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## Factory and Chinese Mall, Catastrophe and Dreamworld



I have just opened a new document to begin writing this text on February 2, 2018, two days after the premiere of Hong Kong Exile’s *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3: For Three Visibly Chinese Performers* as part of PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, Vancouver.<sup>1</sup> In a different application window open to Facebook, I see that two friends have posted a *Guardian* news article with the headline “Amazon patents wristband that tracks warehouse workers’ movements.”<sup>2</sup> I’m writing this on my work-issued Apple Macbook Pro.

Hong Kong Exile, *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3: For Three Visibly Chinese Performers*, 2018, PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, Vancouver. Photo: Sepehr Samimi. Courtesy of Remy Siu.

The “Foxconn” in the work’s title refers to the factories of the Foxconn Corporation, which is the largest employer in China, boasting more than one million employees. Foxconn is best known for manufacturing Apple products, as well as for a spate of widely reported worker suicides beginning around 2010 due to extreme working conditions. The first suicides came just as Foxconn was manufacturing in overdrive to meet the launch of the Apple iPad.

*Foxconn Frequency, no. 3*, the last iteration of a project helmed by composer Remy Siu of the Vancouver-based collective Hong Kong Exile, is a musical work in which three performers each execute, simultaneously, a game-based score on a musical keyboard attached to a computer outfitted with a webcam and 3D printer. The score, which pits the three performers in

competition against one another, requires the performers to play a series of piano exercises—that Remy Siu calls “gestures”—on the keyboard that Remy Siu calls “gestures,” while the accuracy of their execution is tabulated in real time, visible to the audience on a giant screen behind the stage. The sequence of the gestures and exercises is unpredictable, so that the performers cannot practice the piece as a routine and must complete each task at high concentration.

The algorithm that determines the unpredictable sequence seems to be based on the poetry of Xu Lizhi, a Chinese Foxconn factory worker who committed suicide in Shenzhen in 2014. Xu Lizhi’s poems were collected posthumously by his friends and a selection was published in a Shenzhen newspaper; a larger selection of poems later appeared in English translation on the website Libcom.org.<sup>3</sup> *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3* continues a practice initiated in 2015 in the previous instalment of the project, which, as Remy Siu explains, used Xu Lizhi’s poems as “a structural blueprint to move through a series of dictations and testings.”<sup>4</sup> Here, stray lines and fragments from the poems, rendered in both Chinese and English translation, appear on the screen alongside real time tracking of scores. The relationship between the poems and the exercises is not immediately obvious. In fact, much of what happens in *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3* is mysterious, and this seems deliberate given the staging of the performance, which resembles a mid-2000s reality television game show in all its dystopian panoptic farce. Why should the audience have any better understanding of the black box than the performers-cum-workers? What we can solidly surmise is that the piece takes on the disciplining of factory workers’ bodies and attention and asks, through the competition and collaboration between the performers, what social forms labour organization might take in the competitive labour environments produced under neoliberalism.

Hong Kong Exile, *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3: For Three Visibly Chinese Performers*, 2018, PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, Vancouver. Photo: Sepehr Samimi. Courtesy of Remy Siu.



At the conclusion of the piece, the screen behind the stage shows three yellow objects that are not quite cubes, which the audience watched being printed out in real time during the performance, with the performers’ scores (or “failure count” as they are named on the screen) underneath their respective not-quite cubes. A perfect score of zero would have resulted in the 3D printer rendering a perfect cube. At the premiere, the scores were 119 for Hong Kong Exile member Natalie Tin Yin Gan, 54 for classically-trained new music

pianist Vicky Chow, and 118 for thirteen-year-old performer Andrei Chi Lok Koo, who, perhaps in accordance either with Canadian child labour laws or his bedtime, abruptly left the stage well before the conclusion of the



Hong Kong Exile, *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3: For Three Visibly Chinese Performers*, 2018, PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, Vancouver. Photo: Sepehr Samimi. Courtesy of Remy Siu.

performance. Even as the performers had at times during the performance visibly colluded in order to advance through the game (the duration of the piece is theoretically endless, and concludes only when the all exercises have been completed to the game's satisfaction), we are nonetheless left, depressingly, with metrics of efficiency and the pitting of workers against one another for trivial performance incentives.

The most obvious reference point for the *Foxconn Frequency* works is Cao Fei's 2006 video *Whose Utopia*, in which repetitive-stress injuries to the joints of real-life workers at the Osram lightbulb factory in Foshan are reimagined as double-jointed dancerly grace. But none of the high-minded poetics of Cao Fei's social practice art are present here; quite the opposite. Music is deadened and reduced to a battery of disciplinary tasks, which seem to trigger MIDI samples of cacophonous factory and industrial music-like sounds. The music, such as it is, at times recalls the netizen-produced YouTube music genre Black MIDI, which transcribes well-known pieces of music in scores featuring tens of thousands of extra notes and plays the resulting cacophonous compositions using piano-simulation software. But more often than not *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3* sounds like the bells and whistles of, again, a game show or a video game sans musical soundtrack. Within the *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3* machine, Xu Lizhi's poetry seems to be a surplus, unproductive attention paid to valueless goods. That the object the performers are so raptly engaged in manufacturing is only a little yellow cube is the piece's poignant critique of our consumer society—and perhaps a sly riposte to the task-based practices of minimalists such as Yvonne Rainer, Terry Riley, and Richard Serra.

However, *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3* is about more than just migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta and the games to which we devote our attentive resources on consumer electronic devices of their manufacture. It does more, even, than draw parallels between the neuro-biopolitics of mobile manual labour forces and the equally deterritorialized labour forces of the so-called attention economy, in which we stare at the same screens when we work and “relax.” Hong Kong Exile, as the collective's name suggests, also is deeply invested in exploring the Cantonese-Canadian condition, and here prompts us to ask whether the dreamworlds of Chinese-Canadian wealth are the inverted image of the factory worker's catastrophe. *Foxconn*

*Frequency, no. 3* takes on the tension between the piano child prodigy and the video game-playing slacker, and from this spectrum of Chinese adolescent behaviour opines on a set of quite different questions about discipline, attention, and productive and unproductive labour. Those questions, which have at their core the double consciousness of the immigrant or second-generation experience, confounded by the exceptional setting of the city that has long been and might still be accurately nicknamed “Hongcouver,” also form the theme of Hong Kong Exile’s collaboration with Chinese-Canadian playwright David Yee, *No Foreigners*, which debuted the week following *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3*.<sup>5</sup>

*No Foreigners*, directed by Hong Kong Exile’s Milton Lim, is set in an unnamed shopping centre in Canada whose stores predominantly conduct business in Cantonese. The play features a handful of interlocking stories that exploit the otherworldly setting of what the characters call “the Chinese mall” to Magical Realist ends. Surprisingly, for a play about the Chinese-Canadian experience, the title does not refer to Caucasian-Canadian racism or xenophobia, but rather a rebuke from a shopkeeper to a young, non-Cantonese-speaking second-generation Chinese man, who subsequently takes on the quest of “becoming Chinese.”

Milton Lim, *No Foreigners*, 2018, performance at The Cultch, Vancouver. Photo: Daniel O’Shea. Courtesy of Milton Lim.

Sharing the technological ingenuity of *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3*, *No Foreigners* features two mostly unseen actors, clad in black and each manning a workstation on stage but in the shadows of the action, voicing over a cast of characters played by figurines that they each manipulate on a series of miniature sets. Silhouettes of these sets, two at a time, are edited together in



real time and projected on a movie screen that serves as the real stage. The foregrounded assembly of the image, smoothed together to bear the soothing texture of mall fountain court LEDs, suggests complex distances between its characters, and their cultures and identities, mediated by the telepresence of telecommunications devices and popular media. *No Foreigners*’ Chinese mall, comprising these stitched-together tableaux, becomes the diaspora’s dream world (our ancestors, the play tells us, live and can be visited in a moth museum in the mall’s nether regions), in which, seemingly, any number of fictions can be reality so long as certain shared core identity practices (ranging from Chinese filial piety, to devotion to Hong Kong popular culture, to mainstream consumption of bootleg media) are adhered to. Frequently hilarious, the play’s highlight finds actor Derek Chan breaking the play’s theatrical fourth wall—as well as the electronic veil that is the play’s staging apparatus—walking into the theatre’s aisles so that his erstwhile “foreigner” character can prove his hard-won mastery of Chineseness by serenading the audience with Andy Lau’s “The Days We Spent Together” in pitch-perfect Cantonese and karaoke parlour histrionics.



The play's titular "foreigner" undergoes significant training and passes this and a number of other tests in order to earn his "citizenship" at the Chinese mall. This is a world away from the tone and stakes of *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3*, but here the two works find common ground in a system of values that is perhaps unique to the Hong Kong-Vancouver Chinese condition, in which Canada's assimilationist discourse of the model minority holds little weight, but in-between identities are created in an active poetics of tests and games—in pursuit of parental approval

on the one hand, and the diasporic tether of Hong Kong-sourced bootleg video games on the other. *No Foreigners'* exploration of the simultaneous strangeness and familiarity of Hong Kong's uncanny *doppelgänger* to its exiled subjects in Vancouver might seem oddly timed, given that Vancouver is in the midst of an unprecedented wave of immigration from mainland China. But in *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3*, Hong Kong Exile proposes the collective's project to be in pursuit of a wider net of affiliation, taking on its exiled subjects' relationship to Hong Kong's close Other, the Cantonese mainland manufacturing hub.<sup>6</sup> Vancouver ceases to be the global city that its international reputation suggests so much as a transnational network, constituted by the Chinese-Canadian characters in *No Foreigners*, the Hong Kong actors and pop stars whose media they consume, the "visibly Chinese" pianists of *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3*, the factory workers who inspired the score they perform, and me writing this on a Macbook Pro that those factory workers manufactured.

Milton Lim, *No Foreigners*, 2018, performance at The Cultch, Vancouver. Photo: Daniel O'Shea. Courtesy of Milton Lim.

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#### Notes

1. Hong Kong Exile, *Foxconn Frequency, no. 3: For Three Visibly Chinese Performers*, Performance Works, PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, Vancouver, January 31–February 2, 2018.
2. Olivia Solon, "Amazon patents wristband that tracks warehouse workers' movements," *The Guardian* (February 1, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jan/31/amazon-warehouse-wristband-tracking/>.
3. Li Fei and Zhang Xiaohui, "我来时很好，去时也很好," *Shenzhen Evening News* (October 10, 2014), A18; "The poetry and brief life of a Foxconn worker: Xu Lizhi (1990-2014)," *Nao's Blog*, October 29, 2014, [libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry/](http://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry/).
4. Remy Siu, "Artist's Statement," in ISEA Symposium Archives, <http://www.isea-archives.org/sample-page/isea2016/isea2016-art-events/isea2016-artists-statement-remy-siu-蕭逸南-vicky-chow-paul-paroccai-foxconn-frequency-no-2-for-one-visibly-chinese-performer/>.
5. Hong Kong Exile and fu-GEN Theatre, *No Foreigners*, Vancity Culture Lab, Vancouver, February 8–18, 2018.
6. The "close Other" is a term used by the art historian Piotr Piotrowski to distinguish the complex relationship of Eastern European cultures to the Western European enlightenment tradition from that of Western Europe's distant colonies in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. See Piotrowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the Avant-Garde," in *European Avant-Garde and Modernism, Studies*, eds. Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 49–58.