Royce Ng on his new work QUEEN ZOMIA

During the Kampnagel season opening, Hong Kong based artist Royce Ng will present the European premiere of his new work QUEEN ZOMIA (4th to 6th of October 2018). In a short interview, he answers some questions on the mythical persona of Olive Yang, global drug policies, an old theatrical illusion technique and the history of national states in South East Asia.

In your new work you use a 3D-hologram which is projected into a glass pyramid. How do you create these images and what is interesting to you in the use of these extraordinary media technologies?

The technology which I am using is actually incredibly old and points to the history of the theatre as a space of illusion. It is called the 'pepper's ghost' trick, which is basically a way of conjuring a hologram or spectre on the stage by using a combination of mirrors, lighting and reflections. It was used in phantasmagoria shows in Victorian England during the spiritualist crazes in the late 19th century. We're updating it by using projectors and 3D holographic plastic to turn my 3D-animations into holograms on the stage – which I, as the 'lecturer', can use as hallucinogenic materializations of my narrative.
How is Olive Yang’s biography connected to the structure of the “nation state” in Southeast Asia?

Essentially, I’ve chosen Olive Yang, the first opium warlord in Northeast Burma in the 1950’s, as a cipher to represent the binary divisions between the low lying valley states and the renegade ‘anarchistic’ populations living in the mountains at altitudes above 400 meters – in order to evade state power. Olive Yang ran the burgeoning opium trade, growing Poppys in the mountainous Kokang state on the border between the Shan states and Western China. She organized trade routes for the raw opium to be traded for gold in the markets of Tachileik, on the tri-state border between Thailand, Burma and Laos. Opium played a central role in the development of the modern Asian state. These illicit flows of narcotics gave the hill tribe people that Olive worked with and lived amongst a cash crop, which allowed them to (just barely) survive. However, the trail of state interests which ultimately benefited from the opium trade, state drug monopolies, licit and illicit taxes, becomes a medium which unites the state and those that try to live outside of it – subsumed within the labour relations of a proto-global capitalist drug economy. At the same time, it was not just various Asian states that benefited. A part of the performance QUEEN ZOMIA deals with how the US played a key role in funding Olive in her early days. The US saw her as an ally against the Southward communist pressure from China. They also supported her direct benefactors, the defeated Kuomingtang army retreating, like the hill tribes, to the impassable mountains of Northern Burma. It was the money and arms the US provided to Olive and the Kuomingtang in the early days of the cold war which allowed them to industrialize their Poppy plantations. Later, it was the pure grade heroin available to US soldiers fighting in the Vietnam war which ended up on the streets of US cities and led to the drug epidemic which would prompt Richard Nixon to declare a ‘war on drugs’ in 1973. I see this as a continuation of the opium wars between the East and West in the 19th century, which were also foundational moments in the formation of the modern Asian state.

What are your opinions on global drug policies today and is this topic something you want to continue working on?

I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about drugs – not just opium – but also psychedelics and their role vis a vis the state and culture in general. I was running a reading group with the Hong Kong based American anthropologist Gordon Matthews on psychedelics and technology, and what I’ve come to understand is that drugs are simply shortcuts to altered states of consciousness, spiritual, religious and liminal experiences which are at the core centre of most cultures throughout history. Think of the Eleusinian mysteries in Classical Greece, of the role of ayahuasca in Indian societies in Columbia, of opium in Asia, or Terrence McKenna’s ‘stoned ape’ theory of evolution. And of course the role of alcohol, the most dangerous of them all. Rather than seeing drugs as being pushed to the outer limits of society, I see them more and more as the absent center around which we structure our cultures. So, there will be continuing efforts to suppress drugs, and efforts to make them more accessible, but the nature of these experiences themselves can be accessed through many paths; meditation, death and artistic experience itself (in which I find myself humbly engaged). My interest at the moment is in continuing to explore their convergence through art.
What kind of material have you explored in your research for the project? Have you ever had the chance to meet or speak to Olive Yang or her friends and family personally?

I traveled to Thailand twice and tried to meet Olive Yang's son, who lives in Chiangmai. But I was unsuccessful, so I've slightly shifted the emphasis of the performance from a direct biography of Olive, which would have been difficult to do in the confines of a one hour performance anyway, to using her story as a way to talk about larger themes. While in Thailand, I tried to find opium but was also unsuccessful, though I did travel to the Golden Triangle, to the abandoned compound of the former drug lord Khun Sa, to the Kuomingtang village of Mae Salong on the Thai-Myanmar border, and visited a few opium museums in the region. I guess a part of the irony of my research – and with a bearing on the question of global drug policies today – was that it was ultimately easier to find opium in Berlin than in South East Asia, an aspect which I also speak about in the performance.

In general, we've tried our hardest to re-create the experience of taking opium through aesthetic means, manipulating images, colour, light, sound and atmosphere to create a completely immersive, sensory experience for the audience. It is meant to be an opium dream poem in the mode of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' or Thomas De Quincey's 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater', which I hope people will enjoy irrespective of whether the history interests them or not!

[Queer | [ISM]

*Interview conducted by Alina Buchberger (Kampnagel) via Email, produced for the Kampnagel-KOSMOS, September 2018*