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WERNER SCHROETER
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Above: **Ming Wong, *Making Chinatown*, 2012,** still from the seven-channel color video component of a mixed-media installation, running time variable.

Below left: **Ming Wong, *Angst Essen/Eat Fear*, 2008,** still from a color video, 27 minutes.

Below right: **Ming Wong, *In Love for the Mood*, 2009,** still from a three-channel color video, 4 minutes.

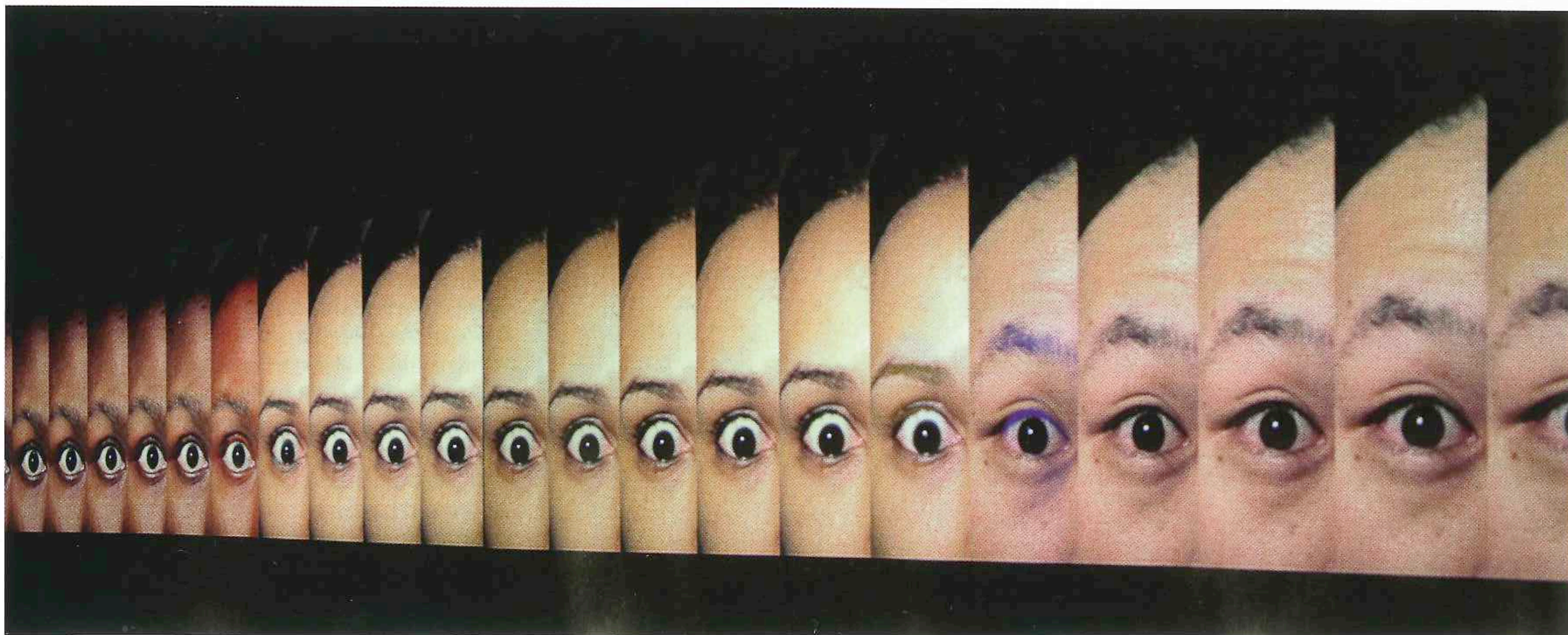
Above: **Ming Wong, *Four Malay Stories*, 2005,** still from a four-channel black-and-white video, 25 minutes.

Right: **Ming Wong, *Whodunnit?*, 2003–2004,** stills from a color video, 32 minutes.

False Front

JOAN KEE ON THE ART OF MING WONG

Ming Wong, *Persona Performa*, 2011, multichannel video projection. Installation view, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm. Photo: Olle Kirchmeier.



From top: **Ming Wong, *In Love for the Mood*, 2009,** billboard, acrylic on canvas. Installation view, Singapore pavilion, Venice. From the 53rd Venice Biennale. **Ming Wong, *Life of Imitation*, 2009,** four billboards, acrylic on canvas. Installation view, Singapore pavilion, Venice. From the 53rd Venice Biennale.

PLAYING EVERYONE FROM TADZIO, the adolescent blond object of desire in Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971), to Jack Nicholson's world-weary Jake in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), Ming Wong has made a career out of reenacting scenes from canonical films. Since 2000, he has cast himself—and occasionally others—in roles from which he might otherwise be excluded by virtue of race, gender, body type, or age. This repertoire would make it tempting to regard his works as vaguely autobiographical meditations on the performativity of identity, were it not for his remarkable ability to at once place himself at the center of his reenactments *and* make his own Singaporean background utterly extraneous to the work's actual operation. In many cases, Wong plays all the characters in a given work himself, implying that identity's core assumption of difference is best understood in explicitly aesthetic terms: a claim that, in his hands, paradoxically becomes a sustained argument against identitarian frameworks of interpretation that parse the world—and the significance of physical appearance—according to multiply reified distinctions.

The urgency palpable in Wong's approach is a direct reflection of the conditions under which the Berlin-based artist displays his work. This became clear when Wong represented Singapore at the 2009 Venice Biennale, which marked his first major international success. Working in the field known as "global contemporary art," Wong confronts an arena that has during the past decades become simultaneously more expansive and more intimate. His fellow players are more likely than not to have read the same books, attended the same schools, and shown in the same exhibitions. But like all those who hail from the contemporary art world's peripheries, Wong is confronted with the expectation of having to perform his cultural identity, a condition he implicitly recognizes by his choice of films: masterpieces of "world cinema" cherished by audiences for whom the prefix *world* often figures as a presumptive status symbol.

Wong's exhibition in Venice, which was curated by Tang Fu Kuen, a dance critic and dramaturge, turned a palazzo into a kind of cinema, replete with billboards advertising the three featured video installations: *Four Malay Stories*, 2005; *In Love for the Mood*, 2009; and *Life of Imitation*, 2009. In the first of these, the artist performs the roles of sixteen characters created by P. Ramlee, the Malay impresario who directed, sang in, and acted in some of the most iconic Malaysian and Singaporean films of the 1950s and '60s. But Wong, himself born to Cantonese-speaking Chinese parents, phonetically repeats the words without fully comprehending the meaning of the Malay language in which they are spoken—a gesture that is saved from becoming pure sound by the apparent sincerity with which the artist utters the

Is it possible for an artist irrevocably marked as Asian and male to speak without either appealing to identitarian terms or acting as if they didn't exist?

Left: **Ming Wong, *Life of Imitation*, 2009,** still from a two-channel color video, 13 minutes.

Above: **Ming Wong, *In Love for the Mood*, 2009,** still from a three-channel color video, 4 minutes.

lines. The friction between what we expect from certain roles and what we experience when those roles are recast or reversed is further explored in *In Love for the Mood*, a three-channel video installation for which Wong cast Kluane Saunders, a white actress from New Zealand, to inhabit the characters played by Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung in Wong Kar-wai's brooding tale of unfulfilled desire, *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Wong feeds Saunders lines from the original Cantonese script—although even their recitation is a daunting task that causes her occasionally to fall out of character. The work strikingly foregrounds Saunders's Caucasianness as a category of racial difference, yet the earnestness of her delivery makes one aware of how reductive it would be to consider this the work's primary subject. It helps that, here as elsewhere, Wong gravitates toward particularly climactic, emotionally charged scenes, whose affective content is channeled into heightening the unreleased tensions inherent in such appropriation. Indeed, much of the impact of Wong's work stems from the subtle ways in which he emphasizes the boundary separating the viewer from the on-screen world and its reenacted emotions without needing to break the proverbial fourth wall altogether.

The third work in Venice was *Life of Imitation*, which is a remake of parts of Douglas Sirk's glossy 1959 adaptation of *Imitation of Life*, Fannie Hurst's controversial 1933 novel on race relations in early-twentieth-century America. For full melodramatic (and box-office) effect, Sirk's last film enthusiastically milked the troubled relationship between the impossibly saintly black housekeeper and her light-skinned daughter, who passes as white. The original film was a Lana Turner vehicle calculated to appeal to midcentury suburban American housewives, but nothing of this middlebrow tone has survived in Wong's version, in which three male actors of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descent take turns playing the daughter who hysterically screams, "I'm white!" at her frustratingly passive, all-forgiving mother. Nonetheless, *Imitation of Life*'s very lack of art-house status makes it a perfect cover for Wong's reconsideration and expansion of the tactics of drag, which here offers him a means by which to examine both the ability to perform innumerable identities and the need to think beyond the infinite production of reified difference. The male actors, in fact, are deliberately imperfect copies of an actress whose self-construction was founded in the suppression of her own racial background: The daughter who passes as

Wong reconceives the question of aesthetics as a fundamental point from which to push the discussion of identity and social relationships in new directions.

white in Sirk's film was played by Susan Kohner, whose own half-Mexican, half-Czech Jew ancestry was "whited out" during the course of her career.

In the adaptations presented in Venice, as in other works, Wong syntactically breaks down each character by taking what seems most visually recognizable about each, then combining these cues to generate images that demand new ways of interpreting what we see, challenging, if not undoing, our assumptions about what an actor's physical appearance represents. The tactic is one that results in a fuller, more immediate, and—perhaps even, to Wong's mind—more genuine sense of the negotiations to which identity is continuously subjected, which in turn compromise "identity" as a means of conceptualizing the world. It was regrettably predictable, then, that the 2009 Venice Biennale jury that awarded a "special mention" to Wong's exhibition chose to praise his examination of "the history of Singapore's multiethnic cultural identities via the demise of the country's once flourishing film industry," a trite and anodyne description that said more about the global art establishment's perpetual quest for readily categorizable difference than it did about how Wong's works embodied the "Expanding Worlds" category within which his award was granted.

Production still for Ekachai Uekrongtham's musical *Chang & Eng*, 1997. Photo: Reuters.

RECOGNIZING THAT whatever he presents will likely be read through the lenses of race, nationality, and gender, Wong understands that the real challenge lies in asking whether it is possible for an artist irrevocably marked as Asian and male to speak without either appealing to identitarian terms or acting as if they didn't exist. On the face of it, his task might sound like a dated throwback to an identity politics that, for some viewers, was rendered happily obsolete by the rise of a resolutely global relational art and its promises of egalitarian community. Except that the debates that emerged from the overlap of so-called multiculturalism and globalization were never resolved to anyone's satisfaction, least of all Wong's, whose understanding of identity was critically shaped by the attempts of the Singaporean state to manage multiple races and ethnicities into a harmonious, if nationalistic, whole. The question is made even more urgent as an irreconcilable localism and a reductive (or willfully oblivious) universalism have often come to seem the only alternatives for articulating one's presence in the world. Accordingly, Wong's practice seeks to occupy what little room there is in the art world between a simplistic, fetishistic nativism, on the one hand, and a postconceptual, quasi-liberal homogeneity, on the other.

One way beyond this impasse is to tease out those moments when what first seems to be communicated breaks down to reveal altogether different meanings. For this reason Wong is especially interested in the incongruity between visual and verbal languages, his interest originating in response to the efforts of the Singaporean state to define a coherent identity for the country and its inhabitants, particularly through recognizing or disclaiming certain languages. Though Chinese Singaporeans constitute three-quarters of Singapore's population, the state recognizes four languages: English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. English, which was inherited from Singapore's days as a British colony, has been recognized as the national language since 1965. By contrast, the colloquial Singaporean English known as Singlish, which contains elements taken from Indic and Sinitic languages, is considered a substandard patois by the state—which may help explain, perhaps, the distorted syntax of Wong's film titles.

This question of language has particular resonance for Wong since his background, like that of many Singaporean artists and curators, is in the vibrant milieu of that country's theater. During the mid-1990s, this world was shaped in part by the Singaporean state's growing desire to emphasize the local, in a way that chimed with the "Asian values" then being vigorously promoted by the authoritarian leaderships of both Malaysia and Singapore. In theater, the idea of an Asian identity was reflected as a cosmopolitan interweaving of regional differences, exemplified in such works as *Lear*, Ong Keng Sen's celebrated 1997 reinterpretation of Shakespeare's play in which the parts were distributed among performers versed in six traditions of dance and vocal delivery, from Japanese Noh to Beijing opera. Anticipating Wong's reperformances of scenes from canonical films, Ong took both the extremity of *King Lear* and what he regarded as the universal applicability of its content and pitted these qualities against the stark formal differences between various techniques of dance. The very seamlessness of Ong's *Lear* gives rise to the question of whether difference was here being homogenized for the sake of promoting a regional identity based on a cosmopolitan (as opposed to national) recognition of differences, the idea of what Ong called "new Asia."

Wong seemed less convinced by this cosmopolitanism when he wrote the script for director Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Chang & Eng* (1997), which became Singapore's longest-running musical. Wong's story followed the early lives of Chang and Eng Bunker, the original Siamese twins, who acquired fame, fortune, and a new life in America following their discovery by a British merchant. This allegory of global commerce and celebrity, as well as of the American dream, was strangely suitable for a genre typified by a penchant for epic sweep as well as for absurdity. For Wong, writing the script was a means of exploring what he called "translocation"—the sense of

psychological displacement accompanying a move to a new country. In the year of the film's release, Wong moved to London to attend the Slade School of Fine Art, where he found that his life in Britain was made more complicated rather than easier by the country's role in Singaporean history.

Accustomed to multilingual forms of communication, Wong soon became attuned to the paradox—and absurdity—that characterized English in its home country. Despite allowing communication across cultural, national, and, increasingly, technological divides, it was also the means through which cultural stereotyping most often took place. In *Whodunnit?*, a thirty-two-minute video first shown in Manchester in 2004, Wong had actors representing each of the ethnic-minority categories listed on Arts Council England funding applications speak to one another in various accents, from straight-up Received Pronunciation to those that more directly implied a particular ethnic background. Confounding expectations, Wong created an evident gap between what each character said and how he or she appeared.

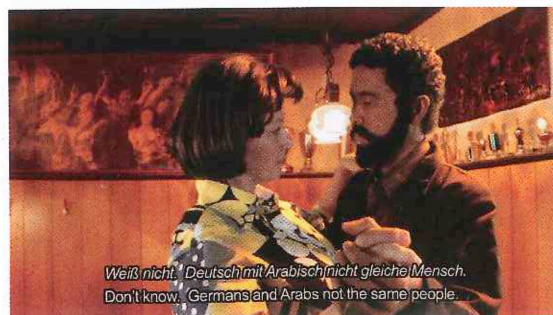
WONG EXPANDED on the possibilities of this mismatch between language and image when he was awarded a residency in 2007 at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. He began learning German in preparation, and the experience led to his making *Lerne Deutsch mit Petra von Kant/Learn German with Petra von Kant*, 2007. In this piece, Wong appropriates scenes from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant [1972]) He attempts to imitate not only Petra's lines but the corresponding facial and bodily expressions. Standing against a neutral white background, training his gaze on a subject that lies just outside the screen's frame, he often speaks as if to a mirror. Wong has sometimes shown this work alongside the original, timing the clips so that as the video progresses, the synchronization between the channels shifts and Fassbinder's Petra appears to respond to Wong's recitation.

Initially, the work registers as comic pastiche: Wong's peroxide-blond wig and ill-fitting bright green sheath dress reflect Fassbinder's delicate balancing act between high camp and an earnestness bordering on the didactic. But when he reenacts scenes such as the climactic moment when Petra lies in desperate (and ultimately futile) wait for Karin, the object of her unrequited desire, the focus shifts to the question of attraction, which in this work takes on a distinctly material sense, due, in part, to Wong's ability to establish parallels without making one-on-one resemblance his primary goal. A similar operation is at work in Wong's other Fassbinder reenactment, *Angst Essen/Eat Fear*, 2008, in which he plays both

Above: **Ming Wong, *Whodunnit?*, 2003–2004,** color video, 32 minutes. Publicity still.

Below: **Ming Wong, *Angst Essen/ Eat Fear*, 2008,** stills from a color video, 27 minutes.

Right: **Ming Wong, *Lerne Deutsch mit Petra von Kant/Learn German with Petra von Kant*, 2007,** still from a two-channel color video, 10 minutes.



Ming Wong, *Persona Performa*, 2011, stills from a multi-channel video projection, running time variable.

Emmi, the German widow in *Angst essen Seele auf* (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul [1974]), and Ali, the Moroccan guest worker who becomes her husband.

In all these cases, Wong's mimicry is deliberately incoherent, the visual equivalent of his speaking languages in which he has little proficiency. His masquerades have sometimes been compared to the elaborate fictional stagings of Cindy Sherman or Yasumasa Morimura, but perhaps the most telling aspect of such comparisons is how they point up the efficiency with which Wong evokes his characters. If Morimura frames the body as a ground on which signs of otherness are inscribed and read, moreover, Wong reconceives the question of aesthetics—particularly matters of affect and form—as a fundamental point from which to push the discussion of identity and social relationships in new directions. In this light, his masquerades may ultimately be more akin to Wu Tsang's explorations of drag and reenactment as a means of challenging narrow-minded preconceptions. What distinguishes Wong's work, however, is that he makes a point of using the emotional resonance of his sources to generate a host of noncathartic feelings that muddle the clarity of distinctions on which questions of identity and group affiliation depend.

The work that most clearly brings out this aspect of Wong's project is *Persona Performa*, 2011, a multipart installation first presented at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York last year. The work is based on Ingmar Bergman's 1966 classic *Persona*, a film that perhaps more than any other emphasizes the degree to which forms alone constitute social relations, as exemplified by the celebrated shot merging the faces of Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann. The relationship between the performers in Bergman's film is a distinctly formal one: Interpersonal relations here operate on a level far removed from the conventional framework of various embodied subjectivities interacting with one another. For *Persona Performa*, Wong took up this notion, enlisting twenty-four amateur actors who all looked superficially the same, insofar as they all wore the same blond wig and matching white robes, and moved identically. His piece disclaims the notion of the autonomous self and instead emphasizes endless replication—with, for example, a parade of indistinguishable Liv Ullmanns/Elisabeth Voglers. The effect of having so many performers from a myriad of cultural backgrounds initially look the same is jarring. Rather than emphasizing their "actual" difference, however, Wong strives to have us recognize a world where our understanding of sameness and difference is perpetually subject to change. If *Persona Performa* was given a lukewarm response by its New York audience, it may have been because such a model of the world still feels alien to the primary audiences of "world cinema" and "global contemporary art," audiences who remain far more attached to the identification and policing of distinctions than to the much more difficult task of letting go of them altogether.

There are, however, instances where the subtlety of such recalibration has been lost, where Wong gives in to the temptation of spectacle. Shown earlier this year at REDCAT in Los Angeles, *Making Chinatown*, 2012, is an elaborate installation comprising large sculptural and painted backdrops interspersed with recordings of restaged scenes from Polanski's noir saga. Wong here plays the roles originally performed by Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Huston, and Belinda Palmer, and his acting is considerably more polished than in his earlier works, while the elaborate minisets take on the air of large-format paintings and photographs. Where his previous videos were far less concerned with narrative accuracy than with the affect that could be produced by restaging high-drama scenes in a low-intensity way, *Making Chinatown* comes across as a borderline sentimental homage to Polanski and Los Angeles, an impression that feeds into the feeling that Wong is here trying to cover his bases by demonstrating how aware he is of the work's physical and discursive location, its source material, and its presumed audience. In this case, Wong's reflexivity verges on showmanship.

Yet there is a timeliness in the way that *Making Chinatown* raises this very question of reflexivity, and that Wong does so in a contemporary art field whose relentless self-examination can foment a culture of perpetual skepticism that discourages viewers from ever allowing themselves to feel wonder or fascination. By making room for such feelings, Wong challenges his viewers to find a language that can discuss works such as his without instinctively reverting to categories of race, gender, age, or even standards of attractiveness—categories designed to permanently undermine the formation of a community grounded in social parity. Indeed, he insists that viewers acknowledge that such basic emotional responses *matter*, even when they compromise our efforts to integrate what we see and hear into a logically cohesive structure. Whether this is possible remains an open question. But the fact of Wong's nevertheless starting the conversation deserves recognition: It is already a significant accomplishment for viewers to begin to imagine what an aesthetics of a nonidentitarian world might look like—and, perhaps more important, how it would feel. □

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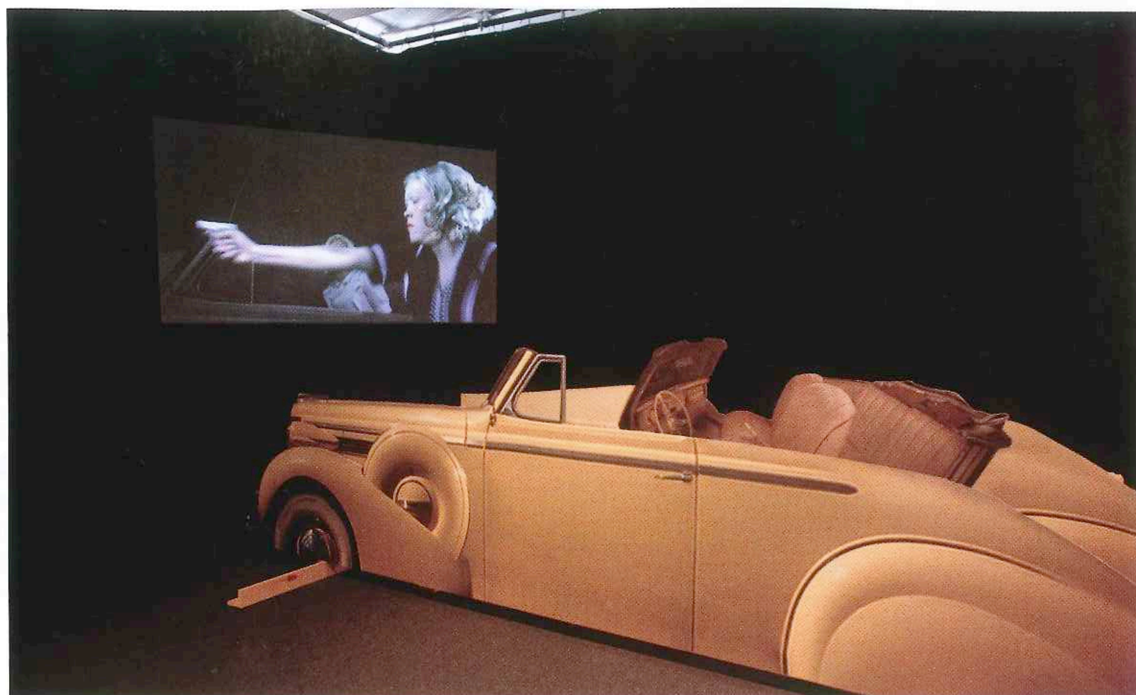

Right: **Ming Wong, *Making Chinatown*, 2012,** mixed-media installation featuring a seven-channel color video. Installation view, REDCAT, Los Angeles. Photo: Scott Groller.

Below: **Ming Wong, *Making Chinatown*, 2012,** stills from the seven-channel color video component of a mixed-media installation, running time variable.