

# Podcast Recording - Hank Bull

**Diane Wong** 03:49

Hello, hello, Hank. Thank you for joining us today. We're just going to start this off with you know, tell us a little bit about your background and how you have come to find yourself in Vancouver.

**Hank Bull** 04:18

Okay, well, I was born in Moh'kins'tsis, which means the place where the bow meets the elbow, the Bow River meets the elbow. Moh'kins'tsis, now known as Calgary, on your roadmaps, and in 1949, a long time ago, and I grew up back East. I grew up in Ontario, Nova Scotia and I always knew I wanted to be an artist from an early age. And I grew up in a very musical family. So you know, I was kind of disposed towards those sorts of things. And then when I got out of high school, I traveled and worked various jobs and then I ended up here in Vancouver. I came because of this place called the Western Front, which was an artist-run centre, and joined this group. That was very exciting, in an old lodge hall. Still going today, a place for you know performance art and video and various kinds of experiments, networking, and lots of artists visiting from all over the place and collaborating on things. So it was a very stimulating place to begin my artistic career. That's where I developed an interest really in, in, in Chinese art and started reading about Asian art in general and a lot of the artists that were influenced by Asian art. So that's how I kind of developed in Vancouver.

Eventually, you know, that developed into not just performance art, but radio art. So I was on a radio show for a long time. And that developed into telecommunications when it became possible to like, send a picture over the telephone line, that was a very exciting moment. In the late 70s and the early 80s, there was a network of artists who were experimenting with these, these new media fax machines came in around 1983. So we, you know, they're kind of a network of artists around the world using these technologies. And that was an exciting moment and this idea of, of a network that nobody's in charge. Everyone has a front row seat. Everyone is doing their bit and participating in a kind of collective creative experiment. That was something that was very important to me, still is, and this idea of a global consciousness that we know, we live on a planet together. And yes, we have a lot of differences that of course, we have to acknowledge and respect but we also have to figure out how we're going to make the planet work, and how we're going to have a kind of planetary consensus of some sort. And I thought that art was a great way to do that, you know, and I was, this is a 60's idea. I mean, people like Jimi Hendrix, were talking about this back and so you know, that's kind of formed my thinking.

And then towards the end of the 80's. Then I was traveling, I made an incredible life changing trip to Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe with Kate Craig and in a sense, I've been dealing with that you're on the road ever since. They put us in contact with artists in these different countries and really made me want to do projects with India, Africa, China and so on that would, you know, eventually bring them to Vancouver or bring them to Canada. I was able to do that organizing performance art tours and, and that sort of thing. And eventually, now we're in the late 90's. We did a big project here in Vancouver called Jiang Nan, which means south of the river and that was all about modern and contemporary art from south of the Yangtze River in China, which is the area around Shanghai and inland from that Hangzhou, Suzhou. It's the place where, you know, modernism was born in this area and exchange

with Europe and other countries, Japan, took place there. It's also got a long history in Chinese art and literature. So it was great to organize this thing. And we had 12 galleries all over the city, including the university galleries and the artist run centres and even the Vancouver Art Gallery, and everybody was able to participate in this show. We had a big symposium which brought together quite a few scholars of Chinese art, historical art, but also contemporary art and it was all translated into Chinese and we published a book so that was a big moment.

After that, we thought, wouldn't it be fantastic to have a permanent center where we could do these things on an ongoing basis and, and recognize, you know, that Vancouver's probably the largest Asian city in the world outside of Asia. So it was a dream until a patron came along who wanted to help support this idea and we started Centre A, Vancouver International Center for Contemporary Asian Art. It was Milton K. Wong, and Stephanie Holmquist and a few others who you know, got the thing going at the beginning. Eventually there was a guy who owned a building on Howe Street, Wayne Lee and you know, he's a businessman, and he had this storefront. It was a travel agency on the ground floor that was vacant. He said, listen, I love your idea, I got a space you can have if you want to, rent free. So that was it, we added a space and we spent our first five years there and did a lot of amazing, amazing shows in that space. And then we went from there, we got you know, the landlord changed. He sold the building and we got kicked out on 30 days notice that was exciting. So we had to improvise. Well, we found an empty space in Tinseltown which was kind of a new and big space which is now the Rexall drugstore. We camped out in there for a couple of months. Did some great shows. And then eventually we found this space on Hastings Street, Hastings and Carroll Street, another huge space that used to be a train station as big. And again, the landlord who was a developer wanted to build a tower there he thought oh yeah, these guys this this can be part of the part of the picture. And so they gave us that space once again, we you know, we paid expenses, but we didn't have to pay rent. So it really made it possible for us to thrive. And we did some great shows in that space. And then I left in 2010 after the Olympics, and Centre A moved on to a couple of different spaces in Chinatown, including the current space. And I've you know, watched with interest but I haven't been that involved in in those spaces. But I think that in those cases that also was a matter of cutting a deal and coming to some kind of encouraging arrangement with the landlord wasn't just paying upfront market rent. And it was a big deal when Centre A actually got to lease on its current space that was a huge achievement.

**Coco Zhou** 12:19

Yeah, thank you so much for that, like very rich chronology. I'm really interested in the countercultural moment when your artistic career started to flourish, but we'll probably come back to that question. We'll wait if we have time. But I wanted to learn more about your travels in Europe and Asia in the 80's and 90's. During which time you helped, and I guess after which time you helped organize the Jiangnan Project in Vancouver. I'm just curious about yeah, like, what was it about those travels that, you know, inspired you to do this project and bring it back to Vancouver? What was your experience in China in particular, like?

**Hank Bull** 13:10

Yeah, well, we you know, it's always an amazing thing to go to another country and go to another culture that's different from the one you grew up in. People do it for many different reasons. And it's always deeply impressing and transforms your life. In my case, you know, I had the luxury of going, you know, got a Canada Council grant to go and do research in Asia. I mean, incredible to think of this. Kate and I had this idea to go around the world, we had been making shadow plays, shadow theater performances that were collaborative multimedia things with multiple projectors, and using our bodies

as shadows and colored lights and all this crazy stuff. But then we learned or at least I learned that shadow theater had a long rich tradition in Asia. That we had a lot to actually learn about. So that was the hook for the grant. We wanted to go to Asia and meet people who were involved in shadow theater and get going with them. And it wasn't that easy. We also wanted to connect with artists, with other artists who you know, in our network of mail, art and correspondence art, but that was still, you know, hard to find because there was no internet, we just had a couple of introductions.

We decided that we wanted to not go to Europe, which is a standard thing and then East to Asia. We wanted to start the other way, we wanted to go first to Asia and then come to Europe after that, which I think was a great decision. So we went to Japan and we did know a couple of artists there and we spent not too long but you know, a couple of weeks and then we went from there to Hong Kong, a similar short visit, Thailand. Then we stopped in Indonesia and in Bali, we worked for two months with a really great dalang who's Shadowplay master, **[E y en Weijia]** who was you know, he was young, he was the same age as us. But we went to his place every day and we learned about the making of the puppets and how the music goes together and how the show goes together. And we would go to them, go with them to their performances, which were, you know, all night shadow plays in small villages in the mountains and it was just an incredible experience to learn about this stuff, and we made good friends, you know. After that, **[Wejia]** came a couple of times to Vancouver.

Then we went to India and similar we were in the south of India and Tamil Nadu and small village we met a guy named Morgan Rao, who traveled by ox cart from town to town with his family and they would hang up a screen made of silk and make a little theater out of blankets and charge two cents and everybody would come to the shadow play and they did the Ramayana. And that was also incredible. We saw other shadow...[INAUDIBLE] where was a sacred art took place in the temple grounds and there was a special building for it, just marvelous experiences to do that. And we went to Africa and we met musicians in Africa and that led to a big project to try and bring musicians to Canada. I was young and naive. The whole thing collapsed and didn't work, but I learned a lot doing that and learned that you know, to do a big project like that you really need to take your time and step back. If it's not ready, wait another year, even another two years. Do it when it's right. So in the 80's I started to do these international projects. And I did get some right, so that's what led eventually to Jiangnian.

**Diane Wong** 17:16

Yeah, thank you so much for telling us about all your travels. We're just listening intensely, just kind of like storytime. So like you previously talked about after the Jiangnian project you, and you know the original founders and the board had the idea of establishing Centre A. So what were your hopes and visions for the gallery at the time, or what were all of your hopes and visions for the gallery at the time and you were also the Director for the first 10 years, what were some of the projects and collaborations that are most memorable to you to this day?

**Hank Bull** 17:54

Well, at the beginning the project was started really in conversation with Zheng Shentian, who is a great artist and a great curator and still very active today in Vancouver and around the world. He's an amazing person that we're very lucky that Zheng Shentian has chosen to make his home in Vancouver and he was a big part of the dynamic exhibitions that was through his connections that we were able to bring really leading artists to Vancouver and put them in touch with artists who lived in Vancouver, with local artists here. We wanted to create a center that would do that, you know, a very ambitious idea. We thought we're going to make a new museum, that was our idea. And we learned quite quickly that

you know, it wasn't going to be a slam dunk and that it was going to be a matter of long plodding work to get the thing going. We weren't going to have a big issue. And then because I had experience working at the Western Front, I knew how to write grants and so on. I said, Okay, let's be patient. Let's take our time. And so I had this role as being kind of the administrator and I felt you know, that we needed basically three, three legs to the stool. We needed to have artistic excellence, that was really the important thing. This is all about art and making art happen. We needed to have stability, financial stability, and we needed a place in the world to call home and to be well organized in that way. And we needed to have good governance. We needed to have a board that would be a broad based board that had all kinds of different people on it that would help to support the thing and spread the word in the community.

So that was really, I spent almost all my time doing that. And then as for the artistic program, it was a matter of bringing people into the organization who would do that. Yes, I curated some shows, but really it was people like Alden Habacon, Steven Tong, Sadira Rodriguez, Joni Low. And then you know when we had some money we hired a curator, Alice Ming Wai Jim came in and was the curator. And then Makiko Hara was the curator so these were the people who really defined the artistic program and made the art happen and it was just a ball to work with them, incredible. We cast the net wide. It was important to us to be really diverse, to be to really be asking the questions: What's Asia? Where is Asia who's Asian? Is it local? Is it global? And to really bring as many people into that conversation as possible. So part of that was not only exhibitions and performances, but also producing symposia. We started off with a big symposium called **Twisting the Box**, which was, you know, to say that was a lively conversation would be putting it mildly. It was intense, and it was controversial and people didn't all agree at all, but at least there was a space where these ideas can be put into motion. We did several other symposia like that. And in fact, on the 10th anniversary, we did a symposium called Let's Twist Again, where we looked back, you know, at the beginning, it was like, what might this look like? Going into the future? What would an Asian contemporary art museum look like? What are we talking about? And, you know, 10 years later, it was like, Well, yeah, and what did it transpired to be and now where do we go from here? So this idea of talking about it was really critical. And also a key part of that is the library.

So we started building a library very early, and when people would donate books, we got some significant donations and then Joni Low cataloged that library, which was an achievement, and made it really a part of what happens. I remember someone came from New York one time and saw the librarian said, you know, this is one of the most important libraries of books on contemporary art and in North America, I mean, it's like, they had nothing like that in New York. So that really amazed me. I don't know if that's true anymore but the library is still a key part of the Centre A organization and it's something I'm really proud of. And then there are the shows, I mean, we did some incredible shows.

The very first show was called the Bubble Tea Club, it was organized by the students. We had a big sign on the front window that said bubble tea, people came in and thought they were going to get a cup of tea and they did get a cup of tea, we always had tea. And then Alden Habacon organized a show, a student show. Again, we didn't have it, we're in a place with fluorescent lights and a carpet. It's an old travel agency. Oh, he did a grad show. He said it's grad time, let's invite all the graduating students from Emily Carr, Simon Fraser and UBC, who are of Asian descent and have a show together and then talk about that. That was, it was exciting and there were great artists in there who've gone on, Gwanessa Lam, who's just opened a show at the equinox gallery. She was a graduating student who showed at that show. We had another show about hapa culture very early on, and that was that was a fantastic

show that hapa big board was a giant skateboard, huge skateboard about maybe 15 feet long was full of drawers and cubby holes where you could write your own hapa story and stick it in these little cubby holes that have an audio cassette. It was like a data bank of hapa stories and of course the surfboard is kind of a Hawaiian Hapa emblem and that was that was really great. And you know, again, we had symposiums around that. I remember one person who said her name is Sarah Ku. She was a film student at UBC. She said, you know, I grew up in Vancouver, I'm hapa, it's normal here. It was in high school. It was just nobody even mentioned it was so normal. And that's the point. This is the first time I've had an opportunity to talk about being hapa with other hapa people in a kind of interesting, creative, safe place. And it meant a lot to her and I realized, wow, you know, we're on the right track.

So those shows were great. Then when we're on the Downtown Eastside, it changed our mission quite a bit because we were right across from Pigeon Park. Germain Koh did a show where she went to the bottle depot. We collected thousands and thousands of bottles and cleaned them and shined them up and put them on the floor of the gallery and they sparkled, they were like jewels and the street people came by and they just thought wow, treasure. Koki Tanaka, who did something similar, saw these wooden pallets in the laneways, and asked can we use them? He made a big mountain out of pallets and covered them with lamps from the junk storage and we showed them at Christmas time. So it had a festive, Diwali kind of quality. That was, that was incredible. And we did the first ever show in North America of contemporary art from Okinawa. We did a show called Charlie Don't Surf on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, which was the first show in North America about contemporary Vietnamese art, a group show and there was a catalog for that. So you know, these are great shows I could go on, there were over a hundred shows that I was involved in.

**Coco Zhou 26:08**

That's really exciting and amazing to hear kind of just like, I feel like that excitement team through as you were recollecting the stories just like there was so much ambition and vision in kind of the early days and it's also quite interesting to hear, just kind of the making of an institution. And as you said, in those days, there was a lot of improvisation. And even as you kind of moved from site to site so yeah, like a lot of centuries former homes, or, like on Homer Street, West Hastings, East Georgia, and now we're at Sun Wah Center in Chinatown. So it has traveled through all of these different spaces and it was interesting when you just mentioned how when center and moved more approximate or in Downtown Eastside that created a change in its mission. And so I'm curious to hear you know, how has sent Centre A kind of orientation to art, the kind of public it was cultivating like how was all that affected by the site that it found itself in?

**Hank Bull 27:38**

Yeah, that's so interesting, right? How architecture can determine what you do, and how the community around the gallery can determine what you do. And I mean, you mentioned the mission. I think the mission is important, and it's always good to look at the mission and, you know, at least once a year, I would say to the board, okay, well, what's our mission and are we done yet? You know, we came out of a kind of social justice agenda in a certain way, related to our kind of anti-racist work. Are we there yet? And the answer was, no, we're not there yet. Right? Still not there. But it's always good to ask that question and to see if you're on mission and do we need to change the mission? Or has our mission changed and have we accomplished some things or we're going to try something new? And so yeah, I mean, certainly getting into the BC Electric Building on Carroll and Hastings Street, changed our mission in many ways, because then we were right, in the face of homelessness, and, in particular, Indigeneity. And we had thought of ourselves as an Asian art gallery. But suddenly, we became very

clear that like any art institution in Canada, we had to figure out how to engage with Indigeneity in a way that made sense with our mission and that was a big conversation, it was hard for the board. But you know, we did that. And Daina Warren did an amazing show involving Indigenous artists from around the Pacific and we realized that actually, we had always been involved in that way. Our first artist in residence in the year 2000 was Santiago Bose, he was an Indigenous artist from the Philippines. And so we hit, you know, that had always been in there, but it became more explicit and in terms of involving the audiences as well on Hasting street.

Then on Georgia Street, it was slightly different because Georgia Street was really in the middle of Chinatown and then suddenly Centre A found itself in the midst of discussions around Chinatown revitalization and Chinatown history and recognition of that, you know, incredible culture. Which is now you look back on it, we've seen the opening of the Chinese Canadian Museum and the Chinatown Storytelling Center and that whole discussion has moved in, in this city but Vancouver, but Centre A was there, you know, and that was early on. Steven Tong did a show, which was a pop up show on Pender Street, real early like in 2002, or something and his idea was to show two things, one that Chinatown has always been home to artists that they've always been artists studios and Chinatown has always been not just Chinese, that there have always been South Asian, Japanese, Korean, Indigenous, many different populations living together in Chinatown. It's not a mono cultural space. So he did a project that explored those ideas. You know, and in those ways, I think we, you help to determine the kind of society that you're going to have. It's, you know, it's not just artists in their bubble, doing art, art it's the center of it but art helps to determine, you know, as we used to, say, at Western Front, the cultural ecology. It determines what kind of country we're going to live in. It determines what kind of conversations we're going to have when it provides a safe space where you can talk about difficult issues about you know, who's Asian and who's not, or whatever, you know, or who am I? Things that are sensitive, and not easy to talk about, but through art, you can actually push the conversation forward and create a really democratic, open society. That's how Canadian society is built. It's not built by government policies. It's built, I believe, by artists.

**Diane Wong** 32:00

Yeah, thank you so much for that very insightful conversation and I think our last question is, like about the future of Centre A and like what you would like to see for the future for Center A, which is a big question, but yeah.

**Hank Bull** 32:18

Okay, well, let's, let's talk. Let's talk by, let's make time go backwards first. We are always talking about the future where it's going to go, progress. Uh huh. Let's, let's go back to this idea about the ideas of the 1960s which is really what formed me, the counterculture you know, I'm an old hippie. So a lot of the ideas that are now front page like, you know, climate change, ecology, feminism, you know, anti-racism. Those were right, right in front of the conversation in the 1960s. But they weren't, they were inspirations, they weren't that well articulated. They certainly weren't institutionalized. They were just at the beginning of, we have ideas like revolution, you know, it's when the seeds were planted. Part of that on the art thing was that nobody's in charge, kind of an anarchic idea. The films of Andy Warhol, where there was no director, the actors just made up their lines and made up the movie as cameras rolled, or mail art. The idea, using the postal system, as a production studio, but as a distribution network as well so that the artists and the audience became the same. The audience created the work, which is essentially the internet. But this model is an interactive model, developed in and given form through the mail art network. And that's what you know, put people in touch with shows. So that's a kind of a 60s

idea and then it's been said that actually the 60s happened in the 70s that it was in the 1970s that a lot of these crazy ideas that were way out there did get institutionalized and did find a space like a building or a storefront or created a magazine or created some kind of structure in which to promote them and develop those ideas. And, you know, it's come a long way since then and so we've been talking about Centre A in the last 25 years. What do I imagine for the future? You know, essentially, keep on keeping on, it's more of the same. Like, I think that the most important thing is the art, the arts, the art and the artists are what drives the whole thing. That's the same as it was in the beginning, diversity and Indigeneity that you know, that it should really be embracing of many histories, many cultures, many languages, many traditions, many definitions of what art can be, many different media. It needs to be rooted in the local as a local roots, you know, right there at Chinatown, but it also has to have a global reach and engage the planet and engage planetary issues. And of course, it's super important to have a stable home. And, you know, my dream would be a really great street level space. Maybe right there, where you are now you know, with a really great landlord who believes in the mission and helps to make it happen and some donors that bring it forward and give you a long term lease. Like it's really important to have that footprint on the ground as well as having a terrific website, you got to have a home. And then I still believe that the library and the archives are very important and that it's critical to keep the history and do not throw out those old project files, those grant applications, all that stuff. Keep it, keep it, keep it, it's gold.

**Diane Wong** 36:14

It's funny that you talk about the library and the archive because Coco, you don't know this, but Coco and I actually started off as both of us as the Library and Exhibitions Assistant. And we're actually trying very hard to digitize our archives. And like I was actually looking through the conference you're talking about like finding like listen, we're in the process of kind of listing out everything, applying for grants, digitize these because I also believe that these are such, I want these to be available for the public to look back on and it's doing nothing just sitting in our back but like there's so much potential for as like just materials to look back on. And it's great. It's been great to talk to you about everything because this has been a great conversation, I think.

**Hank Bull** 37:12

Well, ya know, it's, you're right about the archives. And the thing is, nobody's gonna do that for you. You have to do it yourself. But we've got a nice town where people are doing that, you know, I mean, you can network with Emily Carr, and Western Front, VIVO, you know, places that are actually doing it and that's a great thing to be involved in archives libraries.

**Diane Wong** 37:40

it's just been so interesting because like, I don't know, we're trying to redo Mutations <> Connections with Alice next year. So like, I actually have all the audio recording in my apartment currently, because like I was looking at like I was bringing them down to, like VIVO or Western Front to see how digitizing will work. So the idea was to have both of them available on our website. For next year, hopefully, fingers crossed, grants.

**Hank Bull** 38:08

And there's tons of material like that.

**Diane Wong** 38:10

Like what people don't know is that we have so much interesting research materials in the back just from the archive because, I think up until like 2015 it was very well documented and archived and recorded and everything. And it's just a matter of finding capacity to digitize everything and like we have an archivist, shout out to Brandon, we have an archivist on our board now. So he's been really helpful with that actually, that's one of my projects that I'm most excited for, for sure. And just like even looking through it, is amazing.

**Hank Bull** 38:53

Yeah, that's great. I gotta say to you guys, yeah, just thrilled with what's happening. Right now you're doing a fantastic, fantastic job, it's never been better.

**Diane Wong** 39:02

Thank you, thank you for saying that. It's really, it's a great honor to talk to you as well about this. I know we've previously had a conversation about this, but it's nice to like, sit down with Coco present and like have this conversation. And thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us as well. You're very busy.

**Links:**

[Western Front](#)

[Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yanzi River](#)

[Let's Twist Again](#)

[Centre A Reading Room](#)

Mutations <> Connections