

DECONSTRUCTING HEAVEN: THE FABRICATION OF URBAN UTOPIAS AND REALITIES

Kerry Ann Lee



Figure 1. Kerry Ann Lee, *Electric Warrior* (2009), raw wire sculptures on overhead projectors. Photograph: John Lake.

“Da Shi Jie/The Great World: Shanghai Works 2009-2010” [大世界：2009-2010 创作于上海] was an exhibition by Kerry Ann Lee held at Toi Pōneke Gallery in Wellington. This was the first presentation in New Zealand of works created as an artist-in-residence and solo exhibiting artist in Shanghai. From 29 April to 20 May 2011, the gallery was transformed into a ‘deconstruction site’ – incorporating visual and material meditations on culture, scale and monument, where big dreams are built on top of shifting terrain.

The following excerpt is taken from a public discussion held at Toi Pōneke Gallery, on Thursday 19 May 2011, at the opening of “Da Shi Jie/ The Great World.” A conversation about cityscapes and cultural production in flux in

Shanghai and Wellington was had between the artist, Kerry Ann Lee, and guest speakers Sophie Jerram (curator, Letting Space), Dr Luo Hui (lecturer, School of Languages and Cultures, Victoria University of Wellington, and director of the Confucius Institute) and David Cross (associate professor, Massey School of Fine Arts).

David Cross: The first area of discussion that Kerry Ann floated to me was of the city as a dynamic site for memory, mythology and identity formation. I wanted to begin by putting something to all three of you to pick up and respond to it as you choose to, and it's about this idea of the city and what we might mean by that: What do you understand by the notion of the city in our contemporary context, and is it possible to connect Wellington and Shanghai in any meaningful way beyond the putative identification that they are both 'cities?' Wellington, in contrast, seems like a small town; you could nearly blink and miss it – but at the same time, unlike Shanghai, it has the international cachet of being a capital city. There is little swirling multiplicity that I'd associate Wellington with Shanghai, but then I haven't been to Shanghai.

Kerry Ann Lee: For me, the understanding of the city as a site for possibility and change is really important. A city can mean different things for different people. Like how Wellington is a big city for some people, and we can take that for granted if we've grown up or lived here long enough to feel it's more like a village. Shanghai has a different sense of scale and identity as a 'dynamic future city,' that it wants to be a model for a future notion of the city. It's interesting, because I felt in Shanghai a noticeable difference between Eastern and Western understandings of the city.

Luo Hui: It never occurred to me to compare Wellington to Shanghai. It's quite a stretch of the geography and of the imagination because in terms of scale, as Kerry Ann mentioned, they are vastly different. One's a smallish city and the other's a big supercity. As for similarities, they're both port cities. Although Shanghai's not on the ocean, it has that culture associated with it – that it's some kind of hub, and that really is one of the major factors in the formation of a Shanghai identity: that it is a portal, China's connection to the world.

Kerry Ann, you play a lot with the sense of scale in your work. How much of it has to do with a visceral reaction, moving from a smaller country, smaller city to a huge country, huge city? Artistic concerns aside, how much of it is a desire to control your own environment?

KAL: One of the key concepts in the show is the interface with what I felt was a very alien space, in that I felt like somewhat of an alien there. There were these strange disconnects with being in China. I'm of Chinese descent, but my sense of Chinese space is very different moving from Wellington, doing work and looking at Chinese identity in New Zealand to going overseas and looking at Chinatowns – like in Manhattan, where I was based doing a residency.¹ So from Chinatowns to 'Chinaland' things shift quite a bit. The mythology – what you read and understand and what you formulate about these places – is totally blown out of the water when you are actually there. When you ask about a visceral experience of Shanghai, it was very much a sense of trying to locate myself in such a big, huge, swirling, vibrant, shifting city. For example, the wire works in the show, *Electric Warrior*, was the first body of work that I did, and it was a conscious shift in materials where I built my own armoury to protect myself in the city. It's a collection of 1:1 scale-size objects I made and it was sort of tongue-in-cheek, talking about the difficulties of working and using things in this new environment I found myself in – whereas the more immediate pieces, the photomontages, are projecting aspects of the New Zealand landscape tradition onto some of the futuristic building forms I was encountering.² These were really amazing spectacles. Structures felt like they were constantly collapsing and moving around me in Shanghai.

Sophie Jerram: In response to your question, David, about what cities might be, I think of cities as a commons, and that's the reason we don't all want to hang out in the suburbs – because we don't share memory in the suburbs, we share memory in the city. I'm really intrigued to know, Kerry Ann, if shared memories are possible in a city the size of Shanghai. I imagine there are pockets within Shanghai that you can locate other people within, but I'm interested to know as a whole: is it possible to do that?



Figure 2. Left to right: Luo Hui, Kerry Ann Lee, Sophie Jerram and David Cross in conversation. Toi Pōneke Gallery, Wellington, 2011. (Image courtesy of the artist.)



Figures 3 and 4. Kerry Ann Lee, *Lilliput* (2010) and *The Diamond Republic* (2010), digital montage, 48 x 68 cm. From the "AM Park" series. (Image courtesy of the artist.)

KAL: It's like asking whether or not you can get the helicopter out of the scene to try and make sense of that space. For me, the idea of collective memory or collective stories is what I was trying to make sense of through a heavy process of reflection during and after the residency. I was over there for four months and the first month I found a real extreme hit, and I was spending a lot of time on my own exploring the city and getting lost, riding buses and having these really amazing 'lost in translation' moments getting purposefully culture-shocked, which was one of my

intentions for going over there. What I brought back and what I've been synthesising since then have been from my own experiences, so I've been trying to touch on other stories, memories and narratives in the city. Things like me capturing events outside the bus window on the way back home to the studio villa from downtown Shanghai at night. I found my experiences were very fleeting and precious. That's probably why I try and take care in creating work that responds to those moments.

DC: One of the things I find really curious about the idea of the residency, especially a place like Shanghai, is how you're forced to orientate yourself very quickly, but there's so much chance kicks in, like where you stay, who you meet, what time of year it is. What I'm interested to hear more about are your processes for engaging with the residency in a place like Shanghai where you have marginal context, and how you approach that engagement with the city. Do you plan intensively, do you go on Google Maps and suss out week after week where things are, or do you just turn up and let chance take effect? A place like Shanghai only exists in my imagination. I am really curious about that sense of orientation and the strategies you put in place, negotiated over that period of four months. Can you maybe talk a little bit about your method to deal with Shanghai as a city?

KAL: Orientating myself in Shanghai for the first time involved intensive strategic military planning each night in preparation to travel around the city to get materials and to attend scheduled meetings. island6 Arts Centre, who were overseeing my residency in 2009,³ were really good in making sure I got to meet the necessary people in the Shanghai arts scene (gallerists, critics and other artists) to get a sense of what was going on. Also, I had the help of an assistant, who helped me with translation and would sometimes accompany me on my trips. One of the interesting facts about Chen, my assistant and friend, was that he didn't know much English, and I didn't know much Chinese. He taught me some of the local ways, like how to catch the buses and the subway lines. I really loved getting underground and going through the subway systems and geeking out on maps and visual diagrams. I also attempted to keep up some level of conversational Mandarin Chinese, so I took it upon myself to visit a good Chinese tutor once a week and practice some basic Chinese. Each night I would map out my routes, where I'd need to go and how I'd get there, any particular phrases or conversational terms I'd need to be prepared for in case of any strange encounters. As much preparation as I did, each time I'd go out on any of my missions there would always be chance. This would either make or break or help or hinder what I had to do, and that was part of the thrill. I had some amazing times and some really unexpected encounters. I don't think there's any straight methodology with it.

DC: In the art world we're becoming increasingly concerned about people turning up and making superficial statements about cities, knocking out an artwork then bugging off again, to put it in a colloquial way. Over a four-month period there are only very finite things you can ever pick up, and I'm interested in that aspect of the residency in terms of place responsiveness. Did you identify some particular themes or ideas that were pertinent to your practice that you focused on, or was it very much 'turn up let it soak in,' come back and respond to it?

KAL: I always imagined it to be this unfinished piece, because it's quite a personal line of interrogation – ideas around identity formation and notions of authenticity were themes that came out, and again, I mentioned about scale. That was probably more pertinent when I got there and was experiencing the city. Language is also interesting for me, and not just spoken language but visual language and looking at print media, with my background in graphic art. I knew I wouldn't be able to eat the whole cake. One of the most important things I wanted from it was to get a sense of putting myself in that city and learning about how it works through my own positioning. It's a unique privileged position being an artist in residence. There are expectations that you'd go over there and have that time, create some work, seal it up in a box and put it on a shelf – but these experiences, when you let them get under your skin, they're a bit harder to shake off.

SJ: You're talking about identity there and I'm curious to know broadly whether you felt, as a New Zealand-born Chinese person, you had more of a sense of mandate, towards utopia, towards these new cityscapes you constructed. The idea of utopia or aspiring towards what a possible future city could look like – you've clearly imagined and spent some time considering. Did you feel your view was largely different to, say, that of Chen about

your ability to effect change? I guess I'm asking about your sense of agency. Did you think that as a New Zealander you had more of that elbowroom conceptually?

KAL: I think the sense of agency is a very good area to discuss as a visiting artist, and how much freedom you have to express or expand your wings. My residency in Shanghai was at a time right before the 2010 World Expo.⁴ The Expo's motto was 'Better City, Better Life,' and all those kind of utopian messages, translated in Chinese and in English, were freckled around the city through media and was really part of that world that I dropped into in Shanghai in 2009. I think it's a very pure vision – the idea of the city as being great, but it could be better, and here are some ways of making it better, and here are some sketches. I felt like I was tuning into that dream. The aspirations and feelings about it, outside of the actual realities, are coming from a people-focused place. As someone coming from New Zealand, the conceptual space you occupy can sometimes feel a bit wider.

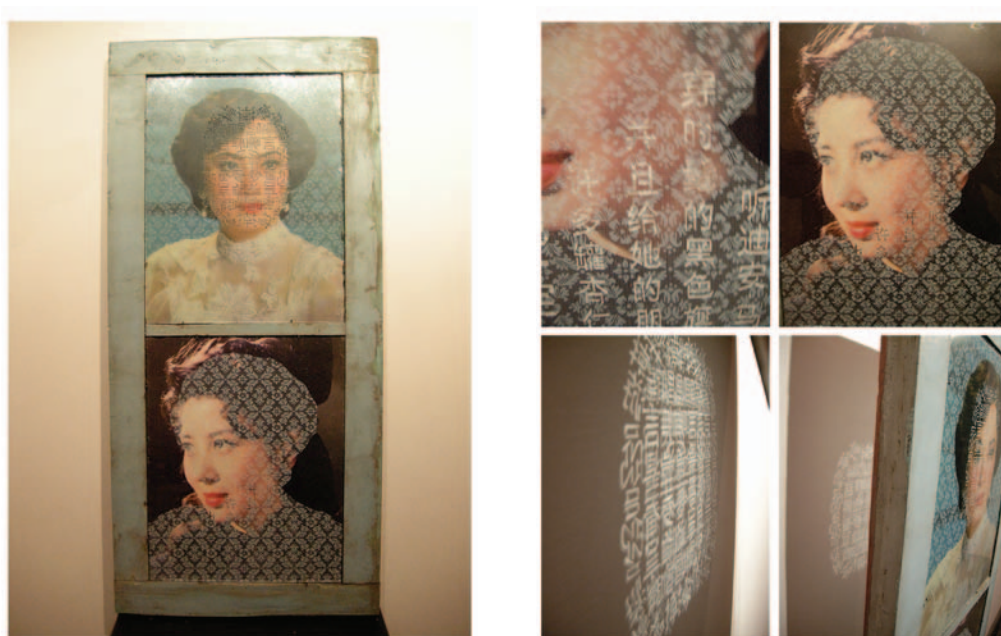


Figure 5 and 6. Kerry Ann Lee, *Ladyface/Almond Sugar* (2009) (detail), paper cutting on digital print, found window frame, glass and plastic adhesive, 80 x 37 x 3.4 cm. From *Chinese Relatives 2*. (Image courtesy of the artist.)

LH: I wanted to say I really like the show, congratulations. There's a lot going on. There's playfulness, as how you've handled the landmarks, icons and the signature buildings of Shanghai. There is this nihilistic gleefulness that I like and there's tenderness, with the picture frames salvaged from demolished buildings, the posters on the walls and your playing with the Chinese characters.⁵ There's also intimacy and eroticism, seduction with the miniature sculptures and the screen, and in the video⁶ I see the gritty side of the work and city as well, so I think it's a really very rich exhibition. Like how it's put together: there are different bodies of work to create one whole. I think there's an underlying narrative, but it's not spelt out – it's implicit and it's up to the viewer to make the story out of it. Certainly I have my version of the story, but back to Shanghai as the subject of your work.

I've visited Shanghai several times and I feel that it's a world of its own and is a very insular kind of city. You can feel incredibly lonely in that bustling, exciting city. And being Chinese, I feel that. Interestingly, paradoxically, part of that has to do with language. Because we're not just talking about the Chinese characters, the written form

of the language, also spoken language. Shanghainese people speak Shanghainese Dialect and it's very difficult to understand, perhaps more difficult than Cantonese for me. It's really a foreign language if you're not brought up in that language environment – so being an outsider; being non-Shanghainese, people can always tell that you're not from Shanghai. It doesn't matter how you dress, how you behave. Even with your best friends in Shanghai it's very funny. They all speak very good Mandarin Chinese, which is the standard language spoken in all the major cities and official media across China, but as soon as they talk amongst themselves, they switch back to Shanghainese as if it's some kind of exclusive club membership you're not part of. So it's quite frustrating.

I was thinking of how Kerry Ann might have experienced that kind of alienation on a different level. I remember reading an interview somewhere with you saying, "I don't speak Chinese, I'm Kiwi Chinese, I can get away with playing with the characters." But the question is how much do you think you can get away with? I really like the creative way you construct grammatically incorrect Chinese sentences, and yet they're comprehensible to me as someone who understands both Chinese and English. I actually quite like them because it reflects who you are, and visually they're beautiful. But my only little problem was when I was reading the flyer where you provided English translations to those sentences – you provided very fluent, smooth English sentences so I wonder, because I'm a real stickler to translation as I do literary translation myself, if you'd actually have to create English sentences that were just as awkward to really reflect that dilemma or in-between position you found yourself in – maybe that the translation part reflects your own linguistic relationship with the culture.

Kerry Ann Lee is a visual artist, designer and educator from Wellington, based in Dunedin as senior lecturer at the Otago Polytechnic School of Design. Lee has exhibited internationally and is also known for her self-published fanzines with titles such as *Help, My Snowman's Burning*, *Celebretard* and *Permanent Vacation* enjoying international exposure and readership over the past 13 years.

- 1 Artist in residence at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) Summer Residency Program, June 2009.
- 2 A series of large-scale photomontage prints by Kerry Ann Lee were exhibited at "AM Park," a solo exhibition at an art space, Shanghai, in June 2010.
- 3 Wellington Asia Residency Exchange (WARE) residency 2009, supported by Asia New Zealand Foundation, Wellington City Council and island6 Arts Centre.
- 4 The 2010 World Expo was an international exposition aimed at a domestic Asian market. The organisers anticipated 70 million visitors to Shanghai over the period of the expo, which ran from May until October 2010.
- 5 *Chinese Relatives* series (2009).
- 6 *Electric Warrior* (2009), *Geometricity* (2011) and video clips taken from bus windows (2009).