



The Form of Non-meaning: Race, Sex, Suicide, and the Art of Ren Hang

This paper examines the burden of meaning imposed on the racialized body through a reading of the work of Chinese queer photographer Ren Hang. Thinking through the insistent ascription of political significance to Ren's images—over and against his professed indifference to both politics and interpretation—the paper sets out to expose the limits of frameworks that bind the aesthetic works and cultural practices of minoritized subjects to narratives of recovery and the logic of repair. Animated by an ethico-political interest in seeing the queer/racialized body as always involved in a process of restoration, popular readings of Ren's work fail to account for the negativity introduced by Ren's investment in aesthetic operations that leave the body in pieces, disarticulated, castrated, reduced to form and geometry, and disappeared into metonymic chains. In so doing, they also miss the way sexuality emerges in Ren's work, not as the expression of desires set free, but as the effect of a meaningless cut, a loss that gets added. It is this sense of loss, I suggest, that also ties sexuality in Ren's work to that which is absolutely heterogenous to the subject: death. Reflecting on Ren's public battle with depression and his suicide in 2017, I consider the shared interpretive pressures placed on the racialized body and queer death, and reassert the importance of addressing the violence that inheres within the structures of meaning-making on which contemporary analyses of race and sexuality (among other categories of social difference) have come to depend.

BOBBY BENEDICTO is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies and the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at McGill University. He is the author of *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and has published widely in journals such as *differences*, *Postmodern Culture*, *GLQ*, *Society & Space*, and *Social Text*, among others. He is currently completing his second monograph, *Fatal Sex: Queer of Color Negativity and the Erotics of Death*.

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Contact Tyrone S. Palmer, Ph.D., Co-Director of the of Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory Certificate with event questions at tspalmer@wesleyan.edu.