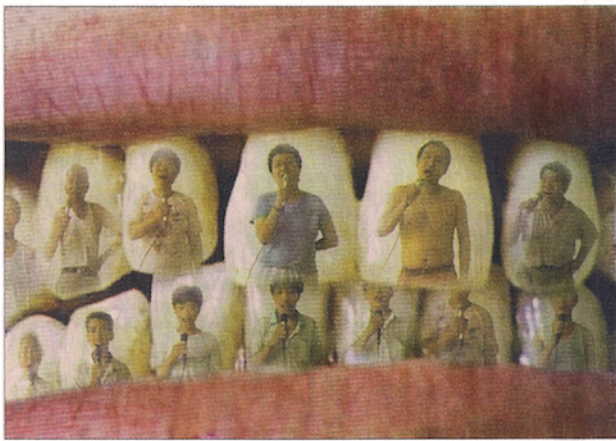


KARAOKE CULTURE

Wang Gongxin's *Kara Oke* shows Chinese karaoke singers on the Beijing-based artist's teeth.

Humiliating music makes amusing art

Japanese-skyscraper-mashing monsters like Godzilla don't terrify me half as much as the sight of some blotto junior executive in a karaoke bar mumbling tunelessly through the Neil Diamond songbook.

This fear goes further than any projection of my own inadequacies. The instant I see the karaoke mike stand and the video screen looming behind it like Big Brother's cyclops eye I feel the pressure to produce — or else. It's worse than that. I sense the presence of a Gitmo-like torture apparatus; heavily wired, enormously intrusive and bent on humiliation.

Maybe that's just me, though. "Empty Orchestra" at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Hart House at the University of Toronto offers a substantially different picture — for the most part. The month-long karaoke-based exhibition is a surprisingly benign, heavily ironic and sometimes acerbically funny investigation into the spectacle of watching complete strangers sing agonizingly off-key while backed by pre-recorded original arrangements of a hit pop song.

Even better, "Empty Orchestra" — the literal translation of "karaoke" from the Japanese — provides a provocative forum for five emerging artists to view the phenomenon beyond its familiar Holiday Inn context. Along the way, the show offers a thoroughly considered rebuttal of the entire *Canadian Idol* state of mind and its dream of plastic musical perfection.

"Karaoke is a way of resisting the perfect ideal of the perfect performance that we've seen through the mass media," says Maiko Tanaka, a co-curator along with Heather Keung. "Each individual singer reinterprets the music, performing alone in a not-perfect, not-prescribed way of singing and acting. It's a celebration of amateurism. Through its connection to cultural and social identity, karaoke becomes a form of resistance to the technology which tells you what to sing and how to sing it."

That's only some of the good news to emerge from the exhibition's five newly designed, darkened karaoke chambers, which the visitor enters only by passing by the luridly brilliant sign reading "Tchang Tchou," as part of Montreal artist Karen Tam's stylized entrance to her installation, *Tchang Tchou Karaoke Lounge* (2008).

Tan's past work, deadpan cheeky and poignant by turns, draws directly from her experiences with the Canadian Chinese diaspora. Her karaoke lounge follows suit, displaying one of the artist's ornate paper cutouts on one wall, with subdued, atmospheric lighting and a pair of video monitors offering Chinese-pop hits such as "Only You," as sung by The Platters. In any real-life situation — if karaoke ever gets close to being part of real life — the Chinese matrons taking the afternoon off to visit their local karaoke lounge would probably be unaware that "Only You" was ever sung in anything but Chinese.

"There's always that guilty pleasure aspect to karaoke," Tanaka points out. "It's a huge entertainment engine. But we've also enjoyed karaoke as a social pastime,



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as something that's close to our Asian background. We've grown up with having karaoke parties in the basement, where it was a way for our parents, our immigrant parents, to have a connection with home, of being able to sing the old songs from the old country."

Karaoke also presents a means of social commentary, particularly in the eyes of Wang Gongxin, with his genius for the comic-grotesque. For *Kara Oke* (2000), individual Chinese karaoke singers are shown on one of the Beijing-based artist's teeth, each singer bellowing a single toneless sound. As we watch Gongxin's fleshy mouth in an extreme close-up — you can count every hair follicle on his upper lip — his pink Godzilla-sized tongue appears as if to scoop the singers down his throat.

"Gongxin is very critical of karaoke as a liberating, progressive commodity," says Tanaka. "The culture of leisure is still new to China, where (karaoke) is brought in an example of a progressive society. To (Gongxin) it's a self-indulgent activity. You're not really singing to friends. He's critical of something that's supposed to be liberating."

Karaoke's capacity to leave the singer at a distance from his uncaring audience is explored in Candice Breitz's *Karaoke* (2000), a video installation featuring a series of monitors arranged in a tight circle in a claustrophobia-inducing darkened room. None of the individuals shown singing their heavily accented version of "Killing Me Softly," the '70s Roberta Flack hit, has English as a first language. The resulting cacophonous impression is somewhat akin to visiting the United Nations basement after a bad day in international relations.

Karaoke's visual convention and technologies are explored in Christian Jankowski's *The Day We Met* (2003), where the artist is shown in a rather tacky domestic drama instead of the stock, amateurish generic travel video traditionally used as a backdrop behind the scrolling song lyrics. In *Classical Music Karaoke* (2006), Tokyo-based artist Ichiro Tanaka has scrolled line after line of phonetic symbols — you'd swear they were claw prints left by some large, ungainly bird — allowing the viewer to mouth nonsense syllables along to Tchaikovsky or Rossini.

"Karaoke has always been an interesting way to find out about your friends," says Tanaka, picking up a microphone. Keung immediately does the same.

Within seconds they're both singing and bopping along with "Islands in the Stream" by Dolly Parton. For a few seconds in this karaoke heaven and hell, they're fans, not curators.

"Karaoke tells you how your friends express themselves," Tanaka says during a break, back to her serious self again.

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