijuana and San Diego; *Brewster Projects* and *The*

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Peekskill Project, upstate New York; *Jamaica Flux*, Queens; among many more—were organized by curatorial teams and enlisted contemporary artists to connect with and make new public art projects for and informed by the different locations and cities undergoing economic and demographic changes. Yet these projects also regarded the curatorial role in its primacy. The Initiative has gone a step further with a genuine commitment to working with artists and communities by creating a hybrid curatorial role for itself. This hybrid role is probably more akin to other community-based models, like *Project Row Houses*, a response to gentrification in the Third Ward of Houston or *ActionLab: Collaborative Arts Projects*, a collaboration between the Bronx Museum of the Arts and the Point Community Development Center to realize interdisciplinary projects with residents of Hunts Point in the Bronx.

For *Chinatown In/flux*, guest curators were invited only as advisors in the process with other Chinatown members and the staff of the Asian Arts Initiative. Throughout this process, the Initiative shaped its progress from conceptualization to soliciting recommendations of artists from the curatorial advisors and managing an open call for proposals, to collectively selecting the seven artists to include, to assisting the artists with community contacts and supervising their eventual public exposition. Most significantly, the Initiative implemented this major project, probably the most ambitious in its twelve years, as a clear and strong reflection of its own organizational mission and goals—which include the forging of strong relationships with living members of the Chinatown community as they did with their oral history project *Chinatown Live(s)* in 2002. As with the aforementioned projects that make art more accessible to the public, the majority of the works in *Chinatown In/flux* are sited throughout Chinatown beyond the confines of the Initiative's own white cube gallery.

The concept of Chinatowns as sites for cultural engagement is probably not new, and may be just as old as the 150-plus years since the first U.S. Chinatown was formed in San Francisco. Chinatowns, like other neighborhoods and enclaves elsewhere, remain intrinsic centers for arts and culture, as well as everyday amenities, where flourishing populations live and work, partake in and preserve its benevolent associations, temples, churches, medicinal shops, senior homes, museums, parks, restaurants, schools, social services, etc.

The art projects of *Chinatown In/flux* were essentially learning experiences for the artists and constituencies involved. Merely placing studio work already done by the artists into a foreign context was never an option. This was not an ornamental undertaking intended to simply beautify or redo a décor. Artists and local audiences, businesses, and organizations had to get familiarized with each other and develop new ways of working together. The collaborative impulse retained an ongoing importance. In addition to spending considerable time in Chinatown, conducting interviews and creative workshops, employing translators, acting as a liaison with other organizations, businesses, and city agencies, and exchanging correspondence; all of the artists were also given a copy of the exhibition catalogue *Chinatown Live(s)* and had access to its online version “Beyond Borders: Oral Histories for Philadelphia’s Chinatown” at www.asianartsinitiative.org/oralhistory. In fact, many responses from the oral history project informed the projects in *Chinatown In/flux*. For instance, *Tell Me A Story*, the installation by Skowmon Hastanan at Serendipity Café, incorporates small thumbnail-sized excerpts of the oral history texts (in English, Chinese, and Vietnamese) and photographic portraits by Rodney Atienza, transferred onto clear and ruby teardrop prisms forming the strands of a chandelier. The artist selected images and phrases that speak about how it feels, especially

for new immigrants, to live in the United States. This intersection between two of the Asian Arts Initiative's creative projects buttresses *Chinatown In/flux* as a natural outgrowth of its collaborative endeavors in Philadelphia.

The most visible, public projects by Tomie Arai and Meiling Hom were originally to be installed in and near a rowhouse north of the Vine Street Expressway—the locus of current development and expansion of Chinatown. Many community members consider this new section of Chinatown North a symbol for the future of Chinatown. Ultimately, these two artists constructed works that clearly mark this site to encourage more dialogue on the impact of urban planning but also to remind the public of the historic and political role of the “Save Chinatown” movement that preserved Holy Redeemer Catholic Church, a longstanding Chinatown community center. Hom's banner image of the layered, photographed eyes of community members is a collective message to any encroaching interests: “We are here and we are watching you!”

Arai's jade-inspired *bi* is a large wooden form made of an overlapping composite cityscape based on Chinatown. Installed in the Vine Street Plaza, it noticeably marks a prime location that may one day become a more permanent public art site and another prominent gateway to Chinatown. The title *Swirl* itself may also hint at the artist's consistent interest in working with multi-ethnic communities throughout the U.S., another transitional quality of Philadelphia's new Chinatown.

Rather than focusing on the multilayering of cultures in Chinatown, Jean Shin's mixed-media installations make transparent some overlooked parts of the neighborhood. Using discarded prescription eyeglasses, the artist continues her signature recycling of neglected items as new sculptures and installations. Mounted onto storefronts, these lenses allow viewers to peek into a variety of workplaces: beauty salon, doctor's office, noodle shop. With varying degrees of prescription strength, they can either clarify or obscure the voyeuristic act depending on the viewers' own powers of sight. Shin's eyeglasses subtly suggest that inherent, conflicting perspectives exist in the concept *Chinatown*. The solid state itself is comprised of other vulnerable, malleable, and volatile qualities.

By conducting workshops with Chinatown community members, Tomie Arai, Hirokazu Kosaka, and Steve Wong emphasize the importance of process in gathering source materials for their projects. Wong compiled memories, narratives, and drawings that became the designs for fine dinnerware, or what is popularly called “china” in the U.S. By getting his own dishes fabricated by a U.S.-based company renowned for the finest examples domestically, Wong exposes the lucrative commodification of Chinese culture by a Western company and also counters the stereotypes and assumptions about Chinatown with the actual stories from people in Chinatown. He also updates Judy Chicago's historic feminist monument *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979) and reminds us of Tomie Arai's own table settings for her wedding banquet installation *Double Happiness* (1998).

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Kosaka continued his series of Japanese wood block prints titled *Ruin Map* (2002) that he produced from the drawings of maps based on the childhood hometowns of 100 elders in Los Angeles' Japanese American community. For *Chinatown In/flux*, Kosaka worked with elders from On Lok House, whose prints will be exhibited throughout Chinatown. Kosaka's piece also literally binds together the fragmented memories into a book intermingling images to make up a composite of contemporary Chinatown. Another cartographic work, Jihyun Park's more sculptural map of Chinatown uses various lengths of incense sticks similar to his inverted map of Manhattan, this time translating the physical outline shape of the area of Philadelphia's Chinatown as the Chinese character for "Middle Kingdom"—one of the names that China uses to refer to itself. Representing the map of Chinatown as a Chinese character itself reinforces the "China" in "Chinatown" and is also consistent with the artist's use of wordplay as a metaphor for the struggles of learning a new language.

While it can be stated that *Chinatown In/flux* exists because of its own cultural specificity—a Chinatown specificity—and like many other Chinatowns throughout the U.S., Philadelphia's Chinatown is urban, largely immigrant, merchant, and working-class. Yet the reality holds: this particular Chinatown is not fixed as "only Chinese" and its residents and employees are from Hong Kong and Fujii, from Indonesia and Vietnam and Mexico. They are also pan-Asian American, non-Asian, ethnically diverse, multigenerational, multilingual, transcultural—always changing, always swirling. *Chinatown In/flux* allowed for another opportunity to investigate Chinatown's own site specificity as a diverse ethnic enclave.

Within the context of Asian American contemporary art, *Chinatown In/flux* has provided for the cultural production of new works centered on Chinatown experiences and an involved process in which most of the artists of Asian descent felt like "outsiders" to Philadelphia's Chinatown, yet found ways to create across commonalities and contradictions with equal lucidity. The projects produced are testaments to the artists, their dynamic ideas and altruism, and the firm obligation to the arts as a means of building community, as well as encouraging a non-traditional art-going audience to support Asian American cultural production. In an age where cultural specificity is salable, *Chinatown In/flux* can serve as an example of how to define what responsible "cultural tourism" can mean today, including how a non-profit arts organization can be an integral part in community and economic development without compromising its vision or resorting to self-exoticization.

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