

**Syphon** is an arts and culture publication produced by Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre that is meant as a conduit between the arts community in Kingston and communities elsewhere. It was created in response to the lack of critical arts commentary and coverage in local publications, and seen as a way to increase exposure to experimental and non-commercial art practices. Syphon has a mandate to feature local arts coverage in conjunction with national and international projects, and an emphasis on arts scenes and activities that are seen as peripheral. It acts, in essence, as a record and communiqué for small regional arts communities throughout the country.

**Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre** is a non-profit organization facilitating the production, presentation, and interpretation of contemporary visual, time-based and interdisciplinary arts. Modern Fuel aims to meet the professional development needs of emerging and mid-career local, national and international artists, from diverse cultural communities, through exhibition, discussion, and mentorship opportunities. Modern Fuel supports innovation and experimentation, and is committed to the education of interested publics and the diversification of its audiences.

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**FOREWORD**

Within the framework of the 10th anniversary of Syphon, we at Modern Fuel look to the past, the present and the future in relation to our programming and to the world around us. For this issue, 51: My Life Is Not Your \_\_\_\_\_, we invited local and national femme-identifying and non-binary artists, community organizers, and other cultural practitioners to reflect on the urgencies of making collective and individual subjectivities, and to propose multiple approaches to taking up spaces, both in the physical sense and on an ideological level, through conversations, writings and visual art projects. We hope that Syphon can be a platform for these important and distinctive voices that are situated at the intersection of contemporary art and social practices. We ask you, the readers, as well as ourselves, to consider how activism informs artistic discourse and its many possible manifestations in the present day.

Activism, as what we take as a point of departure for this publication, exists not only in the political realm and in physical, public demonstrations, but in the everyday, in the topics that we choose to respond to and explore, and the ways in which we do so. Through this lens, artists have frequently brought particular nuances to and acted as advocates for community-bridging dialogues. Artists and cultural practitioners of the femme, non-binary, and BIPOC communities are often on the front line of making, reclaiming, and transforming spaces, when they encourage us to look at the world in ways that we may not have seen before, when they take deeply personal issues and thrust them into the public sphere. We are deeply grateful to all of our contributors and hope that these pages may inspire you, as they have us.

As editors of this issue, we are privileged and honoured to present to you this survey of dynamic and determined subject positions that are inspired by and rooted in spatial and activist practices.

Lastly, as an extension of 51, we are also proud to present you with a video installation of artist duo Inflatable Deities (Jessica Mensch and Emily Pelstring) in our Window Space that will run until mid-June 2019.

Warmly, **Henry and Anne-Sophie, Editors and Publishers**

## Chun Hua Catherine Dong

Interviewed by Henry Heng Lu

I first met Catherine at a group exhibition that she was a part of at the University of Toronto Art Centre (now one of the two galleries of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto) back in 2014. With a queen-size bed set up in the gallery space that she laid on during gallery hours, accompanied by framed photographs of her and her “one-minute husbands” on the walls - strange men whom she, dressed in a red cheongsam, approached on the streets of Vancouver and asked for a photo with, the project, titled “Husband and I” challenges the perceptions of East Asian femininity and attempts to reposition gendered power by virtue of bodily, performative gestures. Over the years, her artistic practice has since taken on a more poignant direction and steadfastly negotiated the social identity intertwined with intercultural dynamics. In 2018, Catherine showed two projects at Modern Fuel: “They” (2017), and “Mother” (2017). In this interview, Catherine discusses these two works, among others, in relation to her recent practice, and shares what she has been working on, in the midst of travelling around the world to develop and participate in projects.

*I am curious to hear more about how you explore the representation of the female/femme/non-binary body in your work, especially in the context of the film “They” (2017). “They” seems to be a more distinctive work that is slightly different from your other works. Could you briefly talk through the process of making it?*

Yes, the four-channel film installation “They” is slightly different from other works. I guess it is because it is a film, which is a relatively new medium for me, and it is teamwork. My actors, cinematographer, editors, sound designer, and musician have contributed their bests to the film. I am very grateful that I had the chance to work with them.

It takes audiences into four femme-identifying individuals’ world to closely examine their ritualized daily lives, their obsessions, their struggles, and their determinations of being who they are. Each of the four of them is unique, but they mirror each other: they deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, and desires that trouble them while also celebrating their own existences in a subversive but almost meditative way.

I am very interested in film and always wanted to make a film that combines cinema and performance art. I had all kinds of performance ideas in my mind that I’d like to act out. In early 2016, I started to look for performers. The first person that came to my mind was Enok Ripley because I was very impressed by Enok’s work and Enok as a unique individual (I am still very impressed). I remember the first time I met Enok in a coffee shop, I was not sure how to refer to Enok, as she or he, so I asked, Enok said “they.” And I fell in love with the pronoun “they” immediately. I felt the openness and inclusiveness of this word. It made me think about “the other,” and the binary system, how we often refer to certain groups of people as “we”, the rest are “they”. I also started to question who “they” are, and whether I am “they” as well. The title of the work is derived from this gender-neutral pronoun. The four women in this film are both singular and plural, referring women as unique individuals who are plural, but whose bodies have been marked as the other.

*In your artist statement, you said “[your] artistic practice is based in performance art, photography and video within the contemporary context of global feminism.” Could you tell me how you locate and situate your work in global feminism?*

A very good but tough question. Well, what I mean in my artist statement is to differ myself from Western feminism. I am inspired by Western feminism, it really opened my mind and influenced my work. However, as a theory and movement, I don’t feel I relate to it personally. And I don’t think women living in remote villages in the non-western world find themselves related to. There must be something different, some unheard voices and opinions from different women in different contexts. My work focuses on bringing the unheard voices out.

**COVER**

Florence Yee, *My life is not your fetish*, illustration, 2019

**ARTWORK DESCRIPTION** The illustrations humorously testify to the racialized complications of being a Cantonese femme, navigating fetishization, violence and the im/possibility of reclamation. Historical and popular depictions of East-Asian femininity within European and North American contexts have long trapped it in orientalist fantasies of subservience, silence and stereotypes. The light-hearted, conversational text confronts the damaging effects of their underlying social structures. Treating the personal as the political, the phrases on the graphic scrolls express mundane narratives in the visual language of handmade poster-flyers.

**Florence Yee** is a 2.5 generation, Cantonese-struggling visual artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto and Tiohtia:ke/Montreal. Their interest in Cantonese-Canadian history has informed an art practice examining diasporic subjectivities through the lens of gender, racialization, queerness and language. Notable exhibitions include *Sino(n)-Québécoise?* at Centre Never Apart, *Le Salon* at Articule, *Prête-moi l’oreille* at Centre Regart, as well as residencies at the John and Maggie Mitchell Art Gallery, La Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario and, the Ottawa School of Art, and the Concordia Fine Arts Reading Room. Having graduated with a BFA from Concordia University, they are now pursuing an MFA at OCAD U in Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design as a SSHRC recipient and Delaney Scholar. They are represented by Studio Sixty-Six.



Still of Chun Hua Catherine Dong’s *They* (2017). Courtesy of the artist.

*Let’s talk about the ongoing project “I Have Been There” (I love it!). How did it first come about? Any interesting stories or anecdotes to share from when you are shooting in different places?*

“I Have Been There” is a travel-based work started in 2015. As a performance artist, I use my body as a material to work; I travel very often because my body has to be there. When I arrive in a city, like everybody else, I often visit the city’s historical sites, landmarks, and tourist attractions. However, I am a workaholic too; I felt it was a pity to not do anything while visiting those beautiful spaces, and I must work. That’s why I decided to make “I have been There.”

What I have been doing is that I make a duvet with Chinese traditional embroidered fabric every time I travel to a new place. Covered by the duvet, I lay still on the ground in public spaces, such as historical sites, landmarks, parks, archaeological sites, memorials and so on, as a sign of negotiating and/or engaging with cultures and spaces.

This work is inspired by a funeral tradition in my hometown in Hunan, China. When an elder person dies, daughters of this elder make duvets with silk fabrics, called shrouds, to cover their dead parent’s body. If this elder has six daughters, this elder’s body will be covered by six different duvets, layer by layer. For me, as a person living abroad alone without family and children, a question of who will bury me after I die sometimes bothers me. Therefore, I make my own shrouds and “bury” myself wherever I go.

For many cultures and societies, death is taboo, and dying is regarded as a shameful aspect of life. Being a woman whose body doesn’t bear a child is a shame in many cultures too. Especially if it is the woman who chooses to not bear a child and the fact she will eventually die alone without a shroud even makes this woman more shameful. In “I Have Been There,” I turn my “shameful” body to a temporary colourful monument erected on the ground of the most significant and beautiful landmarks in the world, celebrating my death, in other words, my existence, publicly and repeatedly.

In the past four years, I have performed in Europe, North and South America, and Asia in more than 150 different public spaces in 25 cities, I guess I will continue doing it until I can’t go anywhere anymore.

Yes, there are some interesting stories. I realized that this project often brings me into a liminal space: a space where I am not necessarily formally excluded, but not welcome either. Especially when I am in a space highly controlled or politicized, my performance becomes risky. In fact, each time I rest in a public space, I create a “buzz” or “hazard” that might lead to something unknown. I was arrested for about nine hours when I was doing this project in Beijing. I was also forced to delete my photo documentation in Istanbul. I’ve been stopped and questioned by security guards or police many times in Athens and other cities. And thus, this performance becomes a tool to test out freedom and democracy of spaces.

*The “Mother” project (2017) is going to places! I am glad that you exhibited it at Modern Fuel last year. How do you feel about the work being circulated widely - the “mothers” featured in the work are travelling with it? What does that mean to you?*

“Mother” [comprised of 14 photographs of Catherine posing with 14 mothers from her mother’s village, and a video depicting all of the mothers] is a work dedicated to my absent mother, and I didn’t intend to show this work at all at the beginning because it is a very personal work. But I shared a few images on social media - I was surprised that people liked them very much, and messaged me about how much they were touched and how this work made them rethink their relationships with their own mothers. I think it is a good thing if a

work can make people feel something. It is very nice to see the “Mother” circulated widely, and I think if this work can make a person who sees it place a phone call to her/his/their mother, I will be fulfilled. My biggest regret is that I didn’t spend much time with my mother when she was alive, I hope other people don’t feel the same way as I do.

Regarding the “mothers” who travel with the work, actually, they are very proud because most of them have lived in the villages their whole lives and have never gone anywhere. They are very happy that the photos of them can travel around and meet different people.

The mothers in the work are very important to me. I see my mother through them. They are my mothers.

*How would you describe your relationship with performance art? Do you find performativity vital in constructing narratives in your work?*

My relationship with performance art is complicated. It has been for 10 years since the first time I performed. In fact, I started my visual art practice from performance art; it has made me who I am as an artist. It is always with me and it always will be. My focus has been expanded to photography, video, and installation in recent years, but I always make sure to go back to my roots and make some performance works every year. Although sometimes my body might not be present in the work, the work itself is always performative.

*Do you find, because of the subject matters of your work, that it is easily being politicized or categorized as being political?*

Yes, it is. My work mainly deals with gender, race, and immigration, which are political indeed. Art is political, and the body is political too, I guess it is hard to escape from that.

*Having known your work for a long time, I have to say your practice has evolved on many different levels, in terms of medium, subject position and aesthetic composition. What are you working on these days? What are some of the new explorations?*

Thanks! I appreciate it. I get bored very easily. Working with different media and subjects can keep me more engaged and excited about art making. I am still focusing on “I Have Been There”, as I am obsessed about it, and I am trying to expand this series a little bit more so that I can show it as a series in the near future. This summer, I will be working on some soft sculptures while doing a collaborative work with robots.

**Chun Hua Catherine Dong** is a Chinese-born, Montreal-based artist working with performance, photography, and video. She received a BFA from Emily Carr University Art & Design and MFA from Concordia University. She has performed and exhibited her works in multiple international festivals and venues, such as Quebec City Biennial, Kaunas Biennial, The Musée d’Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne in Paris, DongGang Museum of Photography in South Korea, Grace Exhibition Space in Brooklyn, Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival in Chicago, 7a\*11d International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto, and so on. Among many other grants and awards, she was the recipient of the Franklin Furnace Award for contemporary avant-garde art in New York in 2014, and listed the “10 Artists Who Are Reinventing History” by Canadian Art in 2017, and “Top Nine Political Art Projects of 2010” by Art and Threat magazine.