Blackbirds and Growing Pains: A Conversation with Rutherford Chang

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Since his installation of We Buy White Albums at New York City’s Recess Gallery in 2013, Houston-born artist Rutherford Chang has garnered international media attention, appearing in such publications as the New York Times and the Guardian. We Buy White Albums is a collection and display of now 944 copies of The Beatles’s seminal 1968 White Album, which was designed by the English pop artist Richard Hamilton. Although Chang’s name is now synonymous with We Buy White Albums, this work certainly does not define his rich and expanding body of work. Chang continues to examine the crossovers between China and North America, drawing his attention to how and why cultural appropriation operates. I had the opportunity to discuss this and other areas of interest with Chang.

Matthew Ryan Smith: I’d like to begin by discussing We Buy White Albums, arguably your most recognizable work. To date you’ve collected and displayed 944 copies of The Beatles’ White Album, a double album originally released in November of 1968. In his review for Rolling Stone Magazine, Jann Wenner writes that the White Album is the “perfect product and result of everything that rock and rolls means and encompasses. . . . The impact of it is so overwhelming that one of the ideas of the LP is to contain every part of extant Western music through the all-embracing medium of rock and roll.” What drew you to the White Album?

Rutherford Chang: I became interested in the White Album when I got my second copy. That’s when I realized that every copy has aged uniquely and tells a story through the stains, writing, and wear picked up over the years.

Matthew Ryan Smith: As you well know, the seminal British pop artist Richard Hamilton designed the jacket of the White Album as a cheeky response to the abstruse cover of The Beatles’s previous album, Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. Hamilton must have anticipated that his design would wither and fray and discolour over time. Looking over the jackets, it becomes clear that there is nothing white about the White Album at all.

Rutherford Chang: The entirely white cover makes any signs of aging especially apparent. This set of white squares, once identical around forty-five years ago, have since become cultural artefacts bearing the marks of their individual histories.
Matthew Ryan Smith: Who are the “we” in *We Buy White Albums*?

Rutherford Chang: The installation takes form as a record store, though one that only buys albums, and one album in particular. The albums are arranged in bins by serial number, and a neon sign hangs in the window advertising: “We Buy White Albums.”
Matthew Ryan Smith: You showed an iteration of *We Buy White Albums* at Recess Gallery, New York City, in March 2013. From my experience, there is a real sense of discovery and excitement when combing through used records, or used books for that matter, and you’ve created that sense here by allowing your audience to examine each jacket for themselves. How important is this process of adventure or discovery to your work?

Rutherford Chang: Browsing and listening to the collection, which is how people are accustomed to interact with records, is the best way to really experience the unique qualities of each copy.

Matthew Ryan Smith: So, you would argue that not only the album covers differ, but their sounds differ as well?

Rutherford Chang: Yes, every album sounds slightly different due to the physical nature of the technology. Vinyl discs continuously accumulate scratches, dust, and other imperfections, changing how they play over time.

Matthew Ryan Smith: I agree with you completely; anyone familiar with vinyl knows that play is also wear. Would you say that the works are sensuous as well? Certainly the work is visual; it’s tactile, it’s auditory, and, of course, it’s olfactory. The albums smell of mould, of mildew, but this is part of their “character” and perhaps even charm or allure. Of course, and we tend to name such imperfections “character,” but to a collector, character is a signifier of disrepair.

Rutherford Chang: The albums are in the condition in which I received them. The ripped seams, tattered plastic sleeves, mould, and odour all reflect the varying personalities of previous owners. Traditional collectors strive for pristine condition, but in my case the so-called “damage” is particularly what I find interesting.

Matthew Ryan Smith: As you well know, vinyl records are enjoying a resurgence. Although music enthusiasts have collected them for many years, the millennial generation has recently turned its attention to vinyl. Part of this turn seems to be a result of the idea that the MP3 is an intangible, non-physical format. To hold a vinyl record in your hands, to mull over its artwork and drop the needle on it is an experience worlds apart from the familiar click of a mouse. Moreover, to obtain a record you probably buy it, whereas MP3s tend to circulate on the Internet through illegal downloading. Do you see your work as being part of this larger cultural resurgence of vinyl?

Rutherford Chang: I agree that tangibility is at the core of vinyl collecting in the digital era. In the case of my collection, where I have amassed identical yet unique copies of the same album, the physicality of the medium is especially apparent.
Matthew Ryan Smith: When I first saw We Buy White Albums, I immediately thought of Robert Rauschenberg's Erased De Kooning Drawing, of 1953. I suppose it has something to do with the gesture of appropriation that both Rauschenberg and the previous owners of the albums have created by altering the album jacket in some way, either by signing their name or doodling on it. Is Rauschenberg's erasure similar to the album's previous owner transforming Hamilton's design? Do you find anything destructive in this gesture? After all, it is an artwork.

Rutherford Chang: Sure, they are both ways of personalizing another's artwork. In a way, the whiteness of the covers invite creative addition, but of course no one could have ever foreseen all the stoned doodles and writing that ended up on these "canvases."

Matthew Ryan Smith: Do you forge any connections between The Beatles, the White Album, and race or ethnicity?

Rutherford Chang: I know Charles Manson had some strong feelings on this subject, but I don't draw any connections.

Matthew Ryan Smith: What about the work in relation to collaboration? I would argue that it approaches the relational aesthetics model, which Nicolas Bourriaud loosely defines as the process of social collaboration, where "[e]ach particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to
other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum." One of the problems with the relational aesthetics model, something Claire Bishop has stressed rather convincingly, is that it emphasizes social merit rather than aesthetic merit. Do you reject this connection, and, if so, how do you move away from mere social collaboration into a place of aesthetic criticality?

**Rutherford Chang:** The process of how the albums themselves, being the material I am working with, have matured is certainly a social collaboration. But to collect hundreds of copies is my aesthetic decision. How the collection has been organized and presented is what brings meaning beyond the individual albums themselves.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** This "aesthetic decision" that you speak of harks back to the artist's multiple, an idea that you've reconstituted or reconceptualized—rather than producing objects yourself, you've appropriated others to tender new forms and display practices. Artists have exploited multiplicity and repetition since Warhol. Do you see Warhol or other artists resonating in the *We Buy White Albums* project?

**Rutherford Chang:** Yes, I think about Warhol often—and about how he saw cultural phenomena. He had a great sense of humour.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** He certainly took the piss out of people—out of art, so to speak—and must have had a laugh while doing so. What appeals to you about Warhol, exactly?

**Rutherford Chang:** Warhol knew how to tell the truth and tell a joke at the same time.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** Now, if you don't mind I'd like to move on to a different work, the installation *Boon Propaganda*. In effect, it makes similar use of the multiple. Here you've appropriated twelve bullhorns from street vendors in China, laid them symmetrically on the ground, and played the recorded advertisements they contain. And, again, you've engaged with sound. Are these works as much about sound art as they are about sculpture?

**Rutherford Chang:** I wasn't really thinking about sound art versus sculpture. I just couldn't ignore these things that were blasting noise all over Beijing.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** How come? Why did this phenomenon resonate so strongly for you?

**Rutherford Chang:** Well, they are so loud and invasive that it's really impossible to ignore them. To me they represent the new marketplace in
China, where the developing competitive landscape lends to such direct and blunt forms of advertisement.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Do you think of yourself as a sound artist in any way? I ask this because sound art, by its very definition, employs sound as a generator of meaning. It seems to me, at least, that works such as these place emphasis on sound as much as they do on the object itself.

Rutherford Chang: The works are rearrangements of cultural products, so the inherent qualities of the original materials appear in the work. In these particular cases, I am working with objects that make sound, so the two are inseparable.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Would you describe these works as a sculptural event with sound elements?

Rutherford Chang: I don’t usually think about works in terms of medium, but, rather, the cultural meaning of the material.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Yes, but what happens during this transformation from a specific commercial meaning in China to a specific cultural meaning in North America?

Rutherford Chang: This piece has a commercial and cultural meaning specific to a period in China’s development. It is in a way an artefact of
urban China in the early 2000s, just as *We Buy White Albums* is an artefact of North American popular music in the late 1960s.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** In my view, *We Buy White Albums* and *Boom Propaganda* point to accumulation—accumulation as waste, as noise, and as pollution.

**Rutherford Chang:** Accumulation is a way to accentuate already inherent qualities.

**Matthew Ryan Smith:** How so?

**Rutherford Chang:** Putting together multiples creates layers and shows differences and variations that may otherwise be overlooked.

Matthew Ryan Smith: If we could, I'd like to move to another work that engages a fascinating and similar crossover between Chinese popular culture and North American popular culture, namely, *Cheng Zhang De Fan Nao (Growing Pains)*. As I understand it, *Growing Pains* was one of the first North American television programs to be aired in China during the 1980s, a period of intense economic development. In the work you've dubbed the voices of Chinese actors over those of the program's stars such as Alan Thicke and Kirk Cameron in the pilot episode. Why do you think *Growing Pains* resonated in China?
Rutherford Chang: People describe it as being "fresh." Being one of the first foreign television shows aired in China after the Cultural Revolution, it was for many their first exposure to American family culture, one that at the time was far removed from their own experience.

Matthew Ryan Smith: And how did you want this work to resonate in North America?

Rutherford Chang: North Americans who grew up in the 1980s are likely to be familiar with *Growing Pains*. But they probably are not aware that the program was also influential in the upbringing of many of their peers in China. *Cheng Zhang De Fan Nao* introduces unfamiliarity to this iconic American program and places it in a foreign context.

Matthew Ryan Smith: These forays into the relationships between Chinese culture and North American culture punctuate your work. Is the ideological and political tension between the two what you find fascinating?

Rutherford Chang: I navigate between these two worlds, so it’s natural that I observe the ways they influence each other as well as the ways they are disconnected. Perhaps the spaces in between these don’t completely make sense, but to me they’re the most interesting.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Finally, do you have any future projects planned?

Rutherford Chang: I will soon be the world’s best Gameboy Tetris player.

Notes