Melly Shum Hates Her Job but Not the Witte de With

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I had the honour of being the inaugural exhibitor at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art when it opened its doors in 1990. The exhibition was a survey of my furniture sculptures, language paintings, and photo-text works. One of the latter works included was *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1989). Represented is a dishevelled young woman sitting in her cramped office. Along with this photograph is text that echoes the title of the work. The vibrating “HATES” speaks to the frustration of Melly Shum, even though the voice of the text is ambiguous. Before the opening of the Witte de With, the 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 so that it could be displayed in a street context for Rotterdam, I immediately thought of Melly Shum.

After the work was taken down due to its weathered state, 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 Melly Shum to return to the corner at Witte de Withstraat and Boomgaardstraat, one caller reasoned that every city needs a monument to the problem of hating one’s job. Since then, Melly Shum has become much more than a marker for the people of Rotterdam: she exists as a dynamic symbol of the relationship between the Witte de With and the world at large. The ways in which people have interacted with *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* continue to surprise me. Flickr and Facebook pages have been created in honour of Melly Shum and her persona has even been adopted by a Tweeter who regularly tweets about hating his own job. While I may have created *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, the public has been activating the work far beyond my initial intentions. This is largely due to the Witte de With and its mandate to extend contemporary art beyond its walls.

In providing me with the opportunity to situate *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* in the public realm, the Witte de With accelerated a growing interest that I had in making public art. At that time, it was clear to me that the Witte de With understood the historical impasse that confronted art museums in 1990. This particular year marked an interregnum period comprised of several years 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 acknowledgement of postcolonial theories and adoption of neo-conceptualist tactics. This impasse is one that the Witte de With 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 agnostic separation between the museum and the outside world. During the 1960s and ’70s, conceptual artists insisted on the extension of art beyond hermetic museum control. 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, the Witte de With absorbed these lessons from conceptualism that many artists working today have forgotten or chosen to ignore.

Since its inception, the Witte de With has consciously defined itself as a venue primarily concerned with extending aesthetic language into public space via its public programming and publishing projects. Its vitality is derived from the consistently transparent ways that it uses the tools of the museum for speaking truth to power. Housed in a former public school building, the pedagogical impulse in the Witte de With’s activities is strong. Notable is the fact that the museum’s 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.” The question of who constitutes the public is constantly foregrounded because of the way that the Witte de With has maintained its ties to public education in such a visual way.

A tour of the Witte de With reveals a striking modesty. There are no freight elevators in spite of the fact that the primary exhibition rooms are located on the upper two floors of this four-story building. This indicates how the structure itself was never fully retrofitted. It is possible that a major renovation was not performed so as to maintain the public character of the building.

There is no museum café or restaurant, nor is there a bookstore offering t-shirts and other knickknacks bearing the Witte de With’s logo. Its total staff number is small in comparison to other peer institutions. Moreover, there is a term limit of six years for a director to make his or her mark. Far from constraining what the Witte de With can do, the 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 possessing economic wealth or an academic education. Such an alignment represents a crisis of division between the wider public and a narrower

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1 This statement is from the mission statement posted on the Witte de With’s website: https://www.wdw.nl/en/about_us/ (accessed 1 August 2019).
elite. It is much more than a matter of public accessibility. Trust must involve an audience, and a wider trust would involve a wider audience or public with implications for issues of polity.

The program of the Witte de With is ambitious, and its exhibitions can be difficult in the sense that “concessions are not made to content.” Yet I have always trusted that its programming started 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.” However, as Michael Brenson notes, openness and transparency have become catchwords for many museums in terms of their aims. The real measure, then, 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?”

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

The Witte de With defined its mandate in terms of the development of contemporary art for a world underlined 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 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 as two distinct terms. Conversely, the fraught phenomenon of globalization can be best understood 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.” 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 the Witte de With assumed, with great clarity and prescience, a role for contemporary art in facilitating just such a wider understanding, believing, as Edward Said 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.”

Visiting Rotterdam earlier this year, 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 diverse neighbourhoods ethnically in all of Europe. The city, along with the Witte de With, continues to interpret and re-envision the subject of identity on multiple levels. While the city’s aims may be to alleviate social tensions, I read the aims of the 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, the museum seeks a role for art that is aligned to a more complete experience of the present moment.

Epilogue

This summer the Witte de With presented a Chinese-language version of Melly Shum Hates Her Job on the front of the Dutch Cultural Centre as part of Expo 2010 in Shanghai. Concurrent with the opening of the Expo was the revelation of numerous jobsite suicides at a factory owned by the Foxconn Technology Group in Guangdong Province. It is here where the world’s Nokia phones and iPhones are produced. The headline of one news site stated that Foxconn workers “feel quite lonely.” Foxconn responded by raising the wages of its production-line workers in order to halt the spate of suicides and the ensuing publicity. This decision was met with some concern. Headlines such as “Companies brace for end of cheap made-in-China era” and “The end of cheap Chinese labour?” blared with foreboding and uneasiness. 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 the perspicacity of a modest contemporary art centre in Rotterdam to extend itself into the world.