

Performing Lives

Zoë Chan - curator



May Truong, *The Outsiders*, 2016
Video, 5 min
Courtesy of the artist

OPTICA CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN

Opening_

Saturday, January 20, 2018, 3 pm to 5 pm

Guided Tour_

Saturday, January 20, 2018, at 3:30 pm
by Zoë Chan

Exhibition_

January 20 - March 17, 2018

Tuesday to Saturday, 12 pm to 5 pm

Family Saturdays _Workshop for Kids

4 years and older

Saturdays, January 27 and March 17, 2018

1 pm - 4 pm

Free | No reservation required

- ▶ Featuring recent video works by a selection of Canadian and international artists, *Performing Lives* explores—and bridges—the supposed gap between documentary and entertainment, information and spectacle, fact and fiction. Making references to and borrowing methods from TV, film, theatre, dance, and music, these videos represent various groups using strategies that venture beyond the expository approach characteristically associated with documentary cinema.

The expository approach indisputably plays a crucial role in informing the public, especially in the face of deceptive propaganda, the phenomenon of “fake news,” and the dissemination of other sorts of misinformation. In *Performing Lives* however, the featured videos eschew straightforward didacticism, instead embracing an array of performative strategies to draw in the viewer. They offer new awareness of and insight into the experiences, perspectives, and interests of groups whose collectively shared identities intersect with a multiplicity of factors—from ethnocultural origins and gender to leisure activities and life experiences: a Roma community living in the outskirts of Paris, Indigenous survivors of Canada’s residential school system, undocumented Guatemalan labourers in suburban Los Angeles, *Twin Peaks* fans, and young Asian-Canadian women.

In *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (2011), film studies scholar Elizabeth Cowie writes that in the world of cinema, there is often a perceived divide between information and spectacle—the former being associated with documentary and non-fiction and the latter with entertainment and fiction. This division is illusory, she argues: instead, these categories are inherently interconnected, as documentary is characterised by “a narrativizing of reality” that “engages us with the actions and feelings of social actors, like characters in fiction.” Cowie thus prefers to describe documentary as “embodied storytelling.”

Blurring the traditional binary categories of fiction vs non-fiction and their commonly associated attributes (lies vs truth, frivolity vs seriousness, etc.), Cowie’s definition of documentary offers a useful entry point into the hybridised narratives articulated in the videos comprising *Performing Lives*. Francis Ford Coppola’s iconic film *The Outsiders*, based on the popular young adult novel of alienated masculinity by S.E. Hinton, is re-cast with an all-female crew of Asian descent (**May Truong**, *The Outsiders*). The ongoing trauma of residential schools is played out in a hip-hop dance sequence inspired by zombie movies and the creepy music video for Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (**Lisa Jackson**, *Savage*).

Though less brashly “mashup” in their respective approaches, the other videos in *Performing Lives* place equal emphasis on storytelling through embodied performativity: *Twin Peaks* enthusiasts act out the roles of their favourite characters from David Lynch’s cult series in scenes written entirely by fellow fans (**Helen Reed**, *Twin Peaks*); the day-to-day struggles of the inhabitants of a Roma camp are evoked in a series of folktale-like vignettes (**Bertille Bak**, *Transports à dos d’hommes*); a Home Depot parking lot in Los Angeles becomes the unlikely setting for displaced Mayan migrants performing choreographed movements that allude to Guatemala’s bloody civil war in which they fought (**Yoshua Okón**, *Pulpo*). While these videos display a range of production values ranging from the DIY aesthetics of community theatre to the professional polish of mainstream cinema, they share a focus on so-called real people—often amateur or untrained performers—who are intimately and intrinsically linked to the stories expressed.

Employing familiar performative conventions from a range of pop cultural platforms (musical numbers, dance sequences, role play, costume, and so on), these videos compel viewers to focus not only on the content of the stories but also on *how* their subjects actively embody their roles. Scholar Carrie Noland contends in *Agency and Embodiment* (2009) that “culture is both embodied and challenged through corporeal performance”; to study the body’s many gestures is to understand how “human beings are embodied within—and impress themselves on—their worlds.” In this way, the body is written on by socialising forces—but also has the agency to write its own story. Noland argues that we should consider “how the body might speak to us—not beyond but *through* cultural frames.” Working in this vein, the videos in *Performing Lives* share a discernable interest in highlighting the agency of the body *within* rather than despite the codified structures of dancing, singing, or acting. Asking what new understandings we can glean from the performing subjects, the exhibition offers viewers a window into the perspectives, subjectivities, and experiences of the groups depicted.

Zoë Chan

Zoë Chan (Vancouver, BC) is an independent curator and critic. In her research, she has focused on youth and youth culture, food, documentary, and discourse around representation and identity.

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