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Family Politics

John Clang BEING TOGETHER

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed ... a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.

Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* (1967)

Text by
David Spalding

Contrapuntal Visions

*Why do we constantly turn our prows to distant shores?
When do we know when to leave, and when to return?
Could we really, really bear to leave those we
knew behind, even if we no longer loved them?*

Wena Poon, *Lions in Winter* (2007)

Being Together (2010–12), a two-part photographic series by artist John Clang, uses everyday technologies to elide the geographical distances between relatives living in different parts of the world. To create the work, participants—mothers and daughters, grandsons and uncles—gather in front of their laptops and webcams as Skype video-conferencing software links family members in two (or more) places in real time. Sitters on each side of the call carefully position themselves to make room for their missing loved ones. Finally, the simulcast video from one household is projected within the other. This act of technologically assisted bilocation temporarily collapses the distinction between near and far, juxtaposing projected and actual bodies side by side in a ghostly digital homecoming. Families participating in Clang's work must resist the temptation to interact and instead remain still and silent, posing according to the conventions of studio photography. The resulting family portraits, produced as mid-scale archival prints, capture Clang and his subjects in the moments when their longings are allayed by fleeting instances of reunification.

For Clang, a Singaporean based in New York for the last 15 years, *Being Together* has its origins in being apart. The project grew from the emotional conflicts the artist has experienced while living abroad: the wish to embrace the filial piety expected of an ethnically Chinese eldest son; the guilt of living so far from Singapore; the shock of watching one's parents age via the time-lapsed experience of annual visits home—in short, the desire to be in both places at once, without ever having to choose. *Being Together* provides Clang

with a solution by opening up a third space in which he, his parents and his brother can all commune through the comingling of image and flesh. Foucault named such spaces 'heterotopias': areas capable of bringing together 'in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible', as well as 'slices of time ... open[ing] onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies'.³ If, as Foucault suggests, we are living in an epoch of simultaneity and juxtaposition, Clang is an artist for our times.

After completing five photographs of himself with his own family, in 2011 Clang expanded *Being Together* to include 40 additional images of other Singaporeans who found themselves divided from loved ones by time zones and national borders. Singaporeans are increasingly looking outside of their own country in search of economic and educational opportunities. As of February 2015, approximately 200,000 Singaporeans were living overseas, while a 2009 survey conducted by Singapore Polytechnic revealed that, if given the chance, more than 50% of youths between 15 and 29 years old would migrate abroad.⁴ Such conditions have shaped the second instalment of *Being Together*, a collection of photographs that merge two or more domestic interiors, as diasporic Singaporeans in New York, Paris, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong and elsewhere are reunited with their families back home. That these cities are hubs of transnational capital is no coincidence. As sociocultural anthropologist Aihwa Ong has written about wealthy, diasporic Chinese subjects, the mobility of many of Clang's sitters both uproots the family and increases its importance, since 'their subjectivity is at once deterritorialized in relation to a particular county, though highly localized in relation to family'.⁵

Though Clang and the other subjects in *Being Together* are not exiles in any political sense of the word, the artist's prolonged distance from home has produced a sensibility that revolves around both highlighting and closing the gaps between two worlds. As Edward Said has written:



Ho Family (Seattle, Telok Blangah), 2011.
© John Clang, courtesy of Pékin Fine Arts

Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal ... For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are visible, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.⁶

As if to emphasise the contrapuntal aspect of the work, throughout *Being Together*, Clang leaves the seams of his suturing process deliberately exposed. In the photographs, the dark shadows cast by the figures stationed in front of the projections contrast sharply with the washed-out colours of the on-screen visitors. Evidence of Clang's crude staging could easily be erased through digital editing. Instead, it highlights for viewers the fact that these are not ordinary portraits but the result of a double vision, one that sees the world's capitol as screens onto which Singapore can be projected and produced, one that envisions 'home' as a heterotopia where distant bodies (almost) touch.

While evoking the spirit photography that swept through the US eastern seaboard during the late 19th century, Clang's *Being Together* is more aligned to a legacy of contemporary works through which diasporic, exiled or otherwise estranged artists have attempted to connect with their families, often using superimposed and projected images to bridge gaps that have kept them apart. Influenced by the writings of psychiatrist R. D. Laing, in 1970 the American artist Stephen Laub began *Relations*, a series of performances in which he sought to situate himself within a family history that had been erased by the Holocaust but preserved on film. Audiences watched as Laub, dressed in white, stood before life-size slide projections made from family photos taken in pre-war Central and Eastern Europe. Adjusting his position until he fit as seamlessly as possible into the spaces occupied by the photos' original sitters,

Laub realised his desire to see himself—and to be seen—within the photographic record of his family's otherwise obliterated past.

During the 1990s, Beijing artist Song Dong created a cycle of related projects that use video projections, photography and an acute sense of site to span the emotional distance separating the artist from his father, Song Shiping. In the first of several works, *Touching My Father* (1998), Song Dong tried to satiate his desire for closeness by projecting an image of his own hand onto his father's body; the weightless touch of his digital caress substitutes for physical contact. In *Father and Son at the Ancestral Temple* (1998), a temporary video installation designed for Beijing's Imperial Ancestral Temple (where sacrificial ceremonies were held to honour of the imperial family's forefathers throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties), Song Dong projected images of himself and his father, shot in the style of standard identification photos, onto two of the temple's imposing interior columns; on a third, central, column the faces of the two men were superimposed into an eerie composite as they were heard reciting their autobiographies. Though this work, Song Dong tried to understand, valorise and ultimately merge with his father, locating his family story within a space embodying the grandeur of China's dynastic, Confucian past.

While Laub and Song combine physical and phantasmal bodies in order to make contact with family, Brooklyn-based artist David Horwitz's recent project, *The Distance of a Day* (2013),⁷ is linked to Clang's *Being Together* in another way. Both artists focus not on bringing together past and present but in thinking about our actions as unfolding simultaneously. To create *The Distance of a Day*, Horwitz asked his mother to witness and record (via her iPhone) the sunset on the Palos Verdes Peninsula in Los Angeles, near where the artist grew up; at the exact same time, Horwitz was in the Maldives, on the opposite side of the earth, watching and recording the sunrise over the Laccadive Sea. The work, which presents both videos side-by-side on two iPhones, measures a day as a spatial, rather than temporal, experience. As a result, the work encourages viewers to rethink their connections to loved ones living elsewhere.

Rather than being undone by the vast stretches of space between us, with the help of Horwitz and Clang we can begin to see ourselves and our loved ones as networked points within shifting, but connected, constellations in which events unfold in tandem. Horwitz and his mother may not be together in Los Angeles, but, like the sitters in Clang's *Being Together*, like all of us, they are together on this earth. If framed properly, that realisation can be profoundly comforting.

1 Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces,' trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* (1986), vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 22–27 (original publication 1967/1984).
2 Wena Poon, *Lions in Winter* (Singapore: MPH Group Publishing, 2007). Quoted in Eddie Tay, 'A Singaporean diaspora?', *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* (2008), vol. 7, No. 2, www.qlrs.

3 com/critique.asp?id=620 (18 August 2013).
4 Foucault, op. cit.
5 See *Singapore Business Review* (2015), 1 February; Kelvin Teo, 'Of migration and the Singaporean diaspora', *The Kent Ridge Common* (2009), 14 April, <http://kentridgecommon.com/?p=2544> (18 August 2013).

6 Aihwa Ong, 'On the edge of empires: flexible citizenship among Chinese in diaspora', *Positions* (1993), vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 771–772.
7 Edward Said, 'Reflections in exile', *Granta* (1984), No. 15, pp. 171–172.
8 This work was brought to my attention by *Photoworks Annual* editor Benedict Burbridge.



Tye Family (Paris, Tanglin), 2012.
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