

HIRAM TO

'KARAOKE'



INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
IPSWICH CITY REGIONAL GALLERY
AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
ARTISTS' REGIONAL EXCHANGE
EXPERIMENTAL ART FOUNDATION
UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

List of works

(All measurements in centimetres, width x height x depth)

'KARAOKE', 1990-92

7 heat-sealed type "C" photographs mounted on custom wood with slanted wood supports, 101 x 152 x 40 each

21 tables with tablecloths

Wood, lead, hardware, paints, starched fabric, embroidery, silk-screening, 50 (diameter) x 65 each

Frontispiece (from "Dr Mabuse the Gambler", Fritz Lang, 1922)

Framed type "C" photograph, 164 x 135 x 4

Works in this exhibition may vary according to venue and spatial considerations.

Hiram To

Born: Hong Kong, 1964. Education: Hong Kong and Scotland. Resides: Brisbane, Australia (since 1986).

Solo exhibitions include John Mills National, Brisbane; Hong Kong Festival Fringe 1987; Bureau Artspace, Brisbane 1989; *Pseudonyms, Object, Casual Victim*, Michael Milburn Gallery (Milburn + Arte), Brisbane 1989-91.

Selected group exhibitions since 1985 include *Performance Season*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 1987; *(I)magical Poetics*, Institute of Modern Art; *Site of Execution*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; *Work to Screen (Projecting Performance)*, Queensland College of Art Gallery, Brisbane 1988; *Proposals*, George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne; Contemporary Art Centre, Adelaide; Artspace, Sydney; *Stealing Blind*, Artspace, Sydney; *Estate*, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane; *Salle de Reconnaissance*, Institute of Modern Art; Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney; 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; *Random Access; Visual Poetics*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane; *Uncommon Knowledge; Outside the Greed of Silence*, IMA programme 1989; *Mist from the Chest*, Aglassofwater at Site, Brisbane; *NO*, Aglassofwater at Michael Milburn, Brisbane; *Dis/appearance*, national fax project 1990; *Body Without Organs*, First Draft West, Sydney; *Instant Imaging*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; *Doors*, Gold Coast City Gallery; *Microcosm*, Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney 1991.

Selected bibliography: Urszula Szulakowska, *Eyeline* 3, November 1987; Adam Boyd, *Agenda* 2, August 1988; Graham Coulter-Smith, *Photofile*, Winter 1989; Carol Hampshire, *Eyeline* 10, 1989; Hannah Elliott, *Agenda* 7/8, October 1989; John Stafford and Hiram To, *Broadsheet*, March 1990; Urszula Szulakowska, *Art & Text* 37, September 1990; Anne Kirker, *Instant Imaging* (catalogue), and *Imprint*, Winter 1991; Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Eyeline* 16, 1991.

Complete biographical details are available at the gallery for the duration of the exhibition.

Touring itinerary 1992 -

Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
6-29 February

Ipswich City Regional Gallery, Ipswich
6-27 March

Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
2 April - 2 May

ARX, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery,
University of Western Australia, Perth
April

Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
14 May - 14 June

University of Hong Kong,
Department of Fine Arts
8 - 21 September

Donna McAlear has worked as an administrator and curator in Canada since 1981. Most recently she was curator of contemporary art at The Nickle Arts Museum of The University of Calgary, Alberta. She moved to Brisbane in 1991 to conduct doctoral research in Cultural Policy Studies at Griffith University.

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Installation view detail: Brett Goodman.
Back cover photograph: John O'Brien, courtesy of the IMA.

Representation: Michael Milburn Gallery, 10 Petrie Terrace,
Brisbane, Australia Tel: 07-367 0277.

For further information write to: P.O. Box 98, Red Hill,
Brisbane, Queensland 4059 Australia.

'KARAOKE' is assisted by the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's Arts Funding and Advisory Body; the Australian Film Commission, the Queensland Film Industry Development Office; the Queensland Government through the Minister for the Arts, and the University of Hong Kong. Touring has been facilitated by the Institute of Modern Art.

Kara (empty) oke (orchestra)

A possible way to consider Hiram To's work is in terms of comparative sociocultural relationships. One such example might include a look at the associations of high art (and its historical canon) to popular media. Would an irreverent and ironic subtext emerge, one that posits the artist as textual critic (moralising, complicit, teasing, ambiguous?) of institutionalised and/or baser cultural productions and processes? Another selective reading might explore the interface of body (nature) and machine (technology) to review the locus of "person" in mass culture. Has the individual been subsumed, manipulated or glorified by the ubiquitous nature and profound influence of cosmopolitan telecommunication networks? Yet another may ask: In what context(s) does private expression (visual art/artist) situate itself now, and what is the community value (effect) of such practice? Clearly, Hiram's work may cause a reader to pose one, none, or all of these questions, the ethos of these being relative to the reader's interests, knowledge-base and experience. In the past, writers have exposed Hiram's work through some of these topical issues. So, rather than furthering precedential approaches or referring directly to **Karaoke** itself, I will offer an alternative mode of thinking about this installation, one that I have found evocative in my own acquaintance with the artist and his work.

Generally speaking, **Karaoke** put me in mind of current dissertations in the social sciences by ethnographer James Clifford and feminist Donna Haraway. These writers work in different fields and offer varied outlooks, but both have provocatively shown that postmodern strategies of "deconstruction ought to imply more than the exchange of one ideological frame for another" (Coulter-Smith, 1989:7). Concerned to move through and beyond postmodern theory, they elucidate poetic and political ways of coming to know and use recently gained perspectives of social difference. A most polemical and meaningful aspect of their methods is a tenacity to imagine possible world futures with a view to persuade epistemological change. Clifford's work surveys "hybrid and subversive forms of cultural representation, forms that prefigure an inventive future" (Clifford, 1988:17). Haraway seeks "a concept of agency that opens up possibilities for figuring relationality within social worlds where actors fit oddly, at best, into previous *taxa* of the human, the natural, or the constructed" (Haraway, 1991:21). When considered in tandem, their range of view is full of extraordinary, contradictory and destabilizing propositions. They fashion scenarios wherein new world players are inauthentic beings who negotiate flexible social arenas from sites of constant displacement. Yet, in this transitional moment (when we are looking back in order to move forward), Clifford and Haraway seem to proffer a liberating and prospective outlook.

Karaoke registers the dislocation of self and lived social relations on an unsettled world stage. It resonates today's experience of "perpetual displacement" explained by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* as "a form of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct" (1988:9). Clifford's study of Western vision and practice in twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art offers this impression of world culture:

This century has seen a drastic expansion of mobility, including tourism, migrant labor, immigration, urban sprawl. More and more people "dwell" with the help of mass transit, automobiles, airplanes. In cities on six continents foreign populations have come to stay—mixing in but often in partial, specific fashions. The "exotic" is uncannily close. Conversely, there seem no distant places left on the planet where the presence of "modern" products, media and power cannot be felt. ... One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighbourhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth (pp.13, 14).

By this point in time, postmodern scholars have well scrutinised the inadequacies and limitations of dominant epistemological traditions that have informed and secured twentieth century Western social and political technologies. These include traditions of evolution and progress, the appropriation of nature as an economic resource for products of culture, and the construction of the (Occidental) self from the reflections of the "other". Counteraction by marginalised groups to overarching patriarchal and hegemonic discourses has generated new possibilities for varied experiences and distinct ways of living to be represented in the global arena. Yet even now, when there is much evidence to suggest that people's assertion and intervention in the dominant cultural monolith have significantly challenged Western sociopolitical relations, traditional attitudes resist the push off centre stage. Epistemological change is slow-paced and frustrates. "Oppositional" strategies have effectively shattered the Western gaze but may lack visionary solutions. To quote Clifford: "It is easier to register the loss of traditional orders of difference than to perceive the emergence of new ones" (p. 15). Thus, the current face of "the West" reflects a "perpetual displacement" and its future manifestation is negotiable: an ambiguous and disorienting project.



The Perfect Body Is No Body

How might an interconnected and diverse cultural future be negotiated? Ours is an unprecedented time, when overlays of multivocal and multiethnic traditions coexist in fragmentary, often discordant, dialogue. As Clifford explains: "Twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages" (p. 14). He suggests that one may renegotiate new forms of interchange from the standpoint of "participant observation": "a state of being in culture while looking at culture" (p. 9). Critical to his proposal is that the participant observer be situated both inside and outside of the cultural forum. In this dislocated and shifting locale, one can remain "perpetually 'inauthentic': caught between cultures, implicated in others". For Clifford then: "Identity is conjunctural, not essential" (p. 11)

The notion of participant observation and how it may operate in flexible sites of displacement has been most radically imagined by Donna Haraway in her seminal feminist essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985). Haraway points out that discussions of everyday social relations are persistently expressed in hierarchical dualisms. Her view is that certain dualisms—such as man/woman, self/other, whole/part, reality/appearance, civilized/primitive, culture/nature, mind/body, truth/illusion—are problematic because they have well served, and continue to support, Western scientific and political frameworks of knowledge. She observes that these dualisms "have all been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of ... [those who are] constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the [Occidental] self" (p. 219). In her challenge to these symbiotic metaphors, she simultaneously critiques the mythic construct of "identity" that generates a desire for (unattainable) completion and holistic experience. Haraway seeks a destabilization of this entrenched border culture. Consequently, her vision does not rely on traditionally prescribed logics of dualism, appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification. Instead, she proposes that we might regenerate our limited concept of "identity" to enable a fuller (and more empowering) participation in sociopolitical relations, which are by now significantly determined by communication-based scientific and technological interactions. Thus, Haraway asks us to reinvent our self image through a recognition of the mediated experiences of a hightech world:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation (p. 191).

Haraway's political (science) fiction centres on a personal and collective self-fashioning that can bring about world change. Her (utopian) hope for cyborgs rests in their ethereal qualities. Cyborgs are hybrids of machine and organism, and so they are gender-neutral, multiethnic, and therefore are without purity of origin (and cultural baggage). A cyborg's very neutrality, mobility and technological skill, enables it to readily transgress precedential boundaries. Accepting (rather than resisting) their partiality of existence, cyborgs can take pleasure in the confusion of borders while interconnecting with a plurality of community forums. Cyborgs are quintessentially "inauthentic": the ultimate participant observers.

I Want to Make My Selves Partially Appear

Karaoke, in its relational fragments, seems emblematic of the confluence of object and subject in a state of perpetual displacement as articulated by Clifford and Haraway. Its very materiality—mute singers, untranslated braille codes, vacant lounge tables with only three legs—is destabilized, partially present, misfit. This empty space, inhabited by Chinese performers who give voice but are not heard by an absent audience, generates a disruptive void. The silent atmosphere and the serial images of anonymous karaoke singers causes the visitor to be held at a distance: there is no where to sit, no place to get comfortable, we are not at home. Yet ironically, such disconnection from the site, from its "exotic" characters, its meaning, makes one greatly conscience of one's own corporality. And while a lack of bodily presence and clarity of speech may permeate the overall construct of this empty orchestra, vestiges of familiar knowledges remain to enable access to the cultural play. Hiram engages directly the borders that mark difference: between cultural groups (the dominant ethnic make-up of the persons represented, including the presumed audience, are Caucasian and Asian); between conventional zones of creative production (art and entertainment, cinema and television); between constructions of self (does one express oneself best in reality or appearance?). **Karaoke** gives away as much as it withholds.

I would like to suggest that the implied ambivalence of **Karaoke** shares an affinity with the dislocated sites and inauthentic cyborgs welcomed by Clifford and Haraway as necessary for the generation of possible cultural futures. Hiram acknowledges the continuity of acquired cultural codes, but simultaneously resists a fixed usage of conventional discourses. He denies symbiotic constructs as essential and absolute to an understanding of life. Through strategies of silence and a refusal to engage oppositional metaphors, an empty orchestra is realised. The vacuity of this locale indeed conveys a sense of loss, but as Clifford and Haraway reason, this does not have to be viewed in terms of deprivation. Rather, a loss may open a space for confusion, and only in this transitional moment can one come to understand the inadequacies of historical certainty. **Karaoke's** Asian performers occupy displacement, and are kin to the cyborg entity discussed earlier. They draw our attention to the gaps between cultural traditions and experiences. Their performing attitudes suggest potentialities for reinventing partial selves from flexible vantage points—both via human interaction and fusion with simulated technological networks. Cyborg actors, inauthentic and dislocated, they challenge our desire for holistic authenticity with direct and disorienting questions: What is the point of understanding yourself through the reflection of someone else? What is the point of seeking something outside of yourself that isn't there? Perhaps an empty vision, from which to reinvent a series of partial selves capable of shifting with the moment, is preferable. An insightful Igbo saying (offered by way of James Clifford), aptly expresses the participant observer's condition in complex social relations: "You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade" (p. 15).

Donna McAlear

References

- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Coulter-Smith, Graham. "Salle de Reconnaissance." *Photofile*. Winter 1989, pp. 7, 8.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." In Linda J. Nicholson (ed). *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Haraway, Donna. "The Actors are Cyborg, Nature is Coyote, and the Geography is Elsewhere: Postscript to Cyborgs at Large." In Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (eds). *Technoculture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

杜子卿「空場」裝置

這個名為「空場」的裝置，是取材自電視一個新秀歌手比賽節目，杜子卿從影帶中剪取參賽歌手一些定鏡，這些亞洲面孔溶入他們所演繹的流行曲調，沈醉於個人的表演中；他所剪取的圖片，宛如宗教式祈求的面譜。

「空場」——即卡拉OK（日文之「無人樂隊」縮寫），這種消閒玩意，早已瘋魔亞洲及世界各地，但這次展出的「空場」卻相當嚴肅。杜氏的空場象徵著藝術這玩意，藝術家就是表演者、導演、監製兼宣傳——一個有待發掘的天才參賽者。「藝術家是天才參賽者」這概念，可從杜氏將圖片裝裱的手法中瞥見，他攝影了自己的皮膚，將負片裝嵌在圖片上下方作為襯托。

整個展覽佈置得像一個卡拉OK，放著一組組桌子，都是三隻腳的鉛足桌子，桌上的枱布刻有一篇盲人凸字並繡上一個數字，一派不願溝通的模樣，令人難以理解，這些桌子都是跛子，三條腿都是錯誤地安裝在臨時的軀體上，好像一群表演者集合在一個「空場」中。

杜子卿在香港出生，先後在香港及蘇格蘭兩地受教育。一九八六年起定居布里斯班，曾在澳洲各地展覽作品，「空場」裝置的最早版本是在布里斯班的現代藝術學院展出，其後又移師昆士蘭、悉尼、阿德雷德及珀斯等地展出。今次在港大展出的裝置，跟最早版本略有分別。

'KARAOKE'

An installation by Hiram To

8 - 21 September 1992

"What do you think of Expressionism Herr Doktor?"
"Expressionism is just a game, but nowadays in life everything is just a game."

Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler, Fritz Lang, 1922

I had a lot of peculiar near - sighted experiences ... One night I was sitting at the far end of a bar ... drinking a gin martini, and I noticed this very sexy guy down at the other end of the bar who seemed to be cruising me. So, you know, I started smiling suggestively, and doing things with my face that you do to attract people, but he kept staring in this uncommitted fashion, so this went on, and I had another drink, and finally I thought, obviously I have to make the first move with this one. So I screwed up my courage and stood up, and started walking down to his end of the bar. And, as I got closer ... Don't tell me, I said. When you got there you realised he was hideously ugly. Actually, it was worse than that, Libby said. Because when I got up close to him, he turned out to be a stain on the wall.

Gary Indiana, Horse Crazy , 1989

In Hiram To's installation, the Asian faces, recast from video stills of contestants in a televised new talent singing quest, are absorbed in their (re)interpretation of popular tunes, self-consciously mesmerised in a personal enactment; landscapes captured as masques of religious beseechment.

The frivolous pastime of 'karaoke' (contracted from the Japanese phrase 'empty orchestra'), popularised in bars all around Asia and over the world, is here a serious business. To's 'KARAOKE' is a metaphor for the game of art where the artist is actor, director, producer and promoter - a talent contestant waiting to be discovered. The artist's identification with the talent contestant is further referenced in the framing of the photographs with sections of negative images of his own skin.

Intruding into each of the photographs are captions borrowed from *Dr Mabuse, The Gambler*, a 1922 Fritz Lang film, wherein the monstrous criminal Dr Mabuse sets out to destroy his victims and their destinies. In the film's opening sequence, Mabuse shuffles portraits of himself made up in different guises, deciding on the mask for an occasion. The talent contestants in To's 'KARAOKE' parallel the personas within these captured disguises; willing participants in a system where each is invited to gamble on their possible fate.

The exhibition, like a karaoke bar, contains groups of tables. These are three-legged, lead-footed tables, their tablecloths imprinted with a braille text quote from "Horse Crazy" and embroidered (tattooed) with a number, a portrait of refusal, incapable of understanding and communication. The tables are crippled people, three-legged misfits trapped in temporal bodies, an ensemble of players in an empty orchestra - karaoke.

Hiram To was born in Hong Kong and educated in Hong Kong and Scotland. He has lived in Brisbane since 1986 and exhibited widely throughout Australia. 'Karaoke' was first shown at the *Institute of Modern Art* in Brisbane, and toured to *Ipswich Regional Art Gallery*, Queensland, *Australian Centre for Photography*, Sydney, the *Experimental Art Foundation*, Adelaide, and alternative versions at *ARX (Artists' Regional Exchange)* 1992 in Perth, Australia and the University of Hong Kong.