

Podcast Recording - David Khang

Diane Wong (03:43):

Hello, David, welcome to our podcast. Thank you so much for joining us today. Please tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to the art scene in Vancouver and how did you come to find yourself in Vancouver?

David Khang (03:59)::

Well, perhaps I can work backwards. When people meet me these days. And when they find out that I do these multiple things, art practice, dentistry and law. The immediate thing that people latch onto is like this kind of idea of renaissance man. And I reject that reading right off the bat in a polite way. Because to be one is a position born out of privilege. So then I unpack that and so then and then I say that the dentistry that I first did as a young man was an immigrant experience, which some people get automatically some people don't. And it was a way to, you know, raise oneself out of poverty with your family. I came to Harvard at a later date after practicing dentistry for five years despite objections from the parental units, right, that we all know and of course, most recently took a step back away from the art world in practice to study law. So in a sense that you can see that it came to the earth even late as the mature students and although I didn't quite go away from the art scene to study law, I did choose to take a step away from it. For I think, personal and community reasons, and which hopefully, maybe we can talk about at a later date. And you might be able to see my cat!

Coco Zhou (05:29):

Yeah, first of all, I just want to say the decision to choose dentistry over family considerations is very relatable. And I'm wondering about what made you diverge from the more, I guess, predictable model minority sort of path to go into art making.

David Khang (05:36):

Yeah, I think we can think of different paths that people have taken. And I think that people of Asian descent and maybe some other POC groups can relate, right? That dynamic. I remember listening to Sandra Oh talking about how she bolted from the parental unit. Like she just kind of said, I'm doing what I'm doing. More recently, Simu Liu said that he was an accountant before he became an actor, right? So we do have these antinomies, shall we say. And for me, it was the difference between the mother side of the family and father side of the family. Father grew up in poverty and knows nothing but survival. And so I don't expect him to understand. Whereas on my mother's side of the family, we had generations of artists and activists, which connects to my own exploration of art, as well as exploration of law as a way to kind of follow that lineage, if you will, or keep up the tradition. And because one wasn't enough, like practicing art for one's own life didn't feel true to me personally. And some other people might kind of feel that calling and maybe put it aside for the sake of art. Others go the other

way, or others follow mammon or money in comfort and security. So those are, I think all the different motivations at play and we choose what we choose.

Diane Wong (07:32):

Yeah, it definitely does. Yeah, I think we all kind of share very similar, like, you know, parental concerns about pursuing the arts. I think my parents are still being like, what are you doing? But they have eventually kind of relatively accepted it, but I also bolted when I was 18, like to Montreal. So I think Coco did as well actually.

David Khang (08:24):

If I may just squeeze in a little anecdote that Liz Park shared with me. When she met me for the first time when she was doing the Curatorial Studies program at UBC, she was excited because she could share this news to her mom and say, you see, you can make a living at art or you can do art and have a meaningful career. And Liz was floored by her mom's response. The mom said, well, you see, you can do both too. So the expectations are through the roof.

Diane Wong (08:31):

Yeah, I think an ongoing joke with me and Coco is like, oh, is it time to just go to law school as well? Like, I think we talk about it at least like once a month. I think it's a very common practice for like people who studied art history to consider law school as like, oh, if we want to leave the art world, law school is a good choice, which is really great that you were doing it. And I guess we'll jump a little bit back about your time working with Centre A, especially kind of on the development of the project, How to Feed a Piano. Could you tell us a little bit more about that, how that project came to be?

David Khang (09:05):

Yeah. So originally, that project was funded by the Franklin Furnace Archive in Brooklyn, New York. So it was supposed to be staged. In somewhere in the greater New York City area. And I ran into two obstacles. One is where do I find a venue in the New York City area that's large enough for a horse and the idea was to work with an organization called Federation of black cowboys. They're retired police officers and prison guards who are teaching and they're all black, African American. They're teaching young black kids how to ride horses in an urban setting. Very well, they were the cause and I remember seeing a documentary about them. So I contacted them. And when I explained them to the project their spokesperson said let me get this straight. You want to do what with a horse. He was like, and then pretty soon after it was a click. So facing those two obstacles, Martha Wilson of Franklin Furnace Archive recommended maybe trying to stage the venue at home or in Vancouver first, and then try to get it restaged at a later date. Which really hasn't happened but it's okay. But it's because I've worked in to always try to consider the site me when Quan talks about site specificity site responsiveness, you know, and historical specificities so it no longer made sense to work with black cowboys,

but it made much more sense to work with Indian cowboys in the Pacific Northwest context. So, in a conversation with Cheryl Arendelle, she mentioned that Candice Hopkins is a great horse whisperer. So I contacted her and she came on board and then finding a venue. And then one of the logical choices was Senator Ray because they were at that time at Hastings and Carol at that large, former BMO bank building that had a very high ceiling and it was more than capable of entertaining a horse. A Clydesdale novice which is 2000 paddock can be up to 2000 pounds. So then I approached Makiko Makiko Hara and Hank bull about the project and that's how it came to be.

Coco Zhou (11:12):

That's really fascinating. I'm wondering if we could backtrack a little bit and talk about, like, your ideas around this project. You've worked with, like, various, like life animals, like animal parts, kind of throughout your career. So I guess at that point, in your art practice, what drew you to working with the horse and also this idea of having a cowboy, right? Because I think that's like a very historically, racially, you know, significant figure, who,

David Khang (12:00):

In the larger idea level, I was thinking about interspecies, interracial relationships, and hence I was experimenting with living with a cat. And that was a huge motivation to kind of understand the other. You know, we talk about the other and Derrida talks about the other a lot. And, but we don't often get beyond the capital O other to think through, feel through and experience how to be in relationship with the other, right? You know, my mind right now is not necessarily in a space to consider these questions about my own art because of what's happening in Gaza, but it relates to my response to your question. I began art making seriously at grad school and I arrived in Southern California in 2001 and then two days later, 9-11 happened. So what does one do? How do you make art in an environment where every ethical, passionate, thoughtful response to 9-11 is being completely shut down? So in a sense, whether it's literal or symbolic, my response was a way to obviate or bypass the blockage of linear, rational, articulate language towards a non-linguistic, animalistic, bodily response. And so I was thinking about sacrificial animals a lot at that time. And then I happened to stumble onto Lamont Young's compositions, 1960, which was of course in 1960. And he was experimenting with non-musical sounds, which has a huge performative element, right? So for instance, turn a butterfly loose in a room, feed a piano until it is satiated, draw a straight line, which Nymcan Pack had performed. And so my first ever public performance, which was new to me, and so that was a bit of risk-taking that I think kind of paid off in terms of opening vistas to an artistic practice that I hadn't considered. Going into grad school as a, mainly a sculptor and an installation artist, and then considering, and I still do, but considering the body happens to be my body as a sculptural object to install into a time-based installation, and not to personalize it too much, but recognizing that the body is not a neutral body, but it is a racialized and gendered body, which also can shift in context, right? So when I was performing in Japan in

the early 2000s, or mid-2000s, I became only a man, not a racialized man. But when I go back to North America, I am definitely a racialized man. So those kinds of intersections of race and gender, and of course we never talk about class in the art world. And by the way, law doesn't know how to talk about class either, in a significant way. So anyway, maybe I lost the thread of the question that you were asking, but I hope that begins the initial sewing.

Coco Zhou (14:58):

No, I think that was great. Yeah, there were so many threads there. I think just to acknowledge that, right, we are having this conversation in kind of the backdrop of horrible acts of genocide in Palestine. And at least the question that's on my mind these days is like, what are we all doing in the art world? How can we respond to it in any kind of significant or meaningful way?

David Khang (15:28):

If I may, quickly, maybe not so quickly, but a couple of things. I just want to recognise that it connects to us in that deep connection between what's happening in Palestine and on Turtle Island, that it's a loss of land, taking away land. And we don't want to have to get into the Biblical narrative of that and the mythology around land, the milk and honey that settlers found, whether it's in the ancient Jews or 20th-century Israelis, Jews from Europe or Christopher Columbus, right? They have parallel rings that are really important to draw upon. And I respect artists who continue to make art full time. And I remember listening to Leon Golub one time in an interview and said, you know, the absurdity of him recognizing everything that's going on in the world, the atrocities, and I think he was speaking about the Vietnam War. And yet I go into my studio every day to ask the question of whether this particular area should be red or blue. And that's the finding that all artists have to, well, ought to wrestle with, but I don't think we all do. And maybe I don't care if we all do. I just want people who do care to actually take those steps rather than being in a state of helplessness. So come join me.

Diane Wong (17:03):

Sorry. I'm also just thinking about what we were just talking about, jumping kind of back to the fact that the performance is happening in Vancouver. What was the significant connection within the Vancouver art scene? Because the previous part of the project that you did before How to Feed a Piano was done in New York, and one of them was also done in Western Front. How did you see this connection within Vancouver in comparison to the performances that you did in New York?

David Khang (17:36):

I'm not really sure if I know how to answer that question. How do you see the significance? Because as an artist, we all want our work to be impactful and significant, but how do we really know? I have some ways to gauge that, but really it's up to the audience. So if you're asking the question of the significance and the impact of it, it's everybody but me who's feeling that, I

think. So please, I would love to hear what you think about what that is for you. But what I can say are a couple of things. One is I do remember - Marina Roy, I think it was a second hand comment that I heard that she said that that was the best performance I've ever seen in Vancouver. Now, I don't know what to do with that. I don't know what that means. It is certainly a compliment. It was definitely impactful for her. On one level, when you're asking the question about this thread between New York and Vancouver, it's asymmetric because I'm a Canadian artist going into New York City, and there's at once a freshness to how I'm viewed, but also the marginalization as, well, you're not from a major center, so therefore your work must not be as significant. Like those dynamics that we, maybe we have all personally experienced, but also we embody and repeat by the pecking orders that we create in our minds between what is the center and what is the periphery, the marginalized. And then of course the screwed up dynamics in a place like Vancouver is that we gravitate towards the signifiers of import. Once we hear the words New York City, then the assumption is, oh, it must be more important than us. So that dynamic is always, I think, at play, and so leading into the question you asked, I'm not really sure. It certainly hasn't translated into more knocks on the door by curators of larger institutions. I think it's also the place of performance art in the Vancouver scene where the most significant gesture in I think our recent history is Glenn Altim starting and building up live performance biennial and then handing it off. And then it's really plummeted in its value and significance, 10, 15 years. So I think that it's at a marginal position, and performance artists also by themselves maintain a marginalized position. It is more immediate than anything else we can experience. Well, I'm not sure if that's true. I think it's true to some degree. But so again, it's about unpacking beyond simple memes and continuing to dissect it and understand it better so that we can become a more intelligent community rather than a competing community of pecking orders.

Diane Wong (20:56):

Yeah, definitely. I think that to kind of like answer your question, I think when we first started the idea for the podcast and we were coming up with the list of speakers, because we've been looking at your catalogue for so long, like because we still have your catalogue in our boutique. So we've been looking at it for so long. And at least for me, I see it kind of as like when we were at Hastings, it was kind of the glory days of Centre A. And your performance was kind of like in my mind, like at the centre of it. I was not in the art world at that time. So like, you know, I wasn't at the performance, but the grandness of the performance within the space and the utilisation of the space and bringing in the horse was kind of what drew us to wanting to talk to you about what was like working as an artist at the time with Centre A and working within that West Hastings space as well, because it's now like a light store. And that's kind of why we were really interested in talking to you.

Coco Zhou (21:58):

So I think for audiences who are new to, you know, *How to Feed a Piano*, I want to read like a little excerpt from the catalogue, and this is from Candice Hopkins' essay, I think, where there's like a little description of the performance. But it does use future tense, so I'm assuming that this is like a script of what will happen at the time of this writing. So on May 16th, Khang after climbing onto a stage will quote, feed a piano hay and water. He will then have this naked body covered in blue paint and will attach himself to a rope at the near of the workhorse's harness. At the combination of the performance with the horse acting as the drawing tool, his body will leave the trace of a perfectly blue circle. All the while, two pianists now on the stage will together reinterpret Lamont-Yon's original composition. In keeping with Khang's original idea, the horse will be handled and written by a person of First Nations descent, effectively an Indian cowboy. There's a lot happening in this performance, and I'm wondering what it was like performing with Robbie the Horse?

David Khang (23:17):

Yeah, and I appreciate that you referred to Robbie as Robbie, although the whole idea is the horse came first. It was very humbling to be so near a 2,000-pound entity that could easily squash me with one swift kick. So there was a huge amount of trust in both Candace Hopkins and Gary Godforson, who also assisted in handling the horse, managing the horse. And Candace is Clingit, and Gary is Zech Reptumov. So that was very meaningful. So yes, there is a lot happening, but that's the way I work. >And I try to layer all my work so that there's an entry point for somebody. And I only strategically say, no, that reading is wrong, if you choose to stay only at that level, because some people interpret it in a very formal way. Well, okay, how do you get beyond the formal? The former substances are always working hand in hand, and we constantly learned that in our art school, but we jettisoned that quite immediately, conveniently, I should say. So those things that are happening and working with Robbie was important, but it was also important working with Candice. And then it goes towards the meme of working with being in relationship to the other, which becomes embodied and experiential through working with both a non-human species and somebody who is different from me in terms of origins. So going back to the previous works, I think the work that I did with with Bernalda Walcott in Toronto, a fellow with Centrix, was trying to make that connection between black and yellow bodies commingling and being in relationship through key cultural figures like Bruce Lee, who was a cultural hero to a lot of disenfranchised black youth who were being traumatized by police. So here's this small Asian dude who can fly through the air and kick ass. So that kind of empowering movement. And I would like to differentiate that with what's happening right now with Marvel Comics and CMU and all the superhero characters. I don't equate those things. And we may or may not get time to talk about all of that because they're so tangential. Equally important, but maybe within the framework of this conversation. I just want to leave that out as a teaser.

Coco Zhou (25:58):

I think just like looking at the photographs of this performance in the catalog, I think I'm most immediately just kind of struck by the humility that you mentioned. I think there's like an incredible level of vulnerability and surrender attached to that. I can't imagine what it's like being dragged along. You're kind of planking on this huge canvas and turning yourself into a brush or a tool, dipped in paint and being kind of dragged along, completing this composition along with Robbie. What was that experience like for you, I guess, on a bodily or spiritual level?

David Khang (26:45):

That's a really lovely question to ask me, because at the moment, I am so task-oriented. Execution is the key for me. And there's plenty of time later to reconsider and reflect. I think that's a part of the beauty of art making, in that we may not know what we're doing at the moment, but we can figure it out later too. And that's, I think, part of the risk-taking that we often forget. And I think we do well by reminding ourselves of taking those risks, whether they're bodily or emotionally, right? And yet still remaining somewhat in control. It's not bombastic risk-taking, but it's control risk-taking, by having Candice and Gary in place to manage the situation effectively. And going back to what's happening today in Palestine, it's out of control. And so how do we gain back some measure of control? Because that's the only way. Of course, it will go out of control. History has shown us. So moving back and forth between the harsh reality of war and art, I think showing our underbelly, that's the way to get to our audiences, I think. I think it gets communicated. Sometimes we need to also get over our own fears because we make that shit up. Hilarious comment that I got back from Rebecca Belmore was, it was the first time, you know, some people think that I'm an exhibitionist because I've done new performances, but I really don't, I only do it when the project demands it. I remember telling one young student who was, who wanted to do a piece on rape, but didn't want to take off any of her clothes. And I managed to convince her, as challenging as it was, as sensitive as it was for an older male artist to encourage a young woman to take off her clothes. It was very difficult, but she rose to the occasion and the other students in the class, the respect that they showed her was that they, everybody, learned in that environment. So I'm nude in front of hundreds of people and I can sense my shoulders cowering, getting smaller and smaller. And Rebecca's response was, don't worry, don't think too much of yourself, we're all looking at the horse. That was also very humbling and it made me more courageous. And of course, coming from somebody like Rebecca, it meant more and it makes me want to share that experience so that young artists have courage.

Diane Wong (29:36):

Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Yeah, and I totally agree. I think sometimes like the art world is very in its own world, that like we don't want to show vulnerability. And I find that if you're vulnerable with people you trust, it helps build relationships and it kind of makes art a little, not less serious, but more open, which I find lacking sometimes, just an observation,

I guess. I guess you don't have to talk about it, but we're all very curious. You know, you have a very busy life being a lawyer now. Where are you with your artistic practice?

David Khang (30:16):

So I think importantly, I wanted to step away from the art, not making art, but the dynamics of the art world, which quite often I've witnessed rewarding bad behavior. And we look the other way, or we're too busy with our own practices to even weigh into it. And I wanted to explore what systems of justice can be implemented. And of course, you know, our own justice system is very deeply flawed in many ways. But I do appreciate a number of things that I bring back into the art world. One is that legal training promotes brevity in law students. And in contrast to the going on and oneness of many artists, with statements or during Q&A's, everybody wants their own seconds of fame or minutes of fame. So emotionally and for my ego, that was very important to distance myself. To distance myself away from and also running towards understanding an obtuse opaque system like law and knowing how a toaster works by taking it apart. And so now I need to figure out how to put it back together, as well as in a way that is definitely reflected and impacted by my recent schooling. I don't know what that looks like, but it definitely puts me on more solid ground in terms of learning from yet another framing device to view the world through. The confidence, the courage and the curiosity to make impactful and significant work. Divorce from the positive impacts of it on an art career. Do I want my art to be more significant and impactful and have lots of shows at major institutions? Of course, who doesn't, but that kind of separation of one's legacy from the work that we make is how I choose to practice art.

Diane Wong (32:23):

That's actually such a great answer, because we're all kind of struggling with the art world, I believe. And knowing that there are others who have as well, it's a really meaningful comment. Knowing that it helped with your artistic practice and you as a person to take a step back from the art world, I think is really impactful for others to hear about as well. So I want to thank you for sharing that.

David Khang (32:50):

I don't want to paint the rosy picture of law school. I half-jokingly frame it as an endurance performance art piece, and you need endurance, and it's bombastic at times. Often, it's bombastic and very rigid and hierarchical and equally lacking in space for racialized and gendered subjects. So I did not go in with a rose-colored lens, but what I did find is that I was pleasantly surprised to get to know more progressive-minded law students than I had expected. We expect that kind of dominant corporate mindset, that's a given, and that still continues to be the majority, but I was pleasantly surprised by the substantive size of the minority. So how do we grow the cluster of courage?

Diane Wong (33:49):

I think this is one of our last questions, and it's kind of an office question because we all kind of want to know. Coco, do you want to ask this question?

Coco Zhou (34:00):

What was it like to study with Derrida?

1:15:55

So I what I feel when you ask to ask that question is a genuine curiosity and I've always advocate I always already advocated for curiosity. But I want to differentiate that curiosity with what's on people's minds often when they ask that question is, perhaps the more perhaps a slightly differentiated question from that would be why is it that so many people are interested that I had studied with Derrida I remember being in a dinner table conversation with a bunch of academics in Vancouver. And and there was an academic who was like absolutely saying nothing to me. Complete avoidance. And then as soon as a mutual friend said, Oh, by the way, David started with Derrida and then immediately 180 degrees, total interest. So that says, you know something about what we what we see often both among students as well as academics. This, this association with fame or famous people, without getting to the substance, being curious enough to be to inquire into the substance of a person or a thing or an experience. I find that to be tragic, and but it's very prevalent, and I want to be able to, to do things to counter that. With every bone sinew and muscle of my body every day.

David Khang (34:05):

So what I feel when you ask that question is a genuine curiosity, and I've always already advocated for curiosity, but I want to differentiate that curiosity with what's on people's minds often when they ask that question is perhaps a slightly differentiated question. Why is it that so many people are interested in studying with Derrida? I remember being in a dinner table conversation with a bunch of academics in Vancouver, and there was an academic who was absolutely saying nothing to me, complete avoidance, and then as soon as a mutual friend said, Oh, by the way, David studied with Derrida, and then immediately 180 degrees total interest. So that says something about what we see often, both among students as well as academics, this association with fame or famous people, without getting to the substance, being curious enough to inquire into the substance of a person or a thing or an experience. I find that to be tragic, but it's very prevalent. And I want to be able to do things to counter that with every bone, sinew and muscle of my body every day, but it does exist. And so what I would say to your question, Coco, is that he was genuine, kind and curious in the best of times, coy and evasive at worst, but kindness and curiosity isn't necessarily on the level of some grandiose philosophical tradition. He was equally curious about his cat and in part his privilege, but also he maintained that curiosity until the end, which is when I met him, like a

year before his sudden death. So behind me right here is a letter that he wrote. It's the Lettre du Derrida, which is, I guess, a keepsake in a sense, where he gave me my final grade for his seminar from Paris by writing a letter to me. And I think that quote has made it into the exhibition catalogue.

Coco Zhou (36:26):

That's very lovely and thoughtful. Thank you so much for entertaining us. I'm, I think, just struck by what you said about what art's responsibility is in terms of teaching or modeling, humility and courage. Also, I'm in awe of the way that you are constantly navigating all of these different disciplines and all these different worlds as a way to make sense of history and of their underpinnings. Thank you for sharing all that with us today.

David Khang (37:04):

Thanks for the conversation.