

Helen Cho's *Tai Lam: Memory of Hunger Finds Its Form* — Essay by Kitty Scott

Helen Cho's recent video, *Tai Lam: Memory of Hunger Finds Its Form* (2014), is set in Toronto and points, in more ways than one, to a defining characteristic of what is the most populous city in Canada, and fourth largest in North America. Only around half of the people who live in Toronto were born there, the remainder from somewhere else. In 1986, Tai Lam, the main figure in Cho's video, entered Canada and eventually settled in Toronto. Cho herself had arrived in Ontario four years earlier and, after extended stays abroad throughout her education and artistic career, returned to the city to make it her current home. Their individual stories, as dissimilar as they are, become entwined in the creation of this affecting work.

Before she left South Korea and immigrated to Canada with her family, Cho lived for a few years in Daejeon, a large inland city south of Seoul. For almost ten years prior, during the 1970s, her father had worked for the Rural Advisory Board at the height of the so-called New Community Movement, a state-led effort to modernize the agricultural economy; in those years her family had lived in a number of small villages in a province on the country's eastern coast. In October 1982, the family left Korea for Canada. Like many Koreans who came here, they landed in Ontario and eventually moved to Toronto in 1985. In the early 1990s she enrolled in the Fine Arts program at the Ontario College of Art and Design but focused on ceramics. Sensing there was more to know and a larger world beyond Toronto, she left Canada, first returning to Korea before spending time in Berlin in the late '90s. Eventually, with her family's support and a fully funded scholarship, she went to London to complete an MA in Fine Arts at Goldsmiths in 2005, before returning to the international milieu of young artists in Berlin. She lived and worked in Berlin until 2013, when she returned to Toronto to be near her family.

Cho's trajectory of travel and movement follows the logic of a young artist; it is bound to the idea of wanting to circulate as much as possible in an international context and to be understood as participating in the larger art world's dialogue, with its variety of approaches to art making, debate, discussion and exhibition. On returning to Canada,

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(image on the previous spread)
Helen Cho, *Rocks from downtown Toronto collected between 2013 and 2014*, archival image for project *Tentatively Entitled: 21 Objects for Hesitation and Reimagining Their Many Selves*, 2013–ongoing

Cho knew that she did not want to lose the new international connections that she had worked so hard to establish. One of the ways she sought to do this was by reading a novel written in Korean; it was her first experience of reading in her native language since moving to Canada. Cho chose *Seoul 1964 Winter* (1965) by Kim Seungok, which is set in the period when the city was still recovering from the Korean War and in the throes of rapid industrialization and modernization. The story opens with three men randomly meeting in the capital over a drink and cheap snack at a street stall on a cold evening. They are a city clerk, a graduate student and a bookseller. At first, the clerk and the graduate student have little in common but manage to find a shared obsession, animatedly discussing the everyday things they notice in the urban environment, such as a streetlight that is out or how many and what kind of people are waiting at the bus stop. Eventually the bookseller asks to join them and invites them to wander the streets to drink and take in the evening. The bookseller wants to spend and be rid of the money he received earlier in the day when he was forced to sell the body of his recently deceased wife to the hospital. These quotidian details and the way they speak of the sense of alienation in the urban environment experienced in a modernizing Korea appealed to Cho.

In navigating her return to Toronto, Cho herself decided to learn more about everyday life in the city by walking through it, the timeworn way of the *flâneur* to learn about a place: the slow pace combined with the street-level textures – the buildings, people, noises, or smells – encourage a careful observation. One day, while perambulating through the city's centre near the intersection of Spadina and Harbord, in a space that is geographically situated between Koreatown and Chinatown, Cho came across a lone man feeding pigeons in an unused, asphalt-covered lot bounded by a chain-link fence. Such a sight, a man feeding pigeons, is not necessarily out of the ordinary in Toronto or any other city (more rare, perhaps, was the unused lot, certainly a rapidly disappearing feature of downtown Toronto as new real estate development claims ever more of the inner city). This lot assumes a level of importance in this theatrical narrative, effectively becoming a large open-air stage for the public coming-together of the man, his bird feed, and the pigeons. But what drew Cho's eye to the scenario, above all, was the flamboyant gesturing of the man as he threw seed in large arcs to feed the flock. As she describes it, "he is theatrical and seems to perform this gesture in a very grand way, yet there is layered over this, the poignancy of his modest offerings."

Cho started to film the actions of the pigeon-feeding man with her iPhone, and later learned that his name was Tai Lam or Tai Phuoc Lam. Tai, as she calls him, is of Chinese and Vietnamese descent and came to Canada in 1986 as a refugee, paying smugglers to transport him out of Vietnam. Other family members died making the same arduous journey. All of them, including Tai, had set off on small boats, working out a destination en route, not knowing where they would end up. The smugglers were cruel and treated them brutally; in a savage robbery on the high seas, some were killed. Even after the initial boat escape was done, he spent almost five years in a refugee camp in Indonesia. According to Cho, Tai has a very optimistic outlook despite the very tough life he has led.



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Tai has worked at a pizzeria for 15 years, a hole-in-the-wall operation next door to the empty lot where he feeds the birds. He has been doing it for ten years now. Tai goes out every day except Sunday, feeding the birds once in the morning and once in the afternoon. In Cho's video, *Tai Lam: The Memory of Hunger Finds Its Form*, we see him in a number of shots, filmed in different seasons, in both black & white and colour, as he comes to the empty lot with large bags of seed for the pigeons. Many of the birds wait in anticipation for him while others fly in as he starts to distribute the bird feed. Cho's camera lingers on the pigeons after Tai leaves and we see the birds wander around the blacktop as their heads bob up and down, looking for food.

The pigeons are no doubt quite happy to be fed regularly. Scientific studies of the species show they are able to recognize and distinguish people. Surely, those birds we see in the video by now know Tai Lam. But this isn't how we generally think of them; more typically we consider pigeons, particularly when they congregate in large numbers and their droppings accumulate, to be pests. It isn't hard to imagine that many of the neighbors of this lot dislike the fact that these birds, little better than vermin, are being fed daily.

The pigeons in our city centres are an invasive species. The Toronto population of pigeons probably derived from domestic birds that escaped captivity and found freedom as British settlers made a home in the area. These once-domesticated birds rely on our throwaways to thrive. Tai feeds his pigeons twice a day, so they have no need to search for food. There is a sense that he identifies with this flock. As he said to Cho when she asked why he fed them, "I know what it is like to be hungry."

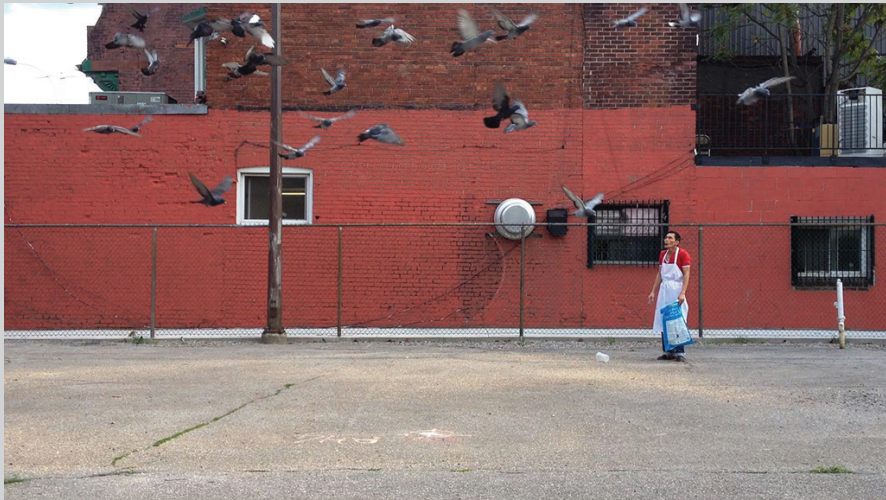
Tai equates tending to the birds with the hardship he has experienced. He wants to care for them so that they will not go hungry. Moreover, he sympathizes with the pigeons' plight and their dependence on human generosity. The theatricality of his gestures as he feeds these birds seems to communicate that surplus of meaning – after all, he is hardly the only person providing sustenance to a flock in Toronto; there is something about his movements and their contrast to the stark, barren urban lot on which he stands that was striking to

Cho. Beyond identification, Tai Lam casts his food in mourning, a gesture directed

as much to his lost family and memories of his own past, as to these birds who no doubt would survive without his twice-daily ministrations. Perhaps Cho noticed Tai because she was sensitized to the everyday rhythms of Toronto through reading Kim Seungok's story, and finding commonality through alienation and hardship. In that moment of Cho's filming, we experience two very different times, Tai's present and past; they are superimposed one over the other, bringing to the surface and making visible an otherwise invisible trauma.

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Helen Cho, *Uncertain Act Two*,
2014, HD video still



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Helen Cho, *Tai Lam: Memory of Hunger Finds its Form*, 2014, HD video still

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(image on the next spread)
Helen Cho, *Papier-maché replicas of rocks from downtown Toronto collected between 2013 and 2014*, archival image for project *Tentatively Entitled: 21 Objects for Hesitation and Reimagining Their Many Selves*, 2013-ongoing

