

Book Review

William Yang: Stories of Love and Death
by Helena Grehan and Edward Scheer (Sydney:
NewSouth Publishing, 2016)

TEIK-KIM POK

I first encountered the work of William Yang as an undergraduate student when he undertook a development residency at UNSW in the year 2000. He presented to students a series of his slideshows (including *Blood Links, Shadows and Sadness*) in preparation for a major European tour. Nearly a decade later, in 2009, I attended a workshop facilitated by Yang and his long-term collaborator, Annette Shun Wah, at which six Asian-Australian individuals were invited to share and develop narratives springing from their grandmothers. This culminated in a slideshow showcase event called *Stories East and West*, an experiment that injected life into an up-and-coming company called Performance 4A. The company is now dedicated to developing unique performance experiences with a strong autobiographical flavour drawn from the lives of artists who identify as Asian-Australian. Its works include *Stories Then and Now* (Carriageworks, 2013) and *In Between Two* (Sydney Festival 2016) featuring musicians James Mangohig and Joel Ma. While mainly serving as co-dramaturg with Shun Wah on these projects, the role that Yang's single-minded exploration of the confessional mode has had in convincing stereotypically reserved individuals of Asian descent to open up cans of family worms for public consumption is undeniable. In *Stories of Love and Death*, Helena Grehan and Edward Scheer set out to acknowledge the breadth and impact of Yang's work through a study of his practice. Sensitive to Yang's own artistic sensibility, the chapters of the book simulate the slow-travelling camera lens in the hands of a photographer, zooming in and out of various iterations of his work, illuminating his unique sensibility.

This methodology begins with the book's cover, a black and white photograph of six-year old William, with a story snippet inscribed upon it in what appears to be Yang's own handwriting. This layering of material sets the tone for the book, which features pictographs scattered throughout. These pieces of image and text evoke personalised postcards of yesteryear and at the same time recognise the inextricable link between his verbal storytelling craft and how we view Yang. As one of many photographs featured in the book that Yang has not captured himself but definitely used in his slideshows, the cover image is a reminder of how his work does not merely serve as a showcase for his photography, but also makes evident his role and skill as a documentarian of images.

In the Introduction, Grehan and Scheer emphatically foreground the context in which we are asked to read Yang's significance as a gatherer of images. They advise readers unfamiliar with Yang's work to consider the role of the photographer in popular consciousness, nodding towards his role as a society photographer whilst reading him as both a committed and dissatisfied practitioner of self-portraiture and performance (15). Placing his work in an art-historical context they explain that his practice predates 'selfie' culture and participatory art and instead 'acts as a retort to the era ... in which the photograph becomes at once all-pervasive and largely redundant' (21). In contrast, the authors identify in Yang's work an element of emotional proximity that makes them feel part of Yang's extended family. For example, Scheer gives an account of thinking that Yang's sister Frances, based in Orange County, California, meant that he too had family in there (25).

The first chapter, 'Speaking, Acting, Narrating,' initially invites us to consider his live slideshows as focussed on advancing the form of spoken word narrative and image, and recalls his early training as playwright in the 1960s as the springboard for his storytelling craft. As one who has experienced Yang's work live, I can empathise with the serpentine approach employed by Grehan and Scheer in describing what Yang's persona and delivery achieves in drawing the audience in, and its relationship to postdramatic dramaturgy. In grappling with Yang's fluidity as artist, the writers name their critical dilemma as that of how to talk about his presence as, 'a combination of punk minimalism and exotic otherness'(40), a combination that they suggest ultimately facilitates a process of mutual recognition for spectators through relating 'events and gestures in terms of their external appearances ... leaving the selection of emotional register' (37) to the audience.

Also acknowledged in this first chapter is Yang's understated and profound activism in illuminating intersectional cultural concerns within an Australian social historical context. For example: negotiating his Chineseness across generations of his family in *Sadness and Bloodlinks*; recognising his sexuality and documenting the fight for justice for those whose lives and stories were threatened by the AIDS epidemic in *Friends of Dorothy*; and sharing the sense of possibility through the lives and struggles of key cultural figures in Sydney's artistic history in *My Generation*. Through the images he gathered, these projects all aimed to unsettle the impact of categorising forces upon such communities.

Next, the book examines the significance of Yang's conversion of his slideshows into filmed documentaries for broadcast and attendant move towards a more overt narrator role. The writers note that his choosing to be a visible and direct narrator within the frame had the effect of maintaining a degree of authorial continuity with his live shows. Responding to the fact that Yang chose in these broadcast features to dress in a 'sparkling waistcoat' (consistent with live performances), Grehan and Scheer observe that Yang may have embarked on a journey towards cult performance historian in a way that was deliberately 'overtly theatrical', animated and enthusiastic (77). The writers attribute the greater sense of urgency conveyed through heightened theatricality to the march of time that threatens to diminish the memory of the impact of the AIDS epidemic. They restate

the significance of *Friends of Dorothy*, for example, as an uncompromising response to the growing complacency enabled by advances in antiretroviral drug treatment. Given the backdrop of the contemporary struggle for the recognition of same-sex relationships and the recent devastating acts of bigotry-inspired violence in Orlando, the writers' embrace of the power and relevance of *Dorothy* for its directness is timely. Similarly, while the Australian arts scene faces its largest cuts to public funding, *My Generation* offered a salacious fly-on-the-wall look into a creative ecology in its infancy and in what seem to be much less conservative times.

Yang does not spare himself or his family from his uncompromising approach. *Bloodlinks*, the most frequently updated of all his works, faithfully traced the ongoing development of his family tree. While Grehan and Scheer also consider it Yang's most encompassing definition of family—including gay, artistic, Chinese, Australian, audiences and social media contacts (98)—they also note the effect of the digital noise that *Bloodlinks'* final montage of faces has in 'removing any capacity for recognition or connection' (101), accepting that it is one Yang's most chaotic works but key in exposing his methodology—a process of recognition that follows: 'individuation, self-discovery and reconnection'(100).

In the penultimate chapter, Grehan and Scheer delve further into the mechanics of Yang's photography performing on its own. The writers remind us that his work hails from the era of the analogue image, and that reliability and certainty are expectations that Yang plays with (112). Again, the writers are at pains to position Yang's careful composition as both crossing genres of photography and a rebuff to the practice of selfies. The pictographs employed throughout the book, where handwritten script is applied to unfamiliar figures to enforce an intimate moment shared in confidence, stays close to Yang's storytelling persona. That many of these images feature male nudes reveals the sense in which the camera allowed him to express his own muted desire. Grehan and Scheer observe that this confessional mode persists in Yang's documentation of family rituals and relationships, most poignantly in the *About My Mother* series of his mother. Once again the authors observe that Yang seems to be communicating another form of yearning, one that explores 'the inevitable entanglements of affect, of love and loathing and finally of loss' (133) that emerge from the strained relationship he inscribes outside the frames of these pictures. The last type of photography that cements the legitimacy of Yang's gaze and the permission that was granted him is his documentation of Sydney's mainstage and his access to celebrity. Pictures of Geoffrey Rush, Cate Blanchett backstage and Pina Bausch smoking in rehearsals extend his inquiry into what is and is not performance. The writers note that we are yet again granted a special access to another intimate space, one that allows 'art and life ... to speak at the same time (144).

The concluding chapter grapples with Yang choosing to extend his practice through micro-blogging on Facebook. While Grehan and Scheer note a sense of completion with his live performing, they cast his foray into social media sharing as a natural progression into a more durational practice, one that allowed him to perform another type of subterfuge. The authors explore how Yang used the platform as 'both a repository and as

a space for the development of “new cultural mythologies” (165), suggesting that in his latter years the global network of friends and connections he accumulated could partake in his performance at their own convenience. One gets the sense that the writers firmly believe that like every iteration of Yang’s photographic and performance, his embrace of technology is inseparable from his ability to stay relevant and influential, driven by his persistent fight to remain in the present. This is a point that Grehan and Scheer reinforce through the final human-centred image in the book, of 71-year-old William bearing a wide unguarded grin, waiting to blow out candles on a birthday cake presented to him by relatives in his native Queensland.

Grehan and Scheer have compiled a lucid and heartfelt response to Yang’s body of work, striking a taut balance between lionising and deconstructing the effect of his broad influence, making both an engaging introductory reader and patiently-considered retrospective.

TEIK-KIM POK is a performance artist who has created numerous solo works and worked collaboratively with companies such as Gravity Research Institute, Theatre Kantanka and Branch Nebula. He is also known as the Dance Instructor in Deborah Kelly’s award-winning *Tank Man Tango*, and lead actor in Platon Theodoris’ *Alvin’s Harmonious World of Opposite*. Most recently, Teik-Kim was involved in developing new and diverse playwriting voices with Playwriting Australia. He is currently undertaking an MFA in Cultural Leadership at NIDA.