

Annual Art Journal 2022

# ISSUE 11 EMERGENCY



**Cover Image**

Dušan Petričić, *Emergency*, 2022, pen and ink, coloured in photoshop.



ISSUE is an international peer-reviewed art journal focused on exploring issues in contemporary art and culture. This annual publication is an inter- and trans-disciplinary journal that carries a curated set of scholarly articles, essays, interviews and exhibitions on disciplines ranging from contemporary art, design, film, media, performance and cultures.

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Goran Vojnović

Zaki Razak

*The Editors and Editorial Board thank all reviewers for their thoughtful and helpful comments and feedback to the contributors.*



*Introduction*

**Introduction**

Venka Purushothaman

01

*Exhibition*

**Haunted by Catastrophe**

Ksenia Jakobson

*Featuring artists* Yevgenia Belorusets, Bombily Group, GLUKLYA/Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya, Nikita Kadan, Dana Kavelina, Lesia Khomenko, Matvei Krylov, Victoria Lomasko, Marina Naprushkina, Non-Governmental Control Commission, Pasha 183, Mykola Ridnyi, Mikhail Tolmachev, Oleksandr Volodarsky.

03

*Essays*

**All That We Saw**

Amitesh Grover

67

**Archiving Emergency: A photo-essay on engaging hidden emergencies through woodcuts and others**

Chen Yun

75

**Rising From The Flow**

Mahsa Aleph

95

**Emergency Times...**

Zaki Razak

103

**Time comes when there is no more time: We need the language of emergency**

Goran Vojnović

113

*Conversation*

**Art and Emergency**

ISSUE editor, Venka Purushothaman in conversation with artists Vincent Leow, Pratchaya Phinthong, Milenko Prvački.

125

*Contributors' Bios*

139



## Introduction

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Since 2020, ISSUE has had a focused response to the crisis of humanity brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic. A polyptych of four volumes was organised. *Viral Mobilities* (Vol.09, 2020) focused on the Anthropocene as a “virus-vectorised community and economy.” This was followed by two unique volumes dedicated to art and performance. *Tropical Lab* (Vol.10, 2021) studied the impact of the pandemic on artist residencies and mobilities with a close study of *Tropical Lab*—an international art camp. *Arrhythmia* (Special Volume, 2022) looked at the impact and potentiality of isolation and determination, and severe implications for performance-making and embodied communal and social practices.

Vol.11 of ISSUE, themed *Emergency* forms the fourth dimension of the polyptych.

As a contemporary idea, an emergency is primarily borne out by sudden medicalised ruptures to the human body, severe political fractures to the body politic of society, and regular breaks to temporally attend to matters with a sense of immediacy and urgency. These ritualised signifiers form the basis on which one can help ascertain the current station of society. Humanity currently faces a pandemic, eviscerated by an increasingly simultaneous flow of newer emergencies from new and renewed diseases, ritualised lockdowns, political and memory wars, identity and equity battles, food security and supply chain blockages, climate changes, rise in the cost of living, etc.

Etymologically, words such as merge, emerge, emergence, emergency, immerse and submerge draw their primordial reference from classical Latin's *emergere* (to rise, bring to light). To bring to light (as Zaki Razak's essay in this volume alludes) is an integral, if not existential, consideration for artistic practices. Through careful enquiries—scanned through past and current environments—art has been a beacon to proffer ways of re-thinking the world. However, with the increasingly shrinking mind-space in an information and social media-led world, artistic considerations are crowded with an urgent need to respond to everyday concerns besides pandemics, new nationalisms or environmental concerns.

This volume is significant in that artists and curators reflect critically to real-time issues. Ksenia Jakobson (Russia) curates Russian and Ukrainian artists in a first-ever book exhibition reflecting on resistance and artist expressions in an ongoing memory war. Chen Yun's (China) lived experience during Shanghai's 2021-2022 infamous lockdowns, form the backdrop of her photo-essay on artist response to the pandemic and its associated crisis management practices. As Amitesh Grover's (India) allegorical essay draws attention to meta-fictional disappearance of images, Mahsa Aleph (Iran) reconstitutes installations on Iranian memory terrain. Zaki Razak (Singapore) and Goran Vojnovic (Slovenia) look inward to speak from a space within—within their unique everyday concerns while dealing with the pandemic. A conversation between three Southeast Asia-based artists provides an insight into the core concerns of being an artist today.

These contributions provide us with a way forward as to how to 'speak' to art and its new emergence.

# HAUNTED BY CATASTROPHE

Curated by Ksenia Jakobson

The catastrophic shock awakens an acute awareness of the past. It triggers an understanding, albeit belated, of the linear order of events leading up to the calamity. What before was barely legible now reads loud and clear. Yet again, Walter Benjamin's argument stands—events of the past gain their historical meaning retrospectively.<sup>1</sup> And yet, every time such a moment of catastrophic clarity arrives, it comes as a surprise. As if suffering from a peculiar type of collective memory disorder, we are unable to make sense of the past. Long-term memory remains intact, but the recent past is not registered. Unable to produce new memories, we end up living in an endless now. Stuck in an infinite loop, we are doomed to repeat the past, and unable to imagine the future.

Back in the 1980s, Frederic Jameson characterised postmodernism by this very kind of historical amnesia.<sup>2</sup> The postmodern subject, claimed Jameson, had lost their sense of linear temporality—the past, present, and future were replaced by a “series of pure and unrelated presents in time.”<sup>3</sup> With no cultural forms capable of articulating the present, the endless now starts to resemble a composite in which the present is saturated with the past to the extent that it almost feels right. But it doesn't feel right. Amid countless catastrophes layering upon one another, the endless now has slowly become an “end times.”<sup>4</sup> For only today is guaranteed, never tomorrow—as Günther Anders once put it, speaking of the doctrine of mutually assured destruction.

Our task today is to fight this selective amnesia—to try to remember that the future was once possible. Perhaps it will soon be again. Since with each catastrophe comes the potential for historical rupture, the subversion of the order of things.<sup>5</sup> Moments of regression hold a redemptive potential to reveal the contingency of historical order, and to open up space for new social configurations to emerge.



With this potential comes a demand—that the society that created the catastrophe progresses beyond it. And for that to happen, we will need to start remembering, learning, and mourning. We are haunted by the unprocessed trauma of the Soviet catastrophe. In turn, this trauma triggers compulsive repetition: “If the suffering is not remembered, it will be repeated. If the loss is not recognised, it threatens to return.”<sup>6</sup>

And it is back. We failed to do the work, to remember and to mourn, and today amidst the catastrophe brought on by Putin’s Neo-imperialist regime, we cannot afford to fail again. Only the impulsion to remember can overcome the compulsion to repeat.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the Concept of History

<sup>2</sup> *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 27

<sup>4</sup> Anders, “End-Times and the End of Time”

<sup>5</sup> Diner 9

<sup>6</sup> Etkind 16

<sup>7</sup> Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*

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Nikita Kadan

*Pogrom*

2016–2017

charcoal, wash, paper

Courtesy the artist and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN - Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie)















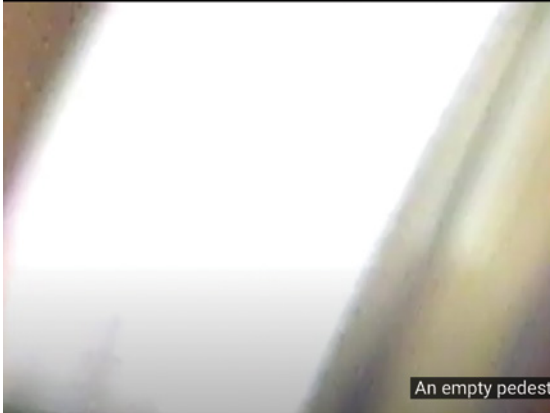
Dana Kavelina

*There are no Monuments to Monuments*

2021

2-channel video, 34:35min in colour, sound.

Courtesy the artist



An empty pedestal is a bad omen.





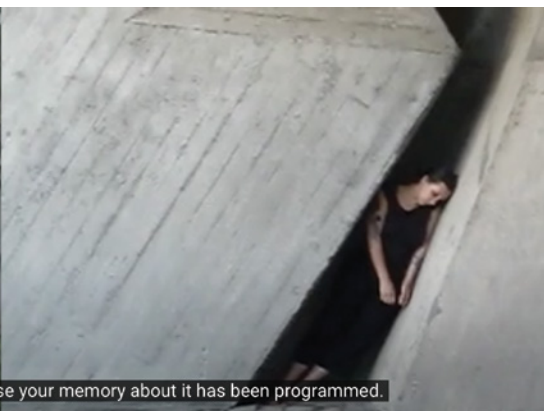
You wake up in the morning, and you feel that your memory is somehow false, that something is wrong.



The streets have been renamed, the branches of the trees are out of place, the monuments have new faces, and you might have a new face too.



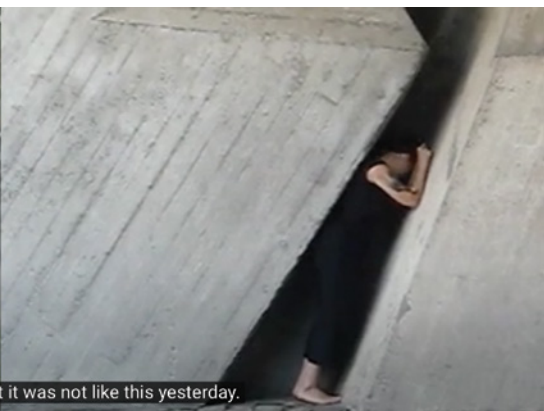
Everything looks familiar, but this is only because your memory about it has been programmed.



You seem to know how to manage living in this world, you find the right path, slippers under the bed, the shop is where it's supposed to be and all that,



but you can't help but feel that it was not like this yesterday.



The catastrophes you remember, of which you know, give off some kind of unnatural forms;







they are somewhat immature and primitive.



As if no one had grieved about them yet.



Your life is as if it was not lived right and not lived by you.



And it really might not have been lived by you, you just never knew about it;

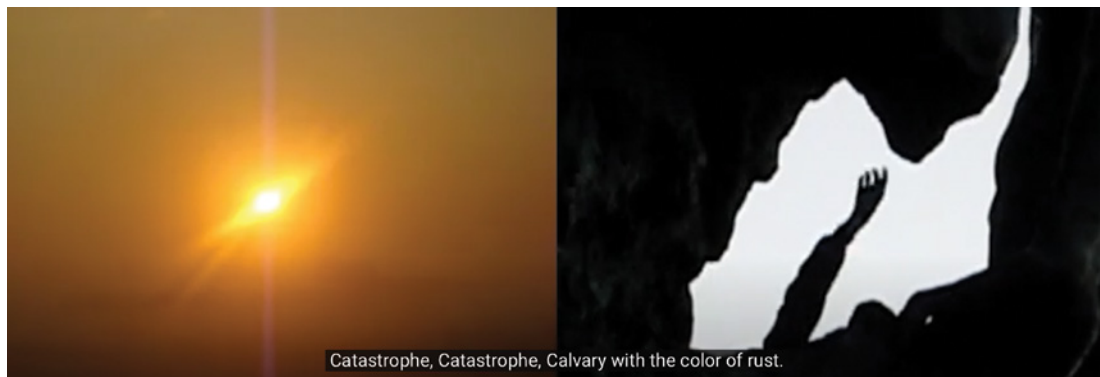


you will be forced to celebrate the feats that actually brought nothing but misfortune.



You'll have to bring flowers to the grave of the unknown soldier, who never really died.





Catastrophe, Catastrophe, Calvary with the color of rust.





Don't eat my sisters, I command



Don't hit me in the teeth, I demand.



Leave now you must.



Mikhail Tolmachev

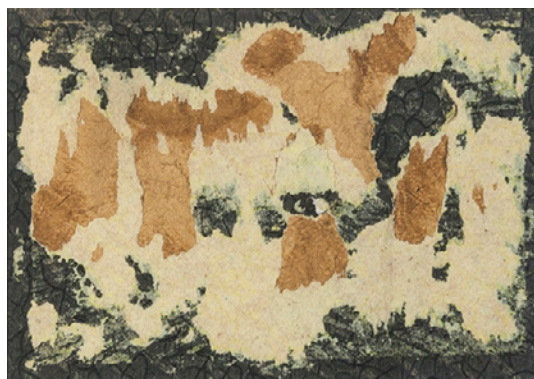
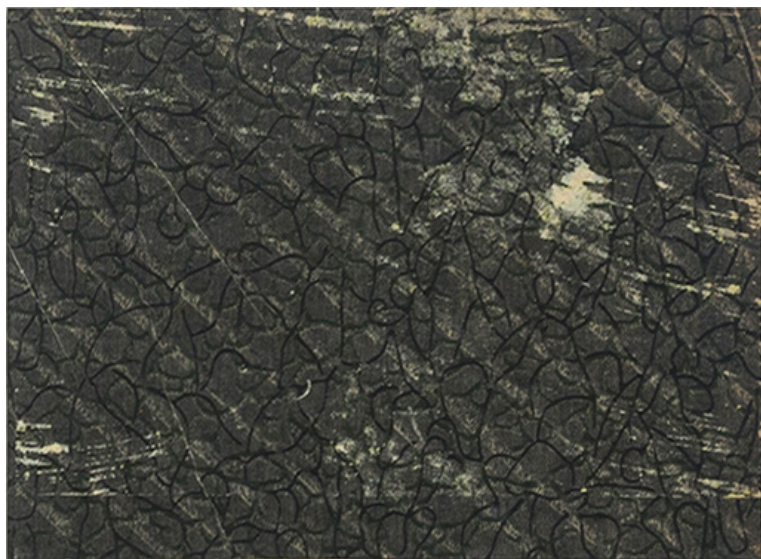
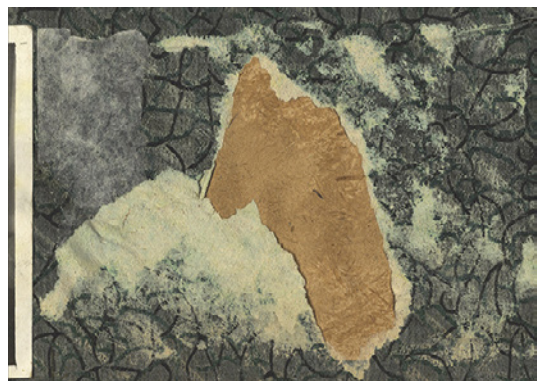
*Pact of Silence*

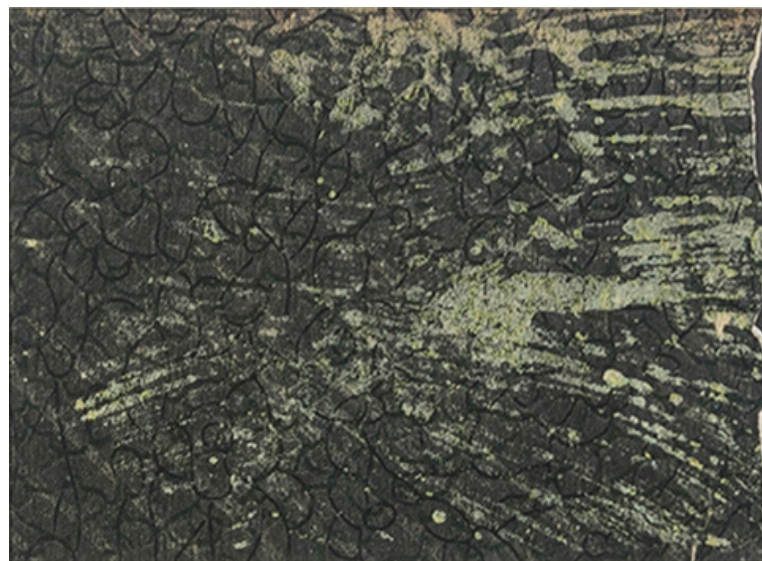
2016

22 c-prints

7-channel IR sound-installation

Courtesy the artist





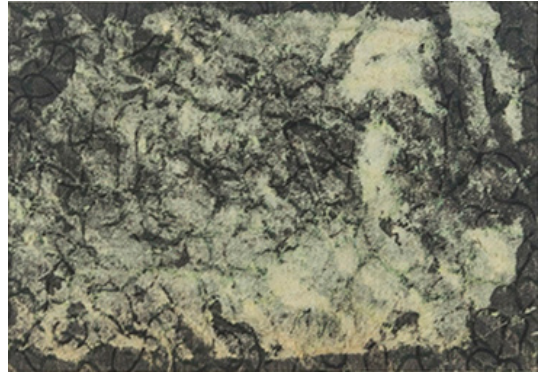




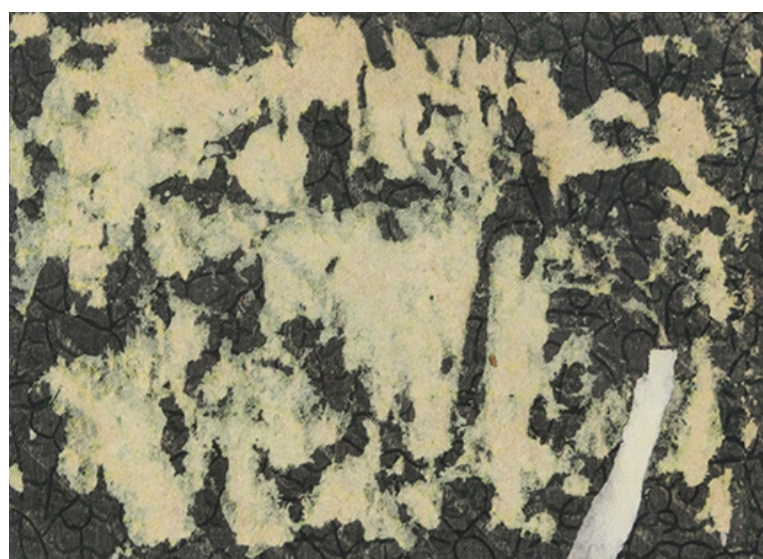
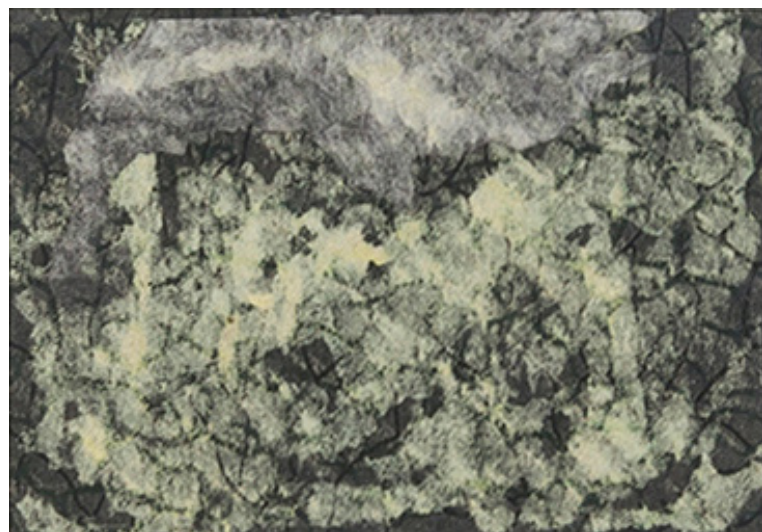


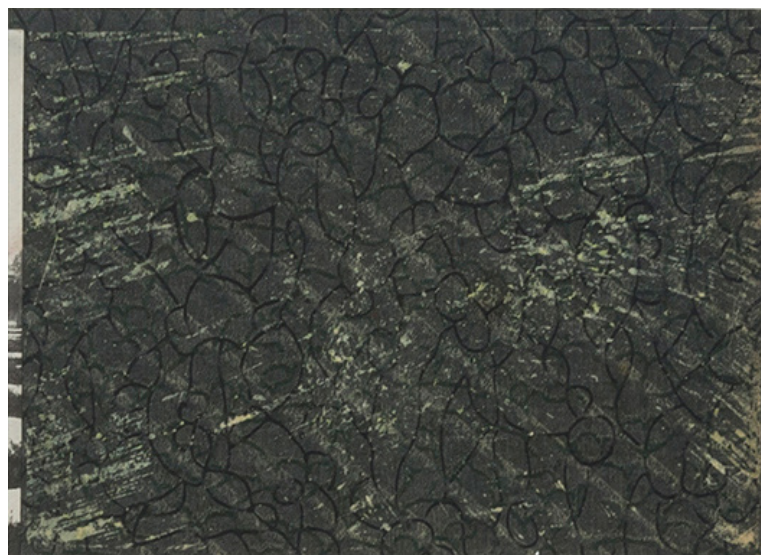
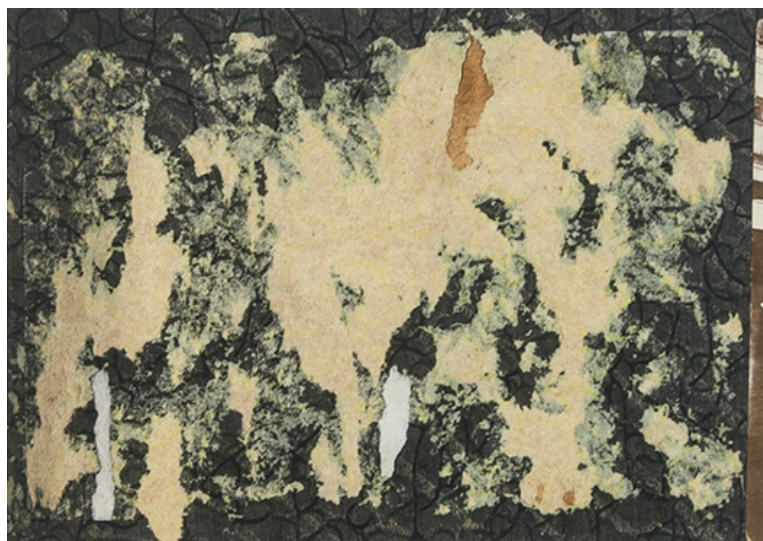




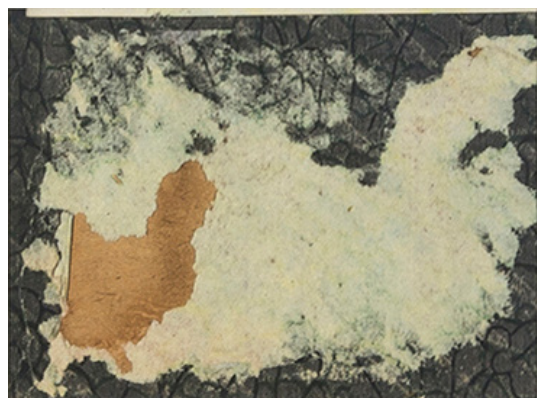


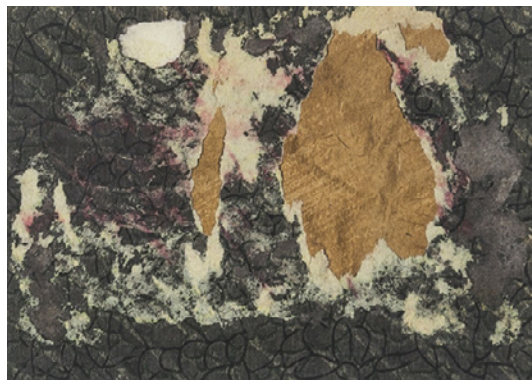
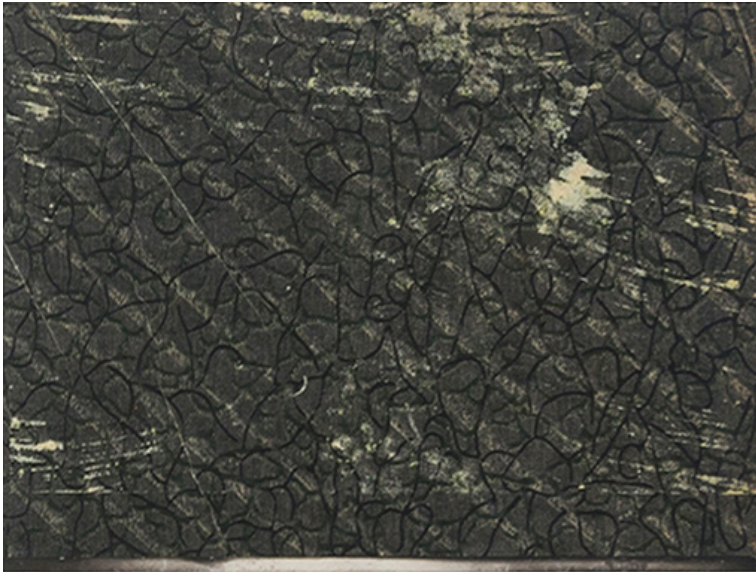
















Mykola Ridnyi

*Blind Spot*

2014–2015

acrylic spray on c-print

42 x 59.4 cm each (8 of a series of 20 works)

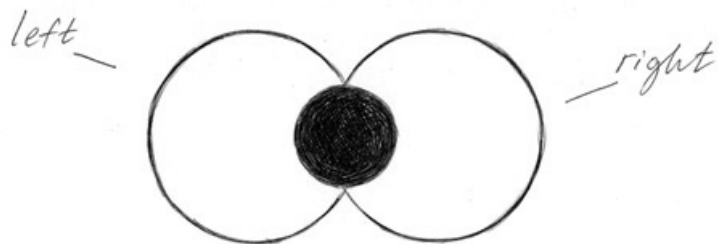
pen on paper

21 x 29.7 cm each (2 of a series of 4 drawings)

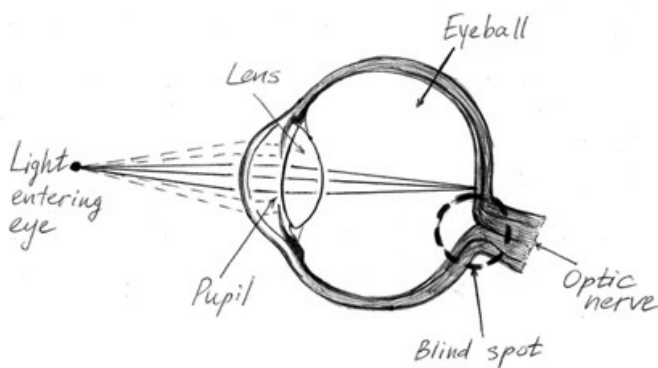
Courtesy the artist







A blind spot, scotoma, is an obscuration of the visual field. A scotoma (Greek σκότος / skótos, darkness; plural: scotomas, scotomata) is an area of partial alteration in the field of vision consisting of a partially diminished or entirely degenerated visual acuity that is surrounded by a field of normal - or relatively well-preserved - vision.

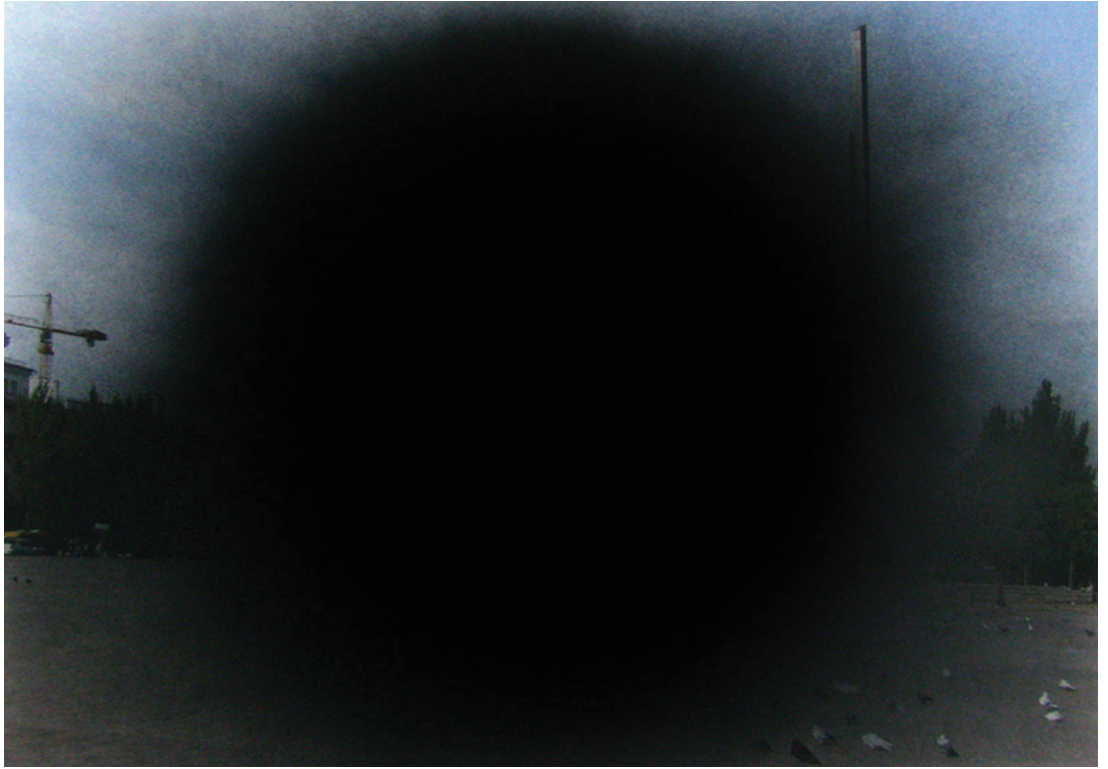


Every normal mammalian eye has a scotoma in its field of vision, usually termed its blind spot. This is a location with no photoreceptor cells, where the retinal ganglion cell axons that compose the optic nerve exit the retina. There is no direct conscious awareness of visual scotomas. They are simply regions of reduced information within the visual field. Rather than recognizing an incomplete image, patients with scotomas report that things "disappear" on them.











GLUKLYA /Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya

*Clothes for the demonstration against false election of Vladimir Putin*

2011–2015

textile, handwriting, wood

Courtesy the artist and AKINCI, Amsterdam,

Photo: Alessandra Chemollo; Courtesy of la Biennale di Venezia, with the support of V-A-C Foundation, Moscow









Lesia Khomenko

*After the End*

2015

A series of watercolours in box-frames under milk glass

Courtesy the artist





















In December 2021, amidst yet another wave of political repressions, Russia's Supreme Court ordered the closure of Memorial International—Russia's oldest human rights group, founded in the late 1980s to document and study political repressions of the Soviet Union and present-day Russia. The decree was carried out under the “foreign agent” legislation, which indiscriminately targets organisations and individuals seen as critical of the government.

In the fall of 2011, the Medialmpact International Festival of Activist Art took place in Moscow as a special project of the IV Moscow International Biennale of Contemporary Art. The group exhibition, public lectures, and discussions had gathered a great number of local and international artists and activists. Performances and artistic interventions spilled out into the streets and public spaces of Russia's capital. Just a few months later, the same streets had witnessed some of the biggest protests in Moscow since the 1990s.

I happen to have the catalogue of the Medialmpact festival, which I had conveniently ‘forgotten’ to return after borrowing it in 2013 from the St. Petersburg office of an international arts organisation I was working at at the time, thankfully, amid the frenzy of a “foreign agent” inspection, no one noticed that catalogue had gone missing. Flipping through it now in 2022, as the Russian army is bombing Ukrainian cities, as people in Russia are being arrested for even a slight suspicion of protest activity, to see the documentation of an activist art festival taking place in Moscow feels bizarre, almost unbelievable.

On the following pages are reminders of the recent past, when for a brief moment it felt like another future was possible, and perhaps soon it will be again.



Non-Governmental Control Commission, *Vote Against All*, 1998

Photograph

Courtesy the artist

Source: [http://osmopolis.ru/protiv\\_vseh/gallery/a\\_138](http://osmopolis.ru/protiv_vseh/gallery/a_138)



The group's first work—the most ambitious in the history of Moscow Actionism—was Barricade on Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street,

Non-Governmental Control Commission, *Barricade*, 1998

Documentary film (released in 2015)

Courtesy of Russian Art Archive Network (RAAN)

Source: <https://russianartarchive.net/en/catalogue/document/V1429>

# the convincing victory

## two stories on what really happened

Национально-патристический центр  
www.office-antipropaganda.com

Office for Anti-Propaganda

BELARUS TODAY

May 2011

25.01.2011

Muammar Gaddafi's private Jet Dassault Falcon 900EX performed a charter flight from Tripoli to Minsk and back

The governments of Belarus and Lithuania didn't confirm this information.



Lukashenko sells weapons to Gaddafi, who uses them to kill his population with it. Lukashenko is a threat not only to his people but also to the world.



Natalia Katsina, director of the Free Theater

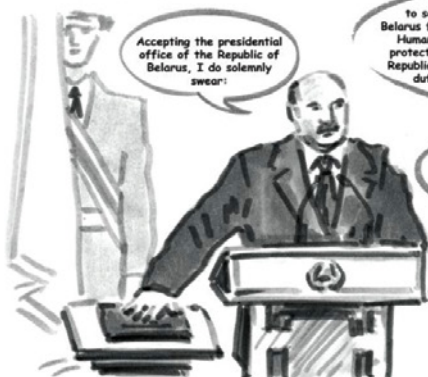
I came to you down the „Axis of Good“



Libya

21.01.2011

Inauguration of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko



Accepting the presidential office of the Republic of Belarus, I do solemnly swear:

to serve the People of the Republic of Belarus faithfully, to respect and preserve Human Rights and Liberties, to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, to execute the assigned duties faithfully and conscientiously

The Belarusian nation is confidently following the path chosen by the people. Let God strengthen and enlighten You, greatly respected Alexander Grigor'evich, in your high public service



Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk Filaret



I have intel, from outside Libya, that there are pilots from Serbia and Ukraine. I can not however confirm this but I believe that they are true and accurate.



Is this information accurate?



Marina Naprushkina, *The Convincing Victory: two stories on what really happened*, May 2011  
Newspaper  
Courtesy the artist

Note:

The 12 pages of the continued political comics illustrate how the situation unfolded in Belarus after the presidential elections in December 2010. All the latest developments—i.e. political repressions, balance-of-payments and economic crises, a bomb attack in Minsk subway, etc.—are described from two viewpoints: the first one shows how they are interpreted by the state propaganda machine, the other presents information taken from independent mass media and blogs.





Oleksandr Volodarsky, *Chemistry*, 2013

Book

Courtesy the artist

Note:

*Chemistry* is a collection of writings and drawings that the anarchist Oleksandr Volodarsky kept while serving time in a penal colony.





Yevgenia Belorusets, *Mobilisation*, 2012

Video, photographs, text

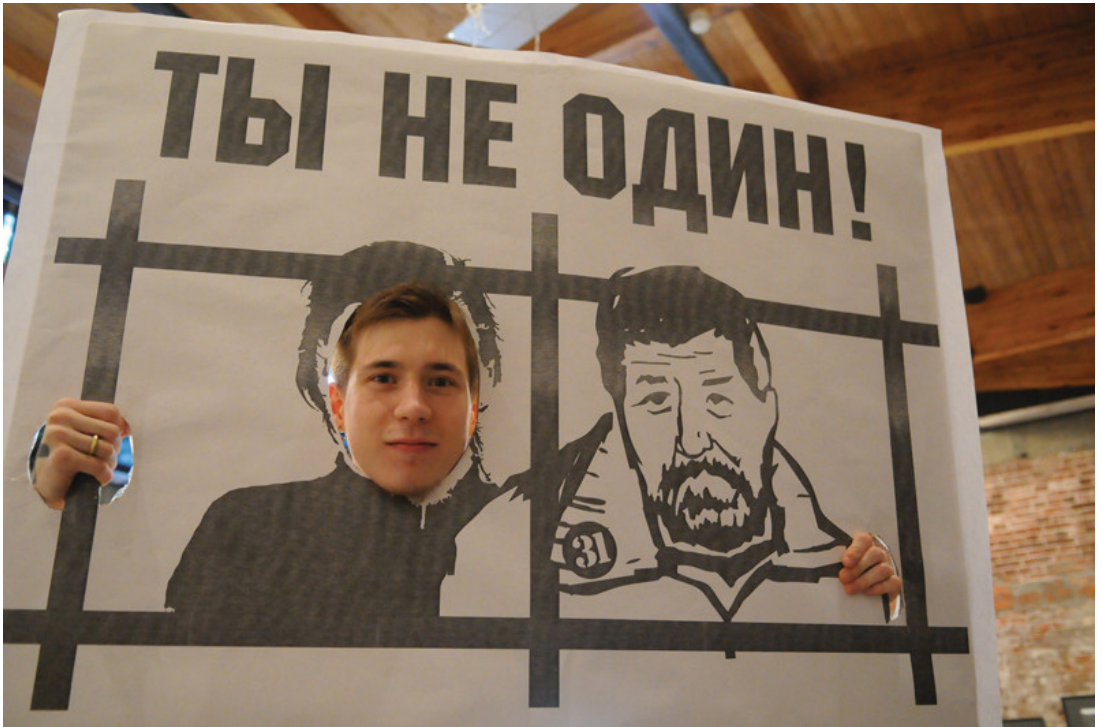
Courtesy the artist

Source: <https://belorusets.com/work/video-mobilisation>

Note:

"Whenever I've taken part in poorly attended protests, passers-by and accidental spectators have always looked on with undisguised surprise. At some point, it struck me that the demonstration's subject and goals were meaningless—whether it was about education, labour laws, or brutal violations of human rights.

We invited people enjoying a day off in the centre of Kyiv to take part in a brief improvised protest, which was recorded in stills and on video cameras. The protests were held in advance of legal proceedings to determine the fate of two illegally imprisoned social activist-artists, Dmitry Solopov and Alexander Volodarsky. Participants were invited to speak out in defense of the two activists, against anti-refugee discrimination, against the violation of prisoners' rights, or against the criminalisation of political activism and imprisonment for minor offenses. They were offered several banners to choose from; they were also allowed to turn their backs to the camera or hide their faces. For the majority of participants, this was the first protest of their lives. Lots of people refused to take part, while a few of those who agreed only decided to take a stand on the condition that their faces could remain hidden behind the banners. In this case, perhaps the only reliable thing was the banner they held in their hands—like the last bastion, preserving them from the dangers of political life." Yevgenia Belorusets



Matvei Krylov, *You are not Alone*, 2011

Cut-out board

Courtesy the artist

Note:

This cut-out board was originally designed for the exhibition *Mokhnatkin* (Artists supporting Sergey Mokhnatkin) in Sakharov Center. Russian artists had collectively organised a number of exhibitions, happenings, and Internet campaigns in support of the political prisoner *Sergey Mokhnatkin* who became an accidental victim of a long-lasting political struggle between the authorities and the opposition.



Victoria Lomasko, *Chronicles of Resistance*, 2011

Ink on paper

Courtesy the artist, Copyright the artist

Note:

"2012 was marked by heavily attended protests by the Russian opposition. For the first time since the early 1990s, the protest movement in Russia attracted worldwide attention. Many people anticipated an "orange" revolution... Beginning with the elections to the State Duma, on 4 December 2011, until November 2012, I kept a graphic 'chronicle of resistance' in which I made on-the-spot sketches of all important protest-related events. I will try now to recall and describe the protests, in which I was involved as a rank-and-file albeit regular participant." Victoria Lomasko



Bombily Group, *We don't know what we want*, 2008

Photo documentation of performance

Courtesy of Vlad Chizhenkov archive and Garage Archive Collection

Source: <https://russianartarchive.net/en/catalogue/document/F5o78>

Note:

On May 1 2007—International Labour (Workers) Day, Bombily blocked Bolshaya Polyanka Street in Moscow with a six-metre slogan "We don't know what we want." Soon the group was detained by the police, and subsequently, the photo documentation was destroyed. The performance was reenacted in the Tushino tunnel and on Ivanovskoye highway on July 12, 2008. The action was held with the participation of the art group Voyna and others.





Pasha 183, *True to the Truth 19.08.91 Reminder*, 2011

Screenshot documentation by author of life-size stickers of riot police over doors of Moscow metro station.

Source: <http://183art.ru/putch/putch.htm>

Note:

*In True to the Truth 19.08.91 Reminder*, the heavy swinging doors of the Krasnye Vorota metro station were covered with life-sized stickers of "OMON"—the Russian riot police. The title alludes to the 1991 Soviet failed coup *d'état* attempt by hardliners of the Soviet Union's Communist Party to forcibly seize control of the country from Mikhail Gorbachev.

## Artists' Bios

**Yevgenia Belorusets** (b.1980, Ukraine) is a photographer and writer. She is the co-founder of *Prostory*, a journal for literature, art and politics, and a member of the interdisciplinary curatorial group, HudRada. Her works move at the intersections of art, literature, journalism and social activism, between document and fiction. Her artistic method was established in her long-term projects such as *Gogol Street 32*, which portrays the residents of a communal apartment building engaged in their daily activities in a slowly decaying living environment. Another is the project *Victories of the Defeated* which comprised of a series of documentary photographs, texts and interviews, and was dedicated to the coal miner communities which continues to exist in Eastern Ukraine on the very edge of military conflict. To accomplish this work Yevgenia Belorusets visited cities near and in the war zone of Donbas Region in Ukraine between 2014 and 2017.

Bombily Group is an art collective created by the artist and curator Anton Nikolaev in 2004. Members include Anton "Madman" Nikolaev and Alexander "Superhero" Rossikhin, former members of Oleg Kulik's studio. The name "Bombily" refers to a colloquial name for a private cab driver engaged in illegal taxi services.

**GLUKLYA / Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya** (b. 1969, former Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, Russia) lives and works in St. Petersburg and Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Considered as one of the pioneers of Russian Performance, she co-founded the artist collective The Factory of Found Clothes (FFC) using conceptualised clothes as a tool to build a connection between art and everyday life and the Chto Delat Group, of which she has been an active member since 2003. In 2012, FFC was reformulated into The Utopian Unemployment Union, an inclusive project uniting art, social science, and progressive pedagogy, giving people with all kinds of social backgrounds the opportunity to make art together with the help of artist method embracing the Human Fragility. In 2017, Gluklya passionately threw herself into the research of the Integration Politics and its implications for newcomers, and for this purpose, rented a studio at the former prison Bijlmer Bajes in Amsterdam. The long-term project was concluded with the performative demonstration *Carnival of Oppressed Feelings* on 28 October, 2017, and presented in *Positions #4* at the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) in 2018-2019. Gluklya's work *Clothes for Demonstration Against False Election of Vladimir Putin* has been presented at the 56th Venice Biennale of Art (*la Biennale di Venezia*) in *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor (2015).

**Nikita Kadan** (b. 1982, Kyiv, Ukraine) is a visual artist and activist who creates paintings, graphic works and installations. His pieces, often developed in collaboration with representatives of other fields (architects, sociologists, human rights activists), address collective memory and historical politics. He is a co-founder of the artistic group R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space), established during the Orange Revolution, and the curatorial-artistic collective HudRada.

**Dana Kavelina** (b. 1995, Melitopol, Ukraine) is an artist and filmmaker. She graduated from the Department of Graphics at the National Technical University of Ukraine (Kyiv). Her works have been exhibited at the Kmytiv Museum, Closer Art Center (Kyiv), and Sakharov Center (Moscow). She has received awards from the Odesa International Film Festival and KROK International Animated Film Festival.

**Lesia Khomenko** (b. 1980, Kyiv, Ukraine) is a multidisciplinary artist that reconsiders the role of a painting medium and constructs complex critical statements around it. In her practice, Khomenko deconstructs narrative images and transforms paintings into objects, installations, performances, or videos. Her interest lies in comparing history and myths, revealing tools of visual manipulation. She is co-founder of R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) since 2004 and since 2008, a member of the curatorial group HudRada, a self-educational community based on interdisciplinary cooperation. She is a tutor, and a programme director of Contemporary Art at Kyiv Academy of Media Arts.

**Matvei Krylov** (b. 1989 in Orenburg region, Russia) is a political activist and actionist artist. He works with poetry protest evenings and organised dissident traditions like *Mayakovsky Readings*, as part of his engagement with political issues. He had earned time in Buturskaya Prison, as well as the Alternative Prize of Activist Art.



**Victoria Lomasko** (b. 1978, Serpukhov, Russia). Drawing on Russian traditions of documentary graphic art, Victoria Lomasko explores contemporary Russian society, particularly the inner workings of the country's diverse subcultures, such as Russian Orthodox believers, LGBT activists, migrant workers, sex workers, and collective farm workers in the provinces. Her work has appeared in *Art in America*, *The Guardian*, *GQ* and *The New Yorker* and in exhibitions globally, including at Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria; Garage Museum, Moscow, Russia; GRAD at Somerset House, London, UK; and the Cartoonmuseum Basel, Switzerland.

**Marina Naprushkina** (b. 1981, Minsk, Belarus) is a political feminist artist and activist. Her diverse artistic practice includes video, performance, drawings, installation, and text. Her work engages with current political and social issues. Naprushkina works mainly outside of institutional spaces, in cooperation with communities and activist organisations. She focuses on creating new formats, structures, and organisations that are based on the capabilities of self-organisation. In 2007, Naprushkina founded the Office for Anti-Propaganda that concentrates on power structures in nation-states, often making use of nonfiction material such as propaganda issued by governmental institutions. Starting as an archive on political propaganda, the "Office" drifted to a political platform. In cooperation with activists and cultural makers, Office for Anti-Propaganda launches and supports political campaigns, social projects, publishes underground newspapers.

**Non-Governmental Control Commission** was founded by Anatoly Osmolovsky in 1989. Anatoly Osmolovsky (b. 1969, Moscow) lives and works in Moscow. He is an artist, theorist, curator, teacher, and one of the founders of Moscow Actionism. From 1990 to 1992, he was leader of the group E.T.A. Movement (Expropriation of the Territory of Art). In 1992, he became editor-in-chief of the journal *Radek*. In 1993, he formed the group Nezesüdik and in the late 1990s, he created the group Non-Governmental Control Commission. In 2011, he founded the journal *Base* and the institute of the same name.

**Pasha 183** (1983–2013, Moscow) also known as Pavel 183, was a Russian graffiti artist based in Moscow. His work often carried social critically engaged messages over public structures, and he was best known for his grayscale photorealist spray painting.

**Mykola Ridnyi** (b. 1985, Kharkiv, Ukraine) lives and works in Kyiv, Ukraine. He graduated in 2008 from the National Academy of design and arts in Kharkiv, where he got his MA degree in sculpture studies. Ridnyi combines different artistic activities: he is an artist and filmmaker, curator and author of essays on art and politics. He is a founding member of the SOSka group, an art collective based in Kharkiv in 2005. The same year he co-founded the SOSka gallery-lab, an artist-run-space in an abandoned house in a centre of Kharkiv. Under Ridnyi's lead, the gallery-lab was instrumental in the developing the artistic scene in the region before it closed in 2012. He curated a number of international exhibitions in Ukraine, among them *After the Victory* (CCA Yermilov centre, Kharkiv, 2014); *New History* (Kharkiv museum of art, 2009); and others. Since 2017 Ridnyi is co-editor of *Prostory*, an online magazine about visual art, literature and society. In 2019 he curated *Armed and Dangerous*, a multimedia platform that brought together video artists and experimental film directors in Ukraine. Ridnyi works across media ranging from early collective actions in public space to the amalgam of site-specific installations and sculpture, photography and moving image which constitute the current focus of his practice. In recent films he experiments with nonlinear montage, collage of documentary and fiction. His way of reflection social and political reality draws on the contrast between fragility and resilience of individual stories and collective histories. His works are in the permanent public collections of Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Ludwig Museum in Budapest, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Arsenal City Gallery in Bialystok, V-A-C foundation in Moscow and others.

**Mikhail Tolmachev** (b.1983, Moscow) is a visual artist who investigates alternative documentary practices. He is looking for aesthetic strategies to explore various constructions of reality and how they form temporality, space and agency. With installations, photo etchings, and spatial interventions he examines the intersections of realism and imagination, technology and territory. Mikhail studied documentary photography in Moscow and Media Arts in the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig. For his work he extensively collaborates with architects, writers, sound-engineers, poets and historians. Mikhail's work was presented internationally, at the Kyiv Biennial, Tate Modern, Moscow Biennial, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, MUSA Vienna and Kunstverein Karlsruhe amongst others. He is based in Moscow and Leipzig.

**Oleksandr Volodarsky** (b. 1987) is a Ukrainian left-libertarian political activist, publicist, performance artist, and blogger. In the past, he was a member of the independent student union Direct Action, the Autonomous Workers' Union, and the All-Ukrainian anarchist association called the Libertarian Coordination. He is a programmer by profession. From 2002 to 2009 he studied in Germany and since November 2009 he has lived and worked in Kyiv.



## All That We Saw

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It was sometime last year that the news of a mysterious event began to trickle in. By early this year, it had become a topic of intense discussion amongst photographers, archivists, hobbyists, and almost everyone who kept and looked after vintage photographs. Very soon, it became obvious that what had been predicted in fictional stories, in Sci-fi that dealt with the existence and proliferation of low tech and analogue pasts, was shockingly precise and prescient. Images were beginning to disappear.

No one quite knew exactly when, or how, it began. But one after another, news of mysteriously vanishing photographs appeared on social media. Old photographs began to show bizarre signs of erasure before the new ones did. At first, we dismissed it as a hoax; as yet another cheap stunt by the conspiracy-loving fringe to gain traction online. But soon, big tech and media began to report the inexplicable event that started somewhere in a small, quiet town, and soon spread across territories and borders across the world, like a virus.

From archives across the world, stacks of newspapers, the walls of galleries and museums, in warehouses, personal albums and smartphones, photos had slowly and permanently begun to vanish. Their ink, their colour, their imprint had begun to evaporate, and it left no trace behind. Photos were becoming irretrievable, somehow. The hanging frames were getting emptier; albums were turning despairingly pale; digital files were turning corrupt. There seemed to be no order, nor pattern to this inscrutable event. Within months, this mysterious contamination had spread across all continents, leaving millions of frames barren, walls empty, folders vacant, boards bare, exposing what the people in the photographs had masked with their presence—furniture, trees, curtains, fruits, sky, appliances, waterfall, wires, mountains, billboards, rain, the horizon.

This devastating phenomenon unleashed mass hysteria and public chaos, leaving millions in shock, distress, and disbelief. There were those who turned to scientists to explain the riddle of this disappearance, while hoards of people turned to shamans, priests, and religious books for answers. People found it difficult to stop mourning this incredible and unprecedented loss—of the past, of all times imaginable. The photo of an inconsolable young girl refusing to let go from her arms an empty, bare photo-frame is arguably the very last image the world saw. And that was the end of it—all gone!

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that it started as a tiny speck of contamination in the digital wild before it passed through hundreds of millions of computers and smartphones trailing havoc upon being downloaded into our systems, our devices. At the time of writing this, almost all of the 21.5 billion interconnected devices are infected by this virus. Whether it is a virus or not is not known yet, but if it is, its total weight, all of it circulating and residing on our devices across the world, could be collected to make a mound of dust to keep in no more than the palm of my hand. It didn't make anyone sick—thank God for that—but it brought in its wake another kind of illness, an illness for which we have no word, yet.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that the images were all damned to vanish from the start; they were meant to darken over time. Silver salt, asphalt, mercury, copper, all the plates and later, the pixels, carried the exact same annihilation date. Their expiry was encoded into the exquisiteness of every image, because, as some knew, light when molten into 'form' and 'shape,' frozen in a frame, was bound to burst into flames one day. And, that day was upon us. How are we to resolve the pain of love living in the absence of images? How are we to reconcile with the utter absurdity of our existence, in which we are now cursed to live, forever, in the terror of the present?

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that the ghosts of all the dead people, which lived in photographs, had longed for freedom. They had yearned to escape the visible level in which they had had the misfortune of being arrested in. It took them decades of struggle and labour to establish 'hearing routes' between photographs, an intricate web of listening threads, invisible to the naked eye, which helped them find common cause in their misery, and gather momentum to burst through the images together, all at once! Many people claimed that they witnessed an apparition when it happened: Spectre, a spirit, a shadow leaving the photograph in front of their eyes, freeing itself from its captivity. Not every figure appears to have left its picture in the same manner. Some took off screaming like a banshee leaving the slipstream of a speeding train; some bleached and got washed out; a few others pixellated into a block of colour before departing; others, melted and dripped away.

Why had the images disappeared?

In an ethnographic research done a few years after the phenomenon, it was found that people did not believe in the disappearance of images to be an aberration or a mystery. They saw the 'death of images' as a divine intervention, an automated reprieve requiring no explanation nor extensive investigation. Mechanisms of control like personal data, CCTV surveillance, biometrics identification, face-recognition, electronic frisking, device-searches and others frequently produced situations where anxieties would run high, rules would break, and violence could occur. The rules of circulation—where, how, and when to share images, or how to associate with them—were too elaborate and constantly shifting that people were bound to break them at some

point or the other. Most people had suffered from or witnessed “image-violence,” a term that had become commonplace for violence that was inflicted in, through, or as a consequence of images. This violence often took the form of beatings or other cruel bodily punishments.

Many reported that they had, at several points in their lifetimes, barely escaped death at the hands of the police, or sometimes a mob, because they couldn’t explain the presence of a certain image in their phone, in their house, or in their wallet. This nerve-wrecked society had actually produced a population which was no longer able to understand what an image was—no one was able to describe any image anymore, nor wished to for the fear of being beaten. By threatening people with death in this way, everyone had begun to deny the existence of images to escape this condition of a subjugated life. The society’s material infrastructure exacerbated this precarity of life. Image-violence was often administered at points of contact composed of a dense architecture of stationary and mobile establishments. Over time, public and private infrastructures began to align itself to further this kind of subjugation with highways, bridges, roads, streets, and airports becoming “dual-purpose” spaces of circulating images and bodies, and also of arresting images and bodies that did not align with each other. Until one day, all images disappeared, leaving no trace in data, no residue in the massive server farms that contained them. The image died—they tell it like a folktale—so people could continue living.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that a great dictator had ordered a restructuring of the world. In the new world, he wanted us all to begin again, afresh, from a clean, imageless start. A group of extremist vigilantes carried out a series of image-destructions, especially of photographs that displayed an “anti-patriotic spirit.” Enthusiastic crowds chanted and witnessed these burnings—they started with setting fire to many well-known photographs at public crossings and intersections, but later, and puzzlingly so, they continued to do it in the privateness of their homes as well. The largest of these bonfires occurred in a city not so far away, where an estimated 40,000 people gathered to hear a speech by a propaganda minister, who declared that the new shining world can become manifest only when the debris of the past is cleaned up. The response to these burnings was immediate and widespread. Gripped by fear, people began destroying all photographs in their possession without mercy or thought, and as they did so, they pretended—to each other and to themselves—that they had little volition in carrying out this brutal act of destruction. They were convinced that the photographs had caught a plague, and needed to be set aflame.

Why had the images disappeared?

Guards stationed outside a museum in my hometown shot dead the chief archivist of images one day. I did not witness the event, but I vividly remember how his death was described. He was a middle-aged, scraggy person with a sincere demeanour about him, but he suffered from a mental illness. His condition sometimes caused him visual hallucinations and other forms of sensory misperception, all of which brought with it acute pain. During moments when his pain would become unbearable, he would run out of his office and wander



the streets. The evening he was shot, he had walked deliriously and come unusually close to one of the guards stationed at the entrance of the museum.

No one had come to ask about his dead body up till late that night, so his body lay in the museum's morgue (assigned for mummies) unclaimed. The next morning, in news, we heard several accounts of the shooting. People were angry with the callous way in which the guard had shot him, but beyond privately simmering in impotent rage, no one knew what to do. Many indirectly blamed the archivist for not being able to find a cure of his hallucinations. A day later, when they re-opened the museum to public, they realised that the images had gone missing from its walls. The frames were there, hanging right where they had been all this while, only the images had gone missing from within them. Not one frame, whether up on the walls, or in the cellar downstairs, showed any image that it was meant to possess. The museum director called her colleagues in other museums across the city, and they all reported the same inexplicable incident—the collection of images had vanished overnight. Not stolen, not erased, not rubbed off, not burnt; images had become air. It was as if the walls, the windows, the doors were all in place, but the building of the museum itself had evaporated. No one knew how or where to begin looking for the collection that was worth millions. And this phenomenon gradually spread to all images that existed in the world. The body of the image archivist still lies unclaimed, though.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that the age of the Great Collapse is upon us. Photographs had retained a certain power that was no less than sorcery: Otherworldliness. A photograph made accessible that which was impossible to see with the naked eye—a technology of bringing the unconscious to the fore—and in doing so, brought uncountable worlds into existence, worlds that ought to have had been left, perhaps, undiscovered. The quantum spectrum of time—our time, in which we exist—had become overburdened with the presence of too many worlds (an eternity!), and this excess baggage needed to be shed, to be strewn across the space in the dark out there, be flung to other worlds and galaxies, where it might belong, in an effort to help this luggage find its rightful place in the universe, where it belonged—elsewhere. We needed to live lighter, in our being, on our planet, without the hope for eternity.

Why had the images disappeared?

Right before the image crisis, a group calling itself “Metaphor Army” had been holding weekly demonstrations in front of the State Theatre. The group's core initiators were also involved in a previous occupation of the Opera House in protests against the extensive use of screens, projections, painted curtains, and visual technology that had come to dominate culture. This radical new group continued to attract a mix of people including conspiracy theorists, subterfuge aficionados, and self-declared fascists. The demonstrations became increasingly aggressive as shows in the theatre continued with state-of-the-art infrastructure, attracting attendees in large numbers to the performing arts experiencing a resurgence after the pandemic. The demonstrators had ignored social distancing measures and even attacked members of

the press alleging that the coronavirus was a mere pretext, a scam to upend democracy, and to keep members of public glued to screens, to (fake) images of other people.

As the demonstrations in front of the state theatre gained momentum, the Metaphor Army started campaigning for an 'image-less world,' arguing that the current culture had become obsessed with "showing everything" (intimate acts like kissing, having sex to show passion; bareness of the body to show nudity; photo/statue of God to show the divine) leaving little to the imagination. "There was, it is to be said, just too much artistic freedom!" said the demonstrator's leader in his conclusive remarks in an interview. "Many people seem to have a deep yearning that someone will take them by the hand and lead them somewhere, where there is no need to see. A place as pure as the ancients had built; a sacred place where there is only light (but no images); a holy place where the only thing to see is to look within." This "mania of the middle-aged people" as the young began to describe it, led us to the rhetoric of the militant anti-imagers and other conspiracy theorists for whom every photographer was a criminal, every viewer a stray child who needed to be reined in. Young activists resisted the Metaphor Army all they could, but in the end, the elders won and managed to stamp out every image with their hardened religionism.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that an old woman who sits knitting on the moon had begun to chew on images one night. She ate them all, one after another, over a long night of darkness, stuffing her mouth, her belly, ingesting them with body fluids that had taken a millennium to build. And when she was done eating the last image, she self-combusted from the terrible intensity of light that a trillion images had contained in them. And since, moonlight has been nothing more than the light of all our pictures that are lost to us now, shining down back on us, every night.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that it was not the images that had disappeared, but our own sight. Somehow, we have all gone blind—the horror of it! This was a sickness of sight that had been waiting silently, showing little symptom, gnawing at the optic nerve, at its health, raising its pressure ever so slowly that we didn't notice, eventually to a degree that was abnormally high. It was not the images, but humankind that was the cause of its own blindness. The disappearance of images was only the beginning of this fateful affliction, the first stage of an outcome that will manifest as the infliction of total and utter darkness. Some remembered the wise words that were uttered once, long ago:

You have never looked enough  
upon that you ought to have looked  
upon. To have eyes, and not see  
our own peril? Eyes, they cannot see  
what truth hides in the world. Only  
when they are gone—the sea in your skull,  
it might see better;  
the true blank in your eye.

In the absence of the image, and worse, if we are indeed losing our sight progressively, how do we retain the power of seeing without being considered delusional by everyone around? If we are to survive in the future as a civilisation and as cultures, now is our moment to find ways to restore our 'real' sight, and in doing so, restore a future for the image. Because, if we don't, we wouldn't know how else to remember anything. And so, we must begin preparing for it. We must begin by reaching into the recesses of our collective and individual minds to inquire how photos take root, and call upon ourselves as witnesses of images, as mental archivists, as contemplative nodes in the memory of a collective, and as participants in the act of restoring the image.

(November 2021/June 2022)

This piece is an expansion of an essay originally written for the Chennai Photo Biennale Journal in December 2021.



Amitesh Grover, *All That We Saw*

27.94 x 27.94 cm

Photo Rag Paper, Ink, Wood, Glass





## Archiving Emergency:

A photo-essay on engaging hidden emergencies through woodcuts and others

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Emergencies, like most human phenomena, repeat themselves. Sometimes, they repeat in the same place in another time, or in another place at almost the same time. However, they also repeat themselves in an imperceptible form that essentially emerges out of the same but hidden structural mechanisms. When they do repeat or show up again, it may be shocking to those who do not recognise their earlier incarnations; maybe because such emergencies do not evoke sharp consciousness or memories of images or sounds in a daily life-flow—when time passes smoothly and individuals do not experience the time and space of this emergency collectively—thus the boundary of a daily emergency is limited to the personal space and do not travel across other domains. They are also not documented in a way to be remembered and recognised in the future as an emergency, or a memory of an emergency.

Emergencies in an urban setting like Shanghai, with a population of 250 million, bear all the above features.



The L-turn street corner of Duolun Road.

Photo by Chen Yun, 2005

On a sunny day in 2005, a young man sitting in a bench reading his mobile messages (in an era before smart phones) while a sculpture of the famous author Ding Ling (丁玲) sat next to him, reading a book.

For a term paper, I paid several visits to Duolun Road, a street in Hongkou District, in north Shanghai in the autumn of 2005. The street has been known as Duolun Road Cultural Celebrities Street since when I was in high school. This long title, though sounding a bit odd in English, makes good sense in Chinese and has been established over the years. In fact, the widening of this once narrow pass was a result of demolishing earlier houses and architectures. After the transformation, the street was made pedestrian-only and new sculptures of famous literary figures (or cultural celebrities) were set up to commemorate the left-wing literary movement once happened here in 1920s and 1930s.

Duolun Road (多伦路) was constructed in 1912. Its original name was Darroch Road (窦乐安路), after the British missionary John Darroch (1865-1941), who fled to China like many foreign missionaries in the early 20th century and later purchased this piece of land to attract investors and businesses. Although this road and its surrounding neighbourhood theoretically belonged to the Chinese settlement, it was built as one of those extra-settlement roads by the colonial government of Shanghai Municipal Council (1854 - 1943). As people could build houses without planning permissions, the road was soon filled with villas of exotic styles, in lanes paved by developers and businessmen.

The convenient location of this area and the relatively cheap cost of housing made it easier for a particular kind of writers and artists to live and work here. It is next to the major Japanese settlement in Shanghai (Japanese residents who had migrated to Shanghai continuously since 1870s) and was filled with numerous cinemas and publishing houses. The most well-known group is called The Chinese League of Left-wing Writers, a progressive literary organisation spearheaded by Lu Xun. It was by then an underground literary group, active between 1930 to 1935.

That summer of 2005 the street looked quiet and beautiful. It was by no means a busy street. In fact, it was much quieter than any of its narrow backstreets. In one of my chats with local residents, an old gentleman complained that the newly paved surface of Duolun Road made it extremely slippery for cyclists and pedestrians; one could simply stand at the iconic L turn of the street and witness them falling down during rainy days. Residents recall the old surface of this road, made of tiny pebbles and stones cast in mud, when falling raindrops over this surface added to the rhythm of traffic. People hardly fell down on Duolun Road in those days.

Eleven years later in 2016, Shanghai Biennale was curated for the first time in its 20 years of history by a non-Western international curator/group Raqs Media Collective (based in Delhi, India), and I was invited to join the curatorial team. I proposed to curate a project called 51 Personae, an off-site programme consisting of 51 events in the city of Shanghai based on the life experiences and potentials of ordinary people. An open call was announced on the *Labour's Daily* (the official newspaper of Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions) on 5 May, days after the International Labour Day. It occupied half of a full page in the Culture and Sports section.

# 上海双年展启动“51人”计划

一阙生活梦想友谊的颂歌 发现你不知道的都市之美

赵思宇

本报讯 记者从上海双年展组委会获悉，第十一届上海双年展主题展将于今年11月在上海当代艺术博物馆举行。本次双年展中，一个不同于以往任何静态展览形式的外延项目——“51人”计划日前正式启动。主办方力求寻找到51位不同职业背景的劳动者，参与从今年11月到明年3月的51场面向公众的活动，51场活动将在上海不同地点依次展开。此举意在以51位劳动者为媒介，让人们重新发现上海这座城市。目前，“51人”计划已进入招募阶段。

## 寻找51位都市劳动者

“展览往往有边界，展厅也不是万能的。”作为“51人”项目负责人之一的陈韵向记者表示，希望正在寻找的这51个人，能涵盖这座城市不同的生存状态。活动将基于这51人不同的职业、特点和才华展开，带领公众体验上海这座城市日渐被忽视的一些“闪光点”。

据主办方介绍，本次上海双年展正在寻找的这51个人，可以有着不同的年龄、经历、志趣、才

能以及人生视角，“希望他们拥有精彩又迥异的人生故事。”

这51个人的身份可以是——有奇思妙想的妈妈、忆事清晰的爷爷、对未来自规划的学生、某项运动的爱好者、抑或是狂热的业余天文爱好者、纪念物品收藏者等。职业可以是——艺术家、诗人、哲学家、小说家、舞者、建筑师、厨师、数学家、公交车售票员等。

## 每周3个故事接力上演

“只要愿意分享自己的故事，促成活动的举行，每位入选者都会得到一个平台，举办一次面向社会的公开活动。”陈韵表示，本次“51人”项目的活动可以在上海城市的每一个角落，以“意想不到”的方式发生。

关于51次活动的设想，陈韵举例道，参加的方案可以是一部以上海为背景的侦探小说片段，以街道名、公交站名所作的一首诗，展示一条上海不为人知的私人导游路线等。“也可以是一些能感受城市变革大潮的记忆节点，一部聆听市民故事的邀请函，一张上海厨房的抽样，一段发生在茶馆里的哲学思辨对话，一首诞生于车座、地下室或其他不寻常地方的新歌……”

所征集到的51个人的51种方案，将以持续17周、每周实现3个活动的频率，带领公众体验上海这座城市里不同职业人的工作、生活状态。

## 构建认知上海的新视角

作为本届上海双年展主题展的一个组成部分，“51人”项目不仅是对上海的重新发现和赞美，也是对生活、梦想、友谊的歌颂。一系列激动人心的体验行为将以展览的方式被提出。据了解，“51人”项目届时还会推出网站平台，用影像、文字资料记录这些事件。除了亲身参与外，公众还可以通过网络关注这51场活动的发生。

主办方表示，符合条件的市民可毛遂自荐，或推荐身边的朋友参与。推荐信中需包含本人（或所推荐的人）的基本信息、主要经历以及认为重要的其他信息。主办方将会对推荐者——回复，并选出51位合适人选。

参与方案和想法可通过信件或邮件发送到上海双年展，标题写清“51人项目”。电子邮件：personae51@powerstationofart.com 邮寄地址：上海市定海路252号（定海路互助社“51人”项目工作组）邮编200090。

The Culture and Sports section of *Labour Daily*, 5 May 2016, with the poster of recruitment of 51 Personae in the middle.

From the first month of 2016 till the beginning of the 11th Shanghai Biennale in November, we have been busily looking for the potential “personae” around us. Open call is one way (although 80% of the applications are from artists with their standard proposals of their works for an exhibition) and personal channels seem to be no less important than the public channels. One day, I was told by a friend of an artist, Eileen, who has recently moved out of her rented apartment in Jingyun Li, Hongkou District. She had sublet from Ms. Cheng Shaochan (程紹蟾), who was also given notice to leave the building. He briefly described Eileen’s situation to me, and it seems to be a typical story of demolition. A major difference is that this occurred in Jingyun Li, an area famous for being one of the former residences of Lu Xun and his left-wing writer friends and the conserved neighbourhood architectures. Then, why was Ms. Cheng forced to relocate? I have been observing and interviewing such cases in Shanghai since 2013 and I strongly feel that such an ongoing story should become one of 51 Personae’s, so that it could be staged, learnt, told, discussed, and documented. Not as part of an official documentation or archive but a story that can be participatory and fluid in its approach. This for me is what 51 Personae as an art project should accomplish.



The demolished neighbourhood near Jingyun Li.

Photo by Chen Yun, 23 August 2016.

With the help of Eileen, I made an appointment with the owner of the house, Ms. Cheng. Ms. Cheng expressed her interest in 51 Personae even before we met. On 23 August 2016, Eileen and I took Shanghai Metro Line 3 and dropped off at Dongbaoxing Road Station and walked through a ruin which was once a vivid neighbourhood since 1920s. Metro Line 3 is an elevated metro line that shares the route with Songhu Railway (1876 - 2000) in its northern passage and it is exactly this railway that brought prosperity to Duolun Road, North Sichuan Road and Jingyun Li. The railway served as an infrastructure attractive to residents and developers in the 20th century, just like metro lines will increase the price of real estates along its line in the 21st century.

On that summer day, we walked through the “neighbourhood” right at the back of Duolun Road. It did not look like the neighbourhood as I had known back in 2005. The once crowded small streets are deserted except for a few people who seem to be stragglers of the land acquisition or simply who were in the business of recycling the materials and taking over the land for their employers. I wondered what Lu Xun and his friends would feel if they had lived till today. Lu Xun passed away in 1935, before the next page of Shanghai and China’s history. Since most of the houses were constructed with wood and bricks, the demolished materials were recycled back into bricks and wood structures, particularly those used as beams and pillars, which will be collected and sold to third parties—part of the demolition economy.



Inside the first floor of Ms. Cheng's *Shikumen* house: the living room.

Photo by Chen Yun, 23 August 2016.

Ms. Cheng, in her late 50s, now lives in a small bedroom on the second floor, sparing the larger rooms for her tenants (one was Eileen who had just moved out, and another girl who lived on the third floor whose belongings were later removed from the house along with the belongings of Ms. Cheng). She now spends half of her time in Shanghai and another half in Minneapolis, where her son lives. The interior layout of this three-storyed *Shikumen* (literally stone gate) house was largely unaltered, keeping to its original structure, except for the position of the staircase which she shifted from the back door to the front—which she later felt was not an ideal change in terms of *fengshui*. However, this staircase later served to stage the 51 Personae event.

Before she purchased the house, it had been used as a dormitory for workers in a small factory. Before 1949, she heard that the house belonged to a musician and his family. Like many private houses, this one was obviously acquired after 1949 by the government and thereafter became government estate, of which the government can decide its land use. When Ms. Cheng purchased the right of lease of this public house from the government (represented by a real-estate company), she gained the right to permanently rent this house and use it. All is fine and binding as long as the house exists. The house will exist because of Lu Xun and his legacy but Ms. Cheng was forced to negotiate a deal with the government who now wants the house back for other use.

The first day we met, we talked for two hours—covering her reminiscences from her childhood to the current situation. The conversation was later edited as a first-person narrative and printed out as a brochure for the 51 Personae event on 8 February 2017, during the 11th Shanghai Biennale. Besides the brochure, which participants of the event may take away, books and journals on the modern history of Hongkou and Lu Xun Studies were piled up on her desks and tables. Ms. Cheng had been independently carrying out historical research as a hobby since when she was young. As early as in 1990s, she shared much of her research that gathered important information on comfort women in Hongkou



area with local university scholars. However, she does not agree with the one-sided patriotic narrative produced out of these historical materials as part of the nationalism argument that prevailed during these years.

She showed me a letter, she received from The Bureau of Housing Security and Management of Hongkou District, captioned: “Report on the housing expropriation compensation agreement made to Cheng Shaochan.” She has written in red, remarks on this letter such as “robbers and rogues” and “intimidating and threatening.” She underlined “the need for renovation of old houses in locations with poor infrastructure” in this letter and commented in red: “the government creates false names (to legitimise its expropriation of the houses).”

At the end of the conversation, she added that she also wondered why she had never been approached by a decent government officer but only men wearing colourful shorts and slippers, who were in fact employed by the government real-estate company to do the job. Why, after all, did she have to return her place of residence to the government for an unknown cultural purpose? Why could she as an individual not contribute to the cultural character by continuing to live there? Above all, the proposed compensation from the government was far below market value of this house and she could not afford to obtain a similar house here with the compensation.



Facing Donghengbang Road, the main gate of Jingyun Li bears three Chinese characters reading from right to left.  
The street of Donghengbang Road has always been home to a street market.

Photo by Chen Yun

The main gate of Jingyun Li is on Hengbang Road, a lively street which used to be a street market. Street markets have been traditionally an important form of urban life in Shanghai where people purchase daily items and fresh foods in the morning and at dusk. However, since 1990s, it has been regarded as something low and ugly, as if the city can no longer bear such indecency and shall replace them with indoor markets.



With the gentrification of the city, and the demolishing of the old neighbourhoods, street markets are disappearing. After Duolun Road became Street of Cultural Celebrities, a grand gate was set up at the back door of Jingyun Li which the residents never use.



The gate of former Lu Xun's residence, No. 23 Jingyun Li.

Photo by Chen Yun, 23 August 2016.

The Chinese characters of Jingyun Li were written in very humble calligraphy, as humble as the main gate when it was built in 1925: the gate opens to a lower middle-class real estate for residents who want a convenient location but who cannot afford to rent something better. Lu Xun moved here in 1927, only two years after the lane was built. It was a practice for tenants to give a big sum of money to the owner of the estate to acquire the right to lease. Under such a lease, Lu Xun moved into No. 23 Jingyun Li in October 1927. Two years later, he moved to No. 17 while Rou Shi (1902-1931), a young and enthusiastic progressive writer who was supported by Lu Xun moved into No. 23. Rou Shi was killed on 8 February 1931 along with another four left-wing writers in Shanghai, after being betrayed by someone within the Communist Party.

Lu Xun (1881-1936) was the first to consider foreign woodcut prints and to recognise the effective potential of using the medium to serve the needs in China, as propaganda and to promote social change. He is considered the father of the Modern Woodcut Movement of the 1930s and 1940s and a leading figure in modern Chinese literature and education. Through his lectures and writings, Lu Xun called for a new form of art that gave voice and passion to the people: the woodcut print.

A woodcut print by Li Hua (1901-1994), who was regarded by some as the best student of Lu Xun, depicts the scene of a six-day woodcut print workshop hosted by Lu Xun in a rented space not far from Jingyun Li, from 17 to 23 August, 1931.<sup>1</sup> The teacher Uchiyama Kakechi was invited

<sup>1</sup> "Li Hua," *People's Art Network of New China*, <http://xzgrmysw.com/detail-22.html>

by Lu Xun as the instructor and Lu Xun himself did the translation for the younger generation of woodcut print artists. Li Hua was not among the 13 students who had participated in this workshop, which was an iconic event marking the beginning of the Chinese woodcut print movement, but he had been in constant correspondence with Lu Xun since late 1934 from whom he received his instructions on art.

Lu Xun often brought works of German artist, Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945), to class and till the end of his life, promoted her works in China. In September 1931, to commemorate the death of Rou Shi and other left-wing writers, Lu Xun chose a print by Kollwitz entitled *Sacrifice* and published it in the first issue of magazine *Beidou*. This was also the first time that Kollwitz and her woodcut print works were introduced to China.



Participants of 51 Personae were working on the reproduction of a portrait of Lu Xun by Zhao Yannian on the blue rolling shutter outside Jingyun Li.  
Photo by Cheng Shaochan, 7 February, 2017.

Ultimately it was Ms. Cheng who curated her own 51 Personae event. She knew what she wanted to do and when it will be done. She set the date 8 February 2017 for the event because that was exactly 86 years after Rou Shi was killed. She selected four woodcut paintings by Zhao Yannian (1924-2014) and said she wanted to know how they would look like if they are enlarged and printed at the two facades of her Shikumen house, within the lane and on the street of Hengbang Road. She knew where these images would go and we would merely facilitate and realise this project as a collective effort.

The day started early in the morning, when a group of open-call recruited participants and our friends gathered in Jingyun Li, ready

with the huge plastic canvas which bore the image of the “Madman”. Cutting out the stencil and spray painting, it took almost one whole day for more than 10 people working continuously to finish. But when they were done, the final outcome resembled a book page.



51 Personae, 8 Feb 2017, Jingyun Li No. 7, the west façade of Ms Cheng's Shikumen house. Based on a woodcut print by Zhao Yannian, *A Madman's Diary* (No. 35), 1985.  
Photo by Chen Yun on 7 February 2017





51 Personae, 8 Feb 2017, Jingyun Li, in a garbage room which was demolished soon after the event. Based on a woodcut by Zhao Yannian, *A Madman's Diary* (No. 37), 1985.  
Photo by Chen Yun on 7 February 2017



51 Personae, 8 Feb 2017, Jingyun Li No. 7, the south façade of Ms. Cheng's Shikumen house, next to the black iron gate (also a feature of Shikumen buildings). Based on a woodcut print by Zhao Yannian, *A Madman's Diary* (No. 31), woodcut print, 1985.  
Photo by Chen Yun on 7 February 2017.



51 Personae, 8 Feb 2017. Based on a woodcut print by Zhao Yannian,  
*To commemorate the centenary of the birth of Mr. Lu Xun, 1981.*  
 Photo by Chen Yun on 7 February 2017.

Although he was only 10 years old when Lu Xun passed away, and had not been taught by Lu Xun directly like his own teacher Li Hua, Zhao Yannian recalls his connection with Lu Xun's famous novel *A Madman's Dairy* (1911) after the Cultural Revolution:

I read *A Madman's Diary* again and again, and realised that the "Madman" is not only not "mad", but indeed a real person who knows right from wrong.

He was "frank", "reasonable" and "brave".

How could the idea and composition of the painting really show the repression and resistance of the madman in the limited space of the painting? This was the first and most difficult problem I encountered. I drew a lot of sketches, arranged them and deliberated them over and over again, trying to figure out the relationship between Lu Xun's original thoughts and my composition.

In the end, I chose to use the image and temperament of a clear, sensible, brave and confident maniac to portray him. I used a flat knife to carve, emphasised the combination of blocks and surfaces, and created a strong dynamic tone through a large contrast of black and white.



Left: Ms. Cheng standing in the middle talking with neighbours who, like her, refused to leave. Mr. Dai Weifeng (first from left) has just finished talking about his story of forced eviction.

Photo by Chen Yun, 7 February 2017.

Right: Younger participants of the event sitting on the stairs and chairs listening to a neighbour (in the middle, holding a newspaper).

Photo by Chen Yun, 7 February 2017.

At the evening of this long day, more people joined the gathering for the screening of a short documentary film (shot by Li Yafeng and produced by 51 Personae) on the accounts of an old gentleman Mr. Dai Fengwei (left in green of the left photo) who introduced the history of Gongyifang (公益坊), a nearby neighbourhood also under expropriation. Mr. Dai was also a man who refused to leave, but on that evening we were told that he has been forcibly evicted by a mob of government-employed gangsters and expelled from his home where he lived since when he was five. The presence of Mr. Dai was a precursor of what would happen to Ms. Cheng. Mr. Dai passed away one year later but his stories were documented and always remembered when we continue to observe and engage with Ms. Cheng in the days to come.



In May 2017, the facades were cleared up (as if).

Photo by Cheng Shaochan.





March 2018.  
Photo by Xu Ming.

One day in March 2018, when Ms. Cheng left home to visit Japan, her tenant was forcibly evicted by a mob. All their belongings were removed from the house and the door openings were sealed up with hollow bricks which were light and easy to pile up to form a 'wall'. Strangely, after one year of rain and heat, the original spray-painted woodcut image at the south facade looked clearer than the year before. What had been washed away was the white paint that had been applied roughly to cover and censor the woodcut print image. What had been added over the 'hidden eye' of this image was a police notice.

By February 2019, two years after our 51 Personae event, the woodcut print image was covered by a notice board with one-sentence description of the history of Jingyun Li. A tourist/patriotic route called *Lu Xun Trail* was curated by the local cultural bureau in the effort to claim the significance of the left-wing literary history. Ironically, by that



10 February 2019.  
Photo by Chen Yun.

time, the neighbourhood which once served as both a living space and a protection for those left-wing progressive writers is almost flattened. The backstreet of Duolun Road is left in ruin and the only houses that still stood there were in Jingyun Li. Only cultural celebrities and their legacies remained but were left placeless, and out of place.

Since the house itself will not be torn down thanks to Lu Xun, one rainy winter morning in February 2019, Ms. Cheng moved back to her house with the help of friends. The house was empty. The ACs were gone and the gas, water and electricity had been cut off. Ms. Cheng went to the public service departments and asked to be reconnected with gas, water and electricity supplies. So she got them back, along with other secondhand furniture that can host her again in the house.

One day, she showed me some socks that she knitted when she was teaching a knitting workshop in Minneapolis. I then realised that she is very talented in knitting and has been interested in it since when she was six. And knitting seems to be a productive and positive way of telling her story, which I will not call a personal tragedy, but something that needs to go public exactly because it is not personal in many senses. I suggested that she knit her stories into the socks and share it with others who may be interested in stepping on the oppressive forces all around them. Or, to invite others to put on her socks and share the same stance with her. She soon produced many pairs of socks, some bearing the initiative JYL and the number 7, and some with Chinese characters of *Chaiqianban* (demolishing and relocation office). She joined us and presented the socks at the abC Art Book fair in Shanghai and at a special booth of 51 Personae at Power Station of Art. The socks, attractive for their unique colours, patterns and forms, were sold for 15-20 RMB and made popular purchases.



*Jingyun Li 7 series fleece socks. Knit by Cheng Shaochan, of various random colours with leftover yarn. Size varies.*

Photo by Cheng Shaochan



*Ms. Cheng Shaochan and the printed silk scarf based on her story at Power Station of Art, 1 October 2019.*

Photo by Mira Ying

Inspired by Ms. Cheng's socks, our artist friend, Yingchuan, designed a silk scarf based on a fable that she had written called *Max and animals dance in the belly of the big snake*; it teaches how to negotiate with evil forces even when one is swallowed by them. The work is called *A Letter from Jingyun Li*. This picture (above) shows Ms. Cheng under this flag-like silk scarf on the National Day fair at Power Station of Art.



Ms. Cheng Shaochan pulling up food from her supporters, by rope-and-basket to the second floor, November 2019.

Photo by Emma Mou

Just one month after that, Ms. Cheng found herself evicted again. All her secondhand furniture was gone and moreover, the staircase between the first and second floor was demolished. Ms. Cheng, daughter of revolutionary parents who were buried in the same martyrs' cemetery as Rou Shi, decided that she will stay in the house on the second floor. She received her supplies by the rope-and-basket system, and by that time, many people including Emma, who had spent a couple of months with her on the third floor (and whose belongings were also removed along with Ms. Cheng's belongings) gave her support of various kinds. Young people who learnt about her story online came to the house to spend nights with her, in fear that another forced eviction might happen for a third time.

And the forced eviction did happen once again in one night in December 2019. When that happened, she decided to live in the local police station, where she had taken up temporary residence during the last eviction. People continued to visit her at the police station and to give her supplies and support. During the day, she would sit at the very last row of the reception hall, while at night, she will sleep in a smaller separate room with AC. When everyone thought that she would be living in the police station for a few more days till the government sent a representative to negotiate with her, she was unexpectedly brought away by the police to be sent to a custody-asylum in north Hongkou, on Shuidian Road. But since her registration (*hukou*) was in Shanghai, she did not qualify to be admitted there. Consequently, she was sent back to the police station; however this time, she decided to sleep in front of the Sub-district Office of North Sichuan Road) just adjacent to the police station. The following morning, she was brought by force into the Sub-district Office where she lost connection with all the relatives and friends for 11 days before she was released.





Artist anonymous, *Wild Grass*, woodcut print, 2019.

Image courtesy the artist.

During these 11 days, Emma and I began to invite about 40 people to contribute to a writing commission under the title of *The Last Time I Saw*. We invited them to describe the moment of their last meeting or encounter with Ms. Cheng, either it be two years ago, or two days ago. We selected and edited 26 pieces and finally compiled them into a little book. We arranged them (either poems or essays) in a timeline from earliest to the most recent. The little book also became a witness/expression of an 'emergency' moment that went all the way back to two years prior to the moment when Ms. Cheng went missing. The contributors did not necessarily know one another but they share one commonality which is that they knew Ms. Cheng and shared her concern regarding her problem. They were all witnesses of an emergency which they felt did not happen only to Ms. Cheng as the one who was evicted and refused to leave her house, but an emergency that mattered to everyone in our own daily life experience. Memory, if not captured immediately, may go blurry and may never again be more accurately told in a documentary format.

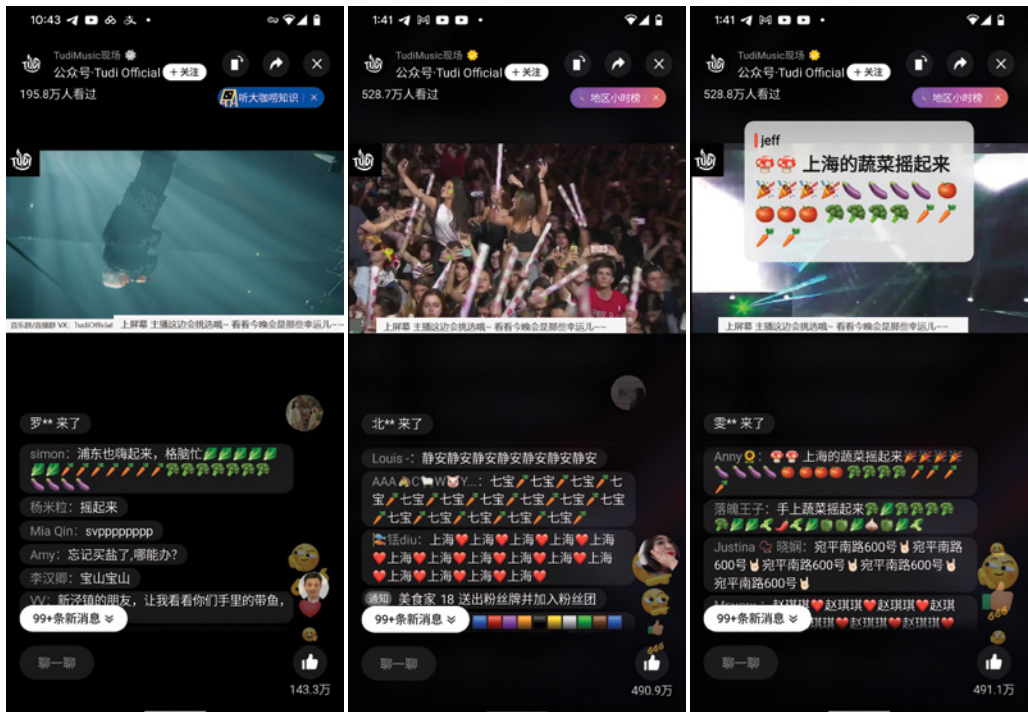
The cover of this book was gifted to us by an anonymous woodcut print researcher and artist. She produced this piece earlier that year and found this work appropriate to serve as the cover of the book. *Wild Grass* was also the title of a famous prose collection by Lu Xun. The book was 'published' a week before Wuhan Lockdown in January 2020. The contributing authors were the first readers of this book, and through this, they became aware of a bigger picture of Jingyun Li event.



The publication of 51 Personae, *The Last Time I Saw*.  
Photo by Mira Ying

Since 2018, 51 Personae has been using “Jingyun Li No. 7” as the address of the project, printed on the copyright page of each 51 Personae work. Ms. Cheng never returned to Shanghai since Covid-19 broke out in 2021.

Emergencies, like most human phenomena, repeat themselves. In the case of Jingyun Li, 51 Personae had attempted to tease out and engage with what constitutes a long-term emergency, an emergency that may not look obvious as an emergency to most people most of the time, but is.



Screenshots of the Ultra Music Festival in Miami, midnight of 31 March and 1 April 2022.

Screenshots by Chen Yun. 92



An online *Spring Festival Gala* attracted more than 5 million participants at the night of 31 March 2022. Starting from midnight of 1 April, the West part of Shanghai (Puxi) went officially into lockdown indefinitely. Before that, the East part of Shanghai (Pudong) had been in lockdown for two weeks. Under an ominous cloud, people had rushed to the markets to get whatever foods available at whatever price.

This online *Gala* was a playback of Ultra Music Festival 2022 at Bayfront Park (March 25-27) in Miami on an electric music *wechat* video-channel called *Tudi Music*. *Tudi Music* did not expect a viewership of a 5-million strong audience, mostly from Shanghai, who participated with passion and spirits no lower than those in Miami, shaking carrots, cabbages and onions in your hands and calling out the names of the neighbourhoods where they are from. This bottom-up celebration of the uncertainty of the *Shanghai 2022 Spring Covid* lockdown can be seen as a collective activation of an impending state of emergency.

The lockdown following that midnight lasted for an entire two months, when people were not allowed to leave their apartments or their neighbourhoods. Streets were emptied with only vehicles for emergencies and necessities. The city went vacant and the most only obvious sounds heard were from the sirens of ambulances. The cost of this silent spring in Shanghai is still yet to be documented, recognised, and understood—it needs a long-term effort from artists and cultural workers. I have flashbacks of the scene of Ms. Cheng collecting food with a rope-and-basket from the window of her second floor as I write this photo essay. If that was a moment when a personal experience has the power to infiltrate a small part of the public, then likewise we—drawing from our own daily lives—as witnesses as a city of 25 million to this spring of 2022, have the power to open our eyes and hearts to observe the sufferings of others and think about the mechanism behind the ‘emergencies’.



Lilin, *Mom, please go ask the doctor if my Nucleic Acid Report is available.* Woodcut print based on the true story of a patient during the Shanghai Lockdown in 2022 Spring.

Image courtesy the artist.

## Rising From The Flow

### Prelude

Today in Tehran, the traces of the past and the thirst for running towards the future are intertwined in such a way that we have lost the ability to speak about the coordinates of our consciousness. By 'speaking', I mean the retelling of the story that the city expresses through architecture. To have a stuttering tongue does not point to our muteness; exactly at the point that we fall silent, the city starts to speak, breaking the silence in a language of fragmented and incongruous alphabets that constructs its words with letters from a multitude of tongues.

The Alborz mountain range and its majestic peak, Mount Damavand, or in the words of the poet, Malek osh-Sho'arā Bahār (1886-1952) in his poem, *The Chained White Beast*, Damavandiyeh (The Dome of the Universe) is the city's only true compass.<sup>1</sup> The experience of life in the city of Tehran highlights, evermore, the special place that Damavand has in Persian mythology. It is in reference to it that we can still locate our place, despite being lost in this speed. In the background of the city's image, and amidst its bizarre transformations and constant metamorphoses, Mount Damavand reminds us powerfully of where we stand whilst the foreground image's exponential growth contends to erase the image of that sleeping volcano.

<sup>1</sup> *The Chained White Beast* was written in 1922

The poet Bahār, writes, in the same poem:

تو قلب فـــــسردۀ زمینی  
از درد ورم نموده یک چنـــــد

تا درد و ورم فرو نشیند  
کافور بران ضما د کردند

شومفجرای دل زما نه  
وان آتش خود نهفته میسند

You are the lethargic heart of the earth  
inflamed from pain  
covered with camphor balm  
to calm bruise and pain  
Explode, thou heart of the times  
and do not choose to hide your inner fire



Left: Damavand peak on bills before and after the revolution  
Right: Digital image, May 2022, Fatemi Square, Damavand peak in the backdrop of Tehran megapolis

“Explode, thou heart of the times” is an exhortation for the sleeping volcano’s eruption: an intervention that the poet asks of Damavand in this urgent situation, exactly one hundred years ago. Bahār asks Damavand to impregnate the clouds and bring down the rains, while in another line he begs it to burn everything down with the fire of its rage.

And today, much like a century ago, the world that surrounds Damavand is still trapped in a state of emergency, and it is this enormous, live mountain that ultimately determines the spiritual geography of its location: the need to refer to its power and beauty, more undeniable than ever, rises before our eyes every morning before the avalanche of smoke and dust makes it disappear.

An emergency is a situation that invites the alert mind to intervene. Like a healthy and conscious mind that belongs to the fragmented, torn and tired body of this city, Damavand, alive and aware, understands all that is going on in the city’s body: how it denies the emergency at hand with an obsessive fervor, pushing reality to the margins in favour of a theatrical charade of order that is in fact founded on anarchy.

I invite you towards the coming lines that lay ahead, not from the point of view of a writer, but that of an installation artist who builds spaces with words. I will let you wander amongst the things that I find myself wandering amidst: in the space of in-betweens, somewhere between reality and truth, between being the narrator and the narrative, between being the object and the subject, between seeing and being seen, between imagination and fact, between our truth and post-truth.

## Interlude

I burned it,  
since building is in burning.  
I destroyed it since construction is in destruction.

Shams-i Tabrizi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Shams-i Tabrizi was a Persian  
Shafi'ite poet (1185–1248)

## Site/Body

Crime scene detectives believe that the body of the murdered speaks to us silently, recounting the entire story of the murder. I believe that places, much like the corpses of murdered bodies, can tell us about the coordinates of a culture, its political and social conditions—in short, all that happens in that place. My aim in writing this piece is to translate the story that this architecture is telling and to place it in the context of this essay. I intend to rebuild and move this body, which I see as the body of society, in order for the reader to access it and to observe and decode it. The space that I recreate here, is indeed a synthesis of my simultaneous observations and interpretations: a “second edition” coupled with a narrative and at times with emphasis on the parts that can convey important information about this body to the reader, much like the spotlight that shines on the main character on a theatre set.

## Observation/Encounter

‘Observation’ is the starting point of every piece that I make; and then ‘writing’ which fills the distance between ‘seeing’ and ‘revealing’ of things. Words make it possible for me to redefine phenomena in a relatively far distance from ‘what the other sees’.



Still from *Untitled* video, 00:10 mins, 27 October 2020, Tehran, Iran

Writing, in my work, is the first step in defamiliarising of phenomena: the first step on the difficult path of revealing ‘what I see.’ In a way one can say that what you are reading is not a reportage, but the result of an encounter. In my view, this work is a non-physical installation in a different context. My approach in the organising and processing of

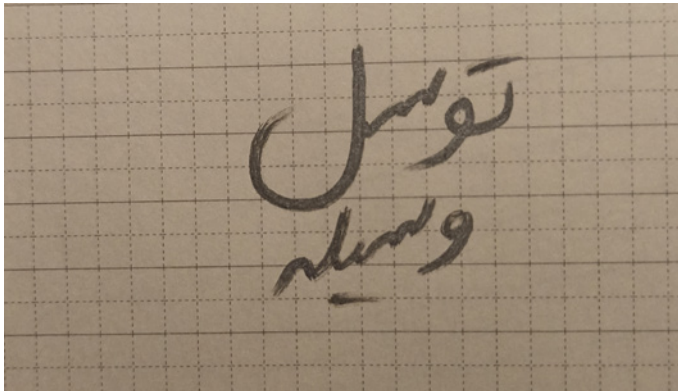


this text and its illustrations before you is the same as my approach in creating installations in the white cube of a gallery or any other space.

### Location/Situation

In the city, objects pile up and then sediment, and their dregs flow to the margins. I write: 'dregs,' I read: 'essence'; much like the people whom in the present world resemble mere numbers. All the materials for the construction of a space are available here in the outskirts of the city. The city is constantly dredging, like the flow of a river that moves the garbage to its banks and continues to flow freely on its bed. But to understand what is happening to the river one has to look at its banks, and to understand the sea one has to step on its shores.

The abandoned brick kilns in the eastern margins of Tehran were home to a small community of people who have had to move to the outskirts of Tehran to work at these factories. Today, after 20 years most of the kilns have shut down and the better part of the families work in other factories or make ends meet by recycling garbage or construction waste. A *hosseiniyeh* is built in this neighbourhood voluntarily by the members of the community. *Hosseiniyeh* is a building type for the performance of religious ceremonies and is supposed to be a place for *tavasol*, which means to appeal and is derived from the word *vasileh* which means instrument. The Prayer of Tavasol is one of the most important group ceremonies that happens in a *hosseiniyeh*. It is a plea to the instruments of closeness to god. Here, instrument suggests something more than a thing or a tool, it is a *cause*. In this setting, the *hosseiniyeh* is the meeting place and appeal is the intention. The difference between this *hosseiniyeh* and any other architecture is in that it conflates the image and the meaning of its geography.



The two words 'Tavasol' and 'Vasileh' written in Persian

### Territory/Sanctuary

The most common building material in this neighbourhood and in most other slum dwellings is construction waste. One can see a slew of these heterogenous leftovers used as building parts in slums; for example, doors discovered as found objects amidst construction waste or purchased from demolition workers.



Digital Image, August 2018, Tehran-Zanjan Highway

The intriguing ceiling of the main space of the *hosseiniyeh* is made from the assemblage of these doors: each door is a door that once opened to a home or a room; a door that might have belonged to a child's room in a tiny apartment where the child marked his/her territory by placing a cartoon sticker on it; a door that recounts the architectural style of Tehran in the 1960s or 1970s; an ideal door to a courtyard veranda in the heart of Tehran of those years. But whose territory do these doors presently mark? Or to which neighbourhood, which space do they open? Changing their function from door to ceiling in this striking installation is perhaps a simultaneous grimace at and praise of poverty. How naïve it is to close our eyes in a fraction of a second on this reality that they only shelter the *hosseiniyeh* from wind and rain; to think that they now open to the sky and heavens above. The absence of the doors' original contexts is less a reminder of their torn from their previous places than it is a form of denial of a perfectly incongruous order, as if this strange city that does not know the taste of its own mouth, swallows everything and continuously throws up the contents of its own belly.

### Order/Border

In the paintings discovered from Paleolithic cave dwellers, we can clearly see the realistic approach of primitive humans in the accurate representation of the animals' reality. They have only observed and painted aspects essential to expressing the appearance and the soul of the outer and inner world of the animals: their beauty, ugliness, agility, grace, and savagery. These paintings often appeared in the inner depth of the caves, signifying the fact that these were not decorative paintings, but considered to have magical powers. They were drawn in order to dominate the soul of the animal and to bind it to a limited frame—that of their own hunting territory.

The repeated exercise of drawing the hunt and the remembrance of all the details to achieve dominance over the body of the hunt is similar to how the margin-dwellers deal with construction waste that is brought in from the city centre. As if in this migrant colony, each member of the society, unknowingly, takes a stab at conquering the souls of the city's structures through this change in the of function and pastiche of these objects: to redefine the meaning of house, *hosseiniyeh*, or an apartment.

As if with the reuse of these objects, these inhabitants get one step closer to conquering the task of owning that which they desire. As if by mimicking the movements of their hunt, and by placing together the dismembered parts of several bodies in a new composition, they manage to create anew a whole body.



Digital Image, 27 October 2019, Beşiktaş, İstanbul, Turkey

This body is evocative of any building that the city accepts within itself. And it is in this way that the migrants within the margins practice house, *hosseiniyeh*, and ultimately the city. But in this way, they have conquered and possessed the soul of every house, every *hosseiniyeh*, not knowing they have transplanted the heart of the city to its margins and have crafted a new spiritual climate outside the boundaries of the

city's relationship with government: abandoned, discarded, apparently separate from the city, but in reality, woven into its roots.

### **Inner/Outer**

The main space of the *hosseiniyeh* is where an installation of doors comprises the ceiling, while the floor is adorned with a multitude of Persian carpets, some overlapping on the edges in order to completely cover the floor. The walls are all covered with brocade banners and standards in green, gold, and red hues. On the main stage of the *hosseiniyeh* there is a podium for the orator which is in fact just an armchair next to a microphone and a loudspeaker. The armchair, much like the door, is a recurring typology in migrant colonies. The *hosseiniyeh* is located between two corridors: one leading to the *shabestan*, (a prayer hall in a mosque deriving its name from *shab* or night, signifying women's quarters), and the other, a passageway to the common courtyard of the slum houses. Here, the *shabestan* is the women's hall and it is comprised of an empty room with a few mats on the floor, blotchy walls, and a lone speaker that echoes the voice of the male orator in the main hall.

This speaker, adorned with a flag, is the only defining characteristic of this empty and cold space, highlighting it from any other space and signifying its function. Now if we consider the *shabestan* as the *andarooni* (the private quarters of historic houses in Iran, often the territory of women), and the main space with the orator as the *birooni* (the public quarters of historic houses in Iran, often the domain of men), we can clearly see that the 'speaker' is male and the 'listener' is female. In other words, that men gain their credibility through speaking, and women, through listening. These two spaces, juxtaposed together, delicately expose the reality of a cultural space. This installation is not an interpretation, but a perfect translation of a cultural pattern, with all its physical insignia and non-physical qualities that make it possible to experience the heart of the city within the peripheries; here, itself regenerating an order.

### **Edge/Threshold**

The common denominator between the doors and the inhabitants of brickyards is that they are both products of the urban outflow. This outflow creates an atmosphere that leaves me on a threshold: the threshold of simultaneously experiencing a truth from the inside while watching it from the outside; that the truth of a city manifests itself on its edges, and that to witness that truth we have to distance ourselves from the city as far as where the waves wash whatever is not of the sea and surrender them to the shore. And that the shore is the sea's memory with all of its waste and its together in an out-of-tune symphony.

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## Emergency Times...

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### **Emergency post:**

**12:27pm, Monday, March 14, 2022**

By the third day I felt better. Yet my psyche remained troubled and felt unstable for me to doubt my being able to critically articulate and reflect. Is it true that the brain shrinks? I refused to submit to it and forced myself to facilitate an online lecture. My mind was not as sharp as there were times I was lost for words, and disrupted by the series of throat-clearing reflexes due to the symptomatic secretion of phlegm. There was not a sense of fulfilment. Indeed, it has taken a grip on my usual self. However, I was positive while being ‘positive.’

By the seventh day I managed to complete a performance-lecture series. This is a significant project; the research which pivots on ‘Telok Blangah’ that commenced in 2018, and I needed it to end on a good, decisive note. Again, I was doubtful of my ability to moderate the discussion between two literary ‘giants’: writer-translator, Annaliza Bakri and poet, Isa Kamari. The aim was to highlight the critical aspects from previous lectures for Annaliza and Isa to comment. The outcome, however, was positively gripping. Annaliza’s commentary leaned towards the cultural and liberal, while Isa’s was grounded with the conceptual and spiritual. Sandwiched between these bastions of knowledge and experience I let go of my critical self to submit to the partial inertia of my brain cells; to allow more of their wisdom to rain throughout the assembly.

Surprisingly, not only did the ground turned from barren to a fertile one, but the anticipated loss of acuity in my mind had conversely led to a self-discovery. My psyche had completely recovered from an alternative ‘booster’! It was resurrected. I was more responsive to Isa’s elucidation. I thought that his would be an ideal masterclass for all art practitioners.

I shall only highlight three from the many. In response to what he considered as an emergency—the loss of etiquette in art practitioners, their ignorance of:

1. The need to interrogate history, not only through research but also through probing by creative process. History itself should not be perceived as ‘classical’ i.e. of the past, but as a movement of time forward responding to an ever-expanding universe.

2. Form, formula, and formation need to be remoulded to respond to the times—in two dimensions: Pure Duration and Serial Time.
3. The arts and cultural manifestation should embody the 'I', 'We', 'It', and 'Its' dimensions holistically. This creates layers of meaning, which are rich and integral to each other.

### Emergency post:

10:13am, Wednesday, March 16, 1560

To begin with an understanding of a particular word, the etymology online dictionary has been, for me, a key portal for a obtain a quick yet in-depth grasp on its meaning. It transports you to various dimensions of time in the probable birth of a word. Before you drown in the sea of meanings, one will rise above for you to understand an iota of its essence. To learn its entirety in a short period of time may not be recommended but to continue its search through the longer passage of time may allow one to be constantly richer in the sea of knowledge.

The word 'emergency' as a noun—it has a familiar ring in the medical context from ambulance to blood transfusion—stems from the Latin verb, *emergere*. This essentially means "to bring to light" or "to arise out of something." *Emergere* can be broken down further into *ex* and *mergere*, which respectively means 'out of' and 'to dip', 'immerse' or 'plunge'. *Mergere* seems to be critical to the word's meaning as it serves as the foundation for an essential understanding. Perhaps we often brush off the *mergere* from the *emergere*, dismissing its significant weight. Should we not 'immerse' ourselves in grasping emergency and to this end, reflect on and evaluate the morals that 'emerge' from it?

Imagine when the word was first written down for all commoners to behold during the Elizabethan era, a century after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, when there was an influx of information. In *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Elizabeth Eisenstein recounted, despite printing being made more visible and texts much more used than they had been during the Middle Ages, that it did standardise the reception of information—bringing many minds to bear on a single text. The word, which used to be concealed, emerged from the chests of those only blessed with 'wisdom', is translated into the respective vernacular languages, to be interpreted at every kitchen table.

Imagine how the word is read by the 'unskillful', 'unlettered' and 'unacquainted with the Latin tongue.' When read in isolation without physical guidance, did it give rise a 'new message' or was it just the 'new medium' which changed Elizabethans' domestic lives? Eisenstein pointed out that the word was internalised by silent and solitary readers, and was conveyed by an impersonal medium to a 'lonely crowd' of many readers. However, if these seem murky, the existence of the printed word strengthened the voice of individual conscience and created collective memory.

A striking resemblance indeed: then, the social networking of the Elizabethans' printed 'faith book' and now, the interconnectedness of our online social media, *facebook*.

**Emergency post:**  
**12:45pm, Saturday, March 19, 2030**

In *Beyond Bicentennial: Perspectives on Malays*, one of the contributors, Isa Kamari, reminded us of the *White Paper* released by the government of Singapore which aims to achieve a target of 6.9 million citizens by 2030. This includes allowing an influx of immigrants to support the economy. Hmm, smells like 1819.

What bothers me more is how our reading habits will fare by the year 2030. Since the inception of the pandemic (or even before) our use of digital and social media platforms have clearly defined and changed our daily routines. One of which is our reading habit. In what few or many ways has it changed? Has any change emerged at all? By 2030 how much are we going to rely on printed reading materials? Will they be obsolete when we become comfortable meeting, studying, writing, and reading through digital media platforms? What would become of our cognitive and moral advancement? Perhaps our millennials would be affected by or engaged with issues arising from social media and mental health. As I write they may be sinking in states of anxiety, depression, suicidal thought, cyberbullying and other forms of ‘ills’ derived from ‘the solitary self’ while their use of social media as entertainment, companion and guardian continues to rise. What would become of our children?

To me, as I weigh it, this is worse than being infected with the virus. Fortunately, though the virus did lead to a short-term physical inconvenience (isolation), it did allow one to retreat to recover, resting the body for it to be recharged and restricting the body from meeting the other bodies, opening a space for the essentials to be reflected upon. What would be unfortunate is when we surrender ourselves to digital media and social media to be immersed in a long-term cognitive impairment and moral degradation unwittingly. However, there is a way to handle and moderate this.

Maryanne Wolf in an ‘emergency’ book, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, foregrounds the characteristics of contemporary readers in one of the chapters particularly, our children of the 21st century: that they have poor quality of attention; they do not have the patience to read; they adopt a skimming and word-spotting manner of reading; and they are contented with TL:DR (Too long; didn’t read) practice. How do we rescue them from these? One of the best ways Wolf proposes is to return to the “ancient soul of a child”—to protect and guide the unique legacy of the reading life. Definitely, no laptops for their first five years! This calls for an ambulance! But the ideal reading life must begin on a loved one’s lap where a shared physical dimension takes place. This simple act, according to Wolf, facilitates a time when parent and child are together in a timeless interaction that involves a shared attention: learning about words, sentences, and concept. A case study by Wolf on how active a young brain is when it listens to stories demonstrated that significant changes occur not only in the regions of the brain underlying the receptive aspects of language, which enhance learning the meaning of words, but also in region underlying the expressive aspects of language learning, which enable children to articulate new words and thoughts.

Jonathan Sacks reflected in *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* on the urgency of the momentous “face of the other” over the connecting technology of *facebook*—the world of “advertisements for myself.” While it claimed 2.41 billion monthly active users since its emergence in 2019, it continues to damage physical and mental health. Worse still, it damages the capacity for sustained and focus thoughts; and echoing Sacks, leaves us morally underdeveloped, addicted to a search for popularity in the form of ‘likes’—that has little to do with character and virtue. We need true communication. The ‘global village’ when the “electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous ‘field’ in all human affairs,”<sup>1</sup> which was first coined (and prophesised) in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* by Marshall McLuhan, is not a true village where the primordial face-to-face of language takes place. If the prophecy stays true, it does allow the infiltration of the human elements more and more into one another, with minds mutually stimulated by proximity. Is this an illusion? A substitute for true communication? Where the abundance of ‘likes’ reigns over genuine engagement? Yikes!

<sup>1</sup> McLuhan 31

Questions and sentiments for the year 2030 are as follows: What becomes of the ‘We’ where the ‘I,’ ‘T’ and ‘T’ dominate? We need ‘We’ immediately. We need to be present—to be alert to feelings through direct encounters with other human beings. At the same time, who can articulate for us or alert us (better) to the presence of an emergency. Artists?

#### Emergency post:

2:15am, Saturday, February 2, 1963



Drawing #1 by Child #1

No refrigerator in the world excels this unique cold storage, developed fresh from World War II, for you can trust that it can store over 100 pieces of dead meat yet keeping them fresh! Beyond that unassuming design, is the guarantee that only hidden mechanisms can give, yet they embody all the secured features which are part of any modern refrigerator. This

unique freezing compartment stands alone as the pioneer of the British built-and-sealed refrigerating system.

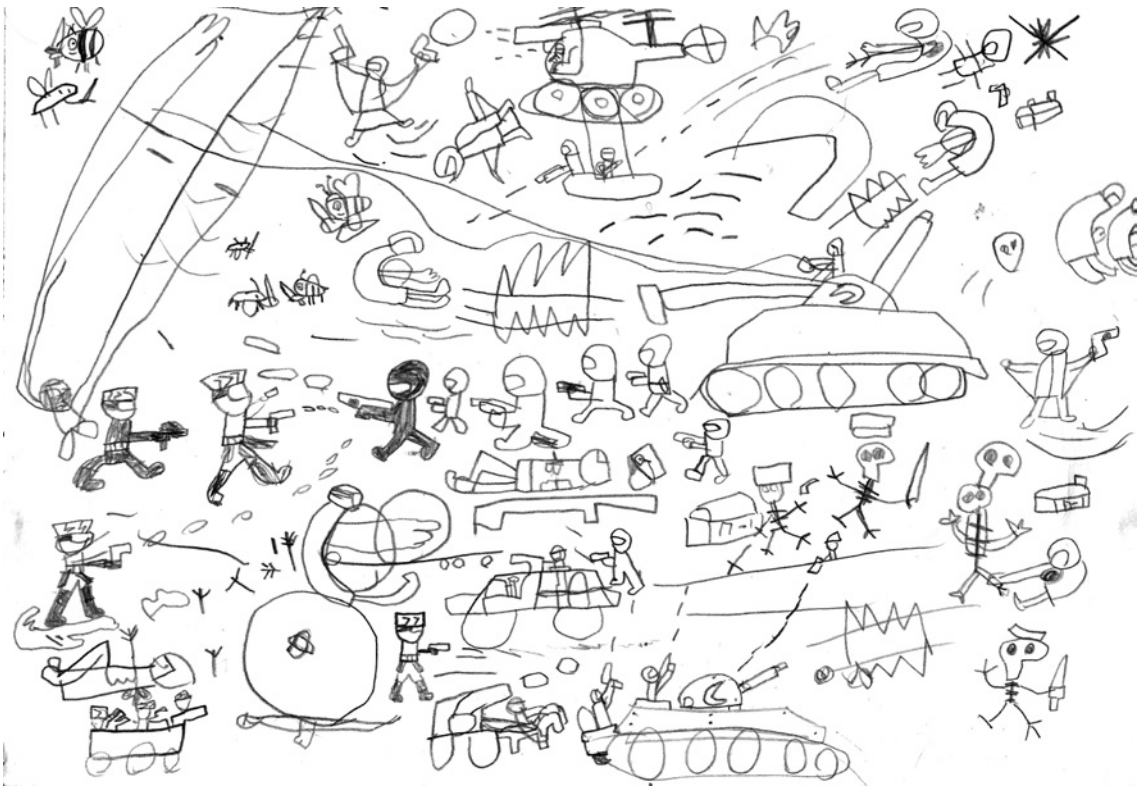
Industry too chooses this unique cold storage, promising that your lives can be simplified through their unique frozen processed foods. Do not worry. Just consume and be happy. Just keep storing and stock-piling. Rest assured they will be fresh!

A 10+-year protection plan fully guarantees each system.

**Emergency post:**

**12:00pm, Monday, July 21, 1964**

In the image below, circle in red all the various types emergencies which are caused by a mutual lack of misunderstanding.



Drawing #2 by Child #2

**Emergency post:**

**8:00am, Tuesday, July 7, 2020**

I believe relief comes after difficult times; for indeed after every difficulty comes relief, after every difficulty comes relief and after every difficulty comes relief, although both can coexist. Between every difficulty and relief there is a significant lesson to be learnt. Lessons will be learnt by



those who seek to reflect on the severe fallout caused by every pandemic. There is certainly a blessing in a catastrophe's quasi-deceptive cloak—when one sees through its illusory concept and context.

What then is the blessing which I have learnt?

The pandemic has left an indelible mark here and beyond. Many submit to their emotions and egos, they project mindless verbal expressions on social media; some benefit profoundly by protecting, nurturing, and devoting their time physically on their loved ones, patiently, wisely, and critically with an innovative spirit. Why then do they say we are trapped? Or are we truly isolated?

At some point during that time of imposed isolation, I smiled. We had sought forever the ideal work-life balance. It only came when we were commandeered, cornered, and had to retreat to our domestic space. Aaahhh... After every difficulty comes relief? I found home. I found my family. My wife and I found each other. We found our children; through intimate observation, reflection, and conversation we found meaning in their growth. We have been reading aloud to each other. In spite of the family being cloaked with emotional and psychological pressures, we found beauty—a fundamental understanding on what essentials means—the living room lives, the kitchen cooks and the bedroom comforts us under a single sheet.

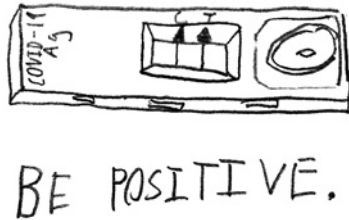
While we comforted ourselves in spite of the emergency, we sought solace and gained wisdom from the counsels of the blind gnostic, the reviver and the saintly Abdallah al-Haddad. Due to such times, we learn lessons:

On Intention  
On Vigilance  
On Inner and the Outer Self  
On Acquiring Knowledge  
On Remembrance  
On Reflection  
On Cleanliness  
On Social Duties  
On Kindness and Charity  
On Gratitude

These are pearls and gems which could not be found under normal, routine, passive, lonely and contented circumstances. Only when one is cornered, challenged, and tested... blessings come after.

A blessing in disguise indeed.

Emergency post:  
12:27pm, Monday, April 11, 2022



Drawing #3 by Child #3

I am thinking about what is the state-of-the art ‘art’ that has emerged from the pandemic. Can I be happy with the hybridity of art exhibitions, presentations, and installations, where experiences are facilitated digitally through sophisticated means on the internet? At this point, I am also imagining ‘social distancing art’ where art could be appreciated and valued while complying with distancing rules. Will we miss the exemplary ‘relational aesthetics’ where most of its beauty derives from physical interactions, event-based participations and meal parties? Even if we were told, “Let’s get back to the Old Normal from the New Normal!” will we still be hesitant, traumatised and be ‘touchy’ over a ‘touchy’ situation?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Note: ‘touchy’ (colloquial meaning: sensitive) over a ‘touchy’ (literally: physical contact) situation.

One that is on top of my list of the state-of-the-art ‘art’, is the unassuming ART test. At a glance, one would feel strange about ART being evaluated by strict measures, but no, A.R.T. stands for Antigen Rapid Test. It is the most prevalent medium ever created—conceptualised, designed, and curated for all walks of life to use. We need to ‘interact’ with it. It is practical, experiential, and cheap! Even better, it is disposable (could be possibly recyclable material for future art performances). However, its ambivalence would lie between the celebration of being ‘negative’ and sadness of being ‘positive’. This could be historically significant whereby these terminologies are in a dilemma. Should we think positively if tested positive? Yes, why not? Let the body rest. Let it recover for a state of renewal however temporary it is. Let the body be isolated within the household. Let it reflect on its parts, on its domestic essentials. Let it exercise its rights with the family. Let it drown in deep reflection within multiple time dimensions. Let it revise its role in the family and society. Let it rise with optimism. Yes, appropriating Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” the ART test is indeed a medium worthy of critical study—in the context of interdisciplinarity. It instills trauma yet we are dependent on it. It is not a survival kit but rather an alarm: a medium that gives a paradoxical message and paints an inessential biological, psychological, and economic crisis.

The late literary figure, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a compelling theory or simile on the role of artists in society (also mentioned by Maryanne

Wolf in *Reader, Come Home; The Reading Brain in a Digital World*). I shall quote him at length here for emphasis:

Writers are specialised cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society—just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think that artists—all artists—should be treasured as alarm systems.

There is an affinity to “let the body reflect its parts” and a familiar “call to duty” from Isa Kamari, that artists should take part in defining or redefining history through their creative thoughts, processes and outputs. It is not surprising that Vonnegut was much inspired by the works of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, who I think were the world's forgotten ‘alarm’ systems. Just to name a few other uncelebrated ones—Socrates, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Neil Postman, Jonathan Sacks, Maryanne Wolf, and Isa himself. They were and are very super-sensitive—they did press the panic button and forewarned the world— to the notional loss due to the ‘global village,’ decentralisation, isolation, standardisation, individualism, from ‘We’ to ‘I’ are contemporary emergencies which has started, accompanied by evidentiary sources, since the great civilisation of antiquity. The ‘loss’ ends in a craving for a more stable foundation on how the world works. Paraphrasing a review by Alexander John Watson on Innis’ *Empire and Communications*, their works when read anew, in this age of present-mindedness, seem fresh and indeed, prophetic despite the many years since.

In an intriguing video conference between Nick Bongiorno and McLuhan's son, Eric, streamlined from the home of his grandson, Andrew, it was deemed as a historical lineage of dissent in relation to media. When asked about the irony of the nature of the interview, its relevance to the ‘global village’ and what McLuhan would think about the current use of internet, smart phones and ‘gadget lovers’ of apps, Eric responded:

He thinks we pretty much made a good mess out of it. That is, we have no more control over these forms and forces now than we did generations ago. The only difference between us and our forebears is that a few of us have some idea of what is going on and the rest is just as blind and stupid to the whole business as ever.

Eric's reference to a collective ignorance and loss in perceptive analysis of the media coincides with Isa's response to the lack of understanding in the arts and cultural manifestation. To achieve an understanding that is ‘layered’—rich and integral to each other—one should embody the ‘I,’ ‘We,’ ‘It,’ and ‘Its’ dimensions holistically. The ‘I’ stands for the individual; ‘We’ represents the collective, society, nation, country or humanity; ‘It’ refers to materials, objects or things; and ‘Its’ signifies the philosophy, hermeneutics or dialectics.

What do you think of Vonnegut's reference of canaries to artists? Can artists adopt 'state-of-the-art' rather than confined to its relationship to products or materials? Is it true that artists are ahead of their time? Will there ever be a gripping sign that states: BEFORE EMERGENCY BREAKS, CRY FOR ARTISTS?

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## Time comes when there is no more time: We need the language of emergency

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In more than ten years of my life at the present address, I had never been so aware of the proximity of the ER (Emergency Room) as in the first wave of the pandemic, when our city closed down for two months and the streets in the city centre got empty. Everything got quiet with only the sirens of ambulances striking thunderously in the silence. The wailing was a sound of pure horror and it used to shake me more than the numbers of newly infected and dead people, while it simultaneously created an invisible contrast between the world outside and the world inside our homes.

Out there, there was only pure emergency. The patients in the ambulances were running out of time, and every minute counted in their struggle for survival. Inside our homes... emergency simply vanished. There was no deadline, there was no 'at once', 'soon', 'quickly' or 'ASAP'. In March of 2020, any expectation of the everyday normality was shifted somewhere into an unclear future. The world stopped and there was no hurry. At forty I found myself in such a situation for the first time, and it was both pleasant and scary at the same time. Pleasant, as I was offered a possibility of relaxation. And it was scary, as I had to learn to comprehend time in a completely different way.

I was left with almost no work, confined in our apartment with my wife, two children, and an overload of time. We had so much time that we got scared that we would drown in it, and therefore we started to plan the forthcoming days in so much detail as if we were on a journey. We drew schedules for each and every forthcoming day and we finished by drawing fifty-four schedules for the fifty-four days of lockdown. In order to master time. To tame it. And while we were drawing schedules for the days, spent in the apartment, we were listening to the sirens of the ambulances driving the patients to the ER. We listened to the struggle with time, and we heard its trickling. We listened to amplified emergency.

\*

Emergency has always been relative in Slovenia. Doctors in our transitional public health system issue notes for specialist checkups with three different designations, 'regular', 'swift', and 'urgent'. This may also happen elsewhere in the world, but here such waiting for a specialist checkup gets longer from one year to another, so it is nothing unusual if you are obliged to wait for an 'urgent' checkup for a year or more.

Many Slovene patients met their deaths sooner than the opportunity to be scanned with magnetic resonance. It sounds like a joke, I know, but it is not.

Recently a traumatologist friend confided in me that she only issue notes with the label 'urgent', as designations 'regular' and 'swift' have no meaning in her eyes.<sup>1</sup> "Everything has become 'urgent' as nothing is really urgent anymore," she said to me. In the best case the label "urgent" on the note means "some time in the near future," so my friend needs to explain to her patients that she regrets not to be able to deliver a note which would put them on a surgeon's table within a reasonable and recommended term.

<sup>1</sup> recollected conversation,  
June 2021

"I feel embarrassed every day," she says, "when I tell a person that his/her knee should urgently be operated on, and I admit immediately after that he/she will wait for surgery at least for a year."

If even solving an individual's health is not really urgent and if even the most urgent medical exams and interventions are not urgent, it is obvious that the understanding of emergency in our society is distorted. For that reason, it is understandable that, during the pandemic, our decision-makers stated again and again, that immediate action to be taken to stem the tide of COVID-19 was urgent, and yet they were late introducing measures—every time. Because they probably did not comprehend the emergency they were talking about.

\*

In *order* to justify the authorities' views we can only state that emergency is a component of time, and that the comprehension of time is simply relative. In his recent interview for the Slovene *DELO* newspaper, Kossi Komla-Ebri, the author from Togo who has been living in Italy for almost fifty years, wittily compares the different flow of time in Europe and in Africa.

He explains: "In Africa buses start on their way only when they are full. Therefore, once a man starts his journey, he embarks into unknown, as the time of departure and arrival are completely undefined. Consequently, the future in the mind of Africans is almost nonexistent. The future is an enormous unknown, and nobody even dreams about planning it. Contrary to the Europeans the Africans thus live in the present and do not deal with the future."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Interview by Aljaž Vrabec,  
15 Jan 2022

His words reminded me of several of my waiting hours in South American, African and Asian bus stations and of my very European wife who could never get used to them. Her future was, so to speak, always meticulously planned and this type of uncertainty made her go completely off the rails.

Once we vacationed on the Thai island of Koh Phangan and in the evening prior to our planned departure we were told that our boat may leave the bay the next day or maybe not, due to the weather conditions. My wife got a panic attack and while her to-the-tiniest-detail-elaborated vision of the next few days started to crumble, local people could not understand what the problem was. The boat would leave eventually, they tried to explain to her, if not tomorrow, then probably the day after tomorrow. And almost certainly by the end of the week.



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A few years later in Laos, during our wait for a ferry—which travelled with no timetable and was nowhere to be seen approaching us from the other side of a small lake—a Frenchman complained: “I’ve been living here for three years now and still haven’t figured out the travel system of this ferry. You come and wait. Sometimes for several hours. And I can’t understand why.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Recollected conversation, Laos,  
September 2011

He was an archaeologist, employed in the nearby excavation of the ruins of a former temple, and his task included teaching the locals how to take care of the sites themselves. Yet he was far from any success.

“In the three years I was supposed to train the local people to manage the museum and to maintain the temple which turned out to be mission impossible. With these people there is no connection between yesterday and today as it is with us. Today is not a continuation of yesterday. Actually, it seems to me that, with them, yesterday and today are two completely different worlds. What happened yesterday simply does not exist for the people here. How are we supposed to teach them anything? Today they have no idea of what they were taught yesterday.”

The Frenchman believed that this attitude towards time stemmed in their religion originating in their poverty. “The memory of yesterday’s hunger makes today’s hunger unbearable. Therefore, people gave up their memory and decided that only the present would exist for them.” This seemed logical. Or rather sounded as an interesting attempt of a European to find his own comprehensible logic in a non-European notion of time. But whatever it was, it is probably true that people all over the world apprehend time and emergency very differently.

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This is exactly what we could convince ourselves of during the pandemic. Ever since January 2020 the World Health Organisation continued to urge countries to take measures, emphasising the emergency situation that require immediate action. Yet, countries responded very arbitrarily to these calls. Many countries, like Slovenia, responded with a fatal delay, not only in the spring of 2020, when this virus was something new and unknown to all, but also later, in the second, third and fourth wave, when the exact projections of the epidemic already existed and everything became easily predictable. Even then the virus overtook us, we seriously intervened only when the intensive care departments of our hospitals were full to the last hospital bed.

Our response to the pandemic was, in a way, a condensed simulation of the response of humankind to the second, much bigger crisis of our time: climate change. As a matter of fact, more than half a century had passed since the first perception of this, still an unimaginable danger to many, and for decades scientists have been admonishing us that it is necessary to respond *urgently*. When talking about emergency, the scientists use words and phrases which are normally used to express emergency (at once, now, immediately, today, this moment...) yet they remain unheard all these years.

And it makes me wonder if we are not able to express real emergency with the language we depend on. I wonder if words like ‘at once’, ‘immediately’ or ‘now’ are in fact foreign and not understandable to





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people, or at least we had failed to translate them effectively. And we thus repeat them in vain to people who would only stare back vacantly at us.

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Slavoj Žižek, one of the great philosophers of our contemporary times, has been repeatedly talking about communism for the new millennium. Though with the word 'communism,' Žižek has been intentionally provoking over-sensitive westerners (western intellectuals?) over the years. He usually explains the Marxist perspective underlying his theories: that global issues cannot be resolved at the level of national states. They need to be solved jointly by humankind, says Žižek, who simply believes that, in order to successfully face climate change or the next, even more mortal pandemic, we need to form a general human, communist-like conscience. And we probably also need to develop a new form of global leadership. We need to understand that we are—as one body of humankind—in trouble, and that we can only resolve it together.

But even, if we succeed in attaining something close to this in the future, if we miraculously succeed in uniting all peoples, races, cultures and religions of this world in our battle against our common enemy, and if we somehow succeed in persuading everyone that it is necessary to act 'now,' our problem will still not be resolved. Because as soon as the word 'now' is activated, it would have to be translated into approximately 6,500 living languages of our world and we would encounter approximately 6,500 different interpretations of these words and we would end up with 6,500 terms of action.

We could already observe some similar occurring at all of the United Nations climate conferences to date—Glasgow (2021), Paris (2015), and Copenhagen (2009). In principle all the members present, with very rare exceptions, agreed that taking action was urgent and that intervention is necessary 'now.' Yet, in setting up the time schedule it always turned out that 'now' was an optionally extendable notion and that each country understood the future in its own way.

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People have a similar difficulty in coming to a mutual understanding of emergency in the everyday life. When a wife asks her husband to vacuum the apartment 'now,' or when a mother tells her child to clean his room 'at once,' or when a company superior orders a subordinate to send a tender 'immediately,' we automatically find ourselves in the sphere of conflict. We usually disagree in our estimate of 'now': whether the husband has time to finish reading an article in the newspaper before vacuuming; whether the child can finish his drawing before tidying up his room; whether the employee has time to reply to a few emails before sending the tender. The same applies to the countries' perspectives at climate conferences; we also often diverge in the understanding of emergency, expressed in the term 'at once.' Yet, in everyday life, in addition to verbal communication, we can also use non-verbal communication. We often do not only 'hear of' or 'read of' an emergency, as we do not grasp it only from the spoken or the written, but we often also 'feel it,' we recognise it. In other words, our understanding of emergency greatly depends on the manner in which a word 'at once' was spoken, and on the circumstances in which it was delivered.

Therefore, in everyday life a wife to her husband, a mother to her child, and a superior to his subordinate do succeed in pointing out 'emergency,' but at the societal level, where there is no non-verbal communication, we encounter difficulties in communicating emergency. Of course, if circumstances help us to identify because danger is visible—if a hurricane is near, or if a war starts—it is clear to us that we urgently need to find shelter. But if danger is invisible, like in the pandemic (or in the case of climate change), emergency often remains ill understood.

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During the first lockdown, one morning I had accidentally spilled boiling coffee on my son's knees. As if in a slow motion I watched how coffee from an overturned coffee-pot ran towards the edge of the table and flowed onto my son's knees. Only when my son shrieked with pain and started jumping around the room, I stirred from my numbness and in a reflex pulled his trousers off his legs, something I was not supposed to do, as by doing so, I also tore the burnt epidermis off his skin which had stuck to his pants.

I carried him, still crying, to the bathtub in order to cool his burning knees with cold water and then, unable to remember where I had left my phone, started running headless around the apartment. And even when I finally found it, I tried in vain to press three digits on my phone to call for urgent medical help. In fact, I was so completely lost that I could not remember number 112 and if my wife hadn't been there, everything would have turned out very badly.

Until that day, I had always imagined that I was capable and able to keep a cool head in extraordinary circumstances and that even when I was under immense pressure, I was capable of staying rational. Only when my illusion was so mercilessly shattered, I realised that 'at once' with me was never 'at once.' And I also realised that this was somehow necessary. I became aware that I responded to most matters in my life with a delay as this was my way of protecting myself from losing my head.

I have probably been always afraid of emergency; I subconsciously knew that, in a battle with time I always lose my nerves in one way or another. Deep down I probably knew that, in a hurry, things get out of my control, and when my actions in a panic become thoughtless and hasty, I regularly make mistakes.

And I defended myself by not wanting to recognise emergency. I preferred to delude myself that there was none and that I had plenty of time. In this way I calmed myself and I secured myself a quieter and more rational, although often an overdue, response.

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Now when I reconsider our society's repeated overdue response to the pandemic and the fact that we repeatedly did not understand emergency and how our 'at once' was never really 'at once,' I somehow recognise myself in this reticence.

"The forthcoming fourteen days will be decisive!" were repeatedly announced by the authorities, when the situation of the epidemic



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rapidly deteriorated and the number of infected people in the country started to grow exponentially. And it was always clear that they were talking about some simply virtual time, about the time we did not have, as the time for an efficient action was already over at that very moment. Obviously, the authorities were afraid of emergency much more than they were afraid of the virus and preferred to consciously fool themselves that action was not actually urgent. "We do not want to cause panic and to frighten people," they repeated, as if panic and fear was a much bigger danger than the virus itself.

We were afraid that our society in a panic would be as headless and lost as I was when I spilled coffee over my son. We were afraid that our reason would fail us. But we forgot that any reason, capable to grasp emergency, has already failed.

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"Time comes when there is no more time," the great Slovene poet Dane Zajc once wrote.<sup>3</sup> And it would be hard to better and more accurately put into words the time we live in, the time we are running out of. Yet, in existing languages we are unable to express it or at least to put it down in the way we could understand. Therefore, it is probably necessary to invent a new language, the language of emergency, in which the merciless words of the Slovene poet will be understood by everybody in an equally merciless way.

<sup>3</sup> "Time of Yours" in *Dol Dol*, published Nova revija, 1998

Because, if we really need to face the challenges of our unpredictable time at the global level, then we undoubtedly also need a language. A language in which we will not be able to delude ourselves, a language in which emergency will not be relative, a language in which 'at once' will mean 'at once.' We need a language in which time will run equally hastily for all of us.

Unfortunately, Time, when there is no more Time, has already come. And it has come to all of us.





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## Art and Emergency

ISSUE editor, Venka Purushothaman with artists Vincent Leow,  
Pratchaya Phinthong, Milenko Prvački

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*This conversation took place in the heritage city of Georgetown in Penang, Malaysia, on 27 and 28 April 2022. The discussion aims to be as close to the participants' comments within their vernacular expressions and has only been edited for clarity where needed. The original transcription was considerably longer, and the present form here is a focused rendition.*

## perceptually art

Venka Purushothaman

We live in a state of flux. We look at an emergency as a crisis that is always called a break, a rupture. That's a bleeding and a wounded society. Wound also means renewal of life—rejuvenation. As you know, in all these moments of crisis, we stop talking to artists about ideas and their take on the world. We have no time to observe but are flooded with imagery. And so, I just want to get a sense from you, mainly where you are at in your practice and your responses to the world. What new things do you observe?

Pratchaya Phinthong

As an artist, a practising artist, I feel a sense of not an emergency but urgency all the time. I make myself available, yet I don't know in which arena I could explain myself. I'm trying to understand all the painting, printmaking, and sculpture I have learnt and then try to forget it all. I have them as an asset, and I recall and work on them whenever I need them. The simplest and hardest thing to do is to be ready and to be able to absorb and feel the things and everything surrounding you and to try to reform yourself.

This experience is happening every day. That's why the sense of urgency for me in practice is to be able to cope with the urgency in terms of where you can; whatever you have learnt in your history, that knowledge will secure you or be fundamental to what is coming at you. I can feel the subject you brought up is very interesting, but to what extent is this an emergency? Is it because, as you were saying, we are dealing with time or is it COVID-19 or war? So, there has been something that has been coming to the peak where we find ourselves emerging and changing and becoming something that will change us forever.

So now we can travel again because we never thought that something like COVID-19 would happen and how our lives would change. I had a lot of changes in my life as well. We shift ourselves from the crisis and we go on. I think the problem I have the most is getting used to thinking to understand, to feel the cause of the emergency. So, this takes getting used to. I'm not applying a negative or positive take on it, but it's a feeling I have to get rid of—to have soft skin to start, to be refreshed all the time. Because all the knowledge, all the media, everything gets you used to war which is already a month old. You get used to something that is constantly nonstop (COVID-19, war); whenever you turn on the TV or open your ears and eyes, everything comes to a state of violence. So how can we have immunity, that is, understanding the point of something?

Vincent Leow

I liked what Venka said about observation. We are all observing this whole thing. And I think that observation as an art student today is lacking because they are all just drawing from their electronic devices. Sometimes when I take [students] for outdoor drawing, they take a picture and then draw from their devices. There is a very mechanical observation and connection with the observation itself. They have become dependent on their devices. I feel that observation is more than drawing their subjects.

I believe that the idea of 'emerge' comes across strongly because 'emergency' or 'emerge' manifests from observing. We become more observant as artists when we see something emerging. I feel that one of the things that artists do is respond to their subject. I think that the

idea of responding is essential. In the military, too, you observe the enemy emerging, and then you respond. And in artmaking, we use that response. I feel that emergence and emergency are connected because of that immediate response to a situation. There are a lot of times I feel that we are somehow stalling, somehow delaying our responding. Maybe we depend on some instructions?

Milenko Prvački

I absolutely agree with Vincent. He brings art students into nature, and they take a picture and then look at the camera. We have the big picture right in front of us, and we reduce it to something that we have to focus on—totally disconnecting from nature because the observation skill is absolutely different when we have another perspective. But I'm thinking about our own stresses. I am trying to say it's not only an emergency in the hospitals, but when you switch on or off the TV, it looks like this. Anyway, you can't sell information, newspapers or TV programmes with good news. We have all of these stresses which are not easy to fight. You know when you cut your fingers, you see a doctor; now [the stress] is something which is becoming very permanent, plus COVID-19 and war. And it's not only about the Ukrainian war. Last thirty or forty years, we have seen war somewhere all the time. I ran away from the civil war in the middle of Europe, but then we have the Middle East—always every day some war, and we never say it's a third world war like the first two which ended. We have a permanent ongoing war. War is consuming all of us. There is a democracy, but at the same time, it's the double standard where the power has a pattern. What's happening in Ukraine-Russian War is very similar to what happened with Serbia and Kosovo.

We all know our history.

Vincent Leow

Art traditionally is always problematic, the problems in art that makes us think, to make us look at it with a fresh eye, inviting different perspectives. The media provides different perspectives from an artist's perspective and intention. Artists look at everything differently; rather than taking sides because to the artists, everything is grey.

Milenko Prvački

I think we don't have pleasant inspiration. We have ideas, but we can't catch any of these beautiful ideas. I have started to understand why art is becoming devoid of aesthetics.

Pratchaya Phinthong

Lacking ideas is one thing that is traumatising. A lot of ideas are also traumatising in certain ways. There is no fine line. Art is a thought-provoking process, so it engages you to be thinking. So, the boundary is also part of the game to set terms for the way of thinking. When you fall into one basket or a different one and then try to admit yourself to that, it doesn't seem to be right. As you say (Vincent), it's not to say that we are to be the victims of the phone this and that or we understand one side or both or up or down below or better than the other, but we are trying to transfer this conflict.

The conflict doesn't have to be so big. It can be small, on the toilet, or anywhere inside your body. That which is provoking us to do art, that's beneficial. It allows me to deal with a lot of things and sets me free to go from one side to the other, and allows me to make myself open and understand other people. It's not in a general way.

Art becomes this line. Every sequence of time you project this urgency or emergency or the unexpected, it obstructs our view. And if you see this obstruction, not in the terms of Buddhism or whatever religion, but in terms of something that is confronting you, for me, that would be subject to mobilise, to work on it. If you turn the other way, you will still see the unexpected kind of stuff anyway. Life has already been created like this and will continue until the last of your days.

Venka Purushothaman

I really appreciate how the conversation is dealing with what I would say the deficit of culture that art presents to us. This is a positive thing but also a negative thing. I mean, you talked about observation, you talked about urgencies, we reached into historical misgivings, and you know there are the perspectives and the boundaries within which we are operating. I think the deficit is also how artists have to respond to immediacy. Actually, as Pratchaya says, artists can choose not to respond to it. What, in actual fact, I think is that we are overly institutionalised in our responses. We are numbed to spontaneity.

I want to return to observation. I was kind of reflecting on what Vincent said. As an undergraduate student, for a module in communications, I had to write, if my memory serves me right, close to 100 entries of observations. For example, one aspect was intra-communication, where you had to observe yourself, for example, brushing your teeth and writing about the ritual. Then you're supposed to write about aspects of non-human communication processes where you could observe a cat, dog, or mouse. Then, in human communication where you had to observe someone that you personally know (for example, family member), observe people who are not your family members and observe people in large group settings. The exercise helped map and shape multiple perspectives and sharpened the way I created perspectives and contexts.

But that's that thing because I think as human beings, we all of a sudden are now being told how we should function, not just as artists, but as humans. How do we observe, and how do we communicate in an increasingly technologised world? Of course, as humans, we are also trained to be nice to people, tolerant, and diverse. But the fact is, we are no longer ourselves in terms of how we respond to people because of technology.

Pratchaya Phinthong

When I ask students to observe closely when they are taking a shower, this is a kind of action. Once you try to see it, it will change from what comes automatically, naturally. It starts with soap. What kind of soap? So, if you have started the same way, you put shampoo. So, if you don't think of that, it goes naturally. So, I think, it's about projection. So, are you projecting yourself or are other people projecting you? So, the change of this kind of movement or the way that this performative thing will change according to them. For me, when I don't 'think' about my shower, every shower is the same all the time.

Milenko Prvački

I find very interesting this writing project Venka spoke about because it connects to the idea of perception, delivery, waiting and responding. So, whatever in these three, four stories you mentioned—perception is number one. Perception skill is the ability to observe and transform. But then, when you look at a toilet bowl and describe it's something very observational and very pragmatic. When you have to analyse your

cat, you are already more emotional. When you have to observe and perceive your close family, then you are very emotional. So, this is how we respond. Perception is always number one. We will have to observe in order to react, but the ways are different. And I think we artists are sometimes quite emotional, which is nothing wrong, but it's becoming wrong because sometimes your reaction is in conflict with new rules.

Venka Purushothaman

Self-analysis is very intimate. As such observational skills and perception are key. We have to care for ourselves before embarking on self-analysis. If I can't look after myself, how am I going to be able to give a sense of a situation or express an experience, or have a conversation with someone else who might have view on a situation. So, I think that self-awareness is important. I find with technology and social media I think our self-awareness has become so much more in a sense of inertia. If we normalise all of this now, do I need to respond?

### **Language of their own**

Milenko Prvački

Art is trapped in the idea of 'style' for thousands of years. We don't have, and it is not correct to use 'style'. Art is about language because it's a very individual. Art is not style. And that's why it's important to understand artists.

Venka Purushothaman

People have forgotten that art itself is a language of its own. Today, there's a sense of urgency to introduce technology in art in every school in every corner of the world. If artists feel a need for technology to formulate their language, fine. If not, why would I want to impose?

Vincent Leow

The media has changed today. The pressure of technology provided to students and they are like "hey, I don't need the sketchbook anymore, I just need the iPad or an electronic device, you know?" So, in the end I think the whole process of processing observation, thinking or self-awareness has become diverse and different.

Venka Purushothaman

I just saw a very interesting piece of final year design student work at LASALLE working through hip-hop dance movement and light systems to develop a typographical system for writing...

Milenko Prvački

This is talking about language I think is very important. It's important that our own limits are personal. How much do we want to be free and unlimited is a personal choice. But, then again, we create our own kind of borders, our own fences and limits and its personal. It's a choice. I get angry when someone else imposes or creates limits for the individual.

Venka Purushothaman

Your point Milenko leads to the right to critique or comment. And the right to critique and criticise was very organic in terms of how a person was thinking through the situation, the issues and all that. But I think increasingly, we live in a world where, like you earlier mentioned, you know the boundaries are very black and white. It's either this or that and technology has enabled, social media enabled it to be very black and white, that the fact that the right to critique is no longer sitting in the in-between space. Because the right to critique is to actually tease out the issues that even the artist may not have realised. Sometimes the artist is coming from a particular perspective and through that conversation/critique you see things that manifest itself in ways that you might not have imagined or intended.

And I don't think we have that space there. Because everyone is taking such categorical perspectives in very thick boundary lines. And I think this is also part of the problem with philosophy and education. Boundaries and binaries are so entrenched and people are struggling to free themselves to create new ways of thinking.

So, I'll give you an example. I was at a conference some years ago in Zurich and the conference was about collaboration. And one of the key topics around collaboration was why increasingly we need to be providing for collaborative collectivist artistic practices, group practices rather than individual and there was a lot of discussion about moving away from the individual as the artist. And this was coming just before the Indonesia artist collective, Ruangrupa was appointed as curators of Documenta 15. So Ruangrupa's Ade Darmawan was there, he was part of it. The Swiss and the German presentation was the art of the future would be highly collectivist. It would be co-created, co-shared, co-thought through in different ways breaking away from hierarchical approaches to power structures. But this is what we do in Southeast Asia anyway. So, I referenced back to the Indonesian concept of *gotong-royong* or coming together to deliberate and proceed as a way of thinking. And hence all of a sudden, you know, Southeast Asia became sexy for Europe. And they were looking for artists who were having that kind of a space that you can come in and infuse a new way of thinking about it.

Milenko Prvački

Not only Europe but US, have become overstructured. I'm able to contextualise everything! Here in Asia, we are talking about opening door, window and trying to get out. There (Europe and US) they are trying to do opposite. To lock down something. They think they are able to anticipate what's going to happen. Because of media, sometimes they do unfortunately. But I think for them Southeast Asia is out you know, because they are suddenly surprised that there are so many open doors and windows here while they have locked themselves. They always ask me when I go back (to Asia) what am I doing there? It is the reason why I bring young artists to Pulau Ubin first; and most of them think that Singapore/Asia is a banana tree. It's totally wrong. I say: "Oh, I enjoy it there because everything is fresh." Here it's just open. You do whatever you want. You accept any influence, you mix up. In Europe everything is already overstructured. It's boring.

Venka Purushothaman

This over-structuring is entering seriously into identity politics. You know everyone you know.

Milenko Prvački

You mentioned about being critical. We are critical about things. We perceive social issues, philosophical issues, historical issues, community. The major problem with us is how much critical we are about ourselves; you mentioned the example about showering and how we shower, I'm sure you always do it in the same way. I shower in the same way and I start from here and go down—it's the way I move. So, I was always thinking about that: every evening when I leave my studio, I'm real genius and then in the morning when I come in, I say shit what did I do. Because being alone with your own work expressing things on the spot sometimes too fast and then enjoying the process, but then when you come back and look it could be different. It's not the right way. Sometimes if you don't step back and look at your own work that's the major mistake of artists.



## fragility

Pratchaya Phinthong

Being fragile also enables artists to create at the same time. So, that's really explaining the situation where we are living. You need to be poor to understand the value of this other side.

Venka Purushothaman

We are fragile in many ways. But then there's still strength in the artistic enterprise, there's still strength in what we are seeing and what artists do.

Milenko Prvački

About the word fragility, I am always thinking that there is no 'normal' and there are no 'normal' people.

People, sometimes or most of the time, are not allowed to comment or have their own opinion. Their job is to execute or produce or do something. With artists, we are a bit open. We unpack and we are exposed to sun, to nature. This is also fragile. Without us, this nature should carry on without problems but we damage the environment and nature becomes fragile. But we are naturally exposed to all this rubbish...sometimes it depends on artists as to how fragile they are.

Apropos, I want to ask Vincent something because I never asked you. I hope you're not going to be offended. When I came to Singapore, you and your group (The Artists Village) were very active as painter and performance artist—very provocative, and you were having lots of problems, risky art. Even now, in the eyes of censorships and politics. And I remember, you did a lot of risky things. You are a quiet man now. What was your perception then, when your art drew strong reactions?

Vincent Leow

It was a journey for me and it is very important and I don't regret it. If I don't do it or because I think that making art is about taking risks and we don't have all answers to artmaking. At that time when I was doing performance, painting and all I'm doing, I feel that at that time I don't fully understand any of these artforms like performance art. I feel that it was an important learning curve in my process. Exploring different artforms impacted me to be able to look at/ reflect on my artmaking process.

Now we can provide art students advice; in my early years very little advice or anything was provided. So, there is a shift in the way we make our art. There is an artmaking practice that you go on our own without guidance (self-taught) and there's a practice that you go with a lot of guidance. And this guidance is institutionalised.

For me, it is the exploratory element in my work and I also learnt a lot—taking risks becomes a big part in my artmaking.

The arts community does give a lot of support. I remember during my risky performance works in the 1990s, people really supported me and helped me. Artists are sometimes not the most articulate people. I really appreciate that there were people who helped articulate the work. So, I think that it can be good stress because after that performance they helped to talk through the process. I saw it as a kind of a reflection. All this experience to me is a part of my journey in my art practice. And this has allowed me to reflect upon what I can further in my own practice and whether I'm able to define my personal and public space. I became more aware and to think deeper into my work. What I have

gone through is all part of learning. What I make or what I do as an artist can only be done are my experiences of the work I make today.

Venka Purushothaman

Because you've spent quite a bit of time in the Middle East, Sharjah, right? If we think Singapore is a strict place, you were going to an even stricter place, and for someone whose works might be perceived by others as being risky.

Vincent Leow

One of the reasons I wanted to go there was I was a young artist, I was eager to learn about Western art. Most of my peers would choose to go to the UK and I chose US because American art was what interested me. My conversations on art with friends were mostly about eastern and western art, seldom or hardly were any about the Middle East and it became a place of interest to me. One of the reasons I wanted to go to the Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE) was because I was curious and there was an opening for me. Even though the place was conservative, I learnt that it was not so as I imagine. Something that I found in the UAE was that there was somehow a very clear line between what is private and what is public in the Middle East. It made me interested about private and public spaces. During my time there I remember, watching a programme on cable television there, realising that they have much more variety of choices than our programmes here. I felt that they don't have as much censorship as we do here, on their private TV channels. Whereas in the public space, such at the Kinokuniya Bookstore when I was there to buy an art book, I see nude paintings redacted using a black marker. In comparison, in the university library I don't see that happening. Being there made me think about the realm of public and private spaces there alot. I think that making my artwork there also allows me to look at a different approaches and perspectives to my artmaking.

### **Struggles/Education**

Venka Purushothaman

And how do you educate, how do you teach, how do you create environments and communities in an information-loaded world. It's not just about the art school, but just general education itself. An important part of education is in building of communities amongst peers to support and learn from each other not just enabling individual skills achievement. This lack of emphasis on artist communities, I believe, contributes to the struggles in the journey of the artist.

Milenko Prvački

In art nothing is fixed. We float and swim all the time, and you know, just waiting to sink. But young artists today are more concerned about many things, and I quite like their independence.

Vincent Leow

...finding their own space, finding their own voices to be heard...

Milenko Prvački

I'm joking here, but Van Gogh will die in Singapore after six months because no way someone would give him food, paint or whatever. You can't borrow money from someone in Singapore easily. If people do give, they make profit out of the loan. In Belgrade, if I have a problem, I ask my parents or my friends and this is very normal. So, that's why I joke that Van Gogh would die very fast here. In Europe, artists are respected. Even bad artists are respected. So I have many friends who became heavy alcoholics. Because when they sit in restaurant, a bottle of wine is there, a table waiting for people to drop off wine and food 'for all the

artists.' Artists stop going to their studios and prefer to sit in restaurants and drink. But we need artists. It's like my grandmother always said, someone in the family has to be artist. Today, there are unions in some countries that will arrange that government to support struggling artists with pensions and medical support.

Pratchaya Phinthong

In Thailand there's no union, no pensions sort of. My way of understanding to be naked to situations and feel all the things as you practise your art. A lot of people in places like Silpakorn University, Chiang Mai university have sort of a name, and some left the university and became artists. In my class of fifty students, probably two or three became artists. They really sit with their thing. And then the others, that's fine too.

Artists cannot be finding a kind of soft wall or soft landing for them wherever the situation is really harsh, there is no way. Because you perform as a professional artist when you are over thirty, selling art is not for everyone also. That is only one part. The second part is the collector, kind of leading you to somewhere for doing art, kind of influencing you. There's sort of playing around, some kind of negotiation, but also will kind of shape you to a certain state.

A lot of young artists I know or artists in my age, they are really doing their thing. I mean, mostly middle class, so somehow when they are short of money, they have some... and some people would just come out from graduation and start to think about having a place to do their own thing, like startups. Of course, the opportunity for startups is there but even then there's no kind of drop of water or something that could transport artists a little bit further. I think money is only one thing.

Milenko Prvački

That is what I want to say. Different countries have a different system on how to manage, or a better way to say it, *not* managing artists. But that means we are in a permanent state of emergency. Because intellectual or spiritual contribution to the society, are ignored financially. You don't remember who is the lawyer or doctor in 17th century but you know what they do, and you go and see this architecture, music, whatever...and not everyone understands Mozart. As artists, through exhibitions, actions and performances, we give something spiritual, something intellectual for a nation or society. So, they don't appreciate, or [they] think that this is contribution that need not be paid for. It's taken for granted everywhere—"You're an artist, can you sing something?" or ask Zelensky, "can you tell me something funny because you are a comedian?"

Vincent Leow

Historically, I believe that artists have had strong patrons. Like the royal family will support the artists and care for them. In contemporary times, I guess it has become like a job and no longer like "oh, you are a painter, come and paint something for us." In the past, I believe that artists play a very important role in society and like the Renaissance period, the Medici families would be patrons and nurture the artists through commissions.

Pratchaya Phinthong

What I did was, I had my wife start a t-shirt business selling in the market for a living: to relieve me of being dependent to, bound to. So, I just want to live my life and do what I love. That is the thing.

And when I ask for money, job from somewhere or support it's all like always having obligations. I don't mind painting someone's house, colour or doing something whatever job —art can really apply to all kinds of things. At the end of the day, I would do my thing. This is what I am. So, in order to do that, you have to make a living. And make a living, you can choose what you like, be a teacher, like floating, through that and a lot of people are having a side job in order to be able to move and you know like I don't know... I mean for example if you pick up very early as a young artist, success somehow, money-wise—there are people buying your work and you're fine. But to what point... yea, you must have a certain point. I think economics is also one subject and that's a great tool to draw out something and I think that's a great medium to understand the world that we live in very easily from the day you start to the day you end. So, I think, yea. This is the model that I found myself—that I believe if what I am doing is not going to sell in the beginning, I believe I am still in process. But that's kind of er...what you call, incubation like the time when you *be* something. You need time to be really you, but listen to everything and then being you. And then try to absorb and feel this. But that time can be poison too. When fragile, the fragility can break you out and destroy you from the beginning. This is what I think.

Milenko Prvački

I think you are right because what I was talking about and what you are talking about— families supporting artists and medicines and all these things. But your point is distressing because it is what's going on in our head, in our brain.

And I want to say that, we were talking about support of rich people, the way we survived in former Yugoslavia was similar but not because of the rich, but because of the middle class. What we don't have in Singapore—a middle class who appreciates art. So over there if they—and every week they have a wedding, birthday party over there—they would come and buy some drawings. And other weeks, they would come and take a painting or some ceramic sculpture as a present for wedding. It was normal. Nobody comes with envelopes with cash inside, or carries a fridge for the wedding you know. And I would also say that in Singapore, we can work more on art appreciation. This may be a middle class which is richer than former Yugoslavia, and they can still do the same. And of course, you are very rich and you will be collecting, you will support artists and you will buy. In Singapore we did have group of collectors, but they didn't catch our generation somehow. They did pioneer artists, they collect old stuff; and new business people, they don't have a collection or they buy work or they want to buy I don't know what. So, there is a gap in Singapore.

There are always some artists who are selling very well, they are rich and have no problems with this. But there are some practices that are not only aesthetic value but it's another kind of value.

Venka Purushothaman

It's kind of interesting in listening to all of you talk through the struggle of artists and in my own mind I was looking at three dimensions to struggle. Financial sustainability. How do I self-sustain and continue to connect. Another dimension is existential. The struggle of the self as to who am I, what am I doing, what is my work? This is even more challenging for emerging student artists There is pressure to succeed in the art world and at the same time a sense of unpreparedness consumes.

Because coming out of school, you only have the tools to put yourself on a journey. The third struggle, again I am drawing from what you all have said is that, really the fact that the artist's and the arts community's contribution to the intellectual life of society has not expanded beyond the gallery walls, transactionalised in some ways.

Milenko Prvački

I do agree. I think the problem with curatorial job in recent years is that they have started to ignore the metaphysical part of art. Instead, curators seek to get the artist to speak or explain. Some artists don't speak. Some are not intellectually capable.

Pratchaya Phinthong

I face that. Before, I never been able to speak as to what I think truly. So, each time I struggle. The way to explain art to somebody is also in the state of the moment. I think about a show I did and a woman came to me and asked me explain why I was doing my work in that way. It was really hardcore like French. "Actually, do you have time for it. It depends on how thoroughly or how big of your basket or and how badly you want to know."

Vincent Leow

In applying for grants today, artists who don't articulate their work through writing will tend to lose out to artist who are able to write fluently about their work. Artists tends to articulate their work on paper before they create. Artworks have become more and more dependent on artist texts. There is a need to read the artist text to understand an artwork. I do feel that artworks should be self-explanatory and should not be dependent on text. Where I find that's not always the case when for us, taking an example of the work of the expressionist artist such as Van Gogh, that we respond to what we see to appreciate the art.

Pratchaya Phinthong

I just want to say that it's all about the 'approach' from my point of view. The proposal, there is a way to approach. What I did somehow experience hasn't taken place yet. This is approach before that right. The reading, when you open exhibition the approach moment is really important to solve that solid situation where you cannot enter to an artwork easily. That approach for me is value. To set that approach very well but not to gain the thing, not to make a gain on that but the approach of reading the proposal and then trying to make that visually to the letters that's one thing. It's amazing. But then to be super abstract is also fine too. I remember when I had a class in Germany, we have artists visit our studio. In our studio we share three working spaces and there is one room. So, we decided to invite this artist and when he came, we shook hands and locked him in for 45 minutes and we left. Later, we unlocked the room and said goodbye. So, this kind of visit raised a lot of...But everything was set for him to wonder, to see, to understand quietly different persons, different works and stuff like that. This is an approach as well to also see what if we are not able to talk to each other. To understand the voice, understand the feeling through your palms, voice and ears. What would happen if you never meet these people—would you be able to get something and would that be all? So, I think it comes back to this point of approaching text, work, and approaching the visual, approaching the moment where it has to be a work. That's really important. Everything is interconnected as we know but how you highlight that into a form of really understanding and sharing.

Milenko Prvački

If someone likes to talk about work, I love talking about the work. Unfortunately, nobody is asking much about the work except

how much it cost and how long it would take to do it. I understand some artists that they can't speak. I have many friends and they're really fantastic but they can't articulate anything.

Vincent Leow

Some of the students make really amazing work but they can't really articulate it well.

Milenko Prvački

I find that, at least from my experience, artists who are able to teach are more articulate because they're forced to talk, to analyse, to look at works critically, to compare. Because we can't tell students I don't know what you're doing. We have reference. You know you have to read, you have to be informed. Not in order to copy, but to know what students is trying in finding their own language. This was a very funny example that happened at LASALLE in Goodman Road: Frank Stella. He was such a bad speaker he couldn't talk about his work. We filled the auditorium where we have staff meetings. My God, you know, everyone it's Frank Stella; but it was rubbish! No, he can't speak about his own work. Well, it's very strange. I was thinking it'd be better, I shouldn't come. It damaged my notion of him. I'm a big fan of his last work. His minimalist work I really like.

Pratchaya Phinthong

That's my curse. So when I had a first show there I had to talk at the Foundation that set me up. I don't like to talk. It's not like me today. Even today I don't like to talk in public. I love to come here because you say it's casual. At that time, people not coming in that time. So there was wine, and just waiting, I just drinking by myself; because it was raining I thought nobody would come and I drank a lot of wine. And the thing is that they came after rain. Full house. And I starting to open my computer. I was slowing down. Disaster. I couldn't remember what I was saying. Then my friend or some person who know me tried to explain my work to the crowd better than me. I just hoping to end really soon then I can go out. I hate talking. Then I felt really guilty because I couldn't take care of the audience. But I still drinking every time I talk. I kind of enjoy speaking to people when they come close and then I talk as it is more intimate. It's a dialogue that begins, their really wanting to understand, to know you. That's fine. That's really peaceful. Otherwise it becomes, like you know, it's shaky. It's a hundred people. Then you have to speak and then the curator. The curator is fine. If you have to do alone, it's disaster again. I don't how to start and then. You have to be trained and listen a lot to other people, how they did well. This is like a talk show. It's a performance.

Vincent Leow

Visual arts students do not visit enough exhibitions to look at the work of their peers. They spend a lot of time thinking and planning. Go look who is working like you. If you start looking at other peoples' work you will never create anything.

Milenko Prvački

Good point, on how to help this this kind of people. I realise it's successful. Otherwise, you don't know what to do with that. You just pick one two sentences about what they thinking about. What is that? And then I always suggest to look at history of references who deal with the same issue. Historically, they're all different. For example, if they want to do 'apple' you have hundreds of different apples. It's not about apple, it's about how you paint or create what language applies to apple and then you choose your own. This is another way. But it's good to know another way historically how that issue was dealt with. We want



to approach *emergency* in the same manner. We didn't talk here about one kind of emergency. We talk about so many things that is even not about emergency. Each narrative, each story has a kind of situation that is interrelated.

Venka Purushothaman

I was making my own notes about speaking of the unspeakable. What do you see of the world? Also, social media has made it very difficult to speak because you are already spoken of. In many ways people have already looked at your work. There is nothing left for you to speak. That's another problem of uncritical reflection of what goes on online in many ways.

Milenko Prvački

In different texts, comments they are quoting from social media. I find that they speak out in a position of anonymity. Nobody knows you. They don't feel responsible for what they are saying. They say so many stupid things. But because they are not exposed, they are not responsible. That's why so many people talk rubbish.

Vincent Leow

There is a kind of system about questioning the state of art like a practitioner and educator. I think it's good to have this conversation always going on. Because the conversation of art has always been formal and people don't get together to talk about it. It's been interesting here.



**Chen Yun** (Shanghai, China) studied Journalism at Fudan University and received an MPhil degree in Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. She was a member of the curatorial team of 11th Shanghai Biennale (2016-2017) and curated *51 Personae*, a public programme series that revealed the transformational potential of 51 persons/collectives/groups/objects/places in Shanghai. *51 Personae* grew out of her work initiating the Dinghaiqiao Mutual Aid Society (2015-2018), a self-organised site for studies, communications, reflection, and social projects, in a working class/migrant neighbourhood of Shanghai. Subsequently since 2018, *51 Personae* has journeyed to new and old destinations with publication as a means of sustaining this spiritual and creative movement todate. More than 20 publication works have been produced and circulated in independent bookstores all across China. Chen has also been working as project manager for West Heavens (since 2010), an India-China social thought and contemporary art exchange project.

**Amitesh Grover** (b. 1980, India) is an award-winning interdisciplinary artist. He moves beyond theatre into installation, video, digital and text-based art. His work delves into themes like the dyad of absence/presence, the necessity of remembering, and the performance of resistance to keep on living. He is the recipient of MASH FICA Award, Swiss Art Residency Award, Bismillah Khan National Award, Charles Wallace Award (U.K.), and was nominated for Arte Laguna Prize (Italy), Prix Ars Electronica (Austria) and Forecast (HKW, Germany). His work has been shown globally at venues like Southbank Centre (London), Arts Centre (Melbourne), MT Space (Canada), HKW Berlin (Germany), Belluard Bollwerk International (Switzerland), The Hartell Gallery (U.S.), and in India at Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Chennai Photo Biennale, VAICA Video Art Festival among several others. He has curated for ITFoK Festival (Kerala), Ranga Shankara (Bangalore), and Serendipity Arts Festival (Goa). He studied at University of Arts London, and is a published author in several journals. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the National School of Drama (India) and is a guest

faculty at NYU Tisch School of Drama. He is based in New Delhi, and his work is available online at [www.amiteshgrover.com](http://www.amiteshgrover.com)

**Ksenia Jakobson** (b.1989, Saint Petersburg, Russia) is a curator and researcher based in Berlin, Germany. She studied Art History at the Russian Academy and holds a MA in Curatorial Studies from the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig. Her research centers on the intersection of postcolonial theory and post-Soviet conditions. Jakobson began her career in Saint Petersburg working with the artist collective Chto Delat (2013), CEC Artlink (2013) as well as other artists and cultural institutions. She has recently worked with the Whole Life Academy at HKW (2021-22), lectured at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg on expanded Post-Soviet decolonial issues, and co-curated the exhibition *Do You Ever Just Ascend?* at Galerie Barbara Thumm.

**Vincent Leow** (b.1961, Singapore) is an artist at the forefront of Singapore art and vanguard figure of alternative art platforms including The Artists Village (TAV) and the iconic Plastique Kinetic Worms (PKW). His practice, spanning over 34 years, with some 29 years concurrently in art education, is formidable in its breadth and diversity. Leow works in painting, printmaking, sculpture, assemblage and conceptual art; and his accomplishments are recognised in the conferment of the Cultural Medallion in 2020. Leow studied at LASALLE College of the Arts (1987); he has a MFA from Maryland Institute College of Art, USA (1991), and DFA from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia (2005). His works are in museum and corporate collections. He has represented Singapore on leading platforms including the 52nd Venice Biennale 2007.

**Mahsa Aleph** (b.1990, Iran) is an installation artist. Aleph's projects deal with classical Persian literature and creating physical forms for words. The central themes behind her work are fundamental questions and concerns of humans while facing the essence of and relationship with existence, relationships between human beings and the environment, and how culture is formed through

our discourse with the environment. The historical memory of materials and objects is elemental in her installations. The process has great significance in Aleph's work: The narration of forming an installation is part of the work. The studio can be her home and can extend to the deserts around Tehran, salt lake, a dried bread factory, and prisons. Mostly, writing a singular sentence is the first phase of creating her artworks. In the following stages, it would gain a physical and tangible form that can be experienced. The artist tries to transform the concept into an atmosphere where one can take a step in, like the experience of jumping into a pool, where we enter a different atmosphere. In *Only the Writer Has Read the Book* (2013) Aleph sets out to return language to its zero point, using a salt-cured book: impossible to read, interpret, or translate. *Aleph's Library* (2017), *An Introduction to Aleph's Library* (2017), *The Aleph's Archive* (2018), *The container Made of the Contained* (2019), *Corpse* (2019), and *Jowhar* (2021) were all made in a similar vein, alluding to a kind of thought that is ready to sacrifice anything for the author's imaginary intentions.

**Dušan Petričić** (b. 1946, Belgrade, Yugoslavia) graduated from University of Belgrade Faculty of Applied Arts and Design in 1969 in the class of Professor Bogdan Kršić. During the last several decades his political cartoons and illustrations were regularly appearing in the major Yugoslav and Serbian newspapers and magazines (Politika, NIN Archives, NOVA), and since 1993 also in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Toronto Star*, *Scientific American*, *The Scientist* and many others. As co-author and/or illustrator he created more than 60 books for children, published in Yugoslavia and North America. Petričić is a recipient of many prestigious international awards for his cartoons and book illustrations from Tokyo, Amsterdam, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Leipzig, Moscow, Budapest, Ankara, New York, Philadelphia, Toronto, Montreal and Skopje. He was a professor of illustration and animation at the University of Belgrade, as well at the Sheridan College, Oakville, Canada and OCAD University, Toronto. Dusan currently divides his time between Toronto, Canada, and Belgrade, Serbia

**Pratchaya Phinthon** (b. 1974, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand) is an alchemist of economic value and social functions. In the work of this Thai artist, financial fluctuations, media alarmism, and the world labour market are transferred into matter as it transforms from solid to liquid to gaseous states, and then back again. Perhaps, however, it would be better to describe Phinthon as a trader who operates according to a logic opposite to that of profit, and who deals in cultural and value systems, trafficking in everyday meanings, hopes, and troubles. Phinthon accepts the perpetual transformation of form and politics, of existence and daily life, poetically transferring the metaphor of fluctuation in currency values to various areas of human action. Pratchaya Phinthon's works often arise from the confrontation between different social, economic or geographical systems. They are the result of a dialogue, and bring all their poetic

forces from an almost invisible artistic gesture. He had solo shows internationally including *Broken Hill*, Chisenhale Gallery, London (2013); *Sleeping Sickness*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Rennes (2012); *Give More Than You Take*, GAMeC, Bergamo (2011); and at CAC Brétigny (2010). Among his participation in group shows include *The Ungovernables*, New Museum Triennial (2012); dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel (2012); 11th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2016); *We Call It Ludwig*, *The Museum Is Turning 40!* Ludwig Museum, Koln (2017).

**Goran Vojnović** (b. 1980, Ljubljana, Slovenia) studied film directing and has been directing films and writing screenplays for almost twenty years now. But despite his successful film career he is mostly recognised for his writing, especially after his first novel *Čefurji raus!* (*Southern scum go home!*) became a regional bestseller and won him many awards. Vojnović has so far written four novels which have been translated into more than twenty languages, while some of them have also been successfully adopted for theatre and film. His most internationally renowned novel is his second, *Jugoslavija, moja dežela* (*Yugoslavia, my fatherland*), which, among many other acknowledgments, received the prestigious Angelus Central European Literary Prize for best Central European novel. For more than ten years Vojnović writes a weekly column in one of Slovenia's biggest newspapers Dnevnik. He lives and works in Ljubljana.

**Zaki Razak** (b. 1979, Singapore) is an artist-curator and art educator. His practice began as a street artist—and now spans a variety of genres, including graphic design and performance art—and challenges assumptions about social languages and rituals. Zaki is an alumnus of LASALLE College of the Arts.

**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 Singapore’s foremost artists and art educators, having taught at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore 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 and USA since 1971, in Singapore and the region since 1993, most notable of which was 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 from France in 2011, and Singapore’s Cultural Medallion for Visual Arts in 2012. In 2020, he was awarded the National Art Award, Serbia.

**Venka Purushothaman** PhD (Singapore) is Deputy President and Provost at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. He is an award-winning art writer with a distinguished career in the arts and creative industries in Singapore. He speaks internationally on transformative art and design education and works to enable the development of cultural leaders in Southeast Asia. Venka holds a PhD in Cultural Policy and Asian Cultural Studies from the University of Melbourne. He is a member of the Association Internationale des Critiques d’Art, (France/Singapore), Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts (UK), University Fellow, Musashino Art University (Japan) and member of the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany).

**Susie Wong** (Singapore) is an art writer, curator and artist. As writer, she has contributed to several publications, artist monographs and reviews in Singapore. She was a regular art reviewer in the 1990s for *The Straits Times*; a regular art feature writer for magazines such as *The Arts Magazine* (Esplanade); *ID* (Metropolitan), and *d+a* (Key Editions), on architecture and design, among many others. She has written for publications such as *Southeast Asia Today* (Roeder 1995); *Liu Kang: Colourful Modernist* (The National Art Gallery Singapore 2011) and *Histories, Practices, Interventions* (Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2016).







