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'Golden': interdisciplinary creative practice and the aesthetics and poetics of leisure and nostalgia in diaspora

Summary

Golden is an ongoing series of works across video, sound, installation, net and live media, that explore possibilities for a critical aesthetics and poetics of place, nostalgia, aspiration and translation in diaspora, within an interdisciplinary creative practice. Key questions include 'nostalgia' as a vehicle for negotiating 'place' in migration, against the 'nostalgic' as a mode of representation; spatial, oral and aural 'leisure' practices as processes of inscribing, translating and performing identity, memory, and territory; and their tactical, critical representation. The AHRC Diasporas, Migration and Identities programme will contribute to the research and documentation of *Golden*, by funding its discursive expansion in a collaborative, experimental artist's book, *Golden (Notes)*.

Project Outline

Golden (Notes) is an artist's book project conceived as part of *Golden*, a series of related works across installation, time-based media and performance, to be disseminated through exhibitions, live events, the internet and print. *Golden (Notes)* will reflect on these works and wider contexts of practice and research relating to a critical aesthetics and poetics of memory, history, place, and translation. The aim is to produce an experimental, reflexive, discursive space in which to explore the languages, concepts and processes of representation in migration and diaspora, that traverse *Golden* as an ongoing practice-led research project.

Research Questions

Golden (Notes) is concerned with practice-led approaches and alternative concepts for investigating, historicising, narrativising and performing the shifting identities and processes of migration in diaspora. The project aims to depart from conceptualisations of migrant subjects in terms of binaristic ethno-national conjunctions such as 'British Chinese', and their evaluation and identification along economic lines – serving particular industries or offering specific forms of culinary or cultural consumption. Moving also beyond dualistic metaphors that measure degrees of cultural 'authenticity' or 'assimilation' according to a spatial logic of proximity or distance (situating subjects 'here/there' or 'home/away'), the aim is to develop and explore cultural practices and strategies that examine and embody the movements and co-temporalities of languages, cultures, histories, and subjects in flux; subjects for whom aspirations to 'settle' and 'return' may not be contradictory, and 'nostalgia' may be understood in more complex terms than a 'backward' gaze.

The project will focus on discourses of 'leisure' invoked by particular narratives of a first generation of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants to 1950s' and 1960s' Britain, and their reading from second and third generation perspectives; from allotment tending to storytelling, ballroom dancing to popular song. The following questions are key:

- How might processes of 'settling' and 'return' be imagined, not as a simplistic choice between assimilation or segregation, but as a perpetual negotiation, imitation, adaptation and transformation of 'host' languages and cultures, through multiple intergenerational practices and processes of mutual exchange?
- How might 'nostalgia' be explored as a means of facilitating or hindering the negotiation of 'place' and identity in the present, particularly through the satellite and digital consumption of popular culture?
- Can the habitual movements and ritualised gestures in the solitary tending of soil, and stylised interactions of ballroom dance, serve as comparable metaphors and tactics for the tending of subjective / cultural memory and territory?
- How might the play of pidgins and pauses across 'standard' and 'broken' Englishes, and various forms of 'Chinglish', be heard or spoken tactically to challenge and elude preconceptions and fixed notions of diasporic identity and subjectivity?
- How might a critical aesthetics and poetics of practice, in and of diaspora, that speaks to moving image/sound traditions and popular song, operate against the 'nostalgic' as a mode of cultural representation to explore notions of 'cultivation', and the contradictions, disjunctures and movements across coincident experiences, histories, and geographies?

Aims and Objectives

Golden (Notes) aims to

- document and critically reflect upon the aesthetics and tactics of an interdisciplinary creative practice that speaks to, and of, diaspora
- explore real and virtual spaces for dialogue between creative practitioners and across the nominal limits of fields of cultural practice and theory
- initiate and explore processes of collaboration with fellow writers/practitioners and curators/editors
- establish and build upon relationships with key independent art organisations in the cultural sector and related communities of artists and audiences
- develop, produce and widely distribute via multiple publishing platforms an original artist's book, e-book and blog (via hard copy, website, downloadable PDF, CD rom)
- organise and document a series of gallery-based and online discussions
- reach diverse audiences across educational and cultural sectors on and offline

Research Context

The emergence of second and third generation so-called 'British Chinese' has coincided with a rise over the last decade in cultural production and diverse practices from visual and performing artists of Chinese and East Asian diasporas, that not only reflect upon and engage with the marginalisation of specific immigrant experiences, histories and narratives, but also begin to challenge the dominance of both Western and certain contemporary Chinese aesthetic languages. While research on the Chinese diaspora in the last century has tended to sideline British-born or based 'overseas Chinese' or relegate them to a passing footnote, studies that address the 'British Chinese' constituency, usually from historical, sociological or economic perspectives, also began to appear at this time. Sustained analyses of cultural production from this sector, which draw for example on Black British and African American cultural studies, or

contemporary Chinese visual, literary and film theories, remain scant however. Moreover, the ethnocentricity of critical approaches is seldom questioned.

Informed by two decades of debates around 'Black art' in British and transatlantic frames, as well as concurrent Western postcolonial and feminist theories and practices, it is the variously critical, theoretical, poetic and filmic works and interdisciplinary practices of Hong Kong Chinese and South/East Asian diasporic intellectuals and artists, among them Rey Chow, Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, that offer the most pertinent and resonant contexts here. As an artist and researcher, my project will speak across practice and theory, to question the ethno-national parameters that frequently delimit hermeneutical approaches to diasporic practices. Developing interdisciplinary and multimedia approaches that explore cultural practice in and of diaspora as processes of 'cultivation', the project will enhance existing knowledges and reach new audiences, contributing to the interrogation of 'fields' via critical, aesthetic strategies that address the specificity, mobility and permeability of gender and class-inflected gestural, linguistic, oral and aural diasporic practices, across spatial and temporal borders.

Research Methods

Golden (Notes) will document four related works (*Golden (Vistas)*, *Golden (Songs)*, *Golden (Years)* and *Golden (Voices)*), including their installations / presentations at Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, Beaconsfield, London.

In the form of a time-based text-piece, the project will critically reflect upon the various visual, audio, installation and live strategies of these works, based on empirical and archival research referencing digital video and audio recordings, archival sound and film, and existing literature. The text will appear online in a 'blog' or journal (as part of www.visual-culture.com, currently in development), a progressive, ongoing narrative open to feedback. Versions of this text will appear in the artist's book, e-book and CD-rom.

In addition, four writers/practitioners will be commissioned to research and develop original texts, which expand both conceptually and formally on the issues, concepts and themes and strategies across the series of works, entering into real and virtual dialogue in venue-based and online events. Working across visual and audio culture, literature, choreography, and film, the progressive production of texts will be punctuated by formal and informal dialogues on- and off-line. Through of range of envisaged outputs – a limited edition artist's book, an e-book distributed as both limited edition CD-rom and unlimited PDF download, a blog, and gallery-based and online discussions – space will be accorded both to the self-reflexivity of an artistic practice, and implicitly that of others, through the production of multiple, critical, creative, discursive spaces that emphasise the sustained discussion and evaluation of ideas, issues, and processes across interdisciplinary borders. In sum,

Project Duration

9 months