**The Weight of Things**
Kimberly Phillips

The shell of the former Ho Sun Hing Printing Company, Canada's oldest Chinese print shop, which stands on the same block of East Georgia Street as Access Gallery, closed permanently on March 28, 2014 after 106 years of business. First established as a rubber stamp store by Lam Lat Tong, a cook on the rail line, Ho Sun Hing grew to become an institution in Chinatown, producing all manner of books, pamphlets, announcements, business cards and restaurant menus for several generations of Chinese-Canadian communities.

The shop famously housed several antique presses, including a 1912 Lanston monotype, modified to handle both English and Chinese type, along with a complete set of 8,000 lead Chinese characters. Having witnessed the print industry change markedly with the expansion of digital technologies and online print businesses in recent decades, Ho Sun Hing's current owner, the 81 year-old family matriarch Hilda Lam, made the decision to retire. In the months leading up to its closure, Lam methodically emptied the shop of its contents. The slow ebbing away – or more correctly, the selling off – of machinery and related ephemera from that site was lamented by local historians, print enthusiasts and the press, not only because of the immediate loss to the community of a significant, century-old family-run business, and with it years of embodied knowledge and experience. The closure seemed also to strike at the heart of the pronounced changes Chinatown is currently undergoing, driven by shifting economies, technologies and social practices, a dwindling population of long-time Chinese inhabitants and the sudden influx of young professionals, as well as the swift transformation of the urban fabric through real estate development. It is clear that (as throughout its history) the neighborhood remains a complex terrain upon which a matrix of racialized and exoticized histories and desires are projected.[1]

Access is entangled with these changes; since 2011 our organization has operated out of 222 East Georgia Street – a building owned by the Yee Fung Toy Society – in a space originally housing a modest-scaled denim factory and retail facility whose workers lived in the apartments above. There are few traces of the building's original occupants and operations, but the weight of their absence has taken on a certain palpability for me that is difficult to explain. In a neighbourhood whose history is now frequently referenced by its new inhabitants through salvaged signage, Asian-inflected provisions and many other nostalgic nods, how is it possible to address (rather than redress) the opacities that we exist alongside?

*Eight Ounces Half a Pound* is a partial attempt to consider local histories of racialized labour that have been silenced or overwritten through time, and the distance between forgotten workers' embodied experience and our own. The three artists whose works comprise this exhibition consider these issues in nuanced ways. Each creates sculptural forms arrived at through different processes and interactions with materials: Guadalupe Martinez's *Across the street, far away* through the performative actions of hauling and assembling; Katherine Soucie's *Skid Row* through the gathering of found objects and repetitive act of binding; and Tommy Ting's *Machine (Iron Chink, invented in 1903, found at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery in Steveston, British Columbia, refabricated by Ionic Model in Beijing, China)* through research and meticulous re-fabrication. All sculpture seems to reference the body (not only because of the dominance – historically at least – of figural representation in this medium, but because of sculpture's tendency to occupy the same physical

space as that of the viewer, thus communicating with – or challenging – the body in its corporeality). In Martinez's, Soucie's and Ting's work, however, the body that is implied is an absent one. It is registered through the materials themselves and through the artists' engagements with them, in an echo of some lost archive of movement, relations and work.

Tommy Ting's practice is centrally concerned with narratives that have become marginalized through the process of history. Working in a number of different media – including sculpture, video, photography and performance – he explores how memories can be fabricated and performed. *Machine* is a recreation of the "Iron Chink" invented in 1903 by a Canadian to mechanize the process of fish gutting and cleaning for the Pacific Northwest's canning industry. The human butchers that the machine replaced were predominantly Chinese (and female, as Eric Wright points out in his essay in this volume), hence the racist name, "Iron Chink." The Chinese contract labourers were thought of by cannery owners as efficient, and most importantly, economical, but was widely claimed that one "Iron Chink" machine could replace fifty human butchers. The "Iron Chink" represents the transference of an insidious racial stereotype onto the physical object. In a wry turn, Ting had the "recontextualized readymade" manufactured in China by a modeling factory, produced in PVC and uniformly spray painted in China Red. *Machine* is installed in the gallery sitting upon its own crate, making its travels self-evident.

The histories of objects and their usage also inform the work of Katherine Soucie, who salvages obsolescent machinery and other found objects, then binds them with cast-off, pre-consumer waste textiles. In the fall of 2013, Soucie temporarily relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, settling at the border of two distinct working-class neighbourhoods, Reynoldstown and Cabbagetown, both with long histories and racial divides. Bisecting the area is a decommissioned rail line, which formerly supplied the Cabbagetown Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill. In the months after her arrival, Soucie began collecting iron fragments, rusted tools and other mill detritus that still litter the decaying railway corridor, observing the materials carefully and recording notes (considering their potential origins and histories) in pseudo-archaeological fashion. The objects were then subjected to a profound transformation, as Soucie wrapped them in layers of pre-consumer hosiery waste material acquired from the Doris Hosiery Mills in Quebec. The artist's laborious, repetitive acts of binding the broken, discarded metal forms calls up the monotonous movements of workers' bodies, and the ways in which they would have interacted with such objects. In their infancy, the bound forms are white. But over time, rust from the metals and tannins from the wood bleed out into the textile, staining it. In this time-based process, Soucie "tends" to the objects for weeks, exposing them to weather and photo-documenting their slow change in colour.

Soucie engages with pre-consumer nylon waste hosiery in a way that attempts to interrupt its life cycle. A petroleum by-product, knitted nylon does not decay unless it is exposed to an application such as rust. For the artist, the acts of binding and wrapping – themselves akin to rituals of bandaging and mummification – enact a kind of reciprocity, and an honouring of the histories and usage of these outmoded, discarded implements. "Mending has always been a part of my vocabulary and way of thinking," Soucie states. "It is both physically and metaphorically embedded into every aspect of my research and practice as an artist."[2]

Like Soucie in her temporary home of Atlanta, Guadalupe Martinez's sensitivity to the spatial, social and political matter of her surroundings is acute. Since her

relocation to Vancouver from Argentina in 2008, she has become increasingly interested in exploring the role of the body in mediating space and materials. “I don’t see materials existing without the body, at least not in my work,”[3] she has explained. Her research combines performance and considerations of three-dimensionality to create site-specific work that mnemonically activates found materials, “reanimating their meaning,” in her words, “into new structures of signification and resistance.”[4] Her actions are motivated by a deep respect for place, despite (or perhaps because of) her own experience of geographical displacement.

For *Across the street, far away*, Martinez’s discovery of a particular circumstance – the immanent closure of Ho Sun Hing Printers – became the project’s focus and propelling force. On Friday, June 13, 2014, following negotiations with the new owners’ demolition crew, Martinez and several volunteers carried the remaining structural materials from the interior space of the emptied print shop down the block, to then be reassembled in Access Gallery. The simple act of transporting materials from one place to another echoed the unspectacular movement of countless other inhabitants, pets and things – crates of produce, laundry bags, bales of newspaper, window-washing buckets – traveling up and down East Georgia Street on any given day over the past century. In lifting and carrying the heavy materials together, negotiating sidewalk traffic and other people and things, Martinez and her participants performed a kind of improvised choreography, bringing a quiet observance to the provisional and fleeting relations between bodies, materials and space. The poetics – and ethics – of this activation serve to remind us of the intricate nexus of entanglements between consciousness, the body, and the objects amongst which we dwell and move.[5]

Elsewhere I have written about both the anxiety that the object’s silence produces. Inert, indifferent, but charged with the weight of our accumulated histories, even the careful excavation, retrieval and preservation of things leads us nowhere but back to ourselves.[6] “The thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient,” Merleau-Ponty reminds us, “…a resolutely silent Other.”[7] It is, to quote another important thinker of phenomenology, “solid (*massif*).”[8] In this case however, the muteness of these things, their opacity and weight, seems to me a relief. The worth of these artistic works, and the practices that underpin them, lie precisely in their respect for that weight, an acknowledgement of the futility in presuming we might recuperate or embody anything other than our own utterances and affective maps. For this same reason, I invited the emergent historian Eric Wright to contribute a text to this publication that would sit in parallel to the exhibited works of Martinez, Soucie and Ting. Drawing on his research of marginalized peoples and labour in the Pacific Northwest and in sensitive acknowledgement of his own distance from that about which he writes, Wright addresses a particular set of experiences that have been all but omitted from the written historical record – those of Chinese-Canadian women living and working in the early years of Vancouver.

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The pages of this publication are folded into cover stock that was purchased from the Ho Sun Hing Printing Company on its second to last day of operation. Block printed in red ink from a single lead plate, the characters that form the basis of the decorative pattern, I was informed, symbolize “Double Happiness,” and would have found use as the backdrop on wedding and birth announcements. For some reason it seemed appropriate, for the reasons I describe above, to *materially* and corporeally connect with the former presence of this century-old printing operation. As a commemorative gesture? An homage? I'm not entirely sure. Perhaps this

decision (as well the act of producing the physical book itself) serves as a marker of something more *massif* and inaccessible: a suggestion of embodied histories we exist in proximity to, but that are not ours to know.

In her haunting bookwork *Nox*, the poet and scholar Anne Carson writes of her inability to grapple with the loss of a brother she did not know. Attempting to describe the "muteness" that is her memory of him, she resorts to an obscure German term – *das Unumgängliche* ("overtakelessness") – which she defines as "that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them."[9] Of course we might read this as a definition of melancholia (as Freud theorized, a pathological response to loss, which cannot be overcome[10]) but what the German term registers for me is a certain physical presence, an assumed objecthood, the form of which obscures and blots out but can only be glimpsed sidelong. It seems to me that Tommy Ting, Katherine Soucie and Guadalupe Martinez each offer their own *Unumgaengliche* of sorts, as a response to an unknowable archive of knowledge, movement and experience, the rapid dispersion or outright loss of which we may only ever be partially aware. The objects present in this exhibition - an ungainly red machine, hauled sheetrock, plywood and ceiling panels, and the bandaged forms of weeping, abandoned tools – might be examined, circumnavigated, and appreciated of course, but the histories they point towards cannot be got round.

Notes

[1] The renowned urban geographer Kay Anderson has written extensively Vancouver's Chinatown as a social construct and a racialized place. See Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

[2] See www.katherinesoucie.com/statement/

**[3]** Guadalupe Martinez, quoted in Polina Bachlakova, "The Work of Guadalupe Martinez," *Beatroute* (October 3, 2013), http://beatroute.ca/2013/10/03/the-work-of-guadalupe-martinez/

[4] See http://www.guadalupemartinez.com.

[5] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); new trans. by Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012)

[6] Kimberly Phillips, "On Indexing Melancholy or, Why We Long For Things," *Unknown Objects* (Vancouver: 221A Artist Run Centre, 2013)*,* 3-11.

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1989), 322

[8] Jean Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (NY: Washington Square Press, 1993), xiii.

[9] See Anne Carson, *Nox* (Canada: New Directions, 2010), entry 8.5. I extend my thanks to Areum Kim, Curatorial Assistant at Access Gallery, for placing *Nox* (for another reason entirely) on my desk at the right moment in the writing of this essay.

[10] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 237-258.