

Alternative Perspectives

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ESTHER CHAN

COMBING FOR ICE AND JADE

Edited by Kurt Tong
Published by Jiazazhi Press/Library,
Ningbo, 2019



A decadent sponge cake, a three-tiered arrangement of steamed lotus-seed buns, and a pile of ham-and-cheese sandwiches are spread out among other party foods before a table of children. This celebratory feast was the intended central subject of a photo, but the photographer had inadvertently captured something else—an overexposed profile entering the bottom right corner of the frame. The ghostly face belongs to Mak Ngan Yuk, the subject of Kurt Tong's photobook *Combing for Ice and Jade*. Mak had worked for the Tongs for more than 40 years as a nanny and domestic helper, since before the artist's birth. Her accidental inclusion in the photo, printed as a spread in Tong's publication, is testament to her overlooked role in the family.

Conceived as what Tong calls a "love note" for Mak, *Combing for Ice and Jade* is the artist's attempt at remediating his ignorance of his former caretaker's personal life, as well as her marginalization—not just in his family but in society as well. The latter is elucidated through Tong's bilingual account of Mak's life, included on a fold-out page with a

photo of her hometown in the Pearl River Delta region. Readers learn that Mak's family had denied her schooling from a young age due to her gender. When pressured to marry, Mak rejected her parents' demands and instead undertook the centuries-old "comb-up" ritual, plaiting her hair in a single braid and taking a vow of chastity to join a community of women who had similarly severed ties with their families. These women financially provided for themselves by processing silk or working as domestic servants. The sisterhood's existence was a major feat, and in Tong's book is contextualized by reproductions of magazine excerpts illustrating the challenges Asian women faced in the 20th century. Attached as inserts onto pages, these booklets highlight the widely unacknowledged contributions of women to the Sino-Japanese war, the Chinese Civil War, and the service industries of the "Free World."

Mak's indispensable role within her own family, whom she continued to provide for, despite having formally cut ties, is the focus of the book's final section. According to Tong, Mak supported "several of her nephew's businesses, one of which flourished." Dispersed throughout the closing pages are photos from her relatives' personal albums, including a frame of the busy clothes-hanger factory that she had invested in, and which later made her nephew Quan a millionaire. Despite this, Mak maintained a simple lifestyle. Tong catalogues her possessions in a collection of photos that are bound together as another small booklet. The last item is a brown comb—a symbol of Mak's independence. Exquisitely put together, *Combing for Ice and Jade* is a carefully considered, heartfelt homage to a figure who has long been sidelined.

CHLOE CHU

14 YEARS OLD & THE WORLD & BORDERS

Edited by Motoyuki Shitamichi
Published by Michi Laboratory and Tai
Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, 2019



Looking out of his classroom window, a young Motoyuki Shitamichi often felt that the school on the other side of the Hyakken waterway was "like a foreign country." Yet as he grew older, the channel separating the two districts "became an ordinary river that could be crossed easily."

It is this kind of frontier, simultaneously near enough to matter but distant enough to feel alien, that constitutes the thematic crux of Shitamichi's book *14 Years Old & The World & Borders*. The linen-bound volume is the culmination of a long-term, multilingual series of workshops in which the artist asked 14-year-olds at various schools across South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan to jot down their thoughts on a border that impacts their everyday lives. A number of their unedited responses, selected by Shitamichi, were published in local newspapers. These clippings, alongside the artist's intimate photographs of cramped classrooms, are collated in this title, designed by Shin Akiyama to resemble a scrapbook, with pages that fold out to reveal the original and translated texts in Japanese, Korean, English, and traditional Chinese.

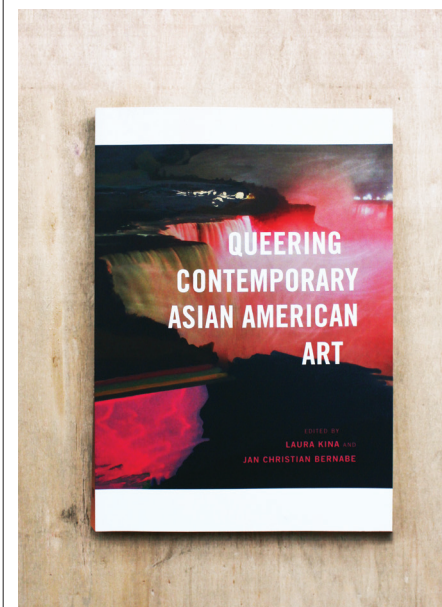
For Shitamichi, the students, themselves occupying the liminal stage of adolescence, are uniquely attuned to phases of change, and the possibilities that lie beyond the boundaries of their experience. Many of their answers are markedly quotidian ("I really want to go inside a plane cabin to see what it is like," writes one aspiring pilot), revealing, as the book states, the "small worlds of 14-year-olds," though there are hidden gems that exude a disarming profundity. One teenager regrets not having treated a now-deceased dog better, but feels guilty for seeking redemption by being particularly attentive to the new pet. This short statement poignantly conveys the porosity of the division between life and death—a perspective recognizable to anyone who has lived in the shadow of grief. Shitamichi's editorial choice to retain all typos and grammatical errors in the original responses lends greater authenticity to a book already brimming (not objectionably) with earnestness.

The hallmark of this title is not *what* one reads, but *how*. The book is meant to be experienced, in the artist's words, as a "game," with the rules laid out in the foreword: the volume must not be sold, and it must be given to someone else after one has finished reading, turning it into a public art project of sorts. The inside front cover has a handy table where each temporary owner can write their name, and the date and place they received the book, while a world map several pages in allows them to trace its journey. Thus the most striking aspect of this book is not what it has to say about the artistic merit of 14 year olds' reflections on borders, but its embedded reminder of the value in traversing unknown terrain, wherever and whenever one may encounter it.

OPHELIA LAI

QUEERING CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN ART

Edited by Laura Kina and
Jan Christian Bernabe
Published by University of Washington
Press, Seattle, 2017



At the outset of *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, late scholar-curator Karin Higa describes Asian American artists, scholars and activists as "the termites of art history." Though perhaps an unflattering metaphor, termites are indefatigable and collaborative insects, gathering to gnaw at and eventually erode entire structures—or, in this case, what co-editors Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe call the "white hegemonic pillars of art practice, history and criticism." The work of radical dismantling may be slow and acutely unforgiving, but it is also vital for the survival of those who inhabit ecologies natural, social, and artistic.

Queering sprung from Kina and Bernabe's own gatherings at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute at New York University's Asian/Pacific/American Institute in 2012, and features 24 contributors writing on dozens of artists (Anida Yoeu Ali, Wafaa Bilal, Cy Twombly, Viet Le, and Kim Anno among them). The book is divided into seven chapters, each with subtitles such as "Queering Surveillance," "Queering Methodology," and "Queering Asian America," and each containing one

academic essay followed by one or two interviews with artists referenced in that text.

"Queering" here is a verb—meaning, in the editors' words, "to participate in a type of unruly and yet alimentary cultural and knowledge production." To that end, not all the artists mentioned or interviewed in the book are queer, or even artists of color. Hasan Elahi and Jill Magid, two subjects of Harrod J. Suarez's essay, do not identify as part of the LGBTQI spectrum, yet their works, which respectively explore FBI racial profiling of brown people and self-initiated surveillance between the white artist, police, and the city, fit Suarez's Paul-Virilio-esque theories of subversion: "Forms of biopolitical intimacy that effectively seduce the surveiller such that his authority is compromised."

The interviews are a refreshing counterpart to the jargon-laced and heavily theoretical texts. In each interview, the editors ask, noninvasively, about the artists' backgrounds and how they self-identify. Most interviewees expand on this act of naming, or of queering their own identities: Filipinx Kiam Marcelo Junio, who sometimes performs as the blonde-wigged, lipsticked marine Jerry Blossom, sees identity as a "moment-by-moment negotiation," resonating with discussions in other essays and interviews around the fluidity of third genders in the Philippines and Vietnam (*bakla*), and in Polynesia (*fa'afafine*).

Much like the work of termites, reading *Queering* can be tedious due to the sheer amount of variegated content packed into 194 pages, and the unfortunately flat-looking black-and-white images that accompany the lively discourse around queered aesthetics. Yet there is no denying that this book gives voice to academics and artists whose queering practices are fundamental, especially in the art world, where such discussions are so often glossed over or even co-opted for commercial profit.

YSABELLE CHEUNG