

CURA Artist Interview Project, Led by Ted Little, Steven High and Alan Wong

Throughout the late winter and early spring of 2009, we will conduct life story interviews with a minimum of ten artists from a variety of disciplines whose practice, process, and/or work actively engages immigrant and refugee communities. We seek to discover the factors that spur such artists to focus their practice on issues arising from these communities, what contributions they feel the arts can make to the healing process and development of these communities, how these artists deal with the exigencies of working within and across cultures and historical contexts when such situations arise, how the artist's art intersects with his or her own life experience, and the degree to which interacting with individual members of oppressed communities has influenced the artist's practice, process, and/or work. We will also look at what kind of responses the artist's work has had from the community and the public at-large.

The interview process will be comprised of two components. The first will be a life story interview that seeks to situate the art in the artist's life experience and how that life experience has been communicated in the public realm. The second component will involve interview questions framed in the working language and methods of arts and artists—questions involving abstract creative imaging, conceptualization, perspective, point-of-view, backstory, previous action, and the like. These questions will be designed in response to the particular genre and oeuvre of the artist. The questions may be related to instances of inspiration, crisis, or transition uncovered in the life story component, or tied to elements of a specific work or body of work produced by the artist. This component is aimed at working with the artist to explore complex relationships between motivation, vision, process, form and content, expression, reception, and social efficacy in artistic practice that engages with “inexpressible” violence. Together, these components will provide a rich and unique look not at not only the life of an artist, but the artist's art, as well.

With respect to the life story interviews, interviewers will conduct as many interviews as required and as the interviewee allows to attain the full breadth of the latter's story. Where possible, we will conduct the interviews in the artists' homes, studios, or workshop spaces; otherwise, the interviews will be done at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital (COHDS) Storytelling. We will also strive to have the artists show and explain their work during the interviews. Only interviewers who have fully undergone CURA training at COHDS will be permitted to conduct interviews.

To prepare for the life story interview, interviewers will be supplied with a “course pack” of methodology articles on interviewing artists. Interviewers must also take the time to do some background reading on any specific genocide, war, or other atrocity addressed in the artists' works or that is a central part of their histories in order to familiarize themselves with the context with which the artist is working and living.

The life story interviews will always begin with the question “Tell us about the first time you bridged your artistic practice with your interest in community issues?” There will be a guide for interviewers to follow should they require it, but they are also not restricted to the guide, though they should make an attempt to address all the themes in it. Interviewers should be flexible in the interview process and allow the artists to determine the direction of the entire interview. Interviewees will have all the options available to them on the consent form with respect to recording media and confidentiality.

With the interviewees' permission, any media resulting from the interviews and workshops will be edited and posted online, used for documentaries, archived, and disseminated in other ways. It is expected that all interviewees will comment on each interview experience they have on the CURA blog.

Artists Interview Guide for CURA Project

Name:

Date of Birth:

Art

Tell us about the first time you bridged your artistic practice with your interest in community issues? How did you come to make this link? In what ways do you feel your artistic practice changed once you began to address community concerns? What kinds of stories did you express through your art when you first began your career as an artist? What was your first experience with the arts? What drew you to your particular métier? How did you develop your skill? What made you realize that this is something you wanted to pursue as a career? Who and/or what influenced your practice? Who and/or what inspires you as an artist? Why is art important to you? Why do you think is your art important? What kinds of messages have you tried to convey through your art? Who is your target audience? What has been their reaction or response to your work? Describe the first time you had a public audience for your work. What was this experience like for you? How did this influence your approach to your art thereafter? How do you view the relationship between art, politics, and history? What challenges have you faced as an artist? Why is art meaningful to you? How has your community responded to your art? What role do you think your art plays in your community? What are the connection between your art and your culture and community? What have been the key decisions and choices you have made in your artistic practice to convey your story or stories? What effect has conveying your own story through your art had on the way you convey or collaborate in the conveying of other people's stories? What has been your approach to relaying the stories of collective displacement through your art?

Activism:

What role has activism played in your artistic practice, and vice versa? What kinds of issues have interested you? How have you participated in society politically? What kind of reactions have you received from your family, your peers, and the wider community? What has motivated you politically, socially, and culturally to get involved in activism? How has political involvement shaped your life? What do you hope to achieve through your activism? What has been the most difficult thing about being an activist? What has been the most rewarding? How has your own history influenced your activism?

Childhood:

Where and when were you born? What was your name at birth? Where did you grow up? What kind of upbringing did you have? What were your friends like? How would you describe your home life? How would you describe your personality during your childhood? What kind of activities did you participate in? What did you do for fun? What did you want to be when you grew up? Who influenced you the most when you were a child? What was school like for you? What were your interests in school?

Family:

Where were your parents born? What did they do for a living? How big was your family? What kind of relationship did you have with your family? Describe your family life. What activities did your family engage in? What kind of discussions would you have with them? How did your family treat you? What kind of expectations did they have of you? How are things different now? What kind of challenges did you face as a family? What did you learn from your family? Who do you consider to be your family? How was your family's relationship with the community?

Culture, Community, and Identity

What do you consider to be your culture? In what ways do you identify with it? What influence does it have on your life? Your work? Your activism? How would you describe your culture? With what community do you feel a sense of belonging? How does your sense of community relate to your sense of culture? How has your identification with your culture and your community changed and evolved over the years?

Conclusion:

How do you think your art and activism affected or influenced the communities you've worked with? How do you think your art and activism has changed over the years? Where do you think your art and activism is heading? Would you like to add anything else before we end the interview?