

Dirty Dozen: Playing 12 Questions with Richard Fung

Helen Lee

Inveterate birdwatcher, black belt in karate, a major green thumb – just a few extra things to know about the man who declared, when we first met in 1986, “Every culture has its own version of the dumpling.” More sage words, about media, representation, identity, all corners of cultural questions big and small, were soon to follow. Lucky for us they haven’t stopped.

- 1 “Richard Fung changed my life” is something I’ve heard as more than an echo in my brain (although that, too) throughout the years. For someone often cited as a mentor, what and who were your influences? Not only intellectual influences but could you talk about the little things too, personal aspects we don’t know about you growing up in the Caribbean, being born Catholic, travelling, all that?

The closest thing I had to a mentor was John Greyson, who in the early ’80s encouraged me to take up independent production and then taught me the necessary survival skills like how to write a grant application. That was necessary because at that time what the grants asked for and what you needed to say were quite different.

My earliest influences in Trinidad were my mother’s cousin, Sybil Atteck, and my sister Arlene. Aunt Sybil was the only artist I knew as a child. She was also the first working woman artist in the Caribbean and part of a culturally nationalist circle at a time when many Trinidadians believed that everything of value came from Europe. I loved to visit Aunt Sybil, who had lots of interesting things in her house like unusual shells and carnival headdresses. As I got older, she let me into her studio. When I later went to art school we corresponded, but she died in the ’70s of cancer. She was in her seventies but still experimenting, working on a series of large paintings inspired by the Prometheus story. At this time she was working with sand and other objects on the canvas.

My sister Arlene is fourteen years older than me, and she left Trinidad to study when I was still very young, returning on holidays. My sister is a physician by profession, but she is interested in literature and art. And she has always had a passionate sense of justice, integrity and truth-telling. I remember having some of my first ethical and philosophical conversations with her. These very much inspired me as a child.

I was also shaped by the whole physical and cultural context of my childhood in Trinidad. I'd read Gerald Durrell's books and I would go up the river fishing for guppies and other creatures. I thought there was no place more beautiful – except perhaps for Corfu, where the books were set and where I'd never been. Later I was influenced by the political developments in the country. Trinidad is a post-slavery society and I grew up at a time when people were questioning the status quo, particularly through the Black Power movement. My classmates and I had lots of discussions about politics and I began to develop a critical awareness of my surroundings.

Finally, I was influenced by a number of teachers. I failed or almost failed my way through most of Catholic high school, feeling alienated and apathetic about what I was supposed to learn. I can't remember the names of the teachers, but I did have a good religious instruction teacher and a good history teacher, who was probably a radical outside of school. In Canada, my most important teachers were Morris Wolfe at the Ontario College of Art, and Kay Armatage at the University of Toronto. They both instilled a love of cinema.

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Do you see yourself as an artist first? The different strands of your work – artistic, theoretical, activist, pedagogical – how do you see them fitting together? I'm particularly interested in the tension. Have you ever felt a conflict?

I don't see myself as an artist first. In fact, I have always had difficulty applying the label to myself. I don't have any philosophical qualms about the term, and I easily use it to describe the work of video artists I admire. But it's something about methodology and approach. I see my work more as pedagogical, though hopefully not pedantic. I think it's also about institutional context. I haven't done video installation and my work doesn't particularly lend itself to gallery screening. It's too long, for one thing. It's been taken up more as independent media.

Though I can't complain about a lack of exhibition – I don't feel excluded on the whole – I think my tapes are often a bit too artsy for documentary venues, and a bit too documentary for art settings. Put it this way: I don't not call myself an artist, but I feel a little like a fraud when I do.

In terms of the relationship between production and other activities, there may be an identity crisis. I feel a little bit like a jack-of-all-trades but master of none, a phrase my parents often used. I sometimes

wish I'd thrown myself wholeheartedly into academia, or art, or social services (especially when I realize I'm getting older and with the cutbacks wonder about pensions or the lack of one). On a more practical level, it's tricky being a producer and simultaneously writing criticism about media art production. I try not to censor myself, but it's difficult taking issue with the work of others in the field, especially when it can be constructed as attacking the competition. I resolve this somewhat by writing mainly about film and popular culture, while my practice is only in video. For the most part, I've enjoyed the convergence, the crossover between the writing, organizing and production.

- 3 Having had a critical approach to your work, not only an artistic one, your work has been taken up in a number of different contexts – queer, Asian, documentary, etc. – sometimes complementary (i.e., hybridity and cultural difference), sometimes not (pornography and the National Gallery; the How Do I Look? conference and the ensuing “October Crisis”). From your vantage point of an almost two-decades-long career, any particular moments of convergence that stand out, or events that took you by surprise?

Let's start with the controversies first. My work has faced censorship or attempted censorship. The clearest example is when *Chinese Characters* was destroyed by Japanese censors on the way to the Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. And when it was programmed at the National Gallery in 1988 there was a ruckus in the Ottawa press about the National Gallery showing porn, and so on. In that instance, I took a low profile not because I was shy, but the press never tried to approach me and I just didn't feel like I should be made to defend the work. Unfortunately, I found out later that Su Ditta, the media art curator at the Gallery and a great supporter over the years, received a barrage of hate mail which included racist and anti-immigrant invectives not just against me, but also against her Italian heritage.

This case taught me a lesson about art censorship. The Gallery director, Dr. Shirley Thomson, was firm in her support of the work; she refused to budge and eventually the protest fizzled. In many cases the institutions simply have no backbone and are not willing to stand up for the artists.

You also referred to the controversy at the journal *October* over my essay “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn.” That piece was done as an illustrated lecture for a conference called How Do I Look? It was organized in 1989 by a group of queer

artists and theorists in New York including Douglas Crimp, then an editor of *October*. The idea was that subsequent to the conference the essays would be published in the journal, but the other editors apparently balked at the “quality” of the work, including my piece. The fight got pretty acrimonious and public, and Douglas eventually quit the journal. Although I read *October* from time to time, the journal didn’t reach the people I wanted to address. The book, eventually published by Bay Press in Seattle, was far better for that. But I feel badly for Douglas who took a very principled and political stance. His work has continued to inspire me, and *Sea in the Blood* owes a lot to his essay “Mourning and Militancy.” Ironically, “Looking for My Penis” had a very successful career and has gone on to be reprinted in several anthologies from academic presses.

As for the convergences, I’m always surprised when something that’s been brewing in my head eventually is made and people are moved by it. Some of the best reception has been given work I didn’t think would have an audience: *Out of the Blue* and *Sea in the Blood* are two examples of tapes I made “for my own reasons,” as one might say.

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With *Sea in the Blood*, which is emerging as one of the real favourites in the Richard Fung oeuvre, I was thinking how certain works – *Sea* included, and also Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* came to mind (and probably most of Trinh’s work) – that one can’t help but read the work through the maker’s paradigm. There is little “reading against the grain.” Having considered the question of audience so deeply in your work, can you speak about those considerations?

Ironically, *Sea* was one of the only pieces where I gave up on designing the viewer’s entry into the tape; usually, I try to plan how I might engage different subject positions. By this I mean I try to be open while creating sequences, but at the same time I’m self-conscious about the implications of my decision-making. So if I feel something has to be clearer, clearer to whom and for what reason? I ask myself. For example, even though *My Mother’s Place* is about history, I wasn’t interested in producing a nostalgic trip down memory lane, but rather, I wanted to think about what it means to live in a society in which slavery, indentureship and colonialism still inform everyday life. I wanted to address a Trinidadian and Caribbean audience and I therefore had to speak from the inside. I knew, then, that the tape couldn’t take the stance of explaining or interpreting Trinidad. That’s why, for instance, I started with my mother singing that lullaby in French patois, untranslated. This strategy worked in many ways, yet my friend Shani Mootoo who grew up in a Hindu family in the south of the island said she had never heard that song. Of course, the

Chinese in Trinidad pretty much creolized into the syncretic Euro-African culture. But Shani's experience brought home to me the dangers of any construction of the national culture.

- 5 How have these notions of audience, which have been so critical to you as a maker and also pedagogically, changed in the past decade or so? Can you assess the impact?

I don't think my ideas of audiences and spectatorship have changed that much; however, I choose to act on them differently, or not consciously engage them at all. Yet, in the new project I'm working on about nationalism and homosexuality in Trinidad and Canada, I have to figure out how what I do will play in both contexts. Social categories and identities are not universal, so if I want to discuss these issues in a productive way I have to attend to both national specificities, including their internal multiplicity and contradictions.

- 6 When Rea Tajiri was making her video, *History and Memory*, she said she started with an image of her mother as a young woman at the internment camp, pumping water from a well. The image was in her head, she couldn't get it out of her mind, and also how dry it was – she had a sense memory that was fictive and imagined. Where do you start when making a piece?

Many of my tapes have begun by something tickling or needling at me conceptually. Then I have to play around with the idea until I get a central image which I have to further chew on. My friend Arlene Moscovitch calls this the “washing machine stage,” with the idea being churned around in the head. By the time I come to shoot the piece, I often already know how the first few minutes will be cut, and I have an idea for the structure of the rest. This can change with trial and error, but the opening portion seldom changes from what I've imagined.

I'll give you an example: *Dirty Laundry* happened by my reading about the almost all-male character of 19th-century Chinese Canadian community, often referred to as “bachelor society.” The term “bachelor” frames these men only as unfulfilled heterosexuals, with marriage being assumed as the normal state. But I began to wonder about the possible homoerotics among these bachelors. When I discovered the 1885 Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration with its explicit, sometimes grotesque and often racist references to sodomy, I began to wonder why this was never taken up, particularly in the writings of Chinese Canadian historians and social scientists; a few had dealt with Chinese female prostitution. It

was only a short jump to marry the image of the Chinese laundry with the expression of washing dirty linen in public.

Similarly with *Sea in the Blood*, the AIDS movement had made me reconsider the discourses of medicine, and I began to ponder my sister's experience with thalassemia. I also realized that for most of my life the closest person to me was suffering from a very serious illness. I held these ideas in my head for several years, unconvinced that it would make an interesting tape. But once I decided to do it, at first half-heartedly, the "washing machine" quickly brought up that underwater imagery: thalassemia literally means "sea in the blood." Though I have to confess that the redness in the water started out as an accident – the redness came from a lens for deep water diving that was on the camera when I rented it.

7 What part of image-making do you love? What, for you, are the rewards of this life's work?

I can't say I love the production process, except for *Sea in the Blood*, which I shot almost entirely myself. It was fun trying to get the shots exactly right and experimenting with the camera. I usually do love editing. This is when things start coming together and you can see the ideas take form. As for afterwards, the screenings can be rewarding – though I do cringe a lot. Much of my work is open-ended, so when people take from it what I'd hoped it can be very gratifying. It's also great when people relate to it across identities or communities. On the other hand, I've had some epiphanies when people have challenged me. I don't mean all challenges – some criticisms are simplistic or trite – but when someone has some really interesting critique it can open things up. I find that often the audience and host are protective of a presenting artist, but it's a good thing to be challenged sometimes.

8 Richard, one of the most persistent aspects of your work which I originally found inspiring and remains a model is that it engages social questions with the desire to innovate formally. And that to be truly radical, the form itself needs to be new. This commitment, combined with the care for the audience, this goes back to your film distribution work at DEC Films in the '80s. Could you discuss this balancing of formal innovation with accessibility and audience issues?

My interest in formal experimentation combined with political commitment and pedagogical imperative was something that came from my era. I was looking at films like *Tout Va Bien* by Godard. It was during my art school years, after all. My first jobs were in community

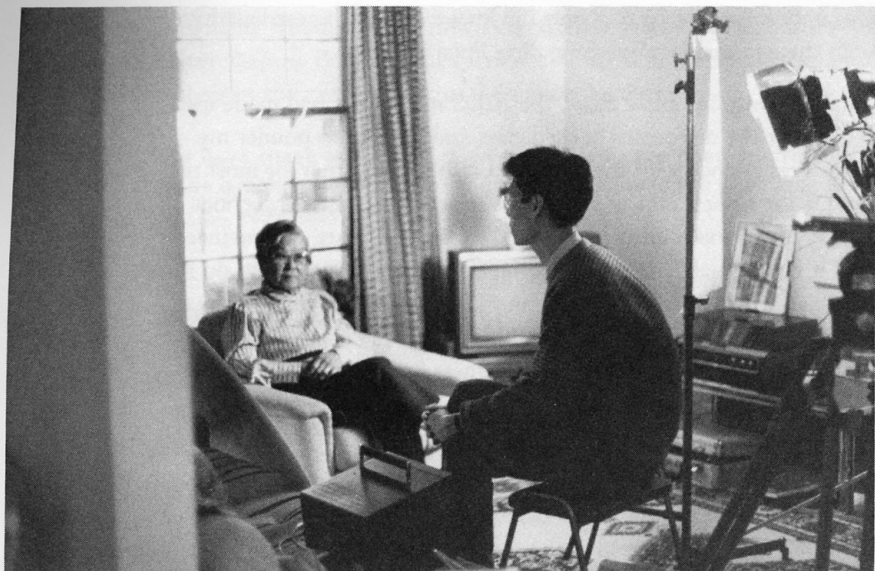


photo: Interviewing
Rita Fung for *My
Mother's Place*
(1990)



photo: Board and Staff
of Images Festival,
1990/91.

(with Fung clockwise
from left: Marg
Moores, bh Yael, Kim
Tomczak, Sybil
Goldstein, Marc
Glassman, Ali Kazimi,
Annette Manguard,
Karen Tisch)

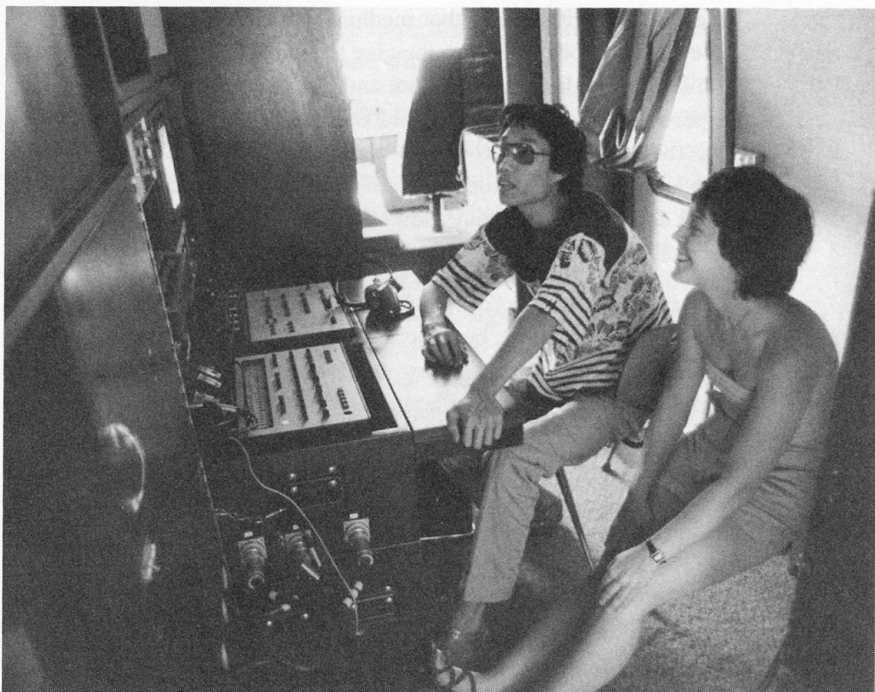


photo: Rogers
CableTV mobile
shoot, 1980. (Cathy
Hamat with Fung)

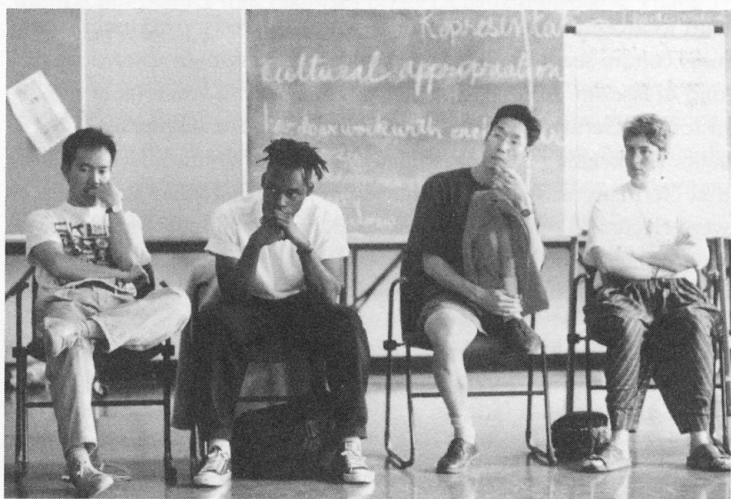


photo: About
Face/About Frame
conference, Banff
Centre for the Arts,
1992. (with Fung from
left: Lloyd Wong,
Cameron Bailey,
Marjorie Beaucage)

television at a time when that medium was self-conscious about its role and methods – hard to imagine today. This is where I learned to think about audience. Art school and film studies introduced me to experimental work and ideas, and DEC Films, which at that time was the largest distributor of political documentary and Third World film and video in Canada, gave me the opportunity to see a lot of work and also think about audience dynamics in terms of various subject positions.

I do still feel that this “dialogic” project is important, but it’s not being done very much because of shifts in funding. Some of this work is moving into the gallery which has a more limited and elite audience – although when Isaac Julien is nominated for the Turner Prize with a film installation it’s a pretty public affair. In any case, it seems the John Greysons, Harun Farockis and Kika Thornes of this world are increasingly rare.

- 9 What are the imperatives for you now, as a maker and critic/activist? What are the new sites of resistance when oppositional politics seem less viable, or challenging at best?

Society moves in cycles and I’m hopeful that the pendulum will swing once again in a more democratic, egalitarian direction. But it’s hard to imagine that now since corporate interests, party politics and mass culture seem to have converged on a scary path toward a new kind of fascism. And I’m not saying this lightly. If you look at the history of Germany you see many parallels to the discourses and actions emanating from Washington, and even Ottawa. Don’t forget that Germany was a democratic country and that when the Nazis were elected to power there was an extremely vibrant avant-garde artistic milieu and many progressive social and political currents, including the first homosexual rights movement.

As for myself, I know my thoughts on many issues, whether it’s on the Palestinian-Israeli question or corporate globalization. It’s not that I have answers but I have an analysis. What eludes me, however, is a sense of a larger project, an overall purpose beyond an opposition to the craziness and injustice that’s rampant. As a society we seem to be going through a very contradictory period in which there is political apathy and disenchantment on the one hand, and an amazing surge of activism on the other. And none of this is straightforward. Everyone seems to proclaim the death of “identity politics,” yet the new class politics often suffers precisely because it fails to attend to a politics of difference: who speaks for whom and on what terms is still a

crucial question. Ironically, at the same time corporations have done a great job of marketing difference: think Benetton.

My work was originally inspired by activism and grassroots organizing. I have always felt that where I had insights, they came more from my working on the ground rather than from anything I'd read or pondered in my study. Yet I can't make that claim anymore. I'm not involved with groups at this time. The early gay Asian activists who were my colleagues all came out of anti-imperialist and other radical political movements. Yet gay Asian organizations are now mainly social and far from political. I do meet progressive young queer Asian men and women, but they're not involved in these formations. Many have gone into academia, which is where I also now work in my part-time day job at OISE/UT (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto).

I'm not sure to what extent it's evident, but my work has always been informed by a class analysis. If it's not apparent, it may be because people think of class as drawers in which we are slotted, or they think that only the working class or poor are classed, just as for many only non-white folks "have race." Anyway, because I bring this broader perspective to the issue, I'm not interested in a supposed anti-racism politics that endorses other racial nationalisms. That's a dead-end street.

So in the last few years I haven't found a home. But there are some great efforts about – the *Blah Blah Blah* series of artists' short videotapes critiquing the Quebec Summit was very inspiring. Not only did it produce some great work, but it also brought together a community of very different makers in terms of age, ethnicity, aesthetics, milieu. The protest happened to be at the same time as the Bell Canada Award ceremony so I couldn't go myself. Yet I feel I want to rise to this challenge of making work that sheds some light on the contradictions and complexities of what we're calling globalization, but is just a more developed stage in imperialism.

10

In a recent profile of former Whitney Museum curator Thelma Golden, there was some discussion of her "post-Black" show at the Studio Museum in Harlem. For many of us who came of age during the so-called height of multiculturalism and identity politics, when race critical theory reinvigorated academia and really took hold in cultural debates and practices, there is something ironic and deflating about this, something perhaps gratifying but possibly dangerous, too. How do you view this "postness?"

Well, I understand that African American artist Glenn Ligon, who coined the phrase originally, used it ironically, meaning that race and racism were still operative despite the desire to believe otherwise. But it seems to have been sweeping into broader currency without that ironic twist. Like some of the “posts” – post-feminism, in particular – post-Black lends itself to a reactionary appropriation. But like all the posts – postmodern and postcolonial, for example – its meaning will never be pinned down.

I can see its attraction for critics and curators to identify the work of some contemporary black artists who are not making work explicitly about race. But it's important to remember that before and during the multiculturalism of the '80s there were black and other artists of colour who were dealing with non-raced issues, and that now, in the supposedly post-Black or post-race era, there are younger and older artists tackling those issues. I understand and in many ways share the desire for fresh ideas and images. But we can't forget that concepts are capital in academia and the art world; it's how academics, curators, critics and artists make careers for them/ourselves. I don't mean to suggest that people are cynical, but we mustn't delude ourselves into thinking that the mechanisms of fashion are restricted to the runways of Paris and Milan. The problem of course is that academic and artistic production doesn't quite work in the same way; artists don't generally come up with whole new approaches every season. What this means is that when the curatorial or critical interests change, many artists and writers and their work are suddenly relegated to the sidelines.

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I know you're a big fan of Octavia Butler and science fiction. Tell us about this particular pleasure.

I'm not a buff by any means, but my favourite science fiction writer would be Samuel Delaney, who since the '60s has been creating amazing narratives and worlds in which the logic of heterosexuality, whiteness, and gender and sexual difference is destabilized. The novels are theoretically sound, and very trippy. More recently, I've enjoyed the Caribbean Canadian speculations of Toronto writer Nalo Hopkinson. And OK, I used to be a big Trekkie, especially of *The Next Generation*. (But the off-shoots have turned into bad sci-fi according to the above definition, and mostly just hokey.) Bad science fiction simply re-presents dominant conditions as universal and eternal. By imagining a different reality, good science fiction has the potential to make us see the limitations of our present world more clearly.

One last thing, Richard. For you someone who reads cookbooks as bedtime reading, what constitutes a perfect meal?

Yes, I'm a cookbook reader, and as a theoretical cook, therefore, I would have to say that the perfect meal occurs only in the imagination. I know I've never had a perfect meal in an expensive restaurant where the more money I pay the more the imperfections stand out.

I have had perfectly prepared dishes, such as the roast duck at Hong Fatt and the roti at Roti Palace in Toronto. Or the shark and bake at a place called Richard's at Maracas beach in Trinidad. I've just returned from Trinidad and my childhood friends Wendy and Avril Siung made some Trini specialities to perfection: corn soup, calaloo, pelau with coconut milk. Back home in Toronto, my friend Kathy Wazana recently put on a spectacular spread of Jewish Moroccan dishes. The couscous was the best I'd ever had.

It's always an epiphany when you eat something and you can see what all the fuss is about. You know how European writers often say the fish or the produce in France or Italy is so much better and you think they're just snobs. Well, I had some green beans in Italy last year and I couldn't believe the concentration of flavour. They were the essence of green beanness. They were perfection.

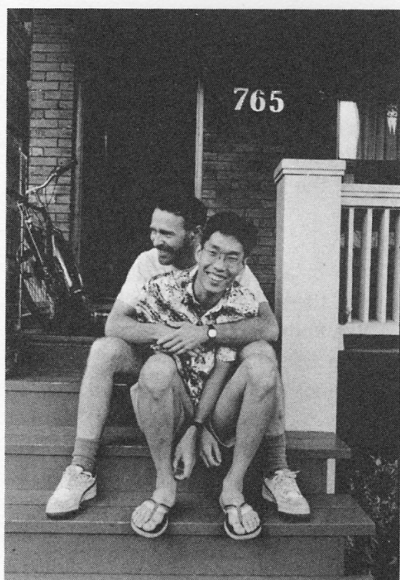


photo: Richard and Tim