

## Between Words and Images: Negotiating the Meaning of Home in Ken Lum's There Is No Place Like Home

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In a world that is characterized by growing mobility across the globe and consequently also by a variety of border-crossings, home seems to be as much a 'real' place as it is a construction - a construction in and through words and images, through ideas, memories, and desires. It would seem that these constructions as well as the 'real' (geographical) locations of home are very much influenced by movements and exchanges across the globe. People take with them their ideas and conceptions of home, their memories and their desires, and they approach and construct new places and, more specifically, their homes accordingly.

Media (particularly commercial advertisements) can also be powerful carriers and creators of such ideas - for example, in their instrumentalization of images that appeal to a nostalgic desire for home 'as it used to be'. In the context of globalization, the growing number of advertisements and commercials for cellular phone services spring to mind; in a somewhat paradoxical way, the idea of cell phone's mobility across borders (personified, for instance, in the image of the cosmopolitan business traveller) is wedded to its basic function of 'connecting people', of establishing links and bonds with family and friends.<sup>1</sup> In this way, it is sug-

1 "Connecting people" is actually the slogan of the cellular phone company Nokia. See also their internet page, where you can click on the button "culture of mobility" to view mobile phone models (<http://www.nokia.com/index.html>, accessed 13 September 2006).

gested, you can be 'home' anytime anywhere.<sup>2</sup> As this example suggests, 'home' can be a lot of different things, particularly as the English word does not make a difference between Heim and Heimat, between home in the sense of the place (the house) where one lives and the geographical, cultural or spiritual community, region or nation a person comes from or identifies with (such as place of birth or cultural background).

In this essay, I will take a closer look at an art project that takes up the multiple meanings of the concept of home in various challenging ways. *There Is No Place Like Home* is a series of photographs combined with written statements by the Canadian artist Ken Lum; it was a commissioned work for the "Museum in Progress" in Vienna, where it was shown in December 2000 and January 2001.<sup>3</sup> Since then, *There Is No Place Like Home* has been a travelling exhibition which has been shown all over the world over the past few years.<sup>4</sup> It contrasts photographs of different people with various statements containing the word 'home'. By placing itself in the public space of the city and using verbal and visual codes which are 'typical' for advertisements, Lum's project comments in highly

- 2 As a contrast to such a 'globalization' of the image of home (its separation from a localized place), there are also advertisements that utilize a nostalgic image of 'home'. They appeal to ideas about home that are connected to the family, its home and hearth, as well as to the comforts of parental, more particularly motherly love. It is a home that is definitely localized, unchanging, and made comfortable and welcoming by ever-present (grand-)mothers whose care and love (together with the advertised product) create this home. Frequently, home products such as ready-made convenience food ("homemade") or household products that assure its users of their ability to create a better, safer home (e.g., detergents) are advertised this way.
- 3 Lum's work was created in the wake of the uproar caused by the Austrian government's decision to make Jörg Haider's ultra-right wing Freedom Party (Freiheitspartei) a coalition partner. See Richard Rhodes, "Ken Lum's Outsider Art," *Globe & Mail* (12 May 2001): V3. For more information on the Viennese exhibition, see Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home*, Museum in Progress, <http://www.mip.at/en/werke/464.html> (accessed 21 September 2006).
- 4 The project was shown at, for example, the Venice Biennale in 2001, on the walls of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa in 2002, at an arts Festival in Norway, and in numerous other places; see Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home*, Museum in Progress, <http://www.mip.at/en/werke/464.html> (accessed 21 September 2006).

I saw the project in Duisburg in 2002, where it was part of the city's annual arts festival "Duisburger Akzente" focusing on the topic "Das Eigene und das Fremde."

complex ways not only on the changing meaning of 'home' in a world increasingly characterized by experiences of globalization, displacements, and cultural (ex)changes but also on the practices of constructing (this) meaning, and, more generally, on the ways in which we make sense of words and images.

Accordingly, my aim is to explore how Lum utilizes the combination and interaction of verbal and visual signs to highlight not only the multiplicity of the meanings that the idea of 'home' can assume for different people, depending on their age, race, gender, class, and the context they are in, but also the fact that 'home' is not something static, a priori, given, but a place that is actively created by those who (long to) live there. The remaining part of the essay is divided into three sections. In the first one, I will provide a brief overview of the artist's work before giving a more detailed account of the project *There Is No Place Like Home*. This is followed by two different, yet partly overlapping analytical approaches to Lum's project; while the second section concentrates on the project as 'imagetext' and takes a closer look at the interaction between photos and statements and how this intersects with various meanings of home, the third section comments on the project with regard to its utilization of commercial strategies, its use of public space, and its status as art.<sup>5</sup>

Ken Lum was born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1956 to parents of Chinese heritage. While studying biology, he took a creative-arts class with the Canadian photographer Jeff\* Wall and discovered the arts, especially photography, for himself as a profession. Since the late 1970s, his reputation as an internationally renowned artist has continually grown; Lum's work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions all over the world and he has received many awards for it. Since 1990, he has been teaching

5 I use 'imagetext' here as suggested by W.J.T. Mitchell to designate "composite, synthetic works [...] that combine image and text." Mitchell further differentiates "image/text" (designating "a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation") and "image-text" (designating "relations of the visual and verbal") in *Picture Theory* (1994. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995): 89, footnote 9.

in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where he also lives and works.<sup>6</sup>

From the very beginning, a large part of his work has been concerned with the individual and his or her position in the public realm.<sup>7</sup> For the project *Anonymous* (1978), the artist distributed copies of a photo portrait of himself all over the city - the pictures did not contain any information regarding their purpose. The copies placed the face of an individual prominently everywhere - yet Lum remained anonymous. The face was thus an enigmatic sign within the information overflow of the city, a strange and unfamiliar advertisement of a nameless individual for an unstated purpose whose "very functionlessness [...] made its recognition as art possible."<sup>8</sup>

Soon, Lum began experimenting with photography in connection with language and, more particularly, the codes of advertisement. Seemingly simple and straightforward at first glance, these photo-texts comment in a quite complex manner on a variety of topics. In his series of *Portrait Logos*, families or individuals are arranged in an imitation (a parody?) of traditional studio-style portraits, while next to them their name is depicted like a company logo. Unifying the individual family members under their surname, the logo functions like a brand.<sup>9</sup>

6 For information on Ken Lum, see, for example, Kitty Scott, "Ken Lum Works with Photography," in *Ken Lum Works with Photography*, ed. Kitty Scott & Martha Hanna (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2002): 15-16; Cathy Busby, "'I Say, Come On! Open Your Eyes!' An Interview with Ken Lum," *National Gallery of Canada Review* 2 (2001), esp. 92-95; and Ken Lum's university home-page, Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory University of British Columbia, [http://www.finearts.ubc.ca/faculty/intros/intro\\_lum.cfm](http://www.finearts.ubc.ca/faculty/intros/intro_lum.cfm) (accessed 13 September 2006).

7 For an overview of Lum's photographic work, see *Ken Lum Works with Photography*, ed. Kitty Scott & Martha Hanna; see also the exhibition catalogue *Ken Lum* (Paris: Centre culturel canadien, Paris, 2002); Jeff Wall discusses both Lum's furniture sculptures and his photographic oeuvre in "Vier Essays über Ken Lum," in *Ken Lum* (Luzern: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1991); as docs Jean François Chevrier, "Montage and Decoration," in *Ken Lum. Come On, Get Up!* ed. Helmut Friedel (Munich: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus München, 1993).

8 Ian Wallace, "Image and Alter-Image: Ken Lum," *Vanguard* (December 1986 January 1987): 24.

9 In earlier works of this series, Lum combined real logos with individual portraits. See Scott, "Ken Lum Works with Photography," 21-23. See also Ian Wallace, "Image and Alter-Image," 24.

Quite often such photo-text combinations are enigmatic and blunt at the same time; frequently, they confront their viewers with topics that normally do not enter the public realm. In Lum's *Portrait Attributes*, for instance, pictures of individuals are combined with statements made by a disembodied observer that seem to disclose their personal thoughts, inviting viewers to establish a personal connection to the people shown. In "Melly Shum Hates Her Job" (1989), for example, we see a seemingly content woman with a faded, almost invisible smile on her face, who is presumably sitting at her office desk at work. Yet, the assumed contentment is directly opposed by the statement: Ms Shum hates - this is emphasized visually - her job, although the corresponding photograph does not give this away.

In another series, the *Portrait-Repeated Texts*, Ken Lum moves away from such descriptive and observing statements to more personal utterances. In "You don't love me" (1994) we become witness to a private conversation, one apparently at the end of a relationship. The photograph shows a woman using a public phone and we eavesdrop on her desperately repeated accusations that reveal her hurt feelings, which are given in bold, colourful letters next to the photo, almost arranged like a poem: "You don't love me / You've never / loved me! / When have you ever / love me? / When have you ever / given a shit / about me?!" While the ad-like character of the composition turns these private conversations into marketable slogans, it is also significant that the formal repetition of certain phrases seems to empty these words of their content.

As these examples show, Ken Lum's works frequently feature photographs in combination with written language, in which both verbal and visual signs and the ways in which they can be read are slightly at odds with each other. Often, Lum draws on conventions of advertising in his arrangements, juxtaposing advertisement's 'public' nature with the 'private' statements and subject-matter of his works. In a continuation of his earlier works and concerns, the photo series *There Is No Place Like Home* (2000) also juxtaposes verbal and visual signs. It consists of three different billboard-size posters, each containing two photographs of individuals and two statements about 'home' which are arranged opposite each other in such a way that it is not clear which statements and which pictures belong

together. These posters are shown alone or in various combinations on advertisement spaces throughout the city.<sup>10</sup>

The first billboard (Fig. 41 below) shows a young woman wearing a hat who is contently looking at something, maybe a landscape or a city monument; she is in the middle of saying something. Her portrait is contrasted

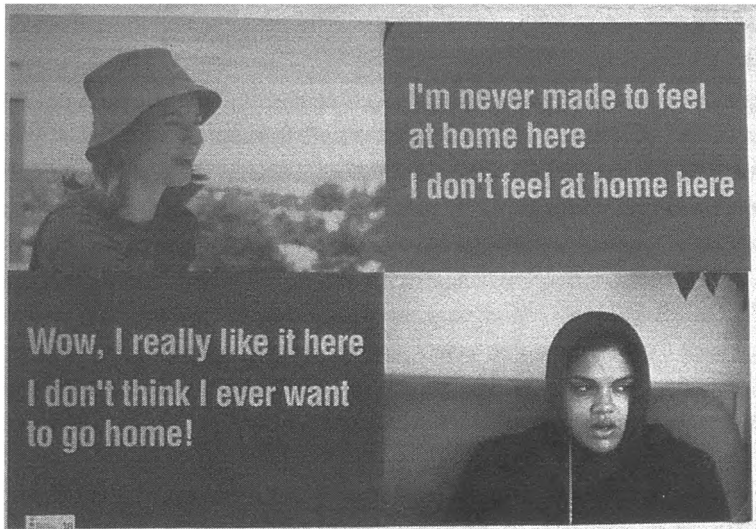


Fig. 41. Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home* (Duisburg, 2002). Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of Nicole Schroder.

with that of another young woman who is wearing a headscarf (suggesting maybe that she is a Muslim). She, too, seems to be saying something, but, in contrast, she looks quite solemn and grave. The photos are accom-

10 I focus here on the way in which the project was exhibited in Duisburg. In other places, different formats were used, such as in Vienna, where the central piece of the project was an oversized billboard (ca. 540 square meters) accompanied by regular sized billboards as well as digital projections on advertising spaces in the subway and newspaper ads.

panied by two statements placed opposite them: "I'm never made to feel / at home here / I don't feel at home here" is contrasted with "Wow, I really like it here / I don't think I ever want / to go home." While the latter statement evokes a positive scenario, such as a tourist on vacation, who falls in love with the place she is visiting, the first statement speaks of the reverse situation; here, the speaker feels 'homeless', unwelcome in the place where she lives.

A second billboard (Fig. 42) features the photographs of a young coloured girl with braided hair and a white man (maybe in his thirties) with long hair worn in a pony tail. The girl is sitting at a table, one arm resting

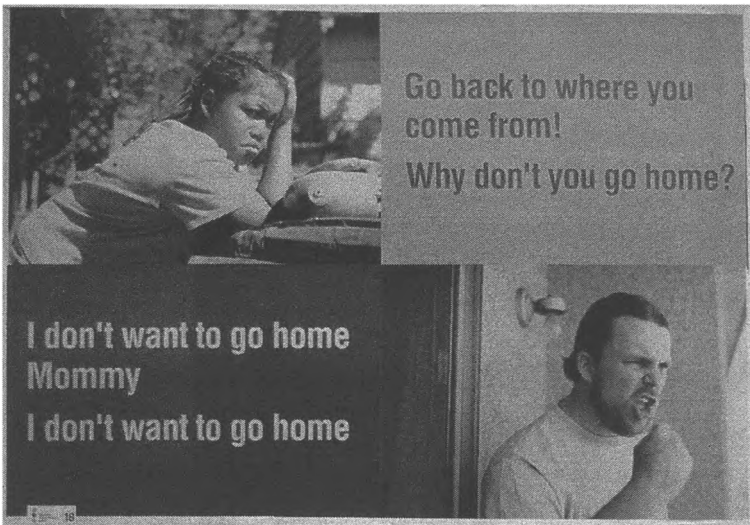


Fig. 42. Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home* (Duisburg, 2002). Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of Nicole Schroder.

on it, the other supporting her head. Her mouth is closed and she seems to be pouting. The man is standing and the camera has caught him in the middle of saying something, possibly - judging by the look on his face -

in an angry voice. He is shaking his fist, emphasizing aggressively whatever he is saying. Here, the rather aggressive "Go back to where you / come from! / Why don't you go home?" is contrasted with "I don't want to go home / Mommy / I don't want to go home." Although the context of immigration is not explicitly mentioned, it is immediately conjured up by the first statement, whose speaker refuses to accept people from 'elsewhere' as belonging to 'this' place. This is contrasted with a statement in which home is rejected as the speaker expresses a desire not to go home. Home, here, is not a place of longing but a place one dreads to return to.

The third billboard (Fig. 43) pairs a young man with Asian features with a white woman who is perhaps in her late forties. The young man is gesturing and saying something; he seems to be in the middle of a heated

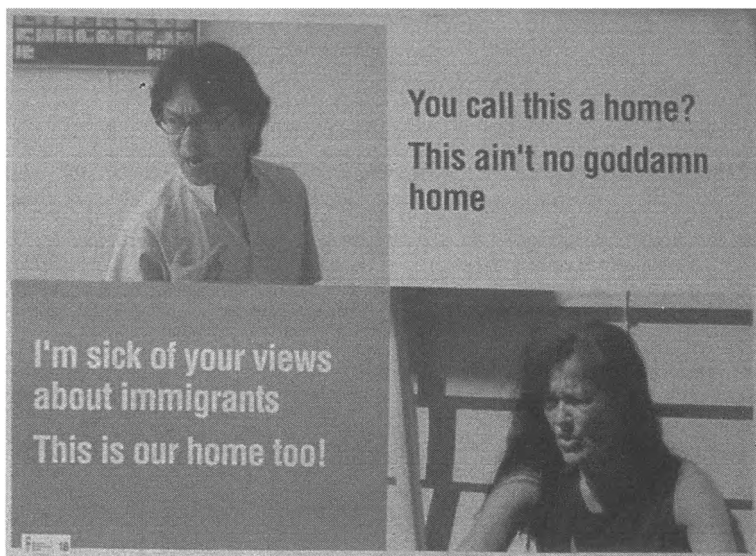


Fig. 43. Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home* (Duisburg, 2002). Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of Nicole Schroder.

discussion. While he appears to be angry, the woman looks not so much angry as worried and exhausted; she seems to be sitting somewhere, per-

haps on a porch in front of a house. This billboard contrasts "You call this a home? / This ain't no goddam / home" with "I'm sick of your views / about immigrants / This is our home too!" Here, too, it is ambiguous whether texts and pictures should be linked horizontally or vertically. While the first statement rejects 'this' place as home, the second one does the opposite: it lays claim to it; the speaker insists on the right to choose this place as a home. Moreover, another difference is significant. While the first statement appears to refer to the emotional and material aspects that turn a place into a home, the second statement brings up a different context: the concept of home vis-à-vis questions of cultural or national belonging, of roots, and of origins, etc.

In summary, in these photo portraits Lum contrasts two different people with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, and possibly class as well as clothing, facial expression, bodily posture etc. At the same time, the manner in which the photographs are composed connects these people: the photos show their upper bodies; all of them are in the middle of doing something. Moreover, the subjects of the paired photographs are related to each other by their clothing (e.g., the hat and the scarf in the first photo combination), their gestures and pose (e.g., use of hand in the second one), or the direction of their gaze (as in the third example). The related statements are similarly connected and contrasted at the same time. They are printed in large, bold, coloured letters on a coloured background reminiscent of the commercial messages used on large-size billboards. While all of them contain the word "home," they differ with regard to the meaning that 'home' assumes in them, such as the context of utterance, the speaker's view of what 'home' is, and his or her relation to the place referred to. Just as the statements are quite straightforward and typical, if not to say stereotypical, the photographic subjects, too, seem to be familiar everyday people.

The viewers' own understanding of home as well as his or her own subject-position (ethnicity but also context of viewing, etc.) is, I would argue,

essential to the way in which they read Lum's imagetext.<sup>11</sup> Home is as much an idea, an image, as it is a fixed place; more importantly, these two dimensions cannot be clearly separated, as images, ideas, and memories of home become, in a variety of ways, intertwined with the concrete places in which we live. Lum uses the multiplicity of the notion of home. The written statements articulate a range of views regarding the places that are taken to be home: confidence in and a sense of belonging to the place called home ("Wow, I really like it here..."); despair, the feeling of not being welcome ("I'm never made to feel / at home here..."); the need to fight for acceptance, to struggle for a (new) home ("I'm sick of your views / about immigrants..."); the aggressive, xenophobic attitude of 'defending' home against 'others' ("Go back to where you / come from!..."); anxiety about emotional and socio-economic aspects of home-making ("You call this a home?...", "I don't want to go home..."). In these statements, home emerges less as a place of refuge, comfort, and welcome than as a contested site of anxious, even aggressive negotiations about belonging, fitting in, and finding a place for oneself by those who feel to be 'insiders' as well as those who feel like 'outsiders' to this place. As different as these statements are, they are connected by a certain stereotypical quality; they sound familiar. In other words, it is not difficult for the reader to supply a suitable context of utterance or an image of a speaker for each of these statements. We have come across such utterances in our everyday lives, in books, films, the news; maybe we have used them ourselves. The portraits have a similar air of familiarity about them, in the sense that they feature average people. They conjure up narratives that supply the person shown with a background story, even an identity. This becomes particularly obvious when reading the photographs together with the statements. Although, strictly speaking, one cannot immediately decide which statement about home is uttered by whom (are photographs and verbal texts linked horizontally or vertically?), some combinations seem more plausible than others. The ways in which certain photographs are connected with certain

11 As Lum's work combines photographs with written texts, I shall use the words 'reader' and 'viewer' interchangeably, implying that both reading the verbal and the visual signs are involved. Similarly, I use the word 'text' to refer both to the written part of the work (in opposition to 'image') and in the more general sense of visual and verbal text.

statements, I would argue, reflect our habit of judging people by their outward appearance as well as a certain conservative understanding of the notion of 'home'. We make assumptions about who says what based on what these people look like, in addition to our own idea of where they belong. These assumptions, of course, are intricately intertwined with and dependent on our own subject-position as viewers.

Hence, certain 'signs' within the photographs are taken as identifying characteristics of the photographed subjects on the basis of which we draw conclusions about where they 'belong', where they are at home. Reading from the perspective of a white Western European viewer, the series (as shown in Duisburg or Vienna) could be read as follows: in the first billboard, for instance, the viewer could automatically assume that it is the Muslim woman who does not feel at home, whereas the white woman, even if she is from elsewhere, is taken to feel that she belongs. Similarly, it is the Asian-looking man who could be considered to be the immigrant who 'originally' comes from elsewhere, not the white woman, although there is no 'evidence' for such an interpretation except the euro-centric notion that 'Asian-looking' means 'immigrant'. Although Lum designed the billboards specifically for an Austrian context and its discussion about immigration and national identity, so that one could argue that the implied reading subject is probably white and Austrian (European?), the photo series works in other national contexts as well. Yet, as far as I know, the art-work has mainly been shown in (European) localities dominated by a 'white' majority.<sup>12</sup> In other parts of the world, the billboards will probably be read quite differently, and it would be interesting to see how it works in, for instance, an Asian context.

Lum complicates this further by underlining certain readings through the composition of the billboards: facial expressions, body language as well as colour subtly link certain photos with certain statements. In the billboard featuring the two women, for instance, the red background underlying the statement "I'm never made to feel / at home here / I don't

12 The billboards were also shown in Lum's home country of Canada. Here, the use of both English and French for the statements complicates the notion of home, as it is always also very much connected to language. Yet, here too, it is non-white people rather than white people who tend to be considered as foreigners and immigrants, placing race and ethnicity at the core of discussions about home and belonging.

feel at home here" is taken up in the colour of the sofa, on which the young Muslim woman is sitting. The green background scenery visible behind the other woman is similarly reflected in the green background colour that underlies the other statement, "Wow, I really like it here / I don't think I ever want / to go home." Similarly, the bluish tinge of the photograph showing the young man shaking his fist connects it to the statement with the blue background, whereas the other statement's purple background links it to the photo of the young girl and her pink shirt.

Despite such clues, however, there is no definite connection between photos and written statements. Moreover, their juxtaposition foregrounds the various ways in which they are linked, and it becomes clear that "all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image)" - the photographs conjure up narratives that provide the background to the people shown while the written statements make us visualize scenarios in which they are uttered.<sup>13</sup> In similar ways, using different 'codes' or sign systems, both verbal and visual texts make us think, invite us to fill their gaps. As Ken Lum explains with regard to his preference for combining photography with written texts:

I [...] hope that the text creates a picture of its own, related to but distinctly different from the given picture. Conversely, I want the picture to generate a text related to but distinctly different from the given text. In this sense, each work represents a kind of double image, one generated by photography and the other by text.<sup>14</sup>

This is precisely what happens in reading these billboards. Both images and words invite the viewers to create their own contexts, to supply the images with explanatory narratives and to add their own, individual visualizations to the given texts. At the same time, Lum's images and words provide their own context, so that a 'double image' is created. Both Lum's imagetext and the viewer's created vision reflect on each other and can, consequently, also comment on each other. They can confirm as well as contradict each other; viewers can never be sure whether their version is the correct one, since a gap opens up that draws attention to our reading strategies. The imagetext becomes an 'image/text' in Mitchell's termino-

13 W.J.T Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 95.

14 Ken Lum, "Interview," *Camera Austria* 51/52 (1995): 97.

logy, revealing a gap, a rupture, between the visual and the verbal signs. As the reader enters into a dialogue with Lum's project, it becomes clear that there is no hidden, a priori meaning attached to either photos or written statements or any of their combinations. Testing their readings against the various combinations of photos and written statements, viewers discover that none of them is as reliable as it first seemed, so that "[a]s a spectator we are caught in the 'in-between state' that Lum covets, negotiating the specificities of language and image as well as their relation to each other" and, one might add, our own location as viewing subjects.<sup>15</sup>

A further aspect of the interactions between language and image is Lum's exploitation of our tendency to regard photography as a "purveyor of truth."<sup>16</sup> Seemingly 'true' representations of 'reality', photographs have always had a special status with regard to their mediation of our interaction with the world, often considered to represent reality in an unmediated way, with no need for interpretation or room for ambiguity.<sup>17</sup> Yet, just like other sign systems or media, photography is far from being immediate or 'objective'. Alluding to the documentary function of photography, Lum maintains that "the camera's importance is in providing the technical means for a society to image itself according to how it sees itself."<sup>18</sup> Lum points directly to the ambiguity of photography: the camera does not simply record or document any 'facts'; rather, it is a medium for creating and constructing an image of something. Far from being an accurate representation of 'reality' (in itself a problematic notion), photographs are constructed images of reality and consequently also help to shape it. Therefore, in order to draw attention to our tendency to see photography as 'purveyor of truth', Lum contrasts his pictures with words, using them as caption and title. Facts, according to Lum, are also always dependent on words. Words, however, "can often belie facts in that they can have different meanings and interpretations."<sup>19</sup> Even if we believe that photo-

15 Kitty Scott, "Ken Lum Works with Photography," 23.

16 Lum, "Interview," 88.

17 On the need for interpretation of photographs (and images in general) see, for example, Martin Heusser, "'The Ear of the Eye, the Eye of the Ear': On the Relation Between Words and Images," in *Word & Image Interactions*, ed. Martin Heusser (Basel: Wiese, 1993): 16.

18 Lum, "Interview," 88.

19 Lum, "Interview," 97.

graphs freeze moments of reality ('facts', as it were), we have no way of knowing what exactly it is they show. For context we rely on the words supplied, which we take to report truthfully what these people say or think.

The photographs have an almost documentary character; they do not seem to be staged, as they capture their subjects in the middle of doing or saying something. Moreover, they depict 'real,' everyday people from different parts of society, which underlines their documentary character. The way in which Lum uses the statements as captions works similarly. Even though, as discussed above, we cannot definitely say which statement or caption belongs to which photograph, we nevertheless assume that the caption tells us what the people photographed say. It seems almost natural to make this connection - to take the caption as a personal statement of the person on the photo rather than, say, a statement by the photographer.<sup>20</sup> It is the same mechanism that advertisements use: printing a statement of some sort next to a picture - any picture - invites the viewer to make the suitable connection.

In a different reading of the interaction between words and images, one could foreground another function of captions: namely, that of identifying the photo's subject as it is used with portraits in particular. Lum's captions could be read to work similarly. Although we are not given names or descriptions revealing further information about the subject (such as a name or the person's profession), the captions tell us something very important about the people photographed: we are told what they think about their home or what they think about 'this place' as home. This is insofar important, even central, as 'home' is part of a person's identity (as place of birth, as cultural background, as the everyday locus of where one lives and works, even as somewhere one yearns to go [back] to or is afraid of, etc.). Consequently, Lum's captions 'identify' or 'name' their photographic subjects with regard to their relation to home, which, in turn, makes

20 In this way, the billboards refer to the tradition of documentary photography as exemplified by Margaret Bourke White's and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). As Jefferson Hunter points out, Bourke-White and Caldwell use captions to provide the reader with statements seemingly made by the people photographed (72). See Hunter, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1987), especially his third chapter, "American Documents" (65-113), which is also a thoughtful discussion of the function of captions within documentary photography.

them more familiar to us, as we can relate to their anxieties and desires regarding home.

In this way, both photos and words seem to document a moment of reality. What is so carefully staged and arranged, with models and props, and with the help of the camera's carefully constructed point of view, is taken to be 'authentic'. The equally carefully phrased caption emphasizes this simulation of authenticity by giving the frozen photographic moment a direction; it helps the 'silent' photo to speak.<sup>21</sup> Lum offers his billboards as documentations of people and their attitudes to home, a move that is supported by his portrayal of everyday people as well as the familiar, (stereo)typical statements about home. At the same time, however, he leaves a gap, a space of and for ambiguity in his imagetexts; although certain image-text combinations might seem more plausible than others, there is no way of determining any definite, 'authorized' reading, which casts doubt on the claim to authenticity and truth. Neither the photographs nor the verbal texts 'contain' meaning in an absolute sense. Both are mediations, signs that refer to something and, consequently, require knowledge on the part of the reader in order to be understood.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, any interpretation of these imagetexts is called into question as soon as it emerges. Leaving open which image-text combination is the 'correct' one, Lum not only draws attention to the way in which we interpret imagetexts (the reading process itself); he also demonstrates the ways in which we bring to bear our own preconceived notions about home on these imagetexts.

Whereas it is unlikely that the angry young man tells his "Mommy," "I don't want to go home," verbal text and photo are rather more loosely connected in the other two billboards: the young Muslim woman could be saying that she likes it here; the young white woman could even be complaining that she is never made to feel at home here (although it could be argued that their facial expressions do not quite support this reading). In the third billboard, in particular, facial expressions and statements are almost interchangeable. I think it is interesting to note that it is our pre-

21 In this context, the question of audience comes up again: who are these people talking to? It seems that they are talking to each other as much as they address (and are addressed by) the spectators.

22 Martin Heusser, "The Ear of the Eye," 16-17.

conceived notions about (our) home and ethnic or national belonging that fix meaning here: in a eurocentric reading, this leads to the (almost automatic) assumption that it is the Asian-looking man who is “sick of [our] views about immigrants” rather than the white woman. He, rather than she, is the person perceived to be displaced, foreign, not ‘at home’.<sup>23</sup> Yet, thinking further along these lines, we have to ask ourselves what exactly makes us connect certain statements with certain pictures. Is it just because of her scarf that we assume the Muslim woman feels like a stranger, not welcome? Does the white woman - although she may be a tourist - feel at home because she is white (which is taken to be the unmarked norm) and thus never ‘out of place’? Clearly, the billboards draw on such preconceived notions about home vis-a-vis questions of ethnic, national or cultural belonging, even as they dismiss or at least question them by making their stereotypical nature obvious.

What these billboards point out is that the idea of home is frequently connected to the notion of belonging; in this quite conservative sense, home emerges as an exclusionary place whose boundaries are strictly defined and maintained in order to differentiate and separate what is felt to be familiar (same or similar) from what is perceived as other (different, strange).<sup>24</sup> Home is constructed in opposition to ‘the Other’, the unfamiliar and unwanted, so that, as Rosemary Marangoly George points out, homes are not necessarily about “inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed borders.”<sup>25</sup> Homes, it seems, are frequently constructed by exclusionary practices, based on a false sense of “stability and apparently reassuring bounded-

23 In almost all the discussions and descriptions of Lum's project, the same photos are linked with the same text, all the while pointing out that we cannot know for sure which combination is the ‘intended’ one. In only one newspaper article is the Asian man linked with the utterance “You call this a home? This ain't no goddamn home.” See Richard Rhodes, “Ken Lum's Outsider Art.”

24 See David Morley, “Bounded Realms: Household, Family, Community, and Nation,” in *The Contemporary Study of Culture*, ed. Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Verkehr & Internationales Forschungszentrum für Kulturwissenschaften (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 1999): 275-76. Morley points to the similarities between images of home and nation, maintaining that both are involved in “the mutually dependent processes of exclusion and identity construction” (271-72).

25 Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home. Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 18.

ness" which "require[s] them to be enclosures, to have boundaries and [...] to establish their identity through negative counterposition with the Other."<sup>26</sup> Control and order are central to this idea.<sup>27</sup> This becomes particularly visible in the felt need to protect home against 'The Other', against 'strangers'. Likewise, it is no coincidence that, particularly in nationalist discourses about home (on a national level), the idea of purification frequently comes up.<sup>28</sup> (National) homes are too often imagined as places characterized by homogeneity and familiarity from which foreigners (i.e. those who are 'out of place') have to be excluded. Rather than being in connection and exchange with other places: i.e. with and through relations to the 'outside,' home is perceived and constructed according to an 'introverted' sense of place, in opposition to and differentiation from what is perceived as outside, Other.<sup>29</sup> Lum's billboards take up these problematic exclusionary notions of home-making and connect them to preconceived notions with regard to the 'proper' place of certain religions, ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities.

To sum up, one can say that the combination of photos and statements opens up a space of and for ambiguity; the gap between visual and verbal representation is open to interpretation, not just with regard to the relation between speaker and statement but also with regard to the use of the word 'home'. The familiarity with 'home' lets us fill in the gaps that Lum has left for us between the pictures and the words so that we "can project quite substantial chunks of narrative onto a relatively small range of clues."<sup>30</sup> In

26 Doreen Massey, "A Place Called Home?" *New Formations* 17 (1992): 13.

27 Cf. Mary Douglas, "The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space," *Social Research* 58.1 (Spring 1991): 289.

28 Cf. Mary Douglas's famous definition of dirt as matter out of place and "essentially disorder"; *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London: Routledge, 1980): 2.

29 See Massey, "Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place," in *Mapping the Futures. Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird et al. (London: Routledge, 1993). Massey criticizes "the idea that places have single essential identities" (64) which can only be maintained by drawing boundaries around them, and argues for an "extra-verted" understanding of places that considers their multiple links with the 'outside'. Places, then, emerge as "articulated moments in networks of social relations" (66), as processual interactions with the outside rather than in opposition to it.

30 Sacha Craddock. "There Is No Place Like Home," *Museum in Progress* (October 2000): online [www.mip.at/en/autoren/600.html](http://www.mip.at/en/autoren/600.html) (accessed 30 April 2006).

this way, the billboards invite us to approach them with our own projections (we seem to know the people and their statements; they have a quite familiar ring to them), while at the same time they make us stumble over them. The different statements insist on the multiple meanings the word 'home' can assume, ranging from the house one lives in, through the various more or less fuzzy areas of one's place of birth, community, region, and nation, to the notion of family. Going or coming home can thus mean very different things, since home is a contested place onto which a variety of competing and contrasting attitudes and beliefs is projected. Its meaning ranges from an individual, quite private sense to a public one that includes a society's willingness to accept multiple outside relations that define places and to welcome people from elsewhere.

The last aspect I want to discuss is the artist's use of public space as well as the utilization of the language of commercial advertising. For an art project concerned with the question of home, it is only fitting to place itself in the space of the public, thereby foregrounding the intersection of private and public aspects of 'home.' Lum's project locates itself on the site of commercial billboards, in prominent places all over the city (Figs. 44, 45). One could argue that the artist functionalizes not only the language of advertising but also the economic marketing strategies such as the high visibility of billboards in prominent places, their countless repetitions, and their resulting ubiquity. Part of this strategy is the appeal to our literacy in the realm of commercial advertisement.<sup>31</sup> Utilizing the language of commercial billboards (size, colour, layout, image in combination with language), Lum makes his project familiar, as his billboards "employ[y] the same sense of instant understanding as the advertising billboard."<sup>32</sup> Yet Lum also makes us stumble over habits and expectations (our 'training') with regard to marketable products and services: the billboards' content stands in striking contrast to such an advertising context. They are familiar in their layout, but their message is strange - instead of

31 See Ken Lum, "Art as Counter-Narrative in Public Space," *Museum in Progress* [www.mip.at/en/autoren/599.html](http://www.mip.at/en/autoren/599.html) (accessed 30 April 2006).

32 Sacha Craddock, "There Is No Place Like Home," n.p.

a product or service that is sold, we are confronted with different perspectives on and meanings of home. Instead of a logo, a brand-name, and satisfied model users, we see a variety of 'normal' people whom we seldom meet in commercial advertisement because of their average character. They do not buy or use a product; they talk, express themselves, seem to discuss 'home' with each other, with us. These billboards do not have anything to sell. Rather, we are invited to re-think our attitude to 'home'



Fig. 44. Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home* (Duisburg, 2002). Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of Nicole Schroder.

in its various facets as well as our involvement in its creation. Nevertheless, the 'message' of these advertisements is not completely unknown

to us. Most of us are familiar with the ideas about home that are utilized in Lum's campaign. Transporting and spreading such ideas with the help of mechanisms usually reserved for advertisement is what catapults them into unfamiliar realms. There is nothing 'sellable' about 'home,' yet Lum seems to advertise, promote, and publicize certain ideas and aspects of the



Fig. 45. Ken Lum, *There Is No Place Like Home* (Duisburg, 2002). Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of Nicole Schroder.

concept and their problems as well as the need to discuss them. In this way, Lum denies that 'home' is exclusively private and emphasizes its public aspects, such as the role both society and individuals play in the opening or closing of their home to others. Hence, discussion can enter

public consciousness, so that it literally and figuratively 'takes (its) place' in the public.

Using the public space of the city rather than a museum can be seen as having a double function. On the one hand, the artist claims public space, which is often dominated by private commercial interests, for non-commercial artistic concerns, while, on the other, he emphasizes the function of the museum as a place of and for the public. Hence, Lum draws attention to the 'public' function of art museums, which are potentially open to everybody but nevertheless tend to be rather well-ordered, highly restricted, and elitist locations that cater to a limited group of people from a certain background (age, race, class, gender) and with specific interests. As institutions whose function is the perpetuation and preservation of a given society's self-image (involving national and local histories, traditions, norms, and values), museums also functions as a tool for evaluating what is art.<sup>33</sup> Hence, they are always in danger of perpetuating norms and values of dominant social groups.<sup>34</sup> Leaving this safe, yet limited and limiting museum for the open and contested space of the public means to reclaim the public city space as a place of and for art.

Lum's strategy thus blurs the boundary between art and the everyday, between public space and museum. His billboards utilize the language of commercial advertising while insisting on their status as art.

Lum wants to intervene aggressively in the public and social spaces where he exhibits. Much of his art practice explores the anxiety, confusion, and contradictions that arise when people of disparate backgrounds meet.<sup>36</sup>

33 See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), "Introduction" (9) and ch. 1; Janet Marstine, "Introduction" to *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006).

34 Nevertheless, Lum appreciates museums precisely because they are "one of the freest places for looking at art [...] especially given the foreclosure of much of so-called public space by civic administration," in Cathy Busby, "I say, Come on! Open your eyes! An interview with Ken Lum," *National Gallery of Canada Review* 2 (2001): 103. Moreover, many if not most of public art projects are organized and financed by 'proper' museums.

36 Kitty Scott, "Ken Lum Works with Photography," 13.

Rather than 'waiting' for viewers in a museum, Lum's billboards 'approach' them unexpectedly, in prominent, highly visible locations.

In Duisburg, the projects' billboards could be seen all over the city, but with a focus on the city centre.<sup>38</sup> One prominent place was the downtown area, where all three billboards were placed on the façade of a department store. This location underscores nicely the pseudo-function of Lum's billboards as advertising something, surrounded as they are by real commercial messages and the places where their products can be bought. Moreover, the downtown area as a place of recreation and commerce is a likely destination for people from other cities, so that it becomes a meeting point where the city's inhabitants mingle with people from elsewhere, which plays into the billboards' discussion of what 'home' means and where it is. Other places of display were highway ramps and bridges: i.e. venues that lead away from the city, away from home (or - depending on the viewpoint - toward home). On top of their symbolic meaning as places of transition, as borders and thresholds, this deployment of the billboards has another, more concrete significance: Lum's billboards reach people who are travelling, on the move to and from those places they call home. Similarly, one billboard was put up at the main railway station, also a place where everyday commuters as well as long-distance travellers meet and see Lum's messages negotiating 'home'.<sup>39</sup>

Lum's project inserts itself in places highly unlikely and unusual for 'art.' Using the display strategies as well as the language of commercial advertisements, *There Is No Place Like Home* is made visible, readable, all over the city, reaching inhabitants and visitors alike. In its juxtaposition of verbal and visual texts, it foregrounds the ways in which we read them.

38 The display strategies slightly changed with each location (see footnote 10 for the Viennese example). I will focus on the way the project was exhibited in Duisburg (2002).

39 Another aspect to which this public display of messages about home draws attention is the spatial dimensions of home. What is it exactly that people consider as 'home,' their house, their neighbourhood, their city, their region? This certainly depends on where we are (going) and who we are talking to, which is precisely highlighted by Lum's billboards.

It is the gap between the words and the images, their openness, that invites us to think about 'home,' to supply both photographs and written statements with contexts to make sense of them, and to enter the discussion about where and what home is; it is also this very gap that demonstrates that meaning is constructed, that a place like home does not simply exist but emerges in the manifold interactions between places and their inhabitants.

Consequently, Lum's project situates the discussion where it should take place: namely, in those places that are, more often than not, the contested sites that people consider as their home. *There Is No Place Like Home* is public in every sense of the word: it is situated in the public realm of the city, it addresses the public, the inhabitants of and visitors to the city, and it intervenes in a public discussion, a discussion about society's understanding of the place called 'home'. In this way, the billboards show our involvement in the construction of home in its various dimensions, ranging from a (private) house to the (more public) national homeland, comprising concrete and geographical as well as abstract, spiritual, and emotional aspects.

This is, finally, where the project's title comes in: *There Is No Place Like Home* seems to express our appreciation of that place we call our home - nothing is more important, more central than this cosy, safe, and protected private place of our own. However, at the same time the title suggests that 'home' as such does not exist - there is no place like home! Home is always an idea, it is desired, imagined, and created. Home, in this sense, can be a variety of real and imagined places. Home, in these billboards, becomes as much a localized place as a state of mind, a personal feeling as well as a political statement. Lum foregrounds the xenophobic character of an exclusive, excluding sense of home (as well as of place in general). Consequently, the billboards can be read as a comment on what it means to be or feel at home in the context of globalization, migration, and racism while 'localizing' this discussion and relating it directly to the home of its audience.<sup>40</sup> Fittingly, this art project tours the world, changing

40 Cf. Jeff Derksen, who maintains that the project "holds in balance the tensions of fixity and mobility that characterize globalization" ("*Fixed City and Mobile World: Urban Facts and Global Forces in Ken Lum's Art*," in *Ken Lum Works with Photography* ed. Scott & Hanna, 37).

contexts by bringing its own background and ideas to each public space in an imitation of global migration. 'Home' and the various discussions surrounding it appropriately travel the world; home, as idea, word, and concept, is in this way truly globalized.

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41 Kitty Scott says of the project that it is "polyphonic" and that it seeks to "open up a debate and disturb" ("Ken Lum Works with Photography," 12).

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