



Henry Tsang: *the map is not the territory*

SPEAKERS

Grace Kook-Anderson, Henry Tsang

- G** Grace Kook-Anderson 00:05
You're listening to the Portland Art Museum podcast. My name is Grace Kook-Anderson and I'm the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art. On the last episode, we learned more about Portland artist Fernanda D'Agostino, whose work can be seen as part of "the map is not the territory" through May 5 2019. On this episode, we hear from Henry Tsang, a multimedia artist living in Vancouver, British Columbia. His entrancing video installation "Tansy Point", is located in a dark gallery of the side of the sculpture court, where visitors first encounter Fernanda's work. More information about Henry and relevant links are included in this episode's description. A full episode transcript can be found at PortlandArtMuseum.org/podcast. This is the Mostly unedited audio from an interview with Henry. You'll hear my voice from time to time if there is a shift in topics, or to add more information. Until then, this is Henry Tsang.
- H** Henry Tsang 01:12
Well, my name is Henry Tsang, and I'm an artist here in Vancouver, BC, Canada. I grew up here. We moved here when I was three and three quarters from Hong Kong. And other than that, I've lived in LA, and Southern California for three years when I did my grad studies, and I taught for a year down there. At some point when I was really young, somehow I got into my head that I wanted to be an architect. And my parents liked that idea because it's a respectable profession. And I never really kind of pursued it at all. I never really looked into design much. But later on when I went into sciences, I started

University in physics and really didn't like my first year science experience. But my one elective was fine arts. So that was kind of the other thing I liked besides physics and when I was younger, so I went that direction. And it's been great. It wasn't part of the family background. I think I took a painting in the park, sort of community program when I was six or so. Oh, I did ceramics once, too, and I was forced to make an ashtray with all the other kids. No one smoked in the house. But that was the norm back in the 70s. At University, at University of British Columbia where I went to school I started off the physics there and shifted over to visual art. There was an instructor who was very influential for me and his name is Roy Kiyooka and he's a Japanese Canadian artist who got kind of famous as a painter and then he decided to stop painting and primarily shifted over to poetry and sculpture and making little chapbooks and performative kind of stuff he is definitely of the hippie era. Vancouver's not a bad place to live. Well, I grew up here, my parents are here. We had kids here. I mean, there are other really great cities, either for art or just to live in. Well, it's a very small art scene. There's a but there's very influential people who've been very successful internationally. Like the photo conceptualists, for instance, right, people who kind of carved out a market and museum presence, I guess I mean, earlier on, there were people who brought the conceptualists into town and showed them before they got really famous, the primarily Americans and some Canadians. And that had a specific kind of influence. And then you had someone like Jeff Wall, and Rodney Graham start to really succeed in that international scene in the, I guess, late 80s, early 90s. And that's helped support a kind of reputation Vancouver has for photo conceptual, conceptualist kind of practices. It's it's much more diverse than that. But, you know, a certain kind of branding happens, right? And, but the Vancouver art scene is much more diverse than that. Sure. I mean, in terms of the art scene, there's much more happening in LA, and there's a huge market down there, etc. But I don't make my work for the market and the market so far hasn't really been that interested. in my practice, so it's not, that's not a reason to do anything for me. So far. One always hopes that one has an audience, right? And I do I know I do know that there are some people who follow my work. Every artist makes work for themselves. You have to, because you need to feel that you're, you're you're growing, you're taking chances, you're exploring something, or at least, I would hope that those are all things that they endeavor to do with every new project. Along the way, one hopes that there are people who appreciate that and support that, hopefully have some conversations that your work will invoke. Sometimes it's hard to know sometimes it gets a response, so you don't anticipate you have to Take responsibility for all that. Sure. But yeah, I can't count record sales, right? I can't I can't count downloads of, of things. I don't have those kind of metrics. So I'm hoping also that the work will be there for the time that I'm not around and hopefully will contribute to other kinds of conversations posthumously. But I don't really make it for for the future. I try and make it for now because I'm living here in this particular part of the world with this confluence of different histories and, and people and influences and

desires and hopefully what I'm making is a reflection of, of various conversations. Okay, so "Tansy Point", this piece I'm making for the Portland Art Museum, it's a really exciting opportunity for me because I've been interested in Chinook jargon since 1990. 1990 when I was doing research up in Kamloops BC, which is a town about four hours away from here in the interior, and I was doing research in the archives I came across of this newsletter that the local missionary had been publishing using a French shorthand to, to phoneticize generic jargon and also translations in English and French. So since then, I've been really curious about how Chinook jargon function as a trade language as a pigeon as a way for people from different cultural backgrounds to find a way to communicate together. It's a very dynamic language, it's not a fully fledged language. So since 1990, I've delved into Chinook jargon for a few projects, including a public artwork down on False Creek here by the waterfront in Vancouver. And so when I was invited by Portland Art Museum to make a new piece I thought, Oh, this is a great opportunity to, to look into the region where Chinook jargon first began, including French and English and other whatever other languages I came into contact. When the first fort it was built in Astoria by John Jacob Astor. in my research, I came across this piece of land that is currently being sold to the Chinook nation that is significant in many different ways historically for them, but also for American history. And in 1851. At this location, Tansy Point, at the mouth of the Columbia River. A treaty was signed by all the lower Chinookan peoples came over the course of, I think, what five days and met the Indian agent. His name was Anson Dart. And they came upon an agreement, a treaty, they signed it. And that winter that people waited for the provisions to come as part of the agreement. It never came. That was the worst winter in generations, they almost all died. The the people who are left around the mouth with a Columbia then, because Congress didn't ratify it, and since then is still hasn't been so from that day on, they've been fighting for recognition they've been fighting for that agreement to be honored that they signed and the government at signed or the government representative had signed. So this project is a video piece that visually documents that site and sort of a mapping of that site does a 360 camera view of that in entire landscape. And the text the voiceover is of the chair of the Chinook nation, Tony Johnson, reading out loud in Chinook jargon, which would have been the language that had been used between the Chinook people and the Indian agent Anson Dart a piece of writing by both the the Chinook people, actually Tony Johnson himself, as well as a white observer at the Chehalis treaty that was attempted by the governor of Washington A few years later, there was an observer, a white observer who wrote about that experience and criticized the way that the Americans were making, we're treaty-making at that time. And I find that a really significant and important historical document. So both these both these texts are in Chinook jargon as a voiceover and then the English literal word for word translation is part of the projection. But there's a visual play off of your body as an audience member to expose that text. Otherwise you don't actually get access to the English. Tony Johnson is the chair of the Chinook nation. And he's a really busy guy, I can't believe he gets as much

done as he does with 24 hours a day. And he's got five kids, I don't know how he pulls it off, it's amazing. But he participated in this project in a way that there's no way that it could possibly happen without his contributions. He, he wrote one of the two sections of the text, he translated the two sections of the text into Chinook jargon. And he did English translation. That's a literal word for word translation, which is the way I've approached Chinook jargon in the past, there's something really beautiful when you take a language and you go to another language and then you come back to the original language, that double translation, that 360. But it, it's already transformed when it goes to another linguistic space, and it transforms again to the third space, except it's the same space as the first one. So what happens in that broken telephone? You know that game that I found it in England, they call it Chinese telephone. For them Chinese was all gobbledygook. But here in North America think we called it broken telephone. We whisper and someone's ear and they whisper in someone else's a year. And then the final phrase that comes out and you compare the first one in the last one. So that literal translation of word for word, through a Chinook jargon, which only has so many hundreds of words. You have to be creative and describing what certain attributes might be. So, I think my, I did a public artwork using Chinook jargon. And the first word in the text was "welcome". And it got translated as "good intentions you come". Actually, it started off with Hi. Hello. Well, you know, but good intentions you come. So, for me, that was such a beautiful way of communicating intent and expectation. Because if you don't have good intentions when you come, you're not welcome. So we have to presume you have good intentions because we don't know if your friend or enemy yet. Yeah, so that's sort of a little theme that I keep returning to is what happens when you translate culture? And what is cultural translation? Is the same thing, or the same idea, or the same smell? Does it have the same meaning and the same reception in, in other parts of the world amongst different people. Even within the same room, different people have their own subjective approaches to something but take it somewhere really far away where there's no way those people would ever be in the same room. Well, what happens then? Is it the same anymore, and that brings up questions of universality, which I don't think people really talk about anymore. It's been replaced.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 14:43

"Tansy Point" is truly mesmerizing. I've often caught Museum visitors walking past the projection, revealing the English translation and stopping in their tracks. And as Henry has said, This isn't his first time exploring the concept of meanings being lost in translation.

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Henry Tsang 15:02

I've done various projects with video. The last one was a collaboration with Simon Levin

and Glenn Lowry, called Maraya. And it's Arabic for mirror or reflection. And I looked at Vancouver's False Creek - it's a body of water that runs into this in and then it just stops. So that's why it's a False Creek. It was what interpreted by developers real estate company out in Dubai as a Dubai Marina. So they built their own version of their False Creek. And they came over here they saw, they liked what they saw. They head-hunted some of the folks who built it here, and they went back to Dubai and built their own version in the middle of the desert where they didn't have any water. So that there was a video component With a switch complex switching program it was and that was also a mapping of those two territories Vancouver's False Creek and Dubai Marina we kind of did this stacking of one over the other. So, there was this kind of comparison of commonality and difference between the two sites that were master planned by the same person. I look at it from a larger perspective of spatial practice. So space as in the built environment, natural environment, political historical, sexualized or gendered environments, certainly racialized and cultural cultural difference also having something that I address or am informed by. So the issues around urbanization, globalization and mobilization of people capital design and the fabrication of construction of desire, all that plays into who we are, and how you identify with something or reject something. So it's easy to find, I think, commonality between people who share a lot. in common, who are more obviously similar to yourself, it's harder to find common commonalities with people or or practices that you're not familiar with, and you just reject as being too different. It takes work to find the commonalities, but at the same time, there are overly simplistic commonalities that happen on a broader and broader scale, global scale nowadays with branding, with products and with lifestyles. So the differences in and are shrinking on one hand and that people start wearing the same branded clothes, their bodies start looking really similar but Are they really that much that much similar when they've grown up in a really different cultural context with really different values? So it's very complex, right. So I like I like to bring attention to those complexities and contradictions and presumptions that we have. Well, my practice takes a variety of different strategies and mediums as well as thematic directions. So I mentioned you know, the globalization, urbanization and cultural identity politics stuff. I'm also interested in a food and how, how we, whoever the we is, again, identify with a certain kind of food as being normative or desirable, and anything outside of that scope can seem to be too weird or it could be desirably exotic again, depending on perspective, we only had access to the local food until a very recent to until the recent era basically is a industrial revolution in England that shifted everything. Because I'm sure you had trade routes before people would trade for something that came over the mountain pass from somewhere else, right. You had the Silk Road and, and so forth. But you get perishables now from from 10 Time Zones away. It's pretty phenomenal. And that kind of mobility is around food stuffs also influences our bodies. And, you know, the world keeps getting smaller. But anyways, I'm digressing a bit. Yeah, food food is a growing kind of theme for me and something I'd like to explore more in the

future. So the large outdoor photograph that's 30 by 40 feet in On the outside of the Canadian Broadcast Corporation downtown office wall is called "Building A: Livestock Building". And it is a commission by the Vancouver Heritage Foundation in collaboration with CBC and the City of Vancouver public art. It's a part of a series of one year long commissions that go on the outside of the wall. And the photograph is of the one of the four remaining buildings on the Pacific national exhibition site, or Hastings Park as it was called, where the Japanese Canadians were moved from different towns along the west coast and then the British Columbia, where the Japanese-Canadians mostly where they're all almost all in British Columbia in 1942 right after Pearl Harbor happened in 1941, December 7, that immediately the Canadian government formed a BC Security Commission and they moved all these folks from out of town into Hastings Park. And the livestock building only ever housed animals before that, so there were stables and they were, there's manure there and all that kind of stuff. So the women and children went into that building. The men went into another one, boys in another one, others were commandeered to become the canteen or the bathrooms and so forth. So the entire site, which was a fairground was turned into a detention center. Prior to those folks being shipped out by train to the internment camps in other parts of British Columbia in Canada, a lot of Americans aren't familiar with that history in Canada, a lot of Americans thought that only happened to Japanese Americans, but it happened here, it happened very quickly. And one of the distinctions between the two countries is that the Japanese Americans were allowed to return to their homes which were kept in trust for them. And they were also allowed to go back to the west coast, many of whom were in California. The Canadians weren't allowed to do that they were still interned until 1949 and then they weren't allowed to come back to the west coast. So they were scattered throughout the rest of Canada. In the meantime, all the property was sold off to pay for their internment. So this photograph is of one of those buildings that housed the women and children. And I used construction industry thermal imaging camera that uses infrared technology to look for differences in temperature, which shows you like a crack you know, in a nuclear silo or heat loss or a damp area where liquid is cooling behind the walls. It's a \$24,000 camera. And so I rented it for one day wasn't cheap, and took these photographs. And so is a metaphor for looking at the hidden history behind the surface of that, of that historic building, and I also shot video, and so forth. So I'm hoping to turn this into another fully fledged project.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 23:30

You can find a link to the Vancouver heritage Foundation's website for "The wall" in this episode's description, or at portlandartmuseum.org/podcast



Henry Tsang 23:31

My practice is a reflection of my relationship to the local as well as the global so the local is very Vancouver's very specific as a city that's undergone particular kind of demographic shift when I grew up here, from the 60s onwards, it was a very Anglo WASPy town. And, and I don't and now it is depending on which part of Vancouver you go to there could be 70 80% Chinese ethnic Chinese, that's Richmond, probably 70 but it's hitting 80 pretty soon I think Vancouver proper I think it's somewhere maybe around 40 to 50% wasn't that that wasn't the case at all when I was growing up, had to deal with racism. I didn't know his Chinese till we moved here, right? I mean, like you don't you're not you don't know your difference until you're different if you're part of the dominant culture or, or the majority, ethnically, racially or culturally, unless you're oppressed. You just think you were the norm back then when I was three I didn't know is oppressed by the British. But if I had gotten older There, I would have learned that right. And that's one reason why we left besides all the terrorism that was happening everywhere and all the bombs being dressed up his presents that were set up all around in 67. So growing up here and watching that and experiencing that shift, and also seeing, learning about the relationships and dynamics that Vancouver has with the rest of the world, yeah has influenced my projects immensely. They're they're very specific that way. And I tend to make projects based on opportunities, invitations or responding to certain conditions. I'm not somebody who goes to the studio every day for three hours and draws or writes or paints or whatever. I don't have that kind of a practice they're project-based and I find I have to Figure out, first of all, what the research research entails. And then from there trying to figure out what form it could take, and enlist whatever help I can find along the way to make it happen. And as I branched into more projects involving food, figuring out other other processes as well, so always trying to learn something new with each project. So decolonization specifically is is a ongoing project given the history of so many empires all around the world and so many oppressions. So, whether it's for from the perspective of gender equality or you know, sexual orientation, Or class difference or resisting white nationalist narratives, which I think hopefully this "Tansy Point" project can contribute towards, then hopefully we can make a difference to to include more people within the realm of a good life. decolonization is work that more and more people are taking on, as opposed to, presuming that they don't have either a stake in it or they're not implicated. So no matter where you live in the world, there are various stages of acknowledgment, acceptance or denial about the power structures that have created the conditions in which we currently Live. And if you're a part of the point 1% Well, you hopefully you will use some of your privilege to make a difference for the betterment of not just the point 1%. And if you're someone who works in a, an educational context like I do as an instructor at a, at an art school, hopefully, when I bring it up in however, however I bring it up. I don't just sound like some, some old grumpy guy complaining. Who knows what my students think of me but I hope that it's in the work I hope there's an awareness and I hope that there's a an active

what acknowledgement and more than just a suggestion that things can be different and that there can be better for more people.

G Grace Kook-Anderson 29:01
Henry may not be alone in his desires for societal change and cultural acceptance, but the ways in which he sends his message are truly engaging. They give you the opportunity to recognize the need for change on your own.

H Henry Tsang 29:17
Well or "Tansy point", I hope there's going to be a process of discovery and surprise, with the interaction, the blocking of one of the two projections. I'm hoping that there will be some moment of learning. I hope that there will be some embedding of a question that will make them pursue some of the specifics of the Tansy Point treaty That was signed, and also what an agreement and what a promise might mean. Because there is a very rich and deep history of broken promises in within the history of colonizing the Americas.

G Grace Kook-Anderson 30:22
Tansy Point is a fantastic example of the effects of colonization that are unknown to most people. And if you take time to explore some of Henry's other work, you will see that uncovering these truths is part of his plan as an artist. It makes me look forward to learning what artists like Henry will do in the future.

H Henry Tsang 30:42
Well, there's a bunch of projects on the back burner that never quite got enough. Whatever support or commitment or what interest from my Self included, to to keep it going. So there's a bunch of sort of like floating the background of my brain or, or the hard drive. And then there's wishful thinking, wondering if I'll ever be able to make a project about Chinook jargon, down at the mouth of the Columbia River. So, you know, when an opportunity presents itself, you kind of, you know, window opens and you try to climb through it. So, I don't know, it's hard to tell.

G Grace Kook-Anderson 31:44
like most people who don't directly share the tragic experiences of a culture or society. There's always the moment of discovery. Henry, who's born in Hong Kong, moved to British Columbia and studied in Southern California doesn't Have an ancestral connection to the

broken promise that took place in 1851. But his practice as an artist is what brought him there.

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Henry Tsang 32:09

I was doing research online about the Chinook about, Chinook jargon and then the Chinook peoples around the mouth of the Columbia and I came across this crowdfunding campaign that's on right now. In fact, you can go and contribute towards the purchase of this land for the Chinook nation folks, so that they will have their ancestral sacred space where they existed before I mean, they were using that as a landing spot and they would collect sweet grass there and it was a special spot along the along the shoreline because the Columbia River is not a very friendly river for boating. It's a little scary. And this is a sweet spot for them. And it was also going to be a sweet spot for their future with the treaty.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 33:09

You can find a link to the Chinook Nation's GoFundMe page in this episode's description, or at portlandartmuseum.org/podcast. Jon Richardson, the Museum's video producer and producer of this podcast asked Henry about his preferred research methods. This is his big piece of advice.

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Henry Tsang 33:31

Go and visit the sites absolutely, absolutely crucial to go and visit the sites spend time there get a sense of one's body within the space do whatever other research around that space possible through whatever means so for Tansy Point, I went to different archives and libraries and and tried to talk to folks and and then Just to just just yeah, try to visit as many places around there as possible. Get a lay of the land and, and try to have conversations with people. So it's, it's kind of like being It's okay, this is a contradiction. It's like being a directed flaneur, a flaneur in 19th century Paris was somebody rich enough to not to have a job so that he and there's almost always a he back then could just wander the streets and explore and just discover and come across happenstance experiences of being alive in the city at that time. Well, to be able to do that as research, but without but having this kind of direction of this theme or this topic or this geography or this. Well, whatever kind of space that want to throw Is it from there's a real beauty. There's a real pleasure in that kind of openness of trying to just receive and and see what's out there. And then at some point you have to narrow down you have to distill what these influences are, what influences come your way are and you have to push to find something that will intrigue me that because I'm the one making the work, it has to

intrigue me enough to, to pursue it and there has to be something at stake. There has to be some kind of either contradiction or absurdity or injustice or something just like mind boggling about it, otherwise, it's not going to hold up to more scrutiny.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 35:49

Henry's commitment to research is clear, and he is no stranger to scholarly pursuits. I was especially eager to hear how Henry interpreted "the map is not the territory," a premise coined by Alfred Korzybski.

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Henry Tsang 36:04

Will I had never actually come across Korzybski before so it was it was quite a delight to be introduced to him. My initial response is more more of a geographers kind of like response to I'm not a geographer, but critical geographer social geographers perspective. So no kidding a map is not a territory. territory First of all, is about control and ownership. It is about having access and also influence on a particular space. A map could be an objective kind of document. representation of whatever that space is, but maps always reflect the desire to control that space. It's also interesting how many maps generated from different parts of the world usually centers the middle of the map is wherever the the power structure is. And then everything else is the boundary and the margins beyond it. But the maps around colonization, they were, are they were really interesting because they were these projections and and to get funding for these expeditions. They always made the distances really short to to where their final destination would be otherwise, if they also they didn't know for sure, they usually made it seem like Oh, yes, just over this mountain range. And then we get to China. You know, and then there's another 110 thousand kilometers to go but The map is not the territory for me is it also has that ling-Well, so there's a lot about linguistics, from what I could find out. And language is being a tool of representation for the world around us, as well as our perceptions of how we, how we inhabit this these spaces is, of course, an abstraction. And so it brings to mind what is reality? And what is what what can our imagination create, with through the tool through the technology of language? And to be able to name something to have a word for it. Is it also an attempt to control it. So these kinds of power dynamics I think are really interesting how it's going to manifest itself through the eight artists an exhibition I'm really curious about So I'm looking forward to seeing how my piece will be in conversation with the others.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 39:05

Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum podcast. With only a few weeks left for

"the map is not the territory," I encourage you to keep an eye on the artists' websites to see where these installations end up in the future. On the next episode, we hear from Charlene Vickers, another artist based in Vancouver, British Columbia. There is a fantastic video on the museum's YouTube channel of Charlene's March 22nd "Diviners Protection Performance." I'd like to thank Henry Tsang for his contribution to the exhibition, Jon Richardson, this Podcast's Producer, and thank you for listening.