

ALTERNATIVE SPACES



Sunita Prasad:
Presumptuous Live,
2016. Photo Bryan
Chang.

Fung Wah Biennial

by Erick Lyle

IN 1997, Fung Wah Bus Lines began operating cut-rate curbside service between the Chinatowns of New York and Boston. Just a few years later, countless competitors had sprung up to shuttle Chinese immigrants from city to city along the Eastern Seaboard. Today, young culture workers facing high rents and scarce tenure-track teaching positions are similarly on the move in search of work. Last year, artist and writer Dushko Petrovich, who lives in Brooklyn but teaches at several schools around New England, launched *Adjunct Commuter Weekly*, a newsletter for nomadic instructors like himself. The success of its Kickstarter campaign and the ensuing media sensation suggested he'd struck a chord with a large demographic. With any city in the Northeast just a fifteen-dollar ticket away, the dirt-cheap Chinatown bus could be the unacknowledged glue holding together the art world's gig economy.

This March, Flux Factory, a residency program and performance venue in Queens, organized the Fung Wah Biennial, an exhibition of twenty-five artists who made site-specific works to be presented on moving buses. (Fung Wah ceased operations in 2015 after years of fighting the federal government over its notorious safety violations, but the title was chosen to honor the company's legendary status as a pioneer in no-frills intercity bus travel.) Independent curators Will Owen and Matthias Borello (both former

Flux Factory residents) and Creative Time's curator of engagement Sally Szwed chartered bus trips leaving New York's Chinatown on three Saturdays in March.

As I boarded a Philadelphia-bound bus for the biennial's second leg with fifty-some other passengers, I chatted with those who had been on the previous week's ride to Boston. At times, they said, it had been transcendent. A high point was *Presumptuous Live*, a performance by New York-based artist Sunita Prasad in which her recumbent body was passed from one passenger to another over the top of the seats from the front of the bus to the back. At other times, the ride was simply mind-numbing: the biennial was stuck in Connecticut traffic for two hours.

The trip to Philadelphia would be far shorter. As the biennial lurched onto Canal Street the artists got right to work. Toronto-based Marjan Verstappen, impeccably dressed as a 1950s flight attendant, walked up and down the aisle, passing out fizzy nonalcoholic cocktails of homemade bitters and seltzer and classy napkins printed with the Fung Wah logo. Other artists squeezed past her, handing out a zine, a newsletter, and various surveys. Meanwhile, I perused the goodies from the bag strapped to the back of the seat in front of me while my phone blew up with texts linking to podcasts, soundscapes, and questionnaires, like Roopa Vasudevan's *eMOTION Mapping*, which invited me

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See Contributors
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Marco Castro
Cosio: *Roots and
Baggage*, 2016. Photo
Matthias Borello.



to type in my current mood at any time during the ride so the artist could later make a color-coded “map” of the emotional state of passengers. By the time we reached the Holland Tunnel, I could already divide most of the biennial’s art into two categories: some of it turned my life experiences into data or maps; the rest was earnest and well-meaning, and oddly recalled car games for keeping children occupied on long drives.

Verstappen’s performance of a hospitality so out of place on the normally bare-bones Chinatown bus brought to mind the era of postwar consumer luxury and the lost future of leisure time it once promised. *Everywhere Northeast Travel Agency*, an installation in the rear of the bus, instead evoked the lowered expectations of the present. If the wireless internet and cell-phone chargers make Chinatown buses a mobile office space for peripatetic workers, Jonah Levy and Julius Ferrer marked their “travel office” in the back of the bus by taping faux-wood paneling and vintage travel posters over the windows and restroom door. Passengers were ushered back to respond to questions about their experiences and to share tips with fellow passengers for destinations around the Northeast. The exchange’s evocation of user-generated reviews served as a reminder that the travel agent is just one of many professions that have been made all but obsolete by the internet.

Much of the work presented at the beginning of the trip encouraged interaction among passengers. It soon became clear, though, that some of the passengers were performers. I quite liked Marco Castro Cosio’s quiet and inscrutable tableau vivant. Cosio slumped in his seat with arms folded, head thrown back, and mouth wide open—the universal posture of sleep in spite of travel’s discomfort. The cord of a cell-phone charger connected to an overhead socket dangled down to a phone concealed in Castro’s chest pocket, so that his body eerily appeared to be plugged into the bus. On the seat beside him, a mobile garden of lavender plants spilled out of an open briefcase. Meanwhile, in a performance near the front of the bus, Pittsburgh-based artist Adam Milner simulated one end of a long, loud, rambling phone conversation for the entirety of the trip.

As we emerged from the Holland Tunnel my own phone began pinging rapidly with a performance by Ariel Abrahams and Rony Efrat that took the form of a meandering text-message conversation on love and landscape. Like much of the art on the bus, this piece and Milner’s could be classified as social practice, intended to activate public space. However, the simultaneity of the text conversation and Milner’s noisy performance suggested a more general confusion about where public space can be found today, as our communication increasingly takes place on privately owned social media platforms. The liminal space of a chartered bus trip—a place neither quite here nor there, not quite public or private—proved a useful metaphor for the virtual commons created by the privatization of digital networks.

Travel inevitably provides us with incongruous yet oddly indelible memories that return to us later like fragments of a dream. When I think of the biennial now, I recall the flyover views of the Jersey ports and railyards from the freeway bridges, container ships and cargo in the shadow of the Manhattan skyline, and the slow transition from burned-out Camden to the old-money world of downtown Philadelphia—all glimpsed beyond the reflection of Cosio, plugged into the bus as if in a kind of half-life, his briefcase of plants eternally ready for travel at his side. The Fung Wah Biennial successfully foregrounded the role of the Chinatown bus in the changing landscape and economy of the Northeast while asking us to consider the curious mix of physical rootlessness and digital connection that increasingly marks an era when we seem to be perpetually moving through time and space without ever arriving anywhere new. ○

View of the Fung
Wah Biennial bus,
showing Keith
Hartwig and Daniel
Newman’s *Lux
Transmissive*, 2016,
LED lights.

