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ISSUE 09
MOBILITIES

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Viral Mobilities

By the time ISSUE 09 went to print, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) had swept the world, bringing utter devastation to societies and economies. Unbound by any notion of nation-state, political ideology, belief or care, a virus vectorised communities and geographies infecting and affecting. As institutions around which communities had built and organised themselves since the 18th century, fumbled and crumbled, hope and 'normal' was scarce.

The anthropocenic revenge had arrived. As gods fell silent, politicians, community leaders and healthcare professionals scrambled to arrest the pillage. A new way of living, working and engaging had to be birthed as tacit lines between self/community, professional/personal and embodied/existential perforated rapidly giving way to anxiety. Redefining cultural norms and practices, communities quickly introduced new rituals in personal and social distancing: masking, isolating, avoiding and disinfecting. As instruments of care, they seemed antithetical to human socialisation (as evidenced by many who objected), yet it is very much part of the embodiment of the modern digital/virtual zone—distanced, isolated and disaffected. A stark realisation.

The pandemic became poignant to the core issue of this volume.

The study of mobilities over the centuries—of peoples, cultures, ideas, ideologies—spoke to the integral nature of the human condition to be constantly on the move, to be moved. Nature and its constitutive environments were prime conditions for the mobility of peoples as communities. Subsequently, as humans organised themselves, commerce, ideologies, religions and education became key movers of peoples as individuals. The human interest to discover, push and conquer one's body and mind functions as a third condition of mobility. These three motivations anchored the manner in which concepts of migration and diaspora were historically understood as evidenced by discourses on mobilities steeped in continental philosophy and the social sciences proposing multiple paradigms such as Baudelaire's *flaneur* (1863, 1964), Castells' network society (1996); Simmel's will to connect through financial circulation (1900, 2004); Bauman's liquid modernity (1993); and Bourdieu's field (1983); to cite a few, to appreciate and study mobility as an epistemological system. Amidst this, the modern world remains fraught with 'normalised' wars, 'nationalised' religions, 'televised' fears, 'modern' slaveries, 'digital' dreams and 'technologised bodies' compounded by heterotopic hyper-cities (defined by major

airports and other transitory systems) remaining a main source of attraction to many—from pilgrims to refugees to corporate expatriates to the intrepid traveller. Writings by Urry (2007), Collier (2013) and others, point to the criticality of circulatory systems found in these hyper-cities such as London, Singapore, Hong Kong, New York, to allow multi-layered circulations to meet and coalesce, fostering an emergence of a new type of nation: a self-sustaining, ideologically pragmatic site of innovation and creativity and a place of the possible. Pandemics have remained in the margins of the evolution of modern society as advancements in public health and science kept them at bay. Just as 20th century health crises such as AIDS, SARS, MERS, etc. ravaged through hyper-cities arriving and departing through flight, so did COVID-19.

The beauty of society is its resilience. Despite the challenges, the world of ideas continues to remain viral and vital. The essays in this edition reflect this. From addressing politics, identities and self-migratory practices, writers explore mobilities through objects, temporality, embodiment, corporeality, aesthetics and through participatory practices—framing critique and appreciation of the multiple threads of movement. These perspectives form the basis on which one can ascertain the current station of contemporary society, not only through the lens of the present crisis but above, around and beyond it.

Mobility = Wandering = Wondering

"Today, we remain stuck in the present. The loss of a reliable historical perspective generates the contemporary feeling of living through unproductive, wasted time." — Boris Groys[1]

[1] Groys, "How to do Time with Art," *Francis Alys* [exh. cat.] 191

Mobility

Today as I write this, a global pandemic is unfolding. Mostly the pandemic is taking place for me online via information from all over the world. We know that virus is mobile and we, humans, its mule. That is a very straightforward idea of mobility. Hop a ride and travel round the world. There is also the other thought, the internet provides speedy access to knowledge and information, that is seeing without moving. But what can mobility mean to an artist? In a prosaic way as I have suggested: travelling, seeing, showing.

In today's sense the idea (and possibly ideal) of mobility often serves artists engaged with notions of identity and politics. Francis Alys, the Belgian artist based in Mexico City, for instance, is a good exemplar of this particular mode of interrogation. *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing)*, 1987, was an action in which Alys pushed a block of ice around Mexico City, or *The Green Line*, 2004, in which he walked along part of the green line that demarcated the different powers that administered Jerusalem, dripping green paint along the way. It is a remake of his 1995 work, *The Leak*, in which he took a walk from his gallery in Sao Paolo, dripping paint, and leaving a trail of blue splatters as homage to Jackson Pollock. His work is clever, and in his actions, there is a poetry as well as a pointed politics. Changing or charging the Abstract Expressionist gesture into a political one. Or, in the case of the block of ice, an existential statement about labour. Alys' works use motion but require the viewers to have a measure of global understanding or awareness.

From the point of our discussion, Alys' is a very straight forward display of movement, motion, international travel, understanding, and thus mobility. However, I'm interested in another way to look at that notion. The one performed in painting through its materiality and history. Wander through any art gallery, and you find painted objects that belong to different eras, or even contemporary ones. Their singular reified nature may convey a sense of being "stuck" in their moment, yet, illogically even, they still speak to us in our present.

Can looking at a singular static object make us travel? What I want to explore is the notion that paintings tend to be far richer objects than they first appear. To demonstrate this, let us take journey through two paintings and an exhibition that may or may not be tangentially connected, outside of the fact that they are paintings. And just maybe that is enough. Before returning to Groy's notion of wasting time in the present. For the moment, let's call this trip (no pun) a travel through time, or maybe with time...

Wandering
Le Déjeneur sur L'herbe, 1863

Edouard Manet, *Lunch on the grass (Le Déjeneur sur L'herbe)*, 1863
Oil on canvas, 208 x 265 cms
Collection of Paris, Musée d'Orsay, donation by Etienne Moreau-Nélaton in 1906
Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay)/ Benoît Touchard / Mathieu Rabeau

It is well known that the composition of Edouard Manet's 1863 masterwork *Le Déjeneur sur L'herbe* draws from Raphael and Giorgione or Titian. The painting depicts two dressed men picnicking alongside a naked woman in the countryside, in the background a semi-dressed lady bathes in a pond. At their side sits a basket and food. To be precise, the composition actually draws from Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael's *The Judgement of Paris*, 1510-20, and the young Titian's, then thought to be the hand of his master Giorgione's, *Concert Champetre*, 1509, which is located in the Louvre. The former provides the poses for the foreground trio, while the latter depicts clothed males with undressed females. In both cases it is the portrayal of a bacchanalian reverie in a rural setting. However, the modernist art historian Michael Fried, from which this analysis draws, also connected Manet's early paintings with French and Flemish sources, touching on all the major European schools of painting and ending with a particular mode of French painting.[2]

Fried points out that *Le Déjeneur* is in the spirit of Antoine Watteau's *fête galante* (courtship party). This category was created by the French

[2] Fried, *Manet's Modernism*. The book is based on his doctoral thesis, "Manet's Sources: Aspects of His Art, 1859-65" published in *Artforum 7*. It had some notoriety as it was the only instance in which *Artforum* dedicated a whole issue to one article. *Manet's Modernism* republishes "Manet's Sources" without change. Instead Fried correctly dedicates the follow chapters to develop, criticise and deepen his arguments.

academy to accommodate Watteau's variations on the *fête champêtre*. That is the garden party or country feast populated by elegant guests, occasionally in fancy dress, which were popular in the 18th century French courts. This connection with Watteau's fête was also noted by the critics of Manet's era. In addition, Fried deduced that Watteau's *La Villageoise*, which depicts a woman wading into shallow water with skirt upraised while glancing to the side, provided the pose for the bather in *Le Déjeneur*. In fact, when Manet's painting was first exhibited in the Salon des Refusés in 1863, it was titled *Le Bain* (The Bath), and thus placing emphasis on the action in the background. A final connection is to Gustave Courbet's, *Young Women on the Banks of the Seine*, 1856-57, having caused a scandal in the Salon of 1857 with its depiction of two women of loose morals—as was commonly accepted then, like those of *Le Déjeneur*. Fried points to the boat in the background as Manet's "gratuitous quotation of Courbet's rowboat," which then connects the two paintings in his [Fried's] eyes.[3]

[3] Ibid. 68.

Why even consider seemingly less direct quotations by French painters when the Italians provided such obvious points of reference? In "Manet's Sources," Fried argues that the idea of Manet we know is seen through the prism of Impressionism, that is, through the vision of the artists that came after, who were in fact inspired by the Frenchman. It is akin to our thinking of Cezanne through Picasso's cubism. The point of connecting with Louis Le Nain (in Manet's previous work, *Old Musician*, 1862) and Courbet is, for Fried, a sign of Manet's commitment to their ideals of realism. This fact evades us given our Impressionist-coded outlook. Fried outlines a different zeitgeist: what he terms the "Generation of 1863," comprising of Henri Fantin-Latour, James McNeill Whistler, and Alphonse Legros, as well as Manet.[4] And in this, grasping the "pre-Impressionist meaning"[5] of Manet's paintings through his peers, instead of the ideas around gesture, roughness and spontaneity, qualities that are ever present in Manet's painting. However, it is the notion of allusion and absorption of his subjects and compositions that Fried is interested in teasing out. In one sense it is a question of nationalism, identity and painting. "Which painters, ancient and modern," writes Fried in 1967, "are authentically French and which are not? More generally, in what does the essence or natural genius of French painting consist? Does a body of painting in fact exist in which that essence or genius is completely realised? Has painting in France ever been truly national, or has it always fallen short of that ideal, however the ideal itself is understood?"[6] These were the questions and thoughts posed by critics, historians and artists of the time. Fried, in *Manet's Sources*, is interested in first a notion of Frenchness that critics at the time were espousing, and then of a universality. In this last point, I would add that in our terms today, we could say Manet brought a sense of "contemporaneity" ("modernity" would have been the phrase he would have used in his time) to his painting; he was very contemporary in his concerns to engage with the French painting of his era (such as Le Nain, Courbet).

[4] Ibid. see chapter 3, The Generation of 1863
[5] Ibid. 6-7

[6] Ibid. 75

Rather than rehearse the intellectual complexity posed by Fried's analysis in terms of absorption,[7] or even the visual complexity and ambition (and ensuring scandal) within Manet's painting itself (comprising of all the genres: history, still life, portraiture, the nude, etc),[8] it is the idea that this painting is not a sealed universe (of a picnic scene) in itself and belonging to the past.[9] In rehearsing the complex matrix of sources to *Le Déjeneur*, as pointed out by Fried, I hope that not only a celestial sense of

[7] In the period between writing "Manet's Sources," 1967, and *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, Fried's research led him to drawing out ideas of absorption which surpasses his original interest in Frenchness and universality. The two books, *Aborption and Theatricality* and *Courbet's Realism*, set the ground work for his understanding of Manet's 'facingness'.
[8] For a more complex analysis of the painting, see Læssøe 195-220
[9] For a sense of the scandal the painting caused in this time, see Bourdieu 14-18

connectivity but also a feeling of time flowing through a singular object comes to the fore. What do I mean by this? Well, when we confront Manet's masterpiece in the Musee D'Orsay we see it in the present. But within the painting, there lie references to 16th century Italian art, as well as an ambitious attempt at contemporary painting in 19th century France by way of past century of French masters.

***Connections: Brice Marden*, Boston, 1991**

Another artist that connected with Manet, albeit more tangentially, is Brice Marden. It may seem strange to bring together an American renowned for his reductive monochromes with a French artwork rich with figurative allusions and pictorial complexity, but in 1991 Marden organised an exhibition at Boston's Museum of Fine Art that included the Frenchman. This was part of their *Connections* series where artists were invited to intersperse their work with selections from the Museum's collections. Boston is also the city where Marden studied as an undergraduate. In his introduction, Marden's co-curator from the museum, Trevor Fairbrother, deduced that a "taste for the painterly and for the somber was probably reinforced by two large works by Edouard Manet that Marden studied in this museum during his student years in Boston."[10] The resulting show was akin to a mini-survey punctuated with paintings by Ensor and Gauguin among others as well as prints and drawings, etc., as well as objects from Marden's personal collection such as Neolithic Chinese Jars and 20th century scrolls and textiles. In his review *The New York Times* critic, Michael Kimmelman compared the small black Marden situated near Manet's *The Execution of the Emperor Maximillian*. He writes: "The lush surface of [Marden's] *Earth I* echoes the rich blacks and grays that are to be found in the Manet. But the relationship between these works is more than formal. Mr. Marden suggests that the tragedy explicit in *The Execution* is somehow implicit in his abstractions. Works in the same gallery by Goya, Giacometti and Zurbaran similarly underscore the idea. And at the same time, they emphasise the figurative implications that Mr. Marden seems to hope a viewer will see in his spare designs."[11]

[10] Fairbrother Intro.

[11] Kimmelman 35

Over the years, Zurbaran and Goya were also cited as inspirations, but a key influence not included in *Connections: Brice Marden* was Jasper Johns. His encaustic paintings in the 1960s depicted flat things in the world, such as flags, maps and targets. These representations could be perceived as self-referential: the painting of the flag is itself a flag, and a target is a target. For Marden they were also "maintaining the plane… [it is] this almost mythological illusion/non-illusion on the surface of the painting."[12] Marden's response was to drain the imagery away and use wax to create large monochromatic 'things'. These early works were made with a combination of wax, turpentine and oil paint applied with a palette knife. I say 'things' of his earliest works as they were painted from the top and edge to edge, while at the bottom the paint was allowed to drip. These dribbles act in reinforcing each painting's physicality, while 'being' traces of their hand-made nature. In addition, their smooth wax surfaces imbue the rectangular canvases with a sensuous object-like quality. Illusion dissipates right there on the surface, as if it had been pushed down and melted away. Marden refers to these bottom edges as "open": working on the 'plane' so to speak.

[12] What painting is all about," Youtube, at 1:36 min/2:48 min.

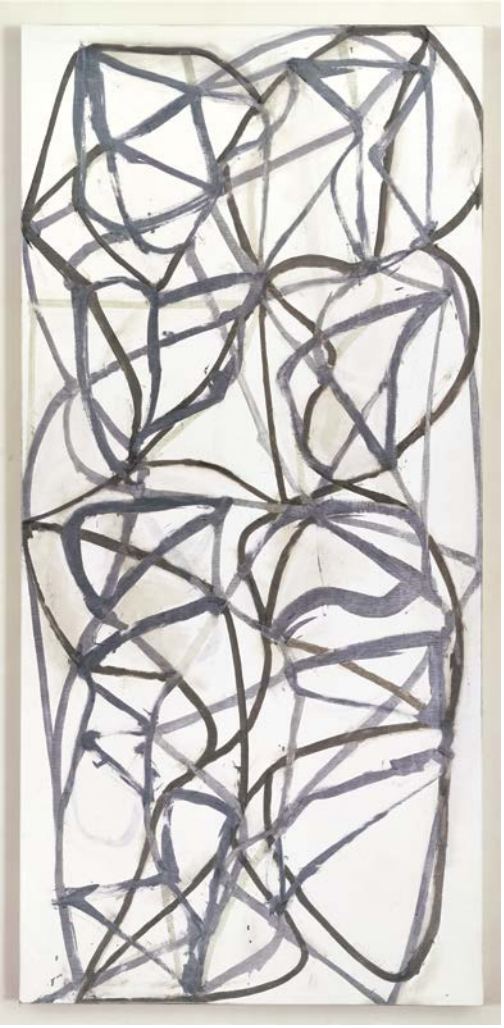
"Open" is perhaps the operative term in relation to his oeuvre and approach, despite their early resemblance to minimal art—the movement of his generation. An early Marden's reductive materiality is only really an anchor for its evocative qualities. It is through colour as Fairbrother and Kimmelman accurately noted, where his art opens out to the world. In the case of *Earth I*, its blackness draws in the emotive drama of Manet. Likewise, it is colour that brings up 'subject matter' for many paintings of that period; it is usually a sense or feel for landscape or nature. However, it is the spatial *quality* we find in our landscapes rather than a specific *place*—instead of a depiction, it is a feeling. For instance, the monochromatic *Nebraska*, 1966, is a "homage": its colour, green-grey, found while driving through the US state: "viridian, plus this, plus that, plus that."[13] While the *Grove Group* series takes its palette from olives trees in Greece, Marden had said: "I don't try to replicate nature. I just try to work from the information that nature gives me."[14] And this information is colour.

Marden's paintings of that period, *Earth I*, *Nebraska*, at first inferred an end to painting, as if they were the last paintings in a Modernist end game. Yet, we know now that they are not the last, instead they recall other monochromes, reductive painters and endgames: Reinhardt, Malevich, Newman, Yves Klein, Rauschenberg (whose monochromes, despite their jest-ful gestures, were nonetheless single coloured), Richter, even Stephen Prina. On the other hand, their wax surface conjoins with artists like Johns and Beuys. Instead of time moving backwards that *Le Déjeneur* performs, there is a moving sideways as well as circularity sense as monochromes echo and recall each other in our present. Maybe it is like jazz, where certain rhythm or standards can be performed and improvised on by different musicians, each time echoing the structure but each time arriving some place else, possibly some place new.

By the time of the Boston show, Marden was already turning away from the monochrome. Gestures and visual structures inspired by Chinese calligraphy and poetry had begun to appear on those lush surfaces. Instead of smooth and sullen allusion, atmosphere brought about from painting, erasure and re-painting came to the fore. In a sense his method of applying pigments in veils, layers and unveiling were still consistent, but now he was using oil paint, and placing emphasis on the drawing—leaving more traces, and in the end unveiling more than veiling. These works from the late 80s connected as much with the weblike skeins of Jackson Pollock's drips as they do with Eastern calligraphy. *Diagrammed Couplet #1*, 1988-89, for instance, used the structure of Chinese poems, right to left, up to down, while pieces like *Cold Mountain I*, 1988-89, with their stuttering architectonic lines conjure—at least to me—the rawness of some cave paintings, even without animals or handprints. The elegant roughness of his touch suggests mountain crags or misty Chinese landscapes.

[13] Marden: "I had written colour notes. You know, like, viridian, plus this, plus that, plus that. So I'm starting with a vague idea about Nebraska, these greens of Nebraska or whatever feelings I had driving through the landscape, and then I'm turning it into a very specific thing called a painting. It's not a representation of Nebraska, but it wouldn't be called *Nebraska* if Nebraska wasn't a big help. It was meant to be some sort of an homage." *Brice Marden. Nebraska. 1966.*

[14] *Brice Marden on finding inspiration in olive groves.*



Brice Marden, *Diagrammed Couplet #2* , 1988–89
Oil on linen, 213.36 x 101.6 cms
© 1989 Brice Marden / Artist Rights Society (ARS),
New York Photograph by Zindman/Fremont © 1989

If Manet's *Le Dejeuner* walks backward in time with direct references from 15th century Giorgione and Raphael before swinging back round to meet 17th century Watteau, Le Nain, and most of all Courbet in the 19th, Marden's paintings in this exhibition allude to different epochs. First, in the earlier works there is the timelessness of nature. Here the idea of the Modernist monochrome provides another notion of timelessness in its endless series and variation. In the later works, Pollock, representing another kind of modernism in the 20th, merges with Chinese calligraphy. Unlike Manet's painting, there is a sense a circular timelessness to Marden's endeavour.

> Terry Myers: When I brought a group of students to your studio in Bridgehampton last summer, they were moved by your suggestion that, in the end, maybe your paintings weren't so important.
>
> Mary Heilmann: Well, it is a kind of deep concept, the idea that the conversation the paintings cause is more relevant than the actual 'masterpiece'. I think of a painting a sign or a word that you put out in a conversation, and then people answer it. I mean, that's really why I did it, all the way from the beginning.[15]

[15] Myers,"Heil Mary" 74

That idea of conversation also exists between artworks as well. Say the one between Manet with Le Nain and Courbet, etc., but also more obviously in the *Connections* exhibition with Marden next to Manet and Goya. Unlike the points of reference exuded by Manet or even Marden, Mary Heilmann's work seems to spring from a more intimate place. We could say that her expression comes through adopting a more conversational tone. Trained as a ceramicist by Peter Voulkos on the west coast, who was renowned for his innovative abstract expressionist ceramics, Heilmannn eventually moved on to study sculpture with William T. Wiley, in a time when artists like Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Ken Price, and her friend, Bruce Nauman, were redefining the idea of form. Of this period she says, "When I was finishing school, some things that started to come out of New York were really important for me: Dick Bellamy's *Arp to Artschwager* show at Noah Goldowski Gallery; Lucy Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* show at Fishchbach; the *Primary Structures* show at the Jewish Museum… I knew that my work related to this kind of thinking, and as soon as I finished school I headed for New York."[16] They were seminal shows that redefined sculpture, more specifically defining American sculpture.

[16] *The All Night Movie* 38

Yet, soon after arriving in the city, Heilmann switched from sculpture to painting. However, notions of sculptural structure and playful, languid paint (the sort you find on pottery) still underpin her work. "First," she says, "they are objects then they are pictures of something…"[17] What are they pictures of? Like the American abstractionist Thomas Nozkowski, each work is drawn from an experience in her life—a "backstory" in her words. Though Nozkowski abstracts and distills, allowing the narrative to recede, Heilmann uses titles to keep her sources close: *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *The Kiss*, *The Blues for Miles*, *Good Vibrations (for David), The Black Door*, *The Big Wave*. Those are her points of departure: at arrival, her paintings exude a joyful ease, whose charm later however belies their depth of sophistication. For me, the easy attitude she takes to moving paint could be compared to the way glazes are applied to clay, like a kind of surface decoration. Nothing signifies their casualness more than when she allows paint to seep into the edges of her tape leaving her lines and shapes with uneven, serrated edges. This is not intended to suggest that there is no rigour to Heilmann's work, rather the opposite. You feel that the paint is very close to the top, if not on the surface. This is not the same way that Marden plays with the plane. For me, it is Matisse that her work channels. Intense colour and space opened by colour but one that is demarcated by line or edge; those are the very operations by which both the Frenchman's and the Californian's paintings perform. However, where a Matisse seems cool and analytical, Heilmann is all hot and

[17] "Mary Heilmann in Fantasy" at 17.56 min.

personal. The New York critic, John Yau, observes that Heilmann was one of the first artists to "absorb the lessons of Pop artists, particularly their allusions to popular culture" and it is the "synthesis of pop colour and geometric abstraction in palpably layered or optically juxtaposed compositions" that create "the absence of fixity."[18]

[18] Yau 49.

A 1983 painting, *Rosebud*, is partly inspired by the martyrdom of St. Sebastian: it is an creamy all white field covered with 17 red splotches spread unevenly across. Although paintings of the Saint date from earlier, it seems to me that the dramatic ones come from the Renaissance and after. However, the only sign of this passion is the dripping red paint. Passion is certainly the theme; it is also inspired by a breakup.[19] In appearance, however, Heilmann's painting could be a leftfield pattern painting (a 70s West Coast, anti-formalist painting movement) or an oddball piece of post-painterly abstraction. That is, it is both cool and hot.

[19] Yablonsky "The Composer"

Mary Heilmann, *Rosebud*, 1983
Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 106.68 cms
©Mary Heilmann
Photo: Christopher Burke Studio
Courtesy of the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser & Wirth

Its title, *Rosebud*, might refer to the MacGuffin in the Orson Welles' film *Citizen Kane*, 1941. *Rosebud* was the childhood sled that symbolises the Orson Welles' film character's lost innocence.[20] Perhaps roses blooming might be what those haptic red swirls suggest. Or is it symbolic of loss? Bleeding and weeping. And, of course, they could also be roses budding. In her impressionistic, note-like response to this particular Heilmann, the painter Jutta Koether writes that it is "[the] most emotional painting of all. Creating the crying one...ornaments and wounds. An emotional field, painted as pouring sentimentality, true sentiments, that stick around, making the painting. Making it through to an optimism, eventually. Yet is heart-crushingly pop…"[21] *Rosebud* is, in a sense, reductive but it is also expressionistic. It's reductive nature acts like a Marden monochrome, but in terms of evocation, as Koether correctly notes, they may be more cultural than they are artistic. It is far from the passion of a tortured saint, and far from away the Renaissance. However, in *Citizen Kane*, or in "blossomings" either bloody or in nature, there is a hint of the cinematic—that is a 20th century phenomenon.

[20] Bradshaw "Citizen Kane"

[21] *The All Night Movie* 86

Do we really see a painting in its time? No, we may be conscious of its era but we meet it in our present. That is, in a practical sense, our eyes/vision touch paint applied by a hand nearly 200 years ago. So, from the 21st century, we are, in a sense, travelling across the centuries by viewing a 19th century object with its references to the 16th and 18th centuries, as well as richly alluding to painting of its own time. Or even a late 20th century work monochrome cycling through the history of that genre.

Wondering… or coming off the wall

In his conclusory remarks on Alys, quoted in my epigraph, Boris Groys describes the present as repetitive and non-historical. It has "lost its past and future...and [is] infinitely repeated"—in other words a sort of existential Groundhog Day. Groys is talking about contemporary life, but it seems prescient in regard to 'contemporary art' which seems to inhabit a continuous present: one place, one time, one issue, all the time. Yes, I'm stereotyping, but speaking as a painter, I sense a shying away from painting at the moment. Perhaps its history is too storied, too full or even completed, and thus of no use value to an infinitely repeated, non-historical present that may want to reduce painting to a mere rectangle on the wall.

Rather as I've tried to show, it is far more complex than at first glance. It is easy to see them in the present, but the tableau could also be an opening, window, door, crack...The richness of the form, as I've been trying to demonstrate with these different examples and moments in time, offers another kind of mobility. It allows the mind to wander. Each stroke of paint inadvertently connects with history, connects with other paintings. Time travel while standing right where you are: looking at a painting. It is not quite like sitting at the computer screen where *information* on the world floods to your fingertips. Rather, it requires the mind to engage in another way...to wander. Then to wonder! And that is the exact pleasure of painting.

Now to go back in time again: a final thought. Do you know that painting came off the wall? Painting actually began on the wall—think cave painting and then church painting ala Giotto. When it came off, it was called a tableau or easel painting. The word "easel" is etymologically derived from the German word for donkey. It is the painter's mule so

to speak. Given the origins of painting, easel painting allowed artists to be on the road. There is some irony to this, as at first it was the painters that had to be mobile. They travelled to the cave or the church to make their murals. Then they became studio artists, when easel and canvases allowed the paintings instead to become mobile. When paint was made industrially and sold in tubes, another idea of mobility came about. That is when painters were more able to move outside and make plein-air paintings. We don't actually use the words "easel painting" much anymore, perhaps it is because easels themselves are less popular. When critics were discussing Abstract Expressionism, easel painting was discussed as something they were going to surpass, as if the artists were trying to put painting back on the wall again.

(With thanks to my first readers: Marcus Verhagen and Clive Hodgson)

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ISLAND NEVER FOUND:
Home, Terra, Island, Unleashed Power, Adventure, Mobility, No man's land or the Artist's Longing and Doubt

The undeniable and unmissable appealing and intriguing mystery of art—whenever and wherever it appears—in all of its forms and in all of its negation of previous forms, is basically and inseparably connected with its challenging, deep, sometimes shocking and destabilising power, which effects the life. The seemingly "useless"[1] work of art, as Hannah Arendt puts it, in its extremity and alienness, in its autonomy and self-determination, is changing our feelings and intellectual orientation: it effects our life and relation to the time, to the place where we live, to the others, we live with.

[1] Hannah Arendt 168

The artist's engagement and obsession is to create this unique entity, this extremely concentrated and multilayered specific "micro-universe" which owns the capacity and competence of involving unlimited references, evocations, memories and perspectives of human experience in a suggestive and irresistible shape of solid internal coherence. The message of the artwork thus has its legitimacy from this coherence. It suggests a possible but not the only possible understanding of the things and happenings around us. There is always an uncertainty which destabilises our orientation but at the same time opens us up toward different perspectives and surprising connections between fields of experiences.

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"In the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration, a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames. Works of art are thought things..." —Hannah Arendt[2]

[2] Ibid. 168

In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes a work of art as a phenomenon in which the permanence and durability of the world, its very stability, is revealed with a clarity and transparence that can be found nowhere else. This function of the artwork, which otherwise – in the practical, tangible sense – is "useless", consists in the fact that in it, the durability of the world appears in an absolutely clear form, so suggestive and brilliant that other perspectives of the perception of the world, other visions of reality, are opened up. "Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to

the use of living creatures... In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else, therefore, does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life, but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present..."[3]

[3] Arendt 167 f.

There are two particularly important points here, which illuminate the specific significance of the artwork for human beings and reveal the essence of the central metaphor of *Islands Never Found*,[4] namely the island. On the one hand, Hannah Arendt speaks of the possibility of experiencing, in and through the work of art, the durability of the world, the "worldly stability" that is impossible to perceive anywhere in the "thing-world". This means that the work of art offers a unique, specific opportunity to perceive an aspect of existence directly, with the senses. The specific entity of the artwork consists in its ability to communicate an inherently clear, transparent and poetically effective vision of the world's permanence, which is otherwise hidden by the thing-world.

[4] Curated by Hegyi and Katerina Koskina, the exhibition was presented at the State Museum of Contemporary Art Thessaloniki, Palazzo Ducale, Genova, 2010

On the other hand, Hannah Arendt talks about the effect of the artwork on human beings. The immediate, moving experience of the durability of the world perceived through its transparent revelation in the work of art, the experience of a "premonition of immortality" as it were, opens up a perspective, a horizon, that allows human beings to perceive and understand their entire situation, their realities, in a different way. This cathartic experience, the comprehension of alternatives communicated through the aesthetic entity of the artwork, the ability to experience immortality metaphorically, one might say, to envision an imagined existence in immortality, is, in turn, related to the special status of the work of art. Perceived from this perspective, the artwork reifies a radical imaginary or fictional perfection of existence in which the alternatives of immortal life— which are practically impossible in the thing-world— appear to be possible.

This poetic, imaginary, fictional perfection relates to the alternative of the uncompromising—and, in the thing-world, practically impossible— essence of the world, its fundamental—and, in principle, unchangeable— immutable permanence and durability, even though individual mortals must die. Inherent in the experience of this "premonition of immortality" through a work of art is the interiorisation of metaphoric perfection, the metaphor of an imaginary, fictional homeland of unlimited – perfectly realised – life.

This second aspect of the special status of the work of art as a communicator of possible perspectives for thought, as a terrain upon which essential experiences can be perceived in transparent, clear forms – which is impossible in the thing-world – is related to the most important function of an artwork, namely its capacity to unveil essential realities, the "durability of the world." It is only in this clarity and transparence that mortal human beings can find a "non-mortal home," in which things "achieved by mortal hands" survive beyond their creators. All the values that are embodied in the works of mortal human beings are incorporated in this "non-mortal home."

The specific capacity of a work of art to unveil essential realities and thereby offer a glimpse of the perspectives of creative perfection, a transparent revelation of the fundamental permanence of the world, enables human beings to see and contextualise their existence on a broader, more complex, more intensive, higher level through the perception of the artwork. The metaphor of the "non-mortal home" is a reference to this higher level. Although individual human beings must die, they comprehend—through the perception of an artwork—the "durability of the world" in full clarity and transparence, and precisely this experience enables them, despite their mortality, to find a "non-mortal home." In other words, the perception of the "durability of the world"—in the experience of art—enables us to grasp the idea of a "non-mortal home" in which the basic values manifested in things created by "mortal hands" survive beyond individual human mortality. These values are part of the permanence of the world.

Thus, by giving human beings the chance to perceive the permanence of the world with a clearness and transparency impossible in the thing-world, and thereby offering a "premonition of immortality," a work of art becomes an imaginary, rare terrain, a fictional island where immortality is a possibility; the very independence of this island from the pragmatic rules of usefulness and practical, functional realities permits a radicalness of clarity and transparence in which the "durability of the world" can be perceived in its purest form.

In this connection, immortality is a metaphor for the perfection of creativity and of work, for the non-transience of things made by human beings. Immortality means an unlimited capacity of creation, an uncompromising radicalness of all possible poetic constructions of thought, an unrestricted creativity and freedom of the imagination. A work of art discloses a "premonition of immortality," which allows us to consider the existence and the creative work of human beings from a different, higher perspective. This intimation of a possible higher level, of a different, special way of viewing things, is the message communicated by a work of art, and as a result it stands, like an island, distant from the usual "thing-world." On this island, with its "premonition of immortality," the fictional, imaginary alternatives unfold: the improbable figures of unlimited, radical fantasy, the intelligible constructions of poetic effectivity, and they unfold with a radicalness, clarity and uncompromisingness that is not possible anywhere else. Such islands are strange lands where improbabilities find a natural home, because, having been liberated from the mandatory laws of necessity in the thing-world, they can manifest and develop imaginary constructions and alternative ideas in complete freedom and without compromise.

In his astute analysis of Gilles Deleuze's concept of the picture, Raymond Bellour describes Deleuze's perception of the figure in the paintings of Francis Bacon as "the figure that is improbability itself." Raymond Bellour points out that Deleuze saw parallels between the writings of Marcel Proust and the paintings of Francis Bacon, in the sense that both of them rejected the "figurative, illustrative or narrative" function of literature or of painting and wanted to give sensual form to "thought-of or seen probabilities" through the radical independence of the text or of the picture. As Deleuze, speaking of Proust, claimed: "He himself spoke of truths that are written with the help of figures."[5] Paradoxically, it is

[5] Bellour 15

Barthélémy Toguo, *Road to exile*, 2008
Wooden boat, bundles of fabrics, bottles
220 x 260 x 135 cm
Courtesy MAM Mario Mauroner Contemporary Vienna + Salzburg

Danica Dakić, *La Grande Galerie*, 2004
C-print on aluminium
100 x 128 cm
Edition 8 +2

precisely through the specifically created figure, which "is improbability itself," that the artist can convey these "thought-of or seen probabilities." The concept of improbability relates to the special status of the work of art, which is not bound by the laws of necessity in the world of things, nor by the illustrative, narrative functions of everyday speech, but can reify thought-of alternatives and the visions of wild imagination with unlimited radicalness and uncompromisingness.

The work of art is a specific domain where fundamental anthropological realities become graspable with radical intensity through the extremity of the figures of improbability. The work of art is an island of improbabilities, which, through the unrestricted radicalness of imagination, through independence from the pragmatic, limited, purpose-oriented functions of the world of things, through the freedom of alternative thinking – gives expression to highly important, fundamental and elementary experiences of inevitable realities with immediacy and power, making them, as Hannah Arendt writes, "tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read."[6] [6] 168

This radicalness, arising out of uncompromising, unrestricted, intensive concentration on the direct communication of basic realities, creates the feeling of a creativity, an inexhaustible power, that can withstand the mortality of human beings. The optimistic, romantic metaphor of the "non-mortal home" refers to the competence and ability of art to reify basic values—which are not clearly manifested in the thing-world, which in the practical processes of the organisation of life and purpose-oriented work are not transparent and graspable in any concentrated form – in the extreme forms of art and to make them perceivable. The metaphor of the "non-mortal home" suggests no religious visions of eternity, but rather gives us the hope that not everything will be lost when we die, that we will not disappear into oblivion, that we need not surrender to the desolation of limitations and intellectual constriction.

This metaphor is one of *activism*, based on the work of mortal human beings, and reinforces human immanence; its central focus is on the preservation of the values human beings create. The work of art offers a domain where these values can be preserved, where they can live on. It also means that everything we have to lose is the result of human creativity, the work of "mortal hands." For this reason, Hannah Arendt emphasises the importance of human immanence in the immortality metaphor: "It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life, but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present..."[7] [7] 168

This rich, complex metaphor—which reinforces human immanence, confirms the creative perfection of work and suggests an alternative way of viewing the world—refers at the same time to the specific entity of the artwork as a terrain of revelation of fundamental experiences and to the effect of the artwork as a communicator of alternative ways of viewing the world and thereby of a new self-recognition. In this connection, there is a parallel to Nietzsche's extremely complex metaphor of "life". To Nietzsche, the metaphor of "life" relates to a radical perfection and also to an alternative way of viewing the world. As Christoph Menke describes: "This programme of a transformation of practice aims at a

different way of doing things. It is different from the model of action. 'Aesthetic transformation of practice' means: breaking the power of the concept of action (and all other related concepts: purpose, reasons, intention, capability, self-confidence etc.) with respect to being active. The doctrine of artists is: One can be active in other ways than in the purpose-oriented, self-confident exercise of practical capability. Nietzsche's term for describing this other way of engaging in activity, other than action, is 'life'. Being active in the way that artists are active does not mean performing actions, it means 'living.'"[8]

[8] Menke 114

The metaphor 'life' suggests radically and uncompromisingly realised perfection that arises not in the context of practical, purpose-oriented action, but in artistic "doing". This emphasises the special status and the specific entity of art as a terrain where a suggestive, unlimited perfection that is graspable with the senses can be realised. This radical perfection, this independence from the rules and causalities of the purpose-oriented actions of the thing-world, is only possible on the terrain of art, in the artist's "doing". "In artistic perfection, in the artist's Dionysian 'doing', on the other hand, we do not have a subject performing an action to realise a known and wanted purpose, but rather someone acting in the grip of intoxication to realise— himself: 'The human being in this condition transforms things until they reflect his power, until they are reflections of his perfection.' The 'aesthetic doing and seeing' consequently leads to a transformation, a perfection of things. But this change that it precipitates is not brought about in the artistic activity: it is not the purpose of this activity. Artistic activity is not based or oriented on any purpose at all. Artistic activity is the 'reflection' or 'communication' of the state the artist is in when he does what he does.... When Nietzsche describes it as 'intoxication', he means, as in the birth of tragedy, a state of 'heightened power and fullness,' which he here again refers to as 'Dionysian.'"[9]

[9] Ibid. 112

Like Nietzsche, Arendt too, emphasises the basic difference between the purpose-oriented action of a subject in the thing-world and purposeless artistic activity, and points out the qualitative difference between useful objects and "useless" works of art.[10] The lack of a purpose is related to a claim to perfection, to unlimited, uncompromising creation, since purpose-oriented action is necessarily limited, being restricted to the fulfilment of a previously known, deliberate, specific function. The purposelessness of artistic activity positions the artwork outside of the thing-world and makes radicalness, concentration and the unlimited heightening of creative powers possible. Nietzsche, on the other hand, speaks of "powers" as of an activity outside of consciousness; powers are unconscious. This is what he means by intoxication: intoxication is a state in which the subject's powers are so greatly intensified that they are beyond the subject's conscious control. Or conversely: the unleashing of powers in intoxication consists in their transcending the aggregate state of self-conscious capacity that they preserve in purpose-oriented action. "Therefore, a human being in a Dionysian state of heightened powers is defined by an essential inability: 'the inability not to react (similarly to certain hysterics, who assume a role at the slightest provocation)': the inability to act as the power to be compelled to react aesthetically, to be compelled to express oneself."[11]

[10] Arendt 167. Cf Arendt: "Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualising their own inherent purpose—as the purpose of a chair is actualised when it is sat upon—can only destroy them. Thus their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages."

[11] Menke 113

This inability to act within the context of the thing-world creates the specific sensitivity and radicalness, autonomy and *un-restrictedness* that

Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck – Migrateurs*, 2007
Single Channel Video Projection, silent, 10:00, loop, performed in Paris
Commissioned by Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-De-Marne (MAC/VAL)
Still Photo by Thierry Depagne. Courtesy Kimsooja Studio and KEWENIG, Berlin

Richard Long, *Mediterranean Arc*, 2008
Stones
730 cm radius
Courtesy the artist and Tucci Russo Studio per l'Arte Contemporanea, Torre Pellice
Photo: Archivio fotografico Tucci Russo, Torre Pellice

is needed in order to be active outside the context of purpose-oriented action: to strive for improbabilities—one might say to create without restrictions—to have alternative ideas that do not accept any of the boundaries set by purpose-oriented goals. In this specific state, on the terrain of art, on the island of the artist, a hyper-intensive artistic process of perfecting takes place, without limitations and without restricting purposes or goals: be they practical, political, didactic or moral. On the island of art, this radical perfecting process becomes palpable, and this intensive experience offers a glimpse of alternative perspectives, of higher horizons, thereby revealing, in Nietzsche's sense, a different "life" or, in the words of Hannah Arendt, a "premonition of immortality." On the terrain of art, on the island of the artist, there is a hint of something that in everyday life, in the purpose-oriented thing-world, cannot be seen or experienced with such immediacy, with such radicalness and intensity. Here we are given an unrestrainedly radical, unlimitedly intensive, highly concentrated, unembellished, unfiltered experience of fundamental realities. That is why Nietzsche calls this fundamental encounter, this radical, unlimited, elementary experience simply "life", a strong metaphor, as we see, for perfection or perfecting, and he suggests that everything else is not real life, or at least is only limited action based on certain purpose-oriented goals. In artistic activity, perfecting acquires a radical intensity that cannot be described in the terms of purpose-oriented action.

In this connection, Christoph Menke believes: "The essential step in an aesthetic transformation of practice consists therefore in learning, from the artist's example, to make a conceptual decision: in learning, in the field of activity, to distinguish between action and life. The first result of this newly acquired ability to discriminate is a new description of the field of practicality. Anyone who has learned from artists that it is possible to be active without being involved in action can see how practicality spreads into life everywhere, downwards as well as upwards... 'Life, one concludes from this new aesthetic description, is both the lowest (in descriptive terms, most elementary) and the highest (in normative terms, most sophisticated) concept of a philosophy of practicality: 'life' is the destiny of *movement* and *goodness*."[12]

[12] Ibid. 114

This real 'life' reveals itself through the heightened "powers" of intoxication, through the radicalness, extremity and total *un-restrictedness* of artistic doing. Radical imagination, liberation from any sort of purpose-oriented, practical, limited goals, the development of forms and narratives of improbabilities, lead to an intensification of fundamental experiences. In this respect, the contemporary artists Gilbert & George say: "If you want to be a speaking artist, you have to be totally crazy, MAD, extreme. Otherwise it doesn't work. You have to be a complete outsider, totally alone. If you are part of something, nothing will happen."[13] Craziness, madness, extremity, radicalness are elements of the intoxication that enables artists to place themselves, in a sense, outside the laws of normality, outside the pragmatic thing-world, outside purpose-oriented action.

[13] Gilbert & George 94

Consequently, the artist achieves a special status that offers the possibility—even if it is not always accepted everywhere, without conditions, without argument, by everyone, by the entire community, by the cultural environment —of uninhibited, indiscriminate, radical, unrestrictedly autonomous language and creative form. This free,

concentrated, autonomous language focuses on what is important, on the essence of things, even if this appears in the seemingly most trivial, imperceptible, unobtrusive banalities and their observation. The expression "speaking artist" used by Gilbert & George refers to this radicalness of language, of speaking out, of the fundamental vocation of the artist to say something important, fundamental, essential. Nietzsche's metaphor of "life", Hannah Arendt's "durability of the world," and Gilbert & George's "speaking artist," all imply that the ability and competence to create a highly concentrated, radically intensified, uninhibited and uncompromising, unfiltered state of extreme sensitivity are inherent in artistic activity. If an artist is involved in any kind of action, if he is "part of something." If he is not a complete outsider, he cannot achieve this state of exceptional autonomy and thus will be not be capable of being a "speaking artist." It is only this outsider position that makes it possible for artists to have the radicalness and extreme sensitivity with which to reveal a new entity through what they do.

But the artist's outsider position also creates loneliness, isolation, apartness from pragmatic, comprehensible, purpose-oriented actions; precisely this radicalness and hyper-intensity, this uncontrollable madness, this extremity, *un-restrictedness* and exceptional autonomy create the island, which becomes not only the land of perfection, the special, peculiar terrain of intensified experience of fundamental realities, the field of unlimited sensitivity, but also an island of alienation and apartness, of loneliness and mistrust, of imprisonment and doubt.

Apartness and strangeness, exterritoriality and extremity, intensity and radicalness—in short, to "march to a different drummer"—characterise the adventure, which, according to Georg Simmel, has a basic similarity with the work of art. "It is precisely when continuity with life is disregarded on principle in this way, or rather, when it does not even have to be disregarded—when something is already there that is alien, untouchable, marching to a different drummer—that we speak of adventure. It lacks that reciprocal penetration with the adjoining parts of life through which life becomes whole. It is like an island in life which determines its beginning and its end by means of its own formative powers, and not, like a piece of a continent, together with those of what is on either side of it. [...] For it is the nature of a work of art that it cuts a piece out of the endless, ongoing flow of perceivable comprehensibility or experience, takes it out of its context, and gives it a self-sufficient form, as if determined and held together by some internal centre. That a part of existence is woven into its uninterruptedness, is nevertheless experienced as a whole, as a complete unit – this is the form that a work of art and an adventure have in common."[14]

[14] Simmel 41

Adventure: another complex, poetically dense, powerful, effective metaphor for the ability of an artist to create, out of an inner formative power, an extremely intense and autonomous form of existence "outside the usual continuity of this life."[15] With the 'adventure' metaphor, Georg Simmel describes the special status of artistic activity, one might say the specific entity of the work of art, which, through its provocative independence, through its eccentricity in "marching to a different drummer," through its radical "detachment from the meshes and links of the purposes in life," is able to centre itself "in a meaning that exists of itself."[16] Such extremity, *unattachedness*, exterritoriality insists on staying "outside the usual continuity of this life," refuses to become involved in the

[15] Ibid. 39

[16] Ibid. 40

Siobhán Hapaska, *Playa de los Intranquilos, 2004*
Fibreglass, two pack acrylic paint, sand, palm tree trunks, synthetic foliage, coconuts, nylon, plastic and glass
Dimensions variable
Edition of 3
Courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery

pragmatic causalities of the thing-world, removes itself from the logic of life and is thereby capable of capturing perfection and radical intensity. Through their uncompromising independence and "detachment from the meshes and links," the adventure and the artwork "are perceived, in all the one-sidedness and coincidence of their substance, as if all of life were somehow concentrated and completed in each of them. And this seems to happen not to a lesser degree, but more perfectly, because the artwork stands altogether outside of life as a reality, the adventure is something totally separate from the uninterrupted, connected process of life in which each element is interwoven with its neighbors. Precisely because the artwork and the adventure stand apart from life..., the one and the other are analogous to the totality of life itself."[17] That is the reason for the enigmatic, indisputable, powerful effect of a work of art, namely the intense experience of a feeling of wholeness, the dramatic encounter with the hyper-intensive, concentrated totality of life, which can be grasped precisely in this form of extreme strangeness, of unusual, eccentric separateness. On this exterritorial island of anomalies, in this strange land of improbabilities, where "that reciprocal penetration with the adjoining parts of life"[18] is missing, we experience a feeling of extremely intensive wholeness and perfection of the various areas of life and experience. Exterritoriality, detachment, separation from the rational contexts of life, or—to use Nietzsche's words—artistic doing, rather than practical, purpose-oriented action, or, as Hannah Arendt describes it, the uselessness of the artwork and its special status in the thing-world, or what Gilbert & George call extremity, craziness, *uncompromising outsiderness* and radical loneliness as the price of the freedom and independence of "speaking artists": all these metaphors refer to the specific ability of art to create an alternative reality that is more real than the given, graspable realities in non-artistic areas of organised life.

[17] Ibid. 41

[18] Ibid. 41

The artist, lonely in his final decisions, alone on his island, incapable of ever knowing whether it is really his own island, his suitable, prepared, living terrain, nor even – to take it further – whether it exists anywhere at all, seeks ways and means of grasping the intensification of the feeling of experiencing something fundamental and complete, in other words, of achieving perfection. The artist, just like his kinsman, the adventurer, "finds a central feeling about life that leads through the eccentricity of the adventure and, precisely in the great distance between the accidental, externally given happenings of the adventure and the centre of existence that pulls everything together and gives it meaning, produces a new, meaningful necessity of his life."[19] It is this "meaningful necessity of life" that reveals itself on the artist's strange, distant island, often very far from us, often never found or found too late, and nevertheless reachable for everyone.

[19] Ibid. 43

(Translation by Beverley Blaschke, Vienna)

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Cultural Cross-pollination or Cultural Misunderstanding?
A case of non-aligned Yugoslavia

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the 'idea' of Yugoslavia,[1] not only in our region, but also globally. This interest has to do primarily with specific Yugoslav socialism as well as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of which Yugoslavia was a key member. The reasons are many: disillusions in the current global world order, especially rapid neo-liberal globalisation which has created huge problems; inequality, the rise of new forms of dependency (economic, political); the rise of right-wing politics and fascisms; and so on.

The NAM represented, at least until the 1980s, a significant "rupture" on the global level—an attempt at an alternative *mondialisation*, and a desire to create a more just, equal and peaceful world order. Yugoslavia was a special case in this constellation, it helped to bring non-colonial Europe into the grouping. Unlike many colonial narratives, Yugoslavia had never asserted itself as a nation or culture that worked to 'civilise' others.[2] Instead, it cultivated and maintained the notion of itself as the culture/nation that aimed to help others establish a position in a role that had yet to be created and clearly defined (the 'older brother' paradigm, which is also problematic from today's perspective). Yugoslavia's socialist, anti-imperial revolution had a lot in common with anti-colonial ones which made the Yugoslav case of emancipation particularly significant. Being one of the key members in the NAM, Yugoslavia supported global anti-colonial struggles[3] not only politically but also economically and culturally.

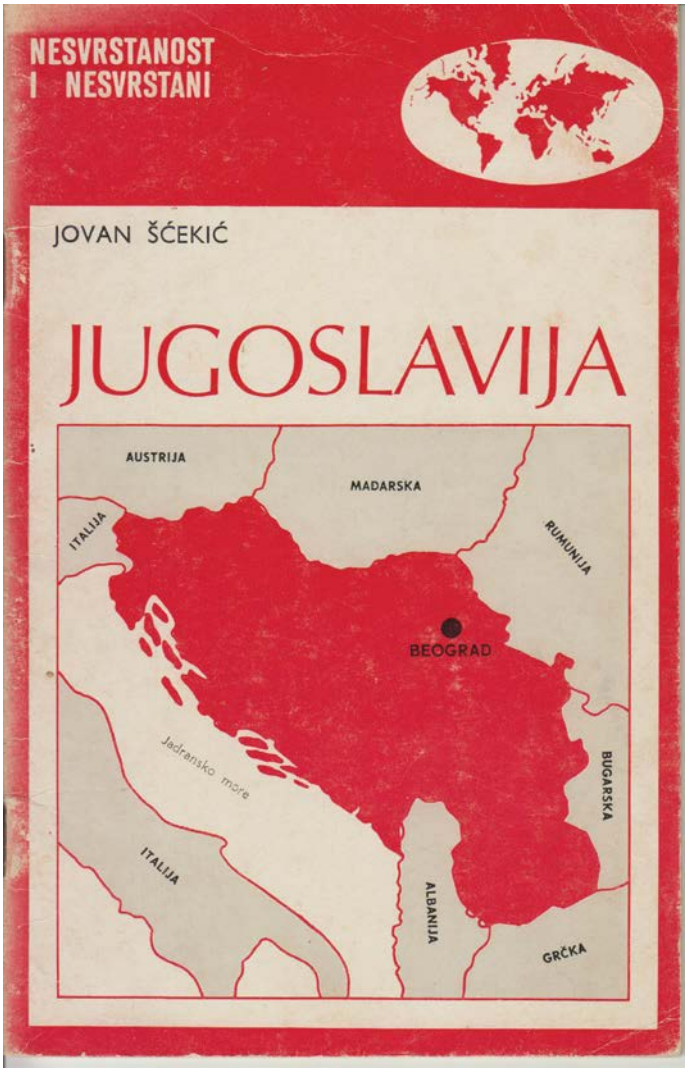
Art and culture played an important role in the NAM, even though comparatively little is known about this today. The reason is that after the Second World War, the main orientation in arts and culture in many non-aligned (decolonised, newly independent) countries as well as in Yugoslavia was the one following the Western epistemic canon.[4] The other non-western 'story' comprised of various "provincialised modernisms,"[5] and heterogeneous expressions propagated ideas that were often in line with similar issues that non-alignment addressed. Such ideas were, for example, the questioning of cultural imperialism, restitution and epistemic colonialism. NAM's cultural politics from the beginning specifically encouraged cultural diversity and cultural hybridity. Western (European) cultural heritage was to be understood in terms of "juxtaposition"[6]; this heritage would be interwoven with and into the living culture of the colonised, and would not simply be repeated under new (political) circumstances. For this reason, a "cross-national appreciation for cultural heritages" and a local-to-local approach was extremely important.

[1] Socialist Yugoslavia was established after the Second World War. It was a federative Republic consisting of six republics. It disintegrated during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s.

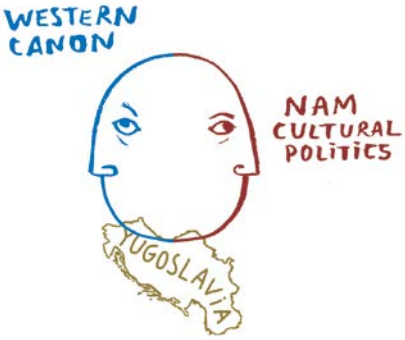
[2] Sladojević, *Slike o Africi / Images of Africa, xv*

[3] Yugoslavia was, for example, the first European country to openly support the Algerian Liberation war not only in the provision of arms and financial aid but also in the field of culture (cinema).

[4] For example, the *Biennial of Graphic Arts* in Ljubljana was from its inception in 1955 oriented toward the West following the Western art canons even though it propagated the ideas of the non-aligned cultural politics with the inclusion of graphic prints from those countries. From the Biennial archival materials, it can be concluded that graphic prints from the NAM countries often did not conform to Western canons and were therefore exhibited in the lower,



Jugoslavija (Yugoslavia) booklet from the series
Non-aligned and the Non-alignment
published by Rad, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 1975
Private archives



less important gallery spaces. A good case-study for this dilemma is the UNESCO-produced cultural policy analyses (1970s) written by experts from Third World countries that focused on the idea of developing their own cultural models.

[5] See Enwezor's notion in "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary' " 36

[6] See Prashad 82

Yugoslavia might be a good case-study for this cultural dilemma. On one hand, Western canons were widely accepted in the art circles and on the other, non-Western ones were politically stimulated through various cultural policies connected to the NAM. However, they were stimulated without a deeper understanding of what "other" modernisms really meant, as it is clear from reports, texts and concrete cases such as exhibitions and other museological contexts of that era. But in order to better understand this specific phenomenon we first need to go at least a hundred years back.

"In 1963 all Africa must be free!"[7]

[7] Savnik, *Črna celina* 3

In the late 1920s, there was already a growing fascination among Yugoslavia's cultural circles with faraway places. However, few Yugoslavs travelled to exotic places, largely because Yugoslavia was not a colonial country and as such had no colonial experience. There were exceptions; there were Yugoslavs studying in France who showed a particular interest in Africa; many of them belonged to the surrealist circles, including Rastko Petrović, an avant-garde writer, poet and diplomat who travelled to Western Africa in 1929. His book *Africa*[8] is a record of that journey. The book was in some ways a typical product of the era, written from the perspective of a white European male, based on pre-conceived colonial knowledge and stereotypes about Africa. Petrović nevertheless attempted to answer the question what it meant to be an "European Other" in Africa; or to put it in a somewhat larger frame, what it meant at the time to be a European "from a margin of European modernity." Another important Paris encounter unfolded in 1934, when Petar Guberina, a PhD student of linguistics at the Sorbonne, met Aimé Césaire.[9] Guberina invited Césaire to his native city Šibenik that same year, and it was there that Césaire started writing his famous epic poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*,[10] which was one of the first expressions of the concept of negritude. Not surprisingly, the preface was written by Guberina. Another figure in that circle was Léopold Senghor, who later became President of Senegal and travelled to Yugoslavia on an official state visit in 1975. In his speech at the *First International Congress of Black Writers* in Paris in 1956,[11] he pointed out: "Cultural liberation is the condition *sine qua non* of political liberation." A few years later Guberina published a book, *Following the Black African Culture*, in which many of Césaire's and Senghor's thoughts on culture resonated. In what sounded much like Senghor's Paris speech, he wrote: "Black cultural workers, although there were few, have manifested a multifaceted function of culture and used it as a powerful weapon against colonisation. Cultural workers have become political workers and vice versa."[12]

[8] *Afrika*, 1955

[9] Poet and playwright, born in French Carribean, 1913-2008

[10] written in French

[11] This was co-organised with Guberina

[12] "Tragom afričke crnačke kulture" 16

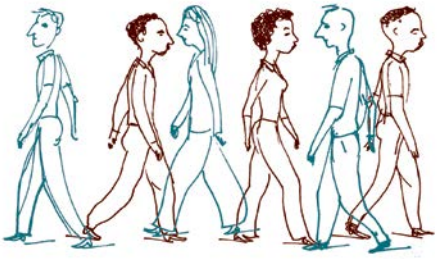
The permanent display of the Museum of African Art (MAA)—
the Veda and Dr. Zdravko Pečar Collection, 1977
Photographed by Branko Kosić. Photo courtesy of the Museum of African Art
—the Veda and Dr. Zdravko Pečar Collection, Belgrade (MAA)

The MAA permanent display, concept by Jelena Arandjelović Lazić,
design by Saveta and Slobodan Mašić, 1977
MAA Photo Archives

It was the 1960s in particular, that saw the rebirth of a specific travel literature about "exotic places," the most prominent example of which was the work of Oskar Davičo—not surprisingly another surrealist writer and politician who had visited Western Africa to prepare for a meeting of the NAM. He wrote a book about the journey called *Black on White*, in which he analysed African post-colonial societies at the time. Davičo, a very different observer than Petrović, did not want to be seen as a white man in Africa. Moreover, he was even ashamed of his whiteness, saying that if he could change the colour of his skin he would have done so without regret: "Yes, I am white, that is all the passers-by see. If only I could wear my country's history digest on my lapel!"[13]

A year later, travel journalist Dušan Savnik began his book *Black Continent* with an exclamation: "In 1963 all Africa must be free!"[14]

To make the Third World a place from which to speak.[15]



Already at the 1956 UNESCO[16] conference in New Delhi, a great importance was put on "dissemination of art works of contemporary artists."[17] Interestingly, the focus of such cooperation was between "the peoples and nations of the Orient and the Occident."[18]

A few years later, the 1964 report of Heads of State participating at the second Non-Aligned Conference in Cairo considered cultural equality one of the important principles of the NAM, at the same time recognising that many cultures were suppressed under colonial domination and that international understanding required a rehabilitation of these cultures. In the Colombo Resolution in 1976, emphasis was placed on restitution; the members requested restitution of works of art to the countries from which they had been expropriated.[19] And at the conference in Havana in 1979, Josip Broz Tito spoke of the resolute struggle for decolonisation in the field of culture. The Havana Declaration also emphasised cooperation among the non-aligned and developing countries, as well as: "...better cultural acquaintance; and the exchange and enrichment of national cultures for the benefit of over-all social development and progress, for full national emancipation and independence, for greater understanding among the peoples and for peace in the world."[20] The Delhi Declaration in 1983 focused more specifically on cultural heritage and its preservation, as well as on cooperation in culture between the NAM members.

In Yugoslavia, a special committee was established after the Second World War called the *Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries*, which arranged exhibitions outside Yugoslavia's borders and was chaired by the surrealist writer and artist Marko Ristić. Cultural

[13] *Črno na belem, Potopis po Zahodni Afriki* 6

[14] Savnik, *Črna celina* 3. A number of books on colonialism were written in Yugoslavia, such as Vera Nikolova's *Colonies Then and Now* in 1954; Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was translated into Slovene as early as 1963, only two years after it was originally published in France. Literature from the non-aligned countries was widely translated in Yugoslav languages, for example, *Zlato črnih dlani* anthology (Black palms' gold), 1963. Travel literature about Africa was also quite popular, emphasising the political, economic and cultural conditions of African states after their independence (Oskar Davičo: *Črno na belem*; Franc Šrimp: *Evropa-Afrika-Evropa*; Jože Šircelj: *Živa Afrika*; Jože Volfand: *Naši obrazi v Afriki*, and many others).

[15] The emphasis of many NAM resolutions turned on questioning intellectual colonialism and cultural dependency. The idea was not only to study the Third World, but to make the Third World *a place from which to speak*. One similar concept from that time is that of "location" which is "a horizon beyond modernity, a perspective of one's own cultural experiences," according to historian Enrique Dussel.

[16] UNESCO and the NAM have had a specific relation and shared many objectives especially regarding issues on cultural diversity, cultural heritage and its protection as well as on restitution of works of art. NAM implemented many UNESCO provisions on culture, education and science in

conventions and programs of cultural cooperation included not only Western and Eastern Europe, but also non-aligned countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These exchanges touched on all levels of cultural production. Cultural cooperation between the non-aligned countries was based on conventions on culture and programs of cultural collaboration.

Yugoslavia, for example, has signed agreements with 56 non-aligned members and observers. In addition, between the 1960s and 1980s many new biennials opened throughout the non-aligned world signifying a different kind of cultural exchange: *Biennial of Graphic Arts* in Ljubljana; *Triennale-India* in New Delhi; *Coltejer Art Biennial* in Colombia; *International Art Biennale* in Valparaíso; *Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh* in Chile; *Biennial of Arab Art* in Baghdad, Iraq; *Havana Biennial* in Cuba and others.

Yugoslavia propagated its ideology and culture globally on the basis of the formula: specific modernism(s) (based on Western canons) + Yugoslav socialism[21] = emancipatory politics. It was at the same time an articulation of an idea, and an attempt to show the world how it is possible to direct one's own modernisation processes.

The NAM's cultural politics were intertwined into Yugoslav cultural politics but in reality those other modernisms and art expressions were never of significant consideration in Yugoslav society nor were they part of the museological deliberations. There existed exceptions in architecture and urban planning but also with the establishment of some new collections, institutions and exhibitions.

"Art of the World" in Yugoslavia

As mentioned already in the first chapter, Yugoslavia had special relations with the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia from the late 1950s. President Tito often travelled to those countries on so called "Journeys of Peace." A particularly significant one was his visit to Western African countries on the Galeb (Seagull) boat in 1961, not as a conqueror, but to support the independence of post-colonial states. These travels consequently acquired a strong economic

its Declarations. UNESCO has had a guest status at the NAM summits since 1979

[17] *Records of the General Conference*, Ninth Session, New Delhi 1956 (Paris: UNESCO, 1957), 26

[18] Ibid. 27

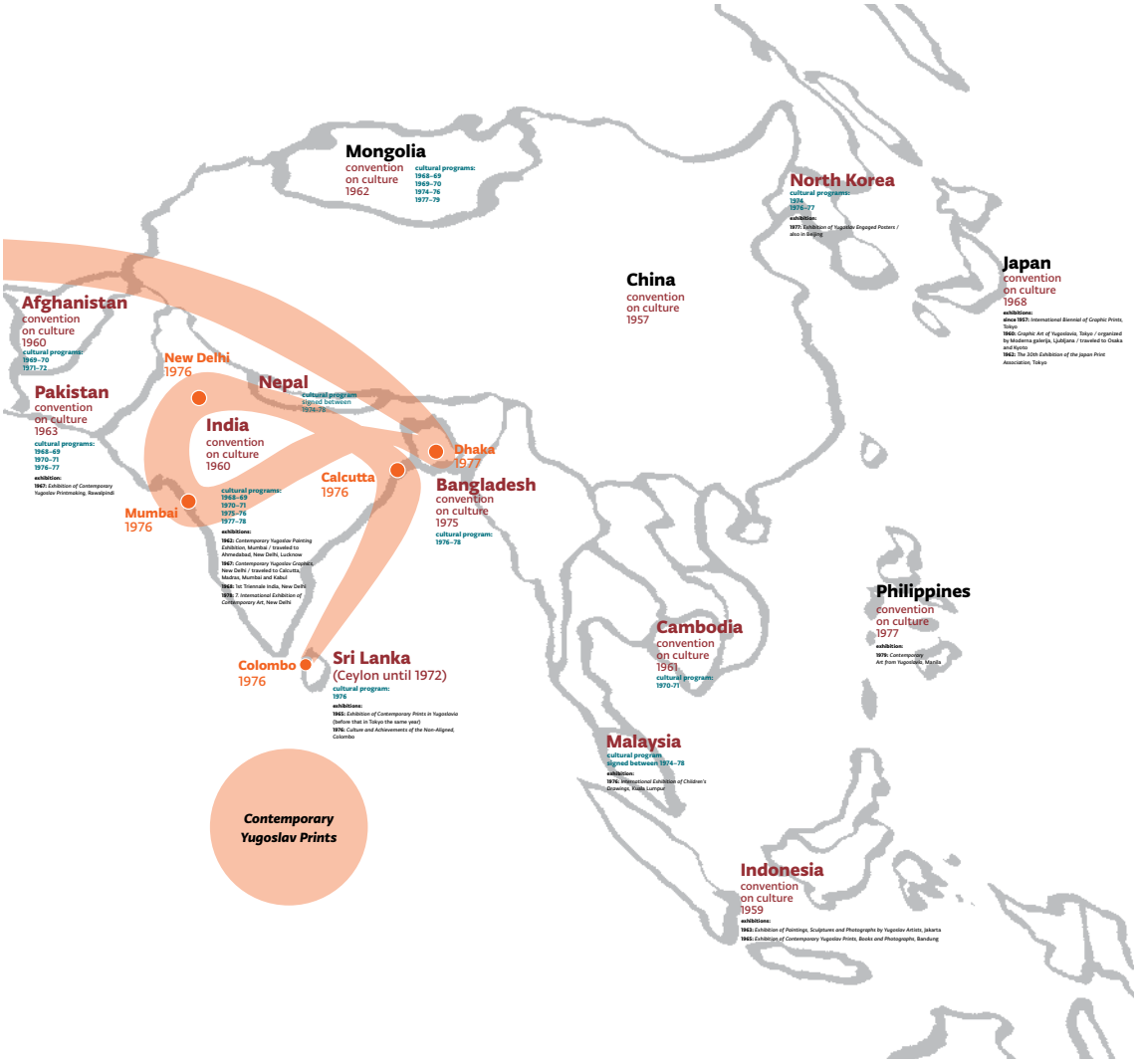
[19] Libya introduced a draft resolution where it presented facts of how the country was deprived of its "human cultural heritage" as a result of colonialism. See: Documents of the Fifth Conference, 149

[20] Documents of the Sixth Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries, held in Havana, Cuba, from 3 to 9 September 1974, 86

[21] Yugoslav socialism was different from the socialism of the Eastern bloc especially after 1948 when it broke relations with the Soviet Union. The sequences that enabled the beginning of a novum in politics and economy in Yugoslavia were self-management and the non-aligned movement. The role of culture was also significant, not because it transformed the inner order of culture or the position of the cultural sphere in social structure, but as Slovene sociologist Rastko Močnik suggests, because it eliminated the cultural sphere, which by its own existence embodies the "barbarity of classes," and re-established culture in the sphere of human emancipation

Dubravka Sekulić's project on *Energoprojekt*. Exhibition view
Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2019
Photo: Dejan Habicht, Moderna galerija

Dubravka Sekulić's project on *Energoprojekt*. Exhibition view
Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2019
Photo: Dejan Habicht, Moderna galerija

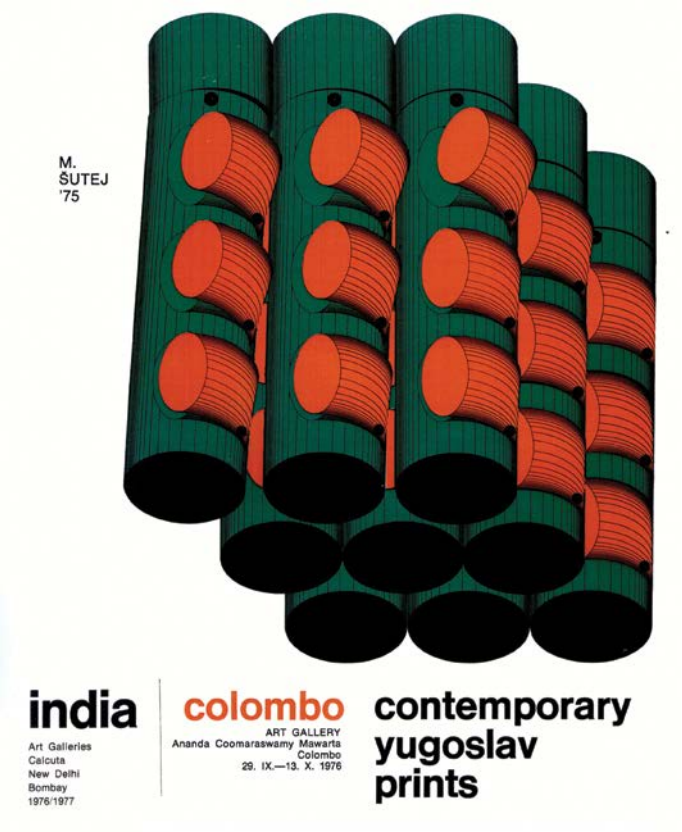


Map (Asia) of Yugoslavia's international collaboration in culture with developing countries

Researcher: Teja Merhar, map design: Djordje Balmazović

Project for the *Southern Constellations: Poetics of the Non-Aligned*

Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2019



Cover of the catalogue for the travelling exhibition *contemporary yugoslav prints*, 1976
Moderna galerija Archives

Exhibition view. *Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned*. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2019
Left to right: the works of Rafiqun Nabi (Bangladesh), Cho Geumsoo (North Korea),
Elba Jimenez (Nicaragua), and Agnes Clara Ovando Sans De Franck (Bolivia)
Photo: Dejan Habicht, Moderna galerija

dimension and created new spheres of interest and exchange among countries of the NAM. Intense economic collaboration at first included Yugoslav construction companies working on projects in Africa and the Middle East—companies that had sprung up as a consequence of the rapid urbanisation of Yugoslavia after the Second World War. Probably the largest of them was the Energoprojekt[22] construction company from Belgrade that operated in 50 non-aligned countries, designing and building infrastructure (hydropower plants, irrigation systems, and electricity networks) and buildings (mostly conference halls, office buildings, hotels, etc). Constructing companies provided everything "from design to construction," including architecture and urban planning. Such examples, as mentioned, were projects in various African and Arab non-aligned countries, like Energoprojekt's Lagos International Trade Fair (1974-77), where architects combined specific (Yugoslav) modernism with tropical modernism and the local contexts.

[22] See Dubravka Sekulić's research on the topic as well as her project "The Sun Never Sets on Energoprojekt (Until it Does)" for the exhibition *Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned,* Moderna galerija Ljubljana 2019

Exchanges of all sorts also happened in the field of the arts and education: students from non-aligned countries came to study in Yugoslavia; museums acquired various artefacts; and some institutions even opened anew. The Museum of African Art which opened in Belgrade in 1977 as a result of this ideological and political climate is a typical case: even though the predominant discourse of the time of its establishment was anticolonial, the methodologies and procedures were almost completely adopted from similar institutions in the West.[23]

[23] See Ana Sladojević and Emilia Epštajn, "Museum Values Reconsidered"

But the earliest example of cultural exchange is the founding of *International Exhibitions of Graphic Prints* in Ljubljana (then Yugoslavia) in 1955. The director of Moderna galerija, Zoran Kržišnik, formed a committee for the first international exhibition, which drew up the guidelines for the biennial exhibitions to follow. The purpose of founding a Biennial was to pave the way for establishing contacts globally, introduce abstraction into Yugoslav art, and prove that even "art can be an instrument of liberalisation." The idea was to invite artists from all of the countries with which Yugoslavia had cultural or political relations. The *Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic A*rts was to be a practical example of Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy and the cultural policies of the NAM which Yugoslavia followed, parallel to balancing its position between the Western and Eastern power blocs. The *Ljubljana Biennial's* approach to acquiring works for the exhibitions was twofold: on the one hand, the Biennial juries made their own selections to get the best representatives of e.g. the School of Paris; on the other, some countries were offered direct invitations to present whatever they wanted, without any interference in their selections. As a result, the Biennial exhibited "basically everything, the whole world," especially after the first conference of non-aligned countries in 1961. The selection process involved competent juries, which largely consisted of curators and critics from the West, such as Pierre Restany, Harald Szeemann, Riva Castelmann, William Lieberman, but also Ryszard Stanisławski from Lodz and Jorge Glusberg from Buenos Aires. But although enamoured with Western ideals and following its pragmatic political agenda, the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts was nonetheless globally one of the first non-bloc art events at the time of the Cold War divisions, putting forward a model for a peaceful coexistence of the first, second and third worlds—if only in art and culture.

5th International Exhibition of Graphic Arts, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1963
Jury members: Mieczyslaw Porebski, William S. Lieberman, Zoran Kržišnik, Walter Koschatzky, Jacques Lassaigne, Umbro Apollonio, Aleksej Fjodorov-Davidov
Photo: Moderna galerija Photo Archives

13th International Biennial of Graphic Arts, Moderna galerija Ljubljana, 1979
President Luís Cabral of Guinea-Bissau (right) visits the exhibition
Photo: Moderna galerija Photo Archives

6th International Exhibition of Graphic Arts, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1965
Flags of the participating countries in front of the museum
Photo: Moderna galerija Photo Archives

Exhibition view. 8*th International Exhibition of Graphic Arts*,
Moderna galerija Ljubljana, 1969
Photo: Moderna galerija Photo Archives

In 1984, The Josip Broz Tito Gallery for the Art of the Non-Aligned Countries was inaugurated in then Titograd, Yugoslavia, with the aim to collect, preserve and present the arts and cultures of the non-aligned countries. It was the only art institution established directly under the auspices of the NAM. This was entrenched in the document adopted at the 8th Summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, a couple of years later, where the gallery was to become a common institution for all of the NAM countries. The activities of the gallery were many: alongside collecting works from the NAM countries they also organised exhibitions, symposia and residencies, and produced publications and documentary films. Works from the collection were also shown in Harare, Lusaka, Dar es Salaam, Delhi, Cairo and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, their aim to create a Triennial of Art from the NAM countries was never realised owing to the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It appears though that there was something of a lack of understanding of such "provincialised modernisms" in Yugoslavia at the time, and a special lack of firmer positions regarding other cultures in relation to (Western) modernism. Some prominent Yugoslav art historians saw the collection which they regarded as comprising works by "not affirmed artists from faraway exotic places"[24] as "works from authoritarian states that support official art." It is true that the gallery was a political project from the beginning, and the acquired works[25] were not always the most representative works of a particular artist. On the other hand, the collection's potential to challenge the ways the Western art operates and produces hegemonic narratives/canons was not particularly well understood either. Unlike Western colonial museums of the past, the gallery in Titograd acquired "art of the world" solely in the form of gifts and donations, while attempting to develop its own cultural networks and frameworks of knowledge and to combine this with experiences from other parts of the non-aligned world.

These are only a few of the examples from Yugoslavia that were directly linked to the non-aligned cultural politics.[26] It can nevertheless be concluded that while Yugoslav political manifestos of the time espoused

[24] "Nesvrstano ludilo" ("the non-aligned craziness"), a newspaper clipping with a statement by Ješa Denegri, a photocopy in the *Osnovna dokumentacija*

[25] The collection includes 1025 works from over 50 non-aligned countries, including many prominent artists, such as Rafiqun Nabi, Hussein M. Elgebali, Gazbia Sirry, Saleh Reda, Edsel Moscoso, Roberto Valcárcel, Humberto Castro, Suresh Sharma

[26] For more thorough information and case studies on this topic see *Southern Constellations*: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned. http://www.mg-lj.si/en/exhibitions/2439/southern-constellations-the-poetics-of-the-non-aligned/

the grand ideas of anti-colonialism, decolonialism and the struggle against cultural imperialism, the practice tended to be different. It took quite a while before art from the Third World (or "art of the world") was discussed in terms of cultural and intellectual decolonisation, cosmopolitanism, internationalism, parallel (or local) histories, and other kinds of modernities in the sphere of art and culture.

Taking into consideration the wider context, the non-aligned transnational network did not produce a common tissue that would create a new international narrative in art. Western canons might have been challenged to some degree but with the exception of a few, sometimes extreme cases such as Zaire's *l'authenticité*,[27] the 'non-Western' cultural expressions were usually interpreted in the frame of ethnology or traditional arts and crafts.

What did happen though was the potential to think ("think with a difference"[28]) and create different histories (modernisms, arts, narratives etc.) that extended beyond the Eurocentric ones. There obviously existed a heterogeneous artistic production, a variety of cultural politics and extensive cultural networks which enriched the cultural landscape of the NAM and enabled discussions about the meaning of art outside the Western canon; this is something that this text also attempts to show.

The story of the non-aligned cross-cultural pollination is far from being resolved and concluded. That is why the task for us today is to discern what were the actual consequences of those progressive, even emancipatory, cultural politics on heritage and how they affected the development of new prototypes of art institutions, networks and epistemologies of knowledge. Have those ideas only been preserved as silent reminders of a possibility for a different cultural, artistic and museological perspective? Or were they perhaps seeds that would one day grow into trees and subsequently, into forests?

Drawings by Djordje Balmazović. Balmazović is an artist and graphic designer, a member of Škart collective (Belgrade / Ljubljana).

[27] A doctrine which aimed to erase all traces of Belgian colonialism in art and culture in Zaire

[28] A difference that would destabilise universalist idioms, historicise the context, and pluralise the experiences of modernity: see Gaonkar 14

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'Cut & Mix': Collage, Creolisation and African Diaspora Aesthetics

This article takes as its departure point *Fragments*, a series of rediscovered collages created by the Black British photographer Vanley Burke since the 1980s. It asserts that the materiality, process and theme of *Fragments* provides a clue to the emergence of strategic combinatorial aesthetics amongst the African Diaspora artists at the heart of the 1980s Black British Art Movement.

My concern is the connection between collage as a methodology and the suturing of fractured diasporic narratives that result from movement and migration. I am interested in the (dis)-connections between personal histories and received history; how neglected or hidden diaspora histories of resistance sparked by movement and migration can be mapped through a canvas, an installation or through pieced-together photographic images; how histories and identities can be worked and reworked by hand. I am interested in the way in which cultures collide, co-exist and coalesce—creating the creolised combinatorial aesthetic present in the works of such artists as Vanley Burke, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney.

Using a theoretical framework grounded in the writings of Kamau Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, this article argues that the use of collage in this context might be seen as a strategic act of subversion and play that facilitates the mapping of histories of people on the move. Furthermore, this article advises that the above artists' creolised combinatorial aesthetics parallels the development of "nation language"[1] in the Caribbean—they are vernacular cultural expressions grounded in the re-assertion of agency through the piecing together of seemingly disparate fragments.

[1] Brathwaite 5

Vanley Burke *Fragments*

In January 2020 a visit to Vanley Burke's apartment-cum-studio in Nechells, Birmingham, led to the unearthing of an intriguing portfolio of large-scale intricate collages entitled *Fragments*. These were created by the artist almost twenty years ago. The portfolio also contained close-up shots of selected sections of each collage. These collages were created in response to the artist's own archive of documents, photographs and objects pertaining to the African-Caribbean presence in Britain from the mid-twentieth century to the present day as part of the Wolverhampton Art Gallery 2003 exhibition *True Stories*.

True Stories was a collaborative exhibition developed with contemporary artists Vanley Burke, Barbara Walker, Wanjiku Nyachae, Peter Grego

and Bharti Parmar, working with two archives: the Vanley Burke Archive and the Benjamin Stone Photographic Archive. Other partners included Birmingham Central Library, the University of Central England, Black Country Touring, the Lighthouse Media centre and Arts Council England West Midlands. The exhibition was founded on the assertion that archives are always open to constant reinterpretation and reinvigoration. As curator Caroline Smallwood writes, in *Fragments* Burke devised a new way of reading his own archive: "By reconfiguring certain photographs in his archive and adding new images, he is montaging not only imagery, but stories, memories and personal histories."[2]

[2] Smallwood, Introduction, *True Stories* exhibition catalogue, 2003

Stone and Burke, though separated by a century, share a belief in the power of the photographic lens to capture layered histories for future generations to discover. They also share a passion for collecting contextual materials that breathe life into their photographs. Stone collected geological and botanical specimens alongside a record of personal life and creative practice. Burke collects ephemera, posters, records, videos, orders of services, ornaments, textiles, carvings and basketry. Stone and Burke also shared an understanding of the role of institutions such as libraries, archives and museums in preserving and providing access to their respective collections. In bringing their work together under one roof, the exhibition *True Stories*, sought to continue the artist/archivist's work of representation, presentation and re-examination.

In respect of *Fragments*, Vanley notes that these pieces re-visit ideas from his childhood. He deploys a range of photographs from his collection and new images—for example, pages torn from magazines and newspapers—to cut and splice together multi-layered landscapes in which perspectives collapse—literally and figuratively. Images are cut, torn, digitally enhanced, pared down, recoloured, rearranged and pieced together. This process reflects Burke's awareness of the tensions and conflicting viewpoints and power relations embedded within relationships, history and Caribbean spirituality. The constant doing and redoing, tearing and joining, sticking and unsticking reflects the cyclical nature of life: "creation, growth, entropy, death and re-birth."[3]

[3] Vanley Burke, in *True Stories* exhibition catalogue, 2003

Coming to Birmingham from Jamaica in 1965, Burke began taking pictures for an imaginary friend back home. This friend "needed to know what fog looked like, to see the faces of people whom I'd never met and whose names I heard every day back in Jamaica; he was my audience."[4] The images produced then were positive images of Black people in Britain. This made them unusual at the time. The collages reveal complex Black lives and complex Black experiences. By the time of *True Stories*, Blackness had come to mean something else; it was not the political construct that it was in the 1970s and 1980s (see below). The Black community re-presented in *Fragments* has a political and social identity that is not solely defined by the colour of their skin. Burke's practice is that of a (hi)storyteller "capturing the moment before it passes." The collage technique captures or fixes such moments in time, yet the urgency of the tearing, cutting, sticking, unsticking suggests a sense of motion that expresses what it is to inhabit the 'in-between' diasporic space. The dialogue has changed/is changing: "It is no longer linear—that is, between 'Black' and 'White'—but more complicated, confused, confusing."[5] This is the multi-layered (hi)story being told by Burke through paper and glue.

[4] ibid.

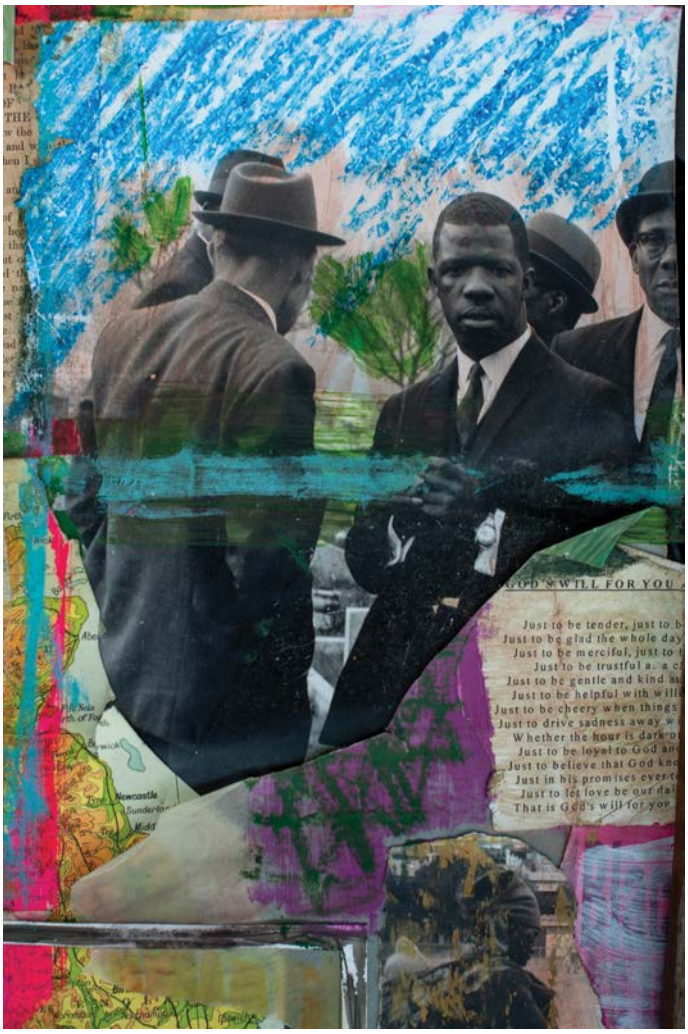
[5] ibid.

Fragments #1, mixed media. ©Vanley Burke 2003

Fragments #2, mixed media. ©Vanley Burke 2003

Fragments #3, mixed media. ©Vanley Burke 2003

Fragments #4, mixed media. ©Vanley Burke 2003



Fragments #5, mixed media. ©Vanley Burke 2003

Fragments #6, mixed media. ©Vanley Burke 2003

Collage, Diaspora and Aesthetics of Journeying

The constantly-on-the-move community that constitutes the global African Diasporas epitomises contemporary notions of diversity and syncretism. Our story begins with the rupture of the Transatlantic Slave Trade that took place between the 16th to the 19th centuries. It is a story that backdrops Burke's and other artists' mobilities. It would be true to say that African Diasporic peoples and cultures have journeyed via routes that were opened by trade and commerce. Central to diasporic experiences is the schism of migration (whether enforced or by choice), the notion of cultural exchange characteristic of creolised culture, and the concept of the past (albeit a fragmented one) acting as an incubator for and cutting into the present. The concepts of "travelling cultures" and "journeying aesthetics" attempt to capture the cultural expressions that emerge from these contradictions. However, cultural critic Kobena Mercer's engagement with African diasporic art practices since the 1980s draws our attention to the issue of what he calls the "burden of representation,"[6] whereby the work of Black artists is assumed to be issue-based, concerned primarily with identity politics at the expense of an appreciation of the materiality of the work itself. He notes that migration throws objects, identities and ideas into flux. Colonial encounters gave rise to a multiplicity of trajectories in which myriad cultural expressions were released from indigenous traditions and mobilised across networks of diasporic travelling cultures.[7] Considering the materiality, process and thematic of key works like Burke's *Fragments*, provides a clue to the emergence of strategic combinatorial aesthetics. Nevertheless, I do want to reference Stuart Hall's assertion that "identity is a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation,"[8] to tie the 'cut and mix' nature of the combinatorial aesthetic to what it means to be in diaspora, that is, to inhabit more than one world and to experience the tension between the two.

[6] "Black Art" 233-259

[7] *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers*, 9. Mercer, drawing on Paul Gilroy's observations, defines 'diaspora' as "a relational network of connective flows that circumvent the sedentary authority of the nation state."

[8] Hall 222

In the essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*,[9] Hall asserts that there are at least two ways of defining cultural identity. The first suggests that cultural identity is founded on shared collective identity, reflecting historical experiences and shared cultural codes. This creates a 'oneness' that binds, that sets aside all superficial differences. This, Hall states, is the bedrock of Caribbean-ness and by extension Blackness. This conception played a crucial role in post-colonial struggles at a global level and provided a creative impetus for emergent forms of self-representation by hitherto marginalised peoples. The discovery and re-examination of such shared cultural identities is often the object of research and creative (self)-making. Such practices rehabilitate us to ourselves and to each other. It is as though having a knowledge of the past as written by us, allows us to reconcile the effects of colonisation, such as a sense of "double consciousness."[10] Vital since, as Frantz Fanon writes:

[9] ibid.

[10] Du Bois 2

> Colonisation [was] not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.[11]

[11] Fanon, as quoted in Hall 224

This suggests that the *production* of cultural identity is enmeshed with the *production* or retelling of history, from the perspective of the formerly colonised, from the perspective of diasporic communities.

In contrast, the second way of defining cultural identity embraces difference. It recognises the "ruptures and discontinuities"[12] that shape the uniqueness of the Caribbean. Here, cultural identity is seen as a "matter of becoming as well as of being."[13] Such cultural identities look forward towards the future whilst glancing backwards towards the past. Such cultural identities are constantly in flux, and are subject to the play of history, culture and power. Aligned to that, African Diaspora identities are always producing and reproducing themselves. They cannot be defined by purity or essence, instead they are defined by diversity, by difference, by creolisation. As previously stated, the Caribbean could be viewed as the home of syncretism. It is characterised by intermingling, blending, collision and coalescence, by 'cut and mix'. This in turn gives rise to what Hall describes as "diaspora aesthetics," born from post-coloniality. As Mercer writes:

> Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a 'syncretic' dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and 'creolises' them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning. The subversive force of this hybridising tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where Creoles, patois and black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of 'English' ... through strategic inflections, re-accentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes.[14]

[12] Hall 225

[13] ibid. 225

[14] "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination" 57

Burke's *Fragments* reflects this second definition of cultural identity. His expressive mark-making and over-printing re-articulate particular signs. The fragmented nature of his layered collages echo the "ruptures and discontinuities" that characterise Caribbean experiences.

I have previously drawn on the process of stitching as a metaphor for the suturing and retelling of fractured African Diaspora histories.[15] Drawing on Sarat Maharaj's notion of "thinking through textiles,"[16] I posited the idea of stitching, and by extension working by hand, as both a means of thinking about oneself and one's place in the world, and a means of thinking at a conceptual level beyond oneself. I suggested that stitching might be seen as an aesthetic, conceptual and subversive strategy akin to post-colonial life-writing and history-mapping.[17] The need to 'write' in one's own voice is central to these genres; post-colonial life-writing and history mapping give voice to the plural self, characteristic of an 'in-between' diaspora mode of being.[18] The process of stitching, unstitching and re-stitching a crazy quilt,[19] for example, captures a sense of multivocality that emerges from these 'in-between' diasporic identities in flux. Similar observations can be made when viewing Burke's works with paper, glue and paint. The crafting and potential readings of each piece hinges on translation and re-inscription. But what do we mean by diasporic art, or indeed diasporic aesthetics? If such things exist, how might we characterise them? Mercer and Sieglinde Lemke are helpful on this issue.

[15] Checinska 147-148

[16] Sarat Maharaj's "thinking through textiles" concept from author's personal notes taken during "Second Skins: Cloth and Difference" conference, 2009. See also, Maharaj, "Textile Art – Who Are You?" 2001

[17] Checinska 147

[18] Bhabha 2

[19] A crazy quilt is a traditional style of quilt that has been made from left over scraps of fabric. The pieces used to create this style of quilt are therefore invariably made up of varying sizes, shapes, colours and qualities of cloth, hence its use as a metaphor for fractured diasporic histories.

Mercer and Lemke have noted that, despite the increasing critical discourse around diaspora studies, the characteristics and purpose of 'diaspora aesthetics' is under researched. Lemke rhetorically asks, "should the subject matter of [diasporic art] invariably reflect the

traumatic events that precede a forced dispersal, or does it capture the nostalgic yearnings for lost origins? Moreover, is there a specific style that we can identify as 'diasporic'?"[20] Meanwhile Mercer, drawing on the work of leading Black British artists Keith Piper and Donald Rodney, identifies a collaged or combinatorial aesthetic that characterises both artistic practices and discourse; an aesthetic that is rooted in and routed through a relational understanding of identity that is distinct to African Diasporic experiences.[21] He questions why the art world still fails to acknowledge the "creative energies of such cut-and-mix aesthetics."[22] Lemke suggests that diasporic art depicts either the moment of dispersal or the consequences of dispersal. Often a longing for real or imagined/mis-remembered homelands feature, as artists render a collective identity out of the bits-and-piecesness of fragmented experiences. Diasporic roots and routes are repeatedly rendered, since an appreciation of origins is key to our self-understanding. However, such backward glances, according to Hall, generate forward-looking art that cannot be represented from one perspective.[23] The diasporic condition, by nature fragmented, gives rise to multiple-view perspectives. I agree to an extent, but I do not advocate any forms of African Diaspora essentialism. Hence the use of plurals—aesthetics, diasporas, cultures, practices—in this article as an attempt to signify nuance and difference. Furthermore, I am cautious of over-racialising the motivations and practices of African Diaspora artists such as Burke for this reason.

[20] Lemke 123

[21] *Then and Now: The Longest Journey*

[22] *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices* 227

[23] Hall in Lemke 124

Method: Collaging the diasporic subject. The artist at work

But what of method? Mercer suggests that collage is a medium suited to the diasporic subject.[24]

[24] *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices* 232

Collage describes both the technique and the resulting work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other ephemera are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface.[25]

[25] Tate, *Art Terms: Collage*

Torn paper. Cut card. Ripped cloth. Picked and unpicked fabric. Split wood. The cut-and-mix nature of collage echoes the improvisational multi-layered qualities and multiple-view perspectives of creolised Africa Diasporic cultures. The experimental use of collage in this context might be seen as a strategic act of subversion and play that facilitates the articulation of identities in constant flux and the mapping of histories of people on the move. The criss-crossing of the Atlantic by waves of migrants is artfully translated via the sticking, unsticking, repositioning and sticking once again that Burke adopts as the preferred method for the creation of *Fragments*. As stated earlier, the urgency of the tearing, cutting, sticking, unsticking suggests a sense of motion that expresses what it is to inhabit the 'in-between' diasporic space. His collaged approach also promotes layered interpretations as the eye travels back and forth to read the works. In contemplating textile crafts, I previously noted that the 'diasporic view' as a mode of creative making, critical thinking and looking feed on flux; it holds the tension between the multiple perspectives mobilised by migration; it thrives on "continual translation and re-inscription."[26] This is what we witness in Burke's collaged works. As with the process of making textiles, the creation of a collage suggests "a way of thinking beyond fixed limits, one that resists the closure that occurs when we attempt to transcribe concepts through writing. The possibilities of multiple viewpoints and interpretations are reduced. Layers of potential meaning are emptied out."[27]

[26] Checinska 148-149

[27] ibid.

Collage as Nation Language

Glued down. Stuck onto a new place. Maybe positioned by arbitrary forces and through the eyes of another with all their prejudices. Overlapping and with rough edges. Poorly defined borders with no history as guide. Out of position. The smaller part but still of the mother part, but now relating to its new, alone, independent position and now juxtaposed against other separated elements. Floating. An island adrift but perhaps freer to explore new possibilities? Creating a new history by necessity. Imposing a new language. These are my thoughts on collage as a nation language.

The creolised combinatorial aesthetic brought to bear by Burke on the history of the African Caribbean presence in Britain could be likened to a visual *nation language*. Both are vernacular cultural expressions grounded in the re-assertion of agency through the piecing together of seemingly disparate fragments. Brathwaite, writing about the 'discovery' of Jamaica, observes that the original Amerindian culture became fragmented with the arrival of European and African cultures—Ashanti, Yoruba and Congo—during the plantation slavery era. With that new creolised language structures emerged. However, these vernacular languages had to submerge themselves since the official language of public discourse was Standard English, the mother tongue of the planters, the language of the colonisers. Submergence performed an important interculturative purpose. The underground language of the enslaved and the language of the planters continually transformed themselves into new forms.[28]

[28] Brathwaite 5-7

Nation Language

Brathwaite asserts that *nation language* has its own rules and rhythms that are influenced by African models. Verbal *nation language* ignores the pentameter to better represent the voices that are shaped by a particular Caribbean environment and experience.[29] Édouard Glissant expands on this idea, defining this language as a "forced poetics,"[30] a kind of strategy since the enslaved were forced to use this language in order to disguise him/herself and to retain his/her culture. Closely rereading Burke's collaged works, that in my view reference assemblage in African traditions, we find that the history of the African Caribbean presence in Britain is hidden in plain sight. Visual nation language might be seen as simultaneously revealing and disguising layered narratives to/from the viewer. Paralleling verbal *nation language*, the noisiness of Burke's canvas creates multiple meanings. Sharp rhythmic variations are created by overlapping layers, rough edges and splashes of clashing colour. The sound explosions of verbal *nation language* are alive in the sudden pops of colour that Burke applies to his montage of images and texts. Stories, memories and personal histories are pieced together like the scraps of misshapen, cast-aside and forgotten fabrics repurposed to create a crazy quilt. There is a homemade vibrancy about these works that echoes the edginess of *Ska*, the "native sound at the yardway of the cultural revolution"[31] that led to Jamaican independence. Crucial to Burke's oeuvre is the emphasis on the African Caribbean community in Britain retelling its own collective cultural history itself, in its own words. This focus and methodology also calls to mind the *riddimic* dub poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson.[32] This is about seizing agency, just as the detonations within verbal *nation language* mobilise a new consciousness of the self from the perspective of African Caribbean peoples and by extension the African Diasporas.

[29] ibid. 9

[30] Glissant in Brathwaite 16

[31] Brathwaite 41

[32] For examples of Linton Kwesi Johnson's work, see the LPs *Dread Beat An' Blood*, 1978, and *Bass Culture*, 1980

The Black British Art Movement

Burke's collaged approach is, in my view, a reminder of the D.I.Y.[33] aesthetics of the key protagonists of the 1980s Black British Art Movement such as Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers and Donald Rodney.[34] These artists came to symbolise a new wave of young black-skinned practitioners whose work actively examined social and political issues, using methodologies and aesthetics that drew heavily on the features of the Pop Art era, using 'readymades', found imagery and new technologies such as photocopying. They shared a radical collective agenda, aimed at promoting political thinking amongst Black peoples in Britain by visually commenting on the social and cultural contexts at that time. They also sought to trouble the absence of Black artists' work within the then mainstream white cube galleries and museums. Politically these were racially charged times. Creativity and conflict coexisted in the streets and on canvasses. A creolised combinatorial aesthetic can be seen on artworks, catalogues, posters and flyers for exhibitions. Keith Piper's *13 Killed*, a commentary on the New Cross fire on January 1981, exemplifies this cut-and-mix approach.

The fire that took place in New Cross, south-east London, UK, saw the massacre of thirteen innocent teenagers who had gathered at a house party to celebrate the birthday of soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old Yvonne Ruddock. Piper dismantled and reassembled newspaper reports about the event, cutting and splicing together images and text on a backdrop of charred wallpaper and skirting board that called to mind a domestic setting. In addition, Piper wrote messages to each of the victims, bringing human faces to the journalists' reports, giving back a sense of dignity and personhood to the local Black community. It is as though, through the use of collage, this important pivotal moment in British history was retold from the perspectives of those whom colonial history and the contemporary racialised visual field had rendered invisible. This observation circles back to the focus of Burke's work discussed earlier. The materiality, the process and the thematic of these works demonstrate the emergence of strategic combinatorial aesthetics.

In the designs for the Black Art Movement exhibition catalogues, posters and flyers, the then high-tech but now low-tech use of photocopied imagery, overlays of torn paper, alongside typeset and stencilled text mirrors Burke's methodology. The monochromatic *Black Art An' Done* exhibition poster, for example, consists of a photomontage of photocopied images of Piper's work and those of fellow artists Eddie Chambers, Dominic Dawes and Ian Palmers. Similarly, the poster for Piper's 1984 solo show *Past Imperfect, Future Tense* at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery, depicts a repurposed image of the infamous slave ship diagram positioned underneath the word 'imperfect'. Four young Black boys carrying upturned dustbin lids as shields march across the centre of the poster; the word 'tense' is emblazoned across the chests of the two central figures. Carefully extracted from newspaper reports and reference books, the style, colour and texture of each component appears to mutate in relation to its new neighbouring element. Piper uses a stark tricolour palette of black, white and red to powerful effect. The stencilled words 'imperfect', 'future' and 'tense' stand out from a blood-red background. Piper's and Burke's cut-and-mix processes become metaphors for what is to be in diaspora—separate elements mobilise to create a new entity within an unfamiliar alien frame or context or culture, *fixed* in place, now in relation to the *other*, new and unrelated yet bound together.

[33] a common abbreviation for the term "do-it-yourself"

[34] These artists were children of Caribbean parents who had migrated to Britain during the 1940s–1950s. They were educated and socialised there.

Cut & Mix: Combinatorial Aesthetics and Agency Today

Riffing off Burke's 2003 series of collages entitled *Fragments*, this article has examined the creolised combinatorial aesthetics of African Diaspora art practices since the 1980's Black British Art Movement. Drawing on the writings of Mercer, Hall and Brathwaite, I suggested that collage was a strategic methodology and diasporic aesthetic device, tantamount to a visual *nation language*. Furthermore, I argued that its use in the context of African Diasporic art forms might be seen as a strategic act of subversion and play that facilitates the mapping of histories of people on the move and the re-assertion of agency. This cut-and-mix approach has continued. It has been adapted by a brand-new generation of contemporary Black British artists such as Richard Rawlins and Jade Montserrat using different materials and methods.

I conclude with a reading of Rawlins' use of collage in the 2018 piece *I Am Sugar*. Where Piper and Rodney took up the use of photocopied imagery, Rawlins embraces digital technology to produce montaged works that comment on the entangled histories and traces of Empire and colonial thinking in everyday life. In *I am Sugar* we see a clenched black fist (a symbol of the Black Power Movement in America) emerging from the centre of a porcelain cup and saucer with a gilt handle. This particular series of works references Hall's provocative statement in the 1991 essay, *Old and New Ethnicities*: "I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth." Using just three simple elements—the fist, the cup, the saucer—Rawlins demonstrates the potential power of collage to continue to 'speak' about African Diaspora concerns, lives, experiences, histories and identities in the digital age.

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On becoming stilled

> [Stillness] makes one vulnerable; it draws one into the world differently and it accesses new agencies and movement. Or not. Such is the complexity of the topologies/ecologies and economies (in every sense of the word) of still.[1]

[1] Bissell and Fuller 2009

Down the road: Propinquity and place in a mobile world

We are a collaborative duo, calling ourselves *Down the Road Projects* (DtRP)—an artist and a cultural geographer who live and work on the edge of the Goldfields National Park in Central Victoria, Australia in unceded Dja Dja Warrung country. Our projects are art-based, pan-disciplinary and experiential, and revolve around issues of place, identity, belonging and becoming.

We both live in Fryerstown in Central Victoria. Quite an isolated place in many respects, it's easy to be alone and feel isolated, to walk through the Australian bush and think that everything is happening elsewhere. Yet the mobility of ideas and their translation across media makes everything unnervingly connected and present. Being 'in place,' being 'down the road,' matter to us. We are a part and apart of the interconnectedness of the world.

Living in a state of disruption

When we began this paper COVID-19 was pretty much confined to Wuhan, China. We were shocked by images of dead bodies, crowded hospital corridors, and people being dragged into isolation. We felt immobilised in the face of the virus. Now the virus and the institutional lockdowns, travel restrictions, bans on gathering, and many closed non-essential facilities have caught up with us. Like Wuhan, and many cities and countries around the globe, we are now under emergency laws. We are immobilised in new and unexpected ways. Not only is physical movement restricted but we also find ourselves in a state of bewildered suspension. The novel virus has engendered a novel state of being, a state of interruption. New forms of stillness are becoming apparent, from state coerced immobility, to travel bans, to self-imposed isolation.

For ISSUE 09, DtRP developed a conversation (often fragmented) as part of a collaborative process reflecting on mobility. But we were immediately drawn to ideas of immobility rather than mobility, as the chronology of disasters we were living through—the democratic protests in Hong Kong, the devastating bushfires in Australia, and spreading contagion of COVID-19—each flowed into the next fluidly

and without reprise. We could have put this down to the simple logistics of considering mobilities' binary; to talk about immobility as oppositional, but it was more than that. Any easy talk about mobility and its relationship to globalisation, a discourse that has pervaded the social, cultural and economic fabric of our lives, became impossible as a new quality of stillness, haunted by death, enveloped us through these tumultuous and shifting times.

The paper draws on narrative, experience, the writing of David Bissell and Donna Haraway, and a discursive commentary on three images that include immobilised solitary horizontal bodies in the picture plane, as a way of unpacking mobility and stillness in a performative way. It attempts to move the discussion from the consequences of disaster events and narratives to the idea of stillness as events where the stilled body becomes the performing agent. What happens when mobility is denied or not possible? What new spaces open up, what new relations emerge, and what further insights into mobility are generated?

We live(d) in a mobile world

The 'mobilities turn' postulates a world in motion, a world of flux, where bodies, objects and ideas are fluid and dynamic. It celebrates the purposeful, active and upstanding, agentive subject. Mobility has transformed the world in complex and significant ways, to the extent that "social life, civil society and political participation are increasingly understood as being performed through mobilities."[2] Relations and places are no longer static, but multi-sited and performative.

[2] Adey 3

Performative modes of practice and 'being' invariably value action. The sense of being always in motion defines contemporary existence for many, and the image of the busy, active individual travelling through airports, boarding trains, moving in a blur of networked connections, has come to represent the active subject of the mobile world. We are in perpetual motion and the interrelatedness and interdependencies of activity and outcome seems to be constantly driving us and the environments we inhabit. Yet in the time and place that we find ourselves, the characteristic notions of mobility and the mobile subject arouse in us a sense of consternation and disconcertment.

The virus is on the move. It's crossed species, from bat to pangolin to human. It knows how to mutate, to spread, to hitch a ride to somewhere else. It's a shapeshifter. Viruses need a host to get around, and this one, by hitching a ride with globalised humans in our much-vaunted 'mobile world,' has found the perfect travel partner. It's now spreading across the globe, popping up in unsuspecting places, multiplying, disseminating itself to all corners of the world. It started with another global movement, that of the illegal wildlife trade where protected animals like the pangolin are secretly traded across regions, across borders, landing in wildlife meat markets in far flung places. Viruses and species meet in a "dance of encounters,"[3] with the movement of one curtailing the movement of the other: a sort of seesaw effect of mobility and containment. Contained virus, mobile people; mobile virus, contained people. It makes you realise just how much mobility is contingent on forms of containment, whether in the form of vaccinations, borders, hospital wards, or self-isolation. Everywhere around the globe new modes of viral immobility are gripping citizens.

[3] Haraway, quoted in Lavau 2014

Fissures and cracks in the promise of global mobility: life in the shadow of containment

An image we found particular harrowing, one that felt cinematic and unreal, was reported across a range of online news platforms with the following headline: "Lifeless Body of Man Lying on Empty Wuhan Street Witness to Chilling Reality of Coronavirus Outbreak."[4]

[4] AFP

Emergency staff in protective suits check the body of a man who collapsed and died in the street in Wuhan on Thursday. (AFP)

This is the new image for unprecedented times: the prone body. The death posture, the dead body lying on its back is the new archetype that haunts the current situation supplanting the upright, hurrying body of the mobile world.

From both a formal and contextual position, the image is complex. As a form of documentary, it is chilling and disturbing. The text of the story describes the man as elderly, wearing a face mask and carrying a plastic shopping bag in one hand. It goes on to report that the figure was "[seen by] AFP journalists prior to an emergency vehicle arriving with police and medical staff arriving." The report adds that the scene was only one block away from a hospital.[5]

[5] AFP

The position of the body is surprising. He is not slumped over, or against a wall. His body is not contorted. The mask and the shopping bag give the sense that the prone figure was attempting to undertake everyday necessities of shopping. Or perhaps he was on his way to the hospital seeking some form of medical support. The scene is so everyday, but rendered troubling by the closed shops and empty streets. What is confronting and so remarkable about this image is the horizontality of the body in this location. How did a man on his way to or from the shops end his time in the classic funereal position of the body laid out ready for burial/cremation?

Compositionally the image appears staged (as staged as any of Jeff Wall's photographs). The composition is defined by strong horizontal and vertical lines and forms. The strong red form of the architecture, the yellow painted horizontal line on the pavement, and most significantly the two vertical forms of the medical officers dressed in white, one intersecting the black clad horizontal figure on the ground.

What is doubly disturbing in the image is the frontal gaze of the two medical officers, as if caught in a scene that needs to be controlled and contained as much as the virus itself. They look menacingly toward the camera, which is now witness to, and documentary evidence of, an unfolding event which we know authorities want to manage in their own way.

Some forms of containment arrive with the force of disaster. The people of Wuhan know this in the form of a government lockdown and immobilisation with stringent regulation—a repressive, controlling form of containment. The people at Wuhan know what it feels like to be trapped, to be stuck, to find yourself somewhere where it's too late to leave, when choice and mobility run out. The citizens confined to their apartments silently enduring the wait belie the tension between movement and stillness: an enforced, apprehensive suspension of waiting in uncertain conditions; a turbulent stillness of contradictory forces; of being immobile when you want to be mobile; of being trapped somewhere when you want to be somewhere else. But lines of containment are never impervious. Containment is an ideal: a dream of stability. Like the US policy of Containment in the Cold War, no protection is permanent, no barrier complete, no defence perpetual. Containment dances with stillness and mobility in dynamic tension. Such a state of contagious suspension and immobilisation usher in a new mode of globalisation, and new experiences of what it means to be a mobile global citizen.

The stilled body as citizen

Jeff Wall, *Citizen*, 1996
Silver gelatin print 181.2 x 234 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel

The exhausted citizen, no longer the upstanding agentic subject, now becomes the prone body stranded in public space. Artist Jeff Wall's black and white photograph, *Citizen* (1996) depicts a solitary figure in repose in an unspecified park setting. In Wall's photograph, the title tells us (presumably) that the figure in the photograph is a citizen. But a citizen of where? A world citizen? A citizen of Canada, similar to Wall? In what

context does Wall use the word 'citizen'? Should we equate citizen with the legality of citizenship, which offers a person the right to be domiciled in a country? Does the figure in the photograph have legal citizenship to be in the country in which the park is located? Or is Wall using the word to challenge the very notion of who has a right to belong to the future? Issues such as these make Wall's photograph so interesting and compelling at this time of viral pandemic when the future is so uncertain. As Laymert Garcia dos Santos asks so pertinently: "Who has the right to belong to the future of humanity, and who is condemned to disappear?"[6]

[6] 58

The gesture of legs crossed, one arm loosely slumped on his chest, depicts the secure and relaxed body of a person at home in their surroundings, a person in place located on the vast open lawns of an urban park. The momentary and instant peace that Wall constructed in this image is now disrupted by the virus. Citizens are no longer safe and comfortable or free to roam in public spaces. The compositional device of foregrounding the solitary prone figure at the front of the picture plane using a strong diagonal, creates a heightened tension and makes us complicit and witness to ideas of citizenship itself.

Today, in the face of the virus, citizens have been called home by governments, and some left stranded when time frames shift in the urgency of response. We have become vulnerable as citizens to the regulatory powers of government and the ability of decision-makers to act strategically in unknown and unexpected situations. As citizens, our lives—or deaths— are in the hands of our country's response to the virus. The importance of 'home' has become intensified as people struggle to find ways to get to their home country, and once there, find themselves confined to home space.

Mobility is a key construct of 'the citizen,' as the citizen is defined by holding the rights of free movement within the nation-state as well as the ability to cross borders.

Historically, the citizen has been entwined with threatening others, initially the vagrant, and more recently the alien or migrant.[7]

[7] Cresswell 2013

Today the coronavirus has taken the place of the 'threatening Other' as the spread of the virus has closed travel across borders and impeded the performance of citizenship in public spaces. The shrinking space of citizenship alters the sorts of citizen we can be, by curtailing both rights and restricting the spaces within which such rights can be performed. It provokes us to question the very notion of what it is to be a citizen in the context of the citizen's relation to mobility.

Reading *Citizen* through this lens of the viral pandemic problematises the figure as it can no longer oscillate between a subject exhausted and besieged by the pandemic and one which lies in the secure knowing of arriving home and surrendering to the circumstance of immobility: immobility not to be mistaken as something lost, but an immobility of quiet resistance. *Citizen* and the idea of citizenship are plunged into a state of ambiguity and the citizen becomes a paradoxical geographical subject[8] when mobility as a given of citizenship is now curtailed. Spaces of performing citizenship in spaces such as the public park are no longer available in a time of 'lockdown'.

[8] ibid.

The eventful space of becoming:
The stilled body and landscape in suspension

Apart from death, immobility is never absolute, there is always something, someone on the move, shifting the dynamics; always in a situation of constant becoming. This leads some to consider immobility or stillness as an 'event', as a doing, not an endpoint or stasis.[9] The event of stillness "breaks with the familiar the recognisable and the comfortable"[10] to pull us, unwillingly perhaps, into an intensified state awash with indeterminacy.

[9] Bissell 2011, 2007; Creswell 2012; Adey 2006.
[10] Bissell 2011, 2652

Acknowledging that we all live somewhere, not the anywhere of mobile existence, we consider becoming stilled as a strategy to reconnect with community and place. We seek out the new agency of stillness, in Bissell's terms of being drawn into the world differently,[11] not as succour or withdrawal, but as a different way of making worlds in a generative moment of fluidity. The artwork *Between Dreaming and Dying* (2015) carries us into an eventful space of suspension, a state between the dreams of 'normal life' and the spectre of death.

[11] Ibid.

Rhett D'Costa, *Between Dreaming and Dying*, 2015
inkjet photographic print on Hahnemühle FineArt Pearl paper 285 gsm,
97 x 66 cm (framed) Edition of 3

Between Dreaming and Dying is a framed photograph which sits against the inside edge of the frame, creating a sense of its own containment. The imagery in the photograph consists of a grass field, a single male figure in white garments lying in repose diagonally across the picture frame, and a dog that seems to be moving toward the figure. It is an ambiguous image, as its title suggests, where the figure is suspended *between* states of dreaming and dying. But what exactly is the connection between the acts of dreaming and dying? Perhaps both involve the physical act of lying down, both involve the process of some form of transformation from the physical realm to a form of non-physicality. Dreaming and dying, figure and field are in the process of being acted out, rather than fixed. They are performed as event.

So what is this body doing in this site, in this state of immobility? The photograph has been specifically staged. Both states, 'dreaming' and 'dying', have to accept the idea of 'letting go,' which is the crucial point in

the image. But what is being 'let go' by the protagonists in the picture? Contextually, it is the idea of place as fixed. The figure lies in this suspended state in a cleared paddock in central Victoria. The bleached grass suggests a hot, dry climate. A horizon line has been created by cutting and digitally stitching two images together, suggesting a precarious precipice in the picture and rendering the landscape in the photograph as spatially disorienting. It is difficult to register depth of field and scale. Like the figure, the space in the photograph is ambiguous and indeterminate. It feels like both an actual and an imagined terrain. The body, either dreaming or dying seems besieged by the menacing dry landscape, by the heat, by the dog making its way to the body, and (possibly) by death itself, a consequence of the pandemic.

The situation is simultaneously one of rest and anxiety, which sets the conditions of the figure imagining what the future may hold. In between the state of living and dying, the figure accepts this state of suspension, where imagination of place becomes borderless and multiple. The spatially ambiguous landscape in the photograph presents, here and elsewhere, simultaneously. In this way, the figure in *Between Dreaming and Dying* (2015) is located in a simultaneity of place and time. Its presence articulates: "He is in the act of re-performing. He is under siege. He is in a state of hope and optimism dreaming in anticipation and is in retreat, sleeping."[12]

[12] Christov-Bakargiev para. 5; D'Costa 266

In many ways this image entangles the idea of the figure as dead (Wuhan image) and the figure as citizen (Wall). The figure in *Between Dreaming and Dying* is suspended between these two states and is emblematic of the situation we find ourselves in today. We can no longer be sure if the figure will fall into the precipice in the landscape or stand vertically and become mobile. Furthermore, we can no longer be sure that the constructed landscape itself will not collapse, folding in on itself along the digitally stitched line. The constructed landscape suspends stability and puts all elements in motion. With no fixed ground, as Bissell and Fuller notes, we and the world become differently. The "promise of still is a particular mode of engagement with a world that rearranges intensities, folds through the vital and the vulnerable, providing a new set of political and ethical concerns."[13]

[13] 2009, n.p.

Conclusion

Stillness brings into focus the place, situation and assemblage of human and nonhuman others that constitute the still figure. Unlike the blur of the background of the mobile subject, or the blurred scenery from the train window, the setting insists on being part of stillness/immobility. 'Where' matters: the paddock, the park, the street, all attend in constitutive ways to the still/ed body.

It's only when things break down, when things go awry, and novel viruses appear, that the assumptions, standards, and values that make things appear 'normal'; make mobility appear as ordinary and everyday, are brought into focus, and the machinations of daily life are disrupted and brought into question.

For some this suspended reality has brought an unexpected sense of being in the world where they no longer have to keep up with the manic, speedy, overstimulated world of contemporary mobile society. The requirements to work faster, go to more places, see more people,

be even more busy, evaporate as travel restrictions are imposed and social distancing becomes the expected norm. For these people, the virus presents an opportunity to slow down and reflect upon the pace of consumption and the futility of contemporary life in the new economy. But, of course, such reflection is not available to workers in precarious jobs, to displaced migrants, asylum seekers and the like. They know about a different kind of immobility.

Writing this paper at this moment in time as the viral disaster continues to unfold has been in many ways an act of poiesis—something very much in process, creating its own intrinsic complexities and ironies as we attempt to navigate everyday practices, and the indeterminate spaces between stillness and mobility. The space outside the body of the COVID-19 virus is shifting, evolving and changing rapidly on an hourly and daily basis, as is official reporting, social discourse and policy, destabilising any attempts of fixity. These fluid states, which in a practical sense may lead to heightened states of anxiety, also have the potential of bringing about transformative encounters through the unfolding experiences of living with the virus. In this respect, these troubling times, when engaged through the lens of poiesis, can take on forms of quiet resistance, appearing under the guise of immobility and leading us to a state of being present and still as affirmative actions.

What sits inside the complexity of this equation is time itself. The speed of the virus, the speed of an evolving and destabilizing world as we watch the number of cases and deaths increase, world economies decrease to alarming levels and people move from mobility to stillness based on their own circumstances and situations. For DtRP this brings us back to where we started: in our neighbourhood, socially distancing down the road from each other—unsettled, confused and immobilised. The destabilisation we feel provokes a reconfiguration of identities and places—personal and spatial.

Donna Haraway urges us to "stay with the trouble"[14] as a strategy to find ways of making more liveable futures. Staying with the virus and its mobility, forces a recognition of the multispecies world we live in and for us to take seriously the agency of nonhumans. It forces us to consider how global connections shape our local lives and vice versa, and how we are constantly shaped by our relations. The source of the virus was not bats or the pangolin, but human wildlife trade, social tradition, and widespread habitat destruction driven by the capitalist juggernaut that brings wildlife and humans into closer connection across fragmented landscapes.[15] Many things are on the move and how we chose to move is part of working towards some worlds and worldings and not others.[16]

[14] Haraway 2016

[15] Shah, Robbins
[16] Haraway 2016

Becoming stilled has opened up the possibility of a different mobility. Not the mobility that takes us to the global or reinforces the national, not the mobility that gobbles resources and leaves people in a space of overstimulated numbness. Rather, we can discern a mobility that takes us home, not in the sense of a parochial move, or a romanticised, essentialised, privileged notion of place. Rather, place in the sense of situatedness and accountability for how we live, how we move. Not the interconnections of global infrastructure, but the relations and entanglements that help build more equitable worlds.

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Comic Purgatory

The shortest story is a picture, or a sentence long. It took humans many thousands of years, till the development of writing, to bring both together. It needed the competition of the cinema to use the sequence of several images (a strip) to make their characters move in hilarious ways that would be impossible in real life—even children (like The Yellow Kid) or animals (like Krazy Kat). Their characters would defy gravity, accelerate to the speed of light and be destroyed and completely restored in no time.

Krazy Kat by George Herriman (1913-44)

One could have called these strips 'fantasticals' or 'supernaturals' but as the first successful versions in newspapers worked as distractive cartoons, they were called 'comics'. This name sticked to the strips, even when they evolved into movies and extended to stories about grim superheroes. In the Western world it took almost a century for more serious strips to become their own genre: the graphic novel.

This was because of another advantage drawn characters had to real actors: they weren't subject to life's greatest tragedy, aging then dying. A comic strip could turn into a never-ending series, and its characters could acquire a commercial value exceeding that of famous actors by far. A saga about gods and empires could also go on forever but it's way easier that the characters and even their settings just don't change: in each episode of a typical comic series, the protagonists go through tremendous adventures, only to end up in exactly the same circumstances in which they began. They keep the same age, character, skills, friends, family, belongings and hardly remember anything that

happened in the previous episodes. No foreknowledge is necessary; new audiences and illustrators can join the series at any point. Furthermore, comic series comfort with the certainty that whatever great, bad or bizarre thing happens, in the end it won't have any consequences. Life is like a play that after a fixed period of time is set back to zero. When Albert Camus famously declared in 1942 that "one has to imagine Sisyphus as happy,"[1] he likely thought of him as a cartoon character.

[1] *Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus)*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1942

Comics are particularly appealing to small children. Their episodic memory is still evolving and when they actively adopt the world, they tend to do it through the harmless form of playing. To learn as fast as they do, they avoid and are kept safe from harsh consequences. But even for small children, watching comic series is regarded as escapist or regressive. The characters are released from the pressure to learn and take responsibility; they are stuck though happier not knowing. Tales come with a lesson and when playing you are enforced to constantly make and test your own decisions, while in the comic series things happen so fast and outrageously that it does not believe itself. At the end of each episode it undoes all its developments in no time. The comic is a self-dissolving dream in reverse, nourishing the dream of eternal life and return.

Overcoming finiteness in general and mortality in particular has been regarded as the ultimate, unfulfillable human ambition. Religions claim immortality as what defines gods and offer humans passage to their realm in the afterlife. Wars have been fought, discoveries have been made, artefacts have been produced to at least gain memetic immortality. But soon we might reach a point in technological progress where we or our successors could enter a state of personal immortality and overall contingency. Ultimate truth and happiness might take a bit longer or are—as in comics—impossible to reach.

Already today many people expect themselves, their family and their friends to live eighty, ninety pretty healthy years. Early death or invalidity are regarded as avoidable accidents. Aging is delayed or compensated with a large variety of tools and techniques. Risks are cushioned by a multitude of state securities and private insurances. Our subsequent unwillingness to risk our life and end up as a martyr has earned us the label post-heroic. We don't even realise why personal sacrifice would be needed.

Since humans started to gain control over their life expectancy, they also started to move dumping grounds, cemeteries, slums, prisons, and later factories, power plants and server farms outside the city, while sewage and cables go under the earth. Due to recursive technological progress, the world is changing faster and faster, yet people live more and more shielded from the immediate effects and insights of this transformation. In planes and high velocity trains, we are under the impression we hardly move. The intelligent gadgets that guide, entertain and surveil us are handy and cute. The more our society is driven by mechanisms and machinery that are far too complex for us to understand or to interfere with, the more we resemble idle comic characters.

In a largely pre-technological, aristocratic society there are the few who rule and the masses who obey. In a mechanised, bourgeois society there are the few who create or accumulate and there are the masses who are

stuffy and square. In an automatised, comic society there are the few who script the next episode, and there are the masses who try not to lose their part. We legitimise ourselves no longer through authority or merits but through our capability to entertain.

When Neil Postman famously warned in 1984 that we "amuse ourselves to death," he was observing the transition from a bourgeois to a comic society. Back then the entertainment industry was muting the masses, who were still stuffy and square. In the fully evolved comic society, we'd rather amuse each other to stay alive, like jesters at a court of nothing but jesters.

The aristocratic society disposes of limited wealth that can be fought for. The bourgeois society disposes of potentially unlimited wealth that can be generated through intelligence and labor. In a comic society all basic needs are already fulfilled. Wealth has to be less achieved and multiplied than protected against intrinsic and extrinsic dangers. Not only that we don't risk our lives, we only fight not to lose them. We would risk too much in following teleological masterplans. It's not that "our society no longer believes in anything but bare life," as Giorgio Agamben claims,[2] but we are so spoiled that only a threat to our bare lives would make us risk any deliberate, fundamental change. We need our possible end as an ecosphere ("Fridays for Future"), a species ("Extinction Rebellion"), a subspecies ("White Genocide"), a culture ("War on Terror"), a nation ("Make America Great Again") or as individual bodies ("War on the Virus") in order to gain determination.

[2] Quoted in *Hannah Arendt Center*, https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/bare-life-and-the-animal-laborans-2020-03-21. Citing Giorgio Agamben: *Clarifications*. Translated by Adam Kotsko, 17 March 2020. https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/

Extinction Rebellion during London Fashion Week, The Strand, Feb 2020.
Photo: Crispin Hughes and XR.

The collective realisation of an existential threat is accompanied by the appreciation of self-imposed lifesavers. It has always been a way to power: to wait for or to provoke a major crisis to then install oneself as the saviour. But while the saviours of the aristocratic age sought for divine legitimation and those of the bourgeois age for ideological legitimation, the saviours of the comic age are chosen for their sense of urgency. Even when the masses feel safe, they're already sniffing the next catastrophe. Till it becomes impossible to overlook the disaster, they have to persist as ridiculed sidekicks, then rise up as acclaimed superheroes.

Friday for Futures, Stockholm
Photo: Anders Hellberg.
Courtesy Fridays for Future International

The mission of superheroes is to turn back time but they lack a coherent conservative agenda. Our world is in constant, accelerated change and to be able to undo one major aberration comes with indifference about the rest. It's not that superheroes aren't guided by ideologically coloured mindsets. They might even regard themselves as prophets. But they have to be innocent outsiders in the political realm and not be affiliated with any established party. Acknowledging them as political figures comes as a surprise: the reality TV villain, the bipolar rapper, the innocent Asperger's child, the nerdy scientist, the provincial doctor, or maybe an animal, a river, an algorithm. Even more in times of crisis, we don't want to get bored. To be boring is to be lame.

The mission of superheroes is to put the world back to order—that is to make the episode end where it started. But in real life we don't know about such an exact moment in time: what would actually be an acceptable amount of carbon emissions, pollution, immigrants, humans or infections that we have to get back to? The mission of the superhero stays a bit random and vague, and it rather ends with people losing interest or getting fed up than with clear success. Triggering a sense of urgency is one thing but actually turning the whole world upside down in no time would create a gigantic mess, while turning it upside down in a sustainable way is

both lame and dangerous. Even more so when all that is at stake is getting back to a previous, already not ideal condition. The superhero turns into a Sisyphus who fails to push the stone up the hill in the first place.

From reality TV, US President Donald Trump learned that to keep punch and drive as a superhero he had to bring each episode to a quick end. Not having solved a case properly gives reliable material for new trouble, that is, the opportunity to start a new episode and forget about the previous one. Even his enemies couldn't help it—everybody was part of his show. Greta Thunberg acted as his exact inversion: young versus old; female versus male; small versus tall; innocent versus guilty; true versus fake; steady versus flighty; serious versus clownish. Trump was the Joker, and she was not Batwoman but the Anti-Joker.
In the aristocratic saga and bourgeois bildungsroman, you have to keep in mind the whole narrative to fully grasp them. A cartoon practices tactical amnesia. A saga or bildungsroman is trying to make you believe in its plausibility, however unlikely it might appear. A comic is deliberately disbelievable. The negation of the glory of the saga is the tragedy, the negation of the rationality of the bildungsroman is absurdity. Both can be perceived for the sake of nihilism or cathartic edification. A comic is an enormous accumulation of tragic and absurd moments, only to zero them out. In real life, the more superheroes overstretch what is usually acceptable behaviour, the more they bullshit or dramatise, the more they are reassuring people in the belief that in the end, everything will stay the same.

The fact that the comic has become the leading social paradigm doesn't mean that people are done with progress. Quantitatively speaking, saga and bildungsroman are still the dominant cultural narratives—including interactive formats like role play or video game. But saga and bildungsroman are too stringent and clear (even in being erratic and mysterious) to feel real. The moment our life fulfills the criteria of being a remarkable story, we are under the impression that it rather complies with a novel, a film or a game.

Saga and bildungsroman deliver a definite scenario of what happens. This is not how we perceive life. We can interpret our past in ever new ways, and when it comes to the future, the facts are not a given. Stories help us to understand how things might develop or might have developed over a period of time but we never know for sure. Games allow to choose between different scenarios but only within certain fixed parameters. Our lives and societies are too complex to be contained in such vessels. In times of crisis we realise that the uncertainty about the results of our actions is so high that even several parallel scenarios are insufficient to cover the entire realm of possibilities. But the longer we remain undecided about what to do, the likelier it is that we'll regret what we finally came up with. Time will be lost and we will realise what it will cost us. It would have been better to follow our first intuition or throw the dice.

Even in fiction, a good story can't be completely planned. You have to let it go and adapt. Even more so in real life: You have to allow your story to be freed from you. You have to let it write itself. When you realise that you yourself don't fit into it anymore, you have give up on it and switch to another. And when there is no more satisfiable story left for you, then it's time to die. In this case it's advisable to have one, or several, grand finales in petto.

Our risk aversion and post-heroism depends on our ignoring the fact that we will die, and that it's not up to us to wait for fate to come but to decide when and how. The state offers palliative care, in some countries even euthanasia, and our heirs profit from life insurance. But when we choose to die—not in the immediate process of dying—we are left on our own. More and more, countries are offering legal procedures for divorce, deselection, and abortion, but they all hesitate to offer general assisted dying—often even declaring it illegal. Life insurance loses its validity in the case of a suicide.

The plea to end up being spoiled by the fake reality of a never-ending comic series and to become again more risk-taking is for nothing. There is no voluntary way back to less safety. Rather, we have to include our deaths into our preparations. As we instinctively resist dying, we have to trick ourselves with options for not just a pain-free but ecstatic euthanasia. Our suicide could be framed by outlandish festivities before and after our death. We could pre-book a surprise bag of manifold actions. Our heirs could profit from a special life insurance that is only issued in the case that we kill ourselves. Should we lack the financial means, we could reach mutual agreements to service each other.

It's not realistic to live every day or every year as if it were our last—only if it *might* be our last. Not just in the sense of a danger but as an option. The possibility to kill oneself is mankind's ultimate freedom—accessible even under the most devastating circumstances. Death is the joker that is always at hand. We only have one but if we don't use it, we'll eventually lose it to a "natural" death that medical progress might turn into a long-lasting procedure. Waiting till all treatment eventually fails is hardly affordable and little fun. Even if we manage to stop aging, the fear that we would eventually die would torment us. To choose death is a modern necessity. It's only a matter of when and how.

Saga and bildungsroman describe how people succeed or fail in unfolding their potentials. But our own story only ends with our death. The one image or sentence that an intelligent life evolves from is how we would like to die—not as a pious hope but as a substantial undertaking. From there we can imagine our future backwards. Everything that we do has to be legitimised as leading toward that death and as better than dying already—for us, the society, and the environment.

To follow this inverse storyline and leave comic purgatory, we have to drill ourselves to make dying part of our daily lives. Things have already started to change with many young people engaging in voluntary palliative care. In a next step, we have to also assist in voluntary euthanasia. People who are dying or committing suicide could invite the public, as German artist Gregor Schneider envisioned for his *Death Room*.[3] The setting could be a minimalist, sober white cube—or a seductive circus of death.

[3] *Sterberaum*, 2011. Kunstraum Innsbruck, Innsbruck

A Letter from the Zoo: Reflections on a Simulated Mobility

Singapore, 6 August 2020

Dear M,

Today is my birthday and it is the first time in years that I am not travelling anywhere. Celebrating my special day during the summertime always implies for me being on a holiday, somewhere abroad with family or friends. Every year it is unique, depending on the place and our celebratory mood. A lemon pound cake is usually the only constant, and me feeling light-hearted and loved. This year everything is different and strangely special: no travel, no family, and also a different cake. It is round, blue and crowned with dreamy clouds and a rainbow, naively evoking an imaginary utopian place while a pandemic ravages the world.

I have been thinking about mobility, its manifestations and representations, since you raised the topic in our last conversation and would like to share some thoughts in this letter. Epistolary exchange was actually one of my first tangible experiences of mobility—besides family travels and TV. Sending a message from one place to another, to people I knew and also strangers, always felt so exciting. Pen pal correspondences, chain letters, holiday postcards, it was a beautiful pastime that connected us to each other and the world. Sharing such personal fragments of experiences in short impressionistic notes was always largely sufficient to imagine the rest. The world was surprisingly complete before it got professionally globalised.

Being a woman of my time, I travel frequently and often alone, visited five continents and over 50 countries. I have always been naturally drawn to the South and the East and enjoyed (Hitchcock's) *North by Northwest* as a film. When I am asked what I prefer in life I like to answer, "being in between," neither here nor there. I feel best in environments where cultural references are multi-layered and interchangeable, thereby offering authentically diverse perspectives on our existence. I spend a lot of time in such boundless, oneiric spaces—between worlds and times. They are my natural habitat.

A space that particularly interests me in this regard is the zoo. Its evocative and artificially constructed wilderness has always fascinated me and in this moment of enforced stillness, where travelling has receded into the distance, it fascinates me even more. It makes it an ideal destination for my birthday this year, not only to let the mind journey

freely to faraway and adventurous places but also to contemplate the dynamics of a complex and mutually inflicted immobility. Humans and animals know how to immobilise one another. Their relationship has always been ambivalent and defined by natural instincts, mechanisms of attack and defence, exploitation, captivity, protection, the conquest and definition of territories and rules that are better not transgressed.

Humans' aspiration to dominate animals has a long history which is, inter alia, exemplified in the institution of the zoo. When zoos opened in the mid-18th century their purpose and evolution paralleled that of museums with the display of exotic exhibits from local and faraway places that served for zoological studies, public instruction and entertainment. Like museums they have become important sites of social activities and tourist attractions, and while caging animals continues to be a highly controversial phenomenon, zoos are also indispensable facilities for wildlife research and species conservation, at least here in Singapore.

End of last year we witnessed a peculiar zoonosis when a deadly infectious disease jumped from an animal to a human and from there to many other humans around the world, to 19,238,910 by now, to be precise. The interdependence between the virus' extreme mobility and humanity's immobility in an effort to contain its spread is logical but unseen on such a large global scale, and therefore emotionally unsettling. The situation went literally viral when its rapid moves—appearances and disappearances in unpredictable waves—invisibly and inexorably colonised the earth. In the search for remedies, animals will paradoxically also be the ones saving us—mice and macaques, our favourite guinea pigs, what would we do without you?

The complex nature of anthrozoology seems to somehow echo my own psychological entanglement with the challenging circumstances of the moment. Moreover, the urge to visit the zoo today resembles the critical impulse of taking a photograph, to frame and freeze a situation in time and space—not without considering the before and after—as well as what is outside the frame. When taking a picture, I search for a visual situation that can hold and express my feelings. And I have this strong intuition that the zoo might provide exactly this and give some answers to what I am unconsciously searching for: maybe simply feelings of solidarity and the consolation of a shared destiny, or an instinctive connection that might trigger ideas of resistance and strategies of escape—at least through imagination.

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The trajectory from home to the zoo feels like a trip around the globe. Travelling 20 kilometres on a tiny island is indeed half of our current world. The 50 km from East to West and 27 km from North to South with 193 km of coastline around is all we have since the travel restrictions kicked in six months ago. The dense traffic on the highway is insane. Drivers are nervously zigzagging around, desperately trying to reach their destination as fast as they can. It evokes a feeling of nostalgia. Until only a few weeks ago we were all ordered to stay at home and the activities outdoors were rare and purposeful. During that time, we became silent observers of nature's grandiose spectacle, which was both fascinating and in contrast alarming. The skies were azure blue, the clouds snow white, the grass spring green, the air pure and the city

calm—it felt like a different place all together with highland and tropical features combined.

The standstill positively forced us to focus our attention, be stationary and in the present. Time was elastic and slow. My personal experience of the situation was drastically amplified when the virus disabled me for almost a month in a 12 square meter hospital room. It was a trip on its own and the acute awareness of time and space has never left me since. In fact, moving freely through the city now and having 721.5 million square meters to physically explore, feels like an incredible spatial expansion. It resonates strongly with the movements of my mind which, for its part, has always been free and never stopped taking me to unexpected places.

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I arrive just in time to check in with my designated group of 2pm visitors. Our gestures are henceforth automated and we know exactly what to do: I take the phone out of my bag, check-in with the SafeEntry online app, get my temperature checked, scan the barcode of my ticket, scan the QR code for the zoo map, put the phone back into my bag, give the doorman a friendly nod while his mask-muffled voice wishes me an enjoyable visit.

I am excited to finally be inside and think that washing my hands would not be a bad idea after the taxi ride. I always had a fascination for public transport seats' egalitarian function but in the current context, moving around is inevitably paired with a latent anxiety. The zoo's outdoor washrooms are an attraction by themselves. With their abundant foliage and chirping insects they are a veritable tropical marker and good start of my tour. As I venture into the fictional wild, I encounter some sleepy alligators, shy tapirs, hot deer-pigs and a deceptively real-looking dinosaur. Every few seconds his mouth opens and closes mechanically, and I wonder why we need a Jurassic Park totem in the zoo. Yet I have to admit that it blends in rather well, certainly due to the surreal and attenuated atmosphere, with the activities just ticking over. There are indeed only a few visitors ambulating at a safe distance from each other and the presence of both animals and humans feels rather alienated.

At the entrance to the white tiger compound, I am greeted by a casually resting tiger sculpture. It is very well made but I can't help and think that in the zoo, like anywhere else in Singapore, representation and mediated interpretations of the actual experience are slowly taking over. I suddenly remember the heated discussion I had with a lady over the counter last year, when she insistently tried to sell me a ticket to a multimedia wildlife show and I explained in vain that I came to the zoo to experience nature and the animals with my own mental and somatic sensibilities. The distinction between the tangible and virtual reality sadly did not make any sense to her.

But here they are: two gorgeous white tigers, lazing around in the afternoon heat. They occasionally engage in a little flirt with each other before giving a yawn and returning into their dreamy lethargy. They look at us and we look at them and contemplating each other in this detached yet attentive manner is hypnotising. The gripping encounter with a different species sets my speculative mind in motion and I

imagine all kinds of scenarios about their past lives, their feelings towards each other and us, and the challenging assimilation to captivity. As I am transported by these dramatic thoughts, I forget to stay within the yellow boundaries of my safe distancing viewing box. Being now too close to another person is inappropriate and causes some discomfort. I quickly apologise. The floor demarcations actually add an intriguing behavioural and visual layer to the already conditioned zoo experience. Being strategically positioned in rectangular and square formats to accommodate small groups and single visitors, they inevitably draw attention to the omnipresent principle of confinement. With two or more creatures staring from cage to cage at one another, a curious confinement complot appears to be at work. When observers and observed are equally caged, it is hard to tell who holds whom at bay.

I walk over to the Pygmy Hippos whose tiptoeing-under-water moves I always enjoy. What catches my attention however, as I sit down, is a technician fixing something within the vitrine. Looking at his precise gestures and dedicated work is as fascinating as observing the animals which he joins, as another living creature, so naturally. In the zoo's established viewing framework, the observation of another human seems as normal as looking at the wildlife and even taking a picture does not feel inappropriate. While being fully aware of the strangeness of this moment and my own reaction, I appreciate how the man's presence interrupts the illusion for a short while and creates an awareness of the concrete labour and operational reality of the facility. As I continue my visit I witness more of such situations and while we are used to seeing zookeepers in enclosures during feeding hours or show presentations, it is bewildering to observe them being inside without the animals. The image of them being trapped becomes an allegory of our own captivity, and the interchangeability of rules and roles a symbol of our topsy-turvy world.

I pass by the kangaroos and they are not at home. I ponder their absence and the rather intrusive strategies of compensating such an eventuality with a wealth of documentation photographs, texts and objects. I spot a life-sized kangaroo sculpture positioned in front of a green screen, ready to participate in the production of a deceptive image, but no image will be taken. A zebra cloth covers the counter indicating that all activities are momentarily suspended. The entertainment props evoke the desolate feeling of an inaccessible past and uncertain future. If only we could add some labels to these objects and title them "performance relics" for the time being. Some ghosts of these activities are still mysteriously hovering around; the reverberation of visitors' voices, quarrels and laughter are floating in the air. When leaving the compound I finally see a kangaroo, printed on a banner and it looks rather happy, surrounded by abundant greenery.

I continue my flânerie, pass by the closed Icy Slush refreshment wagon, look in vain for the elephant compound entrance, and sit down in the Primate Kingdom for a little while. Birthday messages from Europe are coming in and it is good to feel close and connected. Strangely enough it is harder to be in tune with my direct environment. The safe distancing measures and zoo's ongoing renovation works disrupt the usually smooth flow between the exhibits and the missing stream of visitors only amplifies the gaps in between. Luckily, there are the regularly passing trams with zebra, giraffe and tiger patterns. Although empty, they provide a reassuring feeling of continuity, binding the fragmented experience together.

It is almost 4pm and I still have some miles to go. I cross the Reptile Garden, komodo dragon and giant turtle compound and have no affection for them at all. Then the black chimpanzees who bring back the memory of a zookeeper's vivid depiction of their sadistic nature, possibly leading to a pleasurable torturing and killing of humans. He shared other fascinating insider stories about animals' characters and moods back then and it is a pity that none of the multiple texts or screens mention such sharp yet empathetic observations. The north-east corner of the zoo usually feels quite gloomy to me and this year even more so, as it has the most direct connection with the virus. Bats and macaques are hosted side by side, the villain and the saviour in such close proximity!

I continue to walk south where some other of my favourite animals are waiting: the wild cats, giraffes and rhinos. The leopard is wayward and restless, pacing up and down in one continuous undulating move. I head to an alternative observation spot with better viewing conditions but the animal has no intention to follow me on this side of the enclosure. Hence, I contend with attentively examining the mise-en-scène: an arrangement of rocks and bushes inside and outside the vitrine simulates the extension of a life-sized black and white reproduction of a leopard in liberty. Presenting the animal's natural habitat so prominently next to an enclosure seems rather inappropriate, and the yawning void of the vitrine only augments the tension between these disparate realities. None of them is satisfying or capable of completing the other and put together like this, they form a curious diptych of artifice and absence. I wonder what visitors are supposed to feel and think when looking at such an arrangement? The ceiling ventilators are circulating hot air.

The piece next door has a different climate. In a cold room under an aircon unit, a huge poster of a resting lion is mounted on the wall. A printed caption informs the viewer that lionesses prefer lions with fuller and darker manes which symbolise their youthful strength. The widespread promotion of a good looking, vigorous youth, often represented by alpha-type males, also seems to be a trend in the zoo. I miss my own adolescent punk rock days, of which the leading values were provocation, subversion and change, and a cool appearance was an added bonus. The lioness herself is absent, in print and also in the enclosure.

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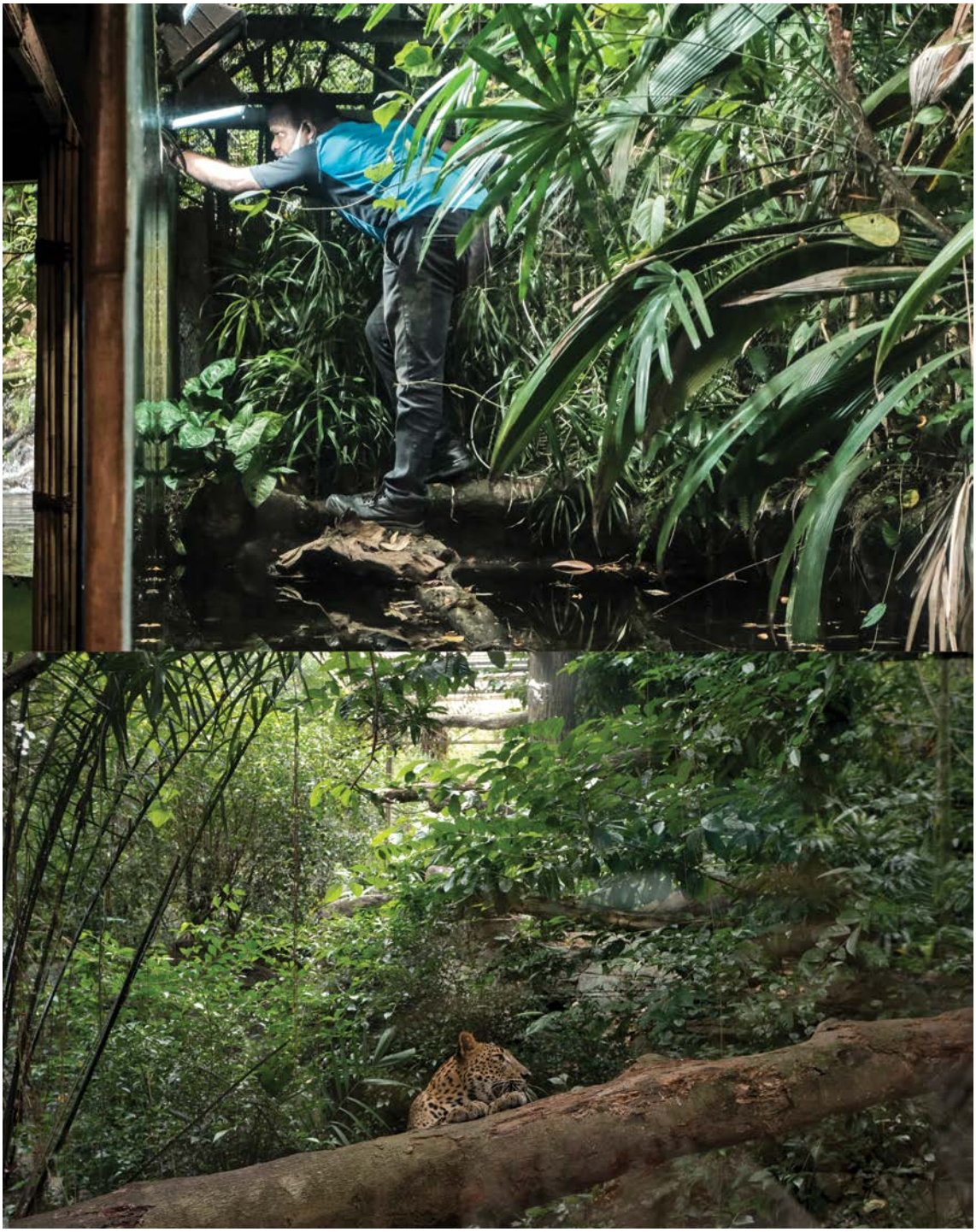
My heightened awareness of the discrepancies between the distinctive physical and imagined spaces is intriguing and contrasts with my usual zoo experience. The microcosm of the zoo is typically characterised by an illusionary ecology of proximities—the proximity between animals from different geographies; between animals and humans; the urban and the wild. Bringing these essentially incompatible spheres together and presenting them as a coherent whole usually rests upon the smooth blurring of their specifics. Situated in the central green lung of the island, the zoo is far away from any visible markers of Singapore's densely urbanised cityscape and the fiction of driving into the jungle is up to now pretty much intact. With the planned expansion of the attraction and redevelopment of the area however—which comes at a high price as the native flora and fauna ironically had to be rescued and relocated to accommodate this other artificial wilderness—this feature will be gone soon. It will require additional tricks to simulate it in the future, just as in the zoo itself, where the impression of a cohesive space is achieved through the skilful blend of built architecture and organically grown vegetation, and a strong unifying visual identity of the various stations. The latter are comprehensively connected through a colourful location map and, of course, the continuously circulating animal tram. In addition, the large enclosures and respectful treatment of all species in equal manners generate a prevalent feeling of animals' close communion with nature and also each other. The comfort of Singapore's customer friendly service culture also naturally makes visitors feel at home and part of the experience.

The zoo's storytelling relies upon a sophisticated imagination to convey the setting and atmosphere of native wildlife. In the spirit of a modern drama, the different sceneries depict real-life environments in which the audience is invited to look through a transparent fourth wall into the lives of the animals. As credible and genuine characters, they perform in real-time and offer spectators a psychologically rich and realistic play which might include a provocative non-performance or mysterious absence. In the current situation however, the fourth wall is taken down and the dramatic plot interrupted. The safe-distancing instructions and delimitative lines act as audience-addresses in the sense of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre,[1] disrupting the stage illusion and generating an estrangement effect. "Let's practise safe distancing. Please make room and be 1 metre apart from one another," says one of the signs in the lion enclosure, and the tape on the benches conveys the same message without words.

[1] Epic theatre is a form of didactic drama associated with the dramatic theory and practice evolved by the German playwright-director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's intention was to avoid illusion and appeal to his audience's intellect in presenting contemporary social realities on the stage. He used "alienating" or "distancing" effects to cause the audience to think objectively about the play, to reflect on its argument, to understand it, and to draw critical conclusions. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Epic theatre," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 12 May 2020, https://www.britannica.com/art/epic-theatre



The viral enemy obviously also caused some damage here. With the dramatic apparatus now being made explicit, visitors are no longer exclusively involved in the emotive animal world. They are put at a physical and mental distance to critically reflect not only on what is presented in front of their eyes but also their own behaviour. The viewing rectangles can indeed be read as micro stages on which visitor's own behaviour is performed and observed.

In addition, the mirror effect of animal's and visitor's confinement, also personified through technicians' and zookeepers' solitary presence in the enclosures, constitutes another layer of distanciation which discloses the manipulative contrivances and fictive qualities of the presentation.

While Brecht's dramaturgy aimed to force viewers into a critical and analytical frame of mind that could potentially lead to transformative political and social action, viewers' alienation from a passive enjoyment of the zoo spectacle challenges another critical aspect: the notion of entertainment. Entertainment plays an important role in Singapore's service and tourism industries as well as domestic policy. In alignment with the state's progression as a smart nation, many of its attractions become increasingly digital and preferably immersive to distract their audiences in seducing audio-visual environments. While some of these initiatives make an original use of the current modes of communication, many flatten every experience through a standardised, non context-specific and lightweight entertainment approach.

I dwell for a moment in my memories of the early days of the internet and new technologies. They were so promising back then, offering an unprecedented space for experimentation, vibrant criticality, and electrifying democratic global exchange. It is disillusioning how, in the course of only two decades, the once utopian free space has been folded so seamlessly into the predominant capitalist system and subordinated to national aspirations.

In a place like Singapore where land is scarce, it certainly makes sense to focus actively on the development of such fictive and virtual spaces, as they can—to a certain extent—compensate for an actual lack of spatial diversity and physical movement. These additional spaces constitute a new form of land reclamation and support the illusion of a territorial expansion.

In this regard, the zoo has traditionally played a critical role as a key site of an imagined wilderness, a feature that has been systematically erased from the original landscape through massive urbanisation and the transformation of natural environments into manicured gardens. The excessive domination of nature obviously reflects a larger political ideology which increasingly also commands the digital arena. All space is political and the virtual is no exception.

In the communicative space of the zoo, technology is mainly employed as a tool for pedagogy or the spectacular staging of events. It is critical however, that the encounter between visitors and animals remains central and that this intrinsically unique experience is neither reduced to bare information nor replaced by a gimmicky theatricality. Every animal certainly has the capacity to run the show if the right contact with the audience is established. Moreover, visitors' own personal observations

and emancipated reading of the animal's persona and habitat must be empowered and the fascinating plurality of perception validated. There is no right or wrong in the sensible apprehension of the world and the zoo is certainly an ideal location to sharpen our own intuitive senses.

The encouragement of diversity seems furthermore critical on a larger societal scale, as well as the nurturing of alternative forms of intelligence, which can emerge from such phenomenological approaches. They are even more crucial in places like Singapore where the cerebral is often privileged over the sensible, and authentic, unbiased experiences are rare. I am increasingly sceptical in regard to this invasive obsession with entertainment which appears to become a generalised strategy to allay audiences' alertness and critical thinking. But then I am probably just a minimalist at heart who believes in the power of true relationships and auratic experiences that can arise from unmediated encounters between humans and animals and also objects. These unique ephemeral and poetic constellations are what I search for when I travel and what I focus on in my photography as well.

To clear my mind from this intense stream of thoughts, I spend my last 15 minutes in an empty enclosure nearby. As an ensemble, cages are silently looking at each other. The stage is set for an intriguing choreography to begin, bodies are invited to take their position and perform within their designated zones. Anyone can participate, but today anyone is no one. The scene is imbued with a transcendental atmosphere, some invisible spirits from the underworld or harbingers of the eschaton might be around.

I have the strange yet liberating feeling that I am finally having my real encounter with the animals, even if, or precisely because, their visual presence is yet concealed. My heart is full, this scene is most likely what I have been looking for today and in all these weeks. A situation that provides a clear and reassuring framework which is open enough to welcome a wide range of expressions and interpretations, with no dictatorial instructions to follow. Forming a collective with enough physical and psychological room for everyone to reimagine his or her role in this new configuration is a principle that I wish to see for the future and transition into the new world. I take out my camera and feel joy in framing the frames that are supposed to frame others who will

frame their own perceptions—through perhaps also as photographs, or just their minds. I click and hope that my picture will adequately reflect this open framework and invite future beholders to complete it with their own meaningful projections.

This energising creative moment actually reminds me of one of my latest photo series titled *Voyage by the window*. I began working on it shortly after my hospital discharge when I experienced a similar clash of disparate realities and got emotionally lost in-between. By way of resistance, I searched for a way to reconcile them, to bravely confront the loss of the protecting hospital cocoon, the continued and extreme isolation, the longing for being with my loved ones in different parts of the world, in places that are close to my heart. The concomitant desire was to travel in time, to stop, revisit and activate moments so that they would become meaningful in the present.

Sissi Kaplan, *Voyage by the Window #2 – Sri Lanka*, 2020
Dimensions variable, fine art print on paper.
Courtesy of the artist

Here you see me standing by my window with a herd of elephants in Sri Lanka. The visually evoked memory was probably more intense than the encounter I could have had with the zoo elephants today. The genuineness of the situation was so astonishing for me and also the viewers that we ended up believing that it was a real-time experience. My window became the frame for 10 of such scenes, which, in a performative act, liberated my mind and body from the imposed immobility and led to the elaboration of a veritable travel history. It was

a reminder that mobility exists essentially as an idea which can easily transgress all forms of voluntary or forced confinement.

And this is precisely the aspect that immersive digital experiences try to ride on, and often fail when the sleek overpowering presence of technology takes over. Memories and imagination are in flux, fragmented and require gaps to let different temporalities, spaces and experiences in. It is in this amalgam of eclectic realities, a certain chaos and imperfections, that participants develop a desire to become mentally and physically active, to contribute to the experience, alter and complete it, and finally take ownership. In this sense the virus-disrupted zoo visit was extraordinary as it ultimately gave a much deeper and more honest insight into this semi-fictional world, involuntarily recognising the limits of a constructed and one-sided storytelling by shifting the focus on untold stories that included the behind-the-scenes of the usually unseen labour and honest care for animals and audiences.

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This letter became much longer than anticipated, my dear M, and I apologise for having taken so much of your time. Once the mind is liberated and in motion, it becomes cinematic and sometimes unstoppable, taking pleasure in audaciously transgressing established orders and conventions, and we shall let it be. It is time for me now to join my friends for a French dinner to celebrate this displaced birthday and our togetherness in the most international and festive manner.

With love,
S

PS. I would like to thank my friends Vinita Ramani for the stimulating exchange on the subject matter and Chris Yap for his help with the photo editing.

Photographs by Sissi Kaplan

Re-imaginings: to look back and move on

Recital

This piece mixes the forms of personal narrative and academic essay with art to refract how the personal is entangled with the social in moments of individual and collective stress and grief. The piece argues that an important task in facing the cultural impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is to re-imagine our entanglements and shared imaginations so as to resist plunging into desperate future-making aimed at recovering the normal without re-evaluating our past and the narratives and practices that lead us to a point of no return. The piece moves in between reflections on my father's death and considerations of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic might have on international mobility, and thus on the nation-state. By doing so, the piece serves as an illustration of how the personal and the collective remain entangled even as their definitions come under pressure when the future is uncertain, and when the past, though previously taken for granted, now appears under new light. Following that line of thought, the piece concludes that art could turn on its own temporalities, and become an exercise of reimagining the past and the communities it contributed in making.

1

Chua Mia Tee. *Epic Poem of Malaya*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 112 x 153 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

How do we experience this painting now? Do we appreciate the freedom with which the speaker shares his breath with the rest? Do we notice how they are not wearing masks?

2

On 28 February 2020 I had to do an emergency trip from Singapore—where I am based—to my birthplace, Mexico City. By then, the COVID-19 pandemic was in the wake of its first global wave. The first case in Mexico was registered hours before I landed at Mexico City International's Airport. Little did I know, the next four weeks would change everything.

> It is now 28 March, and I am writing this while travelling back to Singapore. The globe is shutting down. Borders are closing, and with them countries, cities, towns; even families are closing their own doors. Isolation and distance has surprisingly, or perhaps paradoxically, become the main strategy to defend individual and global health. And the world struggles. Some struggle to avoid falling prey to the mental and emotional strain that being isolated brings; others struggle because they simply cannot just shut down without putting their own livelihood in peril. Back in Mexico, a debate had already sprung on the media on whether self-quarantine and self-isolation are exclusive practices, marks of socioeconomic privilege in and of themselves, and therefore a terrible counter-emergency strategy for a country with an overwhelming informal economy. As I scroll on Facebook while passing the time during my layover at Tokyo Narita Airport, I hear that similar debates are springing everywhere. The pandemic is putting pressure on the conceptual and infrastructural edifice of global governance and its presumed equality.

> An almost empty airport surrounds me, and besides my wife—who caught up with me in Mexico when things took a turn for the worse—all I see are people wearing masks and glasses in the best of cases, and full hazmat suits with plastic headwear in the worst. The crew for the flight to Rome is running around the airport getting as many face masks as they can. My wife and I were about to grab a pack when an Italian flight attendant grabbed it first. Let it go – my wife told me. They need the masks more. And indeed they do. The news we get from Italy are those of a country that has vanished into trauma. We walk away, and sit next to a window. A cargo flight departs, and then the tarmac lays still.

In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* ([1983]1991), Benedict Anderson argues that a nation can be defined as "an imagined political community." (6) It is imagined, he explains, because one will never meet the entirety of the nation and yet one will share "the image of their communion." (ibid) I find that his insight is as relevant as ever, even as Anderson was writing in the midst of a world close to seeing the end of the Cold War, and therefore a world that had not experienced late-stage globalisation and the unravelling of the nation-state. Indeed, the turn of the 21st century saw the withering of the nation-state at the hand of globalisation and its imagined global community. And yet, the second decade of the century charged at us by surprise. Right before the plague came, the cracks in the shiny mantle of globalisation's imaginary were already showing. Some of these cracks were visible via the notorious reawakening of hardcore and racial nationalism, sweeping across various regions of the world. We were experiencing a growing stratification and differentiation between the haves and the have-nots, refugee crises, climate change and uneven responses worldwide, etc. In academia, the rise of academic fields that focused on the cultural and political relations between an enigmatic global north and an othered global south were indeed symptomatic of the myth that a global unity always had a system of exclusivity inbuilt to the extent that its theory only appears through epistemic distancing. If by the end of the last century we could have suspected a shift towards a global and cosmopolitan model for citizenry, the 21st century was quick to remind us that we were still processing the trauma of living in a world ruled by the nation-state.

> My flight is due in eleven hours, and the airport is practically empty. There are just a handful of flights departing from now till then – one to Washington D.C., another one to Houston, one to Shanghai, and one more to Rome. I suspect that they will be full of nationals going back to their home countries. During the past few days, many nations have either urged their citizens abroad to come back, or sent evacuation flights to bring them back, or both. International mobility has taken a turn towards immediate repatriation, and so the imaginaries of the nations of the world get mobilised too. Some people can travel back, some countries can afford to repatriate, and others cannot.
>
> All this scares me. Am I being as careful as I should be? Did I disinfect my hands before I touched my mouth just now? I hear that Boris Johnson – current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom – has tested positive with the new virus. He joins

> a growing number of very high profile people that include Prince Charles, also from the UK, the wife of Canada's Prime Minister, half the cabinet of the current government in Iran, internationally famous actors, and sports figures, among others. That these figures are infected gives me mixed feelings. On the one hand, if the infection is this widespread it could potentially mean that a doomsday scenario is much closer than we want to acknowledge. Yet at the same time, that these figures have been infected may also point the other way and indicate that the pandemic will simply become a common feature of contemporary life, and therefore that life will carry on, somehow, and in a way that is not too different from how we know it. There will be a pandemic, then a massive global recession and financial crisis, thousands of people will die, thousands will be out of a job, things will get critical, and then things will be back to normal. That's how these things go. Just as how humans are explorers, we are also good at adapting. Yes, we will be fine. We will move on.

Or so I would like to think. But I also wonder whether the situation in itself is a way to move on from a past that up until a few months ago was already unsustainable. It seems that we have suddenly forgotten about *all that* – that we have, albeit under a clause of temporary condition, moved on from *all that*. But let's be frank. The virus did not erase the present; it paused our attention to it, in any case. As we anxiously devise strategies to move on from this altered timeline—as we try to move, grab, and materialise a future that somehow resembles some degree of backward normalcy—it would appear that we have forgotten the timeline we were in. We forgot the past we came from, and while in lockdown, we may somehow have forgotten to mobilise our memories of it. How is *all of that* doing now? Are we being too quick to normalise pre-pandemic trauma? Are we supposed to move on from the virus? Or is the virus our window to experience time?

3

> Today is my father's birthday, but he passed away four weeks ago. He died of complications after a brain surgery. The surgery went fine—in fact, the best of the five he had to deal with for the same ailment the last fifteen years. It was his lungs. They could not take it; and then his kidneys; and then his liver; and then him whole. I was fortunate enough to be able to fly a few days before the surgery and celebrate my birthday with him for the first time in a decade. I also accompanied him in what would be his last dinner. He fell asleep and unknowingly faded off. I always knew his death would be excruciatingly painful, but the reality is that this pain was beyond what I could have imagined. It is a blast, straight to the face, a silent, absolute, and temperature-less shimmer as the realisation that nothing will be as it was before squares up in your soul. This sounds trite in words, but it is as good a description as it gets (perhaps that is why everyone says something similar when a parent passes). My father died—I have to repeat to myself—my father died. As if saying so would help me figure out a way to move on. Later today, in a couple of hours, my wife and I will have a ZOOM call with my family to drink a tequila to remember him.

Tequila was the language we all spoke with him. And no, this is not stereotypical. Drinking tequila as a family is as intimate as one gets. I hate it when people think Mexicans drink tequila just because. I hate the "*amigo amigo* let's drink"—what an insult. Drinking a tequila is a ritual of emotional texture; a pillar in and of our collective self. The act performs the elegance and dignity of being a Mexican (or at least, that's how we imagine it, or how the modernist narrative of Mexico wanted us to feel). My father taught me how to drink tequila while discussing global affairs, and his father taught him how to drink tequila while discussing the history of Mexico. I imagine his father did the same with him, and so on.

My father also taught me that to live is to travel. When he was 40 and I was four, he made a working visit to the United Nations (UN), and bought me a toy replica of the UN's flag display. Oh, how I loved that flag display. To this day, I am able to identify most flags in the world because of that replica. It was somehow metaphoric: my father had gifted me the world in its flags. This was the first memory that came to my mind the moment he passed. I realised, as he was taking his last breath, how deeply he had shaped my hunger for the world. Him dying, I was hit by the extent to which many of the fundamental decisions I have taken in life—moving to Singapore, for one—were taken as a way to embody our shared lineage of adventurers, of thinkers, of doers, of live-or-die people. A few years ago, when I had just moved to Singapore, I was invited by the UN to teach in their summer school in New York and my father met me there. We spent a few days walking around in Manhattan, getting drunk in Brooklyn, and taking photos in Central Park. Though the climax of our relationship was his death as my sister and I accompanied him, that trip to New York with him—I realise now—was the fulfilment of our bond; the seal in and of the name he gave me. I am taken aback by this chain of memories. It is as if the UN had been planted in me so that it could resurface as a memory at the time of his death and make me remember him for the rest of my life.

I have been in quarantine at home for two weeks now, receiving two or three SMS texts from the Singapore Immigration & Checkpoints Authority asking me to click on a link and report my location. I am not allowed to even step outside my door until I complete a 14-day period of forced isolation. If I do, I might lose my permanent residency in Singapore. And yet, I cannot deny that I enjoy being at and working from home. I have spent the last two weeks catching up with work, with my students, and with my writing. Naturally, I have also had time to reflect on my father's passing. I have been pondering on what heritage, lineage, and family mean; on how we imagine our identities and communities. I tell my wife that one of the most significant cultural differences between how she and I think about family is in the name. Indeed, what is in a name. Coming from a Malay lineage and tradition, she does not have a surname. She is named as the daughter of her father, and so her father's first name becomes her family's synecdoche. In contrast, I do have a surname; two in fact. Surnames in my culture are what makes you part of a community the moment you are born. You have a Cervera bum – my wife often jokes. But I also have the Cervera culture, the vital know-hows that I learned and that were passed

> to me, assembled as an affect that defines what a Cervera is or how a Cervera feels or thinks—the technique of being Cervera, as many theatre and performance scholars would have it. My grandfather too was a traveller, and all my family work in TV – except me, that is. I opted for theatre thinking that I was the black sheep, but I soon learned that my grandfather, my father, and one uncle had all started off as actors before becoming TV people. This is the community I come from. This is my past, and its imagination is what gets mobilised upon my father's passing.

The UN—what an archetype to seed into your child. Funny thought to entertain these days, too. I wonder how the UN will be remembered after this; or its World Health Organisation, for that matter. There is a way in which we idealise our past and justify its existence and consequences to frame a narrative of life. In hermeneutic psychology, specialists emphasise the value interpreting the lived experience through various artefacts that one produces to articulate its meaning. And indeed, the process I am going through—making sense of the UN anecdote through writing it, for example—is pretty much a hermeneutic endeavour. I try and re-interpret my life vis-à-vis my father's, which is also making sense of the now—and the future—in relation to a perceived past. It entails untangling what it means to have *that* father to *me* specifically, and making sense of how what I have interpreted to be my heritage, has had an impact on my present, determining too—who I project to be in the future. What is the extent of my authorship in the project I call *I* when placed in relation to the ways in which others have interpreted *me*? This could also be a question posed to any nation-state that participated in the efforts of creating and maintain the UN. What authorship does a nation-state have on its own identity in relation to how it is perceived and expected to behave by other nation-states? How is that identity being mobilised in times of social sickness and mass death?

I am interested in remembering my father to understand the ways I have narrativised an ideal story of my family and my heritage: the myth in the Cervera name, if you will. I am interested in reflecting on this because as much as I mourn my father and deal with his absence, I also realise that I tend to forget the extent to which he also was part of traumatic experiences that made me leave Mexico in the first place. This is personal I admit, but what isn't personal nowadays? As the boundaries between the private and the public become blurred during our remote socialising and work, as we peer into each other's homes and rooms, and as *we* become the historic subject that will determine the narrative that emerges out of the pandemic, what isn't personal indeed? Even the UN can be a personal story in times of death and distance.

4

Band of Migrant Workers perform a song at the *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition Finals*. 2014
Courtesy Global Migrant Festival. Photo: © 2019 Abhineet Kaul

What poetry will be written by migrant workers in Singapore after their experience with COVID-19? How will that poetry be shared?[1]

[1] "Poets in action." Migrant Worker Poetry Competitions

5

What communities are being imagined, assembled, and mobilised in times of shared yet uneven sorrow? Trauma, even when globally shared, is personal. While trying to seize the world from the confines of my desk and my home, and to process my loss, I check the latest updates on the pandemic. I see that the US doubled its cases in a week, and that as of today, we are nearing two million infections globally; that the dying die alone, and that the dead cannot be buried by their families. I hear the current president of the USA is accusing China, and I see China sending medical aid to Mexico as a counter-message. Once symbols of national identities, airlines are now transport for an emerging global network of medical supplies. Global leaders meet via videoconference, just as I have been doing with my students. Minorities are getting affected much more than the wealthy because even when they ought to stay put, they cannot not move. Not moving is now a mark of wealth and privilege. Mobility is essentially left for the poor.

The pandemic mobilises communities, albeit in a different way. Its presence fractures the individual and the collective. Surely, we are bound to witness a wave of political romanticism as economies re-boot and concerted attempts to go back to normal are put in place. We are bound to see images, hear songs, watch movies, sit in plays, read books, and experience art that—state-sponsored or not—express the trauma of the pandemic. Many of them will do so by highlighting the collective subject and its importance in the achievement of the greater good. We will see narratives and iconographies that highlight the sacrifice of the one for the many, that embolden the charisma of those leaders who managed to keep their nations safe, and that passionately represent the value of post-pandemic industrial life. And these narratives, images, and representations will carry with them pandemic-infused hermeneutics,

which will be the base we use to remember and re-imagine the communities we come from. These will also contribute to how we re-imagine the boundaries between me and you, us and them, the personal and the public, touch and screen, and between distance and proximity.

Mobility, like the virus, blurs the distinction between the micro and the macro, between the personal and the collective, and between the part and the whole. A few weeks before my father's death, I came to the realisation that I had, and continue to occasionally experience, migratory grief. This is a condition in which the migrant endures a mourning process that is naturally implied in any migratory experience. The phenomenon stems from the sorrow felt upon leaving one's family, friends, and country behind, and consequently missing their lives and life in the country one was born in. Fundamentally, it also means confronting and acknowledging the possibility that death might occur on either side without having the chance of saying goodbye. I realise how extraordinarily lucky I was to have that chance, right in the rise of a global pandemic, and to be able to travel to the other side of the planet to bid my father farewell. In hindsight, as I reflect on the huge difference between travelling to Mexico in late February of 2020 and returning to Singapore in late March of the same year, I am shaken to think just how tight the window I had was. That window is gone, and while for me it worked out with just the right amount of time to have a last memory of my father and be able to accompany him in his deathbed, there are many people around the world that did not enjoy that benefit, even when living in the same home—or worse, when they were caught apart because of the necessity to labour elsewhere.

The way I remember and interpret the trauma of the pandemic will forever be entwined with the trauma of losing my father. Yet, my sorrow, even when influenced by an overwhelming sense of permanent threat, will never be the same as someone who did not bid their father goodbye on the same day I did because they were isolated or far away. How do we re-imagine communities today, in light of the fact that the pandemic set us apart more than before? As I write, Singapore is facing a third wave of contagion, now within the migrant workers' community. Yet, unlike the previous waves, this one is being framed with clear distinctions as the number of infected people in the community is reported as a separate number than those diagnosed in migrant workers' dormitories. Indeed, my experience of migration, and of life and death is substantially different than theirs.

We were already socially distanced before social distance became the remedy to a virus. And it seems as if we forgot this because the pandemic is mobilising a new imagination of community. At first sight, on the surface, this re-imagined community is marked by transpersonal camaraderie and "human spirit", and enacted by the ghostly "we" that will come through this together. But upon closer look, one can see that as isolation becomes the most accepted medicine, national isolationism will become a scaffold for the narratives that nations will deploy to maintain the symbolic boundaries of their identity and power.

6

As we face the task of *having to move on*, re-imagining the past, it seems to me, is key. The answer to the question of what art can do in such a scenario is self-explanatory. Intervening with hegemonic narratives and re-imagining the human condition has been the task of artists in many historic moments. But perhaps the current situation lends itself to interpreting our past differently. If anything, art could now become the exercise of reimagining the past and encourage us to change timelines. How may we re-interpret a gathering of people? The family? The nation-state? Mass migration? The UN? How will we re-imagine our communities, and the links that make us be one?

Kamini Ramachandran performing storytelling in front of *Boschbrand* (Forest Fire, 1849 by Raden Saleh) in 2017
Courtesy Kamini Ramachandran (Moonshadow Stories)

What are the stories we will tell ourselves about this time? How are those stories going to be passed from generation to generation?[2]

[2] The aim of SDEA (Singapore Drama Educators Association) – a non-profit organisation established in 2002 by artists and drama educators is "to advance the profession of the drama/theatre educator and advocate for the practice and value of drama and theatre in performance, education and community." https://sdea.org.sg/about/

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Fight and Flight: An Embodied History of An Immigrant

INDIA: Leave the Tribe (1982)

We didn't emigrate. We fled.

To 'emigrate' suggests a carefully crafted decision to leave one's own country and to remain away. It takes all the force out of the propulsion that prompted our own hasty departure.

I was taught about push-pull factors in geography class when I was around ten years old. People migrate because they are driven out from impoverished, war-torn countries. Push factor. People migrate because they are drawn to the dream of a better life elsewhere. Pull factor. There are degrees of variation on the fleeing theme. Flee a country, a city, a neighbourhood, or a school. Get away from ruination, deprivation and misery. Fear can be a great motivator. This is a roving narrative of what prompted my family's own departure and how I, as a child, grappled with leading an itinerant life.

My first birthday at Grihalaxmi Colony in Ghatkopar, Mumbai (India), 14 July 1979. My dad is holding me.

My mother is from Chennai. All married women returned home to their families to give birth. As a result, I was also born in Chennai. I don't remember the train journey I must have taken with my mother and brother to end up in Mumbai where my father was working as a young, ambitious banker in the State Bank of India. I have fleeting memories of childhood in Mumbai. They show up like haikus and float to the surface of my mind intermittently.

Learning English at Fatima Kindergarten; the Grihalaxmi colony[1] where I played everyday with Israeli Jewish, Indian Muslim, Parsi, Gujarathi, Marathi and Tamil kids, speaking a mélange of Hindi and Tamil; the *hijra*[2] who banged on our door in the middle of the night demanding money, whom my father had to kick and push out; *bhel puri* and *paani puri*[3] stalls in the city; trains and the Arabian sea; falling in love with the voices of Mohammad Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle on the local radio station or the devotional songs of M.S. Subbulakshmi.

We would have stayed in Mumbai. But we were pushed and pulled, in an emotional tug of war. Tribal wars with family became toxic and made life in Mumbai untenable.

I was four years old when we became expatriates. My father joined the Bank of Credit & Commerce International and we moved to Bahrain, a sovereign state in the Persian Gulf.

1 Grihalaxmi Colony is an apartment-complex called a "railway police colony" for officers in the private and public sector. It is situated in Ghatkopar East, in the city of Mumbai.

2 Transgender women in India, who play a vital and interesting role in society, as figures representing characters from Hindu mythology. They are recognised as a third gender in India

3 Street food

BAHRAIN: Bahrain, Burqas and Upset Bellies (1982-1985)

Migration made my stomach churn. I remember being ushered to the bathroom frequently with an upset stomach as a kindergartener. Being a foreigner and leaving friends behind was something I could not grasp cognitively.

In Chennai with the cousins, 1984/1985. A decidedly Indian-style trip to the beach. Get wet but stay clothed. I'm in yellow and terrified because I always worried about family getting swept away by the currents.

In Bahrain, my idea of beauty, if I had one, shifted imperceptibly. Beauty became fragmented. Women were largely veiled in black *burqas*[4]. But I saw perfect wrists adorned in gold bangles; manicured nails painted red; eyes lined with kohl. I remember the law—if anyone tried to commit a robbery, his hands would be cut off (the criminal was always a man; the victim always a woman). That awed me as a six-year old. I thought, *no wonder they can wear all that gold and be safe.*

I also prayed.

Our neighbours were a lovely young Arab couple with a chubby, adorable toddler named Imdad. My mother regularly scooped Imdad up in her arms and crushed his cheek with kisses, while I borrowed his mother's *burqa* to pray every evening. It became a daily ritual. I loved how I could smell her inside the *burqa*; how as a child, I could hide in the billowing fabric. How free I felt inside it.

[4] Full outer garments worn by women following Islamic traditions.

Clad in our neighbour's burqa, getting ready to pray. My mum is carrying Imdad. Bahrain, possibly 1984

UNITED KINGDOM: I'm a west Londoner (1985-1989)

We left Bahrain a few years later, just in time for me to start primary school in the United Kingdom. My brother ended up in a posh private boys' school. I found myself in the nearest neighbourhood primary school in the borough of Middlesex, in Kingsbury, west London. It was a multicultural spot in London, peppered with Gujarati, and Tamil Brahmin immigrant families. My parents went to Harrods and Marks & Spencer on weekends, conducted elaborate *pujas*[5] at home, and let us try fish fingers and chicken nuggets in social settings, so that we would not be ostracised for being vegetarian.

[5] a worship ritual performed by Hindus to offer devotional homage and prayer to one or more deities, to host and honour a guest, or to spiritually celebrate an event

My school friends and I (centre), playing in our garden at Clifton Road in Harrow, on my 10th birthday, 1988. At first glance, this also looks like a scene from Peter Weir's 1975 film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

Walking home from school one day with a friend, our mothers trailing behind us, I was shoved off the pavement by a tall, skinny English girl with a wild mop of dirty, blond hair. She was probably sixteen years old, so in my seven-year old mind, she was a giant, far up in the pecking order. When I turned around, she looked at me and said, "Go home Paki." She and her friend kept walking, laughing at us as they headed home. We waited until our mums caught up with us.

That was my first memory of racism. I was 7 years old.

I didn't make much of it. Later that day, I thought about it again and framed the incident using this logic: she said go home Paki. She meant Pakistan. I am from India. Not Pakistan. She can't tell the difference between Pakistanis and Indians, or the difference between these two countries. She is really stupid. The end.

The naïveté that underpinned this argument was key to how I thrived in London as an immigrant among other immigrants. I could eat jacket potatoes and watch Guy Fawkes burn in a bonfire[7]; head to the countryside and celebrate Shakespeare; make massive collages of The Beatles in school and winter snowmen in our garden.

I fought with and alongside other immigrant kids—fisticuffs, rivalries, best friend cliques.

But I could also be a decidedly *uuru ponnu*: a Tamil girl from the mother country who conformed to all of the cliches of my community—coconut-oiled hair in braids; *pottu*[8] and *paavadai*[9], sandalwood and spices, mangoes and tamarind in my daily diet.

In that way, I felt like a real Londoner.

Of course, at that precise moment, we left.

Participating in the annual *garba*[6] dance festival in Harrow, during the Navaratri Festival, which honours the divine feminine, 1987-1988. I'm in yellow and green.

School concert at Uxendon Manor Primary School with a decidedly multicultural student body, 1988. I'm in the red sweater with white elephant motifs.

[6] Form of dance that originates from Gujarat, India

[7] An annual celebration in Britain on 5 November to commemorate the failed Gunpowder Plot in 1605

[8] A dot marked on one's forehead that carries a Hindu religious significance

[9] Traditional skirt for young girls

HONG KONG: Love & War (1989-1990)
In 1990 I had my first real crush. It was at South Island School in Hong Kong. He was a fourteen-year old English boy. I was twelve. The age difference was a big deal. Also, he was my best friend's older brother. It felt forbidden. I stayed up nights thinking about how significant this was.

I did well in school and gave advice to troubled friends. I liked New Kids on the Block, Kylie Minogue, writing stories and playing sports.

Feeling a little too 'Indian' in Hong Kong, 1990.

There was just one problem: I wanted to be white. It came as a surprise, this sudden need to flee from something so fixed, so inherent to who I was. Since I couldn't stop being brown, I focused on being thin instead. The plumpness that Asians traditionally associated with prosperity and good health, was socially unacceptable amongst pre-teens in an international school.

India hadn't left my life, even if I'd left India. As expatriates moving from one country to another every few years, we returned home in the summers to visit relatives in Chennai and Mumbai. I swung like a pendulum—brown girl trying to be white in an international school, foreign girl trying to be a Tamil Indian girl again during the summers. Bicultural, fragmented, constantly in motion.

It took skill and a lot of energy. So I wasn't prepared for the two other things that happened in 1990. First the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) began losing staff by the droves. Regulators speculated that massive fraud on an unprecedented scale was taking place. Then, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein) invaded Kuwait.

On television, they kept showing footage of huge barrels of oil burning. The First Gulf War (Operation Desert Shield) had begun.

A U.S. Navy Grumman F-14A Tomcat from Fighter Squadron 114 (VF-114) *Aardvarks* flies over an oil well set ablaze by Iraqi troops during the 1991 Gulf War. Photo: Lt. Steve Gozzo, USN. US Defense Imagery. Public Domain.

The Indian parents around me murmured worriedly. My father looked genuinely anxious for the first time. The BCCI was a powerful institution and it went on to crumble spectacularly. Depending on who you ask, the BCCI collapse was engineered by the United States government to shut down a Pakistani bank that had become too powerful and was a threat to UK and US interests.

I didn't particularly care about banks and at the age of twelve; I wasn't an anti-war activist either. But the Iraq invasion was the first real memory I have of war. I understood that something terrible was happening. It forced us to migrate, again. This was my fourth move in 12 years. I was used to leaving and saying goodbye; to morphing, pretending and adapting. But this move felt different. It was sudden, unexplained and, for the first time, I had the sense that I wasn't going to be with my family.

OOTACAMUND, India: Ghosts, Maharajahs & Lice
(August to December 1990)

A job opportunity took my father to Singapore. Concerned that the school-term in the city-state started in January each year and that I would be there in the late summer of 1990 with nothing to do, my parents deposited me in a boarding school in Ooty, a hill station in Tamil Nadu, India. They took my brother with them to Singapore.

Blue Mountains School today. Courtesy Blue Mountains School Management.

The grounds and the cottage that housed Blue Mountains School was built by Frederick Price, formerly the Governor of Burma. The house was sold to Vidyavathi Devi, the Maharani of Vizianagaram, before India gained independence and Price went back to England, since the English weren't needed anymore.

Ooty wasn't the town's real name. It was Udhagamandalam. The British looked at other provincial references and came up with Ootacamund. Even that was too hard for their English tongues, so they shortened it to Ooty.

It had been a hill station getaway for British colonial administrators before independence. It was to southern India what Kent and the Lake District was to England. If you couldn't send your child to a boarding school in Kent, you could send them to Ooty.

When I went there, the school was a ramshackle place with intermittent running water, no heat, bedbugs in the dorm room beds and a lice infestation among the student body.

Each weekend, the cleaners at the school lined us up and parted our thick black hair to weed the critters out. I liked the faint but sure click

of lice being killed. I'd sit there, eye-level with her waist (who was she? A nameless Tamil woman), while she worked methodically to kill the adults and weed out the eggs. These women felt like mothers.

Afterwards we washed our hair and played on the grounds. Our scalps felt icy in the misty climate. Most of the kids had adoptive parents, were orphans, or were from wealthy, dysfunctional families. Like me, several had been sent to the school at the last minute. A lot of them had parents with jobs in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait or Doha.

One of the students was a soft-spoken androgynous Parsee girl who sleepwalked every night. She hurt herself a few times—scratches and cuts. I don't think we ever woke her up during these nighttime jaunts. I became painfully aware through incidents like this that we needed our families. We felt like non-monetary deposits in bank vaults: valuable and protected but unloved and isolated. In the middle of a financial crisis, a divorce, or career failures, we would have preferred being with our parents to being alone. So when the December winter break came, I packed my trunk and headed for Singapore.

My parents were new immigrants there. So long as nothing catastrophic happened again, the plan was to stay. They had enough to start somewhere in the middle. Middle-income, middle class and middling.

SINGAPORE: Too *cheem*[10] or not too *cheem* (1991)

There I was on the grounds of Thomson Secondary School[11] in 1991, a 12-and-a-half year old Indian immigrant raising the Singapore flag and saying the pledge. No one told me whether or not I was supposed to participate in these rituals reserved for citizens. So I learned to sing an anthem in a language that I didn't understand and to pledge allegiance to a country I hardly knew.

In that first year, my hand was on my heart, but it frequently turned into a fist. I mimed the words and never meant it. Sometimes I said it in a monotone. I never looked up. The flag fluttered, wistfully.

After school, waiting at the bus stop to head home, I heard Indian students speaking in Tamil. "She thinks she's better than us. Yah, ignore her. She's not one of us."

They had no clue that I understood every word. I never reacted. I just hated them and said mentally, "Yes, I am better than you. Better-looking, better educated, better, better, better."

Mrs. Khoo, the principal of the school, was a visionary woman. She had to deal with after-school gang fights and the school wasn't going to produce government scholars who would be featured in *The Straits Times*, so she liked me. She told me that her school would be a little less like the international school I had attended in Hong Kong, adding however, that I would be given "many opportunities" to thrive.

I soon realised that this made me target number one for social exclusion. If I'd been a boy, I'd have been beaten up. I was a girl, so everyone ostracised me.

[10] It was roughly translated to me as "very deep, or highbrow." Derived from Chinese dialects, Hokkien or Teochew, it means "something that is hard to understand."

[11] The school has since closed down. St. Joseph's Institution International School now occupies the grounds

Kylie Minogue and NKOTB got ousted. The metal years had begun and for the first time in my life, music took on metaphysical significance. On my backpack, I scrawled the names of heavy metal bands: Metallica, Guns N' Roses and Anthrax. I made fake tattoos with a black pen on my wrist.

I made posters of album covers with art paper and paints to put up on my wall. My brother wrote out all the lyrics to the saddest heavy metal songs.

Our parents reluctantly relented and gave us pocket money for these things, a little afraid of the depressive beasts their children were turning into. We made sure they knew it was entirely their fault. Songs like *Something I can Never Have*, *Terrible Lie* (by Nine Inch Nails), and *The Unforgiven* (by Metallica) formed the basis of our world-view. When I wasn't in school, I wore baggy black clothes and wrote pensive poetry. Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor wailed, "I was up above it, now I'm down in it." He was talking about us.

While the Indian kids ignored me, the Chinese kids at the school asked me, "You're Eurasian, aren't you?" I wondered if I should be flattered that they thought I was partly white, or European in some way. I'd always wanted this, after all. I had finally achieved the kind of racial ambiguity and mobility in terms of my identity that I'd always desired. I was non-committal in response.

Immigrants were rare in 1991 and most of them didn't end up in neighbourhood secondary schools. In Singapore, your identity was conferred upon you regardless of the complexities of your family history. You were: a) Chinese, b) Malay, c) Indian d) Others.[12] "Others" seemed to be a catch-all category for various racial groups, including Eurasians.[13] I didn't fit the racial stereotype of Indians that seemed prevalent in Singapore and when the students in the school figured out I wasn't Eurasian, they didn't know where to put me.

Boys used to like me until I migrated to Singapore. At school, boys thought it was weird that I ran so fast during P.E. class[14] or tried to answer questions during English and Literature class. After I'd say something, they'd say, "wahhh, so *cheem*."[15] I had no idea what it meant.

But saying less in a classroom in Singapore had always been a survival tactic. A way to not let on if you were clueless. It's not like they were timid. I saw them during recess in raucous groups, speaking in Hokkien, Malay and Tamil.

I kept being *cheem* in class, and morose during recess. It wasn't the best move. All the boys from options a), b), c) and d) generally liked girls from options a), b), c) or d) respectively. The popular girls around me seemed exaggeratedly feminine and affected a delicate disposition, which made the boys like them more. I hated being a girl. I ditched the dresses and feminine affectations. I desired gender ambiguity but I could never quite pull it off. I kept trying to move into a body that would better help me communicate the sense of exclusion I felt as an immigrant teen in Singapore.

Then a Seattle rock band called Nirvana released their album *Nevermind* in 1991 and everything changed. Music journalists said

[12] A legacy of British colonial rule, the "CMIO" classification dates back to Singapore's first Census taken in 1824 and continues to be used today

[13] For a poignant and powerful response to how this meaningless category does a disservice to the histories of Singapore's many Eurasian communities, see Melissa de Silva's book of stories, *Others is not a Race*

[14] physical exercise class

[15] See ftnote 11

the band was single-handedly going to start a music revolution—the mainstream would go alternative.[16] In 1992, Dave Markey's documentary *The Year Punk Broke* was released. It chronicled Sonic Youth's 1991 European summer tour with other influential grunge and punk bands of that period like The Ramones, Dinosaur Jr., Nirvana, Babes in Toyland, and Mudhoney. The film affirmed that punk had, indeed, broken. We all felt it.

I took down the posters I'd painted of the Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion I & II* album covers (blue and red). Metallica's *Black* album got shelved. The metal bands made me want to be more of a boy. To rebel was to be tough, masculine. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain made me want to be a strong girl. Through his music I discovered all-female punk bands like Bikini Kill, The Raincoats, and Shonen Knife.

At around the same time, I met a brooding, melancholic girl called Shulian. She'd read everything ever written by Thomas Hardy and the Brontë sisters. She felt like a walking English weather system—around her, things felt cold, dreary and wet. Like me, she seemed a little lonely. She was Singaporean and Chinese, but seemed thoroughly out of place. I realised there were Singaporeans who didn't conform to racial stereotypes or limiting categorisations of identity. So we were weird together. We could be *cheem* and ignore anyone who tried to make fun of us. Fewer and fewer people did.

Once, during English class, I said "Jesus" exasperatedly. The teacher, Mr. Ghazali, looked at me and said, "Don't use the lord's name in vain." He had a glint in his eye. I had just sworn. I felt *cheem* and ballsy. The others in the classroom were vaguely impressed. Somewhere along the way, the *ah bengs*, *ah lians*[17], the quiet English literature genius and the Indian immigrant metalhead all got along. "Friends" was probably too strong a word to describe it. But I didn't feel invisible anymore.

Meanwhile, my brother and I saved our pocket money to buy more album cassette tapes. We took the bus to Changi Airport to see Nirvana fleetingly when they came for a stop-over visit before heading to Australia for a gig in 1992. It was a profound pilgrimage. We didn't know it at the time, but Kurt Cobain was high on marijuana. Possession and consumption carried the death penalty and he escaped it. It made the whole experience even more radical.

On 29th September 1992, Rollins Band, fronted by acerbic punk rocker Henry Rollins, played a show at the Singapore Labour Foundation. The music seemed to rend us. At the show, hardcore kids, skinheads and punks slam-danced and bodysurfed. An article in *The New Paper* portrayed it as acts of violence.[18] In the mosh pit, I saw wiry bare-bodied guys ensuring that no one broke their skulls or necks; body surfing was a dance and it took skill to do it without hurting people.

Soon after that, the government banned slam-dancing. We raged and continued going to local gigs. I never felt more at home in Singapore than I did in these moments. I felt momentarily free of categorisations when I immersed myself in live music. I was glad I wasn't invisible anymore. But I wanted to be seen and heard.

[16] Horner

[17] Terms (Hokkien) for men and women respectively, who bear the stereotypes of low class, uneducated, and unsophisticated

High and mighty. Kurt Cobain being accosted by fans at Changi Airport in 1992. Photo: Vijay Ramani

[18] The front page of *The New Paper*, Thursday 1 October 1992, carried the headlines: "This is happening in Singapore. Will you let your kids do this?"

I left the school I'd fought hard for two years to find a foothold in because I believed I could find a better environment to thrive in as a teenager. I left my friend. I felt guilty but I sensed something pulling me away from the cultural periphery. I was tired of always being the foreigner and the outsider. I didn't mind peripheries as a whole. I just didn't want to be excluded from everything altogether.

Girls & Gigs (1993-1996)

In 1993 I was fifteen and transferred to my eighth school – the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ Toa Payoh). Now our mornings began with reciting the Hail Mary prayer and the pledge. I was praying to a god I didn't believe in and pledging allegiance to a country I wasn't actually a citizen of. I could do this now, without feeling anything one way or another. I'd learned to compartmentalise. I'd begun to culturally integrate.

At CHIJ, there were a lot more Eurasian girls. They were cultural hybrids, so it didn't faze them that they couldn't pin me down. I had become accustomed to the 'Straight Singaporean Chinese' boy or the 'Straight Singaporean Indian' girl (and variations on that theme). I'd been told this was the norm. Here, I encountered a lot of 'miscellaneous' girls – lesbians, butches, rockers, nerds and artists. There seemed to be room for everyone; everything spilled over, nothing fits in place.

CHIJ Toa Payoh Prayer Room, 1994 (date on photo is incorrect).
Many a free period was spent in this room, discussing spirituality and chanting Sanskrit mantras.

At morning assembly, the classes were always lined up in rows like military platoons. In the line next to mine, I met a girl who played in a band. She got a whiff of my music tastes and started surreptitiously passing me demo tapes by local bands. Music had always felt a little forbidden. Now it felt like contraband.

I became close friends with an eclectic Eurasian girl called Kaurina. Everything about her fascinated me—most of all, her ability to hold an array of contradictory ideas in her mind. We would sit in the prayer room talking about *bhakti* movements in India, and what kind of meditation made us feel grounded. I returned to my roots in a roundabout way: as a hippie. An acoustic guitar-playing, mantra-chanting, chilled out teenager who read Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. The irony was never lost on me.

Strict Catholic girls would castigate us for talking about pantheistic gods in the prayer room. They warned us of the fate awaiting our souls if we kept at it. We smiled and thanked them for caring. I was reminded again of boundaries. But differences were necessary. I started seeing that. You were less liable to take your worldview for granted. The tension could be useful, if it didn't descend into prejudice.

The hippie years, 1994. On the walls: Krishna, Kandinsky, Suzanne Vega and Kristin Hersh

My brother and I started going for gigs at The Substation and World Trade Centre. I discovered how diverse and rich the local music scene was by listening to bands like Psycho Sonique, Fuzzbox, The Pagans, Concave Scream, Opposition Party, Stompin' Ground, The Oddfellows, Still, Rocket Scientist, Sideshow Judy, etc. To make sense of the scene, I began reading a local independent rock magazine called *BigO* (Before I Get Old). Founded by brothers Michael and Philip Cheah, together with Stephen Tan, it was in print from 1985 to the mid-2003s and was also where many writers cut their teeth as local music and film journalists in Singapore.

Fugazi at Bukit Batok Community Club, 8 November 1993.
Photo: Fugazi

In June 1993, American post-hardcore band Fugazi released their third album, *In on the Kill Taker*. Once again, I felt my worldview shift as I carefully read the lyrics to their songs. In *Facet Squared*, Ian MacKaye sang:

> It's not worth, it's the investment
> That keeps us tied up in all these strings.
> We draw lines and stand behind them,
> That's why flags are such ugly things
> That they should never touch the ground.

Flags were difficult for me. As an immigrant who had no real prospect of returning 'home' to India, I didn't understand patriotism or pledges. It took me a long time to really understand the verse from that song and to let the revelation sink in: nation states and politics drew boundaries that were artificial. While sovereignty mattered, the ground itself was sacred and could not be marked or divided. Flags desecrated the earth. Through hardcore music I also learned about community as something we could create.

And communities showed up spontaneously, in the most unexpected places.

Posters for the two gigs that Fugazi performed in Singapore (8 November 1993. and 8 November 1996).

Fugazi came for their first show in Singapore in November 1993 and insisted on playing in an affordable venue. Prohibitive rental costs meant that audiences ended up paying for it with over-priced tickets. So there we were, gathering excitedly in the main sports hall of Bukit Batok Community Club to watch a post-hardcore band from Washington D.C. play its first show in Singapore. The gig cost us $15 and proceeds from the show went to the Bukit Batok Constituency Welfare Fund.

They were also in Singapore in the wake of the slam-dancing ban.[19] That meant the community club (CC) had to put down a $2000 deposit. If anyone slam danced, the CC would lose the deposit. An angry German fan protested and was put in his place by MacKaye, who made sure the deposit would not be lost because of one irate fan. Everything about that show felt revolutionary. Unlike the Rollins gig, anger wasn't the thing uniting the crowd.

In January 1994, Kristin Hersh, lead singer of alternative rock band Throwing Muses, released a solo album called *Hips and Makers*. She was featured in *BigO* magazine. Intrigued, I immediately purchased the album. Her weird chord structures and disjointed lyrics upended my world again. I stumbled through writing lyrics and taught myself how to play the guitar, dreaming of the day I'd record my own songs and play gigs.

In 1995 my brother got a summer job and used his savings to help me record, master and duplicate my first demo tape. I recorded another demo a year or so later, sold them at Roxy Records in Funan Centre for $5 a tape, and began playing gigs at The Substation, Velvet Underground, at polytechnics, and any venue that opened a space for local musicians to perform.

[19] On slam dancing, dailies carried headlines such as "The show cannot go on if the crowd dances violently" (*The Straits Times*, 1992); "This is happening in Singapore. Would you let your kids do this?" (*The New Paper*, 1992); and "Row over slam dancing" (*The New Paper*, 1993)

Playing one of my first gigs as *Self-Portrait* with Kaurina and Noor Hairi (now the lead singer of local band The Guilt), The Substation, 1995. Photo: Vijay Ramani

Music and writing became a way to make sense of movement, disjuncture and disorientation.

In 1997, I got a scholarship to do my undergraduate degree in Canada and packed my bags for yet another country. For the first time in my life, I left of my own violition. It finally felt like I'd reclaimed movement. I wasn't being dragged along and I wasn't fleeing. I was *going* somewhere.

With bandmates Pankaj and Damon in Peterborough, Ontario (1997). We briefly gigged across Ontario as Lost in Delhi.
Photo: Mime Radio

Quitter / Stayer / Emigrant / Immigrant

I'm heading for the trees over there.
If that's not a destination, I don't care.
– Buzz, Throwing Muses from the album *Limbo*, 1996.

Was I an emigrant or an immigrant? "To emigrate is to leave a country, especially one's own, intending to remain away. To immigrate is to enter a country, intending to remain there."[20] I suppose we were emigrants who became accidental immigrants.

[20] New Oxford American Dictionary

This is why I found former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's reference to "quitters" and "stayers" in his 2002 National Day Rally speech problematic.[21] The basis of the speech was to criticise Singaporeans who left the country when circumstances became too challenging to remain. That sentiment continues to resurface whenever nationalistic rhetoric is invoked in times of crisis. And now, at a time of a global pandemic, we want the foreigners to quit, and the Singaporeans to resolutely stay.

[21] See for example: "'Quitters' blast by Goh stirs some soul searching." *South China Morning Post*, 26 August 2002

But leaving is not always about quitting, or lacking tenacity. What awaits you elsewhere will require stamina. Even when you've fled, it aches inside. It's bittersweet. You feel split and then you glue all the parts back together to feel whole again. Memory muddles things. You remember it being worse than it was. You remember it being better than it was. To stay doesn't always require tenacity and persistence. Sometimes, gravity takes care of it. You stay and stop struggling.

I've always wrestled with language. What little I know seems woefully inadequate to explain the conditions that characterise this movement: departing, arriving, fleeing, settling, staying, temporary, permanent, escaping, returning. What do these words mean? Each speaks to a particular moment in time, but not to the experience of migrating and moving as a whole. And as the child of immigrants, my experiences were littered with disjointed stories, of past lives left behind, reinventions and reiterations with certain details excised.

Poet and classicist Anne Carson describes writing as a "struggle to drag a thought over from the mush of unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense; every attempt means starting over with language."[22]

[22] As quoted in Anderson, "The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson."

Migration (of any kind) feels exactly like this. You must drag over the mush of your cultural codes and memories into another way of life, another space. You try to make sense *of* others. You try to make sense *to* others.

You're always starting over.

(Unless otherwise stated, all photos courtesy of author.)

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"This is happening in Singapore. Would you let your kids do this?" *The New Paper*, 1 October 1992.

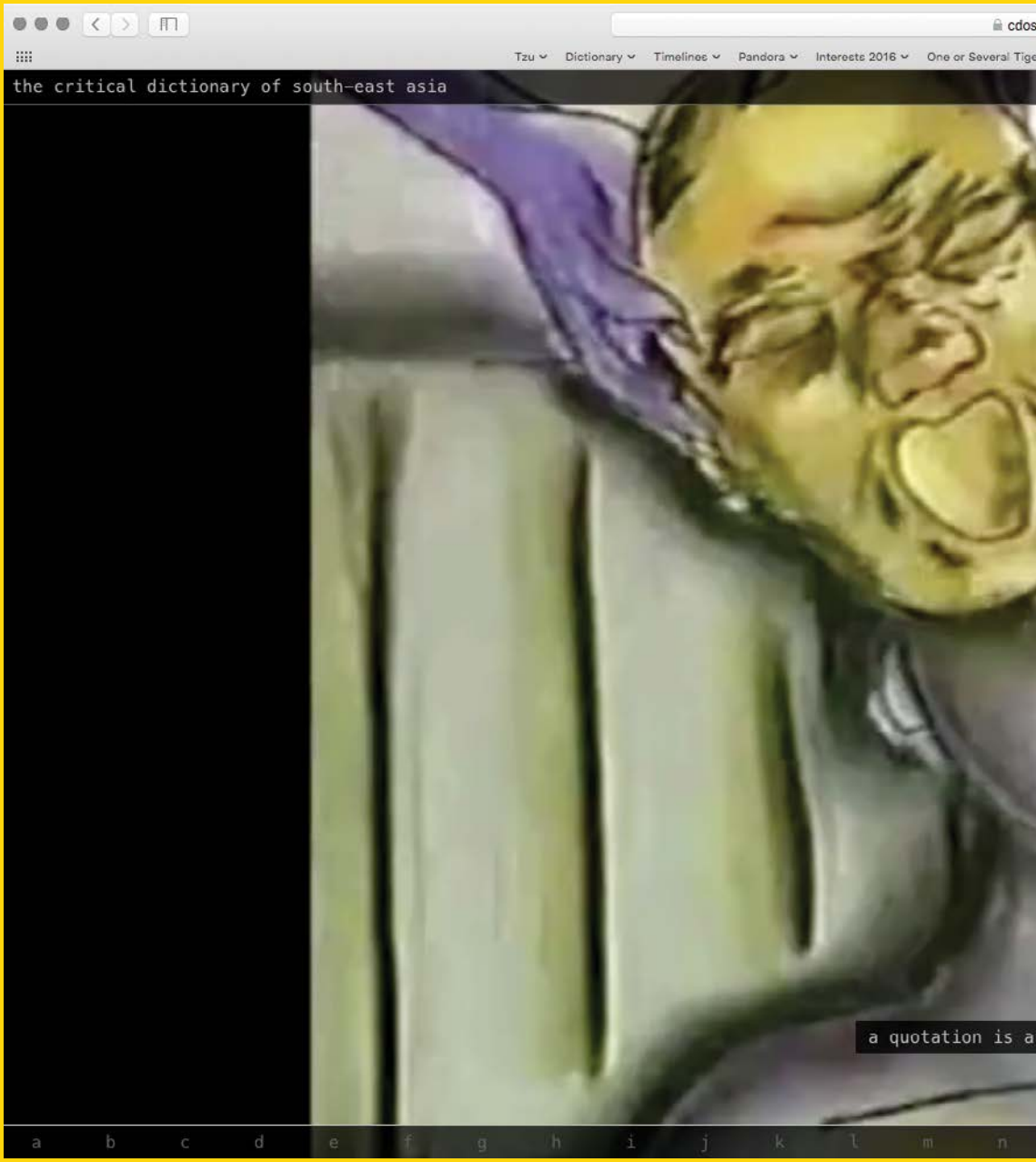
the Ragpicker,

THE FLÂNEUR, THE MEMEPLEXES

A Selection by Khim Ong

On 21 July 2012, Beijing continued to experience heavy rain. Water rose to a depth of four metres under the Guangqumen Bridge. Zhao Zhao went out on an air mattress and gallivants under the Guangqumen Bridge, amidst the flood.

Still from *Rain* (2012), HD colour video, with sound, 6:17 mins. Courtesy the artist.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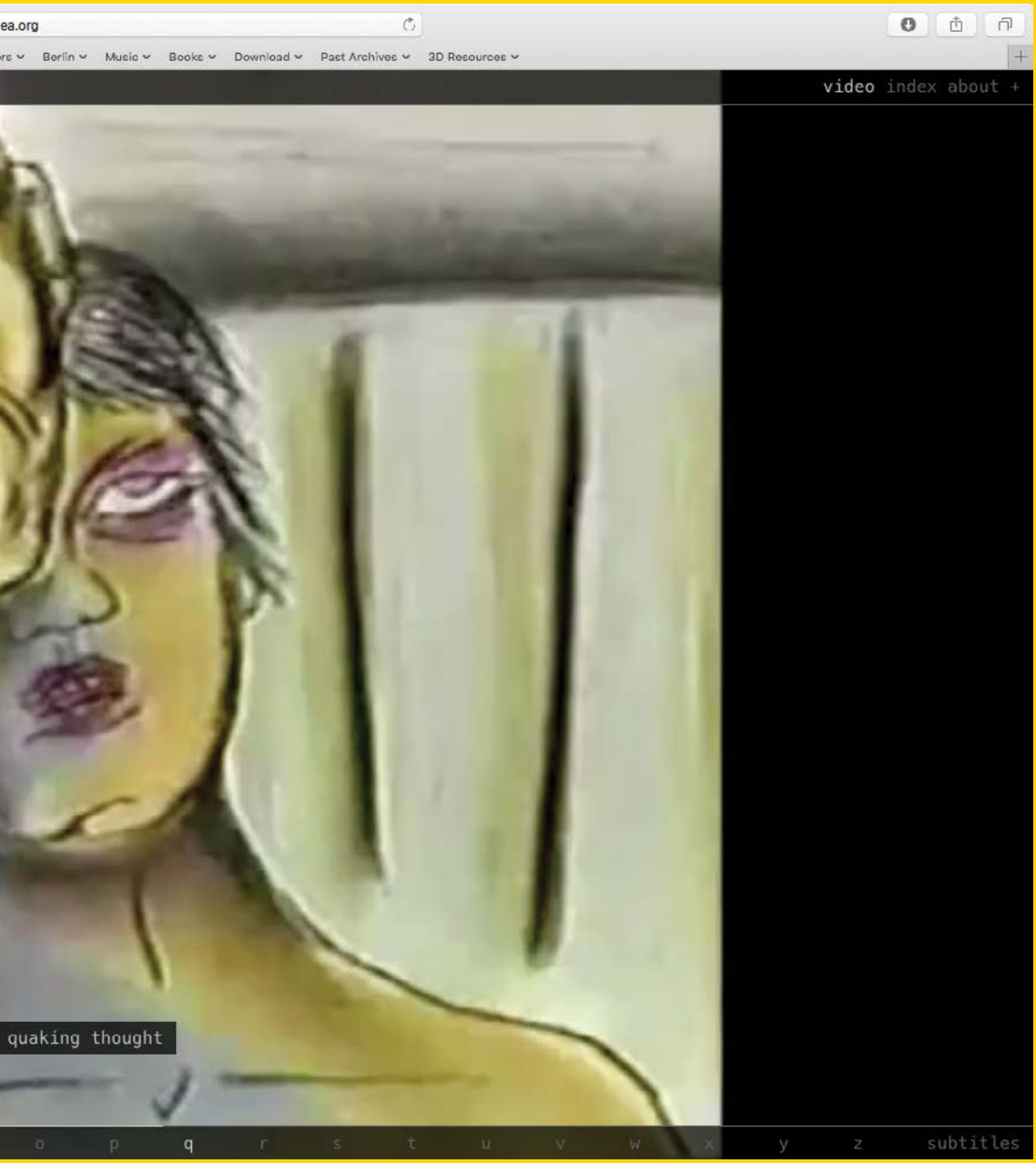
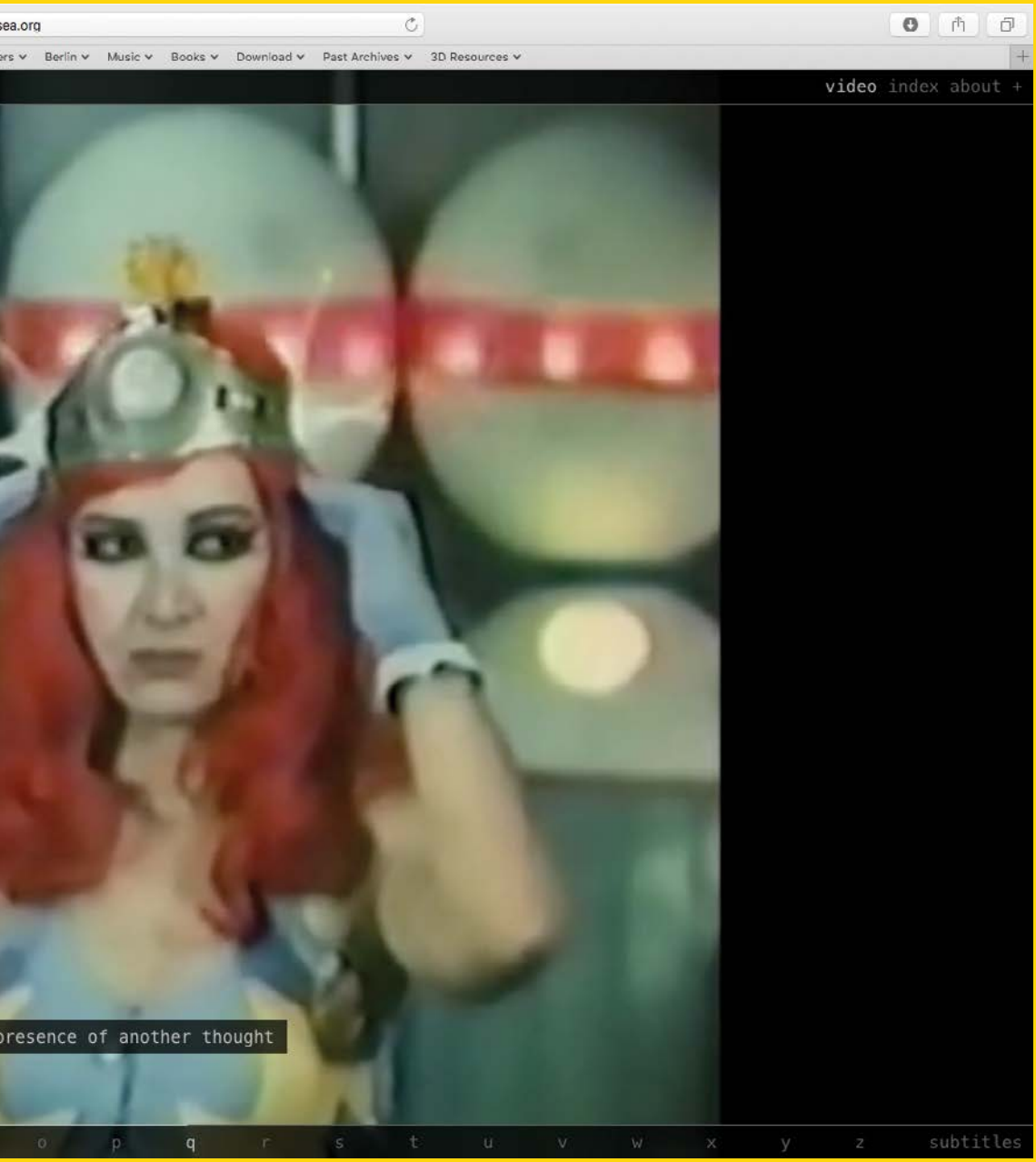


Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–ongoing), screenshot from cdosea.org. Courtesy the artist.


Tzu
Dictionary
Timelines
Pandora
Interests 2016
the critical dictionary of south-east asia
always vibrating with the
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n



Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–ongoing), screenshot from cdosea.org. Courtesy the artist.

In 2013, Zhao Zhao grew deeply interested in the trials of Bo Xilai, a member of the Communist Politburo, and his wife Gu Kailai, accused of corruption and murder in one of the most-talked about events in the recent history of China's political struggle. "Inspired" by the stories uncovered during their trials, Zhao Zhao set up four works to "re-enact" the sex-murder scandals and family dramas revealed in the trials, which had attracted huge popular attention and public voyeurism. He "translated" the keywords: *Slap, Secret Love, Leather Shoe* and *Family* (2014) in order to elevate the improper exchange between the suspects into unlikely radical actions.

— Hou Hanru, "Zhao Zhao: Another Kind of Weiquan Art?" in *Provocateur: Zhao Zhao* (Flash Art Publishing, 2017).

Zhao Zhao, *Slap* (2013), performance, digital C-print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy the artist.

In the first part of the series *Slap, Secret Love, Leather Shoe and Family*, through an open call by Zhao Zhao, volunteer Zhao Haixing agreed to be slapped on the left and right sides of his face with the artist's right hand. Completed on 20 October 2013, at 20:20:20 hrs.

Zhao Zhao, *Secret Love* (2014), performance, digital C-print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Slap, Secret Love involved volunteer Sun Yuan agreeing to let Zhao Zhao, using his right hand, stab him with a knife. Completed at 9:00 p.m, on 27 November 2014 at 305 Caocangdi, Beijing.

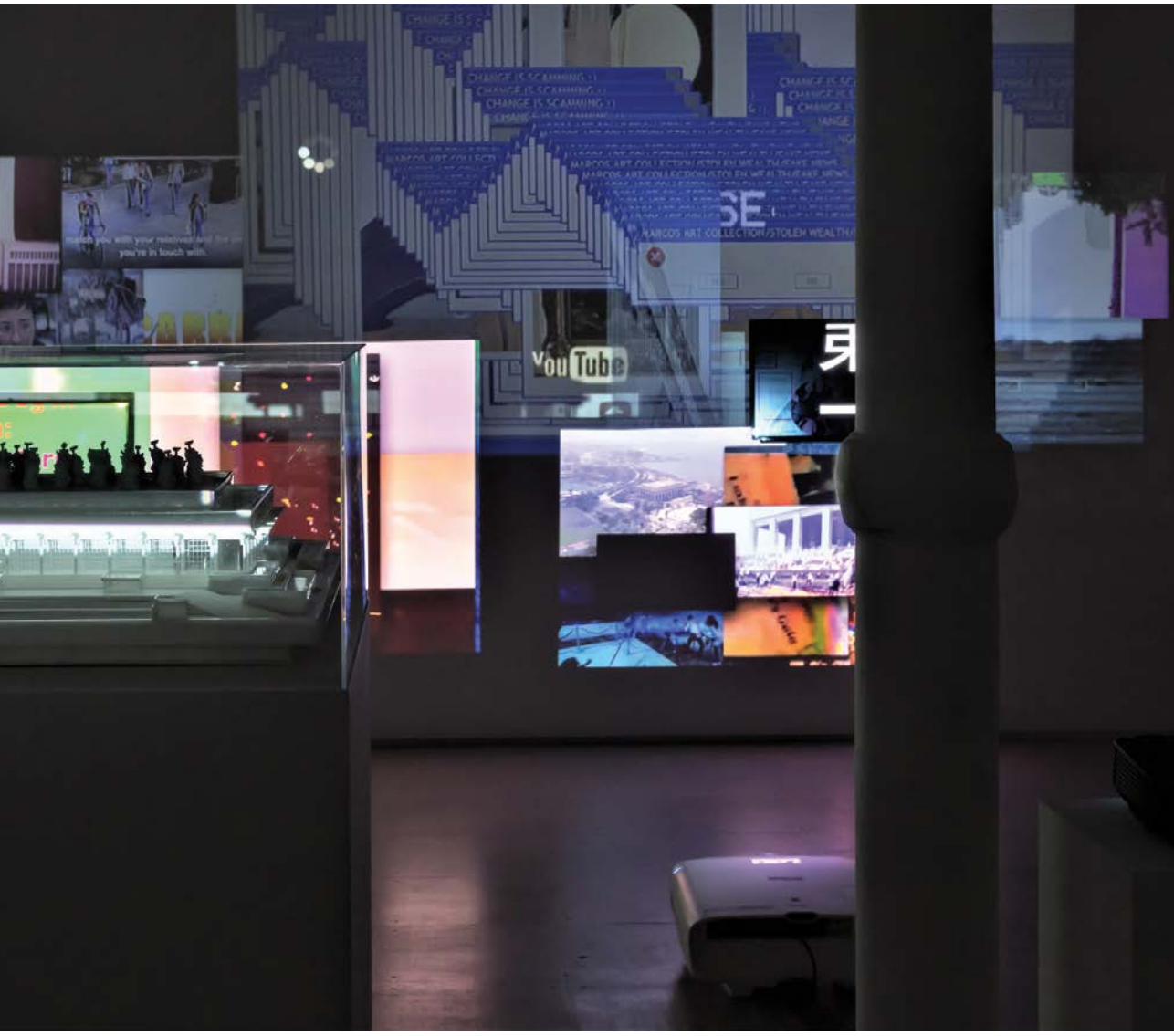
Zhao Zhao, *Leather Shoe* (2014), performance, digital C-print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy the artist.

For third part of the series *Slap, Secret Love, Leather Shoe, and Family*, Zhao Zhao gifted the knife used to stab Sun Yuan in *Secret Love* to the next volunteer who managed to convince the artist to part with the knife.

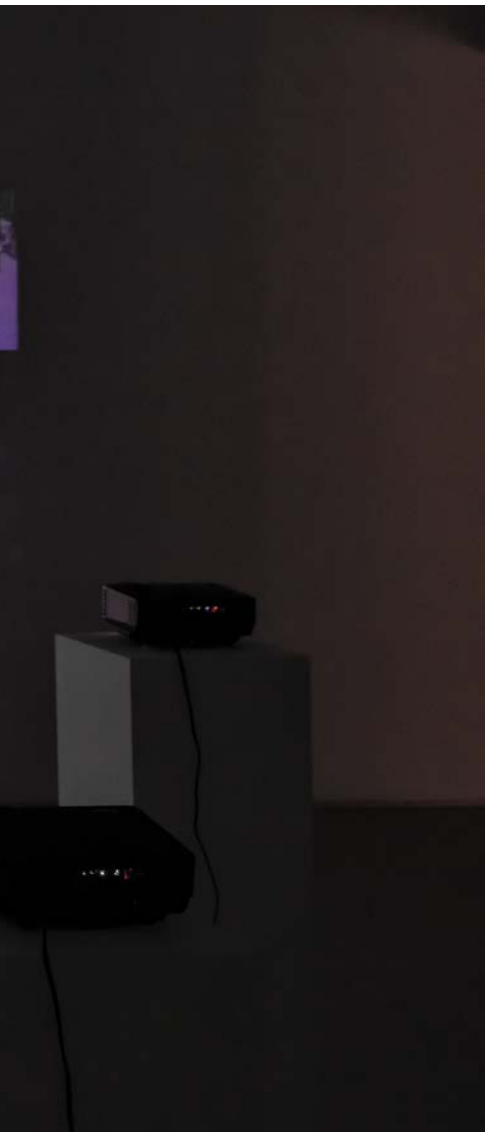
Zhao Zhao, *Family* (2014), performance, digital C-print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy the artist.

In last of the series *Slap, Secret Love, Leather Shoe, and Family*, again, through the open call, Zhao Zhao was invited as a guest to the home of a family of six. The aim was to prolong the visit way past the welcome of the host. The conversations started at noon on 5 December 2014 and lasted till 2:40 a.m. the following day, when the artist was chased out by the host.


YouTub



This and previous page: Yason Banal, *MIFFED BLUE RETURN* (2019), multi-channel video installation, Manila Film Center sculpture, MIFFED YouTube channel, slowed down WiFi. Installation view, 47 Canal, New York, 2019. Courtesy the artist.



Yason Banal's jostling installation centres upon the Parthenon-inspired Manila Film Center, built to provide a venue for the first Manila International Film Festival (MIFF) in 1982, a soft power extravaganza organised at the height of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos' plunderous conjugal dictatorship in the Philippines. Scaffolding tragically collapsed during the brutalist design's hurried construction, fatally trapping a number of workers under quick-drying cement. The constellation around the failed structure and its troubling history of pageantry and power as well as its patrons' recent, dark, triumphant return is made manifest through video collage, drone painting, hyperlink research, sculpture and intermittent technology. Banal decelerates 47 Canal's WiFi made accessible to the public through the gallery's "MIFFED" network (password: MIFFED19)—approximating the Philippines' slow internet speed by way of the Peso to Dollar buffering exchange rate, as the WiFi transfer is now set in New York like an offshore/online account. Banal scans and extends the 'extrarchitectural craft' of MIFF and the Manila Film Center, situating these in dialogue with abstract mechanisms related to crony capitalism, post-truth, cultural patronage and neo-imperialism in the Philippines today.

— from the exhibition text of *MIFFED BLUE RETURN*, 47 Canal, New York

C
for **CIRCLE / CORRUPTION**

On the continuity of the form and logic of corruption from ancient to contemporary Southeast Asia, beginning with early cosmological system of cognatic kinship (transmission of power through maternal and paternal lineages) and endlessly proliferating circles of Kings) to the nepotism of today. Describe corruption as a physical and cosmological system, a corruption of the spirit and a spirit of corruption.

Resonating terms:
Circle (of Kings)
Cognatic Kinship
Cosmology

D
for **DECAY**

Begin with an archaeological mystery in Perak, Malaysia, where excavations uncovered what appears to be graves, except that no human remains were discovered. A recent hypothesis/speculation is that the acidity of the soil, intense rainfall and high rates of humidity in Malaysia brought about the complete decomposition of all human remains, including the bones. This term deals with both the absence of material artifacts plaguing historical research in Southeast Asia, the impossibility of forensic.

Resonating terms:
Decenter
Dispersal
Disaggregation
Dissimulation

E
for **EPIDEMIC/ EVASION**

On epidemics (both biological and ideological) and techniques of evasion.

Resonating terms:
Ecology
Efficacy

F
for **FICTION/ FRICTION / FOREST**

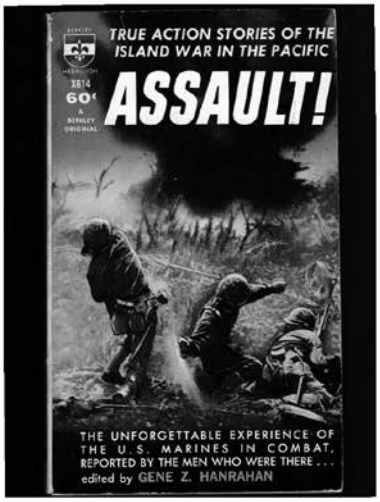
On the friction of terrain presented by the dense, tropical forest, which shelter outlaws (bandits, communists, etc) as well as myths and magic.

Resonating terms:
Fiction
Fluidity (ethnic and national)
Flight (from State)
Friction (in distance)
Frontier

G
for **GHOST / GHOSTWRITER/ GENE Z. HANRAHAN**

On Southeast Asia as a geography of ghosts (the continuing involvement of the dead on the affairs of the living), the production of history through the work of ghostwriters and the history of Communism in Southeast Asia. To end with the figure of Gene Z. Hanrahan, the supposed 'author' of The Communist Struggle in Malaya (1954) – the first authoritative text on the history of the Malayan Communist Party. However, the existence of Gene Z. Hanrahan is open to question. He is an author dreamt up / produced by his books.

Resonating terms:
Geography



15

Pages extracted from *Fragments from A Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* by Ho Tzu Nyen. Courtesy the artist.

Fallen Map is an installation of concrete rubble the artist gathered from construction sites around Metro Manila on which he painted over patterns of the ubiquitous basahan or trapo of the Philippines—circular cleaning rags made from an assortment of rejected fabric—that are disused and found scattered throughout the streets.

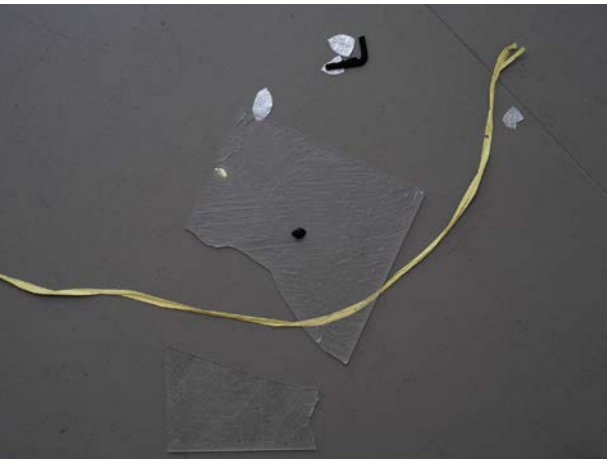
Above: Poklong Anading, *bandilang basahan (flag of rags)* no. 4 (2016), found rags, hooks, fastener, net, aluminum, 55" LCD flat panel display and media player, 198 x 170 x 160cm. Installation view (detail), *Cue From Life Itself*, Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 2020. Courtesy the artist.

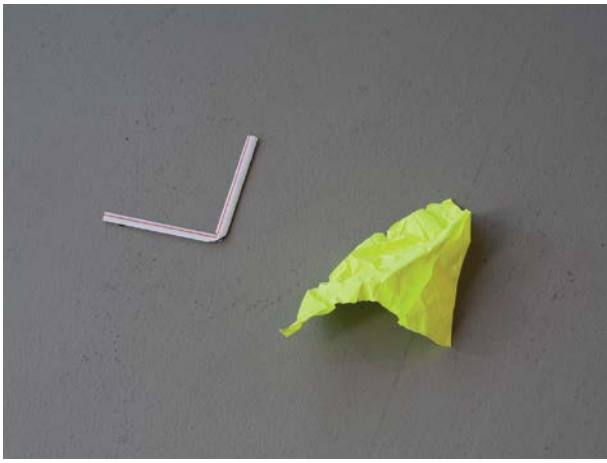
Right: Poklong Anading, *Fallen Map* (2008), Acrylic painted on rubble from road works, water and sewage system, 200 pieces. Installation view, Mag:net Gallery, Quezon City, 2008. Courtesy the artist.

"I spend most of my time far from home and being on the street is like being in another artist's studio where I accidentally find ideas and resources for my work."

— Poklong Anading, excerpt from an interview with Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, 2009.

Poklong Anading, *Fallen Map* (2008), installation view (detail), Mag:net Gallery, Quezon City, 2008. Courtesy the artist.





POLY-A
POLY-A
POLY-A

Under The Bodhi Tree (2019) is an installation of found objects—often discarded materials, detached or torn off from its origin—and photographs printed on paper and folded by the artist. Through his subtle manipulations of the object and the image, the relationship between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional is blurred, creating alternative perceptions.

— From the exhibition text of *Side Affects*, Ota Fine Arts, Singapore, 2019.

This and previous pages:
Chua Chye Teck, *Under The Bodhi Tree* (2019), found objects and images printed on recypal paper, dimensions variable. Installation views, Ota Fine Arts, Singapore, 2019.
Courtesy the artist.

M
for **MANDALA**

An analysis of non-Euclidean organization of space in Southeast Asia, through how ancient, pre-colonial empires of the regions understood the notion of territory, as radiating outwards from centers without physical limits. This is in contrast to the western model of empires, which are drawn inwards from clearly demarcated borders. This conceptualization of space was first theorized by Kautilya in the 2nd Century BCE, who wrote on the mandala system of governance in the Arthashastra, a Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy.

Resonating terms:
Magic
Manpower
Map
Metempsychosis
Mimesis
Mobility

N
for **NATION/ NARRATION / NARCOSIS**

On the narcosis of narration and nation

Resonating terms:
Nomadism

O
for **OCEANS / OPIUM**

On the connection of Oceans and Opium: the trade that links India (production), distribution (Singapore) and consumption (China) by looking at
the opium trade in the 19th Century: production in India and distribution in China, with Singapore as a nodal point for exchange, the same sea route that was central to transmission of memes across Southeast Asia – a meeting point between Indian and Chinese cultures.

Resonating terms:
Orality
Origin
Outlaw

P
for **PADI / POLITICS / PLATEAU**

Politics in pre-modern Southeast Asia is Padi politics. Its mantra: to concentrate the population and hold it in place, and its key condition: creating such state space was easiest where there was a substantial expanse of flat, fertile land, watered by perennial streams and rivers. Against the practices of swidden (slash and burn) agriculture practiced by the tribes of highland plateaus. To connect with Gregory Bateson's study of the plateaus of intensities in Balinese paintings (appropriated by Deleuze and Guattari).

Resonating terms:
Periphery
Piracy
Puppets

Q
for **QUEEN**

On Queens (mythical and historical) of Southeast Asia.

Resonating terms:
Question
Quotation
Quaking

R
for **RESONANCE**

About metallurgy in Southeast Asia and the technology of gong-making (key instrument in Southeast Asian tribal rituals). The term 'resonance' also forms a model of how to think the unity of Southeast Asia.

Resonating terms:
Region
Ritual

S
for **SLAVERY / SOUL**

On the connection between the concepts of Southeast Asian slavery, historical slavery in Southeast Asia and the animistic concepts of soul (and soul stuff).

Resonating terms:
Sea
State
Society
Space
Spells

Pages extracted from *Fragments from A Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* by Ho Tzu Nyen. Courtesy the artist.

Việt Lê, *untitled (Charlie's Angels of History)*, still from *lovebang!* (2012–15). Courtesy the artist.

"The project is a time-travelling, trans-love triangle. And it's trilingual (Vietnamese, Khmer, English). The *love bang!* trilogy comes from some of my curatorial work and also my academic work, trying to figure out what is the gap between historical trauma and pop culture, particularly pan-Asian popular culture. It seems like many people don't talk about past wars but there is such an obsession with pop music—what is the relationship between the traumas of history and modernity, between war and pop (and agit-prop)?"

— Việt Lê, excerpt from an interview with CAAMFest, 2016

Việt Lê
Left: *untitled (Gigi!)*, still from *lovebang!* (2012–15)
Below: *lonely heARTs cluBand-Aid*, still from *heARTbreak!* (2016–19).
HD video, colour, sound, projection, 1:21 mins. Courtesy the artist.

"During the Viet Nam War, *nhac vang* or 'golden music'—love ballads about loss was banned by the Vietnamese government for its potentially subversive content. The 1960s and 70s was dubbed as a 'golden era' of Cambodian rock; many of its stars disappeared during the Khmer Rouge genocide. Today, the explosion of pan-Asian youth culture and pop music obscures traces of the recent past in both countries. In contemporary Viet Nam, Japan, China, Cambodia, and Korea (among other Asian countries), there has been an

emergence of popular cultural production (music, films, soap operas) [which] questions the boundaries of community, identity and identification. How are national and consumer desires linked? The rise of bull markets may presage the rise of pop markets, including J-Pop, V-Pop, and *hallyu*."

— Việt Lê, excerpt from an interview with diaCRITICS, 2012. (https://diacritics.org/2012/10/love-bang/)

V
for **VAMPIRES / VAGINAS**

On the Malayan myth of the vampiric pontianak – ghosts of women who die during childbirth) and the Javanese legend of Ken Dedes, the wife of a local governor whose genitals glowed with fire.

Resonating terms:
Vision
Voice

W
for **WERETIGER**

On the myth of Weretigers as embodiments of man-animal symbiosis. Such transformations take place in water – the most liminal of elements.

Resonating terms:
Water

X
for **XENO**

On the relationship to the outside/outsiders.
To consider:
Xenocracy (government by a body of foreigners)
Xenodochial (hospitality to strangers)
Xenagogue (guide, someone who conducts strangers)
Xenophilia (love of strangers)
Xenophobia (fear of strangers)
Xenomania (inordinate love of foreign things)
Xenogamy (cross fertilization)

Y
for **YIELDING**

On the spirit of Yielding – an attitude to things and forces, lending itself to sympathetic magi.

Resonating terms:
Yearning
Youth

Z
for **ZONE / ZOOMORPHISM**

On the shatter Zones of refuge (forest, mountains, archipelagoes), which are also the Zones of Zoomorphicism, against the Zone of Control (Zombies and Zoos)

Resonating terms:
Zoography
Zoophilia
Zomia
Zombies

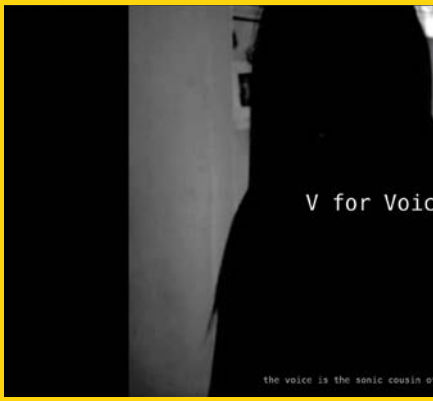
Page extracted from *Fragments from A Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* by Ho Tzu Nyen. Courtesy the artist.

The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia (cdosea) begins with a question: what constitutes the unity of Southeast Asia—a region never unified by language, religion or political power? *cdosea* proceeds by proposing 26 terms—one for each letter of the english / latin alphabet. Each term is a concept, a motif, or a biography, and together they are threads weaving together a torn and tattered tapestry of Southeast Asia. [...] Since 2016, Ho Tzu Nyen has been working with a group of collaborators to manifest the dictionary as a whole. With Berlin-based programmers and platform creators Jan Gerber and Sebastian Lütgert (0x2620), a platform for absorbing and annotating online audiovisual materials was created to feed an editing system endlessly composing new combinations of audio-visual materials according to the 26 terms of the dictionary. [...] *cdosea* is a platform facilitating ongoing research, a matrix for generating future projects and an oracular montage machine. https://cdosea.org/#video/a

Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–ongoing), screenshot from cdosea.org. Courtesy the artist.


V for Voice
the voice is the sonic cousin of the ghost


g for ghostwriter


V for Voic
the voice is the sonic cousin o


ghosts of women who die during childbirth
v for vampires, vaginas


v for vampire

Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–ongoing), screenshot from cdosea.org. Courtesy the artist.

Artists' Bios

Poklong Anading's (Philippines) work ranges from video, installation, photography, to drawing and painting. A keen observer and explorer of a mutating ecology, his practice is marked with an investigative character and an interactive approach. Many of his projects are based on the notion of deductive research—collecting as an act: a method to extract the essential but then portray the organic appropriateness of dissimilarity. He has participated in exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum (San Francisco, California, United States); Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie (Karlsruhe, Germany); Yokohama Museum of Art (Japan); Singapore Art Museum; Asia Society Museum (New York, United States); and Minsheng Art Museum (Shanghai, China). His work was shown in the *5th Asian Art Biennale* (Taichung, Taiwan); and twice in the *Gwangju Biennale*, South Korea (2002 and 2012). Anading's work is in the collection of Singapore Art Museum, Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, Japan) and Guggenheim Foundation (New York, United States). He has received several notable awards in the Philippines including the *Ateneo Art Awards* in 2006 and 2008, the *Thirteen Artists Awards* in 2006, and the *12th Gawad CCP for Experimental Video* in 2000.

Yason Banal (Philippines) is an artist whose work moves between installation, photography, video, performance, text, curating, and pedagogy, exploring myriad forms and conceptual strategies in order to research and experiment with associations and refractions among seemingly divergent systems. He was in residencies at the Rijksakademie (Amsterdam, Netherlands) and Arts Initiative Tokyo (Japan), and has held visiting lectureships at London Metropolitan University and Tokyo National University of Fine Art and Music. His works have been exhibited widely including at the Tate Modern, Frieze, Vargas Museum, Christie's, Singapore Biennale, Shanghai Biennale, Asia Pacific Triennial, and more recently at National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Asia Film Archive and Venice Architecture Biennale. Banal obtained a BA Film at the University of the Philippines, MA Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. He currently teaches at the University of the Philippines Film Institute and heads its Film Center.

Growing up in a family of carpenters, **Chua Chye Teck** (Singapore) has always had an affinity with wood and the three-dimensional form but had chosen instead to challenge himself by working with photography as a medium. His photographic series, *Beyond Wilderness* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2016) is the culmination of a decade in photography practice where he has explored different ways of presenting his views on found objects, spaces, and nature. Both sculpture and photography have their respective technicalities and Chua's recent interest in returning to sculpture follows an urge to focus on creating from scratch rather than reacting to a given scenario. In his recent work, shown as part of *Side Affects* at Ota Fine Arts Singapore, Chua works between photography and found objects and "treats the printed image almost sculpturally, paying special attention to its materiality and its interaction with light and space" (curator Tan Guo Liang, exhibition text of *Side Affects*, Ota Fine Arts, Singapore, 2019). He has participated in a one-year residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin, Germany) in 2009 and his work is in the collection of Singapore Art Museum.

Premised on complex sets of references, the artistic production of **Ho Tzu Nyen** (Singapore) harnesses film, video, performance, and installation. His richly layered and technically challenging works weave together fact and myth to mobilise different understandings of Southeast Asia's history, politics, and belief systems. His ongoing multi-part work, the *Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* has, since its inception in 2012, generated a number of filmic, theatrical and installation works including *One or Several Tigers* (2017), *Timelines* (2017), *The Name* (2015), *The Nameless* (2015), *2 or 3 Tigers* (2015), and *Ten Thousand Tigers* (2014). Recent solo exhibitions were held at Edith-Russ-Haus For Media Art, Oldenburg, Germany (2019); Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany (2018); Shanghai Ming Contemporary Art Museum, China (2018); Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2017) amongst others. His works have also been included in major group exhibitions such as: *Aichi Triennale*, Japan (2019); *Sharjah Biennial 14*, United Arab Emirates (2019); *Gwangju Biennale*, South Korea (2018); *Dhaka Art Summit*, Bangladesh (2018) among many others. He is co-curator of the *7th Asian Art Biennal*, Taichung, Taipei (2019). Ho represented Singapore at the 54th *Venice Biennale* (2011).

Việt Lê (Vietnam) is an artist, writer, curator, and academic based in California, United States. His recent projects have been collaborative and based on working with other cultural producers such as artists, designers and cinematographers. Transversing the disciplines of visual studies, ethnography, queer theory and diasporas histories, his works have employed the vocabulary of popular music videos and fashion to speak of the overlaps of historical and personal traumas as they manifest in representations of identity, spirituality and sexuality. Lê has recently presented his work at Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, United States (2018); and Bangkok Art and Culture Center (BACC), Thailand (2013); and in the solo exhibition *lovebang!* at Kellogg University Art Gallery, Los Angeles, United States (2016). He is a co-founder of *The Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network* (DVAN) and is Associate Professor in Visual Studies at California College of the Arts, San Francisco, United States. He is also a board member of the Queer Culture Center and has been a panellist for Art Matters, Camargo Foundation, amongst others. His writing has been translated into Chinese, German, Khmer, and Vietnamese.

Manifest in the works of **Zhao Zhao** (China) is a persistent interest in Chinese history, tradition, craft, culture and a keen observation of life. Subtle expressions of individualism figure strongly throughout his artistic practice: from obscure acts that playfully challenge the regulated social and ideological sphere, absurd representations of social phenomena, to witty commentary on the economy of (ethical and cultural) values. Recent solo exhibitions were held at Mizuma Gallery, Singapore (2019); Roberts Project, California, United States (2019); and Tang Contemporary Art, Hong Kong (2018). Zhao Zhao has participated in numerous exhibitions in China, United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Ukraine, Spain, Belgium, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, and Australia. His works are in the public collections of Daimler Art Collection, Berlin, Germany; DSL Collection, Paris, France; The Guy & Myriam Ullens Foundation, Switzerland; Tiroche DeLeon Collection, Frankfurt, Germany; and White Rabbit Collection, Sydney, Australia. In 2019, he won the *Artist of the Year Award* in the 13th Annual Award of Art China (AAC) and in 2017, he was shortlisted for the Young Artist of the Year Award in the 11th AAC.

An abridged conversation in acts

As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, a scheduled meeting in Singapore was cancelled, and a series of online conversations about the current project, *Abridge*, developed between February and late March 2020. Wei Leng Tay had been developing the project since 2018.

Protests in Hong Kong revealed forks in the road, narrative tangents that turned the camera on the process itself, prompting Tay to look back through layers of her practice, across shifts in time, place and media. As the pandemic has impacted the creative and curatorial process, it was difficult to resist the strange resonance between the current sense of inert urgency and displacement, and these narrated memories of migration, hardship, and uncertain identities. In much of Tay's work, there is an implicit tension between lives lived and the administrative, national or cultural boundaries that attempt to define them, and across which, in practice we continue to move.

Abridge develops from the earlier project, *The Other Shore* (彼岸), in which Tay explored 'Mainlander' identity through a group of young students and professionals whose studies, work opportunities or family migrations had brought them from Mainland China to Hong Kong. While none of the subjects is identified, they resist forming a coherent group, with each image a new encounter for Tay and the viewer alike, complicating rather than simplifying the assumptions the project set out to confront.

For *Abridge*, Tay turned to the stories of an older generation of Southern Chinese migrants in Hong Kong—often the parents or grandparents of today's protest generations—their personal journeys and complex sense of place, set against the massive infrastructural development and administrative integration being promoted across borders that have hitherto defined their lives, their memories. This border, that had been both a dangerous frontier and a barrier defining Hong Kong as a safe haven, today is dissolving in a web of rapid development across what the central government styles as the Greater Bay Area. While this official idea has given rise to unprecedented construction, as well as economic and administrative integration across the Pearl River Delta, many hallmarks of this 'development' formalise what has long been an organic and often clandestine circulation of goods and people back and forth across successive generations of borders.

The following text combines excerpts from a series of conversations[1] recorded between February and March, with vignettes from interviews Tay had undertaken since 2018, on her return trips to a Hong Kong in flux.[2]

[1] Conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese, a dialect from the Dongguan/Guangdong area, and interspersed with English

[2] For this essay, the subjects of interviews are referred to as 'Auntie', 'Mom', 'Dad'—this is an informal way of addressing them, and does not mean a family kinship. For her work, interviewees are kept anonymous.

Kai Yuen Lane missing sign, date unknown.
Fuji RVP100F slide (Kodak E100VS discontinued), 120mm
2019
Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist

Auntie 文化大革命後就已經 forget 啦 in a way, 唔再諗。我 try to go through 我個心理。70年呢，我記得好清楚㗎，去廣州見哥哥家姐，爸爸有去，嗰陣時係坐火車嘅。一上咗大陸深圳嘅火車，就有嗰啲歌聽，我係嗰陣時會喊嘅，聽嗰啲歌會喊嘅。哩個就係嗰陣時嘅心理。It just recalls 你嗰個……你嗰陣時會成日想，會發夢返屋企啊，冇得返呢即係唔係成日有得返呢，即係我嗰時嘅學校啊，乜啊。嚟就，幾時開始冇咗哩啲嚟嘅夢呢，我就……應該係文化大革命開始淡咗啦。到六四啦就，no more，即係好clear cut 嘅。

Auntie After the Cultural Revolution, I started to forget, in a way. I stopped thinking about it. At least, that's what it felt like. But I remember very clearly, when we went back in 1970, we went to visit my older brother and sister in Guangzhou; father went too, we took the train. As soon as we got on the train in Shenzhen, there were Mainland songs playing, and when I heard them, I cried. I cried when I heard those songs. That's how I felt back then... Back then, you'd dream about going home, because you couldn't go back all the time. When did I stop dreaming of that? Well, it probably started from the Cultural Revolution. But after June Fourth, that was it, no more. It was a really clear cut.

OK Walk me through again, what it is that you're doing...

WLT I was thinking about the people that I was talking to. When I spoke with them, they were trying to remember or articulate their lives for me; they were trying to present themselves. Some were trying to make sense of what had happened to them before with what was currently happening when I was talking to them, which was the protest. For one of the aunties who went to Hong Kong in 1960, it was a process of constantly toggling back and forth between then and now, because I think the protest was so much on her mind, and undoubtedly related. She talked about herself as a child of China. She looks at a lot at Chinese media too, but she is clearly for the protests.

For a lot of the people I was talking to, I think it was a matter of them trying to figure out, OK, what do I tell her, and how do I tell her this? It was then that I realised that I couldn't, or rather didn't want to actually show any images of these people. I was thinking, how do I photograph this, beyond the kind of infrastructure and those scenes that I was already making with video and photos? I started thinking about the pictures that I've been making in Hong Kong since 2005 or so; you don't see those kinds of images anymore — like the photographs that I have taken of the Hong Kong families.

A lot of places where I would photograph them were in their daily lives. It was about looking at how they were living with different layers of history, in their own homes or things like that. That seems, not flippant, but unimportant at this point. Is it a bit indulgent or is it necessary? It's also because I was using medium format film, and right now that feels archaic.

WLT As I interview people I ask myself, why am I doing this? Am I simply doing something that many other people have done? And beyond talking to people about their lives, that kind of information, what else am I actually doing? Over the last few years, it's become increasingly problematic for me if a work is in an exhibition setting and is purely informational. Even though I'm interviewing particular people, I don't want that voice to be representational, or the images I make to represent them. With *The Other Shore*, we did that in terms of thinking about how the voice becomes a context or an environment; how the voice could move people through space, or create certain visceral reactions. And then you're not just thinking about that information in terms of a voice, you're thinking about the quality or nature of that voice, the age of that voice, and what it can do beyond such 'information'.

WLT How did Hong Kong people see those coming over?

Mom There was definitely a difference.

Dad They didn't like it so much; they didn't like people coming here and bothering them.

Mom We are even in the movies — Ah Chan! [laughs]. They didn't imagine we would be so hardworking.

Dad Those of us who came out back then, we weren't afraid of dying, we weren't afraid of hardship.

WLT For this project, all the people who were talking to me, they know that their story is part of a narrative that's been retold. When I asked how people perceived them, one of them told me it's like 'Ah Chan.' He said, "We've all seen the shows, we all know the characters." So, talking to people who have to narrate their own lives to me alongside all these stories that they have watched and heard, all these stereotypes about themselves, that also became an important part of the process.

Dad I had thought about it way earlier; it was just a matter of when I would leave.

Mom At that time, many people were leaving.

Dad Everybody dreamt of Hong Kong. Those songs we would hear from the radio back then, we would get Hong Kong radio and songs of that period.

Mom It was illegal...

Dad Hong Kong seemed interesting, very free, like it was easy to find work there. That's what we thought. One day I heard rumours that Hong Kong was opening up. I was pretty much done with the construction work, so I went back to my village. I took some chicken biscuits and escaped, and walked over to Hong Kong.

WLT How did you walk?

Dad I just walked, and walked, and walked....

Mom He walked for five days...

Dad No, I walked three days and three nights.

Mom From Shenzhen?

Dad What are you talking about? Shenzhen? From our front door!

Mom Back then, if you didn't reach Hong Kong in five days, and your family at home didn't hear from you, they would worry. [laughs]

WLT I've been very interested in Southern Chinese migrants, people who were crossing or migrant workers. When I started thinking about who to talk to for *The Other Shore*, it was interesting for me to talk to these younger, more privileged Mainlanders; it's a new generation, a new type of immigrant whose coming into Hong Kong, because of policies, because of new wealth. And with this new wave, there's a lot of money being put in and it's changing the landscape of the city.

I remember a time in Hong Kong when the brands, the electronics, started becoming Chinese; all the jewellery shops that started appearing, all the pharmacies, all the changes... where even in Causeway Bay, close

to where I used to live, where the things that you thought you could get in the areas near the small shops across from Lee Theatre, you couldn't get anymore because it all became these shops for tourists. So it was affecting all parts of your life... So talking to the young Mainland Chinese felt like the first step, as talking to Hong Kongers felt like a very big or difficult task. From there it became more natural to start talking to older people, but it's also harder because it's a different generation, a different way of communicating. And I'm finding them through the kids of these people in different demographics, so some people are suspicious.

One of the things that I was thinking about as I was doing this, and while I was thinking about *The Other Shore*, was that the works are so much about Hong Kong. For my other works, I try not to think about them as place-specific; they deal with certain relationships or issues. In the Pakistan or Singapore works,[3] if you want to categorise them in terms of issues, there is statelessness, migration, displacement. But in terms of Hong Kong, even though they do deal with those things in a way, the history of the people who have settled in Hong Kong is very specific, the type of regimes and events they had to flee, in terms of the way that they crossed the border. Of course, you can also say this is reminiscent of other situations with border relations.

OK This could also reflect the fact that it's the place you've done the most work, where you're most familiar, even compared to Singapore.

WLT Yes, my understanding of Hong Kong is more so than my understanding of Singapore. Since I spent the majority of my adult life there, it makes sense.

OK Going back to this question around the medium, back to the photos you had produced in Hong Kong, with film. You've been thinking about that also in relationship to the recent protests, or would it be the Umbrella?

WLT I think with the Umbrella movement it was different because I was there. I was in the middle of making *The Other Shore*, and things got really tense. One of my friends called me a China sympathiser because I was making work with Mainlanders.

OK In the first exhibition, showing a bit of that work in Hong Kong, people accused you of being pro-China or too sympathetic.

WLT They were also writing comments [in the exhibition book] like, "If it's this hard for you, why don't you just go home," to the people in the project.

But I've always thought the work isn't about giving voice; it's not a question of empowerment, of bringing certain situations to light, that's not the point of what I'm making. But nonetheless it was very interesting

[3] *And this is the lady and her pond* (2015-2018); *the first chapter it starts with the horses* (2017-2018); *"you think it over slowly, slowly choose..."* 「你就慢慢考虑，慢慢选择……」(2018). These works were exhibited in Singapore in a 4-part solo exhibition *Crossings* at NUS Museum from 8 March 2018 – 4 May 2019.

to see the comments. That was quite preliminary, that phase. I wanted the people who were in the project to see what I had done and to hear comments, if they had any, on what was being done with their likeness and their words.

OK How did that work?

WLT Quite a few of them came; many didn't say anything. Some of them did. Some were actually quite interested in hearing what people like them, who had come to Hong Kong from China, had to say for themselves. Because they had been artificially lumped by me into a peer group, some of them were actually very interested in hearing what their 'peers' had to say...

Auntie My brother and sister? I've never talked to them about this before. We're blood relations, but we're not close. After we came out [in 1960], they came out after they were grown up and one had a kid [in the mid-70s]. We were already distant. Our backgrounds were different, language... They can't speak proper Cantonese; they don't understand Hong Kong society. They're Hokkien and live in North Point, they don't have many Cantonese friends, just colleagues. Unlike me, they aren't integrated into Hong Kong society, even now. I understand everyone's Hokkien in North Point. Because of language, they can't communicate naturally, that's to say, they might be able to talk to you, but they can't really communicate with you. The majority can't, even the ones who are younger than me. Many have returned to China to live; they come and go. So you heard in North Point the Hokkiens came out to beat people up; they don't think about integrating. They want the benefits, but don't feel any ownership. I can understand that this is their condition. But if they think it's so good there, why don't they go back?

WLT But that was one of the times when I started realising the spatial dimension of the voices... How do you juxtapose that kind of seemingly benign image with these voices, when they might not necessarily be saying anything controversial, but the fact that they're speaking in Mandarin, when most people in Hong Kong, or in the gallery at least, actually have difficulty understanding—that creates a very specific response in many people. That was actually a good lesson for me in the kind of visceral reaction voices, sounds or images, can create.

WLT I think the turn the project has taken is because of the protest. When I first started interviewing people, I was making video interviews, and when they were speaking about themselves and why they came, they were relating things about their own lives. But this was many months before the protests. After the protests started, it was difficult to talk to people, because they were busy, and it was more difficult to move around. There was an increasing sense of fear or worry, perhaps on my part also, that when you ask people to speak of these things, of fleeing China, of leaving, and why it was bad—perhaps it's not the best idea to show their faces. So I decided to just have audio for the interviews, which really changed how the audio was being used, because when I

was working with the video image, what was interesting for me was how people were presenting themselves and recounting their own lives to me, then that whole part of the work fell out. It made me wonder how I would show that.

At the same time, as I was going back from Singapore to Hong Kong, I kept asking myself, why am I doing this... because I left, right? I was thinking about what I had done before in Hong Kong, about the images, but then thinking over these things through talking to people in Hong Kong.

OK To somebody who's even more of an outsider, you're actually not that far from this context. It seems to be quite natural for you to empathise with some of the narratives, the sense of history and movements across borders; intergenerational issues, in terms of family narratives and personal identities. All of that feels familiar, although different to your other work. I feel like you're making a point about it as though somehow you shouldn't feel comfortable in that space or you shouldn't see yourself as an insider because you are not really, but it seems like degrees.

WLT If you're talking about, as a person who has lived in a place where I don't quite belong, I'm not from there, or who has moved around — in that sense, then I would be an insider, when you are thinking about those experiences. But in terms of thinking about Hong Kong politics, I feel that I'm an outsider. If you look at recent events, the chant of the *heunggongyan* ('Hong Konger')... I do not consider myself, and I've never been seen as, a *heunggongyan*. Even though I'd lived there for 15-16 years, I was never a *heunggongyan*. In that sense, I felt like an outsider. But where you are talking about a kind of displacement or migration, then I am an insider, so to speak. For me, the danger with the work is when it falls into the latter kind of politics.

OK That brings us back to the sort of work that you're doing right now, printing. You're looking back at slides mostly.

WLT I'm looking at slides, I'm also looking at contact sheets.

OK What's the process; how do you start?

WLT I'm asking myself that a lot actually, because I keep telling myself to have a system, but when I go through the images I end up not having a system. I choose images that I want to re-photograph, sometimes because I can remember the instant when I was photographing them. I remember what people said to me or how I felt. But some images, I have no recollection of whatsoever. In a way, it's led by my memory of these different things. And one of the reasons why, for example, I wanted to work with the Pansy Ho image[4] is because it speaks to me of a different time in Hong Kong.

Barney Cheng fashion show, 2001.
Fuji RMS slide, 35mm
2020
Archival pigment print, 60 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist

It was at the Barney Cheng[5] fashion show, early 2000s, with all these rich Hong Kong socialites. It was that kind of Hong Kong scene that I was photographing, and I remember things that happened when I was photographing.

WLT

But often it doesn't work. For example, when I showed you those pictures of the grandpas playing kickball in Central, they used to be there all the time, but now you don't see them anymore. Don't know where they are now. They were such a staple, in a way, of the weekend. They were almost iconic... But then it's also a question of working through this, having to push against that sense of nostalgia. I think it's quite important in the work. I don't want to fall into the trap of 'those good old days.'

Dad

At the Shenzhen border, there were a lot of high-powered spotlights. They would shine the lights everywhere, and spotlight you. We were chased and chased by PLA[6] soldiers. We had already avoided them once, but they caught us off guard. We had passed them, and for no reason they turned around. That first time I didn't have enough experience; I didn't think to crawl into a drain — I would have gotten all wet — so I got caught. The shoots of grain weren't tall enough at the time.

Mom

Didn't you lie flat in the fields?

Dad

Lie down!? I didn't want to get my clothes all wet. So, when they surprised us, we got caught.

[4] Canadian-Hongkong billionaire businesswoman (b. 1962); she is the daughter of Macau-based billionaire, Stanley Ho.

[5] Hongkong luxury fashion designer

[6] People's Liberation Army

Mom It wasn't like that for us. For us, we passed the border. In the paddyfields, it was like we were swimming. Yeah... Their lights were so strong, their dogs were barking so fiercely.

Dad It was very dangerous to do that. One could die...

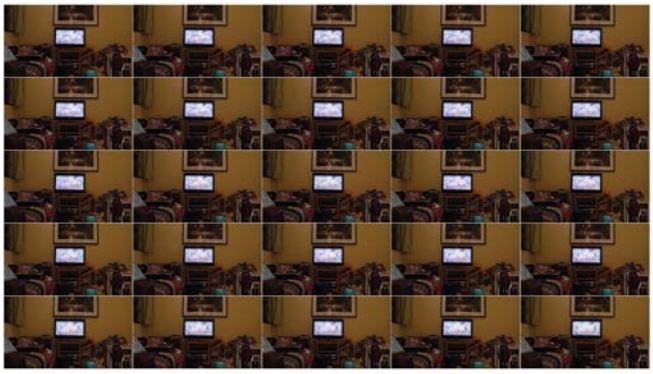
Mom Yes, it was a gamble.

WLT In terms of making new images from the old images, how much representation is actually needed in the image itself? That's one of the things that I've been thinking about. There are some pictures where I am photographing the film as object. But then there are also some where it gets too close, where I cannot focus because of the focal length of the iPhone, so it creates that compression, that blurriness. There are different layers in the image that I'm making: where I'm layering the background of where it is photographed, let's say it's Hong Kong or Singapore. Then you have a juxtaposition of the present and the image, that history in that photo. Or there are reflections: one photo I actually really like—which makes me question what a good photo is—is a photo of a photo that I made of Kai Yun Street, where I used to live.

View from Kai Yuen Street, date unknown.
Fuji RVP100F slide (Kodak E100VS discontinued), 120mm
2019
Archival pigment print, 90 x 120 cm. Courtesy the artist

You can see my hand and my iPhone, I'm taking the picture and you see the window right in the middle of it. I like that photo, that act.

One of the things that made me turn back to photographing my own pictures from the past was how photographs were being used when I went back to Hong Kong. I actually felt a refusal to make new photos, although I did in the end. I was thinking about not wanting to make images. It felt like consumption and rather gratuitous, because then what do those photos do? I made that work[7] because I was staying at a friend's place and there was one evening when things really exploded and we couldn't go out for a few days.



Live streaming, Prince Edward, 12/11/2019, 23:35:05-6.
25 frames per second, 1920 x 1080
2019
25 archival pigment prints, 22.5 x 40 cm each. Courtesy the artist

WLT

As I was watching a lot of the streaming, I realised this was how a lot of people must be experiencing the protest, on their screens. So I took one second of the video and made 25 frames (because it was in PAL); in a way, having a document of the mediation of the protest. That is also one of the reasons why I'm using the phone to photograph as opposed to a proper camera, because of the ubiquity of the image. Everyone uses the phone, that's how we often make images and how we understand photographs now. So I wanted to use this to look at my own work.

Mom

I always say, if it comes to a point where they have to choose, should Hong Kong become China? They will definitely say no. And yet, now they will not stand up and fight. I am not saying they're all like that. I see many Hokkien kids out fighting for Hong Kong. They will. But, for example my mom, who's 100 years old—when she hears that I go to the protests, she doesn't like it. Of course, there are many things— your DNA, your character, whether you will show up or not, whether you are scared or not. That all makes a difference. But frankly, nobody wants Hong Kong to become like China, if you ask me.

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[7] This work comprises 25 images, each image corresponding to one of 25 frames in a single second of PAL format video of the protests in Hong Kong at that time.

OK Are you re-photographing more at the moment?

WLT There is more that needs to be done, like when I make photographs of the surfaces. On some of them, for example *Causeway Bay*, which have very smooth surfaces, the photograph becomes quite impenetrable. You can't actually see it, but then it's there.

Causeway Bay, 2001.
Contact sheet, Kodak Tri-X 400, 120mm
2020
Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist

OK It's funny, you think it's impenetrable, yet that looks to me like a moment of respite, because it's detailed, partly in focus. Your eye says, "I know what I'm looking at, I'm looking at a reflection." And ironically, because of the power of the lens, you can focus on the surface. Whereas in some of the other images, you're looking at something which you wouldn't actually really see. Going back to this protest image: you might register what it is, but it's not how you typically would see images. It looks like a mistake. Whereas the other image just looks like it's an abstract image, but the resolution, the focus, is all there.

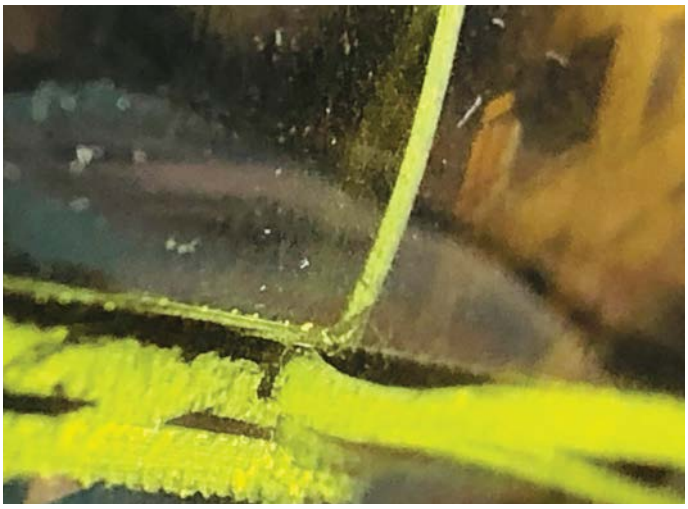
Article 23 protest, Causeway Bay, 1/7/2003. Contact sheet, Kodak 400VC negative, 35mm
2019
Archival pigment print, 45 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist

WLT There's a different sense of flatness to this image, *Article 23 protest*; it's doing something quite different. It's not really an object anymore, it's become a graphic; the texture is not really a texture. It's digital, the image is falling apart. Whereas *Causeway Bay* feels almost like the opposite; there's actually a sense of solidity, and that's what the lens is focused on. Which is not to say that one is the right way and the other's not. It's just I see those things in different ways, and that seems to bring out the tension. The way that the image is disintegrating distracts you from the reality that it once was supposed to represent.

I think that's a good observation. One of the things that I've been having trouble with is—what can I do as I'm photographing? What do I focus on? How can I think about that flatness? How can I think about that surface? How can I visually show how I'm trying to think about the event?

Abridge will be exhibited at the Verge Gallery, University of Sydney, from 15 April to 22 May 2021. It will comprise photographic prints (some of which are included here), a video and a sound installation based on the interviews above. The exhibition is supported by Verge Gallery and The University of Sydney: China Studies Centre.

This conversation between Wei Leng Tay and Olivier Krischer was transcribed by Cheang Chu Ying. Cantonese transcription of interviews was by Wing Chan.



Ming Yuen West Street II, 2010.
Kodak E100VS slide, 120mm
2020
Archival pigment print, 45 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist

A boy at Repulse Bay beach during SARS, 2003.
Kodak E100VS slide, 35mm
2019
Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist

Ming Yuen West Street, 2010.
Kodak E100VS slide 120mm
2020
Archival pigment print, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist

Felipe Cervera (Singapore) is an academic and a theatre- and performance-maker. He is a lecturer of Theatre at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore and is a Graduate Faculty member at the Centre for Drama, Theatre & Performance Studies, University of Toronto, Canada. His research interests are the interplays between performance, science, and technology as well as collaborative academia (teaching and research). He has published locally and internationally on these topics in journals such as *Theatre Research International; Text & Performance Quarterly*; *Performance Philosophy and Theatre; Dance & Performance Training*; and in volumes such as *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics* and *The Palgrave Handbook of Experimental Theatre* (forthcoming). From Mexico, he has been based in Singapore since 2012, where he directs for the stage, and is a regular contributor to public forums about theatre and performance. Cervera serves as Associate Editor of the international peer-reviewed journals *Global Performance Studies* and P*erformance Research*.

Dr Christine Checinska (United Kingdom) writes about the relationship between cloth, culture and race. The cultural exchanges that occur as a result of movement and migration, creating creolised and hybridised cultural forms, are recurring themes within her work. She is currently the V&A's (Victoria & Albert Museum's) Curator of African and African Diaspora Fashion; an Associate Researcher at VIAD (Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre), University of Johannesburg; and Visiting Lecturer in Critical and Historical Studies at the RCA (Royal College of Art) London. She was awarded her PhD, *Colonizin' in Reverse! the Creolised Aesthetic of the Windrush Generation*, by the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London in 2009. In 2016, she delivered the TEDxTalk *Disobedient Dress: Fashion as Everyday Activism* at the Hackney Empire. Her recent publications include "Spinning a Yarn of One's Own," *A Companion to Textile Cultures*, *Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History*, John Wiley & Sons Inc, New York, 2020; "Aesthetics of Blackness? Cloth, Culture and the African Diasporas," *TEXTILE: Journal of Cloth and Culture: Taylor & Francis Online*, vol. 16, issue 2, 2018; "At Home with Vanley Burke," *Image & Text: a Journal for Design*, vol. 29, no.1, 2017; and "Stylin' the Great Masculine Enunciation and the (Re)-fashioning of African Diasporic Identities," *Critical Arts*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2017. She has also worked as a creative designer in the fashion industry for over thirty years.

Rhett D'Costa (Australia) migrated to Australia from Bombay, India (where he was born) at an early age. His research draws on his hybrid background of British, Indian and Australian cultures translated across a pan-disciplinary artistic practice. His research focuses on the roles of resilience and optimism in the intersecting areas of identity, place and belonging and specifically how this relates to culturally composite ethnicities and mixed-race communities. These interests take into account shifting social and political circumstances and the tensions and consequences of mobility and migration in complex transnational environments. D'Costa's artistic research examines the agency and role an artist as researcher can have within these often precarious and unstable spaces. In a career spanning thirty years in art practice and tertiary art education, his particular focus has centred around the Asia-Pacific region. He is currently a lecturer in the School of Art at RMIT University managing their undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Hong Kong.

Lóránd Hegyi (Italy) is an art historian and curator. He taught at the Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest and at the University of Graz in Austria in the 1980s. He was director of several museums including the Ludwig Museum (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig) in Vienna, Austria from 1990-2001; the Palazzo Arte Napoli (PAN) in Naples, Italy from 2002-2006; the Saint-Étienne Modern and Contemporary Art Museum (MAMC), France from 2003-2016; and The Parkview Museum, Singapore and Beijing, China from 2017. While directing different museums in Europe, he also curated many important international exhibitions such as *Abstract/Real - Reference Malevich, Duchamp, Beuys* (Vienna, 1996); *La Casa, il Corpo, il Cuore—Construction of Identities* (Vienna,

Prague, 1999); L*'autre moitie de l'Europe* (Paris, 2000); CONCEPTS OF SPACE (Barcelona, 2002); *Passage d'Europe - Réalités, Références* (Saint-Étienne, 2004); *Essential Experiences* (Palermo, 2009); and *The Artists's Voice* (Singapore, 2017). He co-curated the 45th Venice Biennale (Italy, 1993); Toyama Biennale (Japan 1993); Stuttgart Sculpture Triennale (Germany 1995); Valencia Biennale (Spain, 2003); and the Mediations Biennale (Poland 2008). His publications include *The Courage to be Alone: Re-inventing of Narratives in Contemporary Art* (2004); *Fragilité de la narration* (2009); *Contemporary Art on Show* (2012); *Roman Opalka's essentiality 1965/1- ∞* (2015); *Significante Incertezza: Saggio sul disegno contemporaneo,* (2016); and *Tre Maestri— Interrogazione sul tempo: Roman Opalka, Ilya Kabakov, Jannis Kounellis* (2019).

Dr Lesley Instone (Australia) is a cultural geographer whose work explores the material and embodied encounters and entanglements of humans and nonhumans in (mostly) Australian settler colonised lands. Her research experiments with different ways of paying attention and engaging performatively in the world and draws on a richly diverse theoretical landscape including science studies, feminism, postcolonialism, and more-than-human geographies. She has a particular interest in how affect, encounter and contingency shape relations, identities and worlds.

Olivier Krischer (Australia) is interested in the role of art in modern and contemporary East Asia. He has edited, co-edited and authored publications including *Zhang Peili: from Painting to Video, ANU Press*, 2019; "The State of Play in Asian Art Research in Australia and New Zealand," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art: Taylor & Francis Online*, vol. 16, issue 2, 2016; *Asia through Art and Anthropology: Cultural Translation Across Borders*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013; and was previously managing editor of *ArtAsiaPacific* from 2011–2012. His curatorial projects include *Between–Picturing 1950-60s Taiwan*, Canberra, 2015; *Wei Leng Tay: The Other Shore*, Canberra, 2016; and *Zhang Peili: from Painting to Video*, Canberra, 2016. He has published translations from Japanese and Chinese, most recently for the catalogue *Woodcut movements in Asia: Blaze Carved in Darkness, 1930-2010s*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2018. He is currently acting director of the China Studies Centre at The University of Sydney.

Ingo Niermann (Switzerland) is a writer and the editor of the speculative book series *Solution*. Recent books include *Solution 295-304*: *Mare Amoris* (2020); *Burial of the White Main* (with Erik Niedling, 2019); *It's Me!* (with co-author David Pearce, 2019); and *Solution 275-294: Communists Anonymous* (ed., with Joshua Simon, 2017). Niermann invented a tomb for all people, *the Great Pyramid* (thegreatpyramid.de), and together with Rem Koolhaas he has been building a tool for public ballots – *Vote* – in Gwangju, Korea. Based on his novel *Solution 257: Complete Love* (2016), Niermann initiated the *Army of Love* (thearmyoflove.net), a project that tests and promotes a just redistribution of sensual love. His work has been featured at Berlin Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, dOCUMENTA(13), La Biennale di Venezia, MACBA, MoMA, mumok, Castello di Rivoli, and ZKM. Niermann was born in Bielefeld, Germany, and is currently living in Basel. www.ingoniermann.com

Khim Ong (Singapore) is an independent curator. She was the Deputy Director of Curatorial Programmes at NTU CCA (Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art), Singapore, from 2016¬–2019. At the Centre, she co-curated solo exhibitions of internationally acclaimed artists Tarek Atoui, Amar Kanwar and Yang Fudong, as well as research exhibitions *Trees of Life – Knowledge in Material* (2018), *Ghosts and Spectres – Shadows of History* (2017), and *Incomplete Urbanism: Attempts of Critical Spatial Practice* (2016). Previously, Ong held curatorial positions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Singapore, LASALLE, and Osage Gallery, Hong Kong. She was curator of the Southeast Asia Platform at Art Stage Singapore in 2015; and was one of the curators of the Bangkok Art Biennale 2020.

Bojana Piškur (Slovenia) graduated in art history from the University of Ljubljana and received her PhD at the Institute for Art History at the Charles University in Prague, the Czech Republic. She works as a senior curator in the Moderna Galerija (Museum of Modern Art) in Ljubljana. Her focus of professional interest is on political issues as they relate to or are manifested in the field of art, with special emphasis on the region of (former) Yugoslavia. She has curated many events, has written for numerous publications, and lectured in many parts of the world on the topics such as post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, radical education, socialist cultural politics, and the Non-Aligned Movement. Her most recent exhibition that dealt with the topic of the non-alignment was *Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned* (Ljubljana, 2019).

Vinita Ramani (Singapore) is a writer and editor. Born in India, she has lived in Bahrain, UK, Hong Kong, Canada, Cambodia and the USA. She migrated to Singapore thirty years ago with her family. She was formerly the co-founder of Access to Justice Asia, an organisation that represented indigenous Khmer Krom survivors of the Khmer Rouge period at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia from 2008-14. She currently heads a consultancy, Asia Untold, which endeavours to document the stories of communities affected by political conflict or a violation of their social, economic and cultural rights.

Sherman Mern Tat Sam (London, Singapore) is an artist and critic. He has exhibited internationally, including one-person shows at The Suburban (Chicago, 2007), Rubicon Gallery (Dublin, 2009), Equator Art Projects (Singapore, 2014), Annka Kultys Gallery (London, 2016), and most recently at Ceysson-Benetiere (Luxembourg, 2018). His work has also been included in numerous group shows, including *M6: Around London* at Centro Cultural Andratx (CCA) Art Centre (Majorca, 2009); *Connected at Feature Inc* (New York, 2012); *The Theory and Practice of Small Paintings at Equator Art*

Projects (Singapore, 2014); and *Slow Painting*, (Leeds, Plymouth, 2019–2020). As a writer, he has written for various British magazines including *The Brooklyn Rail* and online magazine *kultureflash* (kultureflash.net). Currently he contributes to *Artforum*, *Ocula* (ocula.com) and *ArtCritical* (artcritical.com).

Silke Schmickl (Hong Kong) was a curator at National Gallery Singapore, the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore/LASALLE; a researcher at the German Art History Centre in Paris and the co-founding director of Lowave, a Paris/Singapore based curatorial platform and publishing house for film and video art. She has initiated and directed numerous art projects dedicated to emerging art scenes in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and has curated exhibitions in partnership with museums and biennials in Singapore, Paris, Guangzhou, Beirut and Düsseldorf. Recent exhibitions at National Gallery Singapore include *Minimalism: Space. Light. Object; Rirkrit Tiravanija: untitled 2018 (the infinite dimensions of smallness)*; and *Haegue Yang: Forum for Drone Speech – Singapore Simulations*.

Wei Leng Tay (Singapore) is an artist whose projects begin with conversations and draw links between how desires, personal relationships and histories are tied to society and the state. She works across mediums including photography, audio, video and installation to question ingrained modes of perception and representation. Tay's solo exhibitions include *Crossings* (NUS Museum, Singapore, 2018-2019); *The Other Shore* (China in the World [CIW] Gallery, Australian National University, 2016); and *How did we get here* at ChanHampe Galleries, Singapore (2015). She has also collaborated and has shown with organisations such as NTU CCA (Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art), Singapore (2019); Vasl Artists' Collective (Pakistan, 2015, 2017); ARTER Space for Art (Istanbul, 2014); and Selasar Sunaryo Art Space (Indonesia, 2012). She has given presentations as a visiting artist with universities including Yale School of Art, USA; Mount Holyoke College, USA; and Australian National University, Australia. Her works are in collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; NUS Museum, Singapore; Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Hong Kong; National Taiwan Museum of Fine Art, Taiwan; and the Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Japan. Tay holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, Bard College, USA.

Milenko Prvački (former Yugoslavia/Singapore) graduated with a Master of Fine Arts (Painting) from the Institutul de Arte Plastice "Nicolae Grigorescu" in Bucharest, Romania. He is one of the Singapore's foremost artist and art educators, having taught at LASALLE College of the Arts since 1994. He was Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts for 10 years, and is currently Senior Fellow, Office of the President at the College. He also founded *Tropical Lab*, an annual international art camp for graduate students. He has exhibited extensively in Europe, USA, and Singapore since 1993; among the major exhibitions, was most notably the Biennale of Sydney in 2006. He has participated in numerous symposiums and art workshops worldwide, and acted as visiting professor at Musashino Art University in Japan, Sabanci University in Turkey, and University of Washington School of Art + Art History + Design, USA. He is Adjunct Professor at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He was awarded the *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government in 2011, and Singapore's *Cultural Medallion for Visual Arts* in 2012. In 2020, he was awarded the National Art Award, Serbia.

Dr Venka Purushothaman (Singapore) is an art writer, academic and arts and cultural manager. He is currently Provost at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

Susie Wong (Singapore) is an art writer, curator and artist. She has contributed to several publications in Singapore: she was a regular art reviewer and art feature writer for the arts in Singapore: in the 1990s for *The Straits Times*, *Life!* Singapore; *The Arts Magazine* (The Esplanade); 1990s to 2010s for *ID* (Singapore), and *d+a* (Singapore) on art, architecture and design. She has also written several artists' monographs, and had contributed essays in publications such as *Southeast Asia Today* (Roeder, 1995); *Liu Kang: Colourful Modernist* (National Gallery Singapore, 2011); and *Histories, Practices, Interventions* (Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2016).

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