



# THE CALIFORNIA PRINTMAKER

THE JOURNAL OF THE CALIFORNIA SOCIETY OF PRINTMAKERS 2019

## Social Statements





## POLLUTA, THE FLOATING PARADISE

Michelle Kuen Suet Fung

In 2084, the imaginary country *Contradictoria* has solved its pollution problem with *Plan Polluta*. Under this plan, air pollution is condensed into building bricks, which are used to build arcologies called *Polluta*, floating green vibrant artist colonies! Artists can live, work and show for free, forever! It sounds too good to be true. It is.

*Polluta* was meant as a joke, a wry serious joke. This body of oil-based woodblock prints on cloud-dragon handmade paper features ninety-nine unique propaganda prints—seven completed and ongoing. Each print features one aspect of this ecotopia. *Polluta* is perhaps my crazy solution to mind-boggling problems: pollution, artists' struggle with money and integrity and world politics, knowing fully that it is not a viable solution. It is a feverish murmur, perhaps a frustrated joke.

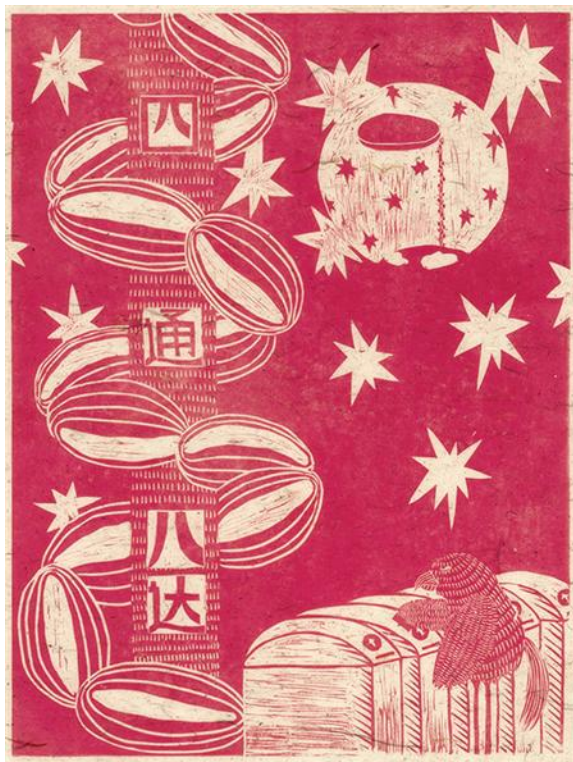
### Political Origins of Chinese Woodblock Prints

Woodblock prints have existed in China as an artistic medium for over one thousand years, but underwent substantial changes and became political tools in the early twentieth century. Traditional Chinese woodblock prints, unfailingly busy, cheerful and life-affirming, were popular with folklore and religious purposes and used ink and watercolours exclusively. In the light of recent shameful national defeats such as the First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Protocol, China saw an explosion of patriotic self-awakening sentiment in the 1920s, when Chinese intellectuals looked west for enlightenment. In this New

Culture Movement, led by cultural luminaries such as Cai Yuan Pei and Chen Du Xiu, art education was believed to be an effective tool for social improvement. Woodblock printers began a grassroots movement and sought a conscious departure from both expensive literati ink paintings, reserved for scholars and oil on canvas paintings which were recently introduced by the first generation of Chinese artists who studied abroad.

These avant-garde printmakers made a conscious effort to align with proletarians in these somber, monochromatic prints. However, it is highly unlikely that their works actually reached the masses; in the 1930–40s these “proletariat” prints were only accessible through publication in literary journals, public exhibitions and in private circulation. Even though later traveling exhibitions attracted a fair number of visitors, the movement carried on largely unnoticed by the masses the printmakers wanted to address and impress the most.

The effectiveness of woodblock prints as a mass medium truly blossomed when they were adopted to spread official messages in the 1960s. This grassroots movement was endorsed by the state as early as 1935, when the state sponsored a multi-city traveling exhibition, *The National Joint Woodcut Exhibition*. Yet, the state's enthusiastic usage of woodblock prints in the 1960s had an effect much like Instagram or Facebook posts on an organization's official social media pages today, spreading official messages like wildfire. These printed posters were displayed widely and prominently all over the country, from metropolitan cities down to small rural villages. Slogans on these posters became the mantras of those days.



### Historical Context and Precedents

My choice of a medium laden with political resonance was no coincidence. The complex history of Chinese woodblocks echoes the duality of the *Polluta* story. *Polluta*'s promise makes every artist's pupils dilate. Give an artist shelter, food, studio, art supplies and a bunch of talented artist friends. Isn't this what artist residencies are supposed to be? However, behind that relentless optimism in the promotional print materials, there is, always, a caveat.

For me, the shiny facade of *Polluta* seems confusing at best. The privileges in *Polluta* come with a price: artists cannot have a normal family life (family members except for artists are not allowed to stay on premise after 11pm) and they have no access to outside entertainment (even the amusement park in their backyard is only accessible twice a year). One cannot help but wonder if *Polluta* is a conspiracy to lock all artists up, out of sight from a functioning society. Artists are free to form families as long as it's all incestuous within the artistic circle. Oh, and children are not allowed to live there!

*Polluta* was largely an intellectual exercise to make sense of the art world. Hong Kong, where I have been based for the past few years, emerged as an international player when Art Basel purchased Art Hong Kong in 2011. In the following year, 1,661 art exhibitions took place in the city, an average of 4.5 exhibitions per day! In *I Love Art Basel*, Leung argues that superstar brands chose to open Hong Kong branches purely for geographic convenience and economic reasons;<sup>1</sup> cultural and historical considerations were not part of

the picture, while Hong Kong's bustling international art market (blue-chip galleries, art fairs and auction houses) led a parallel existence completely detached from the local social fabric. Regular gallery goers detect a growing trend of exhibiting artists' diminishing age, sometimes having solo exhibitions even before their grad shows! This phenomenon is perhaps unsurprising considering how an alluring art market beckons promising fame, opportunities, and security for unproven artists facing an uncertain future. And there is some substance there, as I have personally lost count of how many times artist interviews are featured on financial channels, and how often dollar signs enter the conversation. Yet, money increasingly seems to be the only worthwhile yardstick. This overbearing worship of the market propelled me towards the other extreme, an idealized world with no poisonous capitalist vapor—an artist colony.

As a point of comparison, consider how creative artists were grouped together in the Artists' Union of the USSR between 1932 and 1993, where they were pampered and their every want catered to. Food, lodging, exhibition space and studios were provided along with holiday amenities. Multiple picturesque locations were available to which the artist could move, using Union funds. Tell me you won't kill for that. Even though everything was free, there really was no free lunch. Just like artists in the capitalist system, socialist artists were expected to produce cultural activities of value. Commercial domination is replaced by a political one. In such a system, "The objective criterion for defining a cultural value is its progressive character for society."<sup>2</sup>



Individual insights? What is that? Pollutarian ideology explains how that manifests in artistic activities:

Art should portray an optimistic picture of *Polluta*.

Art should further our national environmental causes.

Art should be honest about the world today. Myth, folklore and fairy tales are strongly discouraged.

In order to protect the equilibrium of our sacred ecotopia, artists should strive to nurture and protect Pollutarian ideology.

In case that was not clear enough, the Four No's remind you that art should be of no "innovation, inspiration, intuition and investigation." "The artist finds herself selling her soul, piece by piece, until nothing is left but an empty husk."<sup>3</sup> However, accepted *Polluta* residents should not be caught by surprise. The only application channel to *Polluta* is an entry interview in which the potential resident is to answer one question from the *Polluta* President.

Interviewees with any sign of spunk or flair were instantly rejected. One interviewee, initially accepted, began making the logo drawing into a hangman game. (Each interviewee was requested to complete a *Polluta* logo.) Visibly annoyed, the *Polluta* President revoked her decision and rejected this applicant. Another applicant had better luck. The President asked her to pick three essential items to bring to Mars. Obviously flustered, the interviewee eventually blurted out "water, a form of communication and a compass." The enraptured president shrieked in delight, "You are boring! I like it! You are accepted into *Polluta*!"

### ***Polluta* and America Today**

Is this the price of a safe haven? What is a safe haven? Since World War II, the US has been a magnet for refugees and immigrants. The American Dream not only attracted the



desperate, but also the ambitious and the talented. Indeed, one can argue that America's current cultural dominance is largely built upon an influx of intellectuals since the 1930s. Think scientist Albert Einstein, Google co-founder Sergey Brin and architect Ieoh Ming Pei.

Recent American hostility towards immigrants, exemplified at the border, seem to make a sick and twisted joke out of the American Dream. During the recent *Polluta* exhibition, 2000 immigrant children were separated from their parents. President Trump summarized this attitude by saying that "They are animals."<sup>4</sup> Have we all, like *Polluta* residents, been reduced to our basest and most animal instincts?

Getting far less public attention but perhaps even more unsettling has been a growing challenge to naturalized citizenship. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services was charged "to identify people who lied on their citizenship applications and to denaturalize them."<sup>5</sup> While these attempts were putatively aimed at those who deliberately lied on their applications, in many other cases the line between a lie and a misunderstanding or honest mistake seems fuzzy at best. One is almost certain that the benefit of doubt is not given to the immigrant. The same arbitrariness is echoed by *Polluta*'s entry performance. The applicant's acceptance hinges on his/her answer to a single question. Such an important decision (one is supposed to live in *Polluta*, forever!) is contingent on numerous frivolous factors, nervousness, picking the wrong question and the President's whims and fancy. It is clear that access



to *Polluta's* resources is not a right one has earned, but a privilege granted by authority, to be taken away at a moment's notice. With political power being reshuffled across the world's stage, one cannot help but to fear what the future holds, especially for creatives whose profession is to voice their opinions. In this uncertain atmosphere, the promise of *Polluta* looks like an awfully inviting paradise, as long as one is willing to abide to a few housekeeping rules.

<sup>1</sup>Leung, Anthony Po Shan. *I Love Art Basel*. (translated title) *Dirty Press*, Hong Kong, 2018. P. 52-57.

<sup>2</sup>Zvorykin, A. A., *Studies and Documents on Cultural Policies: Cultural Policy in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*. P. 10., <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000012/001240eo.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Choi, Joon Nak, "Polluta as the Mirror of Truth", *Polluta Floating Artist Colony in the Sky*. Hong Kong, 2018, P. 50

<sup>4</sup>McCarthy, Tom., *Deadly and Unconstitutional: Trump Attacks California Sanctuary Cities*, *The Guardian*. 7 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/16/california-sanctuary-city-laws-donald-trump-attack>

<sup>5</sup>Gessen, Masha. *In America, Naturalized Citizens No Longer Have an Assumption of Permanence*, *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/in-america-naturalized-citizens-no-longer-have-an-assumption-of-permanence>

### Artist Information

Michelle Kuen Suet Fung is a visual artist and art educator whose ongoing oeuvre revolves around a grand narrative of a dystopian world set in the year 2084. With bold imagination,

subtle humour, and delicate pathos, she weaves acute observations of the early twenty-first century into an absurd, fantastical landscape populated with plastic-eating "humans", flying elephants and islands floating in the sky. Her works present a fictional geopolitical map of a bizarre future, one impacted by changes in the Anthropocene. She has exhibited internationally and has participated in artist residencies including Banff Centre, Canada; Island Institute, Alaska; and Art Omi, New York (the Cecily Brown Fellowship). Her works have received awards including 50 Best Books for Secondary Students, Hong Kong Professional Teacher's Union, 2018; Young Writer's Debut Competition, Hong Kong, 2017; the Grotto Award, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2015; and Award of Excellence, Fourth Greater China Illustration Awards, 2012 and 2016.

[michelleksfung.com](http://michelleksfung.com)

### Image Documentation

*Fifth of Ninety-Nine Views of Polluta: All Roads Lead to Polluta*, Oil-based woodblock print on cloud-dragon handmade paper, 18" x 23.5", 2018

*Fourth of Ninety-Nine Views of Polluta: High Spirits in the Green Sun*, Oil-based woodblock print on cloud-dragon handmade paper, 23.5" x 18", 2018

*Sixth of Ninety-Nine Views of Polluta: the Hub in the Sky*, Oil-based woodblock print on cloud-dragon handmade paper, 23.5" x 18", 2018

*Second of Ninety-Nine Views of Polluta: Fragrance in the Air*, Oil-based woodblock print on cloud-dragon handmade paper, 18" x 23.5", 2018

*Polluta Performance*, dimensions variable, Pro Arts Gallery, Oakland, CA, USA, June 2018

*Third of Ninety-Nine Views of Polluta: Green New World*, Oil-based woodblock print on cloud-dragon handmade paper, 23.5" x 18", 2018

Liu Lun, *Baba cong qianxian daihuilai de wanju (The toy daddy brought back from the front)*, woodcut on paper, 1945, © The Trustees of the British Museum

Li Hua, *China, Roar!*, Woodcut, 8" x 6" 1936 (the hi-res digital copy depicted above via *A Journey Round My Skull*), The Huntington Archive, public domain

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