

Introduction: *City Beneath the City*

“Seeking Silicon Valley,” was the 2012 theme of ZERO1, the biennial Silicon Valley art and technology festival. Instead of focusing on the future, curators at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) contacted Stanford archaeology professor Barbara Voss about displaying a part of San Jose’s past that dealt with issues often excluded from Silicon Valley’s narrative of opportunity and progress: immigration, migrant labor, racial prejudice. Stanford houses the Market Street Chinatown collection, archaeological remains from a late-19th century Chinatown that occupied the site of the current Fairmont Hotel in downtown San Jose. Nine months of collaboration with the ICA produced *City Beneath the City*, an artifact-inspired art installation by Rene Yung. *City Beneath the City* hopes to present the viewer with a dialogue between the layers of absent and visible histories in San Jose. As a student researcher, I was invited to help execute the loan of the artifacts alongside collections manager Megan Kane, and then assisted in preparation for the exhibition at the ICA. When the installation was moved to Stanford Archaeology Center, I reprised a similar role.



ICA installation. Photo credit reneyung.com

City Beneath the City first opened at the ICA in May 2012. After closing in September 2012, it moved to the Stanford Archaeology Center in January 2013, where it will remain until the end of April. Due to less space availability, the design of *City Beneath the City* was altered when it moved to the Stanford Archaeology

Center. In the case when I do not refer to a feature of the installation specifically by its location, it is broadly common to both. Coming into the ICA gallery, you pass through an entryway suggested by a pair of pedestals holding pieces of building material: glass, wood, bricks. Next you encounter leather shoe fragments almost at ground level, placed in front of a small pedestal whose sole object, a doorknob, acts as a portal that draws you into the intimate spaces of the home. Further pedestals evoke the dressing table, the washroom, and lastly the dining room at the heart. Many of the pedestals are decorated with a “found poem” of words that describe the Market Street Chinatown (e.g. “traces” “daily” “discarded”). At the Stanford Archaeology Center version of the installation, these words are supplemented with phrases labeled on artifact tags in the display cases.

Unlike a fictional or historical narrative, the installation’s art dialogue does not present the lives of individuals or a single arc of events. Instead, it relies on the viewer making a connection to the artifacts that is personal, yet absent of specific personhood. *City Beneath the City* does not recreate Market Street Chinatown whole, nor does it invent a museological experience of it. It makes art out of the archaeological process as much as it does out of the artifacts themselves. The installation is a form of excavation, where the ability to place objects in their context varies due to prior knowledge and chance encounter. *City Beneath the City*’s refusal to tell a “whole” story means that its investment in complexity can look a lot like ambivalence. Here, Barbara Little’s definition of the connection between historical archaeology and storytelling is helpful to frame the discussion. “The language of storytelling is not soft or easy or transparent and it may indeed be essential to convey what is important about the past -- to translate what is essential, what is true beyond facts” (Little 2000:11). Storytelling is not a spoonful-of-sugar way to translate archaeological finds to the public, but rather another equally

complex framework with which to interact. Little uses the idea of “image” (not merely visual image, but any combination of verbal, mental, perceptual, optical, or graphic) to help “reunite our data sources and improve archaeological analysis” [emphasis mine]. *City Beneath the City* is an example of this kind of mixed media image. Ideally, the installation disrupts traditional methods of artifact display in a way that helps reunite the different scales of the Market Street Chinatown: from the individual rice bowl to transnational networks of material and cultural interaction. In practice, this reunification is rarely complete.

What’s interesting is not the failure of reunification -- which is impossible, since the past never was and never can be restored whole -- but where and why the process of reunification is incomplete. I will focus on the installation’s multiple fragmentations of word and object. But before looking at the points of fracture, I will first investigate what holds them together. *City Beneath the City* is organized by two underlying concepts: the affect of the everyday, and the household.

The doll leg: historiography and affect



Porcelain doll leg featured in *City Beneath the City*

The potential for affect drove the initial selection of objects to be included in the installation. Despite a lack of specific historic persons associated with the Market Street Chinatown artifacts, personal presence can still be called up by objects that would have belonged to or been in frequent use by people,

or in a populated setting. For example, the rice bowls decorated in the distinctive Bamboo pattern are displayed stacked together as if on a shelf in a home or boarding house where they would have been extremely common. The selection for aesthetic and personal affect was closely joined with historical affect, items that contributed to a critical historicity of the Market Street Chinatown. These artifacts worked against both popular and scholarly stereotypes of Chinatowns in the US. In overviews of the field, Douglass Ross (2013) and Voss (2008) characterize much of the early literature in Overseas Chinese archaeology as subscribing to a linear acculturation model.¹ Studies assessed the degree to which Chinese immigrants had assimilated into non-Chinese populations. Paralleling popular views about the insularity of Chinese immigrants, many concluded that the because of frequency of imported Chinese goods found at Overseas Chinese site, that the Chinese maintained their traditional culture and ethnic enclaves.



Case from Stanford installation

While the Market Street Chinatown was defined by exclusive boundaries and law, its archaeological remains reveal a dynamic transnational culture. Founded in the 1960s, at its peak Market Street Chinatown housed more than 1,000 Chinese men, women, and children in addition to

Chinese-owned businesses, a temple, and a theater (Voss 2005:429-430). Not welcome elsewhere in San Jose, Market Street Chinatown's buildings were densely packed and faced

¹ Writing about Overseas Chinese archaeology began in the 1960s and 70s, although it did not develop into a mature field of study until the 1980s and 90s (Ross 2013:2).

inward toward shared alleys and communal spaces in contrast to nearby single and multiple-family homes with private yards (Voss 2008:42). Market Street Chinatown's two city blocks were a locality shaped by nationwide anti-Chinese sentiment. The passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 drew together white labor unions and legislatures, which continued to expand legal and social prohibitions. In 1887, Market Street Chinatown was destroyed by fire, likely started by local white residents.

Bricks, pane glass, burned wood, and a bag of soil sample with "smells" written on its label were all chosen for *City Beneath the City* because they help to conjure the physical, sensory experience of the structural environment, before and after its destruction. A single porcelain doll leg hauntingly recalls the losses of childhood and challenges assumptions that the Market Street Chinatown community was made up uniformly of male laborers. A European whiteware plate peck-marked² with a Chinese character is an unusual example of culturally hybrid ownership. The chosen objects reflect more recent Overseas Chinese scholarship that has shifted toward interpretations of the material record that emphasize fluid identities, cultural exchange, and diversity within Chinese immigrant populations.

Fragmented stories: artifacts and outside text

The outside text that accompanies the artifacts (the found poetry decorating pedestals and the Stanford artifact tags) was taken from Market Street Chinatown archaeology reports and the book *Chinatown San Jose, USA* written by Connie Yung Yu, the granddaughter of Market Street Chinatown residents. Similarly to the artifacts themselves, the combination of words from these two sources mixes personal affect with historiography. A third, optional source of installation

² A peck mark is created when a Chinese character is etched (post production of the ceramic) through the glaze and into the paste of a vessel. Peck-marking is a labor-intensive process which in China is generally used to inscribe blessings, but in the Market Street Chinatown assemblage is mostly restricted to names on imported Chinese wares, perhaps to keep track of personal goods in the boardinghouse environment (Michaels 2005).

text is the artifact map, which visitors can use to direct themselves through the installation in a suggested sequence. The artifact map adds historical and material facts about the artifacts, in contrast to the tags and pedestal decals, whose words do not directly describe the artifacts associated with them. The object fragments and the installation text both tell stories that contribute to the dialogue of present-absent histories. However, the stories they tell are slightly different.

Since there are so many literal pieces of object and text, it's hard to make broad characterizations that take into account each one. But, overall, the outside text is focused on telling a story about the Chinatown community and its place in the American nation. The artifact tags share specific information about the people that lived together on Market Street, give street names, creating a specificity of place and community that the artifacts alone do not provide. The pedestals words "fragile," "fire," "resurfacing," and tags that label European-made things "partially adopted/adopted," loosely narrate the continued resilience of the Chinese immigrant experience. By contrast, the story told by the artifacts and the artifact map³ is more transnational. The artifact map foregrounds styles of manufacture, place of origin, and style (ie "chinoiserie.") The artifacts and map speak more directly to descendent communities than the outside text. In the "From the Community" poster at the Stanford installation, Lilian Gong-Guy and Connie Young Yu's statements center around how encountering familiar objects as one of the reasons why they had become involved with the collection in its early years.

"A piece of blue and white porcelain caught my eye among the artifacts displayed in the archaeology room. The shard, smooth and shiny, evoked a rush of memories, not my own, but my grandfather's"

--Connie Young Yu, Historical Advisor to the Market St. Collection

³I am grouping the artifact map along with the objects rather than the other texts because the information in the artifact map does not draw from or have a broader narration outside of the objects.

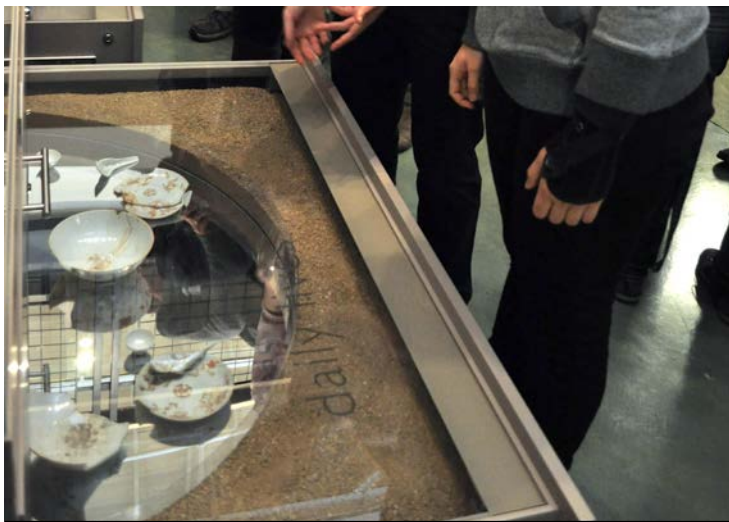
“These unearthed shards inspired me to do something, to involve the community in bringing this history to life.”

--Lilian Gong-Guy, Co-founder of Chinese Historical and Cultural Project

The demographic that includes the members of the Chinese Cultural and Historical Project may use the artifact map may be used more for guidance through the installation rather than for artifact information,, as they tend to be older and less familiar with the conventions of contemporary art. The outside text story of the community’s makeup and resilience seems more directed to an audience who is less directly connected with the collection’s history. I draw distinctions between artifacts and the outside text not to reify an object/word binary, but to show that “image” does not “[pull] together representations of the world” in the way that Little

Household scale: many homes, one home base

suggests (Little 2000:12). Image forces alternate representations of the world to share space, despite the fact they do not all come together.



Drawer opening to reveal table setting, Stanford

City Beneath the City’s household design is a more subtle organizing influence than the historical and aesthetic affect previously discussed. While the visitor’s pathway through the installation is shaped by

encountering more intimate spaces of

the home as one progresses, this is not called attention to, and may go unnoticed by most.⁴ Still, the household is a powerful metaphor that shapes installation features, such as the centrality of

⁴ This effect is also less pronounced in the Stanford version of the installation as the walkthrough had to be compressed since there was less space available.

the dining room table*. In "Between the Household and the World System: Social Collectivity and Community Agency in Overseas Chinese Archaeology," Voss (2008) interrogates historical archaeology's use of the term household when applied to sites like the Market Street Chinatown, where "residential arrangement were shaped by institutionalized discrimination, racial violence, labor practices, economic relations, and culturally specific strategies that Chinese immigrants used to promote their survival and well being" (37). Laws restricting the immigration of Chinese women also contributed to the de-emphasis of the family unit as the most important form of residential collectivity in Market Street Chinatown. Consequently, is the *City Beneath the City*'s adoption of household useful? What is embedded inside the term and the space "household" it creates?

The household in *City Beneath the City* occupies one space, but it is not one home, or family. The installation display draws artifacts from a range of excavation features and depths across the site. The space and time of Market Street Chinatown becomes compressed. The alcohol bottles may have come from a restaurant or bar, the stoneware jars from a store or home. This flexible expression of household is captured in Connie Young Yu's term "home base," which archaeological reports on Market Street Chinatown have often returned to in order to describe its regional pull. While approximately 1,000 people were residents of Market Street Chinatown, it was a cultural and economic center for an additional 2,000 Chinese who worked in the surrounding Santa Clara Valley (Voss 2005:430). By bringing together these different scales, *City Beneath the City* defamiliarizes the experience of the household. Reunification itself draws attention to the diversity of what is being brought together. The manner in which artifacts are displayed also defamiliarizes their everyday nature. In contrast to the traditional museum display of artifacts, the lack of glass at the ICA exhibition, the table projection (from the wall, inside a

drawer) and the unusual placement of artifacts within cases all contribute to a slight disorientation for the visitor. The processes of reunification and fracture happen continually, changing as different visitors encounter the installation.

Conclusion: active and ambivalent artifacts



Opening of Stanford installation, January 2013

In their exploration of 19th century Western Victorianism, Praetzellis and Praetzellis (2001) refer to the “live information system” surrounding artifacts -- the social work they perform, as well as their utilitarian functions (645). All of this dynamic social information is harder to access after

artifacts *become* artifacts, and are removed from their original context. Without discussing it explicitly, Praetzellis and Praetzellis also choose to use a series of highly descriptive narrative case studies to study the production of gentility. Storytelling and image are both ways to reintroduce artifacts into a rich system of meanings. An art installation has the benefit of being an embodied experience, but potentially less immersive than a fictional narrative because in the former so little of included details are foregrounded.

While there is an argument to be made about how the exposure to complex images is rewarding (as is great literature) whether we ferret out every allusion or not, it's hard to know how the installation's is being perceived by visitors without an investment in its production. The “Community Pages” comment forms that are available to fill out and hang on the wall of the Stanford Archaeology Center reveal positive impressions of the installation, with visitors

frequently sharing a personal anecdote about the transnational histories of their own families. Yet this is a small and select sample. In yet-to-be-published honors thesis, Stanford senior Meghan Gewerth undertook ethnographic observation of visitors at Market Street Chinatown Archaeology Project events. Her preliminary findings suggest that public archaeology days, where children and their families are able to handle artifacts in activities that mimic the archaeological process, involve higher levels of visitor interaction than at *City Beneath the City*. Handling artifacts is an unusual experience for the member of the public, however, and not often able to be replicated in art gallery or museological settings.

One audience in which the installation has noticeably produced high levels of engagement is the archaeologists and students involved in the Market Street Chinatown Archaeology Project. During the past decade, archaeologists have increasingly come to see their project as being parallel to that of contemporary artists (A short list would include Hall 2001, Renfrew 2003, Shanks 2011). Both archaeologists and contemporary artists are interested in understanding the human condition, often through the discarded elements of material culture. In a statement posted at the Stanford installation, Voss writes that the *City Beneath the City* “has profoundly disrupted [our normal] archaeological routines. Both artifacts and archaeologist became the objects of artistic scrutiny. We began to notice things we had not seen before.” This, too, has been my experience. Bringing art practice to the Market Street Chinatown collection also influences our approach to the collection outside of the installation. Seeing the artifacts within a larger context of image can be brought to further public education efforts, the data we collect on artifacts, and the questions we bring to them.

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