

## **The situational ethics of John Young**

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THE ROLE OF AN ARTIST SHOULD IDEALLY INCORPORATE that of a teacher. At the very least, when confronting ceaseless change in society, it is important that an artist's work should include a didactic dimension. Some people today might fail to notice the shared past that stares at us from history's rear-view mirror, and its reflection on our present life may be much closer than we think. For artist John Young, the speed brought about by globalisation can generate a sense of ethical indifference. Alternatively it can lead to an explosion of values and sentiments, leaving a 'politics of melancholy' in its wake. Young sees a role for art in linking the present to 'a world of forgotten stories, discarded objects, and memories'. As he explains: 'Making art not only means to recollect stories, but to reawaken an intrinsic ethical impulse in the present.'

Two of the artist's most recent projects - 'Bonhoeffer in Harlem' (2009) and 'Safety Zone' (2010) - reflect Young's growing scepticism towards the discourse of transcultural identity and highlight this important new impulse at play in his work. The shift in the artist's practice has prompted an exploration of stories that 'situate ethics and moral judgment within the context of crossing from one culture into another', articulating an important notion of situational ethics that is dependent on the crossings of different cultures rather than on a universal moral code. As a Hong Kong-Australian artist, Young has experienced the state of melancholy associated with cross-cultural existence which he feels is 'indeed poignant, both intellectually and emotionally'. His experience

draws him to literary sources such as the geopoetic writings of Kenneth White, which he has read over many years. Yet Young is also conscious of the need to move beyond such a state of loss and 'search for an active principle' in engaging the ethical dimension of cross-cultural exchange for individuals, groups and societies. Young believes he has found this active principle in his two most recent projects.

Young conceived 'Bonhoeffer in Harlem' while speaking with his German gallerist Alexander Ochs, during a 2007 visit to Berlin. Young recalls how Ochs encouraged him to look at the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a Lutheran pastor and the chief protagonist in a lost story of the Second World War. Before his 1931 ordination in Berlin, Bonhoeffer spent a year in New York, teaching Bible studies to local African-American women while assisting at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. Here Bonhoeffer wrote about the need for strong opposition to racial divisions in America and, on returning to Germany, further revealed his strong moral conviction by defying Hitler's rise to power. When the Second World War broke out, Bonhoeffer remained to work for the German Resistance until his arrest in 1943. He was sent to Flossenbürg Concentration Camp and executed on 9 April 1945.

Preparing for the 2009 exhibition - which was staged at Berlin's St Matthäus Church where Bonhoeffer was ordained and which now forms part of the city's cultural Kulturforum precinct - was a life-changing experience for Young, pointing in particular to ways of working in art 'outside of the conventional art frame or context'. In delving into Bonhoeffer's life, what unfolded for Young was a series of synchronistic events and

apparitions that led him to discover another lost story – this time to do with the Japanese invasion of the Chinese city of Nanjing in 1937. In the six weeks following the 13 December invasion, Japanese troops killed an estimated 250,000 Chinese citizens in what has become known as the Nanjing Massacre.

In the resulting exhibition ‘Safety Zone’ – presented at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, in 2010 – Young explored the intrinsic ‘ethical dimension’ behind the forgotten story of another German figure: John Rabe (1882–1950). A member of the Nazi Party who was stationed on business in Nanjing in 1937, Rabe, together with the American missionary Minnie Vautrin, led a group of around twenty foreigners who attempted to create a ‘safety zone’ to protect the city’s citizens from the Japanese.

‘Bonhoeffer in Harlem’ and ‘Safety Zone’ both feature a series of chalk drawings on blackboard paint-covered paper. Here Young makes a reference to the 1970s blackboard drawings of Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner’s blackboard lectures following the First World War – a connection already made by Allison Holland’s 2007–08 exhibition at Melbourne’s National Gallery of Victoria, ‘Joseph Beuys and George Steiner – Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition’.

Once an important tool for teaching, the blackboard underscores the vital didactic dimension of Young’s recent work. Presented with texts in Chinese, English and German, most viewers would experience nostalgia towards a vanishing medium now largely replaced by digital media. The blackboard was arguably the primary didactic

medium of the twentieth century – it is impossible to calculate the number of important ideas that would have been worked out and shared on this medium during this time. Furthermore, blackboard and chalk brings together writing and drawing; allowing quick erasure and thus offering an ideal metaphor for Young's recent explorations on the theme of disappearance and loss.

In both recent projects, Young combines blackboard drawings with digital inkjet prints and painting or tapestry. Each visual element evokes the search for a 'principle' in the process of recollecting and retracing lost memories. The combination of these media points to the artist's inherently pessimistic view of the contemporary interconnectivity of art and techno-disciplines. As Young explains:

'Safety Zone' was initially conceived as an account of cross-cultural heroism, but it became a project that can be related to our contemporary dada – linked to desertion, amnesia, disappearance and the apocalypse; including in a wider sense modernity's disappearance and the apocalypse of art as we know it.

With 'Bonhoeffer in Harlem' and 'Safety Zone' Young offers a valuable insight to the art world, particularly as it looks for ways to link itself to the world at large.

Contemporary art's recent focus on relational aesthetics provides little real function to art except to highlight the role of art as a medium for communication. To identify an actual role for an art grounded in communication, Young suggests, artists need to take

on a more didactic approach. This includes exploring the important ethical dimension in forgotten stories and resituating these within the present. Witnessed by Young's recent projects, the act of crossing culture could be seen as a crucial vehicle in exploring our ethical impulse through the active principle of art.

**John Young: Safety Zone**, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, 15 April - 22 May

2010; **John Young: Bonhoeffer in Harlem**, St Matthäus Church, Kulturforum, Berlin,

13 April - 2 August 2009.