

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Painting Is Forbidden*, this anthology of newly commissioned texts and interviews examines the work and legacy of Chinese-American artist Martin Wong (1946–99). Entitled *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, the book presents an expanded perspective on Wong’s practice through the inclusion of rarely seen reproductions of his photographs, poems, drawings, essays, recollections, and correspondence. A transcript of a lecture given by the artist at San Francisco Art Institute in 1991 rounds out the picture of an impassioned practitioner working at what, at the time, appeared to be the margins of the art world—but what today would be acknowledged as some of the most fertile grounds of the twentieth century’s cultural production: the streets of San Francisco and New York.

Annotated cover of *Splash* magazine, April 1989. Text: Martin Wong, photo: Ken Nahoum. Reproduction rights courtesy Jordan Crandall. Image courtesy The Martin Wong Papers; Series II; Box 2; Folder 89; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

MY TRIP TO AMERICA BY MARTIN WONG



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BY MARTIN WONG**

Edited by  
and

**CAITLIN BURKHART  
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The impulse to organize an exhibition about Martin Wong derived partly from seeing his work in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. In that context, Wong's paintings were included in a show-within-the-show selected by another artist, Julie Ault. In their subsequent research the ten curators of this exhibition found that Wong was an integral part of many artists' lives. He collaborated with the Cockettes and the Angels of Light in San Francisco, the ceramicists of Eureka, California, the writers and poets of the Nuyorican movement, New York graffitiists, and the artists inhabiting that city's Lower East Side.

His work naturally reflects this *mélange* of influences. It takes many different forms and operates across media and genres. This multiplicity is further and productively complicated by Wong's ambivalent relationship to his Chinese heritage and sexuality, and his quest for identity. Unsurprisingly, the recurring motifs that characterize his artistic production are an eccentric mix—brick walls, sign language, firemen, astrological symbols, customized calligraphy, and more. This provocative eclecticism of form and expression makes him in many ways a contemporary artist *par excellence*—while also explaining, perhaps, why his work remained relatively under the radar in his lifetime. But whether active as a painter, poet, photographer, collector or set designer, his inquiries generally relate to language and more specifically the creation of a personal vocabulary or code with which to record, and to some degree obscure, his private beliefs and desires.

To navigate this encryption, communication with those who knew and loved Wong proved a significant resource for the organizers of this exhibition during their research. So, too, did the artist's sketches and source books, his poems, early works, and ephemera—or, in other words, the more spontaneous and candid expressions of his inner life. The decision to base this exhibition around these collateral materials is thus an attempt to offer a more comprehensive account of Wong. *Painting Is Forbidden* does not, contrary to a literal reading of the title, exclude Wong's paintings from this account. Rather it contextualizes them as part of a practice that saw itself as somewhat illicit, daring, and out of joint with its time, and situates them physically in relation to a number of Wong's experiments in other media. Much of this work has never before been presented publicly and includes early ceramics from his student days at Humboldt State University, set designs, and notebooks. It is worth noting additionally that this is the first show to assess the breadth of Wong's production, despite the fact that his paintings have been more frequently seen in recent years.

This publication continues the research work of the exhibition, offering additionally the voice of the artist in an edited transcript of a talk that Wong gave at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1991; thoughts from Tahara and Beaver, two of the Angels of Light; Stuart Krimko's speculative trawl through Wong's astrological chart; an analysis, by Rui Tang, of Wong's subject matter and exhibition history through the lens of his uncertain relationship to his Chinese heritage; and Tanya Gayer and Julian Myers-Szupinska's assessment of the insights contributed by Wong's personal papers. Taken as a whole, these texts offer an expanded reading of the artist's work by focusing on many of the aspects of his practice until now considered peripheral. They are animated by a wealth of reproductions unearthed in the personal collections of the artist's friends and collabo-

rators, and in the considerable archives of the artist, which are housed in NYU's Fales Library. The title of the book, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, was inspired by the issue of *Splash* magazine from 1989, its cover emblazoned with this phrase added by Wong in black ink. The publication team aimed to explore this statement through Wong's natural observations and personal relationships in the form of sketches, photographs, poetry, and correspondences.

Wong provided the perfect subject for this year's graduating Curatorial Practice students. Their shared passion for his varied interests united the group in the organization of this show and publication. For their collaboration, research, and tenacity we would like to congratulate: Alia al-Sabi, Amelia Brod, Caitlin Burkhart, Roxanne Burton, Courtney Carrino, Kathryn Crocker, Tanya Gayer, Dino Dinçer Şirin, Rui Tang, and Angel Vázquez-Concepción. Their efforts have in turn benefited from Associate Professor Julian Myers-Szupinska's unfailing guidance and support. He has both instructed and collaborated with the students, in the process contributing a considerable amount of time and energy to this undertaking.

We do not take for granted the offer to contribute to the Wattis Institute's exhibition program on an annual basis, and we'd like to thank Anthony Huberman, the director, and his staff, for their generosity on this front, as well as their assistance in realizing *Painting Is Forbidden*. In particular, gallery manager Justin Limoges has worked closely with the organizers to attend to and realize their ideas for their installation. Head of Operations Rita Sobreiro Souther has aided their efforts on all other fronts.

This is the sixth exhibition publication that Jon Sueda has designed for us. We couldn't be more grateful to him for once again accommodating our ambitious ideas and deadlines and exceeding such limitations in this handsome publication.

Of course this exhibition could not have succeeded

without the commitment of the artist's Estate and Foundation. Accordingly we'd like to extend our warmest appreciation to P.P.O.W. Gallery and The Martin Wong Foundation respectively for their encouragement and counsel, and to thank in particular Wendy Olsoff, Mark Johnson, and Michael Moe for facilitating loans and advising on other important logistical considerations. The estate of the artist has additionally lent a significant amount of work and in thanking them for their generosity we would also like to acknowledge the many other institutions and individuals who have so willingly contributed: the Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University; the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; San Francisco State University; Peter Broda, Gary Ware, Julie Ault, Bob Schultze, Michael Pearce, Noel Munn, Peggy Dickinson, Steve Hyman, and Debra "Beaver" Bauer.

This publication and exhibition mark the slightly belated celebration of our program's 10th anniversary as well as a celebration of Martin Wong's life and work. We're extremely grateful to The Battery in San Francisco for recognizing these dual achievements by offering us their spectacular space in which to mark this moment and to our friend Natasha Boas for introducing us to the wonderful team—Matt Bernstein, Stacy Horne, and Thomas Moller—who have been instrumental in helping us to realize our events.

There are a host of other people who have contributed their time and energies in crucial ways to the realization of *Painting is Forbidden* and who would remain unrecognized if they were not thanked here as follows: Anneliis Beadnell, Brianna Calello, Julian Cox, Gregory Cruikshank, Rachel Greer, Jeff Gunderson, Peter Kirkeby, Betty Martin, Christopher Mühris, Mimi La Plant, Tahara, Marvin Taylor, and Philippo Weck.

The last expression of gratitude is reserved for Martin Wong. This show and this publication are for him.



## MY TRIP TO AMERICA BY MARTIN WONG

My Secret World 1978–81 (1984), acrylic on canvas.  
Collection of Raymond Leary & Méva Bucksbaum  
Courtesy of the Estate of Martin Wong and PPOW  
Gallery, New York



Martin Wong (1946–99) wrote many letters in his lifetime. He wrote to his parents, to friends, to his romantic muses and artistic collaborators, in handwriting that was brisk, compact, wandering, or loopy, depending on his chosen format or state of mind. His correspondences were sometimes playful, other times heartfelt; in every instance they reveal his keen mind and, despite separation, his profound desire to connect with the person he addressed. Letter writing, after all, establishes distance and overcomes it in a single gesture.

Take as an example a postcard Wong wrote in 1974 to the Angels of Light, the pioneering free theater group with whom he was involved in the 1970s:

HELLO ANGELS HOW IS PARADICE. STILL STRANDED  
HERE ON EARTH AS USUAL, SLOWLY UNRAVELING LIKE  
A WEED IN SUMMER. FREIGHT TRAIN THUNDER ROLLIN  
PAST. JUST DOING TIME AS THEY SAY. WAITING FOR THE  
JUDGE. I LOVE YOU BUT I COULD NEVER BE A PART OF  
YOU. A MOMENTARY GLIMPSE IS ALL I ASK. DON'T DENY  
ME THAT. THE WAY IT IS IS THE WAY IT IS + THAT'S ALL  
THERE IS FOR NOW SEE YOU SOONER. LOVE.<sup>1</sup>

1. Postcard to the Angels of Light, 1974, in the collection of Angels of Light founder Tahara (otherwise known as James Windsor). We reproduce it here with Wong's particular approach to spelling and syntax intact.

2. Amelia Brod's interview with members of the Angels of Light (on p. 113) expands on Wong's relationship with group. His mother, who was deeply involved in Wong's life and career, did not approve of his affiliation with the Angels, who in turn required total and absolute commitment from their members—a condition by which the ever-independent Wong could not ultimately abide.

3. Rui Tang's essay "The Dynamic: Martin Wong and the Asian American Community," on p. 103, discusses this relationship, and how it manifested in his Chinatown paintings.

4. See Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* (October, 1981), and Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October*, Vol. 16 (Spring, 1981).

5. See Adam Mansbach, "The Stupidity of New York's Long, Expensive (And Ongoing) War On Graffiti," *The Awl*, January 15, 2013. Accessed January 26, 2015. <http://www.theawl.com/2013/01/new-york-war-on-graffiti>.

While affectionate, Wong's note seems to be negotiating his departure from the group. "I love you but I could never be a part of you," he writes. Hinting at his discontinuous relationship with the Angels,<sup>2</sup> these words also speak to the essence of who he was: a man loving, but apart—glimpsing the Angels' "paradise," but stranded on earth.

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In building this publication (and the exhibition that it accompanies) this postcard has frequently come to mind as an emblem for the contradictions that Wong and his work embody. Wong was both Chinese and American. He was attracted to men, but belonged to a traditional family where such attractions were difficult to acknowledge openly—even as San Francisco's sexual revolution bloomed around him. He was circumspect about his Chinese American heritage in the moment of the identity-driven, pluralist art scene of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> He was an inveterate romantic in an era of postmodern irony and skepticism. He embraced painting at the very moment critics like Thomas Lawson and Douglas Crimp announced the medium's "end" in the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> He was an artist who defied (and was alternately defied by) the fashion-cycles of mainstream Western art.

But if Wong defies art historical narratives, he complicates convenient stories of subcultural resistance as well. Although he championed the young, mostly black and Latino, graffiti writers of New York, at a time when they were under attack by city authorities in the infamous "war on graffiti" campaign of the 1980s, Wong was not himself a graffiti writer.<sup>5</sup> He pictured graffiti artists, and incorporated their graffiti into his symbol-thick painted cityscapes; he collected

their jackets and "piece books." But Wong was from a different generation and his work had a distinct aesthetic; he belonged and did not belong. Which is to say that no one narrative will do. And if this difficulty speaks to art history's enduring desire to frame and locate, it was equally for Wong a conscious stance—a disposition perhaps closer in character to contemporary artists than to the art world of his own time. As a motto from one of his many drawings acknowledges: "My story is not a simple one."<sup>6</sup>

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Inasmuch as his biography informs his artistic practice, it bears some spelling out here. Wong was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1946 to Chinese American parents, with faint (perhaps apocryphal) traces of Mexican ancestry.<sup>7</sup> He grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown, and after a stint at the University of California, Berkeley studying architecture, transferred in 1968 to Humboldt State University, Eureka, where he majored in ceramics. Wong spent close to a decade in this quirky bohemian town that he came to love. He also traveled frequently during those years, most notably in 1971 to Afghanistan, to visit the famed mosaic workshop at Friday Mosque in Herat, and to Nepal to study under Tantric painters in the same year (as referenced in his *Resumé Consumé*, c. 1975) (see page 27). These travels would factor aesthetically into Wong's involvement with the Angels of Light, through the group's anarchic, pan-ethnic performances in the Bay Area and elsewhere. In 1978, Wong decamped to New York City where, living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, he pursued more single-mindedly his practice as a painter; it was during this time that he became a devoted collector of graffiti art. He would spend almost a decade in New York before moving back to his

6. See drawing, p. 37.

7. Yasmin Ramirez refers to Wong's part-acknowledgment, part-adoption of a Latino heritage during his engagement with New York's Puerto Rican—or "Nuyorican"—community in her essay "Martin Wong: Chino Malo," in *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversation on Asian American Art* (University of California Press, 2005).

8. See "It's Easier to Paint a Store if it's Closed," (p. 89) for a transcript of this talk.

9. Ibid.

family's house in San Francisco for treatment for AIDS-related illnesses, which claimed his life in 1999 at the age of fifty-three.

This not-simple story finds the artist moving at oblique angles, Zelig-like, through Chinatown, Eureka, Loisaida and Herat, and following a dizzying set of vectors: post-Beat poetry, free-love psychedelic theater, hippie ceramics, graffiti art; the Asian American movement and the Nuyorican poets; Latino prisoners and gay firemen; the deaf. Each would find expression in his prolific, bewildering body of work, which ranged from calligraphic writings, drawings, ceramics, paintings, to theatrical sets and costume designs. Not simply an index of his passage through disparate cultures and moments, Wong's work builds upon their unlikely constellation, merging their references and processes to realize works of remarkable singularity and self-invention.

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One of Wong's most emblematic works, *My Secret World 1978–1981* (1984), provides a useful vantage point from which to survey his artistic attitude. The painting is a depiction of the first place Wong lived upon moving to New York; painted three years after the fact, the work is already shaded with quasi-mythic retrospection. In a talk he gave at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1991,<sup>8</sup> Wong describes how a short stay at the Meyer's Hotel, on the city's waterfront, turned into a three year job as the hotel's night watchman; Wong was "paid to stay up all night and paint," using one room as a bedroom and another as a studio.<sup>9</sup> This period in his life would mark his rigorous self-realization as a painter, a shift that saw the transformation of his exploratory artistic practice in many mediums to one dedicated primarily to painting.

Curator Dan Cameron describes *My Secret World* as "a psychological portrait of urban loneliness: a man alone in his dingy room, inventing a vision of the world that he will continue to remake until it finally conforms to his image of a worthwhile destiny."<sup>10</sup> Even as the painting references Wong's actual address at the time, the assembly of objects it depicts might merely be a reflection of the artist's imagination of his ideal world. It is interesting to observe, then, the array of things he included: a painting of dice displaying lucky-seven sums, and another of a Magic 8 Ball; his first ever painting for the hearing-impaired, *Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder* (1980); a small collection of books on the universe, disasters, Bruce Lee, and a picture book on freaks, among other topics; his dresser and suitcases—all neatly arranged within the confines of his diminutive room.

The first two paintings refer to his parents, to whom he would send small works from New York: paintings of dice for his mother, the Magic 8 Ball for his father.<sup>11</sup> The painting for the hearing-impaired—featuring rows of hand-formed sign language letters—is one created in Wong's signature style of his New York years.<sup>12</sup> There is subtle humor in utilizing sign language for the hearing-impaired in the inherently mute medium of painting. In it, too, we witness Wong's ever-present affinity with the marginalized of society, and especially with those who engage in different systems of communication. The painting is legible only to viewers who comprehend (or who choose to decode) sign language. In the same way, Wong's hybrid hand-styled sign language letters echo graffiti "tags," a graffiti writer's personalized signature, and the system of identification that tagging engenders within the graffiti community in the recognition of each writer's style.

10. Dan Cameron, "Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong," in *Sweet Oblivion: the Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), p. 5.

11. Julie Ault, "Some Places it will always be Eureka and in Eureka it will always be Valentine's Day," in *Martin Wong: I.M.U.U.R.2*, ed. Christopher Muller, et al. (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013).

12. These inscriptions spell out tabloid headlines, or phrases from the works of Nuyorican poets, most notably his lover Miguel Piñero. The letters later evolved into more angular shapes inspired by Kufic script, a style often repeated in his notebooks, and in some instances, in patterns that resembled outlines of the urban environment that surrounded him.



13. This project was a short-lived experiment that floundered financially; Wong was forced to close it after only six months. See Sean Corcoran, "Vision and Expression: Martin Wong and the New York City Writing Movement," in *City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection*, eds. Sean Corcoran and Carlo McCormick. (New York: Skira Rizzoli), p. 18–19. Wong eventually donated his entire collection in 1994 to the Museum of the City of New York; two decades later, the museum opened the exhibition "City As Canvas," showcasing more than 150 paintings, drawings, sketchbooks, and documentary photographs from Wong's collection.

*My Secret World* can be seen as Wong's effort to consolidate in one painting, for himself and the viewer, some of the codes and obsessions that characterized his work in this important moment of redefinition. The painting was a sort of index of his work so far. Nevertheless its combining of multiple codes—mysticism and crossword puzzles, sign language and autobiography—exerts a demand on the viewer, requiring their willingness to decipher the artwork's contents, in order for it not to seem willfully obscure. In that sense, this painting, like much of Wong's work, is literally that: work. Wong brings

viewers into his world—an invitation open to one and all—but they must meet him halfway. His secrets might avail themselves if we look long and carefully enough; or we might simply learn to live with, and appreciate, his work's tantalizing obliqueness, as one more weird pleasure it offers up.

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Alongside the indexing and combining of codes, a work like *My Secret World* can be seen from another angle, too: that of the artist's avid collecting. Wong was a lover and collector of objects. Throughout his childhood, he scavenged the shops of Chinatown with his mother in search of tourist souvenirs and calligraphic scrolls. The collection he started there, and which he continued to build until his death, eventually grew to cover every surface of his family's apartment in San Francisco, where his mother preserved it with scrupulous care. Wong's habits also manifested, as mentioned above, in his collection of graffiti. He was so dedicated to this artform that, along with Peter Broda, he opened The Museum of American Graffiti in 1989, in part to house his sprawling holdings.<sup>13</sup>

This activity of recording, collecting, and arranging can be seen as foundational to Wong's painting—his works are a repository of images, words, faces, and ideas gathered in the artist's movement through time and place. Such an interpretation places special importance on Wong's drawings and notebooks; in them he built a resource library of his surroundings that he could draw upon to create his paintings, using a sort of collage strategy to form their "scenarios." A postcard of two firemen kissing (see p. 56) becomes the centerpiece of his painting *Big Heat* (1988); his drawing of Miguel Piñero, captioned "1974 Mikey writing 'Short Eyes'" (see p. 34) is translated into his *Portrait of Mikey Piñero Tattooing* (1988) (see p. 18).<sup>14</sup>

As a mode of artistic production, Wong's collecting can also be seen as a reflection on the composite, complex nature of his own identity, which he imagined, and enacted, as bricolage: most notoriously, as a sort of queer Chinese-Latino fireman cowboy graffitist. Such affectionate "collecting" of multiple identities and costumes marks out Wong's belonging to all at once and yet none in particular. As we have mentioned, Wong was not a graffiti writer; nor was he a psychedelic theater performer, nor a firefighter, even as each of these vocations and communities deeply inspired him. Nor, if we follow the account of his practice, did he understand himself in any uncomplicated way as "Chinese American": Wong's paintings of Chinatown depict his inherited culture with a whimsical Orientalism that only underscores his self-conscious distance from it. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, it was this sensibility of the perpetual traveler and collector, traversing the planes of other worlds, that allowed him to express such love for the marginalized, telling them again and again, "We're all in this together."<sup>15</sup>

14. It is interesting to note that this practice of concatenation in painting finds roots in his experience as a stage set designer during his time with the Angels of Light, where he was literally constructing scenes drawn from influences picked up during his travels.

15. See Wong's 1969 poem "Hot and Heavy and Juicy and Sweet," on page 60.

16. *Splash* magazine, April 1989. The magazine was founded in 1982 by artist and media theorist Jordan Crandall, and it gained its moment of fame from an interview that Crandall, then in his early twenties, doggedly pursued with Andy Warhol. The magazine closed in 1989. See Kenneth Goldsmith, *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews: 1962-1987*. (De Capo Press: 2004), p. 348.

Having now introduced him, let us conclude by explaining why we have chosen to engage his story, which is not simple, and his work. The title of this book, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, is taken from the inscription Wong made on the cover of *Splash*, an art and fashion magazine edited by Jordan Crandall that featured the avant-garde celebrities of its moment: David Lynch and Susan Sontag, Jeff Koons and Richard Serra. Wong's scrawled intervention, then, intimates his sense of distance from the "America" that *Splash* aimed to represent, as well as the bemused fascination of a visitor to this glossy, alien country.<sup>16</sup>

The centerpiece of *My Trip to America* is an image-essay selected from the Martin Wong Papers (c. 1982–99), which are housed in the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University; from the artist's estate; and from the collections of Wong's friends. Following the cue of Wong's inscription, in assembling this collection we have imagined our discoveries as souvenirs from Wong's "trip" to a place that, despite being his home, seems enthrallingly exotic. And we haven't forgotten that the word "trip," for someone who had been a teenager in 1960s San Francisco, might signal psychedelic experience as much as tourism.

We have organized these materials into an order that moves roughly, not simply, from the private realm to the most public. First are photographs of the poet Miguel Piñero, Wong's lover, japing in the bathtub, or sleeping. From there, we follow the artist recording his impressions of the world in drawing and writing in notebooks; here we find a weird menagerie of friends and mythical figures, liquor stores and flying carpets, mummies and Marie Antoinette. Next we find permutations of language, and poems intended for public life—either in the form of the scrolls that Wong produced in the early 70s, or as elements within the complex arrangements of his paintings.

Following these are images from the theatrical performances of the Angels of Light that include Wong's set designs, masks, and costumes. We conclude the section with the artist's correspondences, including postcards to the Eureka-based artist Peggy Dickinson and the Angels of Light (the latter note mentioned above).

These materials augment our understanding of Wong's better-known paintings, largely produced during his time in New York. Their presentation in this book, together with yet other collateral materials in the attendant exhibition *Painting Is Forbidden*, reveals that the paintings derive in part from the artist's vast library of visual materials, compiled together from the artist's snapshots, magazine clippings, and poems, which appear, as if decanted into their individual elements, in this book. In both exhibition and book, therefore, we argue for a consideration of the artist as more than just a painter. His practice moved between painting and poetry, drawing and theater (and, though not represented in this book, ceramics). The paintings look rather different if one understands them as the product of a deep, long-standing, physical engagement with scenography; or if, coming to understand the extent of his commitment to writing, one places him in a lineage of poet-painters. Largely unseen before now, except among his family and friends, these works demand we revise Wong's place in history, and come to a different reckoning with who he might be for us, today.

## THE ACTIONABILITY OF THE ARCHIVE

Portrait of Mikey Pihero Tittmoing (1988), acrylic on canvas.  
Courtesy of the Estate of Martin Wong and  
P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York



In 2014, artist and curator Julie Ault interviewed archivist Marvin J. Taylor on the nature of archival materials. The occasion for the interview was Ault's contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial, which drew on the archives of the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University; Taylor is the library's current director. "Taylor's activist archiving methods have ignited the archiving field," Ault writes in her introduction;<sup>1</sup> the Fales' Downtown Collection, which collects documents of New York City's arts scene from the 1970s to the 1990s, she continues, "is a revolutionary archive, demonstrating the actionability of both archive and history."<sup>2</sup> Taylor's radicality, for Ault, comes in part by way of his complex sense of the value of archival materials in understanding the past—in particular his caution that archives often offer a partial and "disembodied" sort of evidence.

Ault quotes an earlier interview with Taylor, where he tells the interviewer that

[a]n archive is nothing but the fossil remains of experience. For the most time, disembodied evidence. The question I'm fascinated with is, what is the relationship of the archive to the body? The archive as a stand-in for the absent body, because then you could talk about the fetish of the archival object, etc.<sup>3</sup>

1. Julie Ault, "Active Recollection: Marvin J. Taylor in Conversation with Julie Ault," *whitney.org* (PDF), 2014, accessed November 27, 2014, p. 1 <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/JulieAult>

2. *Ibid.*

3. Emily Colucci, "The Dirty Scene of Downtown New York," *Hyperallergic*, August 10, 2012, accessed on January 23, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/55469/the-dirty-scene-of-downtown-new-york>

4. Ault, op. cit. p. 3–4.

With Ault, he continues this line of thinking:

...what disappears is the smell, the touch, all these other aspects of living that are hard to experience from written documents. What we're left with, basically, are things we can look at—at least in traditional archives. There are other objects that archives cannot collect, and that the museums tend not to collect as well, that bring us closer to the person. And I've tried to include those objects as well within the Downtown collection, because I think they have embodied meaning.<sup>4</sup>

As we have assembled this publication, and the exhibition that it accompanies, we have drawn substantially on the Martin Wong Papers (c. 1982–99), part of the Fales' Downtown Collection. And as we have done so, Taylor's thoughts have been on our mind: What does the archive allow us to know about the materials it contains, and the histories it makes visible? How has the particular nature of the Fales' collections—its unconventional archival subjects, its “revolutionary” stance—inflected what it is possible for us to say about Wong? In particular we have become attuned to those “aspects of living” and “embodied meaning” that Taylor evokes—as they mark an aspect of Wong's life and practice that even this revolutionary archive can offer only in elusive ways.

Let us give an example from our own encounter with Wong's papers. Immersed in the material of Wong's life—sketchbooks, artworks, photographs, clippings, journals, personal effects—we became fascinated by a sequence of sketches that Wong created of his lover, the Nuyorican poet and playwright Miguel Piñero. The sketches are undated, but almost certainly come from the years between when the two met in 1982 and the poet's death, from cirrhosis, in 1988; and they are connected by their possible relationship to Wong's painting *Portrait of Mikey Piñero Tattooing* (1988) (see p. 18).

We became interested in a particular drawing, in which Wong pictures Piñero in the act of writing his 1974 play *Short Eyes* (see p. 34). The writer's body floats on the page without a back-

ground or environment, his body depicted by a loose, single outline, in profile view. A cigarette burns in one hand, while the other hand holds a pen to page. His stout arms are crooked as though they are resting on an invisible table. Piñero's fingers take up the much of the frame, out of proportion to the rest of his body. Tattoos of script are visible on his upper arm and forearms, reading 'Mala,' 'Mi Vida,' and 'Adelina.' Wong pays great attention to Piñero's frazzled and curly hair, his beard, and the scars on his arms, using heavy lines that give him character and life. Textual commentary within the sketch states, “1974 Mikey writing 'Short Eyes' Felix Camillo's drama class Ossining State Correctional Facility (Sing Sing) Westchester County”—which indicates Wong's attempt to recapture the time and place of Piñero creating his monumental work.

The complexity of this act of representation will already be evident. The sketch seems observed, drawn from life, while the moment it aims to represent is from a different time entirely: Piñero wrote the play while in Sing Sing prison, where Wong had never been, and did so in 1974, years before the artist and poet met. The drawing's details therefore support a sort of mythic view of Piñero's character, across time: here a pen symbolizes his accomplishments in writing, while tattoos, muscles, and scars display his rough prison background. But to whom do these details aim to speak? The sketch is from Wong's private notebooks; this mythography has no definite audience, except the artist himself. Perhaps presenting Piñero's rougher qualities in conjunction with the tender focus on his hair and face was a romantic gesture, referencing an erotic relationship only known in certain circles. Or, perhaps Wong simply drew them without purpose other than to observe and record.



In another sketch, also undated, Piñero looks down upon a sheet of paper with cool concentration. Hard, sinuous marks describe his hair and beard. Face and arms are disconnected from each other, hanging in dreamlike fragmentation. Here, again, are Piñero's attributes—cigarette and pen—this time appearing only as slender cylinders. A single diagonal line moves from the left edge of the drawing through his hand, inferring (through deft use of negative space) the paper on which he writes. And indeed we find this airy and disembodied quality in a third sketch of Piñero as well: here, details are implied only through comparison—that is, it would be impossible to know what was being represented, without first seeing the other sketches in conjunction. What differentiates this sketch from the others is that the hands and face are traced multiple times, giving the impression that the poet is in motion.

Turning now to the painting to which these sketches seem to relate, we might discover them in a curious relationship to the better-known work. In the painting, the figure of the poet floats against the background of a prison block, enveloped in white paint that gives him a ghostly quality. Time and space are compressed, and his figure is disembodied from its surroundings, even as his familiar characteristics (cigarette and pen, rumpled hair) remain the same. Meanwhile, his tattoos drift from their placement in the sketches as free-floating fragments of language.

The elaborated backdrop in the painting, though, which locates the poet in his prison environment, is new. Elsewhere in the archive one finds articles from *Time* magazine that Wong saved from the early 1980s, reporting on America's toughest prisons. In one article, a two-page photographic spread depicts a young prison guard with a gun. He stands in front of a three-tiered prison block and watches prisoners waiting for their cells to open. The guard's

left hand rests on a metal banister while his other hand grips the handle of his gun. In another clipping, a long corridor of prison cells is shown with a brick wall at the end. From one cell, two hands emerge: one hand holding a peace sign, the other clasping a small mirror.

It was only after poring over these clippings that we realized their elements had been arranged in a collage-like form into the finished *Portrait of Mikey Piñero Tattooing*. The background of the painting reproduces the space from the magazine cutout with the prison guard—though Wong omits prisoners and guard. It appears as though Wong used this article as a template to provide the scenography needed for this painting, to situate the man he knew in a world that he could only envision in mediated form. But so, too, does he alter the scene of the photograph: in Wong's interpolation, Piñero is in solitude, as if in an empty prison; and his activity shifts as well: now he is not writing a play, but giving himself a tattoo.

The act of comparing the sketches, clippings, and painting leads to questions about Wong's practice and inspiration that cannot be securely answered by the archive. Is Piñero, in the painting, truly in the act of tattooing, as the title suggests? Why would Wong paint his lover giving himself a tattoo when he so often sketched him writing? *Did* Piñero write while in the presence of Wong sketching him? And which came first: the sketches, the magazine clippings, or the painting? Does it matter?

We do learn important things from this constellation of materials: that, for example, Wong's paintings are likely combined, as in photomontage, of versions of existing material; or that the artist, once he found a visual arrangement he liked, was prone to repeating it, with different variations, across mediums, as if testing its form against different settings—until, in painting, a satisfying figure/scenario relationship emerged. But these inferences are haunted by things it is now impossible to verify: the order of the works' elabora-



6. Ault, op. cit., p. 24.  
 7. Ibid., p. 24–5.  
 8. Ibid., p. 25.  
 9. Ibid.
- tion, for example, or whether a particular sketch is observed, imagined, or repeated from a previous work. To venture more—to imagine the artworks as the product of romantic play between artist and his subject—is to find our desire for the archive’s “absent bodies” beginning to distort the evidence at hand.

In the discussion mentioned above, Ault warns that archives may well offer “false evidence,” even as she emphasizes the project of history itself, of “getting things as right as possible.” (The exchange is important; we hope the reader will forgive us quoting it at length.) “Documents and artifacts,” Ault says,

...are not intrinsically truth telling; they are fragmentary and often disconnected from context. Archives can mislead through omission. Essential pieces of information, which might answer questions and redirect research, are not necessarily tangible or archived.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile,

[u]ncovered and rediscovered artifacts, such as a letter found in an abandoned basement, a manuscript that surfaces at a flea market, or a diary that suddenly comes to light, have the potential to radically alter historical narratives. The rediscovered document that no one knew existed can provide crucial facts that close gaps and unlock mysteries, and possibly suggest alternative accounts of events. In this way, the archive often feels like a minefield of latent surprises that can result in all degrees of misrepresentation.<sup>7</sup>

And finally,


[h]ow can this square with getting things as right as possible in history writing? I mean it’s not all subjective; there are degrees of historical accuracy and degrees of mythologizing.<sup>8</sup>

Taylor responds,

I always tell students that “archives lie.” They are by their very nature incomplete, fragmented, censored ... [E]vents—and archives—are messy. History is linear and rational because it is a fabricated narrative. All we can do is agree on the most logical and well-argued narrative based on the “facts” we have. Archives exist, in the end, for citation verification. We may not have facts, but as long as we’re looking at the same documents, we can have a discourse about them. Cold comfort, I’m afraid.<sup>9</sup>

By selecting and assembling materials from this archive of Wong’s work, in this book and in the exhibition it accompanies, we are inevitably engaged in a process of historicization: these materials elaborate on old narratives and propose new ones. In particular we have aimed to unfold the narrative of Wong’s production in California in the fifteen years before he moved to New York City, making public materials from this time that have been little seen before now. This project reveals certain continuities and discontinuities between two distinct moments of his work, and his life. We draw together these works and ephemera not to fetishize the archive, or to argue the “truth value” of these materials; instead, perhaps we might argue for the “use value” of displaying the archive, for producing an image of the artist in the present, and contesting other narratives of the artist’s practice currently being assembled.

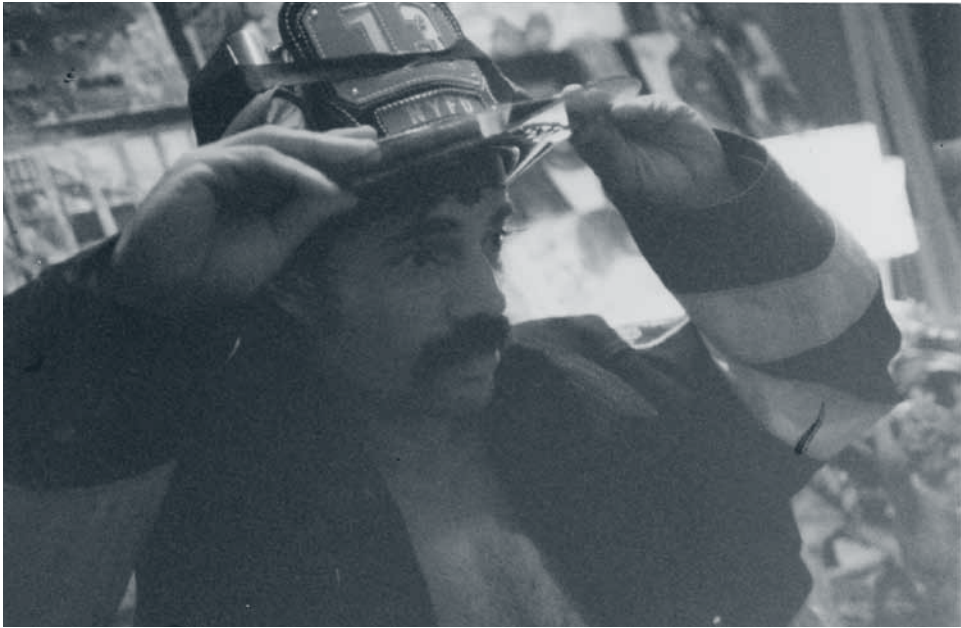
In doing so, Ault’s concept of the “actionability” of the archive and history have been of central importance. The persona and work of Martin Wong, for us, is in his continuous becoming: located in between sketch and painting, conversation and translation, and within the crossed out and re-written narratives in his sketchbooks. And that ongoingness, that ability to *act* on the past, and within its ambiguous limits, is what we can truly know of Martin Wong. “We may not have facts, but as long as we’re looking at the same documents, we can have a discourse about them,” Taylor says. For us, this discourse offers more than “cold comfort.”


  
**RESUME CONSUME**  
 MARTIN WONG

1946- BORN IN PORTLAND OREGON  
 1947- RAISED IN NORTH BEACH DURING  
 ON BEAT RENAISSANCE  
 1964- GRADUATED FROM WASHINGTON HI- SF.  
 1965- STUDIED DRAWING UNDER DOB  
 BOTH WELL USING THE NIKOLADES METHOD  
 1966- TWO YEARS IN ARCHITECTURE AT  
 1967 UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY  
 1968- ENROLLED IN HSU ART DEPARTMENT  
 1970- WON LESLEY CERAMICS AWARD IN  
 CALIFORNIA CERAMICS GUILD SHOW  
 AT DE YOUNG MUSEUM - SF -  
 ONE MAN SHOW AT NOVA 1 BERKELEY  
 RECEIVED BA IN CERAMICS FROM HSU  
 1971- TRAVELED TO AFGHANISTAN TO VISIT  
 CERAMIC MOSQUE MOSAIC WORKSHOPS  
 IN AFRAT AND TO STUDY WITH TANTRIC  
 PAINTERS IN NEPAK  
 COMPLETED ONE YEAR & GRADUATED  
 STUDIES IN CERAMICS AT MILLS UNDER  
 FRED BAUER  
 1971 TWO YEARS AS TANTRIC SET DESIGNER  
 TO FOR UNDERGROUND GORILLA THEATRE  
 1973 GROUP (GANGS OF WATER) SF, NY, AND AMSTERDAM  
 1973 RETURNED TO HUMBOLDT COUNTY TO  
 MASTER THE ART OF OK PAINTING  
 (STILL LEARNING)  
 1975 ESTABLISHED LOCAL PORTRAIT  
 BUSINESS IN EUREKA.



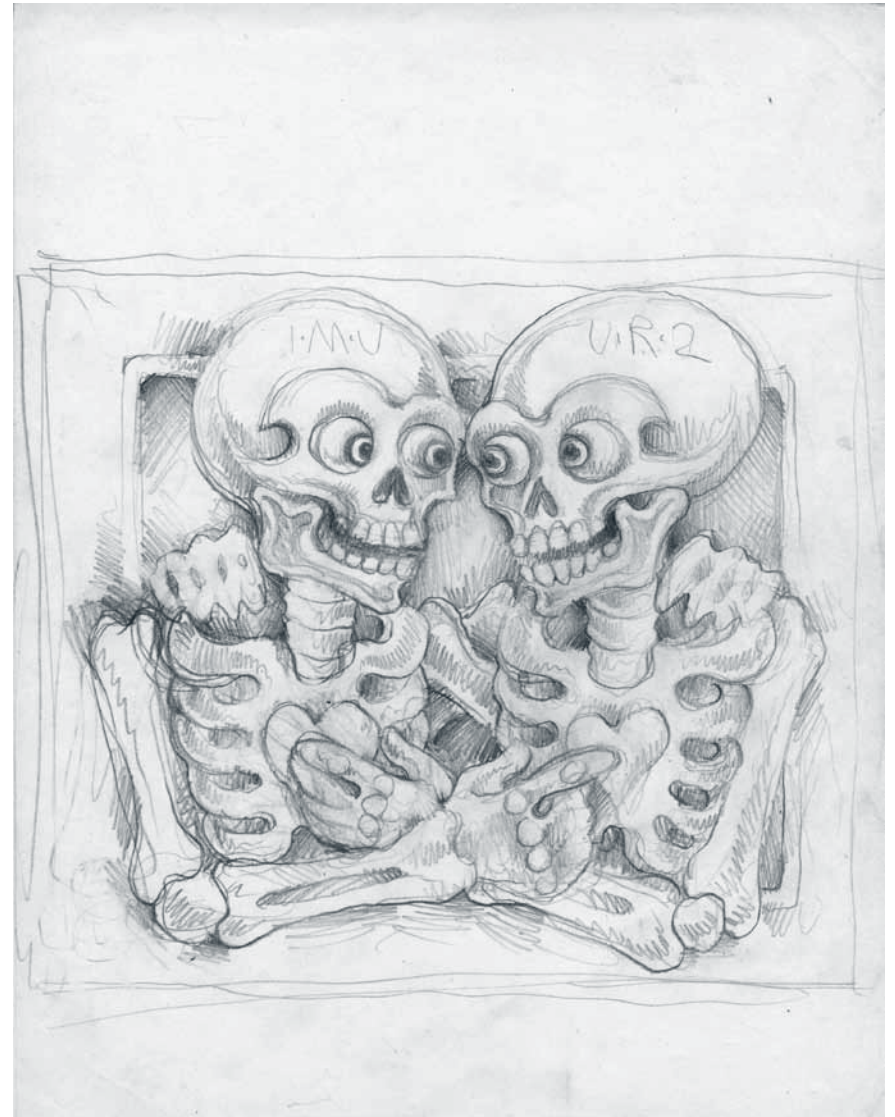


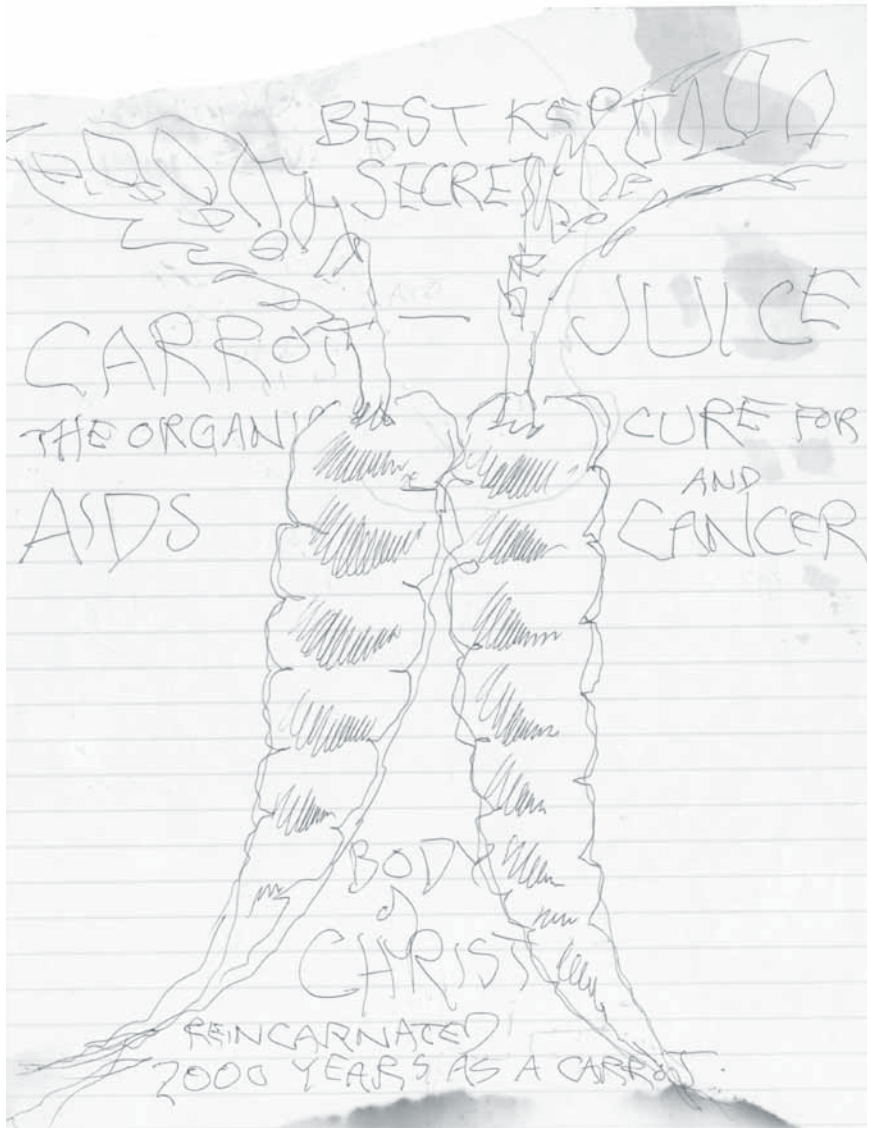




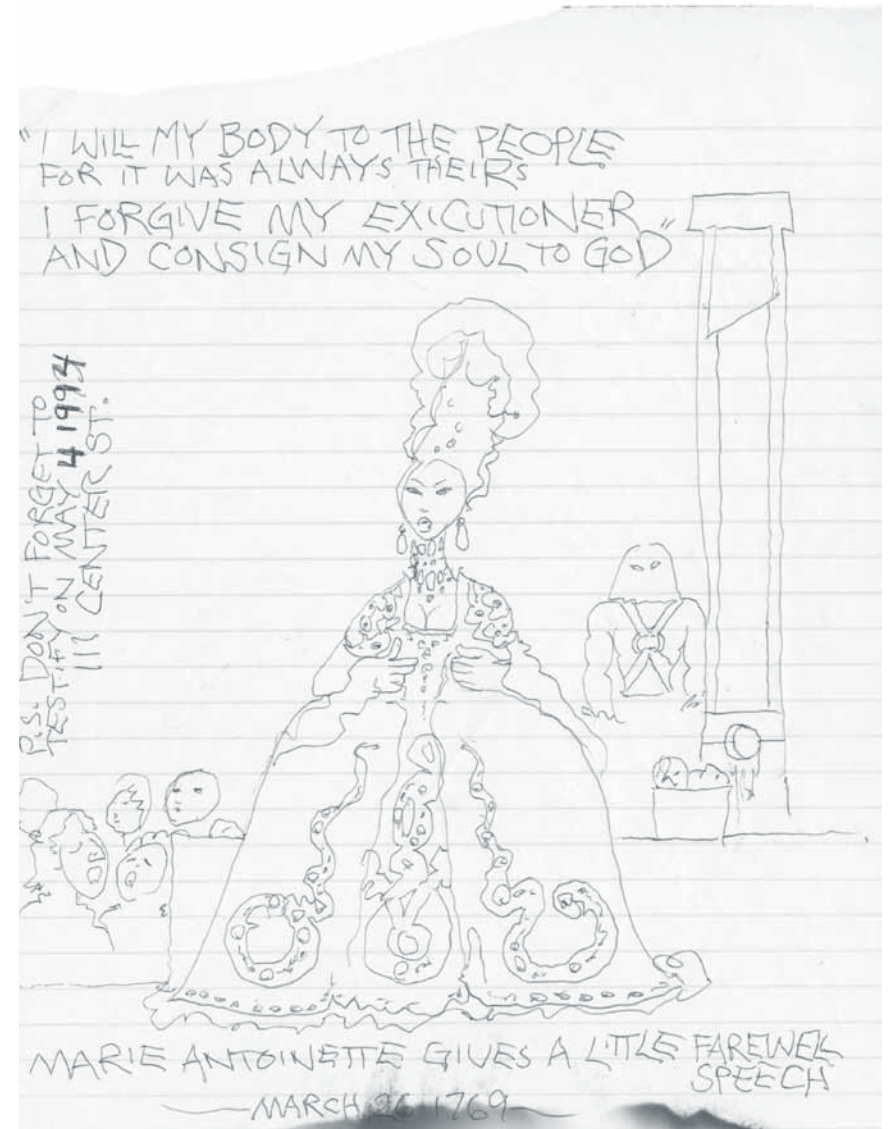












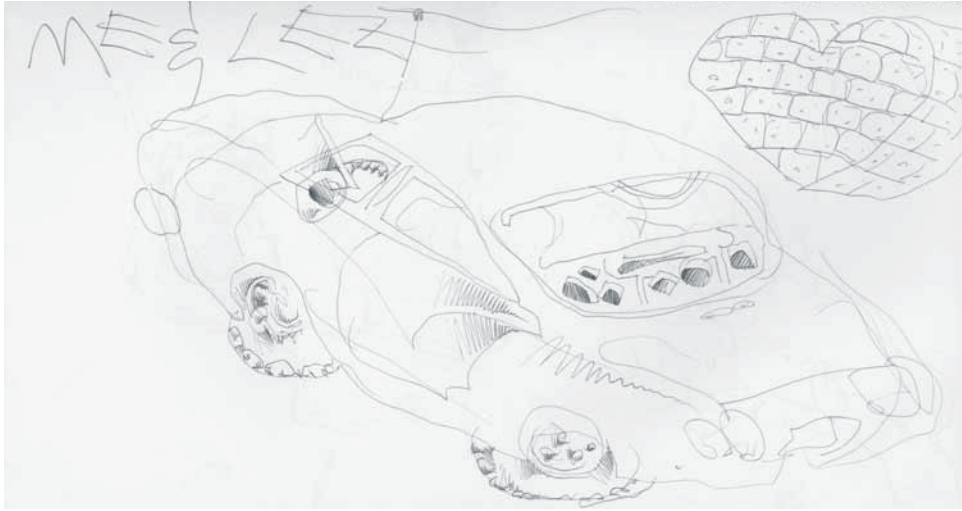
POOR MARIE ANTOINETTE  
THE HORRIBLE THINGS THEY  
USED TO SAY ABOUT HER.  
IF SHE DIDN'T GO TO A  
PARTY THEY THOUGHT SHE  
HAD GONE TO A BETTER  
ONE. THEY DIDN'T REALIZE  
THAT SHE HAD TO GET UP  
AND MILK THE COWS  
SHE ACTUALLY MADE ALL  
THE BUTTER IN VERSAILLES  
HER LITTLE CHATEAU WAS  
NOT A TOY - IT WAS A  
REAL WORKING FARM.

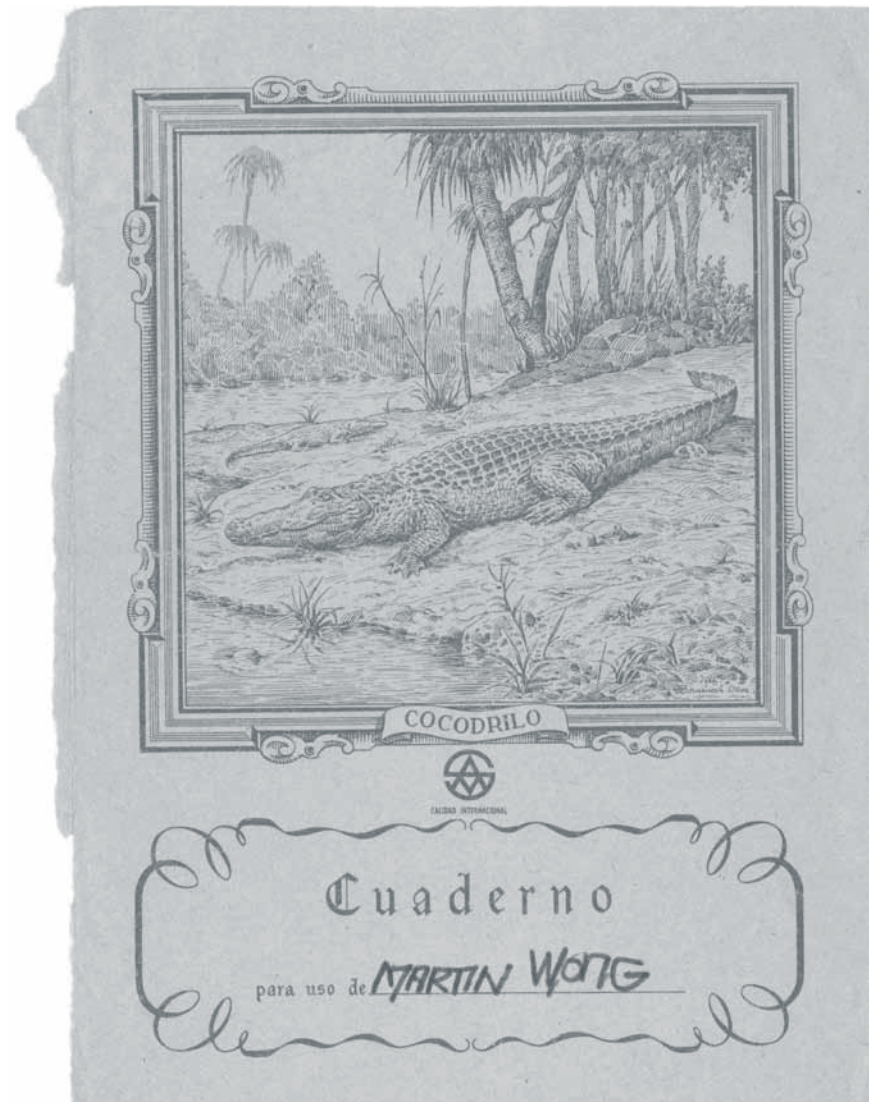




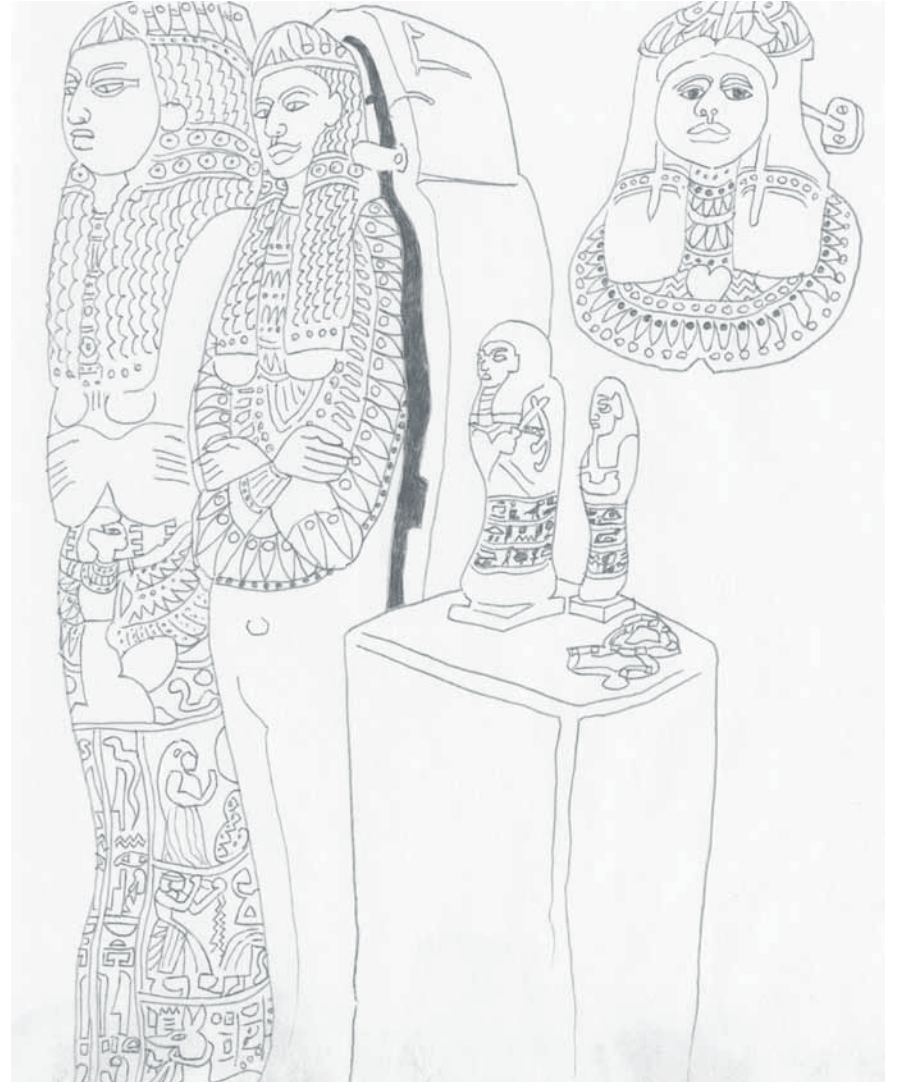




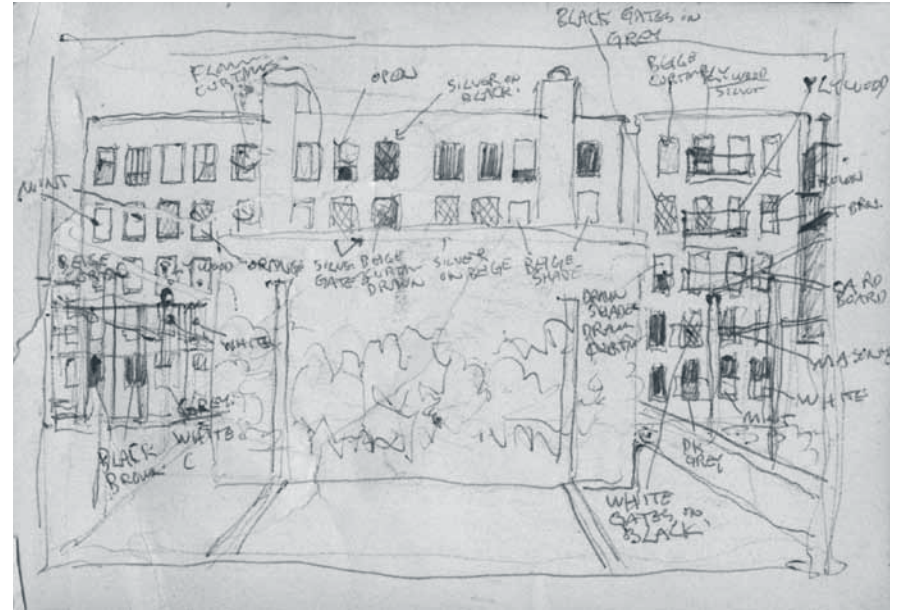
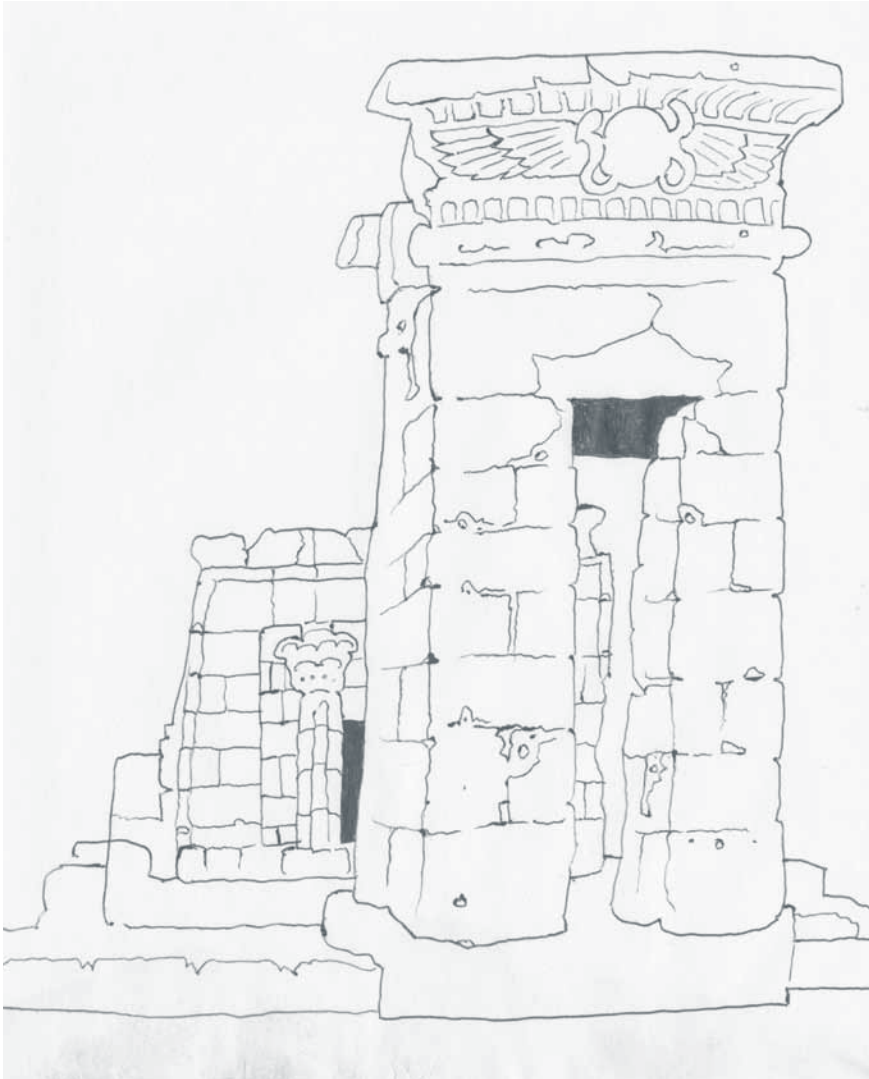


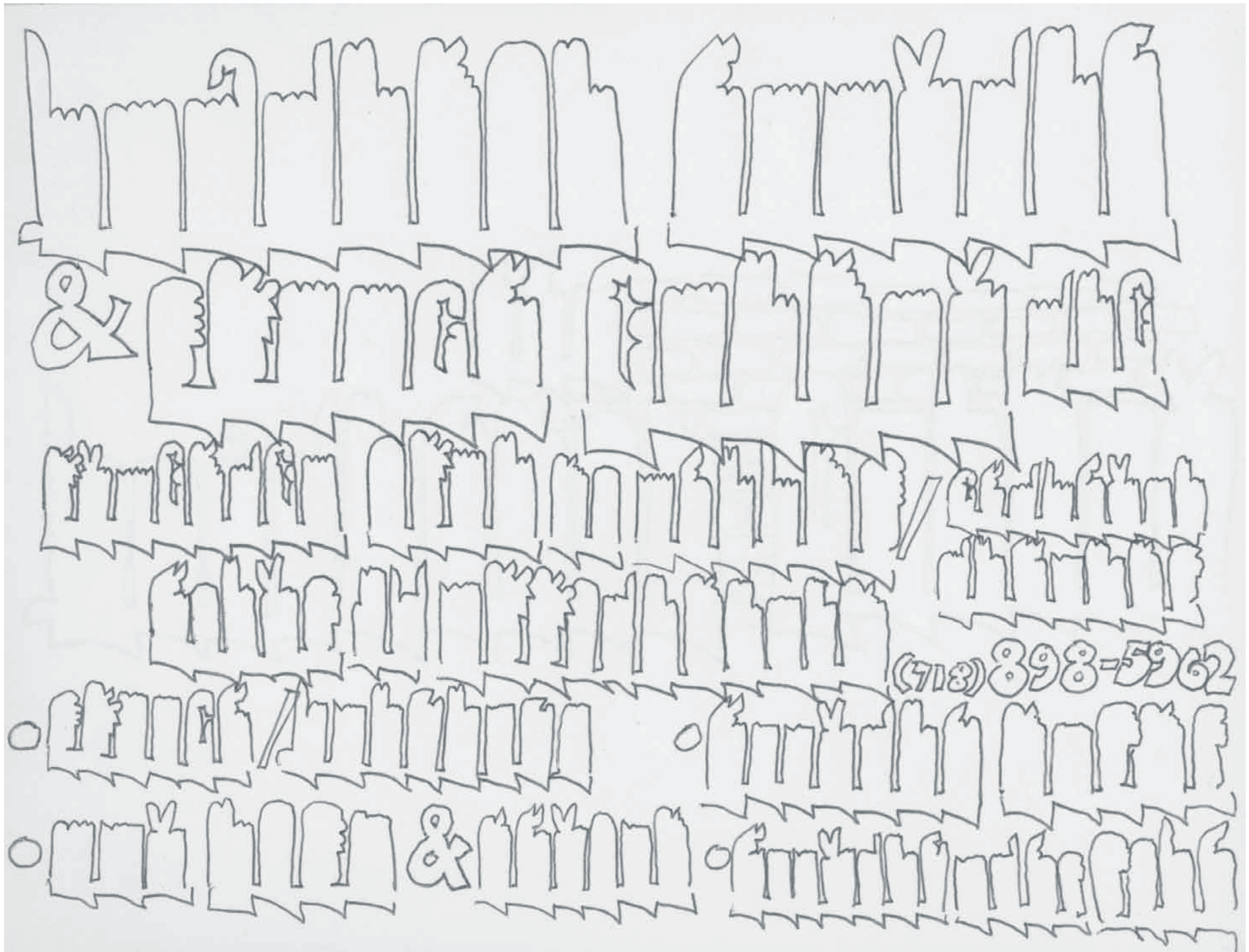














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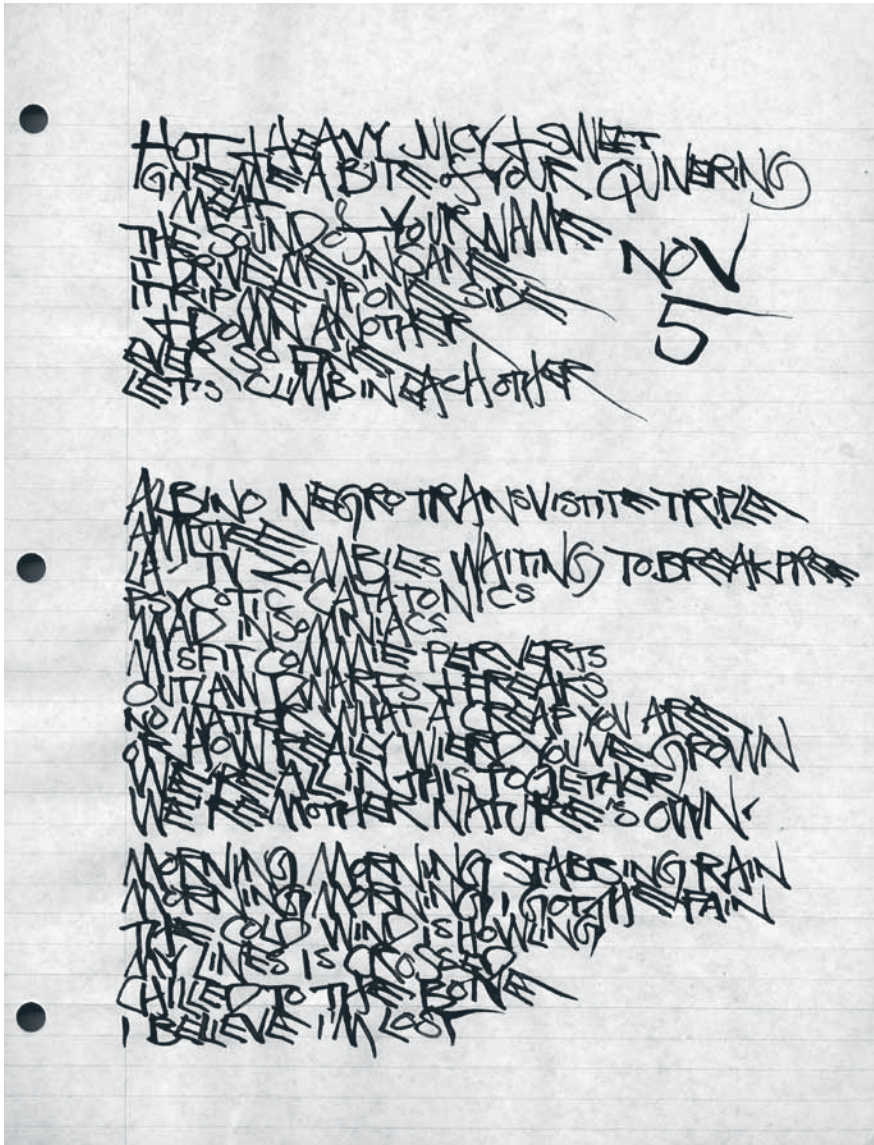
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K IN THE NORMA CRO  
OM BUT I NEVER DID







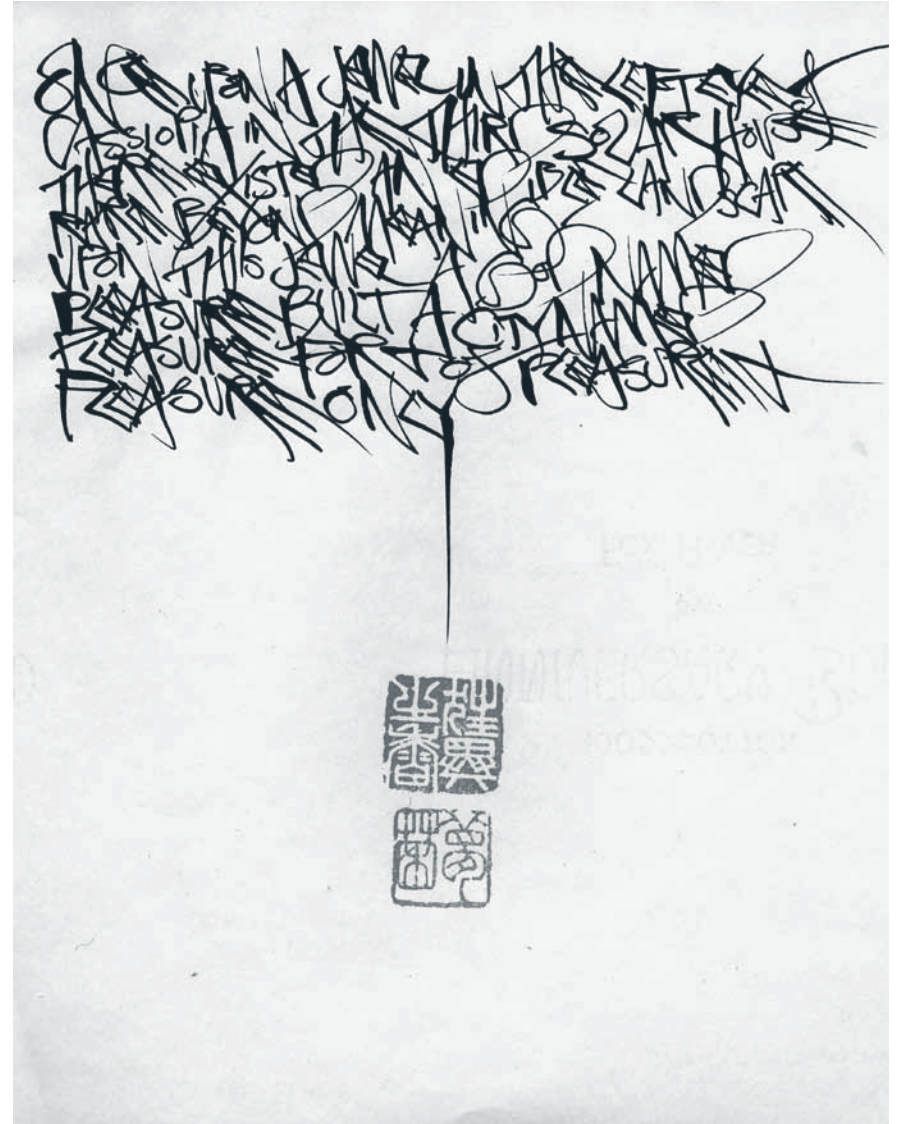
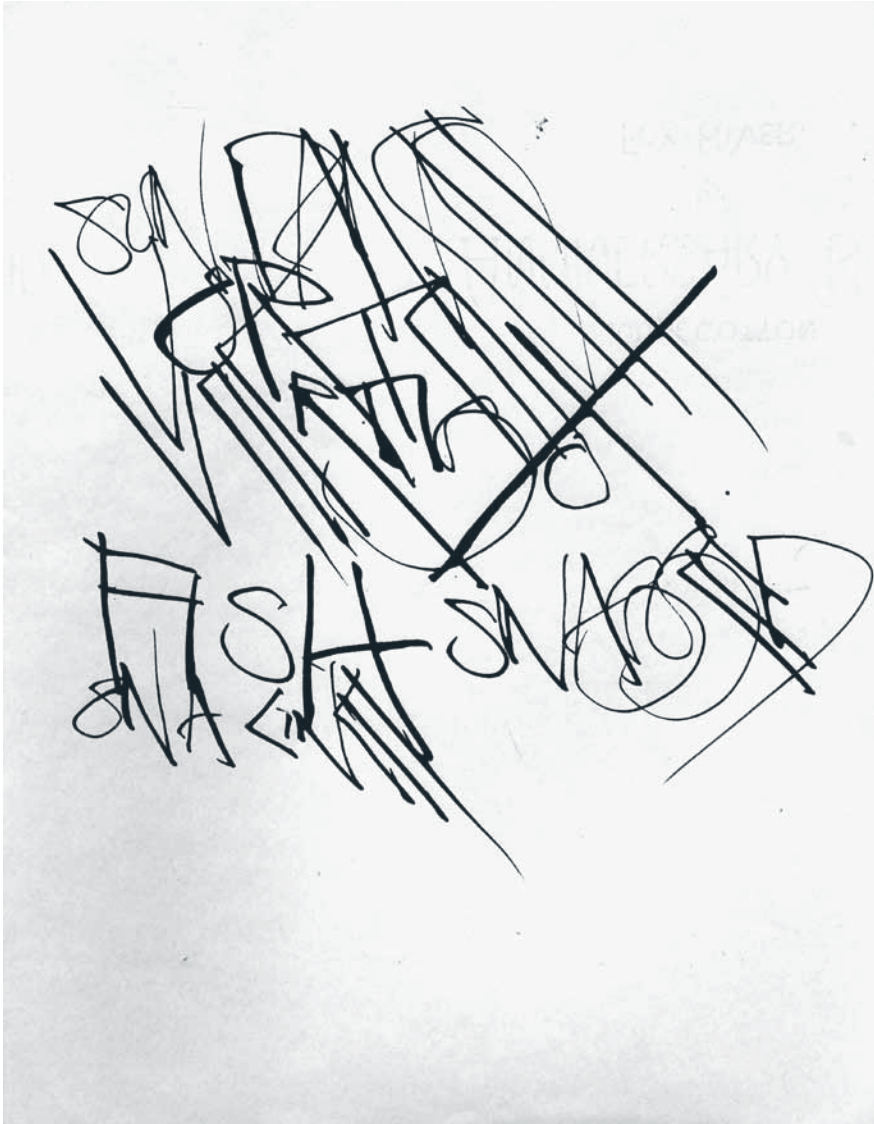


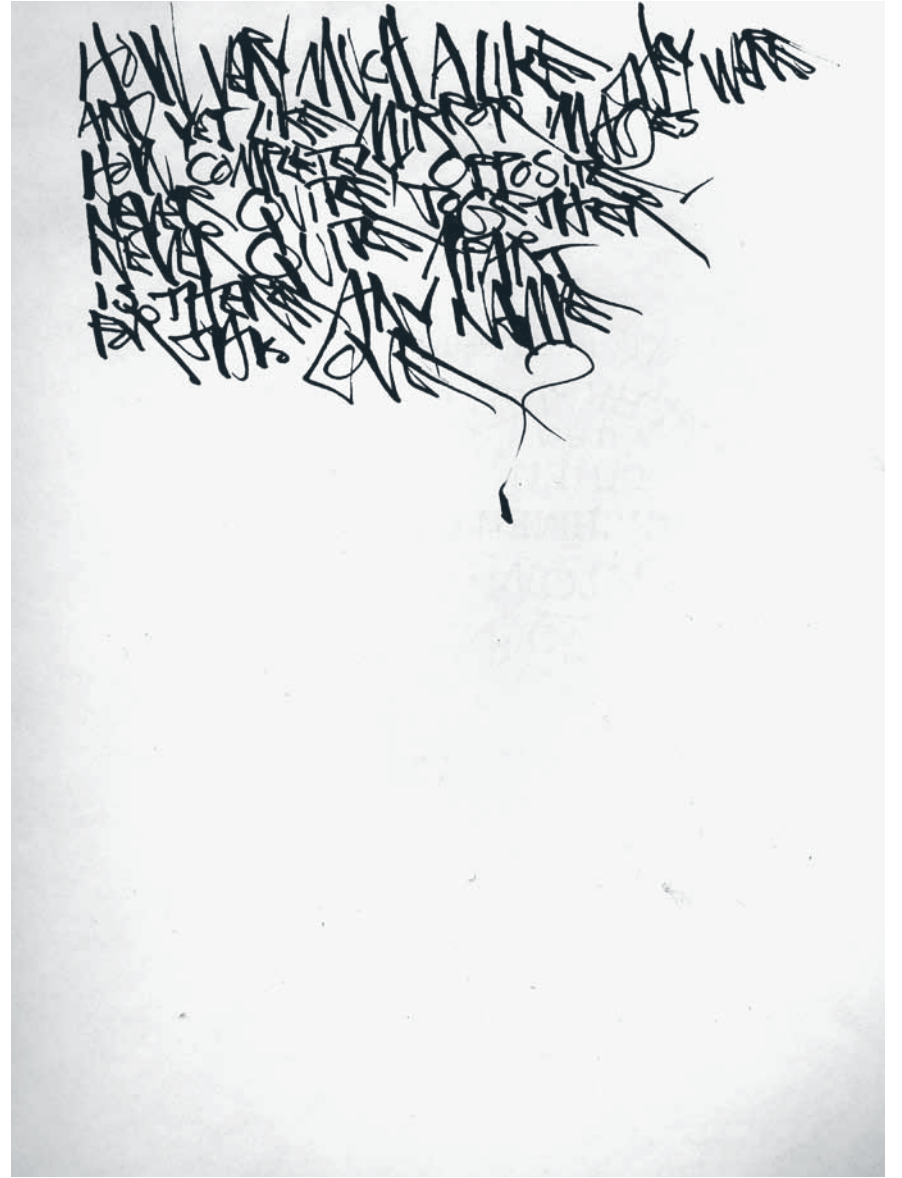




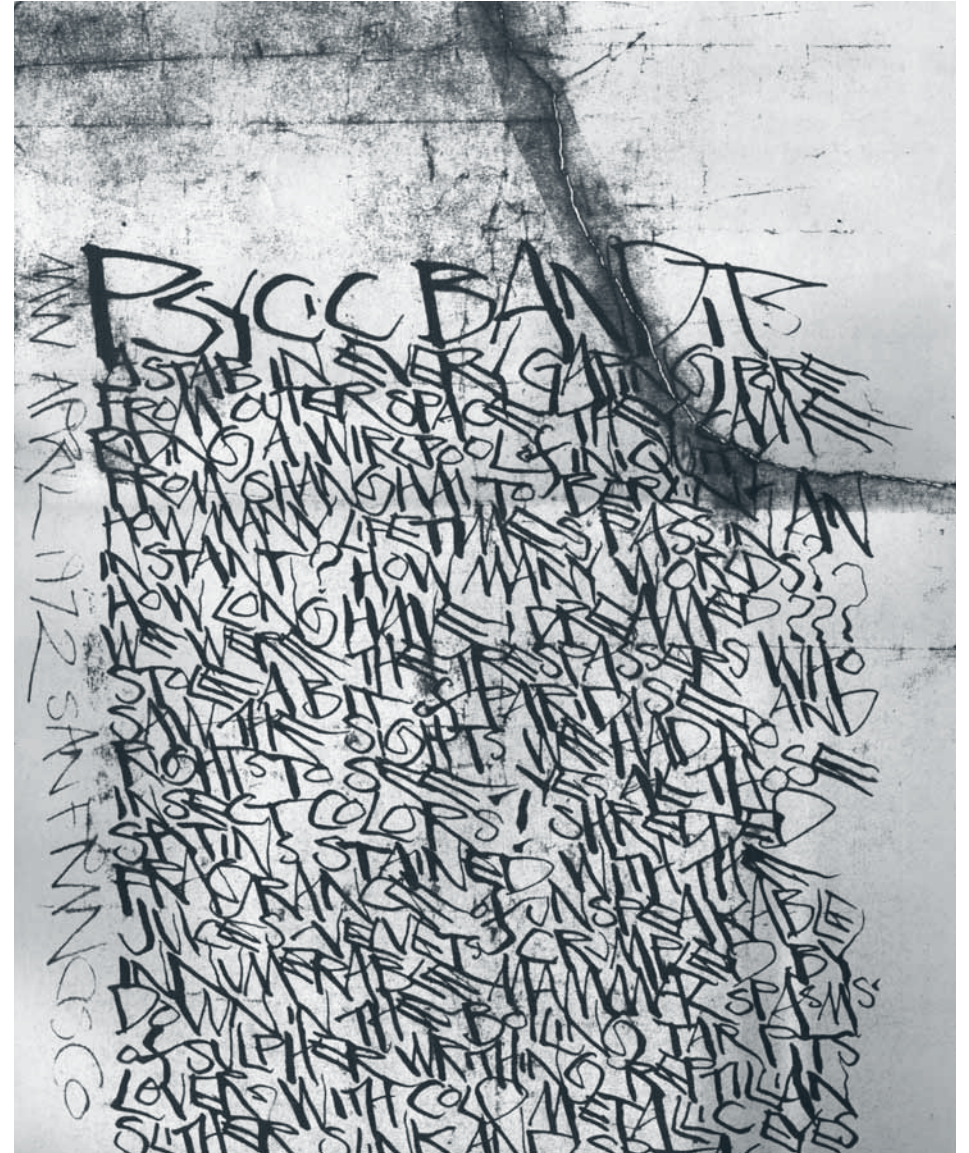




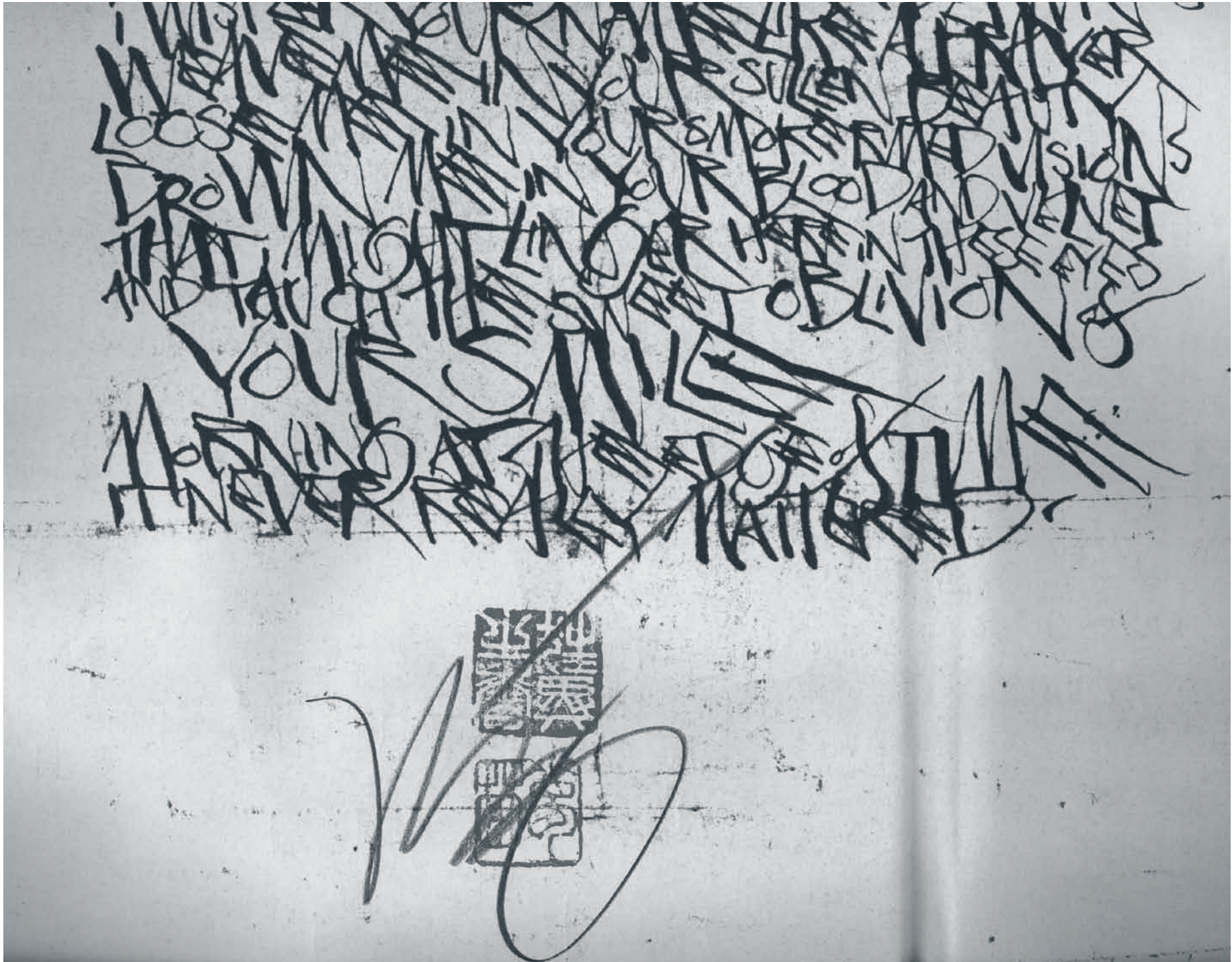




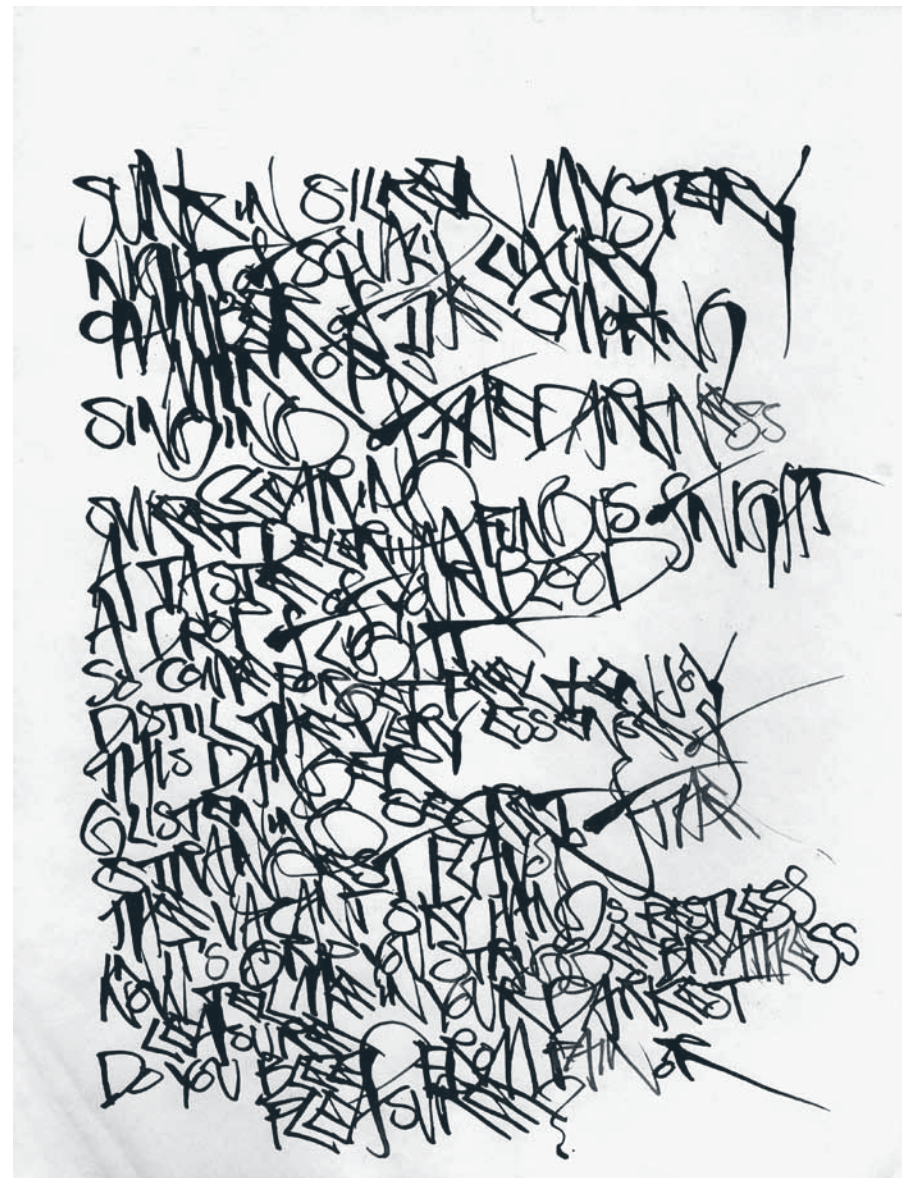
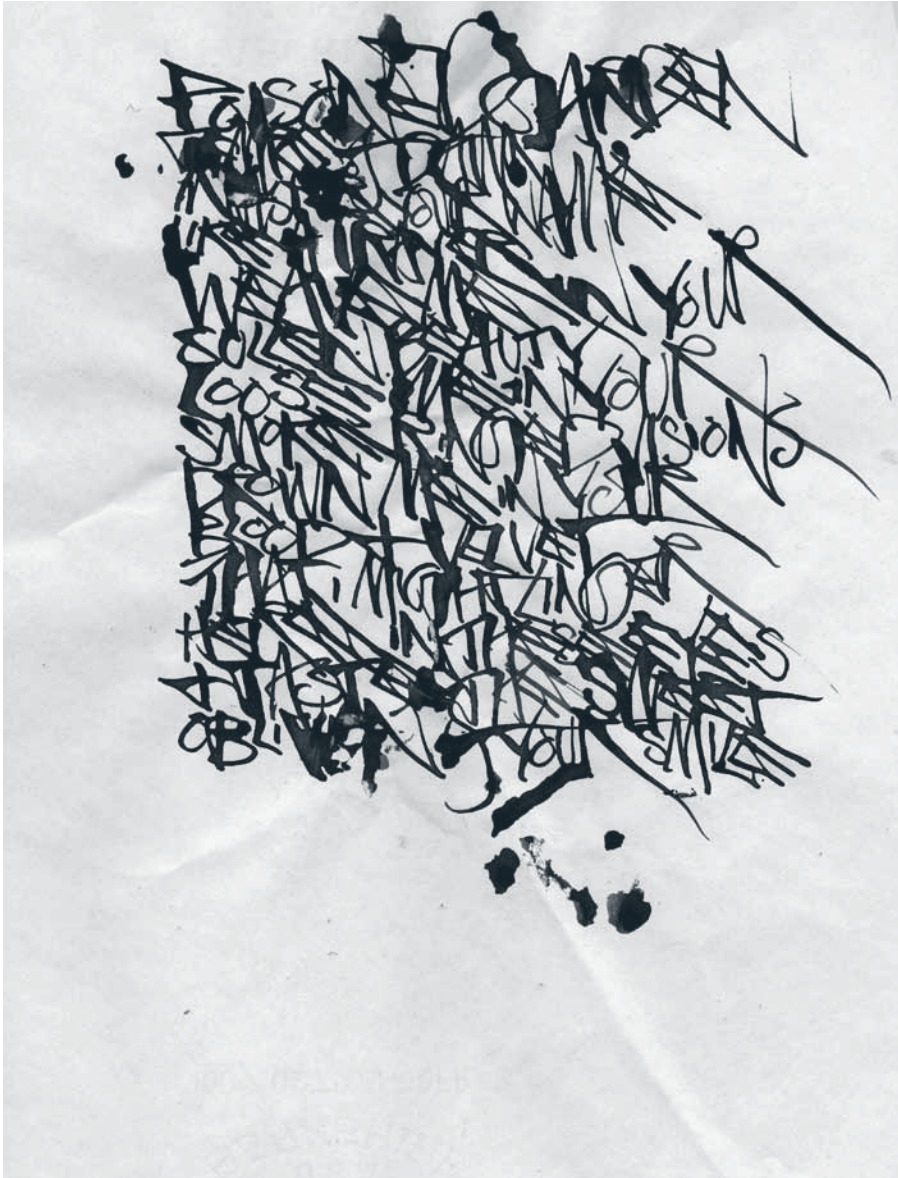








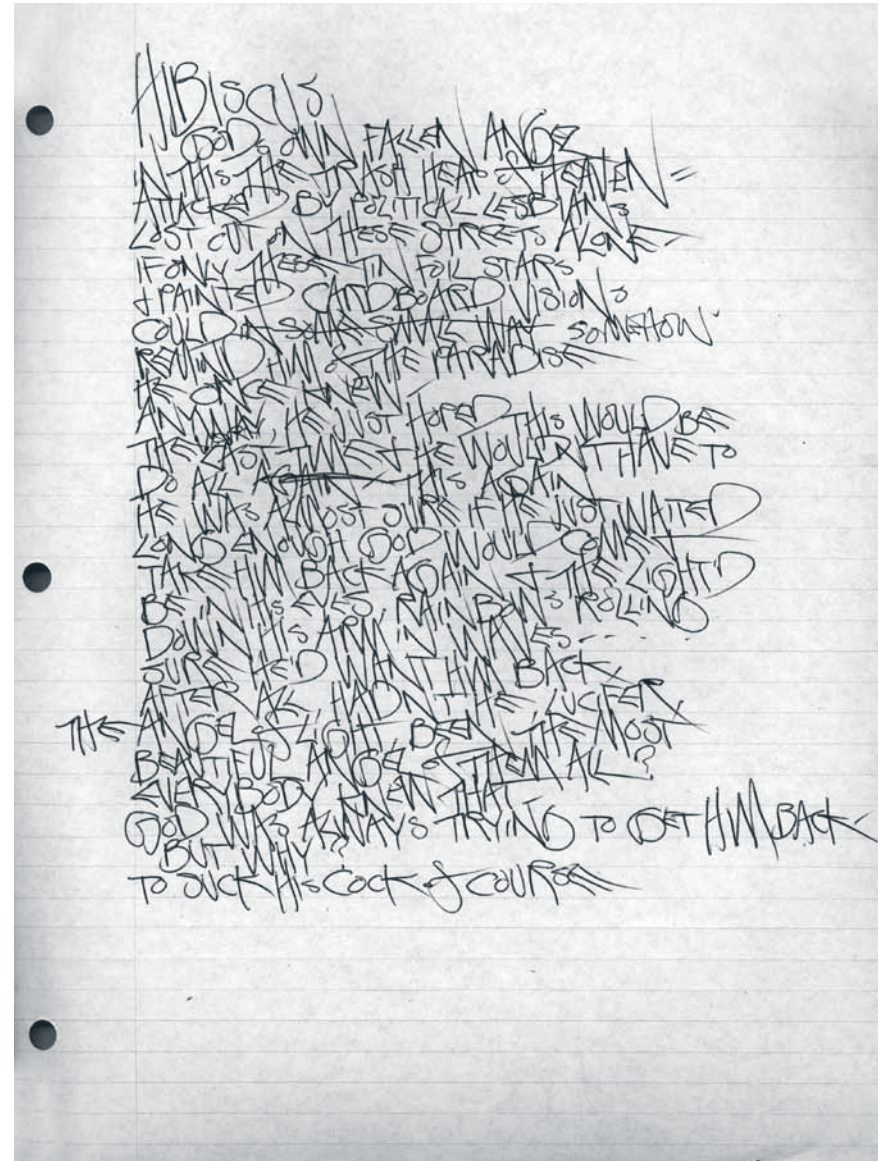
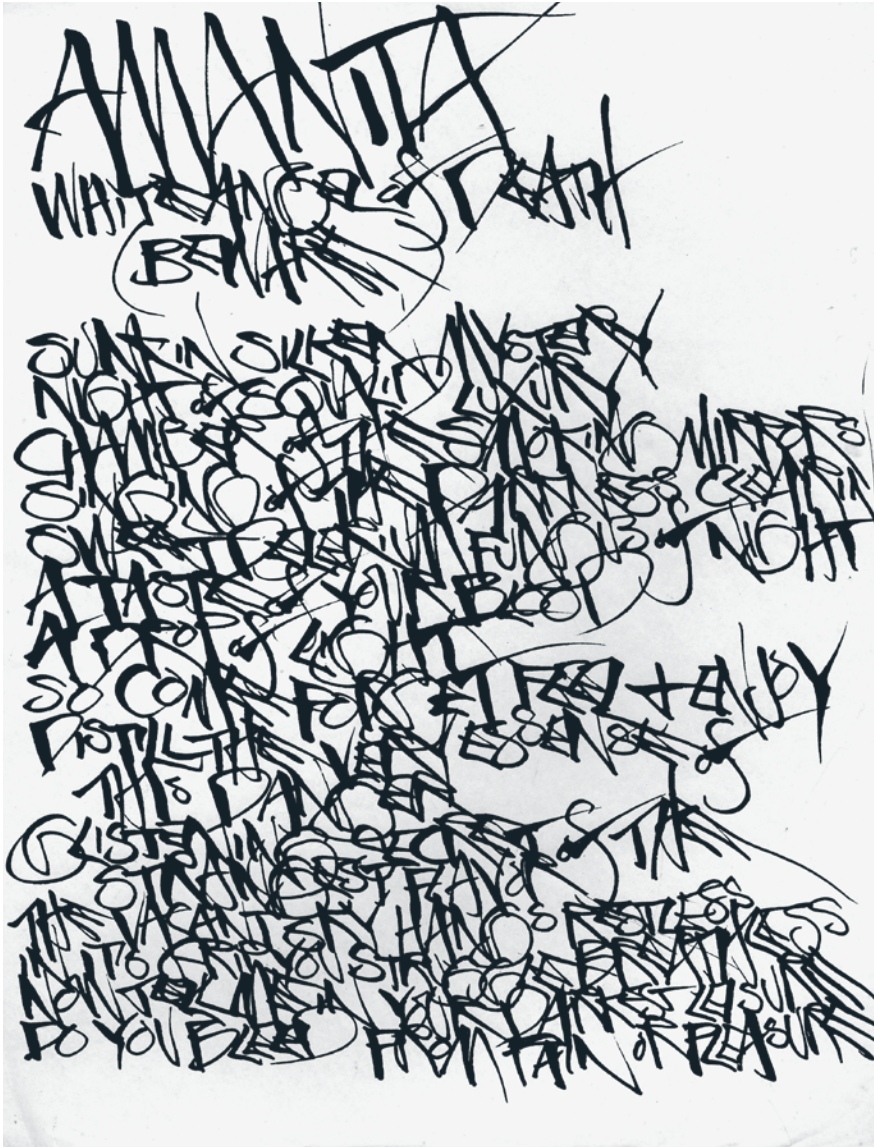






TOYS FOR A SUMMER'S DAY  
WATERPISTOLS FULL OF MATH  
TOYS FOR A T X X  
TOYS FOR



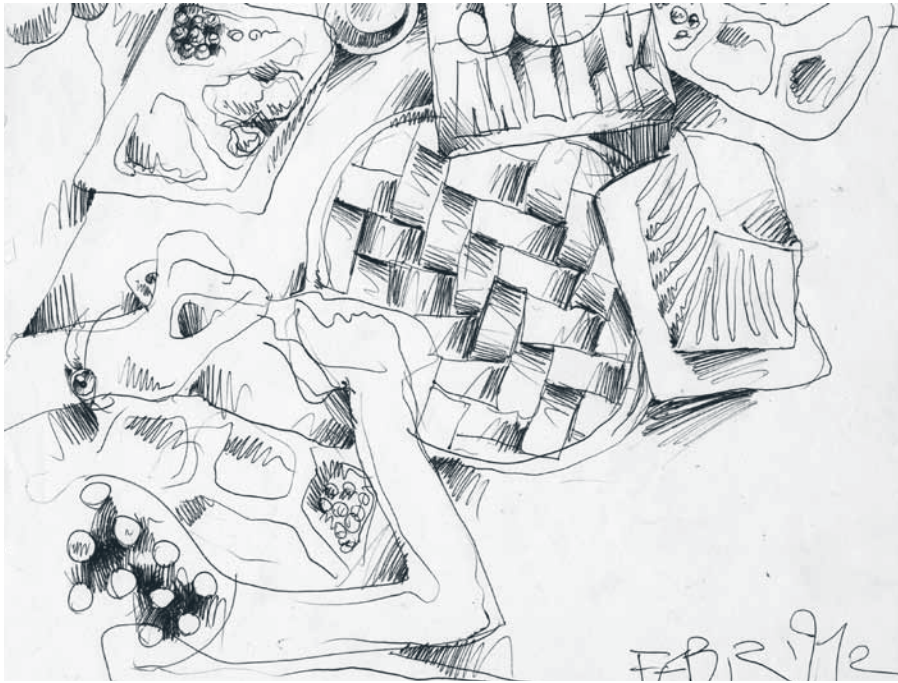














MW MAY 18th 1976 SAMBO'S EUREKA CALIFORNIA USA



# Luncheon Anytime

## Sambo's Burgers

**HAMBURGER COMBO**  
 A big treat with French fries 1.70  
 Topped with cheez 1.80

**BURGER & CHILI**  
 Our Sambo with a piping chili 1.55  
 Topped wif. cheez 1.65

**BACON BURGER**  
 Crispy bacon strips this one 1.50  
 Topped wif. cheez 1.60

**LUX SAMBO BUGGER**  
 With French fries 1.30  
 Topped wif. cheez 1.40

**BURGER**  
 A meal on-a-bun 1.10  
 Topped with cheeze 1.20

all our tasty fresh sand-  
 wiches with zesty coleslaw and  
 whole wheat or rye bread  
 on American cheese  
 ham or bacon & cheez .80

ham 1.25  
 ham & bacon & egg 1.15  
 1.35



# Dinner Anytime

We're glad you're here  
 Welcome to Sambo's. With more  
 than 600 restaurants our  
 Sambo's people are here  
 to make your meal with us  
 as nice as possible.

## Desserts

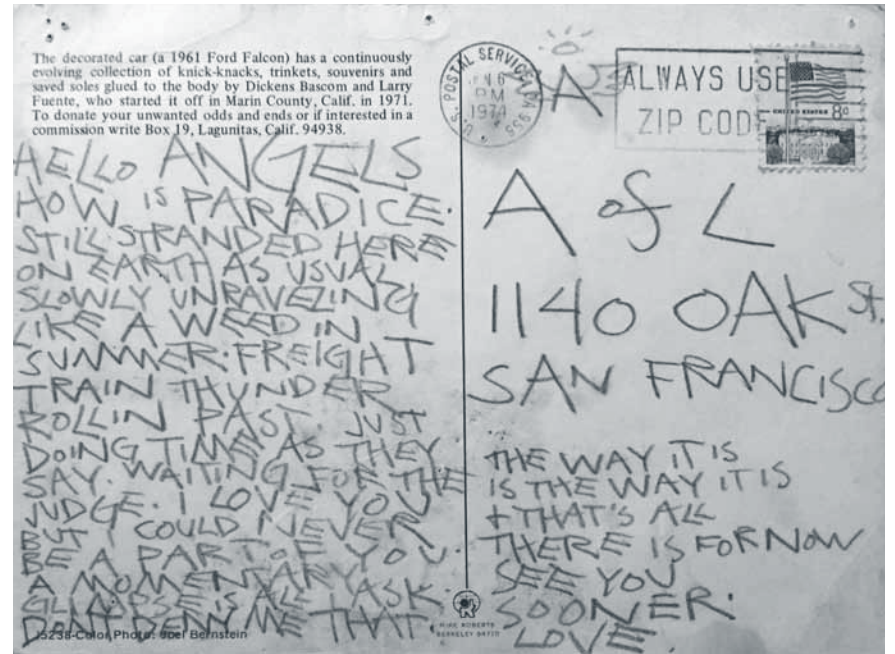
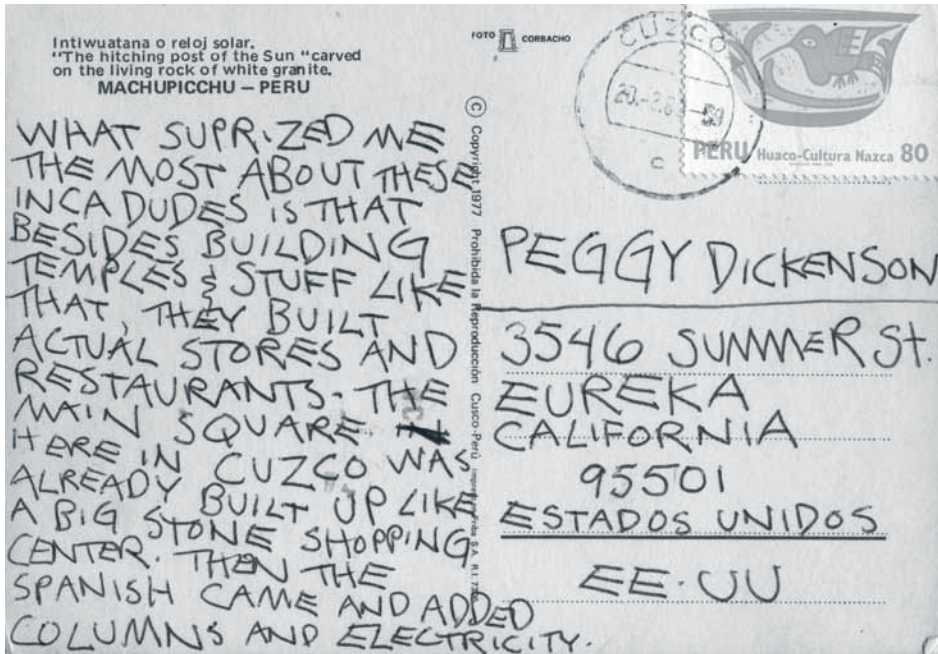
ICE CREAM small .30-.45  
 SUNDAES small .50-.75  
 FRUIT GELATIN  
 With whipped cream  
 STRAWBERRY .40  
 FLAKY CRUST .60  
 CREAM PIE .85  
 CHEEZCAKE .65  
 PUDDING .60  
 CARROTCAKE .40  
 BROWNIE .65  
 A la mode .45  
 .75

## Beverages

Coffee	.20	Buttermilk	.30
Tea	.25	Chocolate milk	.30
Sanka®	.25	Lemonade	.25
Hot chocolate	.30	Root beer	.25
Iced tea	.25	Coca Cola	.25
Milk	.30	Sweet 'n Low on Request	







## “IT’S EASIER TO PAINT A STORE IF IT’S CLOSED.”

*Martin Wong spoke before an audience at the San Francisco Art Institute on February 20, 1991. The event marked a homecoming for the artist who, though he lived in New York City at the time, had deep roots in San Francisco. Born in Portland, he grew up in San Francisco’s Chinatown, and lived for more than a decade in Eureka, California, where he attended Humboldt State University. Rather than play the role of the now-cosmopolitan artist in a marginal city, Wong affirmed his belonging by insisting that he was a “sentimental, realist, local painter.” His was a romantic sort of localism, embracing tales of gangsters, poets, prisoners, and his beloved graffiti writers.*

*An artist’s slide lecture is often sequential in nature, with works assembled into an order, each in turn prompting narratives of production or context—and indeed in this talk Wong frequently describes his technique, his subject matter, and scenes from his life. He follows the order of the slide carousel, gesturing to images one by one that, in the transcript form below, we cannot see. Wong joins to this conventional format the raconteur’s love of storytelling, and the surrealist’s love of non sequitur and improvisation. He begins his presentation with the preamble, “I didn’t really prepare anything so I’m just going to free associate.”*



Wong's sprawling anecdotes make room for myth as much as fact. It is said that he loved to spread rumors—especially if they were about him. Wong's storytelling, then, mirrors his artistic practice, which is to say that these are not just any stories, but are carefully collected and sought out, built piece by piece into the story of a life. The way he delivers the lecture ultimately reflects his method of painting: each layer is applied carefully and intentionally.

Such romantic self-mythologizing finds certain limits here; it is worth mentioning that Wong's mother, Florence Wong Fie, was seated front and center in the audience. And so, despite the artist's voluble character, the lecture includes many moments when his riff trails off, as if the artist decides abruptly not to provide his audience with the more private details of his life. Still, hinting, he lets them know that they are missing out on something. We can read self-censorship into these gaps, and wonder what he might be leaving out. Or, we can see them as the product of Wong's profound love of arcana, secret languages, and private codes, which finds equal articulation in his artistic work.

At the beginning of the lecture, Wong informs the audience that they can interrupt him anytime they have a question. Occasionally they do.

MARTIN WONG: I've never done this before... I didn't really prepare anything so I'm just going to free associate.

Basically everything I paint is in my immediate neighborhood, where I ended up. So, people assume that I'm a local New York painter, but really I'm from San Francisco.

What I wanted to do [in this painting] was get a certain sensation, or something ... anyway ... Do you ever notice sometimes when you try to kiss and then you pass out? I think it's just a lack of air.

This is Stanton and Forsyth Street, about four blocks up from my house. And since then that building has been torn down. The building behind that is the one where the firemen were kissing. Now it's a [housing] project, so this scene doesn't exist anymore.

*Can you talk about what's going on in the sky?*

Oh, it's just a poem. It says, "morning at the edge of time, it never really mattered," and the Spanish there is from a love comic or something.

*Martin, what are the signs? Sign language?*

It's in sign language for the deaf, but in Spanish. I think it said that Renaldo went to Alfredo's house and the door was locked and nobody was home. Because I live in a Hispanic neighborhood, I wanted to fake it when I [painted] the neighborhood, so I would put Spanish writing in it. I would copy random phrases from a love comic and then later somebody told me what it all meant. The smaller sign language [text] says Stanton and Forsyth Street.

That's a friend of mine, Miguel Piñero. We were kind of roommates for a while. He's the one that wrote *Short Eyes*, and that's him on a roof reading a poem. He always used to make up stories about how we met. My favorite one is that he picked me up in a stolen cab. I like to tell that one but then people can tell it's not how it really happened.

We actually met at [the New York City gallery and social center] ABC [No Rio.]

Basically, in painting you have to fake things. When you take a picture it's instantaneous, but when you paint, it can take a couple of weeks. So if you're doing a painting where you're trying to suspend motion, you have to figure some way to get somebody to hold the pose. So the kid with the skateboard was actually lying on his back on my floor. That's why he has a kind of funny expression, like, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

This is the playground at Attorney and Rivington. It's just layers and layers of chainlink fence. I superimposed these two boxers going at it. I don't know how it happened, but [the paint] was half dry and I wanted to change something, so I ran to the bathtub—I usually try to scrub things off with a hose if I want to make a correction. But it had already partially set so that's why it's drooling there. It looks like sweat.

By the way, these are all acrylics. I guess I kind of fake oil paintings or something. I learned how to paint with oil and it took about two years. But once I learned how to do the layers, I starting faking it with acrylic and a blow dryer.

This is a fight scene I did called *Down For The Count*, which goes back to the guy with his gloves in the air. He was always trying to beat up Sharp, this friend of mine. He was stalking him for about two years. He even wrote in spray paint on the side of a building, "Sharp, I want you," and all this stuff. One time we were at Astor Place and this guy was all pumped up on steroids or something—so he comes running up out of the subway entrance and he goes, "OK, Sharp, I got you now! I'm gonna kill you right here." It was Saturday and all the peddlers were selling stuff on the sidewalk. I told him, "You can't get Sharp—he's too pretty." And he said "OK, well, you're gonna bleed now [too]." So [we] had a fight. Afterward,

my head was pretty black and blue. With my eyes closed I got in one lucky punch and all of this blood started coming out of his nose. He started jumping up and down and bellowing, so everybody thought I won the fight. Actually, I felt like I had fallen head first down a flight of stairs.

In New York, because of the housing problem, if you can't afford a condominium, what you do is you just break into an abandoned building and take it over. So that's what these people did, and they set it up as a partial store and the head of a homemade religion. I copied everything that was on the building, and about six months after I did the painting the city tore down the building. I think it was a religion based on peanut butter or something.

Here's Sharp again. This one's called *In The Money*, but it's not really what you think. It might be too long to explain. Sharp is a graffiti artist, and one time *Time* magazine called up at three in the morning and asked if I could get a graffiti artist to do a piece on a wall. They had a specific wall picked out and it was supposed to say, "Crack." I guess they were doing a drug abuse article and they wanted something that looked really gritty. So they said, "Just make sure nobody knows, and if you get arrested do not say who sent you." I didn't realize that I wasn't supposed to tell Sharp that it was *Time* magazine. So I called him up and his dad got him on his beeper, and [Sharp] went there at four in the morning and did this piece that said, "Crack." They sent their photographer at six in the morning, right around dawn, to take a picture of it. Then they sent another guy who looked like a diseased biker, with all these tattoos and kind of emaciated, with \$300 [in] cash to give to Sharp. Sharp was really happy. When the Art Director called and talked to me on the phone, I mentioned that I had told Sharp it was from *Time* magazine. Then the guy flipped out because I had told Sharp, and they couldn't run the photo. I guess they were trying to make the piece seem like it was



already there and not like they had commissioned it.

Here's Sharp behind the chain-link fence again. You might wonder why so many paintings are of Sharp, and I often wonder myself. I think after a while it gave him psychological problems, so he told me to stop painting him. When he hit 24 he told me it was a violation of his personality. I stopped painting him for about three months. Then he went to Europe and I started painting him again.

Here is another picture of him—this painting was the reason he told me to stop painting him. We're actually pretty close but friends of mine say, "You're always painting him either beat up or in jail." So, uh ...

One time *New York Magazine* called Exit [Art] to get the transparencies for this [painting]. They wanted to use it as an illustration. Some people assume that because I paint this subject I'm really political or something. The caption they printed was some guy saying that he thought New York should try juvenile offenders as adults.

This is Miguel Piñero again in Sing Sing [Correctional Facility]. That's the original cast from *Short Eyes*. How many of you have heard of Miguel Piñero? Around 1974 he was in Sing Sing. They were having a drama class and didn't have any money for sets, and since the class was in the rec room, Piñero decided he was going to write a play that took place in the recreational area of the prison. Therefore, he was able to use all of the audience as extras. As the project developed it became a play called *Short Eyes*. Joseph Papp [Public Theater] heard about it at the Riverside Church basement [in Manhattan]. So, the year Piñero was released, the play was being performed at Riverside Church, then Papp took it to [their] public theater, and later it ended up at Lincoln Center. Then it won the prize for best play of 1974 and got turned into a movie.

*How did the playwright die?*

He died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1988. That was a tough year in the neighborhood. There was a poet named Rene Ricard who used to have poetry readings at St. Mark's Church. He announced to everybody in the room that he was going to be dead within a year. Everybody in the room has died since then, but he's still alive. It was weird. Andy Warhol was there and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Cookie Mueller ... all these people. A lot of the people were well-known, a lot were unknown. It was amazing: within two years everybody died except him. It was like they used to tell me when I first went to New York: [that] if I was at a party and Judy Garland walked in, to leave as fast as possible.

This is a scene from *Short Eyes*: Cupcakes and Paco. I wanted to make a literary painting like the ones that were popular in Victorian times. A lot of Delacroix's paintings, like *The Death of Sardanapalus* and a couple of others, were based on poems by Lord Byron. So, I thought it would be good to do a Victorian literary painting. The first thing I did was buy a Victorian painting in the neighborhood and paint over it, so I could use the frame. I didn't notice it at the time, but the little tag there said, "carrot" or "Corot" or whatever. I thought it meant, "Carrot Frame Factory." You know how calendars have trees by the pond and some cows and everything? So I painted over it and left the tag, and later someone else told me maybe I shouldn't have done that.

In this scene Paco is proposing some kind of mad desire for Cupcakes. He says, "I want to be with you," and this guy is saying, "Keep quiet or pipe down," he says, "I'm not a faggot." I guess it's an unrequited proposal. I decided I was going to paint roses, to make it more romantic. Since I didn't have a rose I just copied it off of somebody's arm.

The kids in my neighborhood are really into clothes; they've gone beyond hundred dollar sneakers. They have like, \$125 socks now. This guy told me that he never goes out of the house without \$4000 on his back. Before, they used to mug each other for sheepskin jackets or eight ball jackets; now they mug each other for Versace.

I actually cheated on this one. When you're painting you have to fake things. There have been a lot of things in the news lately about a riot at Rikers [Island] recently, of the corrections officers. They were trying to strike for better wages, and they ended up attacking an EMS worker as the ambulance was trying to go through the [picket] line. These corrections officers stabbed up an ambulance driver; now the story is that he stabbed himself. So, not having any friends in Rikers that are corrections officers, I cheated a little. These were done from snapshots of firemen having lunch; I just changed the patches on their clothes.

Every so often I go back and forth between formalism and just representationalism, so I guess this is my attempt at doing a modern grid painting.

This is a true event: Sergeant Richard DeClara. Did it make the news out here? It was Saint Patrick's Day. This transit cop took off all of his clothes—I guess he was really drunk or something—and started wandering around Grand Central Station. He wasn't really streaking because he didn't run. They got it on video, and there was this big stink about it. He not only got fired, but seven other cops that were on duty got fired. They got a good lawyer, and a year and a half later they got their jobs back with back pay. It turns out DeClara was only liable for a \$50 fine for being without his uniform. When I showed the painting at Exit [Art] the gallery kept taking it down. They were nervous about the reaction from the police department. I kept putting it back up. So finally they

thought. "Well, what the hell, we might as well show it." Ever since then I started getting all this promotional literature about the Gay Police Officers Action Committee. I get invited to their Christmas parties now.

Do you ever have the feeling in the morning sometimes when you look in the mirror and see double?

This is another thing I messed up. After I did this piece somebody told me it was an American Empire mirror that I trashed. Maybe in the future it will be as valuable as the mirror would have been.

This was kind of an early sociological research piece. I found out they were going to condemn the building I was living in. I was living in a hotel, so decided I was going to go out and look for an apartment. I came to this corner and there were all these teenagers there, and I asked, "Do you know if any apartments in the area are for rent?" They said "Yeah, the top floor of this building has been for rent for a year but the landlord won't rent it to anyone in the neighborhood." I went and talked to the landlord, and he asked me what I did. So, I moved in. Then I found out the kids were drug dealers. At night you could hear them chanting different names. Like, now they chant "Rainbow, Rainbow, Rainbow" all night. Back then they used to chant "Black Sunday" or "Red Tape." I started to write down all the names of the things they were chanting in the neighborhood. Then I found out they were brands of heroin.

Everybody thinks all I paint are Puerto Ricans, but secretly I paint Chinatown. For about the last ten years I've been accumulating a secret stash. This is *Harry Chong's Laundry* on Charles Street. He didn't want to pose. While he was telling me he didn't want to pose, I memorized his face. If you notice, each tag is in numerical order. The traditional Chinese laundry is like the post office. They don't really do laundry on the premises, they just gather all



your dirty laundry and send it out. When it comes back they iron them, re-starch them, and sort them as far as who gets what. Somebody in Internal Security once told me it's one way they use to track down runaway husbands. If you ever send your clothes to a Chinese laundry, they write the mark on all of your clothes. I used to be H47. If you move to another town, it's like once you're H47 you're always H47 in the Chinese laundry. So they can actually use that to track missing people.

When I paint New York's Chinatown I do it from life. When I do San Francisco's Chinatown I do it from memory. This painting is hypothetically about 1939, around the time my parents were eighteen [years old]. It's unfinished. I work on the Chinatown paintings in the summer and the jail ones in the winter.

This one's kind of schmaltzy. It was in *Time* magazine, and [the actor] Matt Dillon bought it. I always had this fantasy that I wanted to get in a wrestling match with him. So, after he bought the painting I ran into him at a club. He told me he owned a painting of mine and we started hanging out. Then he told me to come over and see his collection—which I took to mean that he had an art collection. It turns out that he had about 150 hats. He had this huge loft overlooking City Hall with nothing on the walls. He had one painting, a cat poster, a hundred hats, and a whole stack of videotapes. So, I had this idea. I looked at the picture and said, "I forgot to put the fire escapes on there, so I have to take it home and finish it." I grabbed it off the wall and all of a sudden he shouted, "No! That's my painting!" and made a grab for it. So anyway ... next time you want to wrestle with a ... never mind.

To me, it's easier to paint a store if it's closed.

One thing I discovered: You know how you can tell if people are really from New York? If they're really from New York they've never been in the Statue of Liberty.

I got the idea for this painting from watching firemen on an aerial ladder. There are two kinds of firemen: they're either nozzle-men or axe-men. If they're big guys, they are the ones with the axes or the chainsaws. They let the fire out by cutting a hole in the roof, or smashing in the front door or something. So, uh, never mind.

I can't focus this because the slide is out of focus. This is the first painting I sold at a commercial gallery. That's the one that's in the Metropolitan now (*Attorney Street: Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero, 1982–84*). I figure since they bought the painting they should give me some slides of it. But I'm too cheap to pay them three dollars, so all I have is an out-of-focus photo of it.

*What does it say?*

It is an original poem by Miguel Piñero written for the painting. It has never been published anywhere else. It's an autobiographical poem. I could try to recite it by memory but it's kind of long.

The company that makes Thorazine bought all ten storefront paintings. I tried to visit one in Philadelphia, but it turned out the building is as big as the Pentagon and nobody knew where my painting was. It looks good on a resume if you sell a painting to Chase Manhattan or, you know, some big corporation. But it's like throwing it down a deep hole; no one ever sees it again.

That's my original hotel room at the Meyer's Hotel. When I first came to New York I actually came just for a visit. I went to the top of the Empire State Building, then I walked all the way down to Battery Park and went to the Statue of Liberty, and then, walking back along the waterfront through the fish market, I saw the Waterfront Hotel. I think it was the hotel that was in *On The Waterfront*, and I asked somebody if there were any rooms there. The manager told me no, but [that] there were four rooms where

the ceiling had collapsed. He said that if I shoveled out one room he would give me a month's free rent. So I ended up shoveling out all four rooms and they gave me the job as the night watchman. For three years I was paid to stay up all night and paint. I had one room to sleep in and one room to paint in. To me, that was like heaven. I would still be there except that it got converted into luxury apartments, like everything else.

These are just photographs I took in my apartment before I left. Besides the paintings lying around that I'm working on, I also have—well, some people say it is—the world's largest collection of New York graffiti. As far as the amount of paintings, it's not. I have about 150 graffiti paintings and 80 piece books. [A collector] in Belgium has maybe five or six hundred graffiti paintings but he doesn't have any piece books at all.

The paintings on canvas are paintings by graffiti artists, but they're not actually graffiti. The piece books, the jackets, and the subway cars are the only things that are really original to the time. Nobody I know, except one collector in Osaka, was able to actually collect actual subway cars. These two transit detectives have a really huge collection: they have 3000 tags with the kids' real names and addresses in their police files. They also have an undisclosed amount of piece books, which may be more than mine. But no one has actually seen that collection.

*What are piece books?*

Piece books are kind of like sketch books. [Graffiti artists] used them to do rough drafts of cars, like outlines. People think they just go out there and do their things, but they used to do rough drafts, like artists make preliminary sketches for paintings. They did preliminary sketches in these black books. And then it became kind of like Junior High School autograph books. They used to pass them around amongst themselves. Some of them have become

like graffiti museums in their own right. I have a piece book that was done between 1973 and 1976; it has stuff by about almost 100 different artists. Plus, the pages were reserved. So there's about 85 names in the book that are only known now through being recorded in its pages. Some of the later piece books became almost like illuminated manuscripts. The books that are the most valuable aren't always the most beautiful, though, and that's the way I guess it is in regular art. There's a rumor that one of the most famous artists—a black guy named Stay High 149—that his book is floating around. People have called me up telling me that they've seen it or that they wanted to sell it to me, or that somebody else bought it. I've never seen it, but if it's true it's probably the most valuable piece book in the world.

The Metropolitan and the Museum of Modern Art secretly have collections of graffiti but they're afraid to show them. They're funded by the city, and they're afraid of having their funding cut because the city is rabidly anti-graffiti.

There's kind of a long story to this painting, too. I was invited to make a mural for this community center, so I did a brick dick in the back of the stairwell because I figured nobody would ever see it. Of course, it came out in the *Village Voice*, and it turns out my mom like, subscribes to the *Voice*.

This is a painting I did in the Kenkeleba House to commemorate the end of the world. It's called *Tree of Life*. I painted it in three days, right on the spot. It is from my experience making set designs for the Angels of Light. If any of you have ever read the Bible, and then read the Atlas, you'll discover that Armageddon is still there—it's a desert in Israel. And as all the armies of the world seem to be gathering right now, um, well ... Just remember there is always a day after, so there will probably be a day after the end of the world, too. Except we won't be there.



Rui Tang

## THE DYNAMIC: MARTIN WONG AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY



*Harry Chong Laundry* (1984), acrylic on canvas.  
Collection of Howard Rubenstein  
Courtesy of the Estate of Martin Wong and E.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Martin Wong's 1993 painted self-portrait presents the artist as a perplexing, characteristically odd, figure. Sporting a Western shirt and a ten-gallon hat emblazoned with the face of the suffering Christ, at first glance he appears as a conventional cowboy type, more or less. But this ascription proves premature: the face beneath the hat's brim seems to combine Wong's Chinese features with a Latino look, while his bronze skin tone is somewhat darker than contemporaneous photographs of the artist reveal. Meanwhile dragon embroidery—a traditional Chinese motif—crawls across his shirt collar and yoke, while malevolent *Yaoguai*, demons from Chinese myth, chatter in the background. This "self-portrait," then, cuts across different cultural iconographies, and shows us the artist suspended—not altogether comfortably or happily, if his expression is any indication—in some uneasy state in-between them all. Asian, American, Latino, and cowboy: Wong's painting marks out his multiple belonging, through family ties or elective affinity, as a complicated thing indeed.

In fact, Wong's dynamic engagement with the Asian American art scene over the course of his career was informed by the artist's sense of his own identity across distinct cultures. That engagement was substantial: Wong collaborated with the Asian American Arts Center in New York City, and his works, in particular a series of paintings about Chinatown, often reflected an emotional

1. Quoted from an email interview (December 3, 2014) with Robert Lee, director of the Asian American Arts Centre.

2. Quoted from an email interview (January 3, 2015) with Mark Johnson, curator of the Martin Wong Gallery of San Francisco State University.

3. Huping Ling and Allan Austin, eds. *Asian American History and Culture: An Encyclopedia*. (Armonk, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 85.

4. "Introduction to the Asian American Movement 1968," *Asian American Movement 1968*, accessed on December 1st, 2014, <http://aam1968.blogspot.com/2008/01/introduction-to-asian-american-movement.html>

return to childhood memories of growing up in San Francisco. Characterized by a sense of distance, the Chinatown paintings reveal Wong's complex relationship to the Asian American community, both personally and artistically. Yet, as Robert Lee, the director of the Asian American Arts Centre (AAAC), suggests, "Wong's work is unrelated to any other Asian American artist."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Mark Johnson, who curated *Martin Wong's Utopia* at the Chinese Historical Society in 2004, and who knew Wong, states that Wong is no "model minority" stereotype, but [is] instead a highly original person and artist."<sup>2</sup> This balance, between originality and belonging, makes Wong a uniquely fascinating figure among other Asian American artists of his time.

The dynamic relationship between Wong and Asian American communities can be traced back to the early 1960s. Influenced by Third World anti-colonial movements and the struggle for civil rights among African Americans, Asian Americans in the 1960s began to address the racial oppression they were experiencing. From the late 1960s until the early 1970s, student activists from diverse Asian American groups (mainly Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese) initiated what would later be called the Asian American Movement. This "pan-Asian"<sup>3</sup> activist movement took place throughout California, centering in the San Francisco Bay Area (though parallel movements were happening in New York City) and influencing the art scene there in the 1960s. Many activist workshops and collectives based in the Asian community were generated during this time. In California, activists began to establish a number of centers, such as the Asian Community Center, the International Hotel Tenants Association, and the Kearny Street Workshop.<sup>4</sup> Student activists in San Francisco demanded Asian American studies programs in colleges.

In 1968, a 167-day strike began at San Francisco State University, which was the longest student strike in US history.

The Asian American movement in New York City was also massive in the early 1970s, with young Chinese activists forming collectives in Manhattan's Chinatown. Founded in 1970 in the basement of 54 Elizabeth Street by young artists and urban planners, the Basement Workshop was perhaps the most prominent of these activist groups. Engaging with street fairs, mass demonstrations, and cultural publications such as *Yellow Pearl*, the artists of the Basement Workshop responded to community issues by creating publicity materials, posters, and graphics. Some of the artists, such as the Japanese American Tomi Arai, also contributed to murals in Chinatown, elaborating on the lives and labor struggles of immigrants.<sup>5</sup> Wong might well have been aware of these struggles. But however physically proximate the artist may have been, Lee (who not only witnessed but also participated in the Asian American Movement) suggests that in the 1960s and 70s, he "was not close to the Asian American movement in New York City, nor San Francisco,"<sup>6</sup> and that he was also "not close to Chinatown San Francisco life, nor its traditional leadership there."<sup>7</sup> Even though he was present at the epicenter of the Asian American Movement, there is no historical evidence suggesting that Wong was engaged with the movement at that time.

In 1968 Wong enrolled at Humboldt State University in Eureka, California, to study ceramics. He lived there, on and off, for the next fifteen years of his life. As the Asian American Movement developed, and as student protests in San Francisco and Berkeley reached a peak, Wong seemed instead to immerse himself in an inner world of artistic exploration. That exploration sometimes drew him to Asia in a highly mediated or historical form: according to Mark

5. "Art for the Community: A Short History of Basement Workshop in New York," *University of Washington*, accessed on December 1st, 2014, <http://faculty.washington.edu/kendo/basement.html>. And "The Basement Workshop Collective," *Open City: Blogging Urban Change*, accessed on November 18th, 2014, <http://openthecity.org/?p=3687>.

6. Lee, op. cit.

7. Lee, op. cit.



8. Dan Cameron, "It Takes a Village," in Cameron, ed. *East Village USA*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004, p. 42.

Johnson, during Wong's study at Humboldt he travelled from Eureka to San Francisco in the 1970s to participate in the performance group, the Angels of Light, while conducting his research on stage and set designs at the Asian Art Museum. This research would feed into their anarchic, pan-cultural stage shows, where Indian, pre-Colombian, and Chinese influences were combined with cross-dressing and French Revolutionary fashions. Nevertheless, Wong's practices in Eureka can be understood as primarily personal and experimental in nature, if we look at the work he was making at the time. Humboldt professor Emeritus Reese Bullen introduced Wong to calligraphy and poetry, which later inspired his calligraphic writings on long scrolls in a highly inventive style. Breaking with traditional ceramic techniques, he created a series of unconventional and odd ceramics, and his use of sign language can also be traced back to some of these ceramic pieces during the Eureka years, such as his *Mood Indicator* (c. 1968–71). While studying ceramics, Wong never stopped drawing and painting. During this time he developed his portraiture, "Human Instamatic" style, and built close relationships with the local community.

Wong moved from Eureka to New York City in 1978 to begin an artistic career in the rich context of the East Village art scene. It was here that some qualified contact with Asian American institutions first occurred. At the time the Lower East Side was home to a diverse community of working-class laborers—Eastern Europeans, Hispanics, and African Americans. The neighborhood was "in the early stages of transition from slum to middle-class playground,"<sup>8</sup> but still fostered a flourishing countercultural movement in the arts, poetry, and music. Inspired by the vernacular culture and gritty urban architecture around him, Wong devoted himself to a prolific painting practice. Departing from the somewhat solitary and highly personal routines of his time in Eureka, Wong connected to

various communities: he engaged with graffiti artists by collecting their work, and evolved alongside the Nuyorican art movement, collaborating in particular with his sometime partner, Nuyorican poet and playwright Miguel Piñero. During this time, Wong arrived at an "unending process of analyzing and interpreting his [own] environment, searching for points of access and identification that [were] resonant with his own experience."<sup>9</sup>

Wong's engagement with the Asian American art scene in New York began in 1985, when he actively participated at the Asian American Art Centre (AAAC), a successor of the movement begun by the Basement Workshop in the 1960s. Established under the influence of the Asian American Movement, the AAAC during the 1980s was not only a hub for community activism, but also furthered Asian American art by displaying exhibitions of Asian American artists. The institution also maintained an archive of the history of the Asian Art Movement, as well as of all of the participating artists (this remains the most comprehensive archive of Asian American history and art). As one of the artists in the AAAC archive, Martin Wong participated in 1987 in the first edition of the serial exhibition *In The Mind's I Part 1*, three Open Studio exhibitions in 1985 and 1988, three exhibitions about Tiananmen Square in 1989, 1990, and 1994, and *Uptown/Downtown* in 1989. One of the Open Studios that Wong participated in was known as *Ten Chinatowns* (1987). Each representing "one aspect of Chinatown," the ten participating artists opened their studios, located in Chinatown, to the public. The expectation was to "introduce the public to the artistic (as well as culinary) amenities available in the Chinese America[n] community."<sup>10</sup>

*The Mind's I Part 1* was the first in a series of four exhibitions from 1986 to 1987, each titled *The Mind's I* and organized

9. Dan Cameron in Amy Scholder (ed.) *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*. (New York: New Museum Books and Rizzoli, 1998), p. 5.

10. Exhibition press release for "Ten Chinatown: Asian Arts Institute's First Annual Open Studio Exhibition," *Artasiaamerica*, accessed on December 2th, 2014, <http://artasiaamerica.org/documents/2054>

11. Op. cit.

12. "Tiananmen Square Exhibitions," *Tiananmen Square Exhibitions* website, accessed on December 6th, 2014, [http://www.artspirial.org/past\\_exhibitions/june4/june4.php#](http://www.artspirial.org/past_exhibitions/june4/june4.php#), and AAAC "Martin Wong digital archive," [artspirial.org](http://www.artspirial.org/archive_listing.html), accessed on December 16th, 2014, [http://www.artspirial.org/archive\\_listing.html](http://www.artspirial.org/archive_listing.html)

by then AAAC curator Robert Lee under the general theme of "changing self-conception." Martin Wong was invited to participate along with African American artist Benny Andrews, Taiwanese artist Chiu Ya-tsai, and Russian artist Raphael Soyer. Five of Wong's works were shown: *In Pursuit of Antiquity* (1986), *Portrait of the Artist's Parents Over Chinatown* (1982), *Prosperity Forever* (1987–87), *Moo Lee Laundry* (1986) and *Harry Chong Laundry* (1984). Responding to the changing population of the Lower East Side in the 1980s, which was impacted by the influx of immigrants as well as gentrification, this exhibition, distinctively for the institution, did not focus exclusively on Asian American issues, but instead forged connections between diverse ethnic communities in the United States. Lee decided to present a small range of works from each artist produced during the mid to late 80s, mainly self-portraits and depictions of places. The result was four different "self-images," together discussing the positioning of individuality—individual styles and identities—within the context of various ethnic and cultural communities. At the same time, the exhibition intended to reveal the multi-cultural and multi-racial conditions in the United States during the 80s. Describe as a "melting pot" by the associate curator, Lowery S. Sims, the exhibition attempted to show "a delicate balance between assimilation and pluralism" through the four artists' practices.<sup>11</sup>

Martin Wong also participated in three editions of the exhibition *Tiananmen Square*—at the Hong Kong Art Centre in 1990, at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Ohio, in 1992, and at the Buckham Gallery in Flint, Michigan in 1994.<sup>12</sup> These exhibitions were direct responses to the tragic political crisis that occurred in China on June 4, 1989, as were the student protests in New York City's Chinatown that year. The exhibition in Hong Kong included

a painting by Wong similar to his 1989 painting, *Liberty Mourning The Death of Her Sister*, in which the Statue of Liberty expresses pathos and melancholy. In the context of the Tiananmen Square incident, this painting conveys a simple request for freedom.

Wong's modest history with the AAAC indicates commitment to the Asian American community, but also circumspection, whether on Wong's part, or Lee's, about being defined as an Asian American artist. Solidarity with the protestors at Tiananmen was hardly limited to artists of Asian descent, of course, and as we see from his inclusion in *The Mind's I*, the eclectic nature of Wong's practice and the complexity and multi-layered content in his works meant that he was never labeled exclusively or simply as a Chinese American painter. As writer Barry Shwabsky suggests, however, in his essay, "A City of Bricks and Ciphers," Wong was a "painter of memory and desire."<sup>13</sup>

As such, around the time of the exhibitions above, Wong began a series of paintings working through images of Chinatown—both from life, in New York City, and perhaps more intriguingly, from his childhood memories of San Francisco. The latter works shift his focus from a description of his surroundings to the exposure of his psychic world; these paintings may finally present some artistic reflection on the dynamic between Wong and the Asian American community. Many of these paintings date from the 1990s, but in the lecture transcript included in this volume Wong mentions working on these paintings "secretly" over the course of the 1980s. This "secrecy" is reflected in the Chinatown series. As curator Lydia Yee, author of the essay "Martin Wong's Picture-Perfect Chinatown,"<sup>14</sup> observes, Wong's imagining of Chinatown series seems grounded in stereotype: Chinatown for Wong is "an exotic Oriental extravaganza."<sup>15</sup> Yee also suggests that Wong's cultural understanding is related

13. Barry Schwabsky, "A City of Bricks and Ciphers," *Art in America*, September, 1998, p. 100.

14. Lydia Yee, "Martin Wong's Picture-Perfect Chinatown," in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), p. 52–62.



15. Yee, *op. cit.*, p. 55.16. Yee, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

to the “popular representations of Chinatown,”<sup>16</sup> representations towards which Wong was ambivalent. Maybe this mystified and stereotypical “Oriental” imagery served as a guise for Wong’s complex self-realization, both ethnically and culturally.

*Harry Chong Laundry*, from 1984, is an early painting in the Chinatown series (perhaps one of those he professed to have worked on secretly). As the title suggests, the painting depicts the storefront of a Chinese laundry; a sign on the front window declares as much, reading “Harry Chong 30 Laundry.” The exterior of this building is a dark red, contrasting with the mint green tone of the interior. The inside of the laundromat is depicted in detail: in the background, floor-to-ceiling shelves are crowded with laundry packages covered in brown paper. On the left, there is an alcove with hanging clothes. Wong has painted everything so meticulously that the numbers on each package are visible, as are the tiny captions of a poster on the wall. Despite all this detailed description, the three-dimensional space of the laundry shop is unnaturally two-dimensional, lacking a sense of space and depth. The counter seems to merge into the shelving, as if the two structures are a single object. Stuck in this flattened space is an old man with Asian features. Dressed in black, he gazes out at us through the shop windows; in contrast to the detailed items surrounding him, he is blurry and obscure. His expression is trance-like and melancholy.

We, the viewers, see the laundry from the painter’s vantage. He is outside the window, keeping a certain distance in order to capture its panoramic scene. Paradoxically, a panoramic view hardly makes sense with such a careful representation of details. The painting thus becomes an optical puzzle in terms of its sense of space, and the distance experienced both by Wong (and by viewers of the painting). The sense of obscurity is amplified through his inclusion, further evoking a sense of psychological distance.

The same style and the odd sense of distance appears in another of Wong’s Chinese laundry paintings, *A Portrait of the Artist’s Parents* (1984). In this painting, the laundry seems to have no visible owner, but simply the sign “347 Chinese Laundry” in the window façade. Similar to *Harry Chong Laundry*, the painting presents a space both highly detailed and compressed, seen from a confusing distance (too close, yet removed). But rather than the lonely Harry Chong, here we find a beaming pair of elderly Asians. Their gaze is joyful and welcoming, even as Wong receives it from a determinate distance away.

The distorted perspective in these two paintings gives us a sense of the world seen through Wong’s eyes. The sense of an uncertain, or indecipherable, distance echoes his encounters with the Chinese community, which he did not actively engage with until the late 1980s. Even then, despite his collaboration with the AAAC, he never explicitly or actively addressed Asian American issues in that context, as other Asian American artists did. In this sense, it could be said that he was part of the Asian American community, but never truly belonged to it.

In addition to Wong’s Chinatown series, there are other works that refer to Chinese culture and Chinatown life, which Mark Johnson has termed “hermetic and personal.”<sup>17</sup> Some of Wong’s brick paintings, such as *Heaven* (1988) or *Chinese Altar Screen* (1989), are circular, echoing the form of traditional Chinese jade discs.<sup>18</sup> Wong’s personal collections (which he began at the early age of twelve) include ceramic objects based on racist caricatures of Chinese people during the Gold Rush. Johnson also notes that Wong’s “political sensitivity about California’s Chinese American history was clearly on his mind even after he had relocated to [New York City]”<sup>19</sup>—which suggests a deep and ongoing curiosity about the history of Chinese

17. Johnson, *op. cit.*

18. Johnson: “Martin was interested in Chinese culture, but never visited China (although he visited Afghanistan, Bali and other dispersed locations in Asia). In addition to the Chinatown series, many of his works reference Chinese culture, but often in hermetic and personal ways—like the poem scrolls and the multiple works that reference jade discs.”

19. Johnson, *op. cit.*20. Lee, *op. cit.*

people in America, despite his cautious remove from contemporary struggles. And, too, that moving away from San Francisco may have, perhaps ironically, allowed Wong the freedom to build a somewhat deeper engagement with Asian American histories there, on his own terms.

Robert Lee argues that Wong enjoyed his experiences of San Francisco. He was happy seeing the Lion Dance there, and would wander around Chinatown and collect all kinds of small figurines from antique shops, which would later inform his Chinatown paintings. However, Wong's engagement to the Asian American community seems to rely largely, and increasingly, on his family life rather than the community as a whole. As Lee states, "He [Wong] got closer to his mom after he got sick ... he was a San Francisco kid; [his works are] not at all a reflection of traditional Chinese culture or Chinese family practices."<sup>20</sup>

Returning to San Francisco in 1994, Wong spent the rest of his life with his parents. Some of his paintings during this transitional time reflect his childhood in the city. One of these paintings, *Chinese New Year* (1992–94), shows a diminutive figure—Wong, himself, as a child—standing in the bottom center of the parade. He faces the densely rendered performance troupe: filigreed Peking opera singers dancing to the right, and an enormous dragon's head looming above. Wong faces the parade from outside this massive and chaotic scene. The difference, in this painting, is that the figure of Wong is present and, for the first time, closely engaged with his surroundings. This shifting sense of distance suggests, perhaps, a changing relationship: in his final years, Wong returned to the "gaze" of his childhood, and, in doing so, to the life of his Chinese community.

Amelia Brod in conversation with two of the Angels of Light

## WHAT USI IN SAN FRANCISCO

*I met with Beaver Bauer and Tahara, otherwise known as Debra Bauer and James Windsor, on November 17, 2014, in the Mission District of San Francisco, California. Both were key members of the San Francisco-based performance group the Angels of Light, who in the 1970s created a series of non-linear performances featuring elaborate costumes, set designs, psychedelia, cross-dressing, and radical sexual content.*

*The Angels of Light evolved out of the Cockettes, a performance group that achieved substantial fame and notoriety, as well as a certain level of commercial success, in the 1960s. In contrast to the Cockettes, the Angels were a free theater troupe, performing in public or donated spaces such as schools, universities, parks, and movie theaters. They would "dumpster dive" and shop at thrift stores to make their costumes and sets. The group lived in communal houses near Dolores Park and Divisadero Street. The group did not allow its members to hold jobs, not wanting to contribute to a world based on monetary exchange. In this way, they fit into a period of broad collective redefinition of social and political ideals in the Bay Area.*



*We met to discuss this moment in history together, and touched on the contributions of Martin Wong, who was an intermittent member of the group during the 1970s. This proved no easy task, as the group operated on a system of collective authorship. The interview does illustrate, however, what the Angels offered in terms of release, alternative lifestyle, and experimentation, and provides vital historical context for Wong's work at the time. Focusing on the group's wild theatrical practice and communal ethos, the interview portrays a period of Wong's life, little documented until now, that was rich in creative, social, and political energy.*

AMELIA BROD: How did the Angels of Light form?

TAHARA: Our parents disowned us all because we were all freaks. At that time in America the Vietnam War was happening and people like us were all in mental hospitals.

BEAVER BAUER: There were many people from foster homes; none of us got along with our parents. I hitchhiked here from New York.

T: The Angels of Light didn't really "begin." We evolved from another theater group [I was involved in] called the Cockettes. The Cockettes were performing at the Palace Theater and they became something of an underground sensation. But I eventually lost interest in the group. I felt they were going nowhere, that they weren't going to do anything creative, just getting more polished at what they were already doing. So I decided to drop out of the Cockettes when they were at their peak. Ebony, a transsexual in the group, dropped out with me and we were talking about creating a free theater group. Back in those days all these movie theaters were going out of business, because everyone was moving to videotape. There were tons of empty theaters in the city that were just glad to get something in there. The first show as the Angels of Light was a Moroccan opera in early 1971. The Cockettes all came dressed in black and spat at us on the stage. Every time anyone said anything they would hiss like snakes.

AB: Can you speak about the group's ideals?

T: At that time the hippy influence was there. We wanted to start a new way of living that was not war-oriented or capitalist-oriented.

BB: Or based on the exchange of money.

T: There were over 300 communes in the Bay Area, part of an underground network. The network would collect food stamps from multiple communes and portion out the food to the amount of people in need (rather than who put in the most money) and the food would be delivered to us.

BB: We had a fantasy of a world that could exist that wasn't like the other world.

T: There was a newsletter called *Kaliflower*, created at the Kaliflower House, another commune, lead by Irving Rosenthal. It talked about this new world which we were all going to be living in, where everybody was working together and looking each other in the eye. It was the idea that you weren't in the world just for yourself, to be selfish and make yourself a star. It was about helping the world. We did that through free theater, communal living, vegetarianism, and selfless service, which meant giving to others without thinking about what's in it for you.

AB: How did these ideas affect the performances?

BB: We didn't credit individual authors; everything was produced collectively. We created flyers and posters, but they didn't say set design by so-and-so or choreography by so-and-so. It just said the name of the group. If you joined, we wouldn't let you have a job—you had to quit. You were encouraged and expected to participate communally. We were doing these crazy shows that we lived and breathed. Every moment was about getting ready to do a show, or finishing a show, or making costumes for the show, or dumpster diving for the show. We

were obsessed with it and we had a really good time. I could be who I wanted to be and I could be another person the next day. Dress it up or wear it out.

AB: When did Martin Wong become involved?

T: All the hip gay people used to go to The Stud, a bar in the South of Market district. We were all young, meeting each other and dancing. It's possible that a bunch of Angels met Martin there. It's also possible that we met him in the street.

BB: He lived with us at Church Street. It was a house on the corner of Dorland and Church Streets, a Victorian with a yard. Someone I knew moved out, and somehow I got on the lease and moved everyone in.

AB: Could you speak about his contribution to the Angels of Light? Did he ever perform?

T: He was never on stage; he wasn't really a performer. He was more into set, flyer, and poster design.

BB: As a person he was more modest than others in the group. If he was in a room he wouldn't be the most flaming person, but he had a flame inside. He was very tall, and dressed interestingly, but was not as crazy as everyone else. He wasn't the center of attention.

T: I think he started by creating sets for the group. We used to get cardboard from the streets, like refrigerator boxes, and tape them all together. He would cut out and paint sets. The first set he created that I really remember was for the performance *Whatusi in San*



*Francisco* in 1974. It was an African show about a Spanish movie star whose husband had a plane crash in Africa. The title is a pun meaning the Whatusi tribe, but also “What to see in San Francisco.” We were always coming up with titles like *Turban Renewal* or *Peking on Acid*. Martin went everywhere we went. We were always all together, except when Martin went to visit his parents.

AB: Was there a style or trademark to his set and costume design?

B: His sets were very painterly, with a great Asian influence—a lot of Chinese letters. Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, and pre-Columbian Art influenced Martin. His style was loose and painterly, but also hard and graphic. You would look at his sets, but you would have to step back and all of a sudden the form was apparent. He was very sophisticated.

T: He used to keep art books open the whole time he was painting, because he would get ideas from pictures. If he was really thinking about it he would do a drawing first and square everything out. The sets were extremely colorful. But when he went to New York his colors got dull by comparison: browns and dark reds.

BB: He didn't really make costumes, although he did create some masks. He was attracted to the sculptural aspects of things.

AB: How was the division of labor decided on in the group? Did he design all the stage sets for the performances?

T: No, if anyone wanted to do a set they could. We used to arrange all the shows around what somebody was studying or interested in. If someone was studying flamenco dancing we had to have a fla-

menco number in the show, so they could show off their dancing. If someone was into Aztec art we had to have an Aztec scene. The shows would start in San Francisco and end in Paris.

BB: We went to the Arctic in a submarine, but it was the French Revolution.

T: It's amazing that we got any of those shows done. I don't know how the audience ever knew what was going on.

AB: Were the Angels aware of Wong's other artistic practices at the time?

T: Martin had a whole separate life that wasn't the Angels, which was the art school crowd. I don't think we met any of them. He would spend most of his time with us and occasionally he would go into that other world and become reclusive.

B: I think he was compartmentalized, and the compartments didn't fit very well together. We were obsessed with our part. If someone was not present, we would just continue doing what we were doing.

AB: What were the different compartments as you saw them?

BB: Martin really had a great grounding in art history. He was a collector and he painted. He did things we weren't necessarily a part of. We weren't a part of him and he wasn't always a part of us. We were group oriented, but he was his own entity within the group. I think he loved the Angels because through us he could work out a fantasy of the wild part of him—which he wanted, without fully committing himself to it.

BB: And I think the group was probably also a vehicle for him to come out, or to be more explorative with his sexuality.

T: He didn't accept himself as a gay person. He felt being gay with his family background was causing problems.

BB: We represented a part of him that he was drawn toward—but he couldn't go all the way with us. He wasn't as liberated as others.

T: [Maybe] because of his Chinese and academic background. He always fell in love with white guys and part of the problem was they weren't sure if they were ready for inter-racial relationships.

BB: We were firm with the Angels. When you were working with us, you weren't supposed to be doing paid gigs. And his mother wanted him to make money with his art.

Stuart Krimko

## SPRING BEGINS TODAY!

While they often depict places and people he knew well, Martin Wong's paintings are more than documents of the life he lived. Through the use of symbolic language, he transformed what was close at hand into the expression of a poetic, idiosyncratic worldview. Filtered through this sensibility a gritty urban landscape, for instance, can show itself as the product of an idealized mystic vision. I became interested in Wong's use of astrological themes to achieve these ends, and wondered what astrological methods, including the casting of horoscopes, might reveal about the continuing relevance of his project.

On the day that I decided to follow this line of inquiry, I unexpectedly received a book in the mail from a friend with whom I correspond about such issues. I considered the receipt of the book, *Prometheus the Awakener*, as an omen. The book is the work of cosmologist and astrologer Richard Tarnas, who describes how imagery and stories associated with the myth of Prometheus better fit Uranus' astrological significance than anything having to do with the Greek god Ouranos, for whom it was named. As the first 'modern' planet (that is, the first planet discovered with the aid of a telescope, and the first planet therefore to exceed the classical order of the solar





1. Richard Tarnas, *Prometheus the Awakener: An Essay on the Archetypal Meaning of the Planet Uranus*, (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 2008), p. 17.

system, which ended with Saturn), Uranus has come to be associated with what Tarnas describes as,

the principle of change ... and the unexpected breakup of structures; with excitement, sudden surprises, lightning-like flashes of insight ... and with intellectual brilliance, invention, creativity, originality, and individualism.<sup>1</sup>

Drawn to the correspondence between these themes and artistic practice, I decided to see what Uranus might tell me about Wong, who didn't shy away from the kinds of innovation and willful eccentricity that feature in Tarnas' list. I wondered how the planet functioned both in the artist's own natal chart and another horoscope cast for the exact moment of the 1988 spring equinox, the significance of which I will discuss below.

I realize my methodology might strike some readers as unorthodox, if not irrational. Even those with begrudging sympathy for astrology's symbolic vocabulary, or its ability to survive despite its archaic roots, might question my choice of Uranus as an investigative axis based upon my receipt of a book in the mail. However, I am interested in astrology as a divinatory practice that brings increased awareness to auspicious events like births or the arrival of letters from friends—not for the sake of explication, but in order to focus attention on the moment of interpretation itself. In an art-related context like this one, I am not using astrology to explain formal issues, or even historical or social ones, inasmuch as any of these are separate from the fundamental problem of what it means to be a human individual in an ultimately ungovernable circumstance that, for all its joys and passions, eventually extinguishes individuality. This position is informed by the work of the astrologer Geoffrey Cornelius, who argues for a hermeneutic approach to the practice in which

an “omen is understood to be *for* someone who perceives it as significant”:

Mars ... signifies anger and angry men as a universal fact of things, and as an astrologer I can see this correlation in the world. However, this is an objective arm's-length sort of knowing. Even if I look at the astrology for my own character and life history, I am looking down on myself from a distance, as if I can objectively view my life story from the point of view of the cosmos .... However, once we see astrology as a formation of omens, then the world it illuminates is the world of participation: my world or your world ... Mars in a particular chart still signifies an angry man—but the astrology is showing me that—not as a universal truth of nature but as a relative but effective truth for my understanding in what concerns me, here, now.<sup>2</sup>

It is with a participatory model in mind that I take Tarnas' book on Uranus as a way of approaching Wong. Even if the reasons for including constellations in his art are not influenced in any literal way by the influence of Uranus in his birth chart, or even by any specific interest in Uranus as such, my decision to approach his work on astrological terms coincides with the “lightning-like” appearance of Uranus on my desk. The leap of faith required to associate this event with Wong's work is not unlike the leap required to associate a birth with a horoscope, which, because it is a picture charged with symbolic import, is itself not unlike an artwork, a record of unseen forces that communicates a vision of the unknown from artist to viewer.

Next, I began to examine Wong's natal chart. Immediately I was confronted with the one of those bits of the void that separate a horoscope from the occasion it represents, since no precise time for his birth could be found. The planets' movements through the zodiac over the course of a 24-hour period are slight, so that their placement in the signs isn't dependent on knowing exactly when someone was born. A birth time is required, however, to draw the cusps between the twelve houses, which are tools for rooting the archetypal images of the planets in the affairs of everyday life. Their

2. Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination*, (Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 2003), p. 177–78.

boundaries are drawn using one of several calculation systems, usually beginning with the Ascendant, or rising sign, a point that marks the section of sky rising over the eastern horizon at a given moment in a particular place. Nonetheless, there are a few accepted ways to cast a natal chart without a precise birth time. One of these involves casting a chart for noon on the day and place in question (in Wong's case July 11, 1946, Portland, Oregon), which is how I have opted to handle this case.

Looking to Uranus provides a fascinating point of entry because it happens to be conjunct with<sup>3</sup> the north node of the moon; in other words, the planet and the node occupy almost the exact same spot in the zodiac. In astrological terms the lunar nodes form an axis in which the south node describes a kind of "default mode" that comes almost too naturally to the subject of the horoscope, while the north node describes the challenges that will lead the subject forward and generate spiritual or psychological growth. Because the conjunction of the north node and Uranus is found in Wong's ninth house, which symbolizes higher learning and philosophy, one could say that he was called to integrate creative innovations within a system of higher knowledge that he himself had to create. Furthermore, the conjunction takes place in the sign of Gemini, whose twin imagery is symbolic of the ability to shift polarities.

This in turn becomes an interesting way to think about queerness, an idea that Wong himself explores in the 1988 painting *Gemini*. In it, the eponymous constellation is prominent in the night sky above an urban landscape, presiding over a scene in which twinning is a predominant syntactical feature. The windows in the tenements, except for one, are all paired horizontally or vertically with their neighbors. A door on the roof of the building in the foreground is connected by a fire escape to an exterior door on the top story. Finally, at the bottom of the circular canvas, two smiling firefighters

appear to be posing for their portrait; jocular, butch, they are reminiscent of characters in a Tom of Finland drawing. Are they the twins of Gemini, reminding us that it is sameness in this scene that allows us to see difference? Our perception presents us with a field of differentiated phenomena, but it is when we perceive mirrored forms that our propensity to intuit order, symbol, and language is engaged.

The world that Wong depicts here is woven through with symbolic and visual punning. He draws back the curtain on an ordinary evening on the Lower East Side and sees correspondences and harmonies hidden at street level, so to speak, but visible when certain codes are discerned. The lone square window in the side of the building at the center of the painting emits a dim glow, like an all-knowing eye that has more in common with the stars in the constellations than with anything constructed by humans on earth, that 'reads' the brotherhood of the firefighters as one that goes beyond company affiliation. The queerness of the firefighters is not just a matter of their sexuality, but a characteristic intimately entwined with the psycho-spiritual—indeed the cosmological—ecosystem of which they are part.

In a 1984 interview, Wong described his early paintings, those made before he left San Francisco for New York, as "melty psychedelic,"<sup>3</sup> and I would argue that something of this early interest in mind expansion continues to permeate the queerness of works like *Gemini*, if not in a stylistic manner, then in a structural or syntactical one. It's even tempting to make a connection between the notion of a psycho-spiritual ecosystem and Wong's interest in street art, since graffiti is a response to its environment, an interaction between the artist and the landscape in which the work is performed. Through his activities and patronage in this area (including his founding in the late 1980s of the Museum of American Graffiti), the establish-

3. Yasmin Ramirez-Harwood, "Martin Wong: Writing in the Sky," *East Village Eye*, October, 1984.

4. K. L. Franklin, "Sky Watch: This week at 9 P.M.," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1988.

ment of street art as a field of knowledge (to return to the astrology of Uranus in the ninth house) increased the possibilities of expression and reception associated with his own work. Wong's 'museum' was not merely an art-specific institution, but an idea that took shape in the streets, where subjectivity was a much more open and slippery (Gemini again) proposition. Like his art, it was a function of a community of people and ideas, rooted in a particular place (the Lower East Side in the 1980s) and committed to producing a language that could broadcast a vision of that place across time. Perhaps his use of symbolic forms like constellations and sign language stems from a related instinct, to understand mutable structures of communication and knowledge as poetic in and of themselves.

In his archive, Wong retained a variety of documents that provided source material for his renderings of the stars. Among them were a constellation handbook and an astronomical navigation manual. But I was particularly struck by the inclusion of a clipping of the "Sky Watch" column from the March 20, 1988 edition of the *New York Times*. There is a short text that accompanies the circular star map illustrating the night sky (Gemini is among the constellations included). Its first words are, "Spring begins today! At 4:39 this morning, Eastern Standard Time, the northbound sun crossed the equator. Tonight we can look to the east for the rare bright stars of spring."<sup>4</sup> The specificity of the timing, taken as an omen, created the perfect occasion for a horoscope.

Again, singling out Uranus opens up the chart. It is about to cross into the eleventh house, which can be said to emphasize community idealism and abstract languages. Furthermore, during this part of 1988, Uranus had just changed signs, a rather momentous occasion that takes place once every seven years, and had moved into Capricorn, as if to assert that the structures we

leave behind on Earth needn't only carry on the work of tradition. In the realm of Uranus, lasting achievement is more dependent on breaking molds than sustaining them, and our personal eccentricity sometimes finds its most intense expression in the groups of people we assemble around us. Lastly, this season was notable for a conjunction between Uranus and Saturn, symbol of the limits and authority that the electricity of Uranus has a tendency to undo.

Do the combination of the two planets' symbolism and the lessons of Saturnine limitation reveal some crucial facet of Wong's life or work at this moment? I couldn't help but wonder about Miguel Piñero, who played such an instrumental role, on a practical level as well as an affective one, in connecting Wong to the contexts in which his work would flourish. He would die on June 16, not long after the column appeared. If the reputations of both artists have been, until now, dependent upon their ability to represent what has come to be known as the Lower East Side "scene" of the 1980s, they were also deeply idiosyncratic figures whose achievements must also be considered on their own terms. The communities they were so instrumental in fostering continue to demand our attention not because they were unified fronts with specific aesthetic agendas, but because they were collections of individuals, clusters of intense subjectivities who, with AIDS poised to decimate their generation, expressed themselves to the world and to each other against a backdrop of looming mortality. It's impossible to know what was going through Wong's mind when he decided to save this clipping, but for me the 1988 spring equinox chart is about coming to terms with the fact that creative communities, however radical or utopian, are dependent upon the sensibilities and passions of individual people with fallible bodies. Saturn and Uranus together, conjoined on the cusp of the eleventh house, serve as a reminder that whenever we look to Wong's work as a manifestation of the historical moment



during which he lived, we must also consider its existential ramifications, its esoteric power, its ability to expand our experience of—and desire to respond to—the metaphorical conditions that define our own lives. Despite the temporal specificity suggested by this particular equinox, and its proximity to a major marker of mortality in his life, the astrologer in me reads “Spring begins today!” as a call to experience Wong’s interest in the stars as a real-time phenomenon. Like his art itself, it is a symbol of the fleeting moment in which we are living now.

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12 x 9 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Crystal Dagger*, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled drawing (Bunny Crowd), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
12 x 9 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 2; Folder 37; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Untitled drawing (Egyptian Museum Pieces, series), n.d.  
Ink on paper, 2 pages  
10 x 8 inches

The Martin Wong Papers; Series II; Box 2; Folder 44; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Untitled drawing (Mikey Writing 'Short Eyes' [Miguel Piñero]), n.d.

Ink on paper  
8 ½ x 11 ½ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 2; Folder 85; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Drawings (Studies for My Self-Portrait), n.d.  
Graphite on paper, 3 pages  
8 ½ x 11 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 2; Folder 65; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

*In the Beginning*, n.d.  
Ink on vellum  
46 ⅞ x 12 ⅜ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Martin Wong Poems), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
12 x 108 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*Footprints, Poems, and Leaves*, (Self published book), 1968  
8 x 6 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*Psycic Bandits*, n.d.  
Mimeograph  
11 x 8 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Psycic Bandits*, 1972  
Lithograph on cardstock  
42 ½ x 17 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Sewer Gas*, n.d.  
Ink on vellum  
30 x 7 ¾ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Sketchbook, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
6 x 8 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 1; Folder 16; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Sketchbook, 1991  
Ink on paper  
8 ¼ x 5 ¾ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 1; Folder 15; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Sketchbook, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
17 x 9 ½ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Oversize Series II; Box 8; Folder 102; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Sketchbook, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
9 ½ x 17 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Oversize Series II; Box 8; Folder 99; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Sketchbook, (Painting Is Forbidden) n.d.  
Ink on paper  
9 ½ x 15 ¾ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 1; Folder 9; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Sketch (Wong's Apartment, Viewed Through Window), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ½ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 2; Folder 34; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Untitled (Somemore Martin Wong Poems), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
32 x 12 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

Special Projects (Project Proposal for Chinatown Epic Painting), n.d.  
Gold ink on black paper  
11 x 9 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IV; Box 7A; Folder 58A; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

*Still the Snail Continues*, n.d.  
Ink on vellum  
36 ¼ x 12 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (8), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ½ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (21), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ½ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (36), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
8 ½ x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Coca-Cola), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ¾ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Crystal Dagger/Voices), n.d.  
Graphite on paper  
11 x 8 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Dried Mushrooms), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
14 x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Jellyfruit), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
14 x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Man with Big Shoes), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
12 x 9 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Thumb), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
12 x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Voices*, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Voices*, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ½ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Voices*, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
18 x 12 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Warren the Smith Twins*, n.d.  
Ink on paper  
9 x 12 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Writing (In Search of Holguin), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
62 ¾ x 11 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IV; Box 7; Folder 41; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Writing (In Search of Holguin), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
64 ½ x 11 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IV; Box 7; Folder 52; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Writing (In Search of Holguin), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
5 x 3 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IV; Box 7; Folder 53; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Writing (Nutz Boy: A True Life Story), n.d.  
Graphite on paper sack  
28 x 6 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IV; Box 7; Folder 56; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Untitled (Miguel G. Piñero), n.d.  
Ink on paper  
5 ⅞ x 4 ⅞ inches  
Exit Art Archive; Series IV; Box 207; Folder 7; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

*Portrait of Arthur Rimbaud*, 1963  
Graphite on paper  
12 x 9 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

Untitled, 1967  
Ink on paper  
47 x 23 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*Firefly Evening*, 1968  
Offset print  
72 x 12 inches  
Collection of San Francisco State University

*Samarkand*, 1969  
Ink on 3 sheets of lined paper  
11 x 8 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*The Old Rocking Chair*, 1969  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Gail Gousha), 1969  
Ink on paper  
8 ½ x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Catstalking*, c. 1970s  
Ink on vellum  
46 11/16 x 12 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York



*Crystal Daggarr*, c. 1970s  
Ink on painted paper bag  
30 ¾ x 7 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Program booklet (Peking on Acid by the Theatre of Totally Disabled), 1972  
8 ½ x 6 ¾ inches  
Collection of Private Lender

Program booklet (Angels of Light in Jingle Belles), 1972  
8 ½ x 6 ¾ inches  
Collection of Private Lender

Flier (Allah Mode or Chained to the Subculture), 1973  
Ink on paper  
8 ½ x 6 ½ inches  
Collection of Private Lender

*Martin Wong Was Here*, 1970  
Ink on paper  
14 x 10 ¾ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Pearls over Shanghai: Cockettes*, 1970  
Hand colored mimeograph poster  
14 ¾ x 11 ½ inches  
Courtesy Susan and Steven Jacobson

*Tom Meuller*, 1970  
Graphite and blue colored pencil on paper  
12 x 9 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Toys for a Summers Day*, 1970  
Ink on paper  
91 x 11 ¾ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled (Martin Wong Was Here), 1970  
Ink on paper  
11 x 14 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Wendy Palmet*, 1970  
Ink on paper  
17 x 14 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Untitled, c. 1970  
Ink on paper  
22 x 17 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*A Meating of the Bored of Education*, 1971  
Lithograph on tan cardstock paper  
76 5/16 x 13 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Dinner at Englerts 1834 F St., Arcata*, 1972  
Ink on paper  
14 x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Gary Macramay*, c. 1972  
Graphite on paper  
16 x 13 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*Gregory*, 1972  
Ink on paper  
14 x 11 inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*Das Puke Book or Da Otto Biography of Otto Peach Fuzz*, 1973–77  
Ink on paper  
4 x 3 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware  
Untitled poster (Waco Group Show), 1974  
11 ½ x 17 ½ inches  
Courtesy Steve Hyman

*Portrait Drawing: Peggy Dickinson at Work*, 1975  
Graphite on paper  
17 x 19 ¾ x 1 inches  
Collection of Peggy Dickinson

*Eureka*, 1976  
Self-Published book  
12 x 15 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

Untitled (May 18th 1976 Sambos Eureka, California USA), c. 1976  
Ink on paper  
14 x 17 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*Happy Birthday Gary Ware*, c. 1980  
Graphite on paper  
12 x 15 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

*Semaphore Gallery Press Release*, 1984  
Ink on paper  
11 x 8 ½ inches  
Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Drawing (Magic Sam, Feb 15 1985), 1985  
Ink on paper  
8 x 12 ¼ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIA; Box 2; Folder 25; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

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#### Ceramics

Untitled, c. 1968  
Bisque stoneware with iron oxide rub  
24 x 10 x 3 inches  
Courtesy Noel and Ed Munn

*Mood Indicator*, c. 1968–1971  
Salt-fired stoneware  
4 x 3 ¾ x 2 inches  
Courtesy Steve Hyman

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Salt-fired stoneware  
5 x 4 x 3 inches  
Collection of Bob Schultze and Sonja Schultze-Huff

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Salt-fired stoneware  
8 x 10 x 6 inches  
Collection of Bob Schultze and Sonja Schultze-Huff

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
6 x 6 x 5 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
4 x 4 x 6 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
10 x 15 x 3 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
17 x 19 x 3 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
7 x 3 x 6 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
15 x 9 x 3 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1970  
Stoneware  
12 x 8 x 2 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1970  
Stoneware  
13 x 7 x 2 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1970  
Stoneware  
9 x 6 x 3 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
12 x 7 x 2 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1970  
Stoneware  
13 x 7 x 2 inches  
Courtesy Florence Wong Fie's Survivors Trust

Untitled, c. 1968–71  
Stoneware  
6 x 6 x 6 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

Untitled (Love Letter Burner), c. 1968–1971  
Stoneware  
15 x 9 x 5 inches  
Courtesy Gary Ware

Untitled, 1970  
Stoneware  
8 x 7 x 3 inches  
Collection of Bob Schultze and Sonja Schultze-Huff

Untitled, 1971  
Stoneware  
7 x 7 x 4 inches  
Collection of Michael and Daphne Pearce

Untitled, 1971  
Stoneware  
4 ¾ x 6 x 13 inches  
Courtesy Steve Hyman

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#### Ephemera

2 Drawings (Sign Language, series), n.d.  
Ink on tracing paper  
12 x 17 ½ inches; 9 x 12 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Oversize Series II; Box 8; Folder 55a; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Paintbrushes, 3, n.d.  
12 inches (2); 7 inches (1)  
Courtesy Gary Ware

15 boxing cards, n.d.  
2 ½ x 2 ¾ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIIA; Box 5; Folder 124; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Postcard (Kissing firemen), n.d.  
6 x 4 ⅓ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIIA; Box 5; Folder 116; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Printed matter (Sign Language/ The Deaf), n.d.  
11 x 8 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series IIIA; Box 5; Folder 122; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

*The Demon* (mask), 1972  
Celastic  
15 x 16 ¼ x 5 ¾ inches  
Collection of Private Lender

*The Mandrill* (mask), 1974  
Celastic  
21 x 15 x 8 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

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#### Photographs

4 Photographs, n.d.  
4 x 6 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 19A; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Photo collage (Chinatown), 1981  
8 ½ x 11 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 20B; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Photo collage (Natural History Museum), n.d.  
3 ½ x 19 inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 20B; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Photo collage (New York Building), n.d.  
7 x 7 ¾ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 20B; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Photo collage (Commune), n.d.  
9 ½ x 15 ¾ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 20B; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Photo collage (Chinatown), n.d.  
5 ⅞ x 10 ⅞ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 20B; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

Photo collage (Boat), n.d.  
13 ¼ x 9 ½ inches  
The Martin Wong Papers; Series VI; Folder 20B; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries

*The Angels of Light and Cockettes* (Photography Collection), c. 1970s  
36 Vintage color and black and white photographs  
3 ½ x 3 ½ inches each  
Courtesy of the Estate of Martin Wong, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

*PSI Clones... Dancing is Illegal* (Angels of Light performance photograph), 1978  
8 ¼ x 10 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

*Egypt Me* (Angels of Light performance photograph), 1972  
4 x 6 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

*Paris Sights Under the Bourgeois Sea* (Angels of Light performance photograph), 1945  
4 x 6 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

*Whatusi in San Francisco* (Angels of Light performance photograph), c. 1970s  
6 x 4 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

*Allah Mode or Chained to the Subculture* (Angels of Light Photographs), 1973  
4 x 6 inches  
Collection of Private Lender

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the development of *My Trip to America by Martin Wong* and the exhibition *Painting Is Forbidden*, we have been fortunate to have the support of many generous individuals and institutions. First and foremost, we would like to thank the friends and family of Martin Wong for agreeing to this project, and for opening their homes and lives to us during this process. We cannot express how grateful we are to you.

Thank you to our dedicated exhibition advisor and editor, Julian Myers-Szupinska, for guiding, mediating, encouraging, and refusing to settle.

We are grateful to the faculty of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts for their continued support. We especially thank Leigh Markopoulos, chair, Sue Ellen Stone, former program manager, and Carey Lin, current program manager, for their guidance and encouragement over the past two years.

We are deeply indebted to the Martin Wong Foundation, especially Florence Wong Fie, Mark Johnson, Michael Moe, Gary Ware, and Peter Broda, who generously contributed their time, memories, and objects from their personal archives.

We want to thank the Estate of Martin Wong at P.P.O.W. Gallery, and in particular Wendy Olsoff, co-founder, Anneliis Beadnell, director, and Brianna Calello, registrar. Your support and expertise has been crucial.

We would like to recognize the New York University Fales Library & Special Collections and its staff, but especially Marvin Taylor, director, and Rachel Greer, reference librarian and registrar. Thank you for allowing us access to the archive, for loaning works, and for scanning images for this publication.

We would also like to thank Galerie Buchholz, especially Christopher Müller and Filippo Weck, for their assistance.

Special thanks are due Jeff Gunderson and the San Francisco Art Institute for allowing us to digitize, transcribe, and publish Martin's words and observations.

We are grateful to all of the individuals and institutions that lent the works included in the publication and in the exhibition. We want to thank Julie Ault, Peggy Dickinson, Steve Hyman, Mimi La Plant, Noel and Ed Munn, Michael Pearce, and Bob Schulze. Thank you to Humboldt State University, and also to the de Young Museum, San Francisco State University and the Martin Wong Gallery. We also want to thank the members of the Angels of Light, Beaver Bauer and Tahara, for sharing their stories with us. Special thanks to Stuart Krimko for his thoughtful contribution to our publication.

We want to separately thank all those who agreed to have their works reproduced here, including Gary Ware, Tahara, Peggy Dickinson, Jordan Crandall, P.P.O.W. Gallery, and the NYU Fales Library and Special Collections.

To the staff of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts—Anthony Huberman, director; Micki Meng, assistant director; Rita Sobreiro Souther, head of operations; Jamie Stevens, curator and head of programs; and Justin Limoges, chief preparator—we extend our warmest gratitude for generously hosting this exhibition and for providing unwavering support in realizing our vision.

Very special thanks to Jon Sueda for his time and sensitive attention to the design of this publication.

We are grateful to many other individuals at CCA for their advice and time: Brenda Tucker, director of public relations; Laura Kenney, editor; and Laura Braun, communications associate.

Finally, we would like to thank the late Martin Wong, the inspiration behind the publication and exhibition, for creating an incredible body of work.

## COLOPHON

*My Trip to America* by Martin Wong

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Painting Is Forbidden*, organized by students of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts and on view from March 13 through April 18, 2015.

This book is a publication of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts. *Painting Is Forbidden* has been organized by the graduating students of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice: Alia Al-Sabi, Amelia Brod, Caitlin Burkhart, Roxanne Burton, Courtney Carrino, Kathryn Crocker, Tanya Gayer, Dino Diñçer Şirin, Rui Tang, and Angel Rafael Vázquez-Concepción.

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*Design:*

Jon Sueda / Stripe SF

*Printer:*

The Prolific Group, Winnipeg  
Printed in Canada

*Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice*

*Chair:* Leigh Markopoulos

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ISBN: 978-0-9825033-6-2



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