

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive 康尼岛历史工程口述历史典藏

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<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/yanlun-hsiao>

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RZ: This is Zheng Ruonan from the Coney Island History Project. I am interviewing Chinese artist Song Xin. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

SX: Hi, I am Song Xin. I grew up in Beijing. I came to New York in 2000, and I am an artist.

RZ: How did you come across paper cutting as the medium for your art?

SX: I was very fortunate to publish my first book of paper cuttings at the age of 18 and got paid for it. I became aware of paper cutting as an art form. I was living very close to the National Library of China and studied many books about folk art of paper cutting during that time. The National Library of China had everything, including a lot of foreign publications. I was immediately intrigued and inspired. I did a lot of paper cutting during summer vacation, and that was the beginning of my journey.

RZ: How did you come to New York?

SX: New York is an art capital. I came here first just for a visit and didn't plan to stay this long. I felt New York has this charm that lured me to stay. At that time, all my good friends didn't think I would eventually settle here, but I feel like the longer I stay, the more compelling the city is.

RZ: You have lived in Brooklyn for 18 years. Have you observed a lot of changes in the neighborhood? What was the most memorable part, and has it impacted your work?

SX: The most memorable place is where I take the subway – Bay Parkway. That area has undergone big changes. There are a lot of new immigrants on 86th Street, whether it is Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Russian, Polish, or people from smaller Middle Eastern countries, with so many ethnic shops on that street. I used to go to restaurants and shops there because of the delicious food. When I first started, the place was not so prosperous. But by the time I was working on my project, the area was lively. In the two years when I was working on my project, I took a lot of photographs, and witnessed many shops vanish.

You know there is a particular dried sausage that Beijingers love. That's something I can't get in New York. I found that kind of sausage later in the Russian supermarket. The taste of the sausage is very similar to that dried sausage. I thought about how in the Chairman Mao era, Russia and China were brothers, that's why you saw so many Russian buildings in Beijing. Anyway, that Russian restaurant also had another dish -- cucumber salad-- similar to what Beijing would offer. Art is not just pure art, a lot of elements from life can be integrated into it. Once you notice that there are a lot of cross-cultural elements.

RZ: So, your photographs on Bay Parkway were incorporated into your project, right?

SX: Yes. So, the MTA [Metropolitan Transit Authority] had an open call, they were looking for artists to decorate the [subway] stations in New York. I went there to apply without knowing either if I would be selected or if it would be to create [artwork] for the Bay Parkway station. At the time of meeting, the manager said that because Bay Parkway is historically protected, the location [of the artwork] is different from other stations. [In 2005, the station was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.] The other site-specific artworks are on the outside platform/station. Only Bay Parkway's is located inside [on the mezzanine]. I thought about how much I wanted to be selected. The location was just so beautiful. You can spot it when you enter the station and it is visible from both inside and from the street.

Later, I moved to Bay Ridge. I remember a conversation I had with an elderly artist at the meeting. He said: You deserve to be selected as this was your neighborhood, you understand the area. I did a lot of research and eventually handed in my proposal. When they told me I was chosen, I thought I was so lucky. Bay Parkway has a lot of Chinese immigrants, about 30 percent, which is still quite large compared with [immigrants from] other countries.

RZ: How long did [the project] take you?

SX: It took me about two years from the beginning to the final installation [in 2012]. Because the station was so old, it had to be rebuilt. The whole project was quite long. I work on glass, which was fragile. So, the artwork didn't get installed until all of the construction was completed.

RZ: So, you shot a lot within those two years?

SX: Yes, I took a lot of pictures over those two years. I often went there in order to finalize my drawings. My proposal was called *Tree of Life*. I wanted to incorporate the photos of the lives I photographed around this neighborhood into the shape of a tree. The place is a new immigrant hub. I am one of them. Every time you go to a new place it's a lot like a tree growing roots, blooming and bearing fruit. Every time people wait for the train, they get to interact with the artwork and have the chance to connect with it. I think it's interesting that perhaps they can see from the artwork something they haven't noticed in the neighborhood, or something they are familiar with.

RZ: Is there anything you shot then that was gone after two years?

SX: Of course. The corner store of that station for example, it changed after only half a year, so I took the picture again. This way all the new immigrants who have just moved can see what their neighborhood used to look like. This artwork then becomes permanent, because you never know what this place will look like in the future. But at least you can find the way it looked back in 2010 through 2012 in my work, from the houses, residential areas, people, children, maybe children who grew up, restaurants, shops. It's all there. People who live there and often take the subway can surely find something that resonates with them.

RZ: How many photos did you take at that time?

SX: Too many. I really haven't counted, maybe thousands of prints, they were all piled up. The tree is a colorful one. It includes all different kinds of color, layers, places and street names. I

tried to express more, also including store numbers, the Bay Parkway station name, everything that's related to the area.

I had a lot of thoughts going through my mind when I was creating and cutting. Every detail of that work reflects my thoughts and memory of that place – every small leaf, flower, petal, and tree connection had a purpose. I can't recall everything now, but if I see the details again, I will remember the memory of creating it again. I even cut myself into a leaf of the tree, because the work is permanent. Who knows, maybe after ten years, you get to see how much you've changed?

RZ: Do you see your work as symbolic of that era?

SX: Yes, I took pictures of a lot of storefronts, their numbers and decorative elements. I remember the interior of one of the Middle Eastern restaurants. Its Islamic decoration was very beautiful. And that delicious Istanbul barbecue shop. They are still there, but I don't know if they will still be there in twenty years.

RZ: How did you feel when you first installed the artwork?

SX: I was very excited and very happy. It will still be there after however many years. The moment the installation was finished, I immediately felt relieved. I feel a sense of gratification going back there again.

RZ: Have you ever talked to people who saw your artwork there?

SX: I didn't chat with anyone intentionally, but one time when I went there for interviews, someone recognized me and said that they liked the artwork very much. The ticket seller also said that she liked it very much. She looked at it every day as it was across from her. She told me: "I finally get to see you. You are not here often." I was like, even when I am here, I wouldn't intentionally tell you that I made the art. I thought that encounter was interesting. And I got to meet all kinds of people.

One of the most interesting encounters has to be my experience at the Chinese restaurant that's around the corner from the subway station. I went there because some friends recommended it and the waiter waited for me to finish ordering the dishes and said: "Aren't you the artist who made that artwork!" I was like, how do you know it's me? And he said on the day the artwork was installed, he happened to pass by on his way to work. He said he liked it very much as he passed by it every day. I was so moved upon hearing this. Later on, I realized that there are always people watching you when you are doing something. This might be the charm of public art. Ever since then I have done a lot of public art. I realized that a lot of people won't get to experience art if they are not working in this field or don't go to a museum or gallery. The best option for them is public art. They get to see art in the train station in their everyday commute. I think it has an invisible impact on people in New York. The MTA truly did a great job.

RZ: Do you feel like New York is your home now that you have lived here for so long?

SX: It doesn't feel like home, because after all I didn't grow up here. I don't really know where is 'home,' even when I go back to Beijing. I go there once a year, but I don't feel like I belong. It's

true the longer I stay here, the more I like it, the less willing I want to leave. Perhaps that's a feeling of home. I am always very happy whenever I am back.

RZ: Can you talk about your Statue of Liberty work?

SX: I made that work in 2013 for the Flatiron Building. It was the space of the phone company Sprint. They gave the space to artists. Every year they only choose four artists. I felt lucky to be given the chance.

I wanted to build the shape of the Statue of Liberty, the title was called *Cutting Dreams*, meaning the American Dream. No matter who you are, you have a dream when you come to New York. And the Statue of Liberty is the icon of the city, she stands for freedom. I noticed there were a lot of political events that year: we had the Iraq War, Occupy Wall Street, and so on. I thought artists should shed light on societal issues, so I wanted to do this project. Everyone comes here with a dream, an aspiration. The Statue of Liberty stands for freedom, but I do think one needs to make a big sacrifice for freedom. I also selected a lot of related photos, found many pictures of the war, the protest, and policemen who stopped and frisked African-Americans, which initiated a lot of discussion about human rights. I think New York is a particularly strong city. After going through 9/11, she is brave enough to go so far, so I found a lot of such photos of New Yorkers to represent the Statue of Liberty.

RZ: Can you talk about your *Elephant Hotel* work in the *Coney Island Maybe* exhibition?

SX: At the time, the exhibition was held to 'Save Coney Island' from real estate developers planning to turn it into a residential and entertainment complex. Although it was rundown, its cultural heritage is still intact. Many older artists have spent time there when they were young, and they go there every year. They didn't want this place turned into something too commercial. So, we initiated an exhibition [at the Puffin Room, in November 2008], like a small protest. I also wanted to participate. At the time, I wanted to contribute my voice as an artist. At first, I wanted to focus on an old roller coaster as the subject, but a lot of people already were doing it so I didn't need to create my own version of it. I found an elephant in many old photos, resembling the Elephant Hotel. I learned that it was a hotel, and later was a brothel. I thought it was so interesting and ridiculous at the same time, an amusement park for children but also a brothel. I wanted to do *Elephant Hotel* because it is also a testimony to history. Its designer was also famous for designing several hotels, shaped like an elephant, but in different states in the US. In fact, you can look outside from the inside, from the elephant's rear, and see the front where a casino and exhibition center were located. I think this idea is very good, how people from the outside and inside can both interact with each other. I made a paper cut collage of all the 1970's-80's photos of Coney Island and assembled them into an Elephant Hotel. My work attracted special notice at the exhibition. It reminded a lot of people of the old Coney Island, and how all those amusement attractions, landscapes and hotels were consumed by fires and disappeared. I wanted to do this work to remind everyone about this place.