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Introduction

Ken Lum Loves to Write: Twenty-Seven Years of Essays, Reviews, and Critical Texts

Kitty Scott
This book is a collection of Ken Lum’s writings from 1991 to 2018, highlighting his singular voice and perspective. Lum emerged out of Vancouver and New York in the early 1980s and went on to participate in the rise of a globalized contemporary art world from the 1990s onward. As an artist, he bridges the space between post-minimalist sculpture and post-conceptual photography, addressing the tensions of everyday life in so-called postindustrial societies. With his public art, photography, painting, and sculpture, Lum articulates what Nigerian curator and critic Okwui Enwezor—in one of the best overviews of Lum’s work—characterized as the “complex social questions of class, race, ethnicity, identity, indigeneity, migration and difference.” Pieced together, his multifaceted career creates a picture of an artist whose approach is highly adaptable within the field of art: a youthful Lum works as a gallery director, and later as a professor, critic, journal editor, and curator. Lum, it seems, is not content with merely being a successful Canadian artist; instead, he wants to extend his practice beyond the confines of making art and occupy almost every available role in the contemporary art world. Lum’s ability to write clearly and concisely is one of the enabling factors here; over time he publishes as an art historian, critic, curator, and diarist. Lum’s voice is very much that of an intellectual artist informed by a generous curiosity and a finely honed intelligence, buoyed up by a good education and life experience.

During the 1980s and ’90s, artists in Lum’s circle, such as Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall, were actively writing about Vancouver artists as well as international figures. By publishing both nationally and internationally, they called attention to themselves and made their work as artists and writers known to a larger, much broader community. At the same time, writing and language were fundamental components of Lum’s conceptual art. His early Language Paintings (1987) position fonts and graphics in a highly expressive but nonsensical way; the Portrait-Repeated Text series (1993) contains poem-like phrases that appear to be spoken by the individuals portrayed; the Four French Deaths in Western Canada series (2002) uses the form of the obituary to explain, with dry humour, the passing of four people; while his series of sign works, such as Shopkeeper (2001) and Strip Mall (2009), resembles commercial signage. In this context, it is odd to read Lum recounting his thoughts after an editor tells him that he is among a group of “artists who write.” He speculates in some depth on this statement in relation to his primary identity as an artist:

What exactly does this mean, “artists who write”? Are such artists considered less of an artist because they write; writing being something that falls outside of a normal artist’s range and interest? Are artists who write something more? Artists either with the

supplement of intelligence (good), or of scholarship (good and/or bad), or of academicism (bad)? What does it mean to categorize artists into those who write and those who do not write? Are those who write usually the theorizers for truer artists who theorize though their work only? Is one more tempted to criticize an artist’s work because he or she writes, especially if the perception exists that this is a chasm between what the artist makes as art and what the artist writes?²

Throughout the pieces in this collection, we find Lum repeatedly seeking out the “marginal” and “peripheral” parts of the contemporary art world in which he matured. He has personal experience, as Canada is often overshadowed by its far bigger neighbour to the south. Artists living in Vancouver in the mid-to-late 1980s considered themselves even more invisible as they were neither working out of Toronto, perceived to be the nation’s financial and geographic centre, nor out of Montreal, an equally powerful cultural magnet. While many artists have emerged from Canada and gone on to careers of international renown, the country still has a relatively small footprint in the international art world. Lum, it could be argued, owes some of his success to his ability to shapeshift and take on new roles in places far beyond Canada’s borders. By constantly changing his vantage point, his writings open up new perspectives and bring his readers along on journeys of discovery of artists working beyond the art world’s so-called “centres,” in countries such as Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, and Senegal. In doing so, Lum has found himself at the crux of many important global events.

Lum’s beginnings are humble. His story is that of a first-generation Canadian of Chinese descent, born in 1956 in the working-class Strathcona neighbourhood of East Vancouver. His grandfather, Lum Nin, came to the city as a teen in 1908 from a village in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Like many Chinese immigrants, he found work as a labourer on the Canadian Pacific Railway, and it took him over forty years to bring his wife and children to Vancouver.³ Lum’s family members held varied and precarious employment; at times, his grandparents picked fruit in Cloverdale and his mother worked in a sweatshop for a period. It was his mother who ensured that Lum learned some Cantonese—many of the Chinese who came to Vancouver at that time emigrated from Guangdong and spoke the language. The family was impoverished and experienced repeated evictions. As in many immigrant families, Lum’s mother very much wanted him to succeed, so much so that as a child, Lum told his mother, in front of her friends, “I am going to take you out of poverty.”⁴
Being a good and dutiful son, he initially studied science at Simon Fraser University. In 1978, he took a night class in studio art (taught by Jeff Wall), fulfilling a desire that had been present since childhood to study art. While initially somewhat shocked by contemporary art, he was eventually drawn in:

There is something about conceptual art that was really open to a person like me, a person of colour. It espouses a democratic ideal with an emphasis on ideas. To me at the time, conceptual art was sort of like punk music. Anyone could become a punk musician. Conceptual art is open to any interested participant. The art world began to attract all sorts of constituencies, different races, and sexual orientations. SFU facilitated that. I was my own trope, a working-class Asian.\(^5\)

In the early 1980s, Lum moved to New York to pursue a graduate degree. He immersed himself in the city’s art scene and studied nineteenth-century art at New York University with the American art historian Robert Rosenblum. He had to leave the program when his mother developed leukemia. Lum returned to Vancouver in 1982 and began working as director of the Or Gallery, an artist-run centre, the following year. In 1983, he enrolled in the MFA program at the University of British Columbia. Simultaneously, his art career took off. In the spring of 1982 he exhibited at White Columns in New York, and later that year he had a solo exhibition of his furniture-based sculpture at Artists Space. In 1985, Lum was included in an exhibition curated by artist and teacher Ian Wallace at 49th Parallel, a New York gallery created by the Canadian government to promote the nation’s artists, where he exhibited his work alongside that of Rodney Graham and his former professor Jeff Wall. This solidified his identification with post-conceptual photography and a generation of Vancouver artists who went on to successful and diverse careers. For Lum, the 1980s marked his entry into the emerging mainstream of critical contemporary practice.

In a conversation published in *Flash Art* in the early 1980s, a young Ken Lum talks with Thomas Lawson, a Scottish artist and writer living in America associated with the Pictures Generation. Lum comes across as an articulate and spirited art world insider, well versed in the critical language of the moment and highly knowledgeable about the contemporary scene.\(^6\) He argues against the Pictures Generation artists and their use of appropriation, calling instead for an art of critique that brings forward a position on class. Where Lawson is interested in pleasure and references the seductive effect of the “juicy canvases” of 1980s
neo-expressionism, Lum is focused on history and an expanded notion of realism that includes not only the tradition of Goya and Daumier, but also, counterintuitively, American artists Jackson Pollock and Robert Smithson. Lawson turns his attention to Lum’s concern with social relations and the work of Smithson and Donald Judd, as seen in his early furniture sculptures (a picture of one of them, *Partially Buried Sofa*, 1984, accompanies the dialogue). Lum expounds on the importance of the traditions of minimalism and conceptualism with respect to his thinking, but posits that, in contrast, his work is political in that he wants to bring to the fore the implicit subject matter of these styles by publicly scrutinizing the notion of the private. He calls out artists Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, and Lawrence Weiner, and asks that they return to their “jobs as practitioners of social meaning,” while lauding artist Dan Graham for his examination of architecture, television, design, rock music, and youth cultures within his art practice. And yet, even as he displayed this fluency in the languages of critical postmodernism, Lum was confronting the aporias—particularly those around class and race—of these discourses. There is a story, which he has recounted a number of times, of the moment in 1986 when his grandmother, who spoke no English, found her way to his exhibition opening at Nature Morte in the East Village. Lum was mortified and felt exposed: his private self—his family, class, and race—was visible for all to see. However, his embarrassment was tempered by his profound empathy with her: “My grandmother had lived through so many difficulties. She had witnessed the murder of her younger sister at the hands of Japanese soldiers. She had left her homeland and lived in a tiny, cockroach-infested, one-bedroom apartment with several family members in the Lower East Side.”7 That empathy with the experiences of those whose stories have often been excluded from dominant cultural narratives has formed a leitmotif not only in Lum’s artwork, but in his writings as well.

The first piece of writing in this collection, “Carnegie Library Project,” takes the form of a letter and a numbered list with the heading “Partial List of Submitted Books.” Both are components of an artwork Lum made for the Carnegie International in 1991. His inclusion in this exhibition was an early marker of international success, and indeed, the second half of the 1980s were very active for Lum, as he moved from his furniture sculptures to significant text-based series such as the *Language Paintings* (1987) and the *Portrait-Logo* series (1989), which explored issues of identity and belonging in a multicultural society. By the end of the decade, he was also teaching in the department of art history, visual art, and theory at the University of British Columbia. “Carnegie Library Project” is an invitation to participate in the creation of Lum’s work.
for the Carnegie International; in it, he asks the head librarian of the National Library of Swaziland to send him a book of poetry from his collection that he will then disseminate in one of the eighteen branches of Pittsburgh’s library system. Lum also contacted individuals and libraries in a number of cities around the world, with responses coming in from Auckland, New Zealand; Brasilia, Brazil; Fort-de-France, Martinique; Helsinki, Finland; Osaka, Japan; and Rabat, Morocco, to name just a few. With this “global library” project, Lum intended to build on Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropy and facilitate “the subversion of illiteracy, bolster the rights of all to freedom of information movement,” and foster the “increased wealth of the (world) community.”

The accompanying list itemizes the submitted books and various details associated with them. Lum made a series of related “Poem Paintings,” whose texts he sourced from the submitted books. This project betrayed the global aspirations of his approach as well as his deep-seated interest in language, which was already evident in his work from the later 1980s.

The next decade was a prolific one for Lum. He produced significant bodies of work, including the Portrait-Repeated Text Series (1994), the Photo-Mirrors (1997), and his Shopkeeper Series (2001). At the same time, he was invited to participate in a number of significant exhibitions like the Biennale of Sydney (1995) and the Bienal de São Paulo (1997). Between 1995 and 1997, Lum was a visiting professor at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he would be exposed to a notably international cohort of colleagues. He became close to important, internationally active curators like the Chinese-born Hou Hanru and the Swiss Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and to many expatriate Chinese artists resident in the city.

In these years, Lum’s writing often takes the form of travel diaries, as seen in “Seven Moments in the Life of a Chinese Canadian Artist” (1997). This text was commissioned for the catalogue accompanying the travelling exhibition Cities on the Move, one of the most important large-scale exhibitions of the late 1990s. Curated by Hou and Obrist, the show explored contemporary East Asian art and the notion of Asian hyper-modernity. Lum’s text is a series of short, numbered vignettes delivered with clarity and, largely, in the first person. Each one begins with a geographic location and gives the reader insight into what it means to be a visible minority within the contemporary art world. In France, a fellow artist, who knows his work and is meeting him for the first time, smiles and says he did not know Lum was Asian. In Oxford, he talks with a critic who assumes that only artists of colour deal with identity issues. In Paris, he reads a review in the Herald Tribune that focuses on an installation by Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz composed of a series
of laughing Chinese men; Lum thinks the accompanying photograph offensive and is equally appalled by the critic’s admiration of the work’s “inscrutability.” While visiting a northern Canadian community with an Indigenous artist friend, he reports on racial tensions between whites and First Nations, and the fact that the two groups eat at different cafes, both staffed by Chinese people. While teaching at an art school in Martinique, a Caribbean island inhabited by a very diverse population, Lum often eats local chicken or fish dishes with rice; over time, he learns that men from South China and the Indian subcontinent were brought to Martinique as labourers and introduced their culinary traditions. In the final scene, Lum is in Montreal in the company of several Chinese artists who are talking in Cantonese; he is embarrassed to join in, given his poor language skills. Still, he understands the conversation. Someone says it is great to have so many Chinese artists at the table, while another remarks, “well, Ken Lum cannot even read Chinese.”9 One imagines that these experiences were revelatory. Lum shares them so that his readers might also witness the racism he experienced, but also to understand the complexity embedded in language acquisition, immigration, and the movement of large populations. If Lum was no doubt angry and humiliated at times, he must have been equally humoured, especially by the irony in the final situation he described. These scenarios find their echo in his Portrait-Repeated Text Series, begun in 1994—such as Hello. How are you?—which addresses the same themes of identity and difference developed here, as well as focusing on subjects of immigration and inequality.

The new discursive spaces opened up by the Internet soon provided Lum with a platform to continue exploring these issues, and from 1999 to 2000 he wrote a year-long artist travelogue for the online publication LondonArt titled “The London Art Diaries.” In them, he shares a broad range of information in a very informal manner as he travels to and from Vancouver. Always a fantastic observer of contemporary life, the artist’s reflections are filtered through the double lens of race and class. Lum returns to these troubling and traumatic subjects over and over again as he repeatedly experiences difficult social situations. In Paris, Lum struggles to come to terms with his current experiences, which fall consistently short of his expectations. His belief that Paris represents the apex of culture, with an ideal city government and wonderful citizens, is constantly being challenged, and he ends up disappointed and unable to find much sustenance in the French art world. He wants to love daily life there, yet recalls his uncomfortable interactions with the French, who have difficulty seeing beyond their own presuppositions. He comes to
his own conclusions: “I am not saying these people I meet intended to insult me. It is just that the idea of hybridized identities is still a strange concept here for many people.”10

Always fascinated by the changing patterns of immigration, Lum describes how recent wealthy and educated Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong are changing the face of Canada, particularly in cities like Toronto and Vancouver. He cites the example of art patron Annie Wong and her Annie Wong Art Foundation, and her Vancouver gallery, Art Beatus. Lum is impressed by her philanthropy, “dedicated to the furtherance of contemporary Chinese art throughout the world,”11 and cites her support for major Chinese artists Xu Bing and Chen Zhen, who had left China and settled in New York and Paris, respectively. As he was writing this text, there was a tidal wave of international interest in Chinese art. In a groundbreaking gesture, the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann included a large number of Chinese artists in his 1999 Venice Biennale presentation; names such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Zhang Huan, Huang Yong Ping, and Chen Zhen dominated the reviews. Simultaneously, many of these figures were travelling through Vancouver. While major Vancouver-based artists such as Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace were turning away from Canada, looking instead toward cultural institutions in the United States, Britain, and Europe for future success, internationally renowned Chinese artists were changing this orientation. Their journeys from Berlin, New York, Paris, and various cities in China to Vancouver marked the Canadian city as a new stop on the network of a globalized, international art world. In this novel and shifting context, Lum grapples with the complex formation of identity and, more specifically, with what it means to be a Chinese artist working in the global art world. He asks, “what exactly is Chinese about Chinese art, especially in the contemporary context?” and “among Chinese artists, who is more and who is less Chinese?”12

Throughout his writing in the late 1990s, Lum is often troubled by the trope of referring to artists who travel and work around the globe as “nomads.” In the “Diaries,” he states, “travelling has become a matter of course to the contemporary artist in much the same way as a medieval minstrel travelled, in vagabond fashion, and always with the purpose to foment the imagination, economic and otherwise, of the various locals.”13 In a highly critical mode, Lum asks what the artists are learning as they move about in the newly globalized art world. This question becomes the ultimate subject for much of his diaristic writing. In this context, he muses on the power of the Internet in relation to international communications and the corporate implications of the global.
He reminds his readers that artists have a critical role to play at this time and that it is important to stay attuned to the inequalities to which this new system gives rise.14

In another diary post from the spring of 2000, he writes of his fear of going to teach at the China National Art Academy in Hangzhou, even as he affirms the importance of travelling and having an expanded perspective. Lum returns to the subject of the Chinese diaspora again during a visit to Tokyo. He claims that it is rare to see advanced contemporary art being made by Japanese artists, but he enjoys the technological futurism he experiences there and compares Japan to São Paulo in the 1950s, an era with a comparable boom. Tokyo’s French cafes are another topic—he notes their abundance and gives an account of visiting one with artist Huang Yong Ping. Even though they are both ethnically Chinese, Lum tells us they speak in French as it is the only language they share in common. While Lum’s posts were popular, LondonArt began to change. As the publication became more involved in selling art online, writers’ columns were moved further back on the site. These changes eventually led Lum to resign.

The personal, even autobiographical tone developed in these online postings has had a deep impact on Lum’s writing, even within more traditional formats such as the exhibition catalogue. His critical essay on Chen Zhen’s work, “Encountering Chen Zhen,” written for a posthumous 2007 retrospective at the Kunsthalle Wien, is conceived from the position of a fellow Chinese artist deeply committed to a global perspective that is developed and defined in relationship to others. Lum explains that he met Chen while teaching in Paris and experiencing a period of deep disillusionment with the art world. Early in the essay, Lum discusses how the art world was reorienting itself toward places previously considered “marginal,” such as Africa, Central America, and East Asia, during the process of globalization. As he walks to Chen’s apartment in Paris’s Chinatown, he sees other Chinese Parisians and intuits this meeting will be self-revelatory. Lum writes fluently about Chen’s work, describing its themes of homelessness, dislocation and mobility, and eternal time, as well as states of liminality and strategies of supplementation. But he refuses to see Chen’s art as being dictated by his identity as a Chinese artist, stating: “Artists today are increasingly called upon to represent particular ethnic communities of which they may be a part. One of the potential problems with this is the reification of essentialized ethnic identities that contradict the increasing levels of transnational privilege and mobility that many artists working today enjoy.”15 Nevertheless, throughout the text Lum quotes Chinese philosophers such as Laozi, Confucius, and Shen Dao, and refers to
Buddhist thought to better understand the tenets of Chen’s work. In the context of the essay, he looks back to the contemporary art world’s fashion of comparing the artist to the nomad and realizes that Chen has a more dynamic way of articulating his own position in the world, which includes phrases such as “acts of passage and the laws of the immigrant.” The conversation continues and the artists talk about what it means to be Chinese, but born and raised outside China. This prompts a deeper understanding of what it means to be part of the Chinese diaspora. As Lum states: “It is important to consider the ways in which Chen modulated the terms of migration and ethnicity without reducing them to reified terms. Rather, his modulation is highly situational and relational, and allows for an examination of social identity in multitudinous layers. Much of Chen’s art is an expression of how ethnicity is a contingent rather than closed concept.” Further into the dialogue, Chen talks in detail about the migrant experience. Lum recalls Chen’s words: “He said that migration imparts a violence that goes beyond the ideological inscription of social othering and stigmatization. He said that it has the ability to penetrate deeply into the recesses of the individual’s physical body, to the cellular level of mnemonic registration.” Although Chen is sick at the time of the visit, Lum himself departs feeling stronger than when he arrived. The visit reminded him “of the need to always form and express new connections in terms of one’s art, especially in terms of the ways in which one inhabits the world.” In this essay Lum is his fullest self, at once a geographer, critic, art historian, artist, and friend.

Yet by the mid-1990s, Lum was extremely disillusioned with the art world, which, as he saw it, was becoming more corporate and turning toward business and entertainment. He was having difficulty in continuing to believe in art and thought carefully about his options. “I had a choice: I could either stop being an artist or I could enlarge my frame of understanding of art by looking away from what I was accustomed to. I began to embrace an increasingly philosophical view of artistic purpose, one inscribed more in terms of the artist’s life and less in terms of the art world’s view of an artist.” During this time, he took a leave from the University of British Columbia and travelled extensively. Broadening his experience, he taught in Paris and travelled to Dakar “to deepen his understanding of how art could be defined differently.” He also worked as a project manager for Okwui Enwezor’s *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994* (2002). This important survey exhibition was the first to examine decolonization in African art and history and the project of constructing new cultural identities. He also looked to China, conceiving the exhibition that would become *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945* (2004). Alongside these preoccupations, Lum

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16 Ibid., 168.
17 Ibid., 172.
18 Ibid., 173.
19 Ibid., 174–75.
20 Ken Lum, “Something’s Missing,” this volume, 159.
actively made a choice to learn more about the art world beyond the West. He was the co-founder and founding editor of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, the first English-language journal dedicated to contemporary Asian art and culture, launched in 2002 and still active. He also initiated a symposium at the seventh Havana Biennial (2000) and co-curated the seventh Sharjah Biennial (2005). At this time, Lum expanded his repertoire with respect for the geographic reach of the art world and began to understand art as a necessity.

Lum speaks about this period of international travel as he explains how he began to write an essay on Théodore Géricault’s famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, first exhibited at the Salon of 1819, “It was my way of negotiating the edges of the then art world. I worked as a consultant for a project on African art, which entailed extensive research at various archives, including one in Dakar, Senegal. This led to a paper on under-commented-upon aspects of Géricault’s work, the idea of multiple sexual and racial identities in his *Raft of the Medusa*. In this text, Lum highlights the blind spots of modernity and modern art history by exploring race and slavery and how the painting upset the power relations of the time. As he explains: “The painting is an expression of Géricault’s reflection on the profound precariousness of traditional conceptions of race and sexuality at the dawn of the modern industrial age. He understood that to think historically about slavery was to grapple with a profound ambiguity, that slavery continued to thrive in a period marked by profound opposition.” Art history has continued to be of interest to Lum, as evidenced in his essay “Aesthetic Education in Republican China: A Convergence of Ideals,” concerning China’s troubled relationship to modernism during the pre-Communist period, published in the catalogue that accompanied *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945*.

While Lum was constantly on the move to far-flung locales in the late 1990s, he was also thinking deeply about what it means to be a post-war Canadian artist and how cultural politics evolved in such a young country. Published toward the end of that decade, “Canadian Cultural Policy: A Problem of Metaphysics” explains how government policy has positioned culture both inside the country and in relation to the United States. Lum discusses formative moments such as the creation of the 1949 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (more commonly known as the Massey Commission); the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts (1957); Expo 67 (1967); and the passage of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1971). Alongside these, he speaks of the influence of public intellectuals such as political economist Harold Innis, literature and communications scholar Marshall McLuhan, and urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs.
The essay continues by touching on various distinguishing points of recent Canadian art history. Lum includes the still-evolving network of noncommercial artist-run centres active across Canada; the early internationalism of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; and the significance of the Canada Council’s support for Canadian artists. In this section of the essay, Lum weaves together discussions of the creation of Image Bank, a Vancouver-based collaborative, postal-based exchange system between artists, and the three-person artist collective General Idea, two radical practices that were nurtured by this system. In his words, “there was a particular look or at least approach to Canadian art predicated on the idea of aesthetic dissemination, technical literacy, and social concerns, primarily issues of identity through space and time.”24 Lum ends the article with a number of questions, wondering how Canadian culture will thrive given that “global multiculturalism has become a global marketplace of culture, perpetuated constantly by Hollywood, Disney, and McDonald’s,”25 and then asks that we look upon our artists as individual creators first rather than understand them as representatives of a regional culture. Here Lum critiques the bureaucratic process for selecting an artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale and suggests that jurors place too much emphasis on geography when making their choices.

Cultural life in Canada and the position of Canadian artists has always been of interest to Lum and, since he moved to Philadelphia—where he has been chair of the fine arts department at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Design since 2016—he has, ironically, been asked more than ever before to comment on Canada. In “Living in America,” Lum shares a number of anecdotes, articulating what it means for him to have left Canada. He admits that he appreciates the country more now. He posits that in Canada, “the idea of art as social critique is pronounced, in part because that is what is expected of art.”26 In another vignette set during the opening of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, he writes of running into another Canadian artist who has looked repeatedly to Canada but has received little acknowledgement. Instead, the artist in question is warmly received in New York and, like Lum, included in this prestigious exhibition. Yet Lum concludes the text with the affirmation, “I still believe in art.” He continues: “It is through art that I am constantly challenged to understand the world and my place within it, even if that place is one that I am not entirely at home in.”27

Throughout his career, Lum has worked on both sides of the artist-curator divide, engaging actively in exhibition making as curator, project manager, and writer. His work as co-curator on the 2005 Sharjah Biennial was notably generative for him, leading directly to a number
of different texts. Perhaps the most rigorous of them is “Unfolding Identities,” his essay for the Sharjah catalogue. Here he once again delves deeply into the subject of nomadology, reviewing the way various theorists think of nomadic movements. In a Western context, the artist has become highly mobile in an ever-shrinking world. Lum looks closely at this model and notes its ambiguous potential for resistance and criticality. He states: “Nomadology as a tool to theorise the multiple means by which travelling individuals negotiate and renegotiate subject positions in the context of codifications of family and community groups, gender, skin colour, economic and social class, and nation states is useful, but problematic in terms of the often devastating psychological and physical damage borne by these same individuals during the very process of negotiating subject positions.”

Lum then shifts his focus and examines the subject from the perspective of the Arab world, the world beyond the so-called West, a culture “rooted in actual Nomads and Bedouins.” While he notes the sociocultural problems of the region, Lum is interested in the possibilities for an art that is free from the stifling effects of cultural institutions, explaining that, “in Sharjah, as in other sites of the so-called periphery, art can rediscover its collective impulse” and be empowered “as a practice of critical reflection and longing.”

“Surprising Sharjah,” a diaristic account of his days as a co-curator in the months leading up to the biennial, is rather less academic. He relates what it was like to travel in the region, how he negotiated working simultaneously as an artist and curator, and muses on everyday life in Sharjah and the working conditions of the biennial. Writing from the perspective of the exhibition maker, he finds artists’ attitudes somewhat tiresome and feels some sympathy for curators: “I realized how much crap a curator has to endure from artists.”

Lum has often written on his own work, and the occasion to look back at his exhibition at Witte de With in Rotterdam provides a strong example. One of Lum’s greatest works, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, was produced as a billboard on the institution’s exterior for its inaugural exhibition in 1990. When the work was removed at the conclusion of the show, the gallery staff heard from a distressed public who very much wanted *Melly* back out in public. Lum writes:

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 … Flickr and Facebook pages have been created in honour of *Melly Shum* and her persona has even been adopted by a
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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.31

This interest in temporary and permanent public art extends over the course of Lum’s career. In addition to *Melly Shum*, representative projects include *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White* (2000); *There is no place like home* (2000); *Mirror Maze with 12 Signs of Depression* (2002–11); *Pi* (2005–06); *Monument to East Vancouver* (2010); *From Shangri-La to Shangri-La* (2010); *Semi-Public: Vancouver Especially (A Vancouver Special scaled to its property value in 1973, then...)* (2015); and *Peace Through Valour* (2016). Public art is a subject that Lum the writer and curator returns to again and again, and since 2016 he has co-curated a public art project, *Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia*. Relatively early in his career, Lum realized he had the ability to speak to a public with his art, beyond the confines of the art museum. His essay accompanying this recent curatorial project questions the status of the monument today, as much commemorative sculpture is highly contested and in crisis, especially in the United States.

Two texts from the early 2000s offer something like a summary of Lum’s thoughts concerning art making in the present. In “Something’s Missing” (2006)—whose title is borrowed from a famous line in Bertolt Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*—we recognize how revelatory a decade of journeying has been for Lum, and we sense his recovery of a belief in art following the “crisis” of the mid-1990s. While recounting his international travels, he shares how his thinking has changed. Being an artist “means to be in a constant search for meaning.”32 He finishes by insisting that “art should be about life, and draw from it sustenance and relevance. The purpose of art should be to offer a space for pause and reflection.”33 Three years later, Lum’s contribution to the book *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, which takes the form of a letter to the editor Steven Henry Madoff, brings together his experiences as a teacher, artist, and traveller. He writes from the position of someone who truly believes in teaching, but has “mixed feelings” about art schools themselves. He wonders what kind of attention is being paid to life knowledges that are grounded in the body. He asks: “What does it mean to be in someone else’s place? How is it even possible to express something of the pain and suffering or happiness and joy of someone else?”34 Lum’s teaching experiences outside North America have given him the opportunity to “expand and deepen”...
his understanding of the possibilities of art. At a time when Lum was unhappy at the University of British Columbia, he taught at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Here he found a way to collaborate with the École nationale supérieure d’arts de Paris–Cergy, a school located in a large immigrant community on the city’s suburban edge. In 1997, he took a post in Martinique and realized that the students had little knowledge of the social and historical conditions of the island, as well as a limited, colonial comprehension of art history; all of them dreamed of travelling to Paris. For Lum, this period of teaching cemented the purpose of art school, which, he explained, should “raise the consciousness of one’s place in the world and produce expressions at the borders of what can and can’t be said in any given social and historical context.”

While teaching in China, Lum held classes after hours as the environment was less formal; there, students “understood their position as political beings and were learning to imbue their art with a transgressive authority.” Over time, Lum learned that the artist’s role “is to give expression to his or her experiences in a continuous act of self-definition.”

As the writings in this collection make evident, Ken Lum has made extraordinary contributions to the field of contemporary art. His ability to find meaning throughout his career and his willingness to constantly reinvent himself, while always sharing via the written word the knowledge gained from his wide range of experiences, have made him an extremely important figure. For those trying to find their way through the events and global landscapes that make up the current contemporary art world, Lum provides a series of guideposts in the form of highly readable essays that seek to make the political tensions in these sites legible. Whether he is writing on art, artists, art education, art history, biennales, cultural policy, curating, exhibitions, or public art, Lum projects a unique perspective. Writing is everything to Lum. He is an artist who loves to write. He proves that “art is about making everything in the world relevant.”