

20+
YEARS
WITTE
DE
WITH

Edited by

Zoë Gray
Nicolaus Schafhausen
Monika Szewczyk

**WITTE DE WITH
PUBLISHERS**

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MELLY SHUM HATES HER JOB BUT WHAT WOULD SHE THINK OF WITTE DE WITH?

BY
KEN LUM

In 1990 I had the honor of being one of the inaugural exhibitors at Witte de With, with a survey of my furniture sculptures, language paintings, and photo-text works. The latter included *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1989), a photograph of a disheveled young woman sitting in a cramped office juxtaposed with the text, in large letters, that gives the work its title. The word “HATES,” spelled out in vibrating red type, speaks of Melly’s frustration, even though the voice of the text is ambiguous. Before the show at Witte de With, this work was only ever shown indoors, alongside other artworks. When I was asked whether I would agree to remake one of my photo-text works in billboard form for display on the street in Rotterdam, I immediately thought of Melly Shum. After the work was taken down, shortly after the exhibition ended in January 1991 (it had become weathered), something extraordinary happened: The Witte de With staff received several telephone calls and a number of written messages protesting the disappearance of Melly Shum and demanding her reinstatement. Asked why it was important for the work to return to the corner of Witte de Withstraat and



Ken Lum, poster version for Rotterdam of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989



Ken Lum, poster version for Rotterdam of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989

Boomgaardstraat, one caller reasoned that every city needs a monument to the problem of hating one's job. The work was reinstated several weeks later, and since then Melly Shum has become much more than a landmark for the people of Rotterdam: She exists as a dynamic symbol of the relationship between Witte de With and the world at large. The ways people have interacted with *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* continue to surprise me. Flickr and Facebook pages have been created in her honor, and her persona has even been adopted by a Twitter user, who regularly tweets about hating his job. While I may have created *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, the public has activated the work far beyond my initial intentions. This was made possible largely by Witte de With's attempts to extend contemporary art beyond its walls.

In providing me with the opportunity to situate *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* in the public realm, Witte de With accelerated my growing interest in making public art. At that time, in 1990, it was clear to me that Witte de With understood the historical impasse that confronted art museums. That year marked the beginning of an interregnum period, bracketed by the demise of Neo-Expressionism, with its problematic correspondence to conservative sentiments in art, and the emergence of a globalizing art world, with its acknowledgment of postcolonial theories and adoption of Neo-Conceptualist tactics. The impasse Witte de With faced then is one it continues to grapple with today. It is eschatological in nature and has much to do with the life-denying repressiveness of capitalism as expressed by an gnostic separation between the museum and the outside world. During the 1960s and 1970s, Conceptual artists insisted on the extension of art beyond the control of a hermetic museum. They challenged the containment of art both ideologically and physically. Apparatuses of ideology were exposed and the status of the art object called into question. Somewhat ironically, Witte de With seems to have absorbed lessons from Conceptualism that many artists working today have either forgotten or have chosen to ignore.

Since its inception, Witte de With has faced the constant challenge of extending aesthetic language into public space via its public programming and publishing projects. Its continued vitality will depend on the transparent ways that it uses the tools of the institution for speaking truth to power. Housed in a former school building, the pedagogical impulse of Witte de With's activities is strong. Notable is the fact that its appearance continues to resemble a school, thereby visually presenting itself as "an alternative to both the classic museum for modern art and existing artists' initiatives." Because of the way that Witte de With has maintained its ties to public education in such a visual way, the question of who constitutes the public is constantly foregrounded.

A tour of Witte de With reveals a striking modesty. There are no freight elevators, even though the primary exhibition rooms are on the upper two floors of the four-story building. This indicates how the structure itself was never fully retrofitted. While a major renovation is currently being contemplated, questions will have to be asked about how changes will affect the public character of the building. Currently there is no café or restaurant, nor is there a bookstore offering T-shirts and other knickknacks bearing Witte de With's logo. While the lack of branding may seem refreshing to some, like myself, the pressure to increase awareness of the center among potential visitors is strong, particularly in today's context of budgetary constraint and a populist logic that measures institutions according to public-image branding and visitor numbers. Other factors are overlooked. Witte de With's staff is small in comparison to that of peer institutions and, moreover, there is a term limit of six years for its director, which means a limited time to make a mark. Far from constraining what Witte de With can do, however, this instituted modesty has cultivated an intellectual fleetness and creativity that translates into openness and innovation. A problem afflicting too many art museums today is the alignment of institutional authority with an air of exclusivity, the message being that art is largely for those who possess economic wealth or an academic education. More than a matter of public accessibility, this works against the ideal of trust between audience and institution. Trust cannot be built without an audience, and the wider the audience or the public, the wider the trust – with implications for issues of polity.



Ken Lum, poster version for Rotterdam of Melly Shum Hates Her Job, 1989



Ken Lum, poster version for Rotterdam of Melly Shum Hates Her Job, 1989

Witte de With's program is ambitious and its exhibitions can be difficult; as it expresses in its mission statement, concessions are not made concerning content.² Yet I have always trusted that such programming is developed with the following Conceptualist dictum in mind: "It was the result of a greater aesthetic open-endedness that allowed art to intersect with an expanded range of social life."³ While, as Michael Brenson notes, openness and transparency have become catchwords for many museums, the real measure is how these terms are expressed psychologically within and beyond the experience of the exhibition sites. "How much," Brenson asks, "does being open and transparent challenge power and how much does it reinforce it?"⁴

Following the devastation wrought by the Second World War, Rotterdam opted for reconstruction that took into account an increasingly globalized world defined by the expressions and agonisms of a postcolonial condition. The city made the bold decision to reimagine itself according to innovations in architectural and urban planning while also striving to achieve social objectives for regeneration. In 1990 the world was a very different place than it is today: Apartheid was still in effect in South Africa; the Soviet Union was still in existence; and analysts were only beginning to recognize China as an impending world economic power. By the mid-1990s, theories of globalization as constituting a new world order abounded. Hence, Witte de With was founded in a context that saw the emergence of the world citizen, understood as a product of a post-apartheid, post-Soviet, and post-Maoist set of conditions.

I interpret Witte de With's mandate in terms of the development of contemporary art for a world defined by the often involuntary movements of peoples around the globe. Melly Shum herself moved from Vancouver to Rotterdam. Her presence on the side of the Witte de With building serves as a salient reminder of the precarious relationship between the local and the global. Local identities can only be defined by breaching the dichotomy of the global and the local. Conversely, the fraught phenomenon of globalization can be understood best through a consideration of local traditions and histories. In *The Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci claimed, "If it is true that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world."⁵ What Gramsci was arguing for was the empowerment of individuals to develop a wider understanding of the world in its historic richness and complexity, particularly with respect to the bridging of differences from one community to another. In the context of an increasingly multicultural and multiracial Rotterdam, it seems to me that Witte de With assumed, with great clarity and prescience, a role for contemporary art in facilitating just such a wider understanding, believing, as Edward Saïd did, that "there is a common field of human undertaking being created and recreated, and no amount of imperial bluster can ever conceal or negate that fact."⁶ This is not to say that Witte de With has overcome the challenges of reaching out to the public. It has not. Moreover, given the complexity of the public, it would be impossible to satisfy all expectations or respond to all criticisms. The important point is that Witte de With has an understanding of its own historical position, and that this guides its mission.

Visiting Rotterdam in early 2010, I noticed many changes throughout the city, particularly in terms of its increasingly multicultural appearance. A Chinatown is emerging not far from the Central Station and the area of Zuidplein is arguably one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in all of Europe. The city, along with Witte de With, continues to interpret and reenvision the subject of identity on multiple levels. While the city's aims may be to alleviate social tensions, I read the aims of Witte de With differently. Its purpose is not so much to remedy social tensions as to provide an outlet for their expression through art in as surprising an aesthetic language as possible. In so doing, it may seek a role for art that is aligned to a more complete experience of the present moment.



Ken Lum, poster version for Rotterdam of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989



Ken Lum, poster version for Rotterdam of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989

EPILOGUE

In the summer of 2010, Witte de With presented a Chinese-language version of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* on the front of the Dutch Culture Center in Shanghai, as part of the exhibition *Morality Act VIII: Nether Land*, presented alongside Expo 2010. Concurrent with the opening of the Expo was the revelation of numerous jobsite suicides at a factory in Guangdong Province owned by Foxconn Technology Group – where the world’s Nokia phones and iPhones are produced. One news headline reported that Foxconn workers “feel quite lonely.”⁷ As workers went on strike, Foxconn responded by raising the wages of its production-line workers, a decision met with headlines full of foreboding and uneasiness such as, “The end of cheap Chinese labor?” and “Companies brace for end of cheap made-in-China era.”⁸ In what way did Melly Shum’s presence in China at this time tap into deeper global forces, as embodied by the striking workers who were so unhappy with their jobs? Such a question could not be asked were it not for a modest contemporary art center in Rotterdam that has perspicaciously extended itself into the world.

1. “Institution and Mission,” Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, http://www.wdw.nl/general_about.php (accessed 28 July 2010).
2. Ibid.
3. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, eds., *Art After Conceptual Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 14.
4. Michael Brenson, “The Curator’s Moment” (1998), in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 60.
5. Antonio Gramsci, “Selections from the Prison Notebooks” (1971), in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 60.
6. Edward Said, “Dreams and Delusions,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 652 (21–27 August 2003), <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/652/op1.htm> (accessed 3 August 2010).
7. “Foxconn suicides: ‘Workers feel quite lonely,’” BBC News (28 May 2010), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10182824> (accessed 1 August 2010).
8. “Companies brace for end of cheap made-in-China era,” *Japan Today* (12 July 2010), <http://www.japantoday.com/category/business/view/companies-brace-for-end-of-cheap-made-in-china-era> (accessed 2 August 2010), and R.A., “The end of cheap Chinese labour?” Free Exchange blog, *The Economist* (18 July 2010), <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2010/07/china> (accessed 2 August 2010).



Morality Act VIII: Nether Land, Dutch Culture Center, Shanghai (Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989/2010, Chinese version)

COLOPHON

EDITORS

Zoë Gray
Nicolaus Schafhausen
Monika Szewczyk

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Jeroen Marttin
Laure-Anne Tillieux

ESSAYS BY

Koen Kleijn
Ken Lum
Andrew Renton

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

Juan A. Gaitán
Zoë Gray
Belinda Hak
Jeroen Marttin
Monika Szewczyk
Laure-Anne Tillieux

TRANSLATIONS

Walter van der Star (English to Dutch)
Bookmakers (Koen Kleijn's essay, Dutch to English)

ENGLISH PROOFREADING

Zoë Gray
Rebecca Roberts
Monika Szewczyk

DUTCH PROOFREADING

Solange de Boer
Belinda Hak
Jessie Hocks

FACT CHECKING

Angelique Barendregt
Jane Fawcett
Amira Gad
Emmelie Mijs
Jeroen Marttin
Laure-Anne Tillieux
Gino van Weenen

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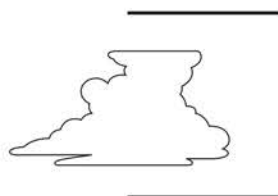
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+1 212 627 1999
dap@dapinc.com
www.artbook.com

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publications@cornerhouse.org
www.cornerhouse.org

EUROPE AND REST OF THE WORLD

Idea Books, Amsterdam
+31 (0)20 6226154
idea@ideabooks.nl
www.ideabooks.nl



Witte de With
Center for Contemporary Art
Witte de Withstraat 50
3012 BR Rotterdam
The Netherlands
www.wdw.nl