

New York, NY

Chinese Take Out: An art scavenger hunt in the heart of Chinatown



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A view of Vincent Como's Objects of Unknown Power and/or Origin, 2001 in a display case at Excellent Pork Chop House in Chinatown.

Credits: Photo by Jailee Rychen

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Chinese Take Out is anything but your average art exhibition. It is an adventure. At least, that was my experience when I ventured out into Chinatown, the neighborhood surrounding [Art in General](#), to view it. Following a map provided on the exhibition's [website](#), I found myself in parts of Chinatown that I never knew existed, venturing into underground malls, narrow alleyways and outdoor markets hidden behind buildings and under the elevated subway tracks. Feeling like a true foreigner in a foreign land, I poked my head into multiple Chinese restaurants looking, not for dim sum or egg drop soup, but for artwork cleverly inserted into the restaurants' decors.

Chinese Take Out is a project initiated and organized by artist Jason Bailer Losh. Losh invited ten artists to participate in an exchange with local Chinese restaurants owners. Each artist negotiated a swap: a picture or decorative element from the restaurant for a piece of art designed specifically to take the place of that object. Also as part of the project, the objects taken from each restaurant have been transported into the first floor gallery space at Art in General.

The goal of the project is to explore the concept of "home." This revolves around the fact that in New York and in many other parts of the world those that have emigrated have had to develop a different idea of "home," one that is based on memories, images and other methods of recollection. *Chinese*

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Take Out attempts to locate and challenge forms of cultural and individual identity within the context of a large, urban landscape.

While walking through Chinatown to locate the different restaurants, seven in total, I was struck by a number of emotions. I wonder if others have had the same impression. Initially, I was impressed how this project provided a unique chance to explore Chinatown with new eyes. Slowly, my enchantment became to fade slightly. Each time that I stepped into a restaurant and was greeted with a friendly “How many?” I felt slightly guilty that I was only there to gaze for a few moments at a foreign art object in the restaurant. While some restaurant owners seemed happy to point out the art on display, other employees were confused and unaware of the existence of the art at all. I did not feel unwelcome and was not treated as a nuisance, yet there was still a feeling of intrusion. However, there was a sense of accomplishment and joy at finally finding an artwork. In most cases, the art is camouflaged within the busy scenery of the restaurant and can be hard to locate. In other cases, the work is not a visual piece of art but a sound installation or a written dialogue. The project also provides the chance to Chinatown with new eyes.

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The most intriguing piece I found on my adventure was Vincent Como’s *Objects of Unknown Power and/or Origin* (2011) that can be found at Excellent Pork Chop House. When I found the piece within a large display case in the restaurant and motioned to the hostess that I was there to see the art, she ran in the back and quickly turned on the display case lights. Filled with a large array of Chinese and American kitsch, Como’s three small minimalist black cubes held almost a magical presence within the now illuminated case of oddities.

What comes to mind after completing my art scavenger hunt in Chinatown is the question of cultural exchange between art institutions and the neighborhoods that host them. Is it possible for a project such as *Chinese Take Out* to successfully engage both an art audience and the local Chinese community? Or is the art and those that seek it only

foreigners intruding upon the everyday space of a local Chinese take out restaurant?

I would like to know more about what others think about this project and the issues that it raises. Please feel free to leave your comments below.

Chinese Take Out is on view at various restaurants throughout Chinatown and at Art in General (79 Walker Street, New York) through July 2.

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Jailee Rychen is a recent graduate from NYU's Museum Studies department. An avid traveler with a passionate eye for contemporary art, she is...

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