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BASIL ALZERI (center) with participants of his performance *Let me tell you about my day, will you tell me about yours?*, 2016, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Toronto, 2016. Photo by Dean Tomlinson. Copyright and courtesy AGO.

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ANIMATING THE ANTIQUATED: COLLECTIVE PERFORMANCES WITH SONG DONG'S COMMUNAL COURTYARD

BY SHELLIE ZHANG

Last October, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) announced that it would be mounting an exhibition to showcase its newest acquisition by Beijing-based conceptual artist Song Dong, who is known for his multi-piece installations and performances that deal with the everyday. Comprised of 100 vintage Chinese wardrobe doors, Dong's seminal installation *Wisdom of the Poor: Communal Courtyard* (2011–13) transformed the AGO's Signy Eaton Gallery into a series of walkways and rooms reminiscent of Beijing's traditional communal *hutongs*.

Organized in conjunction with the Song Dong acquisition, the AGO presented a series of five, three-week-long residencies that took place over the course of the exhibition, inviting local artists to create a response to Song Dong's *Communal Courtyard* and transform the open space within the labyrinth of wardrobe doors. Out of the various parallel programming that were organized, this proved to be a highly successful strategy for captivating a diverse audience. Standouts from the artist residencies were the performances by artists Basil AlZeri and Annie Wong.



ANNIE WONG (center) during her performance *Take-Home Factory Work*, 2016, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Toronto, 2016. Photo by Leah Maghanoy. Copyright and courtesy AGO.

Toronto-based artist Basil AlZeri examines the socio-political dynamics of the family and its intersection with cultural practices. Drawing on the necessities of everyday life and the visibility of labor as sites of exploration, his work aims to facilitate a space for empathy through gestures of inclusivity and generosity. For his residency project, AlZeri presented *Let me tell you about my day, will you tell me about yours?* (2016), a performance piece where gallery visitors are encouraged to share everyday private events in a semi-public space within Song Dong's *Communal Courtyard*. Drawing from the observation that most people live very isolated lifestyles in metropolitan cities, AlZeri created a space where audiences can share their stories. In the center of *Communal Courtyard* was a small circle of chairs, a microphone and a display of large oranges. Periodically, visitors were invited by AlZeri to join in the performance, sometimes they were lured with a tempting piece of orange, a reoccurring material in the artist's practice. Once seats were filled, AlZeri led by example and casually described the details of his day, beginning from when he woke up in the morning to when he sat in his chair in the Gallery. Visitors listened attentively in this confessional group that resembled support circles as each participant described the monotonous details of their day. When participants arrived at a time or event in their day that they did not wish to share, they were given the option to speak into the microphone which muffled their speech into an incoherent garble, acting as a self-censoring device. In this gesture, visitors were granted privacy but also the option to voice details that are often kept to themselves. The pace of the gallery seemed to slow down as contributors were drawn into each other's day.

Staging *Let me tell you about my day, will you tell me about yours?* involved multiple layers of exhaustion, from working with the Gallery's conservation department to acquire the oranges, to listening patiently and attentively to strangers' routines one after the other. The emotional labor involved behind the seemingly simple execution of the work is how AlZeri takes on the weight of the public in order to lighten their burdens, creating small interactions that momentarily break down social walls and limitations.

Annie Wong's project "Quotidian Chinese" (2016) was the last work featured in the AGO's *Communal Courtyard* residency series. In the same way that Song Dong's installation evokes feelings of sentimentality through personal and shared histories, Wong elaborates on these themes from a highly personal yet collective approach. Spaced out over several weeks, "Quotidian Chinese" is a series of five performances that the artist called "moving portraits" where she presents everyday rituals that are practiced by a generation of older Chinese immigrants to younger, Canadian-born Chinese. The series begins with two works based off of intimate and biographical customs that incorporate members of her family.



In *Take-Home Factory Work* (2016) Wong portrays the tedious task of assembling articles of clothing on a sewing machine to reference her mother's first job as a refugee, while in *Wontons and Warnings* (2016) the artist examines the linguistic barriers faced between the children of immigrants and their parents.

As a first-generation Chinese-Canadian, Wong's *Wontons and Warnings* holds particular resonance as the artist has expressed difficulty in communicating with her mother, particularly when her family would gather to make dumplings. To reflect upon this tension, her performance invited visitors to select a word from the English dictionary, which she and her sister would then attempt to translate in broken Cantonese to their predominantly Chinese-speaking mother. Audiences from various cultural backgrounds gathered to partake in the learning experience while sharing personal anecdotes. The evening of my visit was also when several Chinese tour groups visited the gallery. Visitors who spoke Chinese were also invited to join in on the translation efforts. The piece of the dictionary was then cut up and folded into a paper dumpling. I asked Wong's mother in Mandarin if this performance was tiring to which she replied that it was enjoyable to be involved in her daughter's work. It is rare to see performances where the family of the artist is directly involved. In this case, it would appear that Wong has successfully engaged not only the public, but has also created a bonding experience for her own family. Wong will continue "Quotidian Chinese" by expanding the project to include the local seniors in the community.

From mid to end July, *Communal Courtyard* will be the site of a "mahjong master's competition" in partnership with University Settlement, while tai chi practitioners and Chinese chess players will activate its space over the weekends.

ANNIE WONG (center) during her performance *Take-Home Factory Work*, 2016, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Toronto, 2016. Photo by Leah Maghanoy. Copyright and courtesy AGO.



The paper dumplings made during **ANNIE WONG's** performance *Wontons and Warnings*, 2016, at Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2016. Photo by Shellie Zhang for ArtAsiaPacific.

Communal Courtyard and the last of its artist-in-residence series is on view at [Art Gallery of Ontario](#), Toronto, until July 17, 2016.

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