

LESSON FOUR: Globalization and the Standardization of Identity



IMAGE THIRTEEN: Sze Tsung Leong (American and British, born Mexico 1970). *Nan Shi, Huangpu District, Shanghai*. 2004. Chromogenic color print, 31 7/8 x 40 1/2" (81 x 101.8 cm). Fund for the Twenty-First Century. © 2009 Sze Tsung Leong



IMAGE FOURTEEN: Sze Tsung Leong (American and British, born Mexico 1970). *Xizhimen, Haidian District, Beijing*. 2002. Chromogenic color print, 31 7/8 x 40 1/2" (81 x 101.8 cm). Fund for the Twenty-First Century. © 2009 Sze Tsung Leong



IMAGE FIFTEEN: Andreas Gursky (German, born 1955). *Sha Tin*. 1994. Chromogenic color print, 70 7/8 x 7' 8 1/2" (180 x 235 cm). Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel. © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades people from disparate parts of the world have become more and more connected, through fast communication and global travel. We share and exchange ideas, desires, customs, and habits, sometimes blending or adapting traditional or local customs to suit contemporary life, at other times abandoning local ways of life altogether and adopting an international style of living. Increasingly, cultures and cities around the world are beginning to look alike, making it difficult to distinguish one from the next. The artists in this lesson address the changing identities of cities and populations.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to works of art that address constructions of identity in a consumer society.
- Students will explore the roles memory plays in the creation and evolution of identity.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to think about life in present-day cities. What concerns might people living in cities have that are different from those of people living in other kinds of places? Ask your students to consider a range of ideas, from transportation to housing to tourists visiting.
- Ask your students to name some food, clothing styles, and religious customs that have been modified to fit contemporary life. How have these things changed? In what ways are they better or worse than they were before?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students *Nan Shi, Huangpu District, Shanghai*, by Sze Tsung Leong (Image Thirteen).
- Ask them to describe what they see, starting with the **background**, then moving forward to the **middle ground** and **foreground**. Have them describe the **landscape** in each section and the physical features of the buildings. How are they different? What is the relationship between them? Draw their attention to the foreground. What may have caused this part of the landscape to be so different from the background?

Inform your students that Leong was born in Mexico to British and Malaysian parents. He spent his childhood in Mexico, Britain, and the United States, visited China for the first time in 1994, and currently lives in New York. Since 2002 he has been photographing the dramatic transformations of China's urban centers.

- Ask your students to identify old and new elements in the photograph. What might this photograph communicate about attitudes toward history in China today?

Leong's photograph shows tall buildings in the background set behind a sprawl of low brown-roofed buildings rooted in dirt. Many of these low buildings' windows do not have glass in them. In the foreground, pieces of demolished buildings lie in rubble, including entire foundations of homes. According to Leong, in China "history has been defined by the successive erasures and rewritings of the past"¹⁰; the past continues to be something to rebel

10. Sze Tsung Leong, "A History of Erasure," in *Sze Tsung Leong: History Images*, by Norman Bryson, Stephen Shore, and Sze Leong (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 138.

against, defeat, and destroy in favor of a new, powerful identity in line with present-day needs and desires.

- **Ask your students how Leong has conveyed this idea in his photograph.**
- **Ask your students to imagine who might live in, work in, or visit the skyscrapers in the background. What kinds of activities might take place there? Why might these buildings have been constructed there? Ask your students to describe the inhabitants of the smaller structures in the middle of the photograph. What might their daily lives be like?**

Inform your class that the skyscrapers do not bear any resemblance to traditional Chinese architecture. They are a combination of housing, offices, and other retail spaces, built over an older landscape that is being wiped away by development. According to the artist, the skyscrapers were built to “generate and accommodate new wealth.”¹¹ As a result, most of the original townspeople have been forced to leave, as prices have risen. The old architectural traditions are disappearing and streets lacking any visual signs of local identity are taking their place. China’s urban centers now resemble those in Western cities, like New York, which is home to hundreds of sleek, geometric, modern skyscrapers.

- **Show your students *Xizhimen, Haidian District, Beijing*, also by Leong (Image Fourteen), without telling them the title. Ask them if they can tell where it is, based on what they see.**
- **Have them compare this photograph with *Nan Shi, Huangpu District, Shanghai*, naming similarities and differences between them.**

Inform your students that the second photograph depicts the Haidian District of Beijing, China, where the buildings appear to be identical.

- **Now show your students *Sha Tin*, by Andreas Gursky (Image Fifteen). Give your students color photocopies of the photograph, and ask them how the image is organized. Instruct your students to cut up their photocopies according to the picture’s distinct parts—foreground, middle ground, and background. Then, with the class, explore the differences and similarities between the fragments.**

Gursky’s large-scale digital photographs capture scenes of contemporary life, including landscape, architecture, and people. Through scale and repetition, individualism is often lost to the grandeur of the setting or the size of the crowd.

- **Ask your students what the crowd in *Sha Tin* is gathering to watch.**

Inform your students that horse racing is a popular pastime in Hong Kong, where this picture was taken, and crowds of spectators watch their favorite horses compete. Gursky photographed the fans from behind, transforming individuals into two anonymous groups distinguished only by the color of their clothes and by their postures. This photograph captures a phenomenon of urban contemporary life: individual identity is easily lost to collective identity.

- **Ask your students to describe the qualities of the spectators’ collective identity.**
- **Ask your students to name some ways people experience isolation in a crowded urban environment. Have they ever felt alone or disconnected from others in a crowd or on a city street? Ask them to describe the scenario.**

11. Ibid., 139.

ACTIVITIES

The Old and the New

Ask your students to take photographs that highlight the contrast between old and new buildings near their homes. What are some of the similarities and differences between the buildings? Which do they prefer, and why? Which of these buildings have been constructed during their lifetimes? Which ones have been around for generations? If your students don’t know the answers to these questions, encourage them to interview older relatives or other members of their communities to find out.

Show your students two photographs with a similar message to that of Sze Tsung Leong’s works: *Sac-Chich, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico*, from the series *Two Sections of Time* (2003), by Eduardo del Valle and Mirta Gómez (an image of the work is available in the Collection section of the Museum’s Web site. Visit www.moma.org/collection and search for “Sac-Chich, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico”), and *Untitled (L.A.)* (2004), by Carlos Garaicoa (visit www.moma.org/collection and search for “Untitled (L.A.)”). Ask them to conduct research on one of these artists and make a brief presentation to the class about how his or her work relates to the themes explored in this lesson.

Information Revolution

Ask your students to conduct a research project focusing on the so-called information revolution of the 1990s. How did the craze for global interconnectivity begin? How did our world get so interconnected? What were the first signs of cultural change in their communities? To get started, ask your students what their first memory of a computer is. Can they remember the first piece of information they sought out using the Internet? Ask your students to interview older friends or family members about what they remember about the beginning of the information revolution.

Facebook and Twitter

Ask your students how social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have shaped the ways in which they identify themselves. How do these sites foster individuality and interconnectivity?