I remember when I first saw Ho Tam’s work years ago, I was in the subway on my way home from school, scrolling through a list of video works on my phone and I was deciding which to write about for a research paper on Canadian art. It was Ho’s *The Yellow Pages* that caught my eye. Adapted from his 1993 self-published artist’s book with the same title and produced in 1994, the work was commissioned for a public installation at Union Station in Toronto. Presented in alphabetical order, were 26 words often associated with the Chinese experience in the West. Each term was paired with a seemingly random yet poignant piece of footage taken from a variety of sources, such as Japanese anime, Cantonese opera, and popular TV programmes. The silent, mostly black-and-white video calmly plays out a sense of discomfort and instability with the help of dark humour effortlessly planted by the artist.

The early 1990s was the time when influential artistic and cultural endeavours started to proliferate, in the context of the peak of Canadian cultural race politics, after the Multiculturalism Act came into effect in 1988. *The Yellow Pages* was created within that context specifically, yet I had never felt so connected with an art piece before; it managed to visualize and grapple with some of the struggles that I had to (and still have to) deal with as a culturally displaced individual, even though I viewed this work almost two decades after it was made.

Since then, *The Yellow Pages* has occupied a special place in my mind and became an influence on my current curatorial work. Last year, I curated a group exhibition in Toronto that brought together 11 Canadian artists of Chinese descent to examine the idea of Chinese-ness and its connotations from the 1990s to the present day. All the 3 editions of *The Yellow Pages*, respectively published in 1993, 1998, and 2016, serve as an introductory vocabulary for the exhibition, to further reflect on subject positions of collective cultural diaspora and family history.

Hotam press, founded and solely run by Ho Tam, has been consistently productive since the 1990s. Its three main projects *hotam*, *Poser*, and *The Greatest Stories Ever Told* encompass the artist’s interests over the years as a tangible way for him to tap into different spheres of our life: racial identity, gendered spatiality and performativity, the public versus the private, and cultural translations, to name a few. With these critically-acclaimed projects, Tam is frequently at art book fairs worldwide. Through self-publishing, he broke open an exigent type of space that is open for discussions on artistic autonomy, from a much-needed angle of Asian masculinity.

Tam’s publishing practice takes its impetus from the artist’s everyday observations and own life experience;
hence it could be highly personal. *hotam #1* presents a brief history of Tam’s life up until publication time with a select timeline of world events juxtaposed with his personal photographs. The later issues of the *hotam* series explore more playful subjects that would feature objects including a collection of business cards and a compilation of drawings and photographs of Asian men (or “Hot Asian Men”, as Tam might prefer, punning *hotam*). For *Poser*, a series of snapshots of strangers in public, through his lens, he takes in the data and visuals that have come to his attention. It does not take him long to decide what or who to document. For instance, when he was travelling, he would ask strangers waiting at the airport to strike the same pose (*Poser #7*); when he was roaming at the Canadian National Exhibition, he would photograph men with fluffy toys that they had won (*Poser #2*). In his more recent publications, he would start by building connections between formats, pictures, or names, in attempt to make sense of the information that he has collected. Tam’s background in advertising enables this publishing process via his substantial understanding of magazine making and the ways he can marry that with his art making. “I would play with it. Happy accidents happen sometimes,” said Tam, in a recent talk at the University of Toronto. Indeed, the experimental quality signalled in the publications arouses gazes of curiosity and then proposes an alternative to the complex present that we live in.

A few months ago, I met up with Tam at an art book fair in Toronto before having dinner. I sat behind his booth and looked around, only to realize he was one of the very few Asian artists there diversifying the space, with his sincere and refined body of work. At the end of the event, he packed all his publications and his booth setup into his one medium-sized suitcase, and then, we were ready to go. He is really good at this one-man job, I thought. I can’t wait to read the next publication from the Hotam press.

Henry Heng Lu (盧恆)

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1. The artist talk was presented by Cheng Yu Tung East Asian Library in October 2017, as part of the public programming series for “Far and Near: the Distance(s) between Us”, an exhibition project at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.
Ho Tam was born in Hong Kong, educated in Canada and the U.S. and worked in advertising companies and community psychiatric facilities before turning to art. He practises in multiple disciplines including photography, video, painting and print media. His first video, The Yellow Pages, was commissioned by the public art group PUBLIC ACCESS for an installation/projection at the Union Station of Toronto in 1994/95. Since then Tam has produced over 15 experimental videos. He was included in the traveling exhibition Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video by Walker Art Center, Minnesota. His feature documentary film Books of James was awarded Outstanding Artistic Achievement (Outfest, LA) and Best Feature Documentary (Tel Aviv LGBT Film Festival). He also publishes several series of artist’s books and zines.

Tam is an alumnus of Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program, Bard College (MFA) and recipients of various fellowships and artist’s grants. Upcoming, Ho Tam will present A Brief History of Me at Paul Petro Contemporary Art in Toronto for the Contact Photography Festival.

Henry Heng Lu (盧恆) is a Chinese-born, Toronto-based artist and curator. Lu primarily works with photography, video, and performance to investigate often overlooked narratives surrounding cultural identities and inequalities during the 21st century, in terms of values, doubt, insecurity and vulnerability. He is Translator at The New Gallery in Calgary, and co-founder and curator of Call Again, a Toronto-based initiative dedicated to creating space for contemporary Asian diasporic art practices through exhibitions and events. He has presented projects through numerous channels, including Creative Time Summit, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, CONTACT Photography Festival, Scarborough Civic Centre, Toronto Public Library, and Toronto Fringe Festival. Lu holds a Master of Visual Studies: Curatorial Studies from the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

Ho Tam was born in Hong Kong, educated in Canada and the U.S. and worked in advertising companies and community psychiatric facilities before turning to art. He practises in multiple disciplines including photography, video, painting and print media. His first video, The Yellow Pages, was commissioned by the public art group PUBLIC ACCESS for an installation/projection at the Union Station of Toronto in 1994/95. Since then Tam has produced over 15 experimental videos. He was included in the traveling exhibition Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video by Walker Art Center, Minnesota. His feature documentary film Books of James was awarded Outstanding Artistic Achievement (Outfest, LA) and Best Feature Documentary (Tel Aviv LGBT Film Festival). He also publishes several series of artist’s books and zines.

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RAG  Richmond Art Gallery

The only public gallery in Richmond, the Richmond Art Gallery (RAG) is a municipal gallery supported by the non-profit Richmond Art Gallery Association. In operation since 1980, the Gallery presents exhibitions by regional, national and international artists, maintains a permanent collection of over 400 works, and presents innovative and diverse programming for children, youth, and adults. Richmond Art Gallery is dedicated to promoting dialogue among Richmond’s diverse communities through the presentation of contemporary visual art.

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LOCATION

Richmond Cultural Centre
7700 Minoru Gate
Richmond, BC  V6Y 1R9

VISIT US

Monday - Friday: 10 am - 6 pm
Saturday - Sunday: 10 am - 5 pm
Free Admission

CONTACT

gallery@richmond.ca
604-247-8300
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