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OCULA CONVERSATIONS

INTERVIEWS 2016–2017

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CONVERSATIONS
2016–2017

A selection of 25 interviews
first published on Ocula.com through 2016

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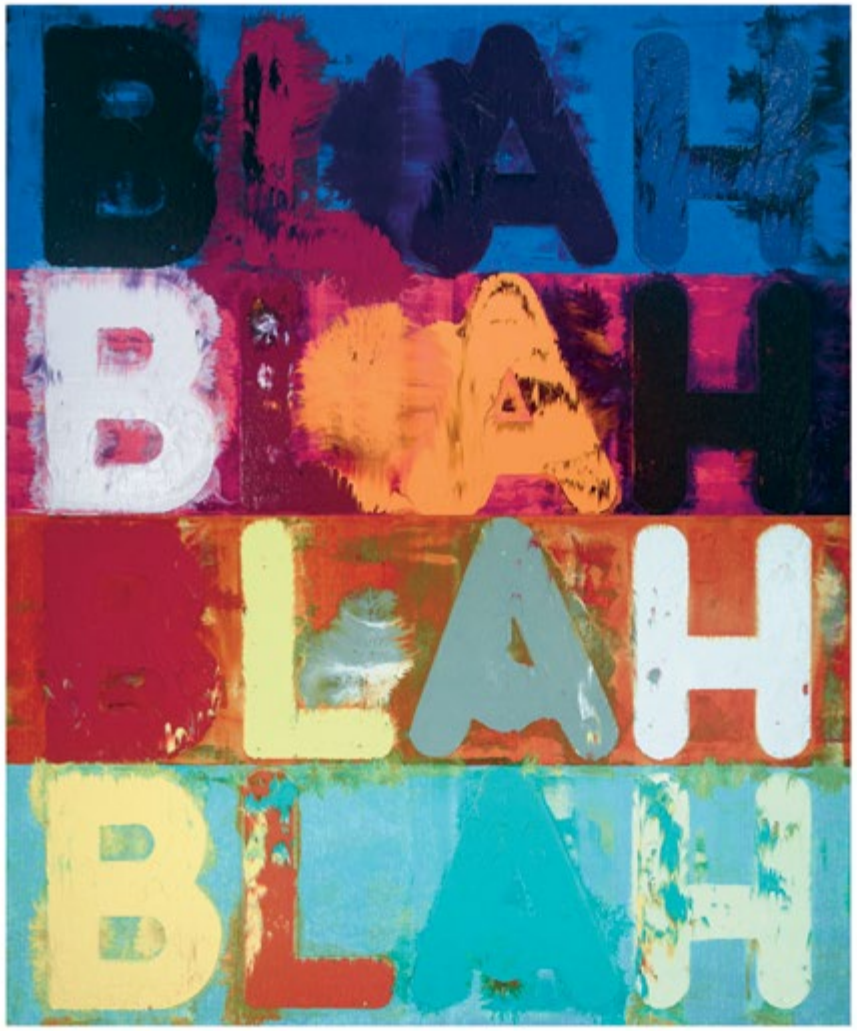
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OCULA CONVERSATIONS 2016–2017

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Following on from the launch of *Ocula Conversations* in 2016, we invited Defne Ayas, Doryun Chong, Natalie King and Philip Tinari to select 25 interviews published in Ocula's digital magazine over the last year for this second edition of the book. In reviewing the selection of interviews, and keeping in mind the political and social events that shook 2016, it seems that the art world not only continues to be a place for celebrating the human and creative spirit, but also provides a vital space from which to reflect on the current state of our world: how it came to be, what it is and where it might be going.

During May 2016, a period wedged between the bombings in Brussels and a post-Brexit reality, we interviewed Luc Tuymans about his New York exhibition *Le Mépris* at David Zwirner (5 May–25 June 2016). In the interview, Tuymans discusses his bruised paintings of dirty canals and forlorn festival floats, likening the show to a 'premonition of decay'. Asked about the exhibition's title (French for 'contempt') and exactly what he feels contempt for, he responded: 'Everything. Politics for sure. You could say we're living in interesting times . . . But we're also living in the decline of the West.'

Certainly, ideas surrounding the decline of America surfaced in much of the rhetoric put forward by Donald Trump, who ambiguously promised to 'make America great again' and was subsequently elected president of the United States in November 2016. It was a result that Alfredo Jaar deemed not inconceivable when we interviewed him in January 2016. In that interview, Jaar discusses not only Trump's possible ascent, but also his work *A Logo for America* (1987)—an animation first projected in New York's Times Square in 1987 that contests the United States' appropriation of the word 'America' as signifying an exclusive ethnocentric identity. Jaar felt the work, on its re-presentation in Times Square in 2014, had acquired a different meaning, related less to language, and more to the question of what it means to be American today.

Martine Syms, during our interview about her work that explores the relationship between black creative cultures and contemporary digital media, discusses how Trump's victory reflects an art world she feels is increasingly conservative, racist, homophobic and misogynistic. These are sentiments that took physical form in the placards that dominated the worldwide Women's Marches on 21 January 2017. Syms' words also resonate when thinking about an artist like Tracey Emin, whom we interviewed in March 2016, and who many argue continues to receive a disproportionate amount of criticism on account of her gender.

The interviews in this book reflect the vital role that contemporary art plays in identifying and questioning dominant power structures that drive society. Danh Võ, an artist who uses the careful placement of objects to create temporal leaps that explore ideas of violence, exile and identity, emphasises the necessity of such questioning in his September interview: 'You can lay naked on the beach and it doesn't get noticed, but if you're wearing a scarf or covering up, people are outraged that you're expressing your private life in public. What is this? What is the public and who defines it? . . . That powerful structure moves all the time and we're not even aware of it. I think that is why we have to challenge these notions.'

Wu Tsang, who discusses her multimedia installation *Duilian* (2016), expresses ideas around the use of language to construct and reconstruct facts and history. *Duilian*, which centres on the relationship between Qiu Jin—a legendary Chinese feminist and revolutionary poet executed for her involvement in a failed uprising against the Qing

dynasty—and her female friend Wu Zhiying, takes the theme of queer history (or rather its invisibility) as a point of departure.

Ideas surrounding the multiplicity of history are drawn out in conversations with artists such as Leung Chi Wo and Ho Tzu Nyen. Wo's interrogation of history, and in particular Hong Kong's 1967 riots, which began with a series of labour disputes and escalated to citywide violent protests against the British colonial government, seems pertinent to understanding the watershed moments that have come to define the territory as it increasingly comes under the control of Beijing. Hong Kong and its shifting identity is also touched on in Ho Tzu Nyen's discussion of his video installation *The Nameless* (2015), which reflects on the complexity of colonial narratives and multiple identities through piecing together found footage from several Hong Kong films starring actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai, who has been cast in a number of films as a double agent or informant. The intention behind the work is to create a fragmentary portrait of Lai Teck, who served as the Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party from 1939 to 1947, and who is believed to have been a triple agent who spied for the Japanese, among others.

Interviews with three collectors who have contributed significantly to highlighting alternative or under-acknowledged histories are also included in this book: Dr Uli Sigg, whose former collection underpinned the exhibition *M+ Sigg Collection: Four Decades of Chinese Contemporary Art* (23 February–5 April 2016); Kiran Nadar, collector and founder of her eponymous private museum that supported the exhibition of artist Nasreen Mohamedi's work at The Met Breuer in New York (18 March–5 June 2016); and John Kaldor, whose non-profit organisation Kaldor Public Art Projects presented *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* (2016), a major installation in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden by Aboriginal Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones (17 September–3 October 2016).

In addition to three collector and fifteen artist interviews, six curator interviews are also featured in this year's *Conversations*, including one with the collective DIS, curators of the 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (4 June–18 September 2016). In discussing *The Present in Drag*, the title of perhaps the most controversial biennale of last year, DIS comment that the reason people were upset about the Biennale is that it was 'focused on understanding our complicated relationships with the world we're in—our internal conflicts as consumers, as political beings, as "leftists", as people who want to do good within the world, as people who feel powerless, as people who are complicit, as people who are just people, as individuals within a system, and as individuals who generate content for this system.'

As we look back on the year that was 2016, the Ocula team, both individually and collectively, have felt it necessary to take stock. The words of Jitish Kallat from our 2016 *Conversations* book came to mind when he referred to 'self-reflection as a political act'. How do we, as an organisation, recognise the conflicts inherent in what we do, and yet move forward with the integrity that we want to have? How do we reconcile the reality of art as a commodity, and equally do justice to the importance of its role outside of the art market? How can we share the ideas of artists and curators with a wider audience, without pandering to a clickbait society? These are some of the challenges we are taking up in 2017 and, in doing so, we pay heed again to Kallat's words: 'Letting go of your own knowledge or certitude is a great place to start on any journey, whether it be creative, political or other.'

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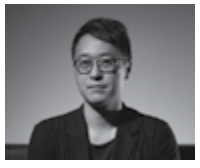
Selectors

DEFNE AYAS, DORYUN CHONG,
NATALIE KING, PHILIP TINARI



Courtesy Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.

DEFNE AYAS is a curator and publisher in the field of contemporary visual art and its institutions. She is currently the director of Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, where she oversees an exhibition programme devoted to established and emerging artists, writers and curators from across the globe. Since 2012, she has commissioned and (co-) curated long-term projects and exhibitions including the three-part *Art In The Age of. . .* series (2015); *Bit Rot* (2015) by Douglas Coupland; *Character is Fate* (2015) by Willem de Rooij; *The Music of Ramón Raquello and his Orchestra* (2017) by Eric Baudelaire; *Relational Stalinism—The Musical* (2016) by Michael Portnoy; *The Humans* (2012) by Alexandre Singh; *Tulkus 1880 to 2018* (2013) by Paola Pivi; *Blueprints* (2012) by Qiu Zhijie; as well as the award-winning exhibition *The Temptation of AA Bronson* (2013). Ayas has worked on a number of biennial projects: as curator of the Pavilion of Turkey at the 56th Venice Biennale; co-curator of the 6th Moscow Biennale; co-curator of the 11th Baltic Triennale; city curator for the 9th Shanghai Biennale; and curator-at-large at PERFORMA in New York. In 2013, Ayas conceived and launched WDWReview.org as Witte de With's online arts and culture journal, together with Adam Kleinman as its chief editor.



Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.

DORYUN CHONG was appointed the inaugural chief curator at M+ in September 2013, a museum of visual culture that will open in 2019 in the West Kowloon Cultural District of Hong Kong. In January 2016, he was promoted to deputy director and chief curator, M+. He oversees all curatorial activities and programmes including acquisitions, exhibitions, learning and public programmes, and digital initiatives encompassing the three main disciplinary areas of design and architecture, moving image and visual art. Recently, he co-curated *Mobile M+: Live Art (2015), Tsang Kin-Wah: The Infinite Nothing* (2015), Hong Kong's 2015 Venice Biennale participation, and *Tsang Kin-Wah: ~~Nothing~~* (2016). Previously, Chong was associate curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, where he organised projects including *Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde* (2012) and *Bruce Nauman: Days* (2010), and acquired a diverse range of works for the museum's collection. He also co-edited *From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan, 1945–1989: Primary Documents* (2013), and held various positions as a curator in the Visual Arts department at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis from 2003 to 2009. Exhibitions he organised include: *Haegue Yang: Integrity of the Insider* (2009); *Tetsumi Kudo: Garden of Metamorphosis* (2008); *Brave New Worlds* (2007); and *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* (2005). He has been part of numerous juries and panels, such as the Walters Prize at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2016); the Wolfgang Hanh Prize at Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2016); and the 2014 Hugo Boss Prize at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. His writing has appeared in journals such as *Artforum*, *Afterall*, *The Exhibitionist* and *Parkett*, and museum and biennale publications for the Auckland Triennial, the Gwangju Biennale and Kunsthaus Bregenz, among others.



Courtesy TarraWarra Museum of Art.

NATALIE KING curates programmes that include exhibition-making, publications, lectures, workshops, colloquia and cultural partnerships across contemporary art and indigenous culture. She is currently curator of the Australian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale 2017, presenting artist Tracey Moffatt; chief curator of Public Art Melbourne Biennial Lab, City of Melbourne and Melbourne Festival; and Senior Research Fellow, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. Previously, she was senior curator of MPavilion and inaugural director of Utopia@Asialink at the University of Melbourne. In 2016, she co-curated *Conversation: Endless Acts in Human History* with Entang Wiharso and Sally Smart at the National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, and *Monyet Gila: Episode One* with Shaun Gladwell and Adri Valery Wens at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. In 2014, she co-curated *TarraWarra Biennial: Whisper in My Mask* and the 13th Dong Gang International Photo Festival, Korea. She has curated exhibitions for numerous museums including the Singapore Art Museum; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; Palazzo delle Prigioni, Venice; the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Adam Art Gallery, Wellington; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo; Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, New Caledonia; and Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne. King co-edited (with Professor Larissa Hjorth and Mami Kataoka) the 2014 anthology *Art in the Asia Pacific: Intimate Publics* and was editor/curator of *Up Close: Carol Jerrems with Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and William Yang*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Australia. Widely published in arts media, including *Flash Art*, *LEAP*, *Artlink*, *Art Monthly* and *Photofile*, King is a member of the International Association of Art Critics, Paris.



Photo: Wang Jun.

PHILIP TINARI has served as director of Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), the museum at the heart of Beijing's 798 Art District, since late 2011. In his five-year tenure, he has mounted more than 60 exhibitions and organised a wide range of public programmes and development activities. His programme has introduced to China major international artists including Robert Rauschenberg, William Kentridge, Taryn Simon, and Tino Sehgal, and has tracked the evolving Chinese art scene through retrospectives and surveys of artists including Zeng Fanzhi, Liu Wei, Xu Zhen, Wang Xingwei, Kan Xuan, and Gu Dexin, as well as initiatives focused on emerging artists such as the 2013 survey *ON / OFF: China's Young Artists in Concept and Practice* and the ongoing exhibition series *New Directions*. Prior to joining UCCA, he was founding editor of *LEAP*, the internationally distributed, bilingual art magazine published by Modern Media Group. He is a contributing editor of *Artforum*, having previously served as founding editor of the magazine's online Chinese edition, artforum.com.cn. Tinari was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2015 and as a fellow of the Public Intellectuals Program of the National Committee on U.S.–China Relations in 2016. He is currently a DPhil candidate in art history at The University of Oxford and co-curator, with Alexandra Munroe, of the exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, which opens at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in October 2017.

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Leung Chi Wo

IN CONVERSATION WITH KATIE FALLEN
HONG KONG, 4 JANUARY 2016

Courtesy MILL6 Foundation, Hong Kong.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Leung Chi Wo's work often explores urban space, colonial history and collective memories. He is a key figure in Hong Kong's art world, having co-founded the important non-profit contemporary art space Para Site in 1996. In 2015, Leung was the subject of a mid-career survey exhibition, *Press the Button. . . Leung Chi Wo: A Survey Exhibition* at OCAT Shenzhen (25 April–30 June 2015). Most recently, The Mills Gallery in Hong Kong, a new non-profit art and cultural institution, inaugurated their opening programme of pop-up exhibitions with a solo show dedicated to the artist at The Annex, Nan Fung Place, titled *Tracing some places* (5 December 2015–9 January 2016).

Soon to be based in the redeveloped space of the old Nan Fung Textile Mill (which is set to open in 2018), The Mills Gallery aims to take as its focal point textile arts, in order to interact with its location's heritage as a central component in Hong Kong's long history of textile manufacturing. Given the connection to history, it is appropriate that Leung's exhibition inaugurated the organisation's programme. *Tracing some places* brings together two new installations alongside a selection of earlier pieces, all of which exemplify the artist's photographic and archival practice. Conceptually rigorous, the exhibition creates interwoven narratives that propel the viewer into the past, calling on them to 'push the button' and become complicit in the re-telling of history.

In this interview, Leung discusses his relationship with Hong Kong, his latest exhibition and his thoughts on the art-world ecology of the city.

KF **Your practice reflects a considerable interest in Hong Kong's urban spaces, language, memory and colonial history. How do you define the relationship between your artistic practice and Hong Kong?**

LCW Hong Kong is a place where I live and work; it's therefore very natural for me to explore subject matters here. I just try to make observations on my surroundings, and I tend to work on things that I feel are accessible. My relationship with Hong Kong is complicated, but I have never ceased to find interesting and inspirational elements in the city. Maybe it's also a matter of time, as I spend a lot of it here.

KF **Your latest exhibition, *Tracing some places*, is organised by The Mills Gallery, a new institution whose location is embedded into the history of Hong Kong's textile industry. This inherent connection between the gallery and the past ties in with your work. Could you talk about why history and research have come to form the backbone of your artistic practice?**

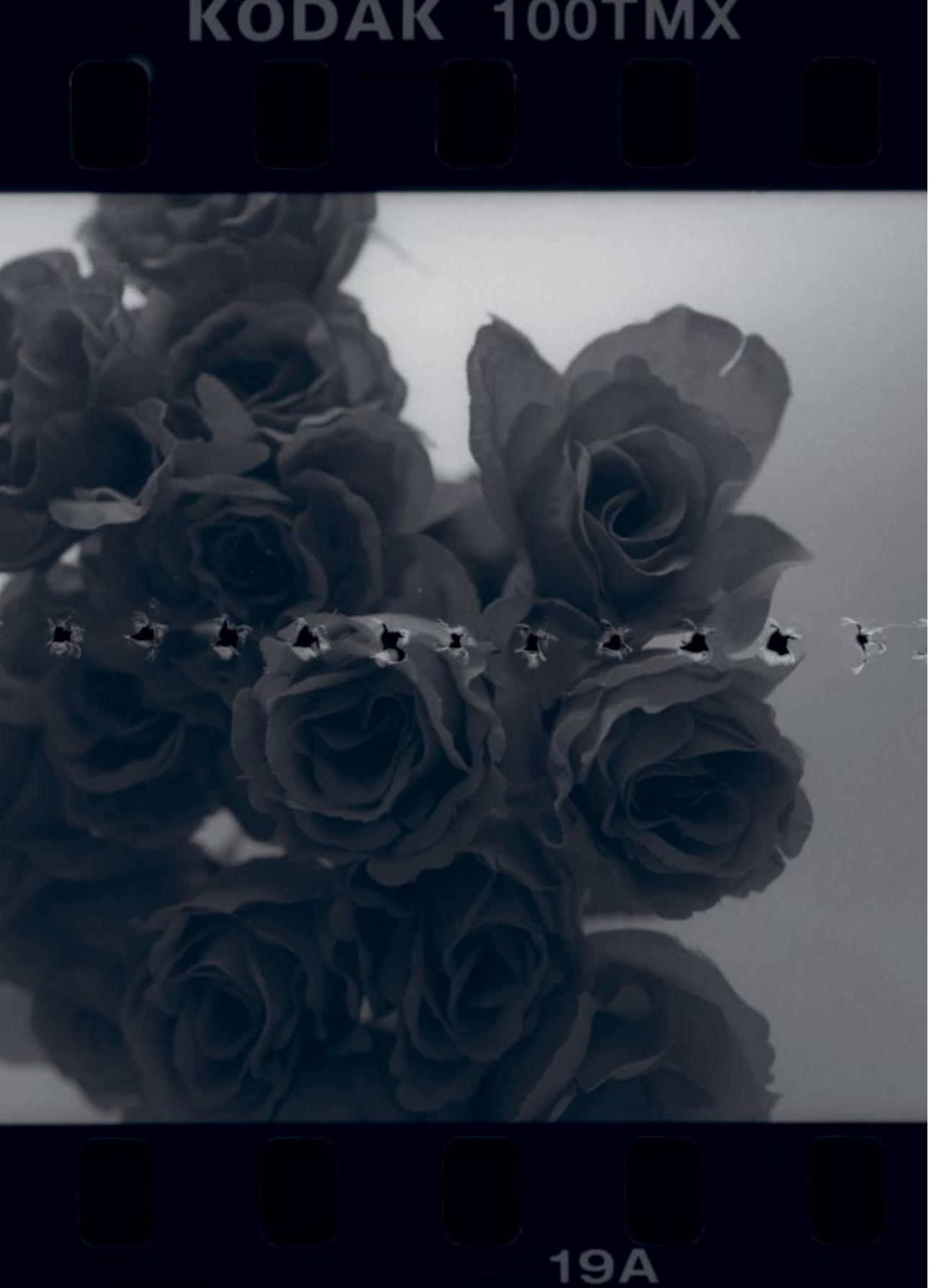
LCW Perhaps I am just not so imaginative, and dreams or the subconscious can never be foundational elements that I rely on. I also consider myself a rather rational person. So research suits my character and gives me knowledge and information to create. History has been my favourite subject since I was young. I also feel that historical sense has been somewhat lacking in general in our society, and maybe my rebellious instinct urged me to do something more uncommon. And not least, I believe we can never live in a place or exist without history.

KF **For your exhibition you created two newly commissioned works, *Frater* (2015) and *Untitled (Roses)* (2015). For *Frater*, you reconfigured an old sewing machine, similar to the one you had in your childhood home, so that it punches holes at one-minute intervals into photographic films, which have images of artificial flowers on them. Could you explain what inspired *Frater* and how you approached the production of the work?**

LCW The notion of violence and conflict is something that I have been interested to explore in my art. When considering the industrial background of The Mills Gallery, I recalled my parents' industrial sewing machine, which stood out prominently in the tiny flat we lived in when I was a child. I noticed that beyond the productive nature of the sewing machine, the tool hides a certain violence when operated at full speed. Then it came to my mind to turn this speed into slow motion, and the concept of time was therefore further developed. At the same time, I was looking into the history of the 1967 riots [in Hong Kong], so I moved on to search for connections between this historical event and the artefact, and then elements like photographic film, artificial flowers and Hong Kong coins from 1967 were brought in to complete *Frater*.

KF **Could you elaborate on the history surrounding the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, and what you specifically wanted to explore about this period with respect to *Frater*?**

LCW The 1967 riots began with a series of labour disputes and escalated to citywide violent protests against the colonial government. It is widely regarded as Hong Kong's watershed moment in terms of social and civil development. It took place before my birth. I am curious how much the riots remain in individual memories; it was regarded as important, even from various political perspectives. *Frater* was my attempt to juxtapose both individual and collective fragments from the time to contemplate the notion of violence and so forth.





Above: Leung Chi Wo, *Frater* (2015). Sewing machine, black & white negative film, 1967 Hong Kong fifty-cent coins, low-speed motor and steel frame. 146.5 × 55 × 65 cm. Dimensions variable. Installation view: *Tracing some places,* The Mills Gallery, Hong Kong (5 December 2015–9 January 2016). Courtesy MILL6 Foundation, Hong Kong, and the artist.

Left: Leung Chi Wo, *Untitled (Roses)* (2015). Inkjet prints, set of 3. 50 × 122 cm. Courtesy MILL6 Foundation, Hong Kong, and the artist.

KF **Why the artificial flowers?**

LCW Flowers are the stereotypical subject of photography. Artificial flowers were chosen because they relate to my question of reality existing in an image, and for their subversive aesthetic. Of course, there is always the contextual link to the 1967 riots, which partly began in an artificial flower factory located on the same street where my father went to work.

KF **In previous exhibitions you have participated in overseas, such as the Asia Triennial in Manchester in 2014, you typically research the city and create a work that reflects the context of the exhibition. The work you created for the Triennial, *Untitled (Love For Sale)* (2014), is now on show in Hong Kong at The Mills Gallery. How do you feel the work's meaning translates into a different context? Do you think it serves to add another layer of meaning or poses a challenge to the viewer's understanding?**

LCW I like to connect the subjects of my work to my surroundings. When I created *Untitled (Love For Sale)* for Manchester, I was aware of my base in Hong Kong where I did the research. Concurrently, I wanted to contemplate the meaning of destruction and construction in relation to the terrorist attacks in Manchester, as well as in other places, like Hong Kong, that face serious or even brutal urban redevelopment. Also, there are material narratives in art that cannot be overshadowed by the context. Different meanings can be taken on if the context changes. That is normal. But for me, the function of art is not to inform but to inspire. Hopefully *Tracing some places* can communicate with the Hong Kong audience in different ways.

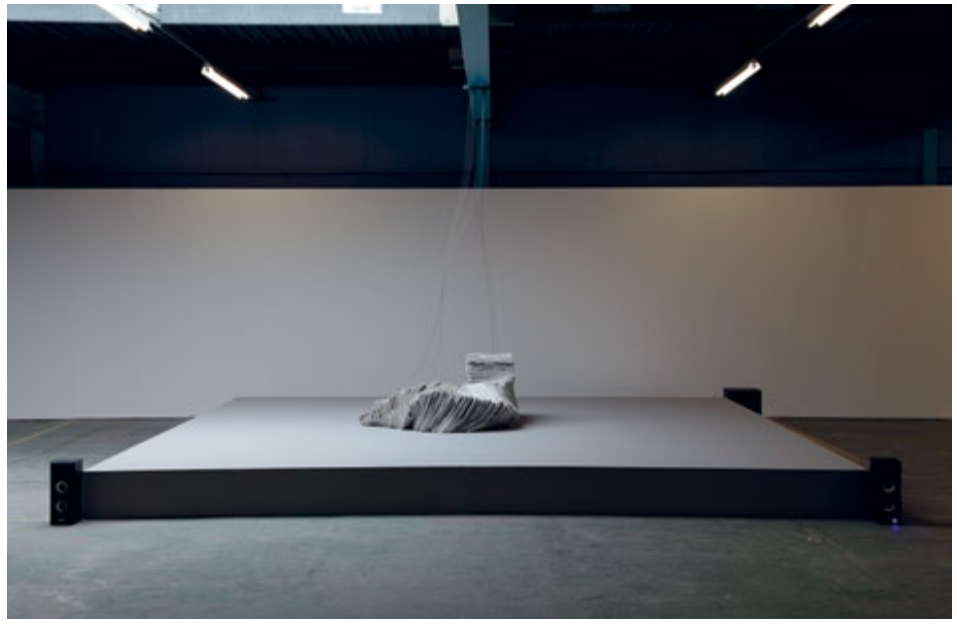
KF **You played a founding role in the establishment of Para Site in 1996, and now your new show marks the beginning of The Mills Gallery's pre-opening programme, another non-profit institution. Considering your central role in the Hong Kong art world's development, what in your opinion is the most important aspect that needs to be developed further to nurture a vibrant art environment here?**

LCW Diversity. Diversity of institutions, funding, market, education and so on. For a very long time, the arts community was too small to achieve this. Now, we are beginning to see the opportunity that comes with all sorts of expansion. Within this network we will also navigate to maintain our creative freedom, something that we cannot take for granted as we learned recently.

KF **You have previously mentioned that when you graduated from university in Hong Kong, there was no concept of an 'artist'. Is it more acceptable in Hong Kong today to be an artist? Where do you feel artists are positioned within the Hong Kong art world?**

LCW Being an artist should be a life attitude, and not a job or career defined by economic value in our society. Today in Hong Kong, we see more exposure of artists thanks to the market, or more commercial recognition of contemporary artworks. Yet, when and how can we recognise the importance of art without its price tag? I don't know. Para Site and The Mills Gallery are important as independent and private non-profit art spaces, but they form only part of the ecosystem, which as a whole needs to continue developing. It's a long journey, to create a true and genuine creative city. Only a very small percentage of art graduates can make art an economically viable career; it is the same in New York and Hong Kong. So do we regard those who don't make it an economically viable career as not being artists? The answer will reflect how we position artists in the art world.





Leung Chi Wo, *Untitled (Love for Sale)* (2014). 1996 gold-proof half-sovereign as switch-button, light box, aluminium engraving, newspaper pile, audio and motor system. Dimensions variable. Installation view: *Tracing some places*, The Mills Gallery, Hong Kong (5 December 2015–9 January 2016). Courtesy MILL6 Foundation, Hong Kong, and the artist.



Alexie Glass-Kantor

IN CONVERSATION WITH RACHAEL VANCE
HONG KONG, 19 FEBRUARY 2016

Photo: Zan Wimberley.

Alexie Glass-Kantor is a curator, author and executive director of Artspace, Sydney, one of Australia's leading interdisciplinary contemporary art spaces. In addition to holding numerous programming and curatorial roles at other organisations, Glass-Kantor is also currently the curator of the Encounters sector at Art Basel in Hong Kong, dedicated to presenting large-scale sculpture and installation works by leading artists from around the world.

In this interview, which took place before Art Basel in Hong Kong opened to the public on 24 March 2016, Glass-Kantor speaks about the role of the curator in the contemporary art landscape and her vision for the fair's Encounters sector in 2016.

RV **What have you been most proud of implementing at Artspace during your time?**

AGK Leading an independent institution like Artspace—where I believe the focus is not on achieving endpoints or outcomes, but about how you demonstrate a commitment to facilitating ideas and ambition to be consistently evolving through time—I am most proud of my team's ability to work outside their comfort zone. I think curators often have sets of interests in areas or research that will occupy them for years or even decades. Something I feel strongly about in a leadership position, where you are curating an overall programme, is that I don't singularly programme for myself and do not curate solely to my own set of interests. Rather, I prefer to work collaboratively with my colleagues to enable an agile, inclusive and discursive programme where we invite the opportunity for the unexpected to shape the coordinates of what we do.

There has been an emphasis at Artspace over the past two years on decentralising the primacy of major exhibition-making as the pre-eminent mode of curatorship, and a move away from always situating the curator as author. The term curator is so contested and value-loaded culturally that we want to foreground responsive curatorial approaches that equally acknowledge public programmes, performance lectures, alternative publishing structures, studios, the archive and advocacy within the mantle of 21st century curatorial practice. In a non-collecting organisation like Artspace, the curator has to have the discipline to have a depth of knowledge about the practices and the methodologies of exhibition-making, and also be able to work in a more agile and lateral sphere, collaboratively recognising the contribution of others. Something I am really enjoying at Artspace is how we are working internally as a team with a generosity to support an expanded curatorial programme, and engaging both existing and new audiences with a spirit of inclusiveness.

An example of working more responsively is a space we introduced in March 2015 called the Ideas Platform. It's a newly revealed space that was formerly an overlooked storeroom at the entrance of our building. In the main galleries, because exhibitions require lengthy lead time and are resource heavy, I felt we were operating in a way that was risk averse, and we lacked the capacity to present projects as they might arise, as opportunities or propositions or speculations, rather than fully fledged major shows. Where were the spaces to test risk in our exhibition programme? The Ideas Platform is as simple as it sounds: if you have an idea, we have a platform. We don't programme this space in advance of each year. We have projects that run for one-, two- and four-week durations, and work with artists, writers and curators as opportunities emerge. In 2015, we had nine standalone projects in this space, which allowed us to do a range of things that we were not able to do within the construct of our exhibition platforms in the main galleries. In this way, it is very true to what I think of in relation to the role of the curator: it is about being committed to both longer-lead, research-based programming and having the capacity to simply say 'yes' more quickly to ideas so you can support more artists to achieve new works. Crucially, it is all about artists.

RV **Do you think your curatorial style has changed since taking on the role of executive director at Artspace?**

AGK Something I have thought about often since arriving at Artspace is the responsibility of

curatorship and how that aligns with the objectives of institutional leadership. Contingent with being a curator of contemporary art and working with living artists, it is important to maintain a curatorial practice that is commensurate with the ethics and accountabilities that are made explicit through the practice and production of contemporary art. It is important to engage meaningfully in arenas that have to do with issues of broader social concern and to consider the political space that art may or may not occupy.

Part of my role as a director of a not-for-profit space is to consider organisational sustainability, diversification of revenue and income sourced through benefaction or philanthropy, communications, human resources and other operational priorities—all of which have little to do with my graduate studies as an art historian. I think the time has passed where organisations could have toxic internal cultures and leadership hierarchies that demeaned personnel or deaccessioned responsibility from others. Over decades, contemporary art and artists have posed questions and created artworks that challenge anachronistic power structures and explore alternatives. As a curator, I am always looking and reading and listening and then I look again, and, if I am to be true to the circumstances in which artists are working, then I have to be consciously aware of the culture of my institution and make a persistent effort to review and support ethical standards. Simply, what happens at the back-of-house must match what is communicated externally, and that's always a work in progress.

International peer spaces that came of age over the past 20 to 40 years—such as Artspace; Para Site, Hong Kong; Art Sonje Center, Seoul; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; and Artists Space or White Columns, New York—have had to constantly rethink their position in terms of how they work as non-collecting institutions, and also how to support the production and presentation of contemporary art through a myriad of platforms. Occupying the dual role of director and curator, and working in an independent or kunsthalle context, you need to be broadly accountable and open to working differently in changing environments. In these institutions, the approach is an expanded one, and it is critical to consider what responsibility the curator maintains in relation to investing in advocacy, alternate spheres of publishing that sit more broadly outside the lineage of monographs and publications, and public programming or online platforms that exist within a shape-shifting field.

In Australia, in certain spheres, there is an ongoing attachment to the curator as author, and a kind of notional status that is attached to thematic curating. As a standard methodology, thematic curating has its place but I think it's only one approach, and the curator has to be more broadly engaged than the person who chooses a theme and assembles a list of names or artworks into group or solo exhibitions. This is an outdated mode and arguably a late-20th-century model of curatorship. Working contemporaneously in independent and museum spaces, the curator has a responsibility to be more agile and less determined by the edifice of the gallery, to think in a way that is less about attribution and more generously speculative and open-ended.

RV **How did you come into the role of curator of the Encounters sector for Art Basel's Hong Kong show in 2015?**

AGK Across the three Art Basel fairs—Hong Kong, Miami Beach and Basel—eight in-



Lawrence Weiner, *THE MIDDLE OF, THE MIDDLE OF, THE MIDDLE OF* (2012). Installation view: Marian Goodman Gallery, Encounters, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). © Art Basel.



Ham Kyungah, *Chandeliers for Five Cities* (2014–2015). Installation view: Kukje Gallery and Tina Kim Gallery, Encounters, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). © Art Basel.

ternational curators are selected to develop special presentations of installations, public art and film. In each location there is a specific approach adopted that is determined by Art Basel and then guided by the curators who specialise in relevant media.

Art Basel invites curators who are attached to independent not-for-profits or museums. We all come from institutional or independent backgrounds, and by coincidence two of the four installation sectors are currently curated by Australians: myself in Hong Kong and Nicholas Baume, who curates Public for Art Basel's Miami Beach show. Over decades Art Basel has been committed to these curated sectors that foreground space, in which the fair can encourage a critical point of engagement and where work is tested at an amplified scale. This dialogue between art gallery booths and curated sectors is key.

I curate the Encounters sector, which is dedicated to presenting large-scale sculptural installations by leading artists from around the world and transcends the traditional art fair booth. Unlike other sectors, the Encounters sector is located across four 'meridians' within the fair itself, which requires extensive collaboration with the Art Basel architects to maximise the full volume of the space and the extraordinary sightlines available. Throughout the year, all the sector curators work in contexts independent of Art Basel, bringing to their sectors particular expertise. I was selected because of my commitment to developing new work by living artists and interest in working collaboratively with the architects and the Art Basel Hong Kong team to realise ambitious site-specific projects.

RV **What impact does a curated sector such as Encounters add to a commercial art fair?**

AGK Art Basel's Hong Kong show is in many ways a city within the city: it is a constructed world that channels the energy and zeitgeist of the international marketplace and creates a meeting place for the region and further afield. But it is more than that. Uniquely, Encounters occupies significant exhibition space within the art fair itself. In 2015, Encounters brought together 20 artists from 13 different countries with more than half from Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. The selection represented artists working in remarkably varied ways, and 11 of the installations were premieres. Although it is not a thematic presentation, there are distinct connections that weave Encounters together through visual association. In the process of curation, I aim to identify artworks that exemplify how art can resituate experience and enliven the viewer.

RV **Can you discuss your curatorial plans for Encounters in 2016?**

AGK Selection of the artists for Encounters 2016 took place in Hong Kong during October 2015. We decided to reduce the number of projects from 20 to 16 to allow more room for ambition in projects. Last year I was thinking about landscape urbanism; this year we were able to go much further, exploring the idea of shifting or altering the perception of order in space. For Art Basel's 2016 show in Hong Kong, I wanted to think about what an encounter is—the encounter in terms of both its ability to create a landmark, but also its register around vulnerability, uncertainty, temporality and the relationship of the encounter to time. In Hong Kong, we have 72 hours to install the entire fair. Time is of the premium, with [an estimated] 60,000 people visiting over five days.

In a first for Encounters, five of the artists have created site-specific works, which are ephemeral in their materiality. A further six

installations are premieres. There are artists represented across generations, with senior artists alongside emerging voices. There is strong representation from the region—the Philippines, Indonesia, China and Japan—as well as artists from the US, Scotland, Germany, Sweden and France.

The feel of Encounters for 2016 will be very material, textural and locative. The audience's interaction with the sector will be very visceral and situated. Visitors will walk the meridians with a selection of exquisite and often beautiful artistic interventions. There are some seriously ambitious works that have a high level of immersion, which will situate the viewer explicitly and directly within the work, particularly activating unexpected senses, such as smell, as in the work of Pae White. I am very excited that one of the premiere works this year is by Brook Andrew, an indigenous Australian artist who has never shown at Art Basel before. I am also pleased that there are works anchored to translation and there is an extraordinary new work by Lawrence Weiner, which will populate multiple positions in Encounters, existing in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Some installations, like that of Zhang Ding, will invite audiences to directly graffiti and alter the surfaces of the artwork.

RV **How have you seen the art market change in the past five to ten years? Do you agree there is more intermingling between public and private sectors?**

AGK Art occurs within, around and in direct contact with a broad range of groups including the art market, collections, museums, foundations, independent spaces, festivals, biennials and all sorts of other collaborations—and has done so for decades. In the contemporary parlance we could say: 'It's complicated'. However, it's worth noting that Art Basel was established over 40 years ago; and by inviting external curators to guide substantial presentations of artworks that sit outside the conventions of the traditional marketplace, the art fair itself actively acknowledges that each one of these groups is distinct but also in dialogue. The arts are a rich ecology and I think that transparency around this intermingling can be dynamic; indeed, the entanglements of these groups are particularly important for supporting the experimentation that drives artistic practice. I want artists to be enabled to lead with risk and creativity and to be encouraged to evolve their practice. For this to occur, there must be conversations and collaborations between all those who are working to support spaces for art in both the public and private sector.



Dayanita Singh

IN CONVERSATION WITH TESS MAUNDER
SYDNEY, 9 MARCH 2016

Courtesy the artist.

Dayanita Singh is recognised as one of today's leading voices in contemporary photography. She is most well known for her practice of archiving and categorising the images she has taken over her 30-year career on various themes, from the intimate and the personal, to still life and documentary style. The mediated collections she forms are presented in traditional photography books, but also in larger, expanded archives, which she calls 'mobile museums': portable displays of her work that are transported in suitcases and re-presented around the world. Through her approach, in Singh's words, her works are 'endlessly edited, rearranged and displayed, casting new light on narrative and poetic possibilities in the process.'

Singh's work *Suitcase Museum* (2015) will shortly form a part of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, *The Future Is Already Here—It's Just Not Evenly Distributed* (18 March–5 June 2016). The work will be presented at the Embassy of Translation, one of the Biennale's seven 'Embassies of Thought', at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney. *Suitcase Museum* draws its content from Singh's ever-morphing archive of work *Museum of Chance* (2014). In this interview, Singh discusses her practice and the work she will present for the Sydney Biennale, referring in more detail to *Museum of Chance*.

TM **Could you tell us more about the work you will show for the 20th Biennale of Sydney?**

DS I am different from many artists in that I do not produce new work upon invitation to an exhibition. Instead, I keep working on something, often for many years, and at a certain time I feel as though it is ready to show. Then I look for the appropriate place to show it, which often comes from a conversation. On this occasion, myself and Stephanie Rosenthal, the artistic director of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, felt *Suitcase Museum* would be a strong fit within the Embassy of Translation.

Suitcase Museum is a travelling body of work—two suitcases and you have the full edition on a flight to Sydney! It contains a large number of images, catalogued as an interconnected body of work and arranged according to themes such as chance, embraces and furniture. Through these processes of translation and re-translation, my works can be endlessly edited, rearranged and displayed, casting new light on narrative and poetic possibilities in the process.

TM **I understand that *Suitcase Museum* will change over time. Can you explain the significance of this transition?**

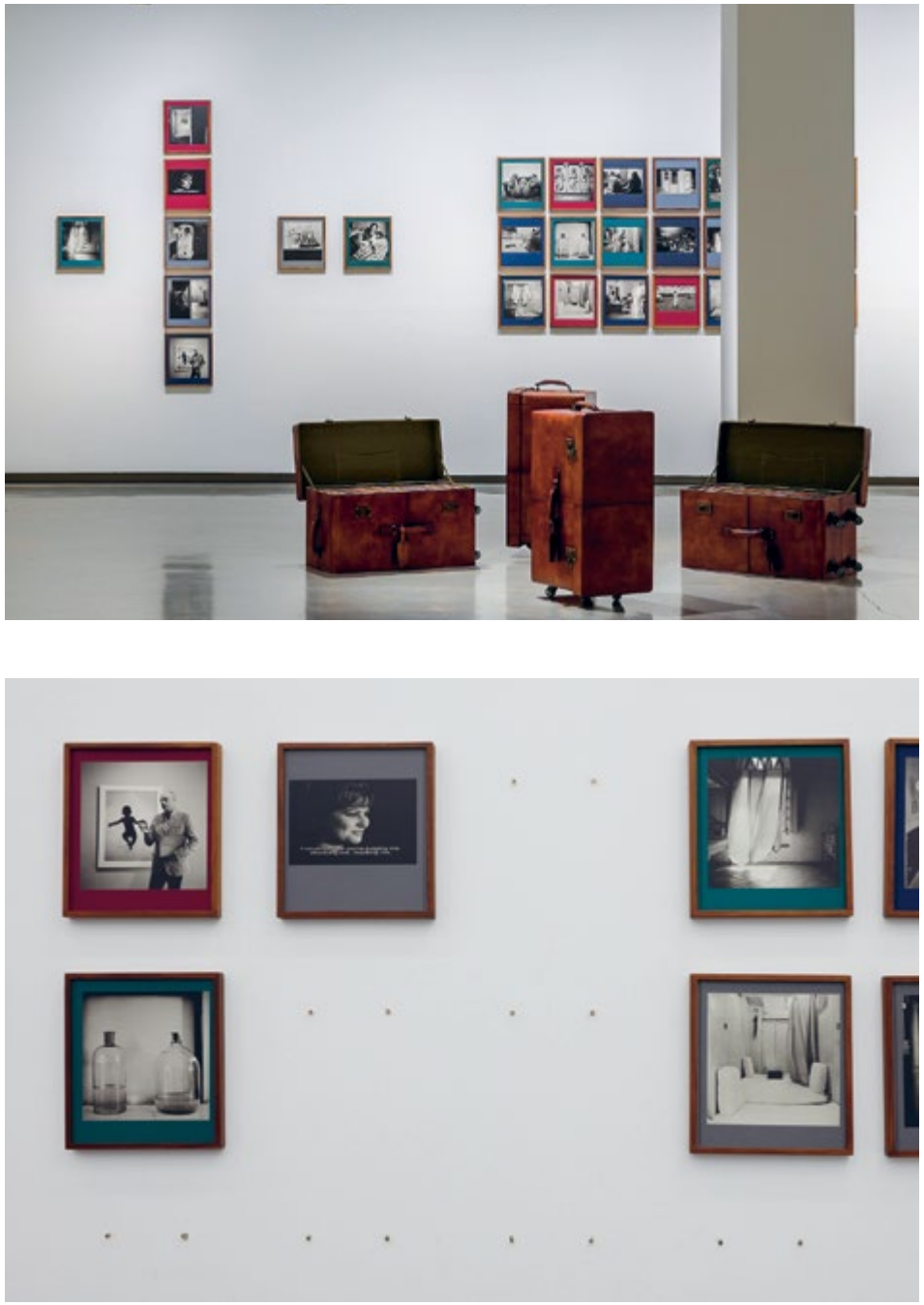
DS For this iteration, *Suitcase Museum* is informed and made up by the images from *Museum of Chance*. The images that comprise *Museum of Chance* were originally translated into a book; then for the Biennale of Sydney, selected images have been removed from this prior content and transformed into a different sequence. Through this work, a mass-produced object becomes a new conceptual work. As you can see, the work has various layers of meditation. In addition, this translation will also be physically experienced by visitors to the Biennale; every other day, one of the assistant curators will turn one book around and thus change the narrative that the viewer may have built around it, and so each time you visit it will have changed.

In my own way, I think this points to a possible direction for the concept of museums of the future, where ambassadors might travel with suitcase museums of their larger collection. I could imagine a museum like The Met having a fleet of ambassadors going out on flights with these suitcases of artwork to be shown and brought back. They could carry facsimiles and the display structures could be built into the suitcases … One cannot always wait for the public to come to the museum, and while I love virtual spaces I also like the physical experience of an exhibition, and the associated conversation that happens within this context.

TM **In the last decade, we have seen a rise in the popularity of the idea of the archive, both in popular culture and also in contemporary art discourse. What do you make of this interest in archival tendencies?**

DS In terms of my own practice, it is very much a personal story for me. I was born to a mother who was an obsessive photographer and album maker, and a father who was involved in various legalities, so that was my earliest experience: files and more files, albums of photographs, and photographs on every surface available.

As for other artists, I think we all see we are witness to a time of change, when we are seeing the last of the paper archives, the last of the libraries; and while we record them, we also are aware of the stories they contain, and I suppose artists then start working with these resources.



Dayanita Singh, *Suitcase Museum* (2015). Mixed media, suitcases, 88 book objects. Installation view: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 20th Biennale of Sydney (18 March–5 June 2016). Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Symons.

TM **You began your career as a photojournalist, and now describe yourself as a 'bookmaker working in photography'. Could you speak more about your beginnings in this field and how it has shaped your practice?**

DS From the very beginning I have been making photographs to make books. In 2007, I made *Sent a Letter*, a box with seven accordion-fold books that became my first book and exhibition. I realised that it was possible to have a book that was also an exhibition, but I wanted to find a form that could be on par with my exhibitions of prints.

Now I make books that are also the exhibition: *Museum of Chance* is an example of this way of working. During the decades in between, I made exhibitions of framed prints on the wall that seemed to me like catalogues of my books. It was like composing music, where each note was separated by the display, and ended up in different symphonies or collections. The exhibition did not satisfy me in the way that the book did. Yet, everyone said that a book is a book and an exhibition is an exhibition.

With *Museum of Chance*, I finally found the way to make a work that is a book as well as the exhibition of the book. The single image or note would now never be divorced from the full symphony or sequence. Each publication cover led to the full symphony that was inside. Even if you can only see the front image, I know that the full symphony is waiting inside. The book is bound to its sequence, its order; but the object can be endlessly rewritten as I move it in and out of its narratives, sometimes just by turning the cover around to reveal the back story—an endless publication.

The key to this work was the editing: to make a set of images that, even if they spanned 30 years and came from very different contexts, was held together by their tonal quality. I have finally learned to listen to the tone of the images, rather than edit by content.

I am particularly happy that I have beaten Amazon. You can order this mass-produced book on Amazon or online platforms, but if you want the whole concept—the idea, structure and individualising of the book—then you have to come to one of the events where I am offering the special editions. (I am the only one who has the full sets.) I will individualise it for you, turning a mass-produced artist's book into a unique conceptual work.

Kiran Nadar

IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA DICKIE
NEW DELHI, 11 MARCH 2016

Courtesy Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

In 2010, art collector Kiran Nadar founded India's first private museum dedicated exclusively to exhibiting modern and contemporary works. Located in the heart of New Delhi, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) most recently collaborated with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, to open *Nasreen Mohamedi* (18 March–5 June 2016), an exhibition dedicated to modernist artist Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990). The exhibition is the smaller and more intimate of two exhibitions to inaugurate the opening of The Met Breuer in New York. It presents a survey of Mohamedi's exceptional drawings, photographs, paintings and collages, with a focus on the artist's work throughout the 1970s. Known for her singular and sustained engagement with abstraction and her independent vision of Minimalism, the exhibition is being heralded as an important step towards fulfilling The Met's promised goal to broaden its contemporary and modern art programme.

In this conversation, Kiran Nadar shares how she moved from collecting art to building a private art museum. She also discusses her passion for Nasreen Mohamedi's work, and KNMA's current exhibition of works by Himmat Shah.

AD **You started collecting art as a hobby, but it clearly was a passionate pastime that morphed into something more serious. This ultimately led you to open India's first private museum dedicated to modern and contemporary art. Can you discuss this transition?**

KN Well, I did start collecting art for myself at first, and also to understand and learn about different movements and styles of art. I'm not trained in art history, but regularly visiting exhibitions, galleries and museums, and having conversations with connoisseurs, art historians and docents, et cetera, gave me the necessary ground I needed to continue to collect art. At some point we ran out of space; we had enough works to fill our house and my husband's office. I had also started collecting large-scale and edgy works that could not be displayed inside domestic or office-like spaces. This led me to put many works into storage, and to think about ways of making the collection more accessible to myself and to open it to the public. So, I thought of creating a modern and contemporary art museum in India. It was a very simple thought, but I had very little idea about what it entailed and what this journey would be like. I didn't realise the commitment and knowledge base that would be required. It took me four to five years to put the idea of a private museum into reality. During this period, my commitment to collecting increased immensely and became focused. As I began to acquire for the museum, I wanted to create, and to fill the gaps in, the collection.

AD **Can you expand on what you mean by 'filling gaps'?**

KN Earlier there was a randomness in my method of collecting, because the purpose was to collect what I like, and learn what kind of art I am interested in and would like to be surrounded by. But then, with the idea of a museum that will be open to the public, I began to think of the whole in a coherent way. This led me to start filling the gaps in the collection, and to think from the perspective of the history of modern art in India. I wanted to ensure that we were collecting seminal modern artworks by masters as well as cutting-edge and new media works by contemporary artists. This was also the moment when many private museums were emerging in different parts of the world, producing interesting debates and doubts around the concept of 'private museums', and about the risk that the 'taste' of private individuals will come to define the art of our time.

AD **How do you view this risk?**

KN Kiran Nadar Museum of Art is a consistently growing museum in terms of its collection, and the directions of this growth emerge from a process. I believe in process. We have a team of curators who suggest, research and help me with the building of the collection and a model that cannot be replicated. I do still rely a lot on my own eye. Over the years of seeing art, travelling and interactions, my art historical knowledge has also grown with my passion for collecting. To this end, I do feel I have a good idea of the importance of various artists, including those who perhaps have not yet received the critical attention they deserve within the art world, and within specific art historical trajectories. I feel I have sufficient knowledge of the breadth of South Asian art practices, which helps me in identifying the lacunae that need to be addressed, and the role the museum can play in South Asia and internationally.

AD **The Met Breuer is about to host a major exhibition dedicated to the art of Nasreen Mohamedi. How did you first come across Mohamedi's work?**

KN Well, very little research had been conducted on Nasreen Mohamedi. After her death in 1990, her friends mounted a kind of small retrospective of her works, which remains one of the important exhibitions that showcased a large body of her works before the KNMA exhibition. So, I was aware of her oeuvre but didn't have in-depth knowledge. When KNMA acquired a group of her works, I was completely taken by the power of her minimalist drawings and photographs. That was around five or six years ago, and I decided that she was an artist I wanted to pursue in depth. I thought the museum should definitely organise a retrospective dedicated to her work and life, because until that point nobody had given her such recognition and an exhibition. So, in 2013 we brought together around 140 works, of which 35 were part of our collection, and the rest were loaned from various collectors across the world. It was a spectacular exhibition, the resonance of which can still be seen in India in the practices of many contemporary abstractionists. It was critically acclaimed by a lot of people, including the curators from the Reina Sofía and The Met. So, in our museum's little history, it was a very monumental show.

AD **From organising the retrospective at your museum, how did this develop into The Met Breuer show?**

KN It developed from the discussions with Manuel Borja-Villel, the director of the Reina Sofía museum, who came to India to see the exhibition and spoke to us about the collaboration and taking the exhibition to the Reina Sofía. He told us that he also wanted to discuss it with The Met. This led to our discussions and meetings with Sheena Wagstaff [Leonard A. Lauder Chairman for Modern and Contemporary Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art], who was very excited about the idea of bringing the exhibition to New York and making it one of the inaugural shows. In September 2015 we opened the show at the Reina Sofía, and soon it will open at The Met Breuer.

AD **Mohamedi's practice can be broken up into three specific categories: from her early sketches to her linear drawings and her later photographs. Is there a particular part of her practice that you most connect with?**

KN Her photographs, I think, are quite extraordinary. I am interested in all of her work, and we have collected all her phases in depth at KNMA. But it is her linear work and photographs that I particularly enjoy.

AD **Outside of her artistic contribution, Mohamedi had a fascinating personal history. She travelled extensively, and perhaps at a time when it wasn't common for women to travel.**

KN Yes, she was a great traveller. She also developed a particular illness quite early in her career. It was an illness akin to Parkinson's disease that impacted the motion of her hands, but she still managed to work continuously until she died. Bearing her illness in mind, the detailing and precision in her work is quite amazing. She worked tirelessly and continued her craft—it must have been very difficult to work through that physical trauma.

AD **How do you view The Met's decision to open The Met Breuer with a show dedicated to Mohamedi in the context of 'shaking up' art historical narratives?**



Nasreen Mohamedi. Courtesy Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.



Himmat Shah, *Hammer on the Square* (2007–2008). Bronze. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

KN I think it's fascinating to see an institution like The Met focusing on art originating from Asia. To open such a major building as The Met Breuer with an exhibition dedicated to an Indian artist is a huge step and recognition. I think we will now see a lot more artists from different countries being promoted and shown. I think that's a major step for The Met and for Indian art, too.

AD **Is there another particular artist you feel has yet to receive their due, and whose work is deserving of the type of institutional attention that Mohamedi's work is currently receiving at The Met?**

KN There are a lot of artists in the Indian context who deserve a retrospective at The Met, but it's too early to say. We have to see how The Met progresses their journey with Indian art and arts around the world; it's their first season with modern art. I can tell you what has really excited me recently though: the retrospective we have on at KNMA dedicated to the work of Himmat Shah [*Hammer on the Square* (28 January–20 July 2016)].

AD **Why do you think he is important?**

KN Shah made an extraordinary contribution to the discourse of modern Indian art. Working on this retrospective was a real eye-opener for me. The exhibition presents around 300 works, with 215 coming from the museum's collection. Other works were loaned from various public and private institutions and collections. He really was one of the pioneer sculptors to work with terracotta, and the exhibition includes a number of his terracotta sculptures and high-relief works which are completely out of public memory. In addition, along with his famous terracotta sculptures, bronzes, and drawings, the exhibition also explores his lesser-known mediums, including high-relief murals, burnt paper collages and silver paintings.

AD **Tell me about the silver paintings?**

KN Himmat Shah's silver paintings are low-relief murals made of silver foil and found material, and created between 1968 and 1973. They are brilliantly textured and look like cartographies. It is very difficult to describe these works in words because they are so sensitively and beautifully conceived. The exciting thing is that KNMA has unearthed and acquired four silver paintings, which are being exhibited after more than four decades and are the only surviving pieces. Himmat says he lost all silver paintings in a flood in Delhi in the 1970s.

AD **The museum has been running for over six years now—over this time have you noticed its audience change?**

KN Yes, definitely. We have worked hard to grow our audience locally. We have strong outreach and educational programmes with schools, colleges and professional groups. Art education is a major focus area for the museum and our talks are led by curators and art educators to enable interactivity, discussion and learning. We are also collaborating extensively with local educational and private and public art institutions on a variety of aspects to encourage footfalls and awareness of modern and contemporary art. The museum has also gained more visibility internationally. We get a lot of interest from the arts community, but our audience is increasingly expanding beyond this.



Stephanie Rosenthal

IN CONVERSATION WITH SHERMAN SAM
LONDON, 17 MARCH 2016

Photo: Daniel Boud.

Stephanie Rosenthal is the artistic director of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, which will open on 18 March and run until 5 June 2016. Rosenthal is also the chief curator of the Hayward Gallery in London's Southbank Centre, a role she has held since 2007. Prior to this and from 2000, she was the curator for modern and contemporary art at Munich's Haus der Kunst, where she organised shows featuring Aernout Mik, Paul McCarthy and Allan Kaprow, and curated exhibitions such as *Black Paintings* (15 September 2006–14 January 2007), which presented monochromatic black paintings by Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Frank Stella and Robert Rauschenberg. At the Hayward, Rosenthal has curated shows dedicated to artists such as Robin Rhode (2008), Pipilotti Rist (2011) and Ana Mendieta (2013), as well as *MIRRORCITY* (14 October 2014–4 January 2015), an exploration of the digital revolution and its impact on London through the work of artists living in the city. Along with Mami Kataoka, Rosenthal also co-curated the experiential exhibition *Walking in My Mind* (23 June–6 September 2009), which engaged with the notion of the artist's imagination through large-scale immersive installation art.

Here, Rosenthal discusses the ideas behind her edition of the Sydney Biennale, *The Future is Already Here—It's Just Not Evenly Distributed*. This interview was conducted in two parts: the first in London prior to Rosenthal's departure for Sydney in 2014, and the second shortly before the Biennale's installation commenced in February 2016. For the purpose of this publication, only the first part of the interview has been reproduced.

SS Before we talk about the Sydney Biennale, I'd like to ask you about your PhD. What was it on?

SR It was about the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg from the 1950s and 60s. It was about black being a space for transformation, the idea of rites of passage. It started with Malevich and Whistler, and then used these painters as a kind of comparison to explain how black can be a *rite de marge* in regard to the ideas of the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep.

SS *Rite de marge?*

SR A rite of passage has three steps: *rite de séparation*, *rite de marge*, and *rite d'agrégation*: you distance yourself from something, then there is an in-between phase, and then you come close to something else. So I'm saying these black paintings are like these in-between phases where you are finding your own language.

SS Has your PhD informed any of your work since?

SR Yes, I think very much. It's interesting, I think this Biennale [the Biennale of Sydney] is a lot about the in-between space … the crack between the physical and the digital. So we experience the physicality of our body but at the same time we are present in the digital realm. I talk a lot about the 'in-between'. The concept of *rite de marge* and that of the in-between is actually exactly the same. I'm very much interested in that place where you don't know where you are going; that kind of space where things overlap or fold over onto each other.

SS Could you talk about your proposal for the Biennale of Sydney?

SR The Biennale is called *The Future is Already Here—It's Just Not Evenly Distributed*. The title references a quote by science fiction author William Gibson. It's an umbrella for a lot of sub-themes because I didn't feel I would be able to make this one statement about the 'now'. I wanted a broad idea and sub-themes that are relevant.

I developed the sub-themes by going to visit artists all over the world and suddenly realising that I met a lot of people who are talking about things that are disappearing, or transforming through disappearance. Also, there are many who are talking about science fiction again. You could say that I felt these clusters. There is a wave of artists who are getting involved in things that also match with my own interests. So I have these seven sub-themes, and I call them 'Embassies of Thought'.

SS Tell me about the Embassies of Thought?

SR Each Embassy has its own name. For example, there is an Embassy of Translation; it's a term I use instead of re-enactment or reiteration, and it is related to the idea of redoing. Artists look at historical subjects of other artists and translate them into the 21st century. There is also an Embassy of Spirit, where artists deal with, for example, fundamentalism or religious rights, but at the same time it is about things such as rituals that could be rooted in personal experience rather than a global understanding of religion.

Each Embassy has its own venue, which reflects the idea of that Embassy. The Embassy of the Real, for example, questions how we perceive reality. Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, which is a 20-minute boat ride from the centre of Sydney, is the venue for this Embassy. The island has a historical value because convicts were held there, and it also has an industrial history as a place

Lee Bul, *Willing To Be Vulnerable* (2015–2016). Heavy-duty fabric, metalised film, transparent film, polyurethane ink, fog machine, LED lighting, electronic wiring. Dimensions variable. Installation view: Cockatoo Island, 20th Biennale of Sydney (18 March–5 June 2016). Created for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ben Symons.

where submarines were built and later, I think, steamers or quite grand boats; so there are these massive turbine halls—like those in Tate Modern, but not refurbished.

The interesting thing for me in relation to the Embassy of the Real is that, on the one hand, Cockatoo Island has historical value and it's a kind of museum, so there are these museum panels that explain things, for example, 'turbine hall' or 'electrical shop'. On the other hand, it's rented out as a television or movie set. The interesting bit is that it's not treated as you think—it's more like things are added to it each time it is used. For example, if Angelina Jolie shot some of her last film there and, say, built part of a 19th-century building, then someone else might think that would be quite handy to keep, and just adds to it, because it's quite attractive … Then another director might think, 'This building is really great so let's paint it green for our movie', and it then gets painted back. So you get to the island and something looks wrong: there is a building that looks like it should be from the 19th century, but it isn't; there's a brick wall, but it's not real, it's just wallpaper. Then you see the museum panels. So this question of what's real becomes questionable, and it's exactly what I want to have for the kind of art shown on the island. You begin to question when things that are fake can actually seem more real. There is this slippage … For each venue we tried hard to find something right for the artist's thinking.

SS **Why did you use the word 'embassy'?**

SR I like this idea that an embassy is a safe place for someone who doesn't belong, who comes from a different country. For example, with the Embassy of Thought I like the idea that it is a safe place for thinking. Also, it is related to the idea that nowadays we are united not by nation but by where our passion, desires or our beliefs lie. I wanted to bring in the question of who owns—and how we own—space, and how we are united. Because I think every country, for example Australia, has had all these problems with immigration and how it's dealt with. I wanted to address that issue without myself saying what's right or wrong, but more saying that art can create these safe places, like islands, where you can act within your own laws.

SS **For the Biennale you appointed what you call 'attachés' to help you shape the exhibition: 13 curators, writers and theorists. Can you tell me more about their roles?**

SR The attachés are all people I like and appreciate, so I feel that we can think together. The idea was that undertaking a biennale doesn't really allow you to go as deep as one wants. I thought, 'How do you work with 80 artists?' I've never worked with 80 artists at one time before. I really wanted to have a support structure so I could make sure a conversation with an artist can have a certain kind of intensity, instead of, 'Let's talk once on the phone and I'll see you again in six months.'

The role of the attaché is to work with some of the artists and decide on a commission with them. For example, Mami Kataoka [chief curator of the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo] worked with artist Taro Shinoda. I can say to Mami, 'Taro is doing this, would you mind if …' So curating makes sense because that conversation is happening; if a conversation is not happening, then what's the reason for having a curator? Because, why does an artist need a curator? My hope is that the attachés will add a certain depth through their own expertise.



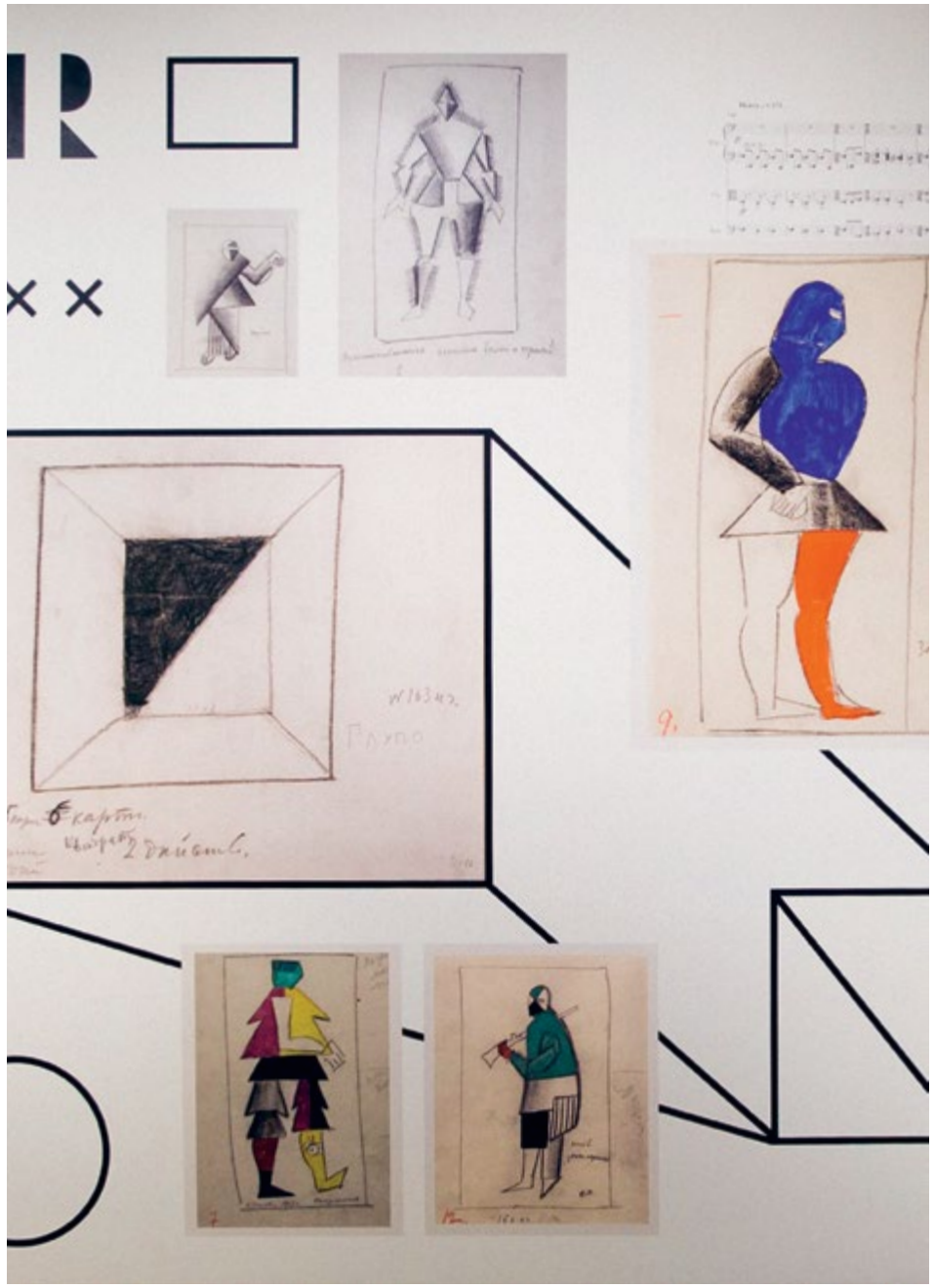
Taro Shinoda, *Abstraction of Confusion* (2016). Clay, pigment, ochre, tatami mats. Dimensions variable. Installation view: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 20th Biennale of Sydney (18 March–5 June 2016). Created for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ben Symons.



Agatha Gothe-Snape with Brooke Stamp, *Physical Doorway (Three Ways)* (2016). Digital print on mesh PVC banner. Installation view: Cockatoo Island, 20th Biennale of Sydney (18 March–5 June 2016). Courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney. Photo: Ben Symons.



María Isabel Rueda, *The Real. Retrato de Norman Mejía* (2004–2013). Slide projection. 6 min., 14 sec. Courtesy the artist.



Kazimir Malevich, Facsimiles of set and costume designs for the opera *Victory Over the Sun* (1913). Installed dimensions variable. Installation view: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 20th Biennale of Sydney (18 March–5 June 2016). Courtesy St Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music. Photo: Leïla Joy.



Neha Choksi in collaboration with Alice Cummins, *In Memory of the Last Sunset* (2016). Dance performance by Alice Cummins at Carriageworks, Sydney (15–19 March, 9–10 April and 28–29 May 2016). Created for the 20th Biennale of Sydney (18 March–5 June 2016). Courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai. Photo: Leïla Joy.

SS Could you tell us about how some of the artists fit into particular Embassies, or otherwise relate to them?

SR Let's start with the Embassy of Disappearance, which has 23 artists or artist groups.

For example, Robert Zhao Renhui's work *Christmas Island Naturally* (2016) focuses on an animal that doesn't exist any longer there; Christmas Island was once owned by Singapore but now belongs to Australia. His work examines how land can change ownership and what gets lost in that change. Another artist, Yuta Nakamura, works with different bits of ceramics he finds all over Japan. In his work *Atlas of Japanese Ostracon* (2016) he creates this postcard where he tells the story of that ceramic and the history of how it came to be broken. This kind of work relates to the idea of memory and disappearance. Neha Choksi, an Indian artist, is layering different images of sunsets over each other [*In Memory of the Last Sunset* (2016)]. A performer, Alice Cummins, will rip each poster off during the course of the Biennale, so at the end there will be these sunsets blurring into each other. In her work, *The Real. Retrato de Norman Mejía* (2004–13), María Isabel Rueda documents the house of another famous Colombian artist, Norman Mejía, who did all these sexual, surreal paintings and lived in a house by the beach that was like a castle. People thought he was using witchcraft, and eventually he had to leave the house because he was threatened all the time, but he painted the house on the inside. Rueda's work takes us back and shows how Mejía has disappeared from people's memory.

For the Embassy of the Real, I am interested in developing the theme out of contrary things. There is the physical experience of the body, the performative or dance, that I've always been interested in. I am also interested in artists who work digitally or on the internet, just to make that point that we live in this overlap, where you constantly meet each other on a physical but at the same time on a digital level. I feel that we're in a time when we accept that both are relevant. I think five years ago there was still this anxiety that we were losing our bodies and that no one was aware of this. Now I think artists realise that we live on the phone, but that being embodied—having sex, for example—is still important. The question of this Embassy is: 'What does this do to our perception?'

The key piece in this Embassy is Malevich's set design for the opera *Victory over the Sun* [by M. Matyushin and A. Kruchenykh]. I invited artist Justene Williams to recreate that 1913 opera. I want to explore how Malevich's 'black square' is already addressing what the internet or cyberspace is—that fourth dimension, this kind of extension into an unlimited space like cyberspace.

Heman Chong has decided to do an 'Embassy of Stanisław Lem' and on quite a literal level it has a direct connection to the Embassy of Translation. It is a very simple work [*LEM2* (2016)]; he is creating a bookshop that will sell only Stanisław Lem books in Polish and English. He wrote a little story that goes with each book. This is partly to suggest that the English translations are not great … though I don't know how he knows that. But what I like is that it is also something that is transformed from one thing to something else. So this Embassy of Stanisław Lem is literally about how in the act of translating something gets lost, and in the Embassy of Translation we deal with this in an abstract way.

There will also be things happening across the city. Hopefully we will be able to realise a work by Agatha Gothe-Snape, which will outlive the Biennale's life of three months, and it'll be a trace left in the city. Gothe-Snape will work with different performers and choreographers and explore different parts of Sydney to create a language, and this will then be implemented either on the buildings or on the street, creating a kind of memory. I imagine a kind of spontaneous popping up of an event, instead of leaving large sculptural works that clutter the city … [*smiles*].



Adeline Ooi

IN CONVERSATION WITH DIANA D'ARENBERG
HONG KONG, 17 MARCH 2016

Photo: © Art Basel.

Art Basel in Hong Kong, which runs from 24 to 26 March 2016, has started early this year. Inboxes are already flooded with invitations for previews and dinners well ahead of the VIP preview. There are more events, more exhibitions, and certainly more collectors descending upon Hong Kong this time around. That's Adeline Ooi's job: to make sure Art Basel in Hong Kong gets bigger and better. How Ooi manages to keep her composure and sense of humour in light of the impending madness, is confounding. Grace under fire would be an apt way to describe this art powerhouse.

As Director Asia of Art Basel, Ooi is in charge of the youngest and fastest growing of the Basel-brand fairs, Art Basel in Hong Kong, as well as bringing an Asian presence to the other two fairs: Art Basel and Art Basel in Miami Beach. With extensive experience and contacts in Southeast Asia, Malaysian-born Ooi is well positioned for the challenging role. In 2013 and 2014 she was Art Basel's VIP relations manager for Southeast Asia as well as director of RogueArt, a Malaysia-based cultural agency that she co-founded in 2009. Prior to that, from 2006 to 2008, Ooi worked as curator and programme director of Valentine Willie Fine Art gallery in Kuala Lumpur. She's no stranger to Hong Kong either, and has watched the Hong Kong art scene grow from a cluster of local galleries on Hollywood Road to an international art market in less than a decade.

Much has been made of the significant dip in the art market in recent months. Auction houses have reported serious downturn in sales profits, and a chorus of nervous grumbles can be heard from dealers, usually happy to overstate sales. 'It's not an easy time, economically speaking', Ooi said at a recent UBS press gathering. 'Miami was a litmus test, but at the end of the day the galleries did well.'

While its success remains to be seen, the 2016 edition of Art Basel in Hong Kong is delivering on its promise to be Asian in flavour. Out of 239 galleries participating, more than half will be from Asia—with nine new Asian dealers, including Singapore's Yeo Workshop, Taipei's Gallery 100, Shanghai's Longmen Art Projects, and Beijing's Ink Studio—and the fair will also host an Insights sector dedicated to Asia. Over 50 museum groups will also be visiting this year, with a strong Asian contingent and a focus on Japan. A new expanded Film sector will also be featured in the Art Basel programme, kicking off with a feature-length film about the M+ Sigg Collection, which is currently the subject of a major exhibition at ArtisTree in Hong Kong.

DD **How did you embark on a career in the art world?**

AO I didn't grow up with a lot of art … I got the art bug sometime in my early teenage years at school in Singapore; I was a bit more exposed to it there. I studied fine art [at Central Saint Martins, London] because I didn't know what else to do, but I knew I wanted to be in the art world. Then when I returned to Southeast Asia, a friend opened a gallery and suggested I become the curator, and eventually I founded RogueArt in 2009 with a couple of friends. Later I was asked to join Art Basel for VIP relations, and now I'm Director Asia of Art Basel. The experience in Southeast Asia has definitely helped; being part of the market and seeing how it developed.

DD **This is your second year as Director Asia of Art Basel. What mark are you hoping to leave on the fair long term?**

AO It's a good question. I think this show is in a good spot. Personally, I would love to focus more on the Asian content because the whole Asian art scene—I mean, there are different art scenes in Asia—has grown and developed so differently from the Western model. A lot of it has to do with the history of independence and the rapid economic development. The thing about the Asian art scene is that there have been such different rates of development and some artists are more well known than others, while other practices and movements are completely unknown because they existed at the time before there was a market. I think Art Basel in Hong Kong is a great platform to reintroduce and rediscover some of the great content and practices that have been overlooked. The Asian market only boomed about 10 to 15 years ago, so what we're looking at is artists who are practicing right now or circulating around the primary or secondary market, and there's still so much more that we haven't discovered, or that the market hasn't caught on to yet.

DD **Are there specific challenges in the Asian market, compared to the American or European ones?**

AO The thing about Asia is that it's paradoxical. I always use this metaphor: that it's like a child who is pumped up on steroids but whose vertebrae hasn't really formed. There's so much activity and it's so robust despite the economic downturn and all that, but it's generally in a state of growth. At the same time, it's growing so quickly and it's still so young. Take, for example, the gallery system: a lot of people have started galleries without really understanding what it means to be a gallery, but they make do and feel their way along the process … the structures here are so different.

I think what we're dealing with is growth that's happening concurrently. There's a lot to do, generally speaking, but anything and everything is possible. It's exciting but also messy. But at the same time that's also the challenge.

DD **A child on steroids, particularly for Hong Kong, seems an apt description of the commercial and market growth within the arts. But institutions and infrastructure seem to have lagged behind.**

AO Yes, exactly. You look at the market growth and it's incredible. Galleries have expanded—even younger galleries, like Magician Space in Beijing. The time is so intense in Asia. What a gallery can achieve in five years here is incredible. It probably took 20 years for a gallery to achieve the same back in the day, but now everything and anything is so accelerated. It's exciting and scary. And you're right, a lot of it is hap-

pening on the market side, the financial side, whereas institutional and cultural spaces for art are still few and far between. I mean if you look at public spaces and outreach and general awareness of art in the public, it's growing, but you need to be able to mould and shape it. It's a lot like a plant that has grown wild. You're really trying to prune and bring it all together so that it'll grow beautifully.

DD **How does the character of Hong Kong shape the development and character of this edition of Art Basel? The city has a specific rhythm to it, its own set of cultural and political idiosyncrasies, as does every city.**

AO I think you're right. The fairs correlate to the environment they exist in. The Hong Kong show is the youngest version; it's also the one generating the most curiosity in the international art world. For example, this year we're getting so many more Americans and museum groups visiting. How does Hong Kong differ from Basel and Miami Beach? Well, I think definitely the Asian presence. It's the one fair that out of 239 galleries, half are galleries from Asia or with exhibition spaces in Asia. So, that is one thing. And I think the face of the city and energy of it also contributes to a very different show, and I think what's exciting is to see how the show will grow. I'm personally hoping that it will result in greater Asian material being presented by Asian galleries, and I hope the galleries in the West will continue to take this market seriously and bring the best that they've got. It's difficult to forecast how the show will grow and evolve; it really depends on what's going on in the art environment as well.

DD **It's interesting to see how the programmes for the various Art Basels have developed and differ. In Basel you have the Unlimited sector, an exhibition with very large-scale works or performances that transcend the art fair booth format, and Parcours, which engages the public with site-specific works and installations around Basel. Tell me about the Hong Kong format?**

AO In Hong Kong we have the Insights sector, which highlights Asian curatorial themes and practices. I would love to have an Unlimited sector in Hong Kong but that just doesn't seem possible right now. It's a one-off for Basel. But who knows? I believe that it's about growing with the times, not just putting something out there for the sake of making it happen. Let's see what else comes up in Hong Kong and what we can do. I would still love a public programme for the whole show. If you can leave something behind for the public … One very small effort of course is the ICC [International Commerce Centre] tower installation, this year by Japanese artist Tatsuo Miyajima, which will light up on 21 March to kick off the Basel week and will continue to stay on until the end of April. If we can have more of that kind of art, where it involves the city and its inhabitants, and does not just come in and out and disappear in five days.

DD **You also have an expanded new film programme. Can you tell me a little about this?**

AO We have two sections: one is a short film programme that will screen at the Hong Kong Arts Centre; and the other is feature-length films that will screen at a theatre at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. Those are open to the public and they're free. I think the film progamme is probably one of the best ways to reach out to members of the public. Sometimes you don't know what to do with art and you think, 'How am I supposed to react to it?' It can be daunting and you walk away.



Isa Genzken, *Schauspieler (Actors)* (2013–2015). Installation view: David Zwirner, Encounters, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). © Art Basel.



Installation view: Jess Johnson, Darren Knight Gallery, Discoveries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). © Art Basel.



General impression: Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). © Art Basel.



General impression: Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). © Art Basel.

Whereas with film, there's a narrative and it tells a particular story, whether about an artist or a collector. It's a gentler and more accessible way into the art world. I'm hoping this is a good way of providing access to the public and that it will be informative.

We're bringing Takashi Murakami's *Jellyfish Eyes* (2013), which we screened last year in Basel, to Hong Kong. It will be screened on Good Friday so I'm hoping it will be a good outing for family and kids.

DD **While Basel is a commercial selling platform, set up originally by gallerists, there seems to be an expectation in Hong Kong that the fair will also shape or influence the city's cultural landscape. Do you feel a pressure or responsibility in a way to contribute to this?**

AO Definitely. We would love to have more of a presence within the city outside of the fair week. I think this is still a young initiative and we're looking at how else to support cultural endeavours. Last year we supported the Hong Kong Art Gallery Association's Art Week, and we're still looking at different ways of having activities outside of March, like in the second part of the year. We're interested in things to fit, in terms of education or education outreach, but we realise we can't do it alone. At the end of the day, Art Basel is a fair and it's very much a market platform. But it's also about banding together with other organisations. These are definitely areas that we're exploring for the Hong Kong show. Something like *Event Horizon* [the large-scale public sculpture installation by artist Antony Gormley, which was shown in Hong Kong from November 2015 to May 2016], for example, is a public art project that is wonderful for Hong Kong, but it also has to be meaningful and inspire people as well.

Art Basel in Hong Kong

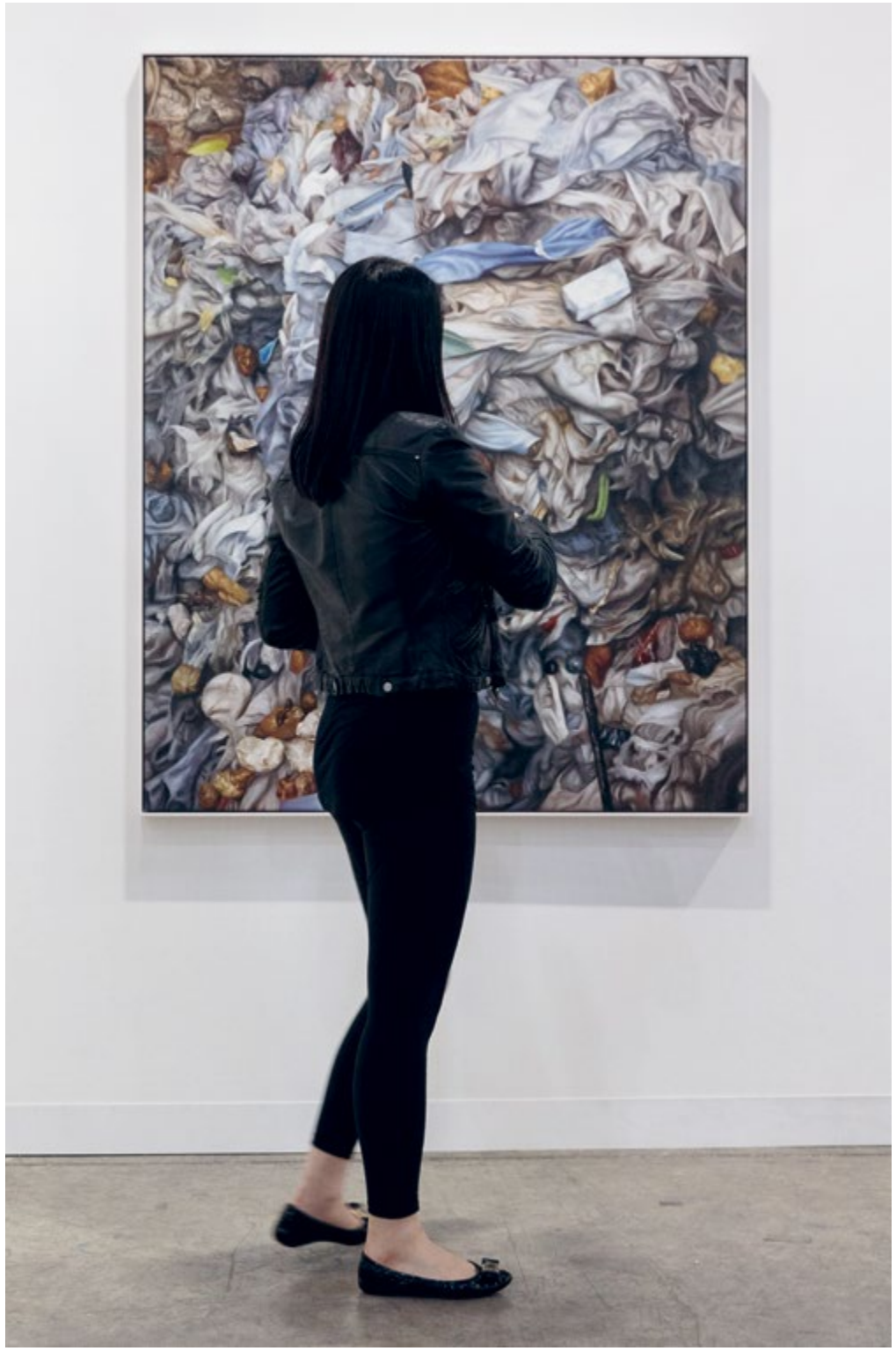
24–26 MARCH 2016



Installation view: Jaume Plensa, Galerie Lelong, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Installation view: Campbell Patterson, Michael Lett, Discoveries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Mike Bouchet, *Bounty (Will)* (2016). Installation view: Peres Projects, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Installation view: Urs Fischer, Sadie Coles HQ, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Installation view: Dale Frank and Michael Parekowhai, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



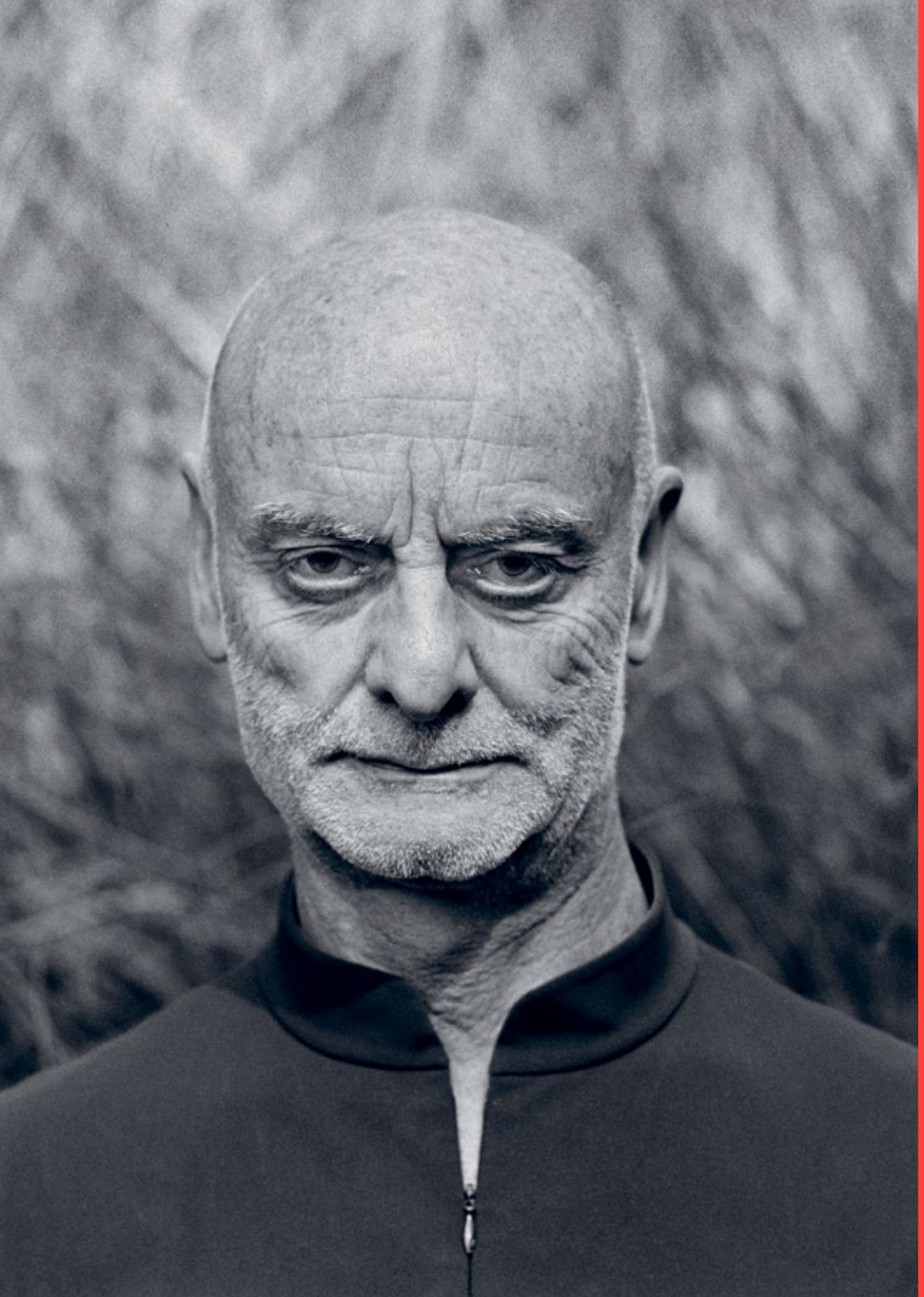
Los Carpinteros, *Derrame. Grupo dos* (2015). Installation view: Sean Kelly Gallery, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Installation view: Eko Nugroho and Ronald Ventura, ARNDT, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Julio Le Parc, *Cloison à lames réfléchissantes* (1966/2005). Installation view: Galeria Nara Roesler, Galleries, Art Basel in Hong Kong (24–26 March 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Mark Blower.



Dr Uli Sigg

IN CONVERSATION WITH DIANA D'ARENBERG
HONG KONG, 18 MARCH 2016

Courtesy Dr Uli Sigg.

When Sydney art dealer Ray Hughes visited Swiss collector Dr Uli Sigg at his Mauensee residence near Lucerne some years ago, a mutual friend asked the dealer how the visit went. 'Did you feel comfortable and find a place to kick your feet up and read?' 'No, to both', answered Hughes; 'there was only art everywhere.'

Sigg has enjoyed a distinguished career: first as a businessman in China with the Schindler Group creating what would become the first Western industrial joint venture with the Chinese government; then as Swiss ambassador to China from 1995 to 1998. But it is art that has defined Sigg's life more than anything else. The antithesis of the loud, brash, show-me-the-money insta-flipper collector that has sadly come to influence the art market these days, for Sigg, the art is everything. The collector, as he would insist, is nothing.

But it is not for nothing that Sigg has earned the moniker 'ambassador of Chinese art'. Over a period of four decades, Sigg has managed to put together one of the world's most impressive and encyclopedic collections of contemporary Chinese art, comprising over 2,200 works by over 325 artists. His consuming passion and drive has made him one of the most renowned figures in the contemporary art world, to say nothing of the Chinese contemporary art world.

'My China stories are in the artworks', Sigg once stated. And indeed they are. In fact, one may argue that within the collection is the history of modern China. Since his arrival there in 1979, he has witnessed first-hand the development of Chinese contemporary art—from repressed underground experimentalism to heady global art market domination—in tandem with the country's social and political changes. He also played a crucial role in establishing the Chinese Contemporary Art Award, which contributed to the wider recognition of several artists and brought international curatorial exposure to the Chinese contemporary art scene.

In 2012, Sigg donated the bulk of his collection to M+, Hong Kong's museum for visual culture, where he serves on the acquisition committee. His 1,510-piece donation, valued at the time at HKD 1.3 billion, is one of the most significant made to a museum in recent years. It certainly marked a turning point for M+ and for Hong Kong's bid to become a cultural capital. *M+ Sigg Collection: Four Decades of Chinese Contemporary Art* (23 February–5 April 2016) gives the Hong Kong public its first glimpse of the art that will form the backbone of the museum's permanent collection.

Surprisingly, as former M+ executive director Lars Nittve stated in the foreword to the catalogue for the exhibition, the exhibition is 'the first to narrate one of the most remarkable events in the last 100 years of art history in a concentrated, chronological, and hopefully crystallised way.' Comprised of selected highlights from the Sigg Collection, the exhibition features more than 80 pieces (paintings, installations, photography and video works) by 50 artists, (including Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Keping, Song

Dong, Ai Weiwei and Zhang Peili) presented in chronological order across four decades of Chinese history. Grouped into three periods, 1974–1989, 1990–1999 and 2000–present, the show reflects on the development of China's art scene and the relationship between art, society and politics. Each period addresses major milestones in modern Chinese history: the end of the Cultural Revolution, with small works by Zhang Wei that were painted in secret; the Tiananmen crackdown, with photographs by Liu Heung Shing depicting the bloody aftermath; and China's sprint towards globalisation and economic power in the 1990s and 2000s, for which a new generation of artists, such as Cao Fei and Yangjiang Group, attempt to address the environmental and social impact.

DD How did you start collecting Chinese contemporary art? When you first started looking at Chinese art there weren't any galleries in China, and certainly no Chinese art market.

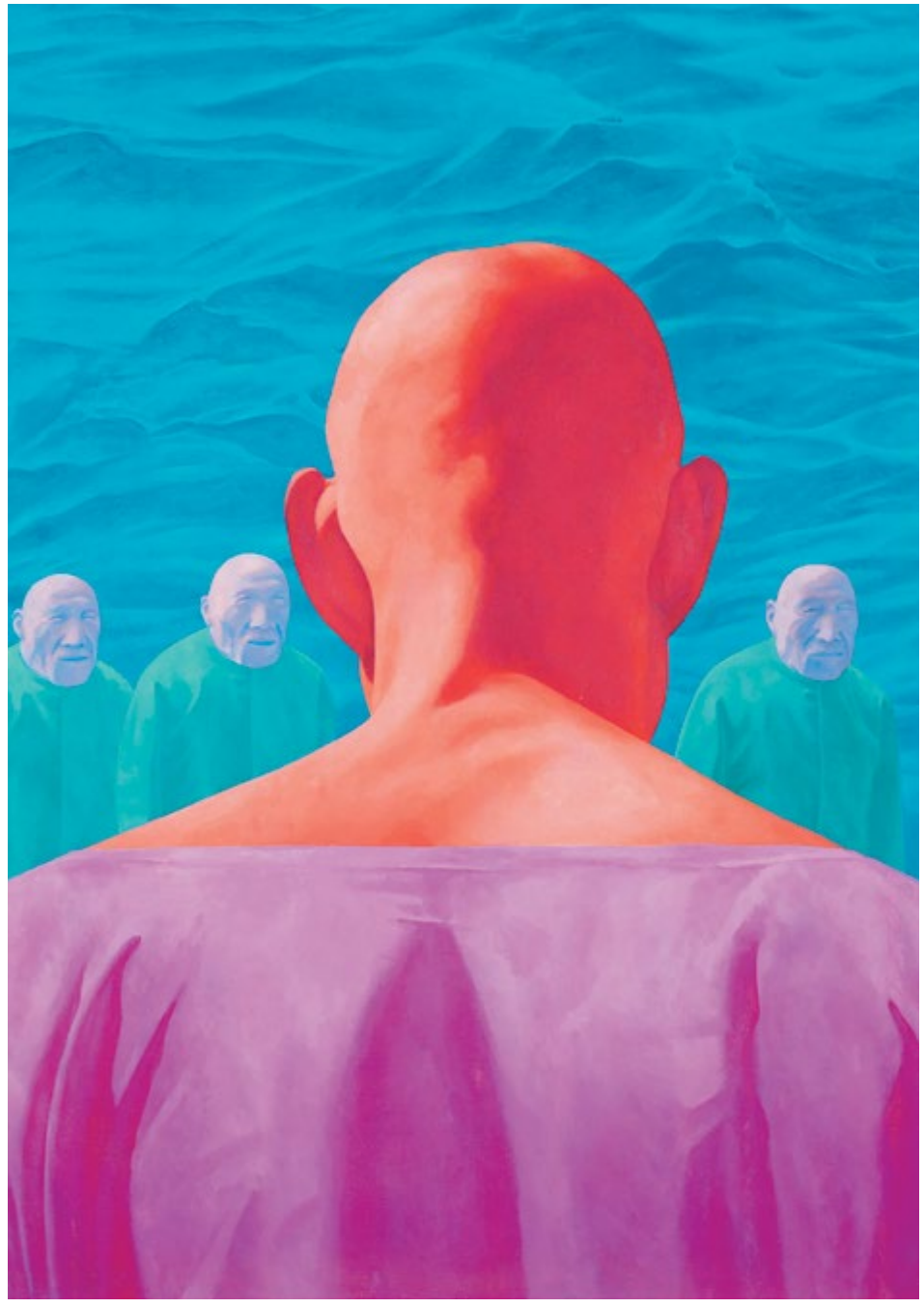
US I started in 1979, when I was first there with Schindler, but I wasn't really excited by what I saw at the time. I looked at a lot of work, but I didn't collect it. But by the late 1980s, I had started to look at it a little deeper. I felt that the art had found its own language, but it wasn't until the nineties that I really started collecting. By then I was moving freely around China. I went everywhere, even though a lot of art was still semi-underground. The constraints were not like those of the eighties, when I was always being observed and followed. In the nineties I could just get in my car and travel where I wanted, to different artists' studios.

DD The earliest works in the exhibition—paintings by Zhang Wei who was part of the underground No Name Group—date back to 1974 and 1975, almost post-Cultural Revolution. There was a great deal of artistic repression at the time, and art was being made covertly. Were you aware of the political and social significance of the works you were picking up?

US Yes. I'm a researcher by nature, and I was fortunate enough to buy the results of my research. Of course, maybe that's the difference between people like me and those who move exclusively in the art world. I was in China as a businessman and diplomat so I saw very different realities, and contemporary art was just another access point for me; but I always thought about how to integrate it into the full Chinese picture. So I was always able to contextualise the work, not just within the art world but also within Chinese society, something that was very important for me.

DD You came from a very Western-centric discourse and understanding of art. How did you initially view Chinese art? Did you have specific criteria in mind when you started collecting or did this evolve with time?

US Well, in the earlier years—and you also see it in the collection—I found a lot of Chinese art derivative of Western art, because it was the first time artists were able to make autonomous art. They could decide what to do and leave the language of socialist realism, so they experimented with the little information they had about Western art. So for us it looked very boring. It took quite some time until a language appeared that was not derivative. And at first I was looking with a Western eye: I was looking for art that could contribute to the global artistic discourse. But of course I couldn't find that. Everything was 50 years too late, 70 years too late. Only when I decided to take more of a documentation approach—to build a collection that allows you to read the story of Chinese contemporary art, because nobody was doing this—did I start looking for works that were important to Chinese art history. They didn't have to contribute to the global art discourse, which is at the forefront in Western art. So with a very different focus, I began to collect very different things. I was collecting backwards, collecting artists like the No Name Group. It made more sense. If you were looking for work that was at the forefront of contemporary art, then all this was not of much relevance. So that's really the difference. I had to change the focus to whatever was important for Chinese art history. Of course, ideally, it would also contribute to the history of global art discourse, and there are many works that do, but there are also many works that don't.



Fang Lijun, *Untitled* (1995). Oil on canvas. 250 × 180 cm. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong (by donation). Courtesy the artist and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Hong Kong.



Liu Wei, *It Looks Like a Landscape* (2004). Black & white print. 306 × 612 cm. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong (by donation). Courtesy the artist and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Hong Kong.

DD What points of difference do you see between the pre-1989 artists and today's generation of artists?

US Well now, of course, artists have fully caught up. Where once there was a time lag, they have now mastered all media, have no issues with techniques and have access to information, and this is all reflected in the art. Some of it, as we discussed earlier, comes across as being part of the global mainstream.

Tradition, or dealing with tradition, has gained a lot of weight. In the eighties nobody would ever want to hear about tradition—it was all about Western conceptualism—whereas now a lot of artists are disillusioned with Western conceptualism. That's a trend that has emerged in the last few years.

DD Is there a particularly memorable anecdote or encounter with an artist that springs to mind regarding any of the works in the exhibition?

US There are a million moments, but there's this work in the exhibition by Ai Weiwei—an installation with 4,000 stone axes [*Still Life* (1995–2000)]. I wanted to offer Weiwei more money than he actually wanted. He wanted a really ridiculously low price. I felt it should have been much higher, and he said to me, 'It doesn't really matter if you or I own it. That's irrelevant and just a blip. These axes have been here for 10,000 years, so what's the human life span? What does it matter who owns it? You take it.' So I did and now I have passed it on to M+. I also don't matter. It was an interesting way of thinking about art and its long-term relevance, if it ever has one.

DD Did you ever encounter resistance or find it problematic being a foreigner championing contemporary Chinese art?

US It was an issue early on when I created the Contemporary Chinese Art Award in 1997. There was a debate that I, as a foreigner in China, shouldn't be able to decide what's meaningful art or less meaningful art. This was the first contemporary art award in China, and I created it to promote a more domestic discourse and to bring in important foreign curators [such as Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, who went on to include 20 Chinese artists in the 1999 Venice Biennale] so they would see Chinese contemporary art, because at that time nobody had a clue about it. It's hard to imagine today, but that was the debate then. I had to explain myself; why I did this and why I should have a say in this—not the only say, but a say.

I had seen more of China than most Chinese back then ever could. As I mentioned, in the eighties and nineties, people couldn't travel freely around. I travelled everywhere for work, but they couldn't. And I had seen and met with thousands of Chinese artists, while many Chinese hadn't. So I created the award to collect material at a time when there were no books, no catalogues, no internet. I had to explain all this so everyone would understand. So yes, there was a moment where it was a problem, whereas today nobody disputes this.

DD Private museums are sprouting up all across China. Given your world-class art collection, why did you forego the private museum route?

US A number of reasons. But mainly, I'm very much a fan of the public institution. I think only the public institution can provide the long-term guarantee that it will continue to exist and it will be 'the' public memory. I have seen a number of private museums come and go in China. Maybe the owner goes bankrupt, maybe the owner decides to hang around with film people, not the art people, so then the money goes there. And you are hostage to the taste of that one person. Maybe that's the main issue. I'd much rather have a whole institution decide how to deal with the collection, rather than just me, myself. And there's also a question of means. I decided I'd rather put my resources into collecting than building this great monument to myself. I'm not so important in this. The collection is much bigger than me.

Of course I built it and there are traces of me in that collection, but it is much bigger than I am. I think it's an important document to Chinese culture, whereas I, personally, am not.



Tracey Emin

IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHANIE BAILEY
LONDON, 18 MARCH 2016

Photo: Richard Young.

On the eve of the opening of Tracey Emin's exhibition *I Cried Because I Love You* at Lehmann Maupin and White Cube in Hong Kong (21 March–21 May 2016), Ocula interviewed the artist about her practice. The conversation took Emin's 2012 survey exhibition *She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea* at Turner Contemporary—located in Margate, the seaside town where the artist grew up—as a starting point. The show presented a new body of work—formal studies of the female form, including expressive line paintings of the body rendered in blue watercolour on paper—that marked a radical departure from Emin's vernacular up to that moment. By then, Emin had become known for angst-ridden expressions infused with the artist's personal biography, which she has consistently used as material for her work. Exemplary pieces include her 1999 Turner Prize shortlisted work *My Bed*, which featured Emin's own bed, and *Everyone I Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995), a tent appliquéd with all the names of people Emin shared a bed with. The 2012 show, by contrast, offered a totally new turn.

She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea was followed by *The Last Great Adventure is You* at White Cube in London (8 October–16 November 2014), and *Tracey Emin | Egon Schiele: Where I Want to Go* at Leopold Museum in Vienna (24 April 2014–14 September 2015). The White Cube show presented an evolved body of work that built on the developments Emin showcased in 2012—paintings, drawings, bronze sculptures and neon lights, all reflecting a more tempered relationship to the female form—while the exhibition in Vienna created a synergy between Emin's formalism and the expressive lines of Egon Schiele's figurative studies.

In Hong Kong, Emin will present a continuous exhibition of painting, embroidery and neon across White Cube's and Lehmann Maupin's galleries, reflecting the diversity of her practice. A central aspect to this narrative is a large stone located in an olive grove outside Emin's studio in the South of France, on which the artist has based a series of drawings that commemorate a marriage ceremony that took place in the summer of 2015. The stone, for Emin, represents a metaphor for stability and enduring love, be it platonic, erotic, or focused on the self; a concept that has defined the scope of Emin's practice from the very beginning.

SB I'd like to start with your 2012 exhibition *She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea,* which was staged at the Turner Contemporary in your hometown, Margate.

With the view of the coast visible from inside the gallery space, it seemed such a perfect articulation of how Margate must have so deeply influenced your work—the coastline feels at once like a potential release and a trap. Could you talk about what this exhibition meant to you as an artist coming home to where it all began? The exhibition opened less than a year after your mid-career survey at the Hayward closed, after all, and presented a new series of works that suggested a real break from the past.

TE With my show in Margate, I really wanted to do something that was more optimistic, that had light. Everybody in Margate was aware of my past and history and that was the idea I had from the start; to exhibit something that showed that my life had moved on but was still related to my past. The most wonderful thing about my show in Margate was that 170,000 people went to view it; that really was a feeling of being home.

SB The exhibition also included these remarkable erotic drawings by J.M.W. Turner and Rodin. Turner being an artist whose work constantly evokes the light, the British coastline, and the billowing clouds that rush over the island. I wonder if you could talk about the influence Turner had on you?

TE When I was a student I actually did a series of oil paintings of Margate in the style of Turner. I find his work very sensual and extremely passionate. It was fascinating as a child knowing that a great artist was associated with Margate.

SB Another major influence on your work has been Egon Schiele. I understand you have been obsessed with him since you were 15. What led you to Schiele, and what was it about his work that spoke to you at such a young age?

TE David Bowie's cover for 'Heroes' was influenced by Egon Schiele, and that's how I became aware of him. I went to the local bookshop and found a book on Expressionism and there was a tiny image of Egon Schiele; a self-portrait that I could totally relate to. I think this was a defining moment for me in terms of my understanding of art.

SB *The Last Great Adventure is You* at White Cube in 2014 took place at the same time as an Egon Schiele exhibition at The Courtauld Gallery in London. Somehow, the two exhibitions put into perspective your prolific career, which recalls the same sense of urgency Alfred Werner observed in Schiele, as an artist who not only relieved himself of his anxieties, but also somehow made the public participate in them. I wonder what this exhibition at White Cube meant to you, given that it preceded your exhibition at the Leopold Museum, *Where I Want to Go*, which presented more than 80 of your works alongside Schiele's?

TE My show at White Cube was a big move forward for me. I showed bronzes and paintings; it was very important to me that the work showed the creative process with my hands. It is only now I'm in my fifties that I really feel that my mind and heart and soul and hands are actually coming together. I just wish it had happened earlier. I think it showed in my White Cube show.



Tracey Emin, *I Cried Because I Love You* (2016). Neon. 80 × 200 cm. © Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin and White Cube.
Photo © George Darrell.

SB **In the White Cube exhibition, I particularly enjoyed a collection of deformed bronze female figures that recalled an interview you gave in 2002, in which you stated: 'I couldn't see myself making a bronze sculpture—it's not me.' And yet, after all this sustained reworking and rethinking, it became you. How do you feel about this development? And further to this, which artists have been the greatest formal influences on you? You have mentioned Bacon, Rodin and Picasso; are there others?**

TE Yes, Louise Bourgeois: I actually had the fortune to collaborate with Louise Bourgeois on a series of images called 'Do Not Abandon Me'. I became friends with Jerry Gorovoy from Louise Bourgeois' foundation [The Easton Foundation], and he introduced me to the foundry that she used. This gave me a lot of confidence in terms of learning the lost wax process, and over the last four or five years I have become very excited about bronze sculpture. It's something I never thought I would be able to do—like learning a language at an old age. It's something that I am pursuing and learning more and more as the days go by.

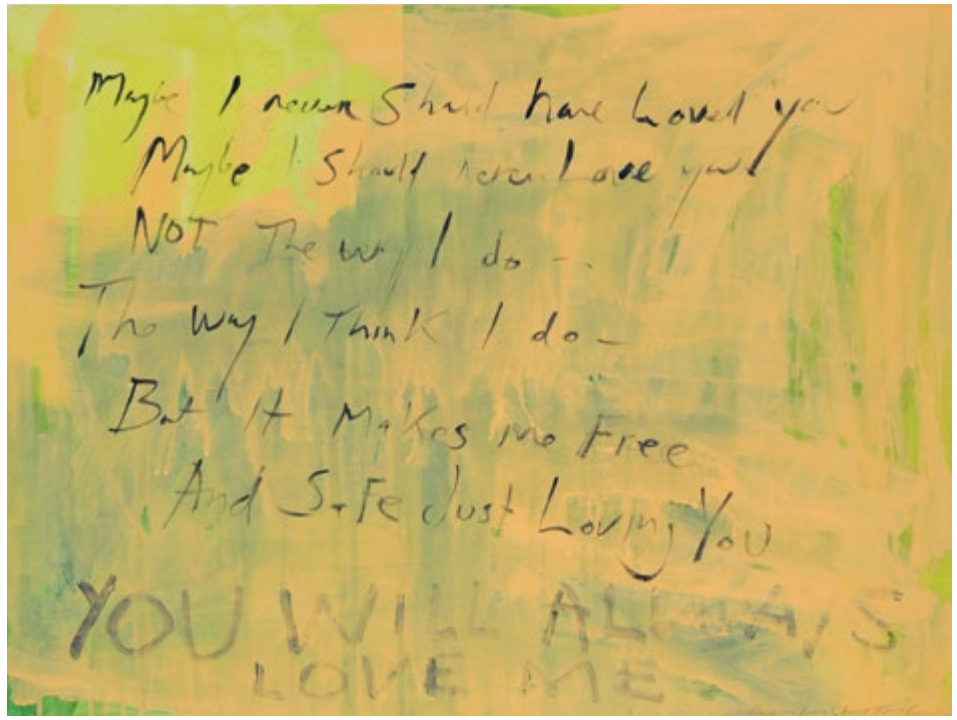
SB **What is interesting, too, is that your formal study of the female form subverts the history of female representation in art, by the fact that it is your own gaze, and not a man's, that is studying and representing it.**

TE It is my body. I know my body better than anyone else. I am my best model; it makes it really different that I am the woman because I am not viewing my body with a sexual gaze but with an understanding one.

SB **What was interesting about *The Last Great Adventure is You* was the positive reception you received from the British press, which reflected another aspect that has defined your career: your relationship to the public and to the media. On the critical battering you received from UK critics for your exhibition in the 2007 Venice Biennale British Pavilion, you noted in an interview with *Vanity Fair*: 'The press was cruel, because they didn't just dislike my work; they disliked me, personally—my voice, the way I dress, the way I look, my attitude. I'm sure they wouldn't have carried on that way if I were a man. I'm absolutely convinced of that.' Looking back, how do you feel your changing relationship with the media reflects the way people have learned to understand your work?**

TE I don't think it's so much people learning to understand me as it is also the fact that I have a much quieter, diligent attitude. I haven't been brow-beaten but I don't really have time or energy to fight back anymore. I just have to get on with my work. I think that after 20 years of being in the public eye, thankfully people are more judgmental about my work rather than the size of my breasts.

SB **You have said you are an Expressionist. This is manifested in the works that deal directly with your past, including themes of rape, assault and the side effects of such experiences, including alcoholism and non-existent self-esteem, coupled with a deep and unbearable need to be loved while being acutely incapable of letting love in. Your later work appears to present a calmer Emin: one who understands, as expressed in one of the neons included in the 2014 White Cube show, that 'The soul will always do what it needs to do'. I wonder if you could talk about your relationship with art in this regard—as a conduit for the soul to express itself?**



Tracey Emin, *Another Love Story* (2011–2015). Acrylic on canvas. 60.5 × 80 cm. © Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin and White Cube. Photo © George Darrell.

TE All those feelings are still there, except I have just learnt to deal with them better. All I seem to do is work and think about my ideas, and by doing that I tend to resolve more of my problems in life—or I just don't have time for problems anymore. I am so lucky that I have art: it looks after me, it holds me, it feeds me, and even though sometimes I may have a creative block, art has never left me. It is always there.

SB **Your work recalls another description of Schiele put forward by Alfred Werner: 'Too many have yet to see that beneath the agitation in Schiele's drawings and paintings there is the calm of a brooding philosophy which searches out the remotest corners of the soul.' I wonder how your current exhibition in Hong Kong at Lehmann Maupin and White Cube might reflect on the corners of the soul you have reached at this point in your practice?**

TE After May, when the Hong Kong exhibition finishes, I am taking a year off, which will give me some time to do some soul searching. I desperately crave more time to think. Art should never feel like a treadmill; it should be an expression of the soul. I would be happy if I can just go away somewhere and scream, even if no one hears me.

Francis Upritchard

IN CONVERSATION WITH RACHAEL VANCE
MELBOURNE, 30 MARCH 2016



Photo: Nicole Bachman.

Francis Upritchard is perhaps best known for her curious, and at times disconcerting, small-scale figurative sculptures which embody a constellation of historical and contemporary references. These figures inhabit a universe where imagination collides with the ancient and contemporary. Often juxtaposed and staged upon the geometric, clean lines of modernist furniture, her imaginative enquiries traverse the limits of human behaviour, imbuing gravitas with each assemblage and scenario.

In 2009, Upritchard represented New Zealand at the 53rd Venice Biennale (alongside Judy Millar), and her distinct visual language has continued to attract critical attention with solo exhibitions such as *Hammer Projects: Francis Upritchard* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (25 October 2014–1 March 2015); *Potato Poem* at the Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Kagawa (13 April–30 June 2013); *A Long Wait* at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (11 May–3 September 2012); and *In die Höhle* at the Secession in Vienna (30 April–20 June 2010).

Most recently, Upritchard's dynamic output is presented in her first major survey exhibition, *Francis Upritchard: Jealous Saboteurs*, at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne (13 February–16 April 2016). The exhibition is presented in partnership with City Gallery Te Whare Toi, Wellington, and is curated by their chief curator Robert Leonard and MUMA's director Charlotte Day.

In this interview, Upritchard discusses the exhibition at MUMA and the opportunity it presents to revisit the different stages of her practice, and the search for otherness within her work.

RV **Your retrospective at MUMA in Melbourne spans 20 years of your career. Could you discuss the selection process of works included in the exhibition?**

FU The selection was made by working very closely with Charlotte Day. We drew up a wish list of works we wanted and then tried to come up with a realistic selection that wasn't going to create too much of a shipping nightmare. My works are strewn across many continents and are often quite fragile, so moving them about was always going to be a major challenge with this show.

We included some of my very early land works, which I actually made at art school, because I thought it was very important for local audiences to see what exactly moving away from New Zealand did to my work. Lots of my first works in the UK are about remembering New Zealand and simultaneously being exposed to new cultures. Upon leaving New Zealand, I quickly travelled a lot—to Japan, Thailand, Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Morocco—and I also visited many, many museums and poured over amazing collections of African and Egyptian works. A special trip to the Wellcome Trust's archive warehouse in London was especially inspiring. I found the 'tikis' made by white sailors on their return from New Zealand in the 1800s. This was very interesting for me and solidified some of my ideas around mis-remembering.

We were really lucky to be loaned *Travellers Collection* (2003), a key work; and also during a chance studio visit I found my old table and was able to reunite the base with the planets in *Planets in the Detrimental Signs* (2003). We tried to represent each phase of my work in the show, and keep a balance across the 20-year span.

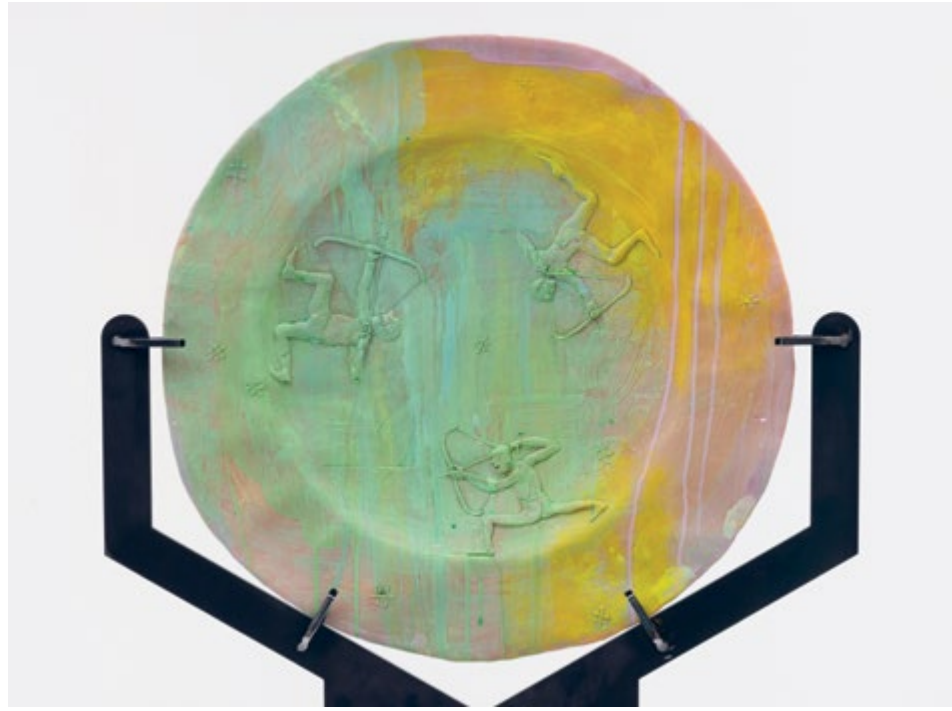
RV **How does it feel to review and reflect upon your practice in such an extensive way?**

FU It's very strange. Sometimes I get the 'old friend' feeling, and often the 'Who on earth are you?' feeling. I can see quite clearly now that my concerns are walking around in circles, even when the look of things are developing. I'm really into materials, and it's nice to see how many materials I'm now comfortable using.

RV **You often deploy staged gatherings of performative figures in your exhibitions. Can you discuss the final exhibition design at MUMA and how the individual rooms engage with each other?**

FU I've been making figures in many different ways these last years. The first emergence I guess would be the mummy, followed closely by the severed heads. Later the rubber 'balata' works, which I developed in Brazil, and lastly the new polymer plastic figures. We decided to see [the exhibition at MUMA] as a series of rooms that were roughly but not strictly chronological. In fact, the first room you enter at MUMA has the earliest and the latest works and also the smaller, more intimate pieces, so the work kind of shrinks and grows along the way.

I have had new walls built over the normal entry and main circulation space to the gallery, so you pass through the rooms in a very different way than you normally would. I'm not sure a new visitor would notice, but a regular visitor will encounter walls where they are expecting doors. I did this so that the space felt quieter and slower; the spine of the building is modern-looking with raw wood, and usually has a faster path for linking the rooms. Visually, my work has changed quite a lot over the years, and there are certainly works I wouldn't display in the same room.



Above: Francis Upritchard, *Archer Plate* (2012) (detail). Modelling material, foil, paint. 52 × 35 cm. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2015. Courtesy the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

Left: Francis Upritchard, *Blue and Green Scarf* (2012) (detail). Modelling material, foil, wire, paint, cloth. 49 × 33 × 38 cm. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

RV **By virtue of the materials and techniques you use, your pieces evade specific temporal reference. For example, the blending of medieval imagery such as harlequin design with Egyptian-esque urns that clash with the drapery of a North African caftan or Middle Eastern *keffiyeh* [a traditional scarf usually made from cotton]. Can you discuss your interest in this illusory time shift and why this has remained such a constant?**

FU Nice question. I'm not sure what it means exactly, but I think it's perhaps an attempt to say that humans are all the same, ancient or modern, black or white. I love going to museums and seeing marble busts of obviously powerful, but dull men; you can just see the vain, rich, managerial expressions. Representations of Jesus have always been interesting to me too, because there is this expression of suffering, and the time, scale, material and technical ability of artists is so very varied. However, you always know who it is supposed to be.

RV **I agree that your figurative sculptures provide a backdrop for a dialogue about human behaviour. There is a certain gravitas about them. Each character appears to represent a human urge in their expressions and body language, and a desire for connection. Is this something you consciously channel when creating your figures and staged narratives?**

FU The narratives are usually pretty simple; [the sculptures are] either male or female, and frequently ambiguous. Sometimes I'm trying to capture a face I glimpsed, sometimes a friend I have photographed, and sometimes a pose. Of course it's more complicated than that, as it often includes race and decoration, but I find it very hard to articulate exactly what I'm trying to do with each work, although sometimes the titles explain a little. *Nincompoop* (2011), I think, is an idiotic character; *Bangle* (2015), which I just made for my show at Anton Kern [Gallery], is confident, serene and adorned by bangles.

RV **You remove the possibility for viewers to enter into a total engagement or reach a level of empathy with your figurative sculptures through the omission of the pupils in their eyes, for example, or in their scale. They are not large enough to be exactly human, nor are they animal, and therefore they can't be fully scrutinised. Do you consider the audience's interaction with these pieces when producing them?**

FU Certainly. I want to remind the viewer that my works are firstly sculptures; despite the face and the clothes, they are a form. They have no actual personality. They are all imagined. I find watching violent or awkward moments in movies very hard. Perhaps it's because I'm not very good at separating reality from fiction.

RV **I want to discuss the way you conflate multiple disciplinary approaches and elements such as design and craft into your art practice. Your installations are therefore critical yet informed by more decorative traditions. What interests you about this mixing of creative processes?**

FU It's pretty complicated for me. I love craft, especially ceramics, glass work and weaving. I also love high art. I know these things are made differently with different intentions, but I'm also sure many artists could, or perhaps should, be craftspeople, and many craftspeople should be artists. Perhaps it's a query into why people might choose one path or another: Class? Education? Confidence?

RV **You have referred to a sense of cynicism located within your work in its reflection and commentary about the world and societal engagement. Is this something you still feel, and if so, how does this specifically resonate in this exhibition at MUMA?**

FU The title *Jealous Saboteurs* refers specifically to this. This title came from a leaflet slipped under my boyfriend's door, who lived in New Cross, a London neighbourhood with a large African community. The leaflet offered services to combat a whole list of interesting ills and I poached many of the particulars for titles, which relates to my interest in talismans. I like that some people believe they need protection from spirits; that an object can protect them from a car crash, or that a wax representation of their leg can cure their actual leg. Perhaps it insinuates that my sculptures could be powerful objects, too.

RV **Beyond MUMA, can you discuss your next project or body of work?**

FU I made a sculpture called *Long Arms and Long Legs go Fishing* (2015), inspired by a *netsuke* [a small Japanese sculptural object] of Japanese characters called Ashinaga and Tenaga that I saw at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. They represent symbiotic relationships and I want to explore them as sculptures because they make a great but complicated piggyback form. There is a sort of bromance aspect to their relationship which is so tender; one can't fish without the other, and they have to work together physically and intimately.



Kapwani Kiwanga

IN CONVERSATION WITH BRIENNE WALSH
PARIS, 30 MARCH 2016

Photo: Vincente Munoz.

Canadian-born Kapwani Kiwanga was arguably the artist with the most presence at The Armory Show in 2016, which ran from 3 to 6 March 2016 in New York. As the fair's Commissioned Artist, she showed the video installation *The Secretary's Suite* (2016), a work based on a 1961 photograph of then-Secretary-General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld's office, the décor of which is sparse and includes modernist furniture, an animal-skin rug, and the bust of a South Asian deity. The installation included a translucent print of the photograph hung in front of a television screen, which showed a video of Kiwanga sorting through photocopies of images of diplomatic gifts while she narrated stories—some real, some entirely fabricated—as if she were an anthropologist going over a recent dig. Kiwanga also produced a limited-edition screen print to benefit The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Photographs from her series 'Flowers for Africa', which recreates bouquets used in African independence ceremonies and negotiations, also adorned the front cover of The Armory Show 2016 catalogue. Finally, Galerie Tanja Wagner from Berlin and Galerie Jérôme Poggi from Paris hosted an independent booth of Kiwanga's recent sisal fibre works in the Focus section of the fair, this year subtitled 'African Perspectives'.

Kiwanga took the time to speak with Ocula from her studio in Paris, where she currently lives and works.

BW **How were you first approached to participate in The Armory Show? Many prestigious artists have been chosen in the past, it must have been an honour.**

KK Yeah, definitely, it was a great honour. It was the curators, Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba from *Contemporary And*, who contacted me. In fact, it was quite funny because Julia had written to me and said, 'Oh, you know we've been elected as curators for the next Focus section at The Armory.' I didn't quite understand the invitation at first; I thought that they wanted me to put in a proposition and then from there they would decide if they wanted to select me as their commissioned artist. I wrote back to that effect: 'Ok, great, I'd love to put in a proposition.' And she wrote back, 'No, no, no, no, in fact you've already been chosen, we want to know if you accept.' For me it was unexpected.

What Yvette and Julia hoped to achieve was quite interesting in terms of really challenging the idea of African art—pushing people to a kind of acceptance of Africa within a global exchange—and I found that was an intelligent way to approach the Focus section.

BW **For your dedicated installation, you chose to feature *The Secretary's Suite*, which I understand is based on a 1961 photograph you saw on a tour of the United Nations. How did you first become interested in the United Nations? And why did you specifically choose that project for your presentation?**

KK Basically this happens a lot in my work. I come across anecdotes or subject matter, something that interests me, and I'll kind of file it away in this to-do list of projects. There was something that related to the UN specifically that interested me, not about the gift economy per se, but more about a visit of a diplomat to the UN and his experience. I try to go to the place or to the country or whatever the appropriate space I'm interested in. So I did the very basic tour of the UN, and then I was lucky enough to have somebody who worked within the UN give me a bit of a privileged tour, as well as showing me different parts of the UN. And then of course my focus shifted completely, and I became attracted to these gifts that were given, particularly at the moment countries were admitted into the UN. I thought they would tell interesting stories about the different political and diplomatic configurations throughout the history of the UN, but also diplomatic relations generally.

As I thought about it, the question of the gift came up more and more, and it really shifted when I came across that image taken in 1961 of the Secretary's suite. Then the narrative really focused in on that, and the circumstances of Dag Hammarskjöld's death—the fact that he was travelling to negotiate a ceasefire at the time his plane crashed. The image I came across was taken only two weeks before he died. I didn't know that when I chose the image. I was drawn to it partially because there were diplomatic gifts present in the image, and I found it quite aesthetically interesting. It seemed to lend itself to a kind of stage scene. I could imagine stories being played out in this scene. It was really that image that ended up becoming the starting point of everything. Had I not been able to visit the UN, I might have done a completely different project in the end.

BW **Do you see any connection between the gift economy and the UN itself as an institution of cultural and social exchange, and The Armory, which is about commercial sales, but also about bringing people from different countries together in one space?**

KK I think there's more contrast, but maybe I'm wrong. I think the fact that The Armory is an art market and things are bought and sold is an exchange that is very much monetary. On the other hand, these gift economies or these gift exchanges [at the UN] are more about mutual bonds and creating things that are much more abstract, although our monetary economy is also quite abstract … So yes, I guess you could say there's a parallel; because what value do you place on an object because it's made by one artist and not another? The act of assigning value may be similar, but I think they're really expressed in different ways. I think the UN is one example, but of course there are many examples throughout history, and also geographically, that look at exchange in a way that is more encompassing than just, 'I give you something or you give me something back.' Gifts can make you obliged or indebted to somebody, and then you create these relationships that can even go beyond the person and go into generations or communities or families of relationships because of the exchange.

BW **What were some of the most surprising gifts you saw when you were touring the UN?**

KK It ranged so much, from, of course, beautiful artworks, things made of precious metals. But there was also something that I found reoccurred a lot in my research, not just at the UN but generally, in looking at diplomatic gifts. There was this tendency to offer gifts that are artefacts or replicas of artefacts from one's own cultural past. It's a way of proudly asserting one's cultural history and sharing that with whomever you're going to meet—to show your cultural heritage and cultural legacy. I found a couple of elements like that in the general display of UN gifts. For example, a replica of a 6th-century-BC urn from Slovenia.

BW **It's interesting considering what kinds of objects people choose to display, and who they assume will pass through the UN to see them.**

KK Not everything is displayed. They have so many objects. When I was doing my research, I was in contact with the arts committee, which kind of shepherds it all and oversees the inventories of the objects. I think they're trying to make [the collection] more accessible. So many things are not shown to the public. They must have so many gifts because every time someone comes, they give something. Some other things I found striking are the 'portrait' rugs offered by Iran, which feature portraits of the past Secretary-Generals, done with intricate craftsmanship.

BW **In some ways, the collection is like a museum. A museum also has so many objects that the curators can't show because they don't have the room. You really only see the tip of the iceberg when you go as a visitor to a museum. Were the flowers you used for The Armory catalogue design also from the UN?**

KK No, that was actually a different project called 'Flowers for Africa'. I started it in 2011 when I was on a residency in Dakar, Senegal. I was looking at archives related to African independence, and I'd gone through the national archives there and pulled out images that showed ceremonies or negotiations between different parties that led to independence. In the series, I focus on the floral arrangements that are present in the images I found. To recreate them, I brought the images to a florist, and we reconstructed them to the best of our ability—taking into account that, of course, most of the images are black and white. The flowers were not the centrepiece or the focus point of the image, per se, so they're sometimes



Above: Kapwani Kiwanga, *Rumors Maji was a lie…* (2014). Mixed media installation. Installation view: *Maji Maji*, Jeu de Paume, Paris (3 June–21 September 2014). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris.

Next page: Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa* (2012–ongoing). Protocol written and signed by the artist, iconographic documents. Unique artworks, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris.



partially out of frame, or not completely in focus. It's a bit of a meticulous project to try and find images that are discernible so that we can see the bouquets.

Up until now, I've been able to do works that feature floral arrangements from eight different countries. The Armory catalogue image is of a section of a floral arrangement that covered the whole podium in the centre of a stadium during the Ugandan independence ceremony, when the British handed over independence to Uganda. The image is a photograph of a floral arrangement that was reconstructed with the help of a Parisian florist. Then, on the back cover you see the bouquet five weeks later, when it has begun to decompose. The idea is that I allow the flowers to fade, wilt and dry up.

If one of these works is acquired by an institution or a collector, it should be reactivated every year. The idea is not to make it a kind of mausoleum, or to preserve the vestiges of these floral arrangements, but more to underscore this action of reactivating to re-examine this moment in history. Of course history is fleeting, and you cannot go back to a time past. You can only observe it from your present.

BW **Did the curators choose that project or did you?**

KK Well, the process was more of a sort of brainstorming. I just laid out all of the images that I found interesting and The Armory team selected ones that they found the most interesting, and then we came to the decision about which image would be the best. It's also a project that I'm still working on, and feel quite excited and passionate about, so I thought it made sense to also share that with the public.

BW **You grew up in Canada, and you work in Paris now. How did you begin to explore Africa as a theme in your work?**

KK My father is from Tanzania, and a part of my family still lives in Tanzania. Africa and the African diaspora are present in my work quite a bit, but I wouldn't say it's the only thing that I work on. Of course, it often gets kind of repeated that this is my main theme. I'd say it's more my starting point. I look at historical, social and political events or phenomena that come out of the diaspora, or from Africa itself, and then from there it always becomes an entangled web of relationships. But I've also worked in different places. It really just depends on where my interests take me. Even though the Tanzanian part of my background influences the things I've been exposed to in my life, my upbringing generally—being brought up in Canada in quite a multicultural environment—is what has really informed my life more, I think, than my African background. I grew up with people from South Asian or Chinese backgrounds, very good family friends … Ugandans. It informed my idea of multiple perspectives and challenged a hegemonic, Eurocentric kind of discourse. I think it's this experience and contact with people throughout life that has informed my work more than my father's birthplace.

BW **Africa is rife with unwritten or forgotten histories because the dominant narrative was, for so long, Eurocentric. As an artist, being able to go back and look at a continent with fresh eyes must be really interesting.**

KK As an artist or as an individual, I think what's always important is that you own your subjective take on things. Of course I'm working in different countries with which I don't have any particular genealogical ties. I also don't believe that I have any



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Vumbi* (2012). Colour photograph. Edition 5 + 1AP. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin.

more authority or authenticity than somebody else to speak about Tanzanian history because I might've had some stake which is historic, familial or whatever else. I think someone's personal or subjective contribution can give a history a particular hue; you contribute to looking at a particular subject in your particular way, although this might be faulty, and you try your best to avoid reproducing those power dynamics that you may have found problematic in the past. Everyone is a visitor somehow. Even if it's your own town, the way you talk about it is always going to be your point of view. As long as you're honest or clear about that, or transparent, then I think it allows you to say this is one among many ways that we can look at the same thing.

BW **My family is Irish, and we talk so much about being Irish, but I was just in the UK last week and I realised how much of my history, being born and raised in America, is really American—how quickly you become the place where you live as opposed to the place where you think you're from. When do you let go of this idea of yourself having a certain kind of history when it really has no connection to the way you've lived or the things that you know?**

KK It's a question I think also of the diaspora, because you're talking about the Irish diaspora. Diaspora augments questions of identity. You feel the identity strongly, but when you go back, there are these funny shifts. I also have an Irish background, and Scottish, and a lot of other things. I lived in Scotland for three years. When my mother came over to visit we went—which everybody does when they come from North America—

to the National Library to try to find our family or clan on the map. I'd spoken to my grandmother about more or less where she thought we're from, and there were two possibilities. I'd already spent some time in the Isle of Skye—one of the possibilities. There was never a question of belonging, because of my physical appearance. People would never say, 'Oh, you have some heritage here.' But I felt that heritage from my upbringing, and just being there in Scotland, I began to notice little things that I didn't know where they came from before, but being in Scotland, I was like, 'Ah ok, now I get where these habits come from.'

BW **Will you display *The Secretary's Suite* somewhere else? And if not, what is coming next for you?**

KK Not so far. *The Secretary's Suite* is a project that I'd like to continue somehow, maybe around the idea of gifting more generally. But I am opening a number of group shows this spring. There's a biennale [EVA International] in Limerick, curated by Koyo Kouoh. I'll be showing *A Memory Palace* (2015). I'll also be doing a collective four-person show at Temporary Gallery, Cologne, where I'll be showing a work that is based on a longer-term project around the Afro-tunnel that hypothetically would link the African and European continents from Morocco to Spain. It's an engineering project which, of course, up until now has not materialised. I'm also opening a solo show, *Ujamaa*, at the end of April at La Ferme du Buisson, an art centre in France, that will look more at the question of a particular socialism which was developed in Tanzania by then-president Julius Nyerere. It really looks at collective living and collective farming because the country was, and still is, primarily rural and agricultural. Those are the next things coming up. As for *The Secretary's Suite* itself, no dates to show it, per se, but these things end up coming back. It might turn into a lecture performance, for example, or something more ambitious with multiple chapters. It depends on how lucky I am with invitations, I guess.



Wu Tsang

IN CONVERSATION WITH DIANA D'ARENBERG
HONG KONG, 21 APRIL 2016

Photo: Mia Haggi.

One of the wonderful things about meeting artists and writing their stories is that you lose yourself in their world and the world of images that they create. This happened to me on the grey, sleepy Friday afternoon that I met visual artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang at Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, where she was previewing her new multimedia installation *Duilian* (2016) (12 March–22 May 2016).

Duilian was the result of two three-month residencies at Spring Workshop, where Tsang researched the life and writing of Chinese revolutionary feminist writer Qiu Jin (秋瑾 1875–1907) and her intimate female friend, the calligrapher Wu Zhiying (吳芝瑛 1868–1934). The artist produced a 30-minute film and several installation works centring on the story of their relationship. Athough Qiu Jin is well known in China, little is known about her in the West, and even less is known about Wu Zhiying (played by Tsang in the film). A revered historic figure, Qiu Jin was executed for her involvement in a failed uprising against the Qing dynasty, one of several revolts and uprisings that eventually led to the end of imperial rule and the founding of the Republic of China. Today, Qiu Jin is a symbol of women's independence in China and a national heroine. Her portrait hangs in the Museum of the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: a lonely heroine in a hall dominated by men.

Sitting in the darkened room in Spring Workshop, I was carried away by the world of poetry and rich visuals Tsang created on screen. Transported across water and time, scenes slipped between Qing dynasty China and present-day Hong Kong. Immersed in Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying's world of love, loss and sacrifice, the film takes the theme of queer history—or rather its invisibility—as a point of departure. It is a fictitious exploration of a queer relationship: something omitted altogether from the official annals of history. But more than this, perhaps the most important theme in the film is language, and the power it has in shaping our relationship to one another; how it can construct or reconstruct truths and how it shapes history. Through deliberate mistranslations—into Tagalog, Cantonese, English and Malay—of Qiu Jin's and Wu Zhiying's poems and historical accounts, an alternative narrative is proposed. It is a stunning interrogation of how language is constructed and used to immortalise, mythologise or relegate to oblivion.

Based in Los Angeles, Tsang was an organiser of the Wildness parties hosted at the Silver Platter, an LGBT immigrant bar that became the subject of Tsang's first feature-length documentary, *Wildness* (2012). Her works have been shown at the Tate Modern, London; the Whitney Museum of American Art and the New Museum, New York; the Hammer Museum and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju.

DD **You first came to China in 2005 to reconnect with your ethnic roots—your father was born in Chongqing. It was there that you came across the historical figures of Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying. Could you tell me about this?**

WT On my first trip to China 12 years ago, I went kind of on a whim to Shaoxing, where Qiu Jin is from. I went with some Chinese lesbian friends who were equally curious to find out more about Qiu Jin. In the museum, we were excited to discover an amazing story about Qiu Jin and her relationship with Wu Zhiying. The true nature of their relationship can never be known, but for me the point is not to claim or label it, but instead to take inspiration from their story. I've done a lot of research and what is most inspiring to me—which I didn't expect ten years ago—is their writing. It makes me think a lot about how language can escape from its time and from the constraints of society. It can allow us to express desire or ways of being. I am trying to create a language here to communicate with others.

DD **I really felt that you had a kinship with the two women, portrayed as they are with such sensitivity. But which of the two did you most relate to, Qiu Jin or Wu Zhiying?**

WT I gravitated more towards Wu Zhiying because I can relate to her subtle toughness. Qiu Jin is more of a romantic figure; she's an official communist hero and a Chinese martyr, so she is more overtly charismatic. I particularly became interested in the pop cultural imagination of Qiu Jin, for example, in the many ways that people have represented her in theatre, film and comic books. Wu Zhiying, on the other hand, is a more obscure figure that you only really encounter in scholarship, through her writings. At the time that Qiu Jin was persecuted and executed in 1907, she was basically a convicted felon and relatively minor figure in the resistance movement. Wu Zhiying played the important role of not only burying her, but of becoming her chief biographer and mourner at the risk of her own life and reputation. I wanted to explore the idea that histories have subjective origins, which are equally as embedded with desire as they are with context.

DD **What do you want the audience to ask themselves through this film?**

WT I do have a question about the nature of love. We have love for other people, but then there's also this love for community, or a movement or cause. What motivates that? What draws people to each other, what kind of energy? This comes from my experience as an organiser in the queer community. I always think that desire plays a huge role in making things happen—in making revolution happen. You have to be inspired and turned on to commit to something bigger than yourself.

DD **You travelled to China to research the work, where you also came across the female wushu group that you featured in *Duilian*. Why did you not just film in China, instead of Hong Kong? How does Hong Kong inform the film for you?**

WT When I set out to do this project ten years ago, I did not specifically have Hong Kong in mind as a site for this story. But living and working there allowed me to see China from a different perspective. People in Hong Kong have a very complex and sometimes contentious relationship to Chinese identity. There is a hybridity that felt somehow familiar to my own experience of growing up with a Cantonese-speaking Chinese dad

in America; we were neither Chinese nor American. It's not the same at all as being Hong Kongese, but I guess there is a fluidity and openness to negotiating ethnicity and history that I can appreciate.

We filmed most of *Duilian* on a boat in a Hong Kong harbour. My thinking on that was that I really wanted to create a world that was floating between different time periods—between the past and present but also between Hong Kong and China—because I think being in Hong Kong has been a significant way for me to reflect on Chinese identity and nationalism, and come at it from a critical perspective. My father's family left China in 1949 during the Communist Revolution, and their first stop was Hong Kong, along with a flood of other political refugees. Considering this idea of a counter-narrative or counter-identity or stories, Hong Kong feels really appropriate to this project. Also, there is a diversity of voices in the film—different people I've encountered during the making of the project who I invited to do translations with me. Everyone is coming from the queer community perspective, and all are Hong Kong-based.

I read the *South China Morning Post* one day, and they were talking about how the Communist Party [of China] is making it illegal to distort history, and I thought, that's interesting because I believe history is by nature a distortion. I was thinking about how in Hong Kong there is palpable anxiety about what's going to happen to the city in relation to mainland China: anxiety about censorship and freedom of speech and a way of life. There's a sense of antagonism, a sense of urgency and questioning about what's going to happen.

DD **In your work, there's a theme of different worlds: the afterworld alluded to in the installation at Spring, *One life, not preserved* (2016); the world of contemporary Hong Kong; and Qing dynasty China. This creates identity slippages: the idea of being able to float between one world and another, and of exploring different sides of one's identity. What is the importance of identity to your films and to your work as an artist in general?**

WT Actually, when I started this project, I had a very specific narrative in mind that was tied to identity. It was supposed to be a story about two women who wanted to be together at a time when it was forbidden. But then through a lot of research, I discovered that queer relationships in China at that time were not exactly a big deal. At the turn of the century there were all kinds of female relationships and they weren't even private; they were just defined in different terms of intimacy and desire. In that sense, the identity categories that we have now just don't apply, and I found that to be inspiring. Qiu Jin is, for me, a sort of 'trans' hero. Not only did she dress in men's clothing and carry a sword, presenting a very public masculine persona of a 'knight errant'—but in a deeper sense, she created a way of being that didn't exist at the time. And not only her—the community of strong women that surrounded her were breaking all kinds of conventions, travelling independently and advocating for women's education and equal roles in society. Love was just one layer of their struggle to define themselves and exist in a time when it wasn't easy to be a woman.

DD **You're saying the relationship wasn't a big deal at the time, yet that part of her history has been wilfully neglected. By making this film, you are trying to address this and fill in the gaps in this history. I feel that there are moments when you pick up the thread of your trans-activism in *Duilian*. There is a quote**



Wu Tsang, *One life, not preserved* (2016). Courtesy the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Photo: MC.



Wu Tsang, *Duilian* (2016). Production still. Courtesy the artist, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Photo: Ringo Tang.



Wu Tsang, *Duilian* (2016). Installation view: *Duilian,* Spring Workshop, Hong Kong (12 March–22 May 2016). Courtesy the artist and Spring Workshop. Photo: MC.

in the film: 'Since the revolution has failed in our community, it's time to brandish our swords.' Is this a reference to address the history of the queer community?

WT [*Laughs*] Yeah, I agree. I'm laughing though because that particular line of poetry came out of a mistranslation. The full line in the film is: 'Since the revolution has failed our community, all we can do is brandish our swords, and sing karaoke with snot and tears!' By 'mistranslation' I am referring to a process of playful collective translation that grew out of social activities at Spring Workshop. Through a series of gatherings with different people, we collectively 'mis'-translated Qiu Jin's and Wu Zhiying's poetry. The point of the social gathering was not to accurately translate the poetry, because the group was very mixed: for example, people had varying degrees of familiarity to traditional Chinese poetry, from not being able to speak or read Chinese, to being traditional Chinese poetry experts. What was important to me was not that we be accurate, but that we use the poetry as a starting point to talk about our own experiences.

So with this line, 'the revolution has failed our community', I also wanted to talk about the current situation. For example, in the US—and I would argue globally, including Hong Kong—many people are coming to critique and question the mainstream LGBT movement as being a kind of failure. The movement has become consolidated under a very normative framework of visibility and inclusion.

DD **This research has been a ten-year commitment and it's quite a part of your life. What is it that inspired you to pursue this project? Is it a desire to do justice to Qiu Jin's story, and to bring the marginalised and neglected parts of her history into the spotlight?**

WT I don't consider Qiu Jin to be marginal, but I am interested in how that word 'marginal' operates in relation to identity; it presumes that there is a centre. Qiu Jin is a vessel, like the film genre itself. Her story as a martyr or hero, or even her tragic love story, provides a structure, a kind of formula, to say a lot of deeper things.

A lot of my work uses performance as a way to get at something real. The play-acting becomes a way in which we unconsciously reveal ourselves. That's why the aspect of community involvement, and the collective creation of content that led to the script, is not so much about telling a historically accurate story as it is about creating a portrait of the world around us.

I feel very sensitive and aware of the fact that with anything to do with queer identity, people tend to gravitate and focus on that. But if there's one thing I hope people take away, it would be how language defines what is and what's not possible; how we are bound by it, but also how we can escape through it or from it. I do not want to claim Qiu Jin as a queer person or queer hero, but instead to tell our story in parallel to her story. Hopefully that is the real conversation.

Frieze New York

5–8 MAY 2016



Installation view: Angela Bulloch, AA Bronson and Keith Boadwee, Esther Schipper and Johnen Galerie, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Alex Da Corte, *Free Money* (2016). Installation view: Frieze Projects, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Thea Djordjadze, *Tickle the sketch* (2013). Installation view: Sprüth Magers, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Isa Genzken, *Hallelujah (New Museum)* (2012). Installation view: David Zwirner, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Michael Sailstorfer, *Kopf und Körper, New York* (2015). Installation view: Galerie Perrotin, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Erwin Wurm, Lehmann Maupin, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Simon Fujiwara and Hayden Dunham, Andrea Rosen Gallery, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Tony Cragg and Robert Rauschenberg, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Mai-Thu Perret, David Kordansky Gallery, Galleries, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Heather Phillipson, *100% Other Fibres* (2016). Installation view: Frieze Projects, Frieze New York (5–8 May 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Yoshitomo Nara

IN CONVERSATION WITH CATHERINE SHAW
HONG KONG, 9 MAY 2016

Courtesy the artist. Photo: Minami Tsukamoto.

During his visit to Hong Kong in March 2016 to receive one of three prestigious Asia Arts Game Changers awards from the Asia Society, Yoshitomo Nara spoke to Ocula about his work, and how he finds the solitude he needs to create by escaping to the small and distant city of Aomori, in northern Japan.

Born in 1959, Nara studied at the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music before moving to Germany, where he continued his studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Returning to Japan in 2000, he has subsequently exhibited widely both in his home country and on the international stage. He is best known for his simple paintings and sculptures of young children and animals that appear innocent yet sinister and combine elements of Japan's manga culture with Western cartoons. While his earlier works touch on issues relating to the painful pressures of Japanese adolescence, witnessing the devastation of Japan's 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami significantly changed the way he thinks about his own work. The experience initially left him 'unable to draw', he explains. His response was to retreat from collaborative projects and refocus on his earlier interest in working with ceramics as a way of 'restarting the [creative] conversation' with himself.

CS **What does it mean to you to be recognised by the Asia Society in this way?**

YN It feels like it is happening to someone else. It doesn't feel real. When it comes to myself, I know the general public likes me, but I was always unsure if professionals in the art world appreciate what I do. I felt inferior, so it feels like this award recognises me.

CS **Do you think of yourself as an Asian artist?**

YN Some things remind me that I am an Asian artist. The first time I had an exhibition in the United States was in 1995 [*Pacific Babies* at Blum & Poe, Santa Monica (12 July–19 August)]. At the opening, many of the audience were Asian American and I realised they saw me as the same as them—as Asian—and that we share the same ancestors. I hadn't realised that before, so it made me feel part of this Asian thing.

After that, I had an opportunity to do exhibitions in Korea and Bangkok with local audiences and they also really saw me as Asian, like one of them. One thing that was very surprising was when I was in Korea in 2005, and my work was chosen for an award. There is a strong anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea and people told me that it is very rare for a Japanese artist to be chosen for an award, so I realised they were looking at me as an artist.

CS **Do you think that has something to do with how your work appeals on an emotional level, without an overt cultural or political message, as with some other Japanese artists?**

YN I think it is also about the manner of presentation. For example, for Aida-san [Aida Makoto], his work has some sort of an agenda that he needs to address. He always is aware of who is viewing his work and is very aware of the audience. In my case, it is not about the country or the people or categories. I am just trying to express individual things, so for people keen to understand things on that level, my work will probably resonate.

Basically my approach is that it doesn't matter if there is an audience out there. Even if I knew there was no one out there to look at my work, I would still make the exact same thing.

CS **Is it true that you can't create when you are happy?**

YN It is true. You probably know that I live in the middle of nowhere and the reason I place myself there is because when you are having a lot of fun, you don't face yourself. When you are living in a place like Tokyo, for example, there are a series of good times and fun activities; you tend to pursue those short-term things and then the joy of painting becomes less and less important. You also don't look into yourself when you are having a good time. When I am sad and angry, I take it as an opportunity to create something.

CS **Is it difficult deciding between being happy and being creative?**

YN It sounds like a paradox, but rather than expressing something fun and enjoyable and translating it into work, taking something negative gives me more enjoyment. I guess it is similar to those people who compose or write when they are angry or sad.

CS **Do you think the audience understands that there is more to your paintings than the first impression of *kawaii*?**

YN Most people just have a superficial interpretation: maybe that is why I am so popular! [*Laughs*] Actually, maybe it is inevitable because of my style.



Installation view: *Yoshitomo Nara*, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (1 March–12 April 2014). © Yoshitomo Nara. Photo: Joshua White.

CS Many artists in Japan were deeply affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Tōhoku. How did it influence your own work?

YN I think what is different between those artists who were affected by the earthquake and myself, is that I grew up in Aomori, which is close to Fukushima. The whole area between us and Fukushima was devastated; the scenery I was familiar with was destroyed. For some people with no relation to the area, they may be affected as an artist, but in my case I was a lot more affected on a personal level because I knew people who were lost. I was quite depressed and unstable for quite some time, but then I saw people from that devastated area returning and they started again.

CS You lived for some time in Berlin. How has that period influenced your work?

YN I guess that Berlin and Aomori are different places, but it is their isolation and remoteness that makes me see things a lot better than when I am having fun. It magnifies things so much more. In Berlin I was a foreigner and I had no language skills so I felt very isolated. It was like growing up in Aomori, which is very much disconnected from the rest of Japan. It reminded me of who I am and helped me rediscover myself.

CS Does working make you happy?

YN I don't have set goals or purposes. My gut feeling or instinct tells me what to do, and then sometimes in hindsight I realise that was something that I wanted to do. I trust my instincts. For example, if I had picked London instead of Germany, I would have had too much fun and I wouldn't have picked up who I am today. Germany wasn't as entertaining, so I was looking into myself and had a better understanding of myself, so in that way it was a good thing.



Yoshitomo Nara, *Fountain of Life*, (2001/2013). Fibre-reinforced plastic, lacquer, urethane, motor, water. 174.9 × 177.8 cm (diameter). Edition of 3, 2AP. © Yoshitomo Nara. Photo: Joshua White.



Yoshitomo Nara, *Cosmic Eyes* (2013). Acrylic on canvas. 130.8 × 97.1 cm. © Yoshitomo Nara. Photo: Joshua White.

I am not Christian or Buddhist and don't practice religion but I think that a god is out there leading me to certain places and to do certain things.

CS **Do you have a clear idea of what a work will look like before you begin painting or drawing?**

YN I don't have a set goal, otherwise I cannot maximise my hidden capability. If you rely on technique or methodology, you won't bring out your hidden capabilities. Sometimes I just stop if I know I am not doing this. Trying to maximise my capabilities is what I started to do after the earthquake—this is the change.

CS **The figures in your paintings are mainly girls—why?**

YN I don't think of her as a girl because it is a neutral image. It is just something that popped into my mind that I have not thought about. For me, there is no distinct sex because people become men or women when they grow up. Children are more neutral. That is the way I see them.

CS **Do you have a preference between sketching and painting?**

YN Sketching is what I am best at. That is when I am doing the best I can. I am good at drawing but painting is a bit of a stretch [*laughs*].

CS **You are quite shy—do you find talking about your work difficult?**

YN I don't like being in front of the public but my work can do that for me. All my works are very personal and about me, but still many people find they resonate with them; so they are basically taking my pieces into them. Some say my work is a representation of this or that and try to associate my work with some social factor, but I don't think that is right. To be honest, what I'd like to tell my audience is that they don't need to have knowledge about me or my work—as long as they can look at it face to face as an individual then the interpretation is up to them.

Alfredo Jaar

IN CONVERSATION WITH KATE BRETTKELLY-CHALMERS
AUCKLAND, 31 MAY 2016



Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images* (2002). Courtesy the artist.

Chilean-born artist, architect and filmmaker Alfredo Jaar is celebrated for his poetic yet unflinching attention to global injustices, political prejudice and tragedy. The recipient of numerous awards and accolades, Jaar was in Auckland, New Zealand, for the major group exhibition *Space to Dream: Recent Art from South America*, at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (7 May–18 September 2016). The exhibition includes images of Jaar's well-known work *A Logo For America* (1987)—an animation first projected in New York's Times Square that contests the United States' appropriation of the word 'America' as signifying an exclusive ethnocentric identity that discounts the southern continent to which it also refers.

Jaar gave the keynote lecture during the exhibition, in which he discussed works from his extensive career that have responded to global political events and issues, including the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011, Finland's historically restrictive immigration policies, homelessness in Montreal, and the Chilean victims of Augusto Pinochet's regime. Over the course of the lecture, Jaar repeatedly showed the same sequence of images: the well-known photographs of the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee who was found dead on a Turkish beach in September 2015. Throughout his artistic career, Jaar has been interested in the power of images to provoke political change—something that those photographs of Kurdi had the potential to achieve when they were published in newspapers around the world. Jaar met with Kate Brettkelly-Chalmers to talk about these photographs, immigration, memorialisation and US politics.

KBC **Your artist lecture was unusually affecting and emotive, especially with respect to the photographs of Alan Kurdi. Can you talk about your approach to this image in the context of a public lecture?**

AJ I lecture quite often—maybe some 30 times a year, all around the world—and I have learned with experience to read the audience. Every one of my works and every single project of mine implores them to 'Stay with me', 'Give me a minute of your time', 'Let me tell you something'—and this is the same with my lectures. Over time, I realised that I had to create a system where the audience is taken with me: where they are truly listening and looking. This is something that can be difficult to do in contemporary society. We live in difficult times and difficult worlds where everyone is centred on their own little problems.

I work with the politics of images. Society does not teach us to look at images. They teach children to read—words, sentences and vocabularies—but not to read images. I am interested in this issue. I want to make people 'see'.

KBC **Is this why you repeated the sequence of images where Kurdi is lifted from the beach about five or six times throughout the course of the lecture? Were you gauging how the audience responded each time they were shown the same very difficult image?**

AJ For me, repetition is not just repetition. With every single reiteration of that image, the audience sees something else—they see another detail. The vision becomes fuller as they see it again and again. On the one hand, I was mimicking what the media has already done with this image. But on the other hand, I was hoping that by showing the further details and the wider context of the photograph, that people would finally see it. In actually seeing it, you start thinking about the meaning of the image: what does it mean for us? What is the relationship of that boy to me?

KBC **Many of your works are memorials to a specific historical event, such as the recent Fukushima disaster. But you also develop works that draw attention to urgent political situations or conditions—the plight of Syrian migrants is a good example. Is this process of 'memorialisation' something that has always interested you?**

AJ It is not that I am just a memorial specialist—you know, I can be funny too! But all of my work is about context. I have never created a single work that is simply a pure product of my imagination. When I am interested in a certain issue, I travel to that place and I investigate—I react. I started travelling around the world and reacting to different tragedies because this was the context I was in … I could not ignore these things. For instance, I went to Hong Kong to look at the refugee camps of Vietnamese people that were escaping after the war. They were called 'boat people' and I did a series of work about them. Then I went to Rwanda and I did a project about the Rwandan genocide. I was also invited by the government of Chile to create a memorial for the victims of the Pinochet regime. Then I was invited to Fukushima to do the memorial you are referring to. So many of my works, one way or another, are memorialising certain people and certain tragedies.

KBC **I am interested in how some of these projects are temporary and how some are permanent, such as the Santiago memorial to Pinochet's victims, *The Geometry of Conscience*, which opened in 2010. How do you approach the material permanence or ephemerality of a work?**

Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo For America* (1987). Installation view: Times Square, New York City (2014). Courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland.

AJ As an architect who makes art, to do a memorial is a beautiful challenge. To make a permanent work that will speak to this generation and then future generations about an event. To have the capacity to trigger memories and emotions about an event that might be far removed from its original context. To be able to trigger different emotions is very difficult to do, but it is a beautiful challenge. In saying this, it can be very painful because the situation itself is difficult; but as a professional challenge it is extraordinary.

KBC **You are careful to remind people that you are, in your own words, 'an architect who makes art' and not a formally trained artist. How did you become an architect and what role does this background play in your current art practice?**

AJ I always wanted to be an artist, but my father thought it was a very bad idea. It was Chile, it was the seventies, and it was wholly unthinkable that I could make a living as an artist. So when I announced to my father that I wanted to be an artist, he convinced me that perhaps I should study architecture. And when I discovered architecture I was the happiest man on earth.

KBC **You were happy? I thought you wanted to be an artist!**

AJ No, I was always very good with my hands, and I did very much want to be an artist. But when I discovered architecture I thought: this is extraordinary! And so when I moved to New York I worked as an architect for a few years to support my art. Instead of being a waiter or a carpenter like most artists at the time, I was an architect and I had a good living. I thought this was a perfect arrangement—that I would live this double life of being an architect during the day and an artist at night. And I do think like an architect: I look at space not only as a physical space, but also as a cultural space and a social space and a political space. So, architecture really did change my life and I am very thankful for that.

KBC **I want to ask you about the work *A Logo For America* that is included in the exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery as a video of the original animation and a series of documentary photographs. This animation was first projected in New York's Times Square in 1987, but you restaged it recently in 2014. Two decades later, the US political environment is very different—did this change how the work was read?**

AJ Language is not innocent. This use of the word 'America' is perfectly reflective of a specific geopolitical reality. This reality is that the United States dominates the political sphere. Until that reality changes, the language will not change.

What made the reading different is that during the Obama administration, in the last four years, this administration has expelled two million immigrants. In fact, in four years Obama has expelled more immigrants than during the eight-year Bush administration.

This has been a point of discussion in the last few years. And the word 'America' became part of the discussion. So when the work was projected this time in 2014, I felt it was read differently. It was not a simple matter of language—of a linguistic problem that I was addressing in the 1980s. It was more about the essence of, 'What does it mean to be American today?' and 'Who really *is* an American?' Many Latin Americans have lived in the United States for a long time and they are still being exposed [as 'un-American']. So the work acquired a different meaning because of this new political reality.

KBC **Even in the two years since *A Logo For America* was restaged, discussions concerning 'Who really is an American?' have taken on a different edge. I am thinking of Donald Trump's rather egregious attempt to take over the Republican Party with what many have perceived as a far-right, anti-immigrant agenda.**

AJ Yes, with this election we are going to see something quite extraordinary. This guy! It is Trump's only chance and he's going to do everything he can to get it. I would not be surprised if he turns around the polls and he wins. I would not be surprised.

The sad part is that the election in the United States will not be decided for ideological reasons, it will not be decided for racist reasons or feminist reasons, no. It will be decided by who picks the best advisor, the best marketing campaign and the best brand. The one who picks the best brand will win.

KBC **But the polls do not look promising for him right now. It does seem quite improbable that he will actually win.**

AJ I was living in the United States when Bush was seeking his second term. We thought: 'How is he possibly going to win?' He was so totally senseless, even dumb. And yet he won a second term. Berlusconi was elected four times and Italians are meant to be 'smarter', politically, than Americans. They elected Berlusconi. Four times.

KBC **Returning to the issue of being 'American' in the context of *A Logo For America*. The Republican Party is said to have a growing demographic problem. The increase in the Latino population means that their traditional voting base, educated white people, will no longer hold a majority in the US in years to come.**

AJ But there are still very low [voter] registration levels [for the Latino population]. Because of Trump, they are now registering in masses, because he has labeled Mexicans as 'rapists' and so on. It is supposed to be a problem for the Trump campaign. They don't have the Latinos, the African Americans, the women. They only have the white men. Right now, Trump is losing by ten percentage points in the polls. But it is meaningless. Once the Democratic nominee is decided, then we will see the real Trump. It is going to be a disaster.



Luc Tuymans

IN CONVERSATION WITH BRIENNE WALSH
NEW YORK, 18 JUNE 2016

Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London. © Photo: Philippe De Gobert.

With over 120 solo shows and 600 group shows on his curriculum vitae, Luc Tuymans is credited by critics such as Peter Schjeldahl with having contributed to the revival of painting, which some critics have been eulogising since 1839, when the French painter Paul Delaroche declared it dead. After studying art history at Vrije Universiteit in Brussels and working as a bouncer in the same city, Tuymans became a full-time painter in the early 1990s. In 1994, he was one of the first artists picked up by the burgeoning David Zwirner gallery—both the gallery and the artist have since become international art world phenomena.

Tuymans' paintings are marked by quiet, restrained tones that seem to suggest they come from a place beyond reality. Tackling weighty themes such as the Holocaust, 9/11, the colonial history of his native Belgium, and market capitalism, Tuymans paints from photographs culled from newspapers, magazines and his personal archive. As a result, they exist somewhere between the real and the copy: they are memories from secondary sources, bearing witness to retelling.

For his exhibition *Le Mépris* at David Zwirner in New York (5 May–25 June 2016), Tuymans approached the general theme of 'contempt' with two series of paintings. The first depicts the Zundert Flower Parade, a yearly event in the Dutch town of Zundert, his mother's hometown. It consists of works such as *Corso II* (2015), which is based on a photograph Tuymans' father took of a float in the parade in the early 1960s and which is rendered in subdued hues of red, blue-grey and white. The second series features the polluted waters of the canals of Ridderkerk, a town in the western Netherlands. The colours are more subdued here, with jaundiced greens and yellows in works like *Murky Water I* (2015) used to depict garbage floating on the surface of the canals.

In this Ocula Conversation, Tuymans discusses his latest show, his process, politics, sense of ennui and feelings on the current state of the art world.

BW **Where does the title of the show, *Le Mépris*, come from?**

LT The title of the show, *Le Mépris*, is loosely and literally translated as 'contempt', which is how I feel. One painting that really goes with the title is the very last painting in the show [*Le Mépris* (2015)], and it is also the last that I painted for the show. It depicts the interior of a very famous villa on Capri, which was built for the Italian writer [Curzio] Malaparte. On that rooftop, Jean-Luc Godard shot a fabulous film called *Le Mépris* with Michel Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot, where you can really see that Brigitte understands zilch of the dialogue. It's a film that escapes Jean-Luc Godard in a very odd way. It's also the very last film image of Fritz Lang, so it's an epic thing where everything comes together. The film is one in a million, actually.

The idea for the show came about with the very first paintings, which show wagons stitched with flowers. [Tuymans is referencing works from the 'Corso' series, which depict images of the Zundert Flower Parade.] The ones in colour are based on images that my father photographed, and the ones in black and white and sepia are based on archival images from my birth year in 1958. My monochromes are of Zundert, where they stage the parade on the first Sunday of every September. It's the same village in which Van Gogh was born.

As a kid, I used to go there on holidays, and I worked on these floats. They were produced secretly, six months ahead of time, and only on that particular Sunday were they paraded out to the public. One float was given a prize and the other ones were all stacked in an industrial square near the milk factory for a week, after which they were demolished.

These wagons were quite close to the ground, so it meant that the kids had to run underneath and push. It was a little bit like slavery. For these works I picked out the wagons and left out all the people. I selected the ones that are very singular in form, sort of flamboyant. They also have a very aggressive tension to them, emphasised by the fact that the wagons move so slowly. That one for example, *Corso III* (2015), is nearly propaganda; it could make you think of Russia.

So the exhibition developed from these paintings, in combination with Polaroids I took years ago for a different project. I decided to make fairly large paintings of the Polaroid images, which are about the element of decay. So this [*points to Murky Water I*] was the very first one in that group. Actually, the first idea for the show was to do all the paintings about murky water. But in the process, I came back to this idea of combining the two series, and so I made them in conjunction.

See the little can floating on this murky, very filthy water [*points to a detail of Murky Water I*]? The idea of this *mépris*, but also of decay … it is also in the flowers in a festive way, but they will decay, too.

In each painting, there is no real physical or tangible presence of a person. There are no people. This gives a feeling of imminent premonition of a public event and its aftermath.

BW **Did you paint them all around the same time?**

LT What happens mostly when I work is that for months I prepare with drawings, pictures, even maquettes. And then when all the pictures are together, one after the other, I will paint them. Every painting takes one day, always. That doesn't mean



Luc Tuymans, *Corso III* (2015). Oil on canvas. 127.6 × 216.5 cm. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.



Luc Tuymans, *Corso I* (2015). Oil on canvas. 250.8 × 184.5 cm.
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

that I paint every day—it's like one day a week. That means conceiving a show is really the hardest work, but it keeps the intentionality very highly strung, because it's planned and mentally prepared out to the point where I don't have to think. My intelligence goes through my hands only. Then it goes through a very speedy process which is very attentive and very concentrated. That's how the imagery comes out.

BW **What do you feel contempt for?**

LT Everything. Politics for sure. You could say we're living in interesting times. A bit worse than that. But we're also living in the decline of the West. So this show talks about the premonition of decay.

In the painting *Le Mépris*, there is a window of the Capri villa that looks out to the sea. You don't see the villa's exterior, because I didn't want to show the splendour of this building, which is a beautiful landmark, of course—iconic as a symbol of European architecture. But the painting shows just the inside, and the light sort of meekly beams out.

BW **Do you think these paintings will speak differently to an American audience than they will to a European one?**

LT I think this [exhibition] will show the work very nicely. I think most of it will come across as very abstract. Knowing how hysterical Americans can get, I think they will love it.

I have a great fascination with artists like Ad Reinhardt and Rothko, especially with Rothko's 'Seagram' series of paintings—not that the paintings in the show resonate as such, but there is an element of similarity in their size and the fact that they are square.

[*Points to Murky Water I.*] It's only in the third image that you can sort of perceive what you're actually looking at, because you see a part of the border that indicates that these are shadows and that there's a foreground and something sticking out. So that is important. And they're all about passivity, in a way, about floating.

So there is a bit of a perceptive challenge involved for the spectators, and that's funny. It was really strange when I got to the gallery, because I had planned the layout in a way that was totally different. When we got here, we had to change it around. In my studio, these paintings look half the size that they do here. And my studio's not as big as this space. That's a really weird sensation for me.

BW **In this recent series, you are mining your personal history; going back and looking at photographs you've taken.**

LT I started to do that six or seven years ago, during the financial crisis, when it was time—instead of being shell-shocked—to just organise yourself. So from then on, I took everything in my hands in terms of publications, in terms of the archive. I have probably the best digital archive on the globe. Over the past six or seven years, we have been preparing a catalogue raisonné of my paintings—there are going to be three or four volumes in total. It will also include the source materials for the works; we keep all the elements in the archive.

BW **I want to go back to the idea of floating.**

LT You see an idea of floating time. In paintings, painted time is something different than real time. You could say there is an element of melancholy, of nostalgia, but it's kind of twisted in a way. There's an element of aggression. So, it's torture. For me, torture is only effective when it's really tender.



Installation view: Luc Tuymans, *Le Mépris*, David Zwirner, New York (5 May–25 June 2016). Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

BW When it has an element of love to it?

LT Yes, because then it's even more horrible. That is actually how the idea of water came up; the stupidity, the banality of the water in those paintings. But then there's an element of beauty, and at the same time it creates an element of angst.

BW And patriotism?

LT One of the journalists that came to look at my studio recently is probably going to relate the paintings to the elections or something, which would be really insane. As I said, the void in this show is imminent.

BW To go back to the theme of the show, do you have contempt for the art world or the system that these paintings exist within?

LT In a sense, you can't feel contempt for the hand that feeds you. But there is an element of danger. When I first started working with David [Zwirner], he had four or five artists. Now he has a whole street. If I were a new artist, I'd be really afraid. That means that the gallery is going to brand you. And of course, I'm lucky to be a bit older. I'm well aware that it's very difficult to be a young artist now. A lot of things are monopolised. But still, the market remains the market. I'm not going to shit on it, because it's what I live off. Even so, I think it's necessary for the market also to diversify itself a little bit. If I see that my work is much more expensive than buying a sculpture that belongs to older art history, basically I have to admit that's a bit disproportionate, if I have to be honest.

I never gave the market any thought when I started out as an artist. Initially I was chucked out of every academy and I worked as a bouncer, up to the point that I became too restless and needed to show my art. It is actually also a war zone. That's how I treat it. I treat it [the market] as a war zone, basically.

But I mean, I never had the strategy of the young artists coming out of art schools today. Not only that, there are many more magazines and there is also an entire discourse around the art world, and with all the networking it actually protects itself. It doesn't necessarily criticise the art market or the mechanism in a constructive way. And when it comes to writing about art, the critical mass has diminished. The interesting people writing about art are getting old; they're 60 or 70 years old. These are things one should be aware of. I think most young artists are aware of them.

I was very happy to attend a dinner about two weeks ago organised by Tobias Rehberger, who curated a gigantic group show in Galerie neugerriemschneider in Berlin. He asked all the artists he knew over a period of years to participate in the exhibition. But the evening was not about the show; it was about the dinner. I sat next to Jean-Marc Bustamante, whom I had first and last seen in 1993. The second time was at that dinner. This illustrates how difficult it already is for the same generation just to come together—except in an airport, when this person is flying here or there. This, I think, has to change.

BW How do you create the space and time to be able to think about your work?

LT Well, first of all, I also curate shows. And mostly on my own: I have done 14 of them, and quite major ones. That is a way to deal not only with other artists, but also with the content in a completely non-market-driven way.

The Belgian nature is one that is not romantic. It deals with the real and only the real, because we've been overwhelmed by



Luc Tuymans, *Murky Water II* (2015). Oil on canvas.
237.2 × 232.7 × 4.4 cm. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

so many foreign nations. Therefore, I've learned to be very individual, very opportunistic and fast. Belgium has only been a nation for a very short period of time, but the country has great prominence when it comes to Europe. It created the best painter of the Western hemisphere, who is not Leonardo da Vinci, but Jan van Eyck. We all know that. But it's all about the real. Even van Eyck, as a concept, is about realism. It's about what is there. And it's unforgettable. He had a motto, something like: 'Be hefty on the humility, but behind that, have the most gigantic ambitions, of course.' And that's how it functions. We're very good with stress, so it's fine.

BW So you feel deeply Belgian?

LT I feel deeply Belgian because it's a lone nation. That's what is beautiful about it. Any sense of nationalism I think is horrible, especially in the cultural realm, because culture has never had boundaries. The diversity was already there.

BW Do you mostly work in your studio?

LT I make drawings on the plane, or anywhere; but painting I only do in the studio. I don't see any point in getting a stipend or moving to Berlin to paint. It's not necessary. It's a more interesting process for people who work in another way. As for painting, no. Just alone in the studio. It's very, very lonely. But it's good. No music, also. I've never bought a record in my life.

BW Where did you work as a bouncer?

LT I worked in clubs, each with the capacity of 600 people, that I had to manage myself. Huge, gigantic discotheques with six bouncers at a time. I've still got eyes on my back. I've never been mugged in New York, except once. The second time it was with a banana. The guy said: 'It's a banana stick-up.' I just went and broke the banana and said, 'Fuck you.' And he said, 'Where are you from?' and I said, 'I'm from Europe.'

Art Basel in Basel

16–19 JUNE 2016



General impression: Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



Oscar Tuazon, *Zome Alloy* (2016). Installation view: Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



Haegue Yang, *Sol LeWitt Upside Down—Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times, Split in Three* (2015). Installation view: Kukje Gallery and Tina Kim Gallery, Unlimited, Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



Installation view: Ai Weiwei and Frank Stella, Unlimited, Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



Pia Camil, *Sleeve Roe Interior* (2016). Installation view: Galería OMR, Galleries, Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



Gerwald Rockenschaub, *bend it (remodeled)* (2016). Installation view: Mehdi Chouakri, Galerie Vera Munro, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Unlimited, Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



John McCracken, *Six Columns* (2006). Installation view: David Zwirner, Unlimited, Art Basel in Basel (16–19 June 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Timothée Chambovet.



DIS

IN CONVERSATION WITH MOHAMMAD SALEMY
BERLIN, 23 JUNE 2016

Photo: Julia Burlingham.

DIS is a New York-based collective responsible for curating the 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, *The Present in Drag*, showing from 4 June to 18 September 2016. The collective—Lauren Boyle, Solomon Chase, Marco Roso and David Toro—came together in 2010 around their common interests in fashion, lifestyle and marketing. Ever since, they have been involved in numerous creative and cultural projects, but are best known for publishing the online *DIS Magazine*, and gathering a core group of collaborators around the magazine's online ecology. Hortensia Völckers and Alexander Farenholtz, the executive board members of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation), responsible for funding the Berlin Biennale, have called the DIS curatorial debut 'a friendly takeover' of an art institution by a group of people who are not rooted in contemporary art but instead are 'experts in not wishing to claim expertise.' With their fingers pointing to new trends, DIS stands at the intersection of pop culture, where everything collides and melts into the air that the wider population eventually breathes.

Although the curators of this edition of the Berlin Biennale have decided to thematically focus on the 'present', it is a different present from that with which contemporary art of the last two decades has been preoccupied. On one hand, their notion of contemporaneity comes after the internet and is described as 'post-contemporary'. On the other, their present, as evident in the title of the Biennale, comes in drag—it is performed not exclusively by human agents, but perhaps also through a civilisational reliance on algorithmic intelligence that is equally capable of executing a sense of the present.

With a busy schedule, the curatorial team made themselves available for a few questions about their plans and hopes for the 9th Berlin Biennale.

MS **A few years ago, at a Lower East Side restaurant in New York, I had a conversation with artist Babak Radboy, co-founder of Shanzhai Biennial and creative director of *Bidoun* magazine, where we discussed his intriguing idea about modern and contemporary art. He believed that people like to see financial operations, political maneuvering and anthropological reasoning behind the persistence of the idea of art from the late 19th century onwards. However, what he thought really propels art and its global force forward is its 'conscious and unconscious embodiment of the ideals set forth by communism'. Even today, in light of the total subsumption of art by capital, the art world is one of the only remaining places where concepts of equality, collectivity and future are discussed or even exercised. Fast forward to the surprising endorsement of Bernie Sanders in *DIS Magazine*'s editorial ahead of New York State's Democratic Party primary, which for me signified the most ambitious aspect of the political image of the DIS collective. I strongly believe in the positive impact of baffling contradictions to the movement of history and the unfolding of the future. How do you personally and professionally reconcile the contradictions between the luxury-loving, money-fuelled world of art and the emancipatory spirit of socialism, which guarantees art its social and historical relevance?**

DIS I think this is one reason some people are upset at the Biennale: it's not about objects, or about luxury, or about the 'inside' world of art. It's focused on understanding our complicated relationships with the world we're in—our internal conflicts as consumers, as political beings, as 'leftists', as people who want to do good within the world, as people who feel powerless, as people who are complicit, as people who are just people, as individuals within a system, and as individuals who generate content for this system.

Artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas' work has been particularly controversial, and is especially important. Kulendran Thomas looks at how the emergence of a new contemporary art market in Sri Lanka (accompanying the economic liberalisation that followed a genocide) functioned as part of a process of 'soft' (or economic) ethnic cleansing, whereby the spoils of prosperity, such as contemporary art, became a sort of retrospective justification for the violence on which that prosperity was founded.

Kulendran Thomas works through the idea that emancipatory communalism for a stateless nation might not be achieved today by force or resistance, or even through any mass-collective moral choice, but possibly through making something that people want. In a way, it's a subversion of the Silicon Valley 'disruptive' mentality, used to chart an alternative scenario for displaced people, evolving a new economic model out of the existing economic system without friction.

At the outset, we thought of DIS as a space in which ideas and value systems are not overtly analysed or critiqued, but represented in their most heightened configuration. We're political without the usual critical melancholy. We don't have a standard oppositional critique and most of the artists we're working with don't either. If anything, critique should occur as a compulsory reaction in the body of the public, rather than as a field of specialised labour.





Above: Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *New Eelam* (2016). Developed in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann. Film production: Klein and West, Mark Reynolds. Design: Manuel Bürger, Jan Gieseking. Architecture: Martti Kalliala. Production design: Marcelo Alves. Biosphere: Matteo Greco. Creative director: Annika Kuhlmann. Mixed media. Installation view: 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (4 June–18 September 2016). Courtesy Christopher Kulendran Thomas and New Galerie, Paris. Photo: Timo Ohler.

Right: Simon Denny, *Blockchain Visionaries* (2016) (detail). Commissioned and coproduced by Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art with the support of Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin/New York; Creative New Zealand, Wellington. Installation view: 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (4 June–18 September 2016). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz. Photo: Timo Ohler.

MS Does this mean you are intentionally evoking rage in your audiences?

DIS This is a show about the present, and the present is extremely troubling. In this show, you don't get an opt-out card. It's aggressive and almost violent in its rendering of the present, and the audience is fully implicated. There is no escape and there is no release valve for tensions. If you point fingers, you have to point them at yourself. So people may leave feeling angry or uncomfortable, which is a valid response; and it's better than them feeling gratified, as if they'd just recycled or donated to a cause.

MS The road to the art establishment's embrace of the new aesthetics proposed by your collective has been long and rough. We all know about the quarter-century obsession of the art world with Marxist and post-structuralist critiques of everything from art's commodity form to its institutional structures. At the same time, the very same institutions and curators have lately come to embrace and assimilate not only the digital and the post-Internet, but the DIS-style blend of art, commerce, technology and design. We have witnessed the ascension of artists like Ryan Trecartin, Jon Rafman and Katja Novitskova in the museum world. I am thinking of the *EXPO 1: New York* exhibition at MoMA PS1 and the New Museum's Triennial in 2015, with which your exhibition in Berlin shares a lot of artists. Since you were appointed as the curators of the Biennale two years ago, one can assume that there has been plenty of time for your collective to reflect back, both on what you have accomplished and what others have done in the name of embracing future forms. What have been these lessons? Can we claim that, given the significance of this triumph, we can expect the 9th Berlin Biennale to be the mother of all post-Internet exhibitions?

DIS It's funny, because our office and home in Berlin at Kunst-Werke (KW) Institute for Contemporary Art has really bad Wi-Fi. The rest of the team is on desktops with somewhat better Ethernet connections, but we use our laptops and the internet is incredibly slow; we were calling it the 'No-Internet' Biennale. This is definitely not a nostalgic show. There are so many ways and lenses through which to look at the 9th Berlin Biennale; post-Internet is just one of them—and maybe not the most interesting. In a sense it's a background condition, but not a closed circuit. Nobody's work is simply about the internet—but the effects of technology and our compulsive connectivity are deeply felt.

We were really inspired by Ursula Franklin, a German-Canadian physicist and historian who's in her 90s now, and we interviewed her for the Berlin Biennale 9 catalogue. Her 'The Real World of Technology' lectures from the 1980s release us from our relationship to technology as a sum of artefacts and gadgets, instead positing technology as the division of labour and the structures that shape and control us. For Franklin, the most influential technologies are 'social innovations' that are increasingly about structuring discipline and compliance and diminishing reciprocity—this has been woven into the fabric of society: politics, banks, schools, government, transportation and distribution of energy. Following this logic, we can see how the internet (as the latest structuring technology) is reshaping all of these societal elements. At the core of the Biennale is a consideration of these immense structures of technology and communication, and our position within them as individuals.



9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, *Narrative Devices* (2016) featuring Tilman Hornig, *GlassPhone*. Video still. Produced by Iconoclast. Courtesy Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art.



9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, *Narrative Devices* (2016) featuring Tilman Hornig, *GlassPhone*. Video still. Produced by Iconoclast. Courtesy Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art.

MS **Would it be correct to say that the question of content in the age of the internet is one of the main concerns of the 9th Berlin Biennale? I can see that there are many different sides to this debate within what we already know about the exhibition. First, there is the number of designers and architects who have been invited to participate. The shift from exhibiting only artists highlights how form and formal solutions can be rebranded today as content. Second, there is DISCREET—An Intelligence Agency for the People: a Biennale-related consortium that addresses the issue of the privacy of content in the hyper-surveillanced environments of networked computing. Third, the fact that the Biennale's online journal is called *Fear of Content*.**

How do you resolve the tension that exists between the definition of content coming from design and commerce, which considers all sorts of previously unavailable digitised information as content, and the realm of art, in which content is more elusive, ephemeral and often only available to those who have the ability to produce it as a result of their encounter with the cultural product? Do you think that the current conditions of artistic production in the age of networked, algorithmic planetary computing and accelerated capitalism make the distinction impossible or irrelevant? Can this blurring of the distinction be productive for political progress?

DIS Many people see DIS as another way that the art world 'eats' other cultural industries. Ironically, that's just a magazine. We are not incredibly invested in the nomenclature of who is an artist versus who is not an artist. However, it is a reflection of the creative industries today that many of our participants do not identify with a single market or field of production.

We don't take it for granted that contemporary art will exist, any more than fashion, music, or any of the other cogs in the culture industry might exist. Still, we are beholden to its formats and conventions, even if we 'disrupt' them—and that 'disruption' is precisely what beholds us to similarities within the 'culture industry' more generally. After all, it's a cliché of the 'creative class' that everyone can be an artist, that it doesn't matter, since we're all content farms anyway. At the same time, people are very tied to their categories: we are dealing with a professionalised 'art world' after all. This is a paradox.

DISCREET—An Intelligence Agency for the People, is a platform created by Armen Avanessian and Alexander Martos. It assumes the complexity of our society and the media-sociological revolution of the Internet/digital: we humans are no longer the only big players. Therefore, our point of departure—the present—has lost its primacy. Algorithms, memes, hyperstitions, et cetera, are instead ruling from the future. And the future can be predicted with incredible accuracy, but it is also uncontrollable. DISCREET is one example of how to use the field of art without producing objects. So, yes, if memes really are more important/relevant today than contemporary art, then the Biennale is also an investigation of what 'gaining traction' in the present condition might actually look like. The big mistake people make is to see this as a disillusioned, cynical or fatalist perspective.

MS **How do you rate Berlin, particularly in comparison to New York? What about its nightlife? Would you move here if you had the chance?**

DIS Berlin has low stress, low consumption, and guilt-free partying for 48 hours. The space of nightlife, gay clubs, physical proximity in dark spaces with music, has been one generating factor for us, and of course so many others, in terms of our community and grounds for creativity. This is celebrated here in New York—but in Berlin, even more so, the club seems to be a space of freedom and anonymity.

On the other hand, we lived and worked at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art on Auguststraße, and it's pretty monastic to live and work within an art institution. Berlin, the city itself, is almost self-conscious—to gentrification, to histories—in a way that New York is not. When a high rise goes up in New York, nobody notices or cares. Here in Berlin it is deeply felt. We could see ourselves here, but not now. Now we are planning our somewhat complicated return to New York.

MS **Lastly, I want to invite you to ask a question of your own, and then to respond to it any way you like.**

DIS What comes to mind when you hear 'paradessence'? The rise of hyper-individualism in the face of the utter powerlessness of the individual. The shift to a personalised, wireless world of networked individualism, with each person switching between ties and networks against the backdrop of complex global concerns, impossible to process on a human scale. The feeling when you open your inbox, and you see a message or notification from your boss, your Tinder date, followed by an imploring call to arms about greenhouse gases, the Zika virus and voting in the next election. The way words and expressions are co-opted and rebranded by corporations and interest groups, like Patagonia's 'Don't buy this jacket' campaign which uses anti-consumerism to sell jackets. Feeling healthy by drinking a green juice while wasting vegetable pulp that emits methane. Soylent, the mysterious substance on the cover of the catalogue, which promises to be the food of the future, while claiming to replace food altogether, but is not approved as food in Germany.

Guan Xiao

IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHANIE BAILEY
LONDON, 8 AUGUST 2016

Photo: Li Songshu.

This year has been an important one for Guan Xiao. In April, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (ICA) showed *Flattened Metal*, the artist's first solo exhibition in a British institution (20 April–19 June 2016). Organised in association with K11 Art Foundation, the ICA show was a perfect articulation of the artist's practice thus far, incorporating a concise body of work that investigates relationships with time and matter. The exhibition consisted of audiovisual works alongside a number of 'sets' that combine backdrops with a series of 'props'. One example included a pair of pink stereo speakers on which a blue surfboard rested, by which a totem-like head rested on a tripod. These objects were positioned in front of a greyscale backdrop printed on mesh screen with a digital collage and lines of text that read: 'IS THIS OUTFIT MORE MARY OR MARTHA?' 'MIRANDA' and 'THANK YOU FOR WATCHING'.

The show was well received: it marked at once an arrival and a departure in terms of how this artist is moving through the world, processing its material information as she goes. Works from the ICA exhibition will form the core of an upcoming exhibition in Shanghai at the chi K11 art museum, titled *Guan Xiao: Elastic Sleep* (9 November–8 December 2016). Between London and Shanghai, Ocula spoke with the artist about the concepts that concern her practice.

SB **Let's start by talking about the title of your recent exhibition at the ICA, *Flattened Metal*. What does this title mean to you, and are titles important to you as an artist?**

GX In the beginning, I tried to find a title that articulates and interprets the intentions of the work in a straightforward way. But soon I realised I was trapped in my least favourite method, so I changed my perspective. Metaphor is the cleverest form of rhetoric: an appropriate way to communicate. For me, *Flattened Metal* is more precise than going straight to an interpretation of intentions. If I use a word that contains '-ism' or 'post-', you wouldn't understand its precise meaning if you didn't already know the background of these words. But anyone is capable of knowing what 'flattened' and 'metal' mean, with their different ideas and understandings. For me, this type of abstract perception, processed by the imagination of an individual, is the essence of the communicated object: the true 'precision'. 'Flattened metal' gives a sense of condensing and transforming complexities into something different, resembling the work of visual artists who use similar traits to transform complex objects.

Titles are important. My installations can be described as different components—including the titles—gathered together in a way that brings forth a backdrop that does not seem to focus on any single subject.

SB **The sculptural installations you present in *Flattened Metal* are quite different to those you made earlier, such as *Documentary: Geocentric Puncture* (2012), where you presented composed photography studio settings. There, artefacts such as an Easter Island Moai statue were positioned in front of brightly coloured, camouflaged screens resembling snakeskin. Could you describe the formal, compositional and material thinking that went into composing the installations at the ICA, in terms of the arrangement of text, screen, sound and object? What is the significance of the number of screens, for example, and the texts and objects you chose to use, and how did these elements fit into the narrative you composed for the show?**

GX Through my installation works I've been trying to describe a context, rather than provide a subject—even if they appear to exist independently. From *Documentary: Geocentric Puncture* to *Documentary: From National Geographic to BBC* (2015), I was influenced by the arrangements of photographic studios, trying to blur the focus within the structure of the installation, and the compositions of elements and the range of complexities, to create multiple subjects or an absence of subject. In a photographic studio, the backdrop is used to emphasise the object being photographed, and I intentionally used colourful and complex snakeskin patterns for these backgrounds to make the objects in the front and the background equally important—all of their colours, degrees of complexity of detail and importance are blended together. Although the works in the show at the ICA are stylistically different, the internal lines of thought align to my previous practice.

The choice of colours came out of personal preference. I like images that have been colour-reversed through a Photoshop process, so I tried to approach that with the colour scheme for the show. The paleness of the metallic colours was based on gradient options in Photoshop that reflect those digitally inverted colours. The deliberate greyscaling and mild colour schemes I used for the ICA show are just another type of sharp contrast. I want the relationship between

the installations to be better fused, with my treatment of the backdrop not only letting the installation itself be able to describe a context, but also transforming the space. So this time I chose a semi-transparent mesh fabric, hoping that the visuals, like the colour and texture, would overlap between installations, making the background, foreground and environment lighten and fuse.

SB Is there a particular way you want people to relate to your works, in terms of how you condense, compress and flatten time and meaning within them?

GX There are internal relations within the works that I am experimenting with. It's not that people lack the abilities to imagine and perceive, but there needs to be a gap to allow people to believe what they actually feel. Hence, for the exhibition at the ICA, I didn't design complex relational structures between compartments. On the contrary, I controlled only the most basic elements, such as the volume of the works and their positioning. How they are to relate to each other became an unspeakable abstract component to be returned to the audience. However, as usual, I still offered the audience elements or keywords.

SB What keywords did you utilise for the ICA show?

GX I've retained my preference for sculptural forms, putting two conceptually opposing objects together: ancient sculptures and modern readymades; limited-edition art objects and endlessly reproduced public facilities, for example. But readers should know that this is not my only standard of selection. After all, for me anything is a material, including concepts. For instance, while this time I chose the stereo set as the main readymade, I don't need its speakers to function; what I need is the concept of the 'stereo set' and its relationship with sound. I don't need the presence of sound here. I just need people to think of any sort of sound they can imagine when they first see the stereo. It is just as I treated the photography equipment: I don't need it to actually work, I only need the concept of it and its relationship with seeing.

Therefore, the words I use are like the other components in the installations: they are just different materials of a medium. The references in the words, the meanings behind them, their contexts, are not so important to me. The words and the stereo exist as a set of conceptualisation materials, broken up from their former existence. Their literal meaning at this time becomes the shape of their being as materials. One thing to note is that different installations represent different word combinations and structures.

SB How does this relate not only to the three-screen video work you included in *Flattened Metal*, but also to your work with video and multi-screens in general?

GX This becomes a more complicated question when it comes to the relationship between multi-screens and my videos. I love TV shows that feature a host introducing an artwork in a gallery or museum, or programmes that show spectators visiting an exhibition. I also like travel shows featuring a presenter explaining objects that the camera points at—I find these mostly on YouTube. On some occasions, the camera replaces the role of the host, and then we are able to see the exhibit and the spectators at the same time.

Different perspectives and ways of seeing are emphasised in these videos. The presenter's voice, the exhibits and the viewers (we may also include the host here) become three different types of media which, when



Installation view: Guan Xiao, *Flattened Metal*, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London in association with K11 Art Foundation (20 April–19 June 2016). Photo: Mark Blower.

put together, form an image. I'm interested in the fact that the three components are at the same time distinctive and in tune.

What distinguishes this kind of film from feature films and documentaries is that one can easily differentiate the three things involved: the scene, the host and spectators. Feature films, by contrast, tend to merge different components as much as possible: the actors, scenes, storylines, voice-overs and so on. The TV show clips do not speak their entirety through images; what emerges is rather some scattered keywords—the images can be described as different components gathered in a way that brings forth a backdrop, without focusing on any one subject. These different perspectives have motivated my interest in using the triptych format. It allows the flexibility of spectatorship: the members of the audience are implicated in a new scene, themselves the consumers and agents.

I suppose there is a strong presence of the sense of time in a single screen, but it is weakened and even resolved in three. This is an important aspect for me, and another reason why I chose to work with three screens. Although my installations and videos appear to exist independently, video functions on a similar basis to my installation works, in which I try to describe a context rather than prove a subject. But due to the differences of media languages, the actual ways of working differ. Objects of perception are a complex but unique multiple; they are born out of the combining effects of various elements and methods. To deliver a clear message of this kind through objects of perception, a linear logic cannot be followed. For my videos, I used the analogue of this forming process for my objects of perception as my means of communication, and to hide the intentions underneath a carefully fabricated phenomenon, letting it grow into a precise shape from intentionally created chaos.

SB **You said that *Documentary: Geocentric Puncture* marked a turning point for you in terms of bringing the old and new together. Does *Flattened Metal* mark a development in your practice at all?**

GX Putting together the new and the old is only one way of putting two conceptually opposing objects together, because I think two opposing concepts often come from the same abstract perception. And the emphasis in the development of this concept lies in how to define and present different, opposing concepts. But *Flattened Metal* as a round-up exhibition doesn't take this point as the main direction of discussion. Its presentation is only a part of the work.

SB **One aspect of your work is the intention to reveal how—as you have said—the things we deem as new or modern are also ancient, which is something that is expressed through the compositional logics you employ in order to manipulate apparatuses of seeing. In the case of *Documentary: Geocentric Puncture*, for instance, we see the camera that documents fragments of history, the fragment itself, and the frame within which the representation is staged. In *Flattened Metal,* it feels like you have employed a similar approach, but we are no longer in a photographic studio, but in a museum instead: a place in which we see, for instance, a large Grecian foot—a fragment, a viewer might imagine, of a larger statue—as an object of monumental time.**

Would you say *Flattened Metal* continues your exploration into the notion of time, as expressed through the objects that define who we are culturally and historically?

GX My statement that 'new or modern things are also ancient in some perspective' is based on the influence of things such as archaeological artefacts and the latest technological products that might escape from the constraints of meaning due to our insufficient understanding or unknowing of them. Also, because of unknowing, the abstract language of forms can escape its functionality into an independent narrating subject, and so be full of imagination.

How the audience understand my works must be a free and also very personal act. My works don't provide a standard answer. Hence, what the composition and structure of my works lead you to think about is your own business. However, with all the materials I use, I don't care about their references, history, the meanings behind them, or their contexts; for me they exist here as conceptualised materials, broken up from their former existence. The reason I prefer using conceptually opposed objects is not only because paradoxical, polarised things often come from the different expressions of the same perception, but also because they can further emphasise this fracture, and liberate things from their historical and functional meanings, and thus from taxonomy. In my work, history has never been my concern. For me, history is a lump of recycled things in changing packages, some accumulating materials.

In some ways, the human race has never progressed; we keep moving in cycles, repeating ourselves. I try not to make the audience think that I'm talking about the historical values of things. Therefore, I don't like the phrase, 'the fragments of history'. On one hand, if we see certain forms and think of them as the fragments of history, the reading of them might be too symbolised; on the other hand, nothing in my work is a 'fragment of history', at least not in terms of what most people would think fragments of history might be. They are themselves.

You asked whether *Flattened Metal* continues my exploration into the notion of time as expressed through the objects that define who we are culturally and historically. I don't necessarily agree with this. I think there's an implication being created here, that limitations created by culture and history become a deliberate discrimination, and are intended to induce a value system. This approach is not only too symbolised, but is also an interference and abduction of perception. Besides, time is a word that measures. My intention has nothing to do with this. And as the author, my works do not expressly talk about 'who we are' identity issues.

SB **How might this also feed into your conception of space and place? I ask this thinking about your participation in *Don't You Know Who I Am? Art After After Identity Politics*, the major group exhibition organised by M HKA, the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (13 June–14 September 2014). In that exhibition you presented *Documentary: Geocentric Puncture* and the video work *Cognitive Shape* (2013), a three-screen installation in which we see a visual timeline of world history through its artefacts, from Neolithic arrowheads to rollerskates. Some of the images we see in that video work, in fact, reappear in London.**

GX Following on from my answer to the last question, the relationships I consider between works and space and locations are within cognitive domains. As for how I consider the relations with space in the exhibition at the ICA, I have already delivered a relatively detailed explanation. But



Installation view: Guan Xiao, *Flattened Metal*, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London in association with K11 Art Foundation (20 April–19 June 2016). Photo: Mark Blower.



Installation view: Guan Xiao, *Flattened Metal*, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London in association with K11 Art Foundation (20 April–19 June 2016). Photo: Mark Blower.

what makes me curious is that although you would think a visual timeline of world history is presented in *Cognitive Shape*, in fact the actual purpose of the animation is the opposite: it intends to deliver a timeline that is messed up—a viewing state that is an arbitrary tiling. This is also the reading state that one encounters when browsing the internet.

SB **This is what I meant when I described *Cognitive Shape* as an exploration into the notion of time as expressed through the objects, or fragments, that define who we are culturally and historically—it is a frame in which time is materially flattened in much the same way you produced the *Documentary* installations. In other words, all things—from a scuba diving suit to a Neolithic arrowhead—are placed on the same expansive plane, like 'arbitrary tiling' to use your words.**

But knowing how you feel—or don't feel—about identity, or perhaps about definitions and frames in general, I'm curious how you, as an artist working in the art world today, felt about your participation within the exhibition at M HKA, which sought to explore cultural and political complexity through a post-identity frame?

GX For the exhibition at M HKA, the curators had a clear curatorial topic, and each artist presented different levels of the topic. My view on the identity issue is: I don't approve of any discrimination/identification by nationality, history, culture, geography and so on. I recognise only one identity, and that is 'human'. Apart from this, any other identification for me is a concept that may change and transform constantly. The different identities are not the point: the point is how to transfer between these different concepts. In my recent exhibition *Weather Forecast* [7 June–25 September 2016] with the Jeu de Paume in Paris, curator Heidi Ballet had the same discussion about identity, and the cultural and political complexity that has followed identity politics. In the publication for the show there is more detailed documentation on my views about identity.

SB **Could you tell me how *Flattened Metal* will combine with *Elastic Sleep* and other works in your upcoming K11 show in Shanghai?**

GX The works have different focuses of expression, and the media is diverse as well. It cannot be explained like a thesis. They are all practices of mine; I am the point of connection. In my answer to your first question, I briefly introduced the core value of my works—it is in this way that they are internally connected.

SB **You once said your work is very much about betraying the world while being loyal to it in your own way. To this end, what advice would you give those who wish to become artists?**

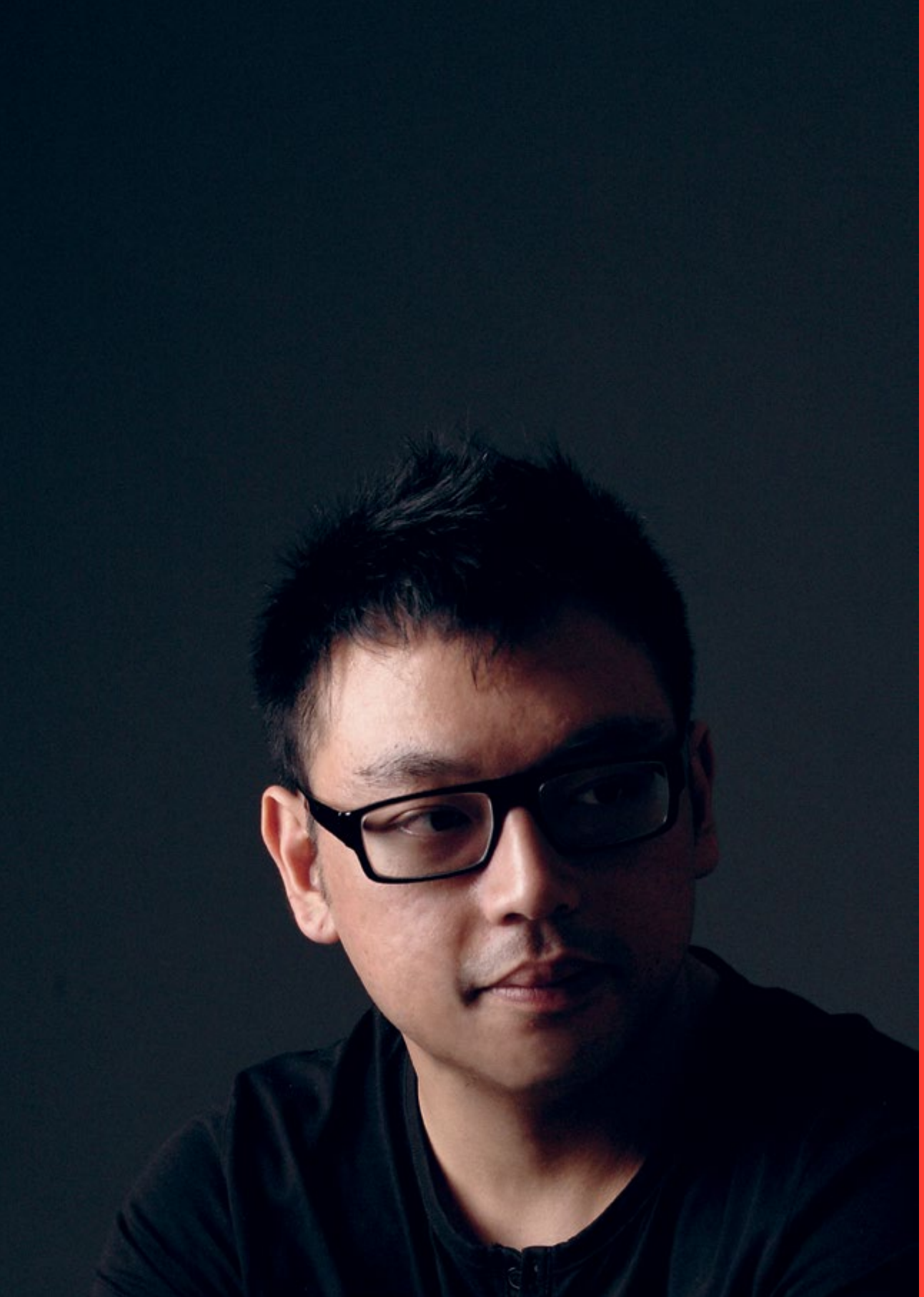
GX That idea refers to a sentence about Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Hannah Arendt's 1968 book *Men in Dark Times*, describing Lessing as never feeling at home in the world and probably never wanting to, but in his own fashion always remaining committed to it. The last time I mentioned it, it was more about my attitudes towards art, rather than about the creation of works. For me, this is a mentality an artist should have. A mind that is always alert and observing the surroundings in the opposites of experience and 'should-dos'. However, this is not some kind of clever strategy, but rather a responsibility and loyalty to the self and the world.

When I first started as an artist, someone gave me the following advice: one, never do what you don't want to do; two, be polite; three, see your goal and go for it.

I want to add another point: As long as you hold on to it, you will have a position for yourself.

Ho Tzu Nyen

IN CONVERSATION WITH ELLIAT ALBRECHT
BASEL, 8 AUGUST 2016



Courtesy the artist. Photo: Amos Wong.

Ho Tzu Nyen's two-channel video *The Nameless* (2015) is currently part of the exhibition *Time of Others* at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art (11 June–18 September 2016). Initially commissioned for the 2014 Shanghai Biennale and delayed due to censorship, the work was shown earlier this year in the Unlimited sector of Art Basel, Switzerland, making Ho the first Singaporean artist to present work in that sector.

The Nameless revolves around the story of a man named Lai Teck, who served as the Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party from 1939 to 1947, and who is rumoured to have used 50 aliases during his lifetime. Lai Teck's real name and background have never been confirmed, but evidence suggests that he was born in Vietnam to a Chinese mother, and served as a spy for the French, Japanese and British governments. The story goes that Lai climbed the ranks of the Malayan Communist Party by operating as an informant to sabotage his adversaries, and escaped Japanese execution by pledging allegiance to their intelligence forces. In 1947, Lai was said to have been murdered by party Communists in Thailand after the extent of his disloyalty was discovered.

Piecing together found footage from several Hong Kong films starring actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai, *The Nameless* acts as a fragmentary portrait of Lai Teck. Ominous and shadowy, the film features Leung (as Lai) in times of distress and introspection, interspersed with repeated motifs of smoke, water, torture and death. A speculative voiceover describes what is known of Lai's mysterious life. To add to the work's ambiguity, the film is presented simultaneously in two separate rooms, one narrated in Vietnamese and the other in Mandarin—a nod to Lai's bilingualism and fluid Sino-Vietnamese identity.

Ho was born in Singapore in 1976. To date, his focus has been the complex colonial narratives of Southeast Asia and, in particular, Singapore, which was established as an independent nation only in 1965. Ho works primarily in film, pulling at the threads of fictionalised myths and political histories. Through his work, the artist acts as a critical historian, examining hegemonies to expose their structures and faults. In 2011, he represented Singapore at the Venice Biennale with his film *The Cloud of Unknowing* (made the same year), which comprised a series of vignettes centred around the depiction of clouds in Western European paintings by artists such as Caravaggio, Bernini and Magritte, as well as in the Eastern landscapes of Mi Fu and Wen Zhengming.

In this interview, Ho discusses *The Nameless*, his practice, the complex history of Southeast Asia and his fascination with double agents.

EA **As I was not familiar with Tony Leung Chiu-wai's movies before I first watched *The Nameless*, I thought that you had filmed all of the footage yourself. I was surprised to find out that the entire work is comprised of found footage from mainstream films.**

HTN Yes, I appropriated all the footage from existing films starring Tony Leung. I took special pains to ensure that it wouldn't feel like that by colouring all of the images to make them consistent. I also added grain throughout the whole film to unify all the clips. So we basically have film footage spanning 20 years with the same actor.

EA **Why did you choose Tony Leung to represent Lai Teck?**

HTN Tony Leung has always been one of my favourite actors. I think there is a very special quality about his presence; a kind of restlessness beneath an almost impenetrable mask of calm.

I've been interested in Lai Teck for the last two or three years, but I couldn't figure out how to make a work about him. Then somehow I began to associate Lai Teck with Tony Leung, who had been cast in a number of films as a stool pigeon, double agent, informer and traitor.

EA **How did you first find out about Lai Teck?**

HTN I've always been engaged with the histories of the left in Singapore and Malaysia, much of which remains repressed. In any case, this was when I came across the figure of Lai Teck. I find him extremely interesting because he's really pivotal to the history of our region. During the Second World War, the main resistance to the Japanese were guerrillas of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, which was closely tied to the Malayan Communist Party. In 1945, when the Japanese surrendered, these armed Communist guerillas could well have undertaken an armed insurrection, in which they would likely have succeeded in the face of a tired and weakened British empire. But Lai Teck, the triple agent, played a key role in turning the Communists away from this path and onto that of an electoral process. That was when the Communists lost the initiative. Two years after the British returned, the Communist Party discovered that Lai was a triple agent, so they got rid of him. One year later, the Malayan Communist Party started an armed insurrection, but by that time it was a lost cause. Things would have turned out very differently if not for Lai: almost like an alternate universe.

EA **Is Lai a well-known figure in Singaporean history?**

HTN No, most people don't really know about him.

EA **I noticed that there isn't very much information about him online. Was your research process difficult?**

HTN Most of the information exists in specialised academic texts, but you also find him mentioned, often in passing, in accounts of Communist histories. His successor as the Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party, Chin Peng, who is far more well known, released a biography which is very widely read. Much attention was funneled to Chin Peng because he was the man who led the armed struggle, but not many people knew about his shadowy predecessor.

EA **Why do you think that is, if Lai was such a pivotal figure in history?**

HTN I think there are a few factors. One is that up to today, we still know very little about him. Lai Teck is one of the 50 or so aliases

he employed, and we still do not know what his real name is, just as we can't really say for sure what even happened to him. Chin Peng mentioned in his biography that Lai Teck was murdered in 1947 by Communist hitmen. Chin Peng didn't witness it himself; rather, it's what he heard. Another factor is the strong repression of information over this entire period, whereby access to the archives was highly restricted, and many early scholars who worked in this field had ties to the colonial administration or the secret police. The histories of insurrections are often told by informers, double agents and traitors, filtered through their so-called handlers, and then locked up in archives or destroyed.

EA **A line in the video mentions the 'secret knowledge and the holy motors of history'. What does that refer to?**

HTN I think that the history of reception of communism in Southeast Asia has to be understood in relation to localised modes of peasant utopianism, which were bottom-up and organic modes of beliefs in equality and fraternity. With this passage, I was attempting to fold these two forms of messianism into a strange, incommensurate whole.

EA **Can you explain the way that you divided the video into chapters?**

HTN The chapters are a way of organising the narrative into things that I'm interested in pursuing. For example, the very first chapter is 'Every Name in History is I', and that is about my interest in naming. In the Western tradition, Adam named the animals, and naming is the first act of possession.

EA **Which is also very true in colonial history.**

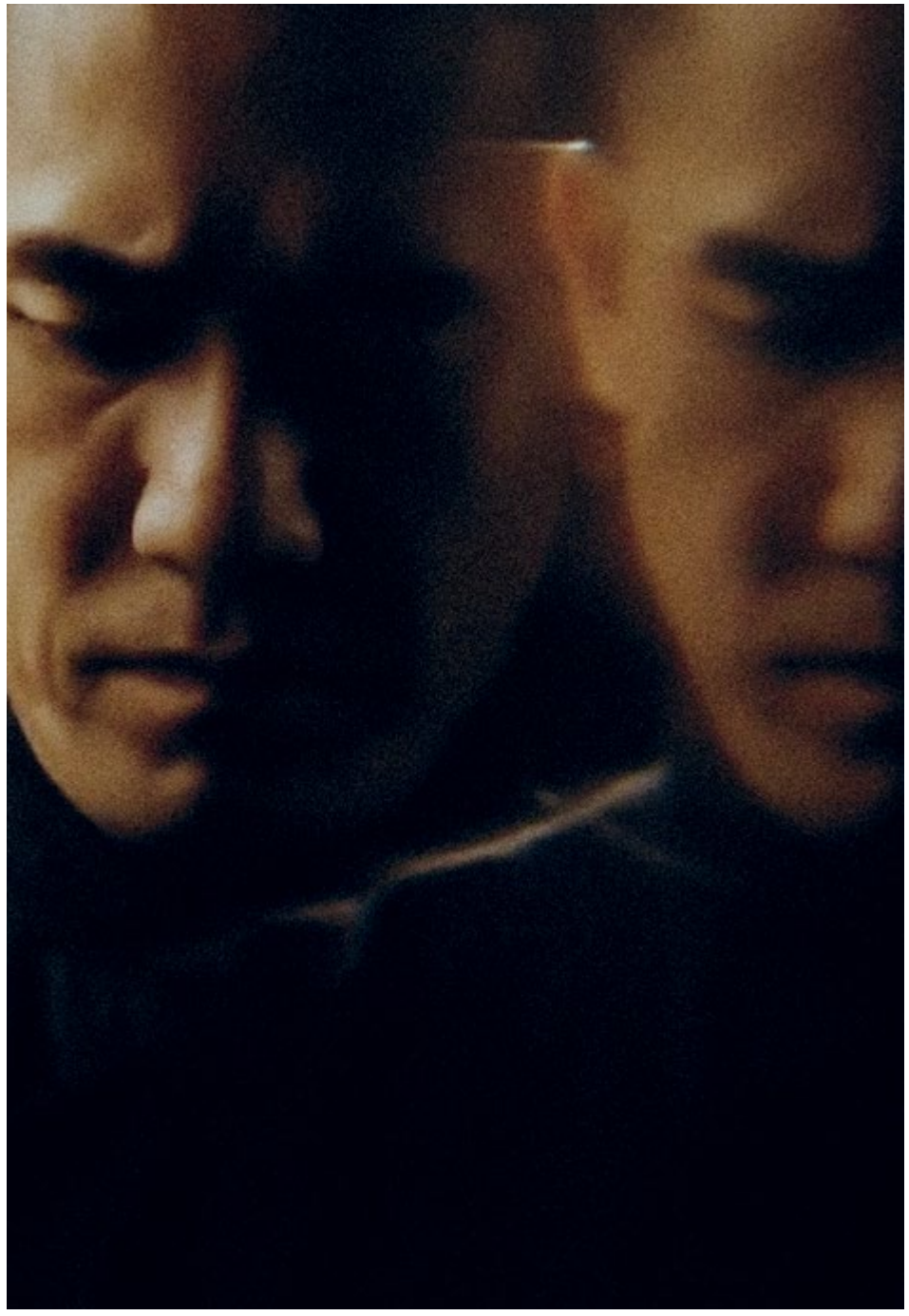
HTN Exactly. With Southeast Asian colonial history, the different ethnicities were classified by the British, which in a way led to an invention of the notion of the Malay race as a single, monolithic category. But then we have this figure Lai Teck, with over 50 names, and no one knows his real name. So it becomes a way of eluding this notion of naming.

EA **There are segments, sometimes quite poetic, of different motifs in the video. For example: blood, ink, water—as in tears, bodies of water, or rain—and cigarettes.**

HTN Water, for me, is a major metaphor. I think about the mode of being a man like Lai Teck as something that is really like water, and I always think of Southeast Asia as a kind of empire of water, in its various states, from its seas and rivers to its incessant rain and oppressive humidity. Water enables the circulation of language, bodies and goods, which is why it was important for me to include the story of Lai Teck's birth in Vietnam, and how, in his youth, he travelled across the different port cities of Asia as a sailor, where he meets and has exchanges with all kinds of people. But water is also the prime element of flux, change and metamorphosis.

The cigarette motif wasn't something I had planned from the beginning, but something that came up repeatedly in the films of Tony Leung. It became an interesting way to link up the footage, while also creating a certain kind of atmosphere associated with anxiety, waiting, or clichéd images of spies and double agents. But above all, the lit cigarettes became, for me, something that evoked breath and also the element of fire itself.

EA **The work does evoke a very strong sense of inner turmoil.**



Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Nameless* (2015). Video still. © Ho Tzu Nyen.





Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Nameless* (2015). Video still. © Ho Tzu Nyen.

HTN Exactly. This is one of the main reasons I chose Tony Leung. He has been repeatedly cast as a traitor, informer or double agent in a lot of Hong Kong and Chinese-language cinema, the last of which was *Lust, Caution* (2007) by Ang Lee, where Leung was cast as a Chinese traitor who was working for the Japanese puppet government in Shanghai. Before that, he was in *Infernal Affairs* (2002) [directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak], in which Leung was cast as a police officer inserted into the Triads. The restraint of Leung's acting is what makes him very unique in this industry, which is populated by powerful and overtly dramatic actors. There is a kind of blankness to Tony Leung's persona, which invites imaginative projections from spectators.

EA **I think that feeling of uncertainty is transferred to the viewer through the video's looped cycle and disjunctive narrative. I recently read an interview where you said that you try to produce work for an imaginary spectator who might have no understanding of your references. Do you think that also applies to this film?**

HTN I think very much so. After all, the videos seem to have worked for you even though you weren't aware of the sources of the images. It has always been important to me that a work of art contains manifold possibilities for reading, and that it does not require a single key or master code. For someone who recognises Tony Leung or his films, every clip evokes at least two possible meanings. The first is the narrative I've constructed, but the second would be the original context from which these films were derived. We could speculate on the third meaning, which might be generated out of the clash between these two contexts. This duality is in turn embodied through the form of the installation, with its double projections on two sides of the screen. On one side we have a voiceover in Mandarin, and on the other in Vietnamese. I chose those two languages because one of the few things we know about Lai Teck is that he was supposed to be Sino-Vietnamese. If you don't understand both Vietnamese and Chinese, you will never be able to know if the same story is being told on both sides of the installation, and there is this persistent feeling of something being left out. There is an excess of context that you can never fully exhaust, which is how I think about the story of Lai Teck.

EA **I suppose there are so many unknowns in his story, the audience projects their own ideas to fill in the gaps.**

HTN There is perhaps a certain strangeness in the film that comes from the fact that it's combining elements from all these disparate sources from over 24 years. So there's always already a fundamental instability within the image already.

EA **Did you write the score as well?**

HTN I didn't add any new music or sound elements, except for the two narrative voices in Mandarin and Vietnamese. All music and sound elements were gleaned from the original sources, rearranged and remixed.

EA **There is a parallel with your 2011 work *The Cloud of Unknowing,* of sampling material from familiar sources to make something new.**

HTN Sampling, collage and mixing is very much my mode of operation. I just rearrange things in different configurations. Another work, *Pythagoras* (2013), was made when I started working with found footage, which is a nice way of saying 'stolen footage'. I am always surprised that we don't see more of this in Asian media

work. After all, mixing and piracy is a big part of everyday life here.

EA **There are indeed a lot of mysterious DVD shops. Do you notice sampling in Asian music culture?**

HTN In Asian popular music, we see a lot of appropriation and translation, for example, the transformation of hip-hop into Korean pop music. But I haven't come across a lot of sampling in Asian music, except for the work of some experimental musicians. It is interesting, however, to consider that while copyright laws are much stricter in the West, there is much more sampling in art and music there.

EA **Do you think that will change?**

HTN I believe it is a matter of time. This access to information, to images and sounds that exist in the infinitely transferrable and translatable form of data, is just awaiting recycling, reactivation and reanimation. This is a very ecological way of working.

EA **What is your process like?**

HTN I mostly work with a team when I shoot my videos. For *The Nameless*, I had just moved to Berlin and was far away from my usual crew, so I took it as an opportunity to create a film on my own. I edited the film, but worked with a great colourist who blended all the images together.

EA **Had you watched all of Tony Leung's films before you began the project?**

HTN Most of them I had seen before because I'm a bit of a cinephile. Actually, when I began, there were specific scenes from films I'd seen ten years ago that I could recall and which I knew would end up in certain scenes of *The Nameless*. One of the reasons I selected Leung was because I remembered that he acted in a great film set in Vietnam called *Cyclo* (1995) by Tranh Ahn Hung.

EA **So he must also speak Vietnamese and Chinese?**

HTN No, he doesn't. In *Cyclo*, he plays a man of few words, a silent gangster. He is always just walking around and smoking, though we hear his interior thoughts which are in the form of poetry. I think there is something fascinating about this practice of over-dubbing, or speaking with other voices. In a way, *The Nameless* is exactly a kind of conceptual over-dubbing, in which I am inserting these alien narratives into foreign images. I especially enjoyed doing this with a lot of the Hong Kong films, which seem to me to have an obsession with traitors, informers and double agents.

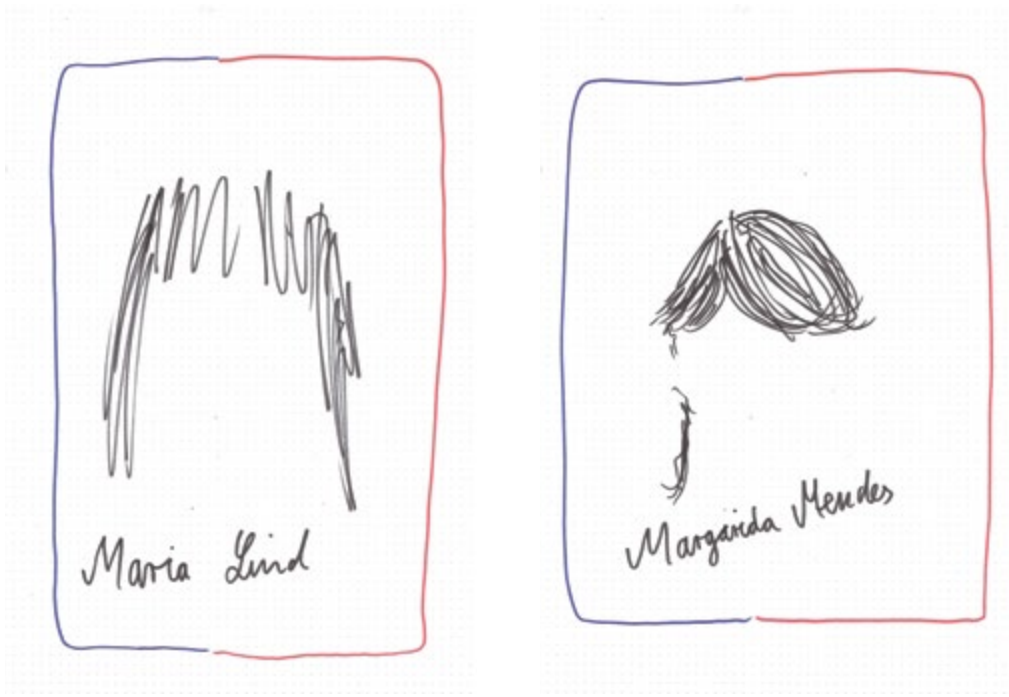
EA **Why do you think that is?**

HTN I think it's an expression of Hong Kong's political history. In a way, Hong Kong is the great double or triple agent, with multiple allegiances and skilled in the pragmatic way of playing one force against another. This is why films about informers, stool pigeons, traitors and double agents are a whole genre special to Hong Kong. I think that although *The Nameless* is a narrative woven around a historical person from Southeast Asia, it is also a work about Hong Kong cinema and its fascination with shifting identities.





Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Nameless* (2015). Video still. © Ho Tzu Nyen.



Maria Lind & Margarida Mendes

IN CONVERSATION WITH SRINIVAS ADITYA MOPIDEVI
GWANGJU, 31 AUGUST 2016

Portraits: Bernd Krauss.

In July 2015, Maria Lind was appointed the artistic director of the 11th Gwangju Biennale (GB11) in South Korea, which runs from 2 September to 6 November 2016. Her curatorial team includes curator Binna Choi, assistant curators Margarida Mendes, Azar Mahmoudian and Michelle Wong, and local curatorial associate Mite-Ugro, a Gwangju-based art collective.

Under the curatorial team's direction, the Biennale's main exhibition poses the question: 'What does art do?' The question is raised in an attempt to query the agency of art today, and its relationship to the future. The Biennale also evokes the idea of the 'eighth climate', a philosophical notion that refers to 'a state, or inter-world, one might reach using imaginative capacities.' Described as a 'constellation of many moving parts happening over one year,' the Biennale includes a series of programmes in addition to the main exhibition. These include: 'Monthly Gatherings' (informal gatherings taking place in Gwangju with the aim of fostering connections between the Biennale and the local art community); the ongoing 'Infra-School' (a programme including group discussions and seminars by GB11 artists and curators aimed at developing a connection between the Biennale and educational institutions); and a forum (through which 'Biennale Fellows'—art organisations whose work is considered important to the art ecology, artists and other cultural practitioners—are invited to come together to share their work and experiences).

In this Ocula Conversation, Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi speaks to Maria Lind and Margarida Mendes about the conceptual framework of the Biennale and its other associated projects.

SAM **The title of the 11th Gwangju Biennale is *The Eighth Climate*, a reference to the ideas of 12th-century Persian mystic and philosopher Suhrawardi and 20th-century French philosopher Henry Corbin. Can you speak more about this concept of the eighth climate? To what extent does it relate to climate change?**

ML *The Eighth Climate* is a title rather than a theme; a title that indicates an inter-world which has a number of similarities with how contemporary art is functioning today. We might understand Suhrawardi's and Henry Corbin's proposition of the eighth climate as a space of potentiality that establishes real imaginative knowledge and function, while escaping rationalism as we know it. The eighth climate does not refer directly to climate change. However, it is conscious of the relevance of this topic today, and many of the artists we are showing share such concerns in their practice.

MM Take, for example, Natascha Sadr Haghighian and Ashkan Sepahvand's installation *Carbon Theater* (2016), which will be located at the GB11 outdoor amphitheatre, where the colour coding of the space mirrors the molecular links of carbon compounds. Whoever passes through the auditorium is already complicit with the 'carbon democracies' narrated in the audio file that one can download and listen to at this location. We address through several angles the problems raised by climate change, the difficulty in representing its totality as a planetary phenomenon, and the challenge to accept our complicity with it and reach pragmatic consensus on how to manage its consequences.

SAM **'What does art do?' is the central question posed by GB11. This framework references the need to revive the role of art beyond its relationship to institutional infrastructures and engage with the urgencies of our time. How does the design of the Biennale as a 'constellation of many moving parts' address this concern?**

ML Take, for example, the black and white photographic series *Land of Undefined Territory* (2014–2015) by Munem [Wasif], showing a surreal barren rocky landscape with traces of human activity and occasionally even a human, which comes out of a project co-organised by Dhaka-based art collective Britto [Arts Trust] on the border between Bangladesh and India. The series speaks about the right to the land, to the resources above and below ground and how they are distributed. Another example is Apolonija Šušteršič's participatory project *Master Plan for Duam-dong* with the residents of the Duam-dong area in Gwangju, based on numerous meetings and workshops about the needs of the neighbourhood, which have taken place since early 2015, resulting in a 'performative master plan' to be used in the local community centre. The lavish tapestry, *From Where I Stand* (2015) by Otobong Nkanga, which refers to natural resources in terms of mining, is another such work. In radically different ways all of them relate to one of the urgencies of our time: what goes on above and below the ground.

The works in GB11 do things in various ways, which is the point: contemporary art is radically heterogeneous, multifaceted, fragmented. As a form of understanding that helps us grapple with existence in all its variety, it can include everything else. Each work does this in its own way, whether concretely, abstractly, poetically, critically, associatively, based on research and so on. In doing so, it also says something about the future, whether the artists are undertaking this consciously or not. This approach means that GB11 will be kaleidoscopic.

SAM **Could you tell us more about the research approaches that you adopted during the process of putting the Biennale together?**

ML I was lucky that I was able to put together a curatorial team that included Binna Choi as a curator and Azar Mahmoudian, Margarida Mendes and Michelle Wong as assistant curators. Everybody brings special knowledge and competence and yet also shares the experience of working with small structures and with self-organisation. The Gwangju-based art collective Mite-Ugro became our local curatorial associate. The relatively short time for preparation—less than a year—has affected the process in terms of what has been possible. For example, while shorter residencies for artists have been organised, longer ones became impossible.

MM Crucial to GB11 was a curatorial and research process that privileges a methodology over a topical approach. In September 2015, a dozen artists joined the curatorial team for the first research trip to Gwangju and Seoul, and all were invited to make new work. To these invitations—and alongside several research trips across the world and a significant amount of time spent in Gwangju itself—we added further artists to the list and started noticing shared concerns and methodologies. Furthermore, we debated among our team what was common in their concerns and practice, and developed what we call 'strands', gathering artists by their affinities. It was a very intuitive yet necessary process, and rather organic. This is how we believe this particular project should grow: with acute sensibility for what is happening in our surroundings. 'Above and below the ground', as mentioned by Maria, is one of the 'strands' within GB11.

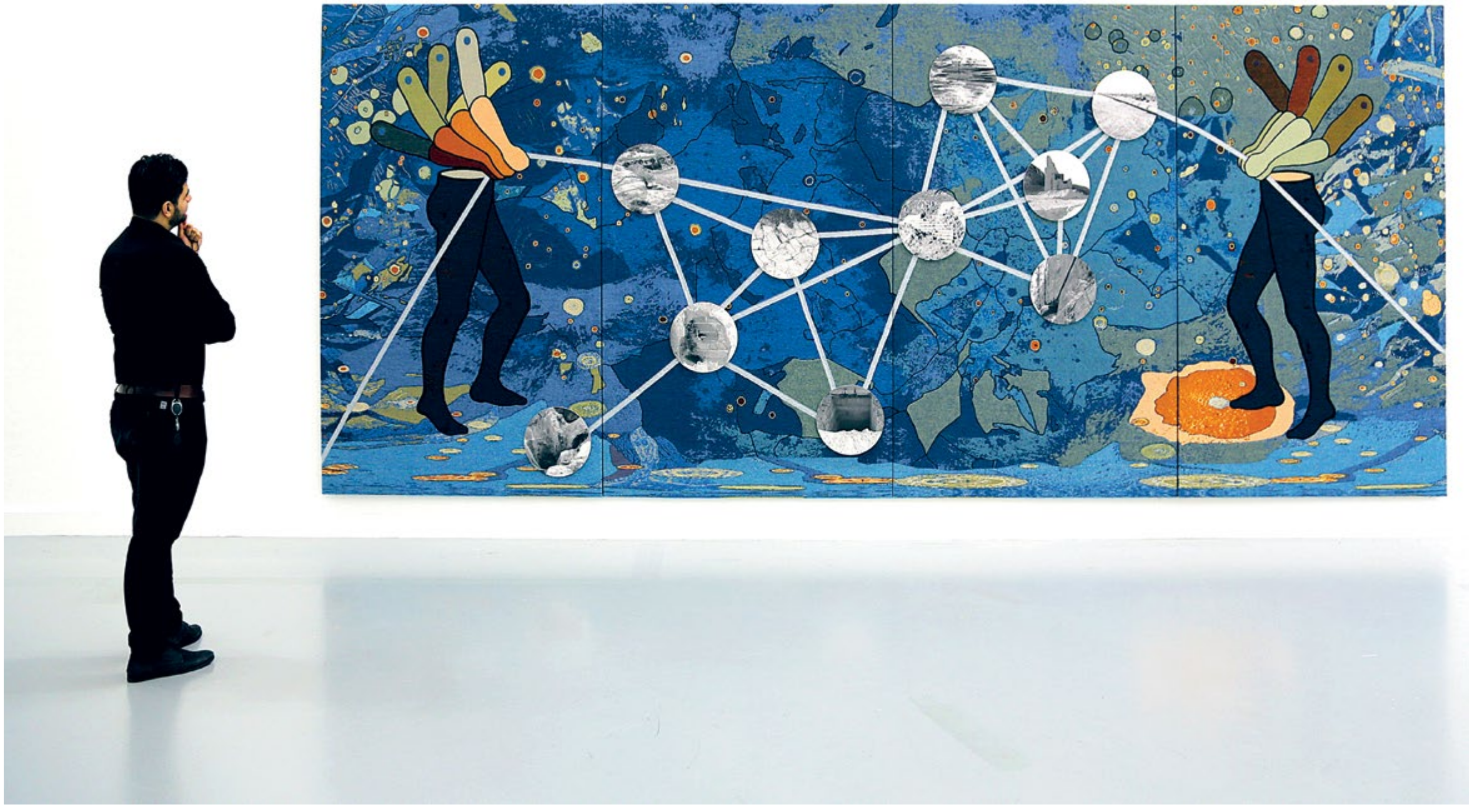
SAM **The forum component of the Biennale, entitled 'To all the Contributing Factors', brings together around 100 small- and medium-scale organisations from different parts of the world; institutions that push the boundaries of artistic and curatorial practice. Can you elaborate more on the importance of the forum in relation to the larger framework of the Biennale?**

ML The forum features Biennale Fellows who represent organisations that often function as the research and development department of the art world, generating new ideas, giving opportunities to emerging artists, and shaping new curatorial and educational methods. Yet they tend to be under the radar of both the mainstream art scene and the media. Concretely, being a Biennale Fellow means that the organisations go on doing the great work they normally do, without GB11 being involved in their activities. By connecting the dots, the aim is to manifest a critical mass and to underline its value.

The forum is a great opportunity for such an encounter. Taking place on the opening days of GB11 from 2 to 4 September 2016, and curated by myself and Binna Choi, it will include contributions by Han Kang, author of *The Vegetarian* (2007); Dr Andrea Phillips, art theorist and PARSE Professor of Art and Head of Research at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg; and Shin Ji Young, researcher and author of *Minority Commune*. From lectures to working groups to mountain hiking at Mudeungsan National Park, this forum will be a special moment to debate questions of value, continuity and scale, and imagining acts in common.



Munem Wasif, *Land of Undefined Territory* (2014–2015). Archival pigment print. 30.5 × 20.3 cm (33 × 22.9 cm framed). Courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai.



Otobong Nkanga, *The Weight of Scars* (2015). Woven textile and photography/yarns, viscose bast, mohair, polyester, bio cotton, linen, acrylic and inkjet print on 10 laser cut forex plates. 4 tapestries, 253 × 153 cm each. Courtesy the artist and M HKA, Antwerp.



Curated Walk—Monthly Gathering (May 2016), 11th Gwangju Biennale (2 September–6 November 2016). Courtesy Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

SAM **Can you expand on the curatorial association with the Gwangju-based art collective Mite-Ugro in engaging with the local context of Gwangju?**

MM When we first started working on this edition of GB11 we were asked to choose a local curator to collaborate with. After our first research trip in September, it was clear that Mite-Ugro collective is one of the most exciting art places in Gwangju. Opting for a collective rather than an individual was a conscious choice, especially as most of our curatorial team comes from a self-organised background, and we share many affinities with Mite-Ugro's programme, curatorial approach and methodologies.

We actively developed the Monthly Gatherings programme with Mite-Ugro in Gwangju. We expanded Mite-Ugro's book collection with art and theory publications and started group readings, as well as group critiques ('The Artwork in Focus'), curated walks and artist film screenings.

The Infra-School programme is another good opportunity to engage with educational platforms, art students and the broader Gwangju audience. Additionally, many of the activities we develop with our partners—such as lectures and artist talks—occur also in Seoul and online. Venues such as Chosun University, the Gwangju International Center, and RAT school of ART became regular platforms to host our visiting artists as well as the curatorial team. It is about using what is already there, connecting the dots.

SAM **Finally, what artist projects are you excited about seeing realised at the Biennale?**

MM It is difficult to select among so many interesting projects, but I must confess that I am particularly excited to see how *Nokdu's Bookshop for the Living and the Dead* (2016) by Dora García will come to life. And I am also very curious to see the local reception of Hito Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* (2015), and Gunilla Klingberg's installation *When Stillness Culminates There is Movement* (2016) at Uijae Museum in the Mudeungsan National Park area, Gwangju.

ML I am excited about how the gallery spaces of the exhibition, with their different atmospheres or climates, will come together. Among the 28 commissions, I am curious about Bernd Krauss' work *Tantogruppen, No Cure for Gardens! And Greetings from Traveling Poohall (Best of Norwich)* (2016), in the Mudeung Museum of Contemporary Art, and how it will inhabit the space given the artist's concerns about creativity, using found material and his intention to change the installation during its six-week stay; and also Ane Hjort Guttu's new film *The Lost Dreams of Naoki Hayakawa* (2016) about an overworked art director of an advertising firm in Japan who starts to hallucinate. An existing work that I am looking forward to seeing installed is Siren Eun Young Jung's film *Act of Affect* (2013), which is about the Korean *Yeosung Gukgeuk* theatre tradition in which, to this day, women play all the roles.

Frieze London

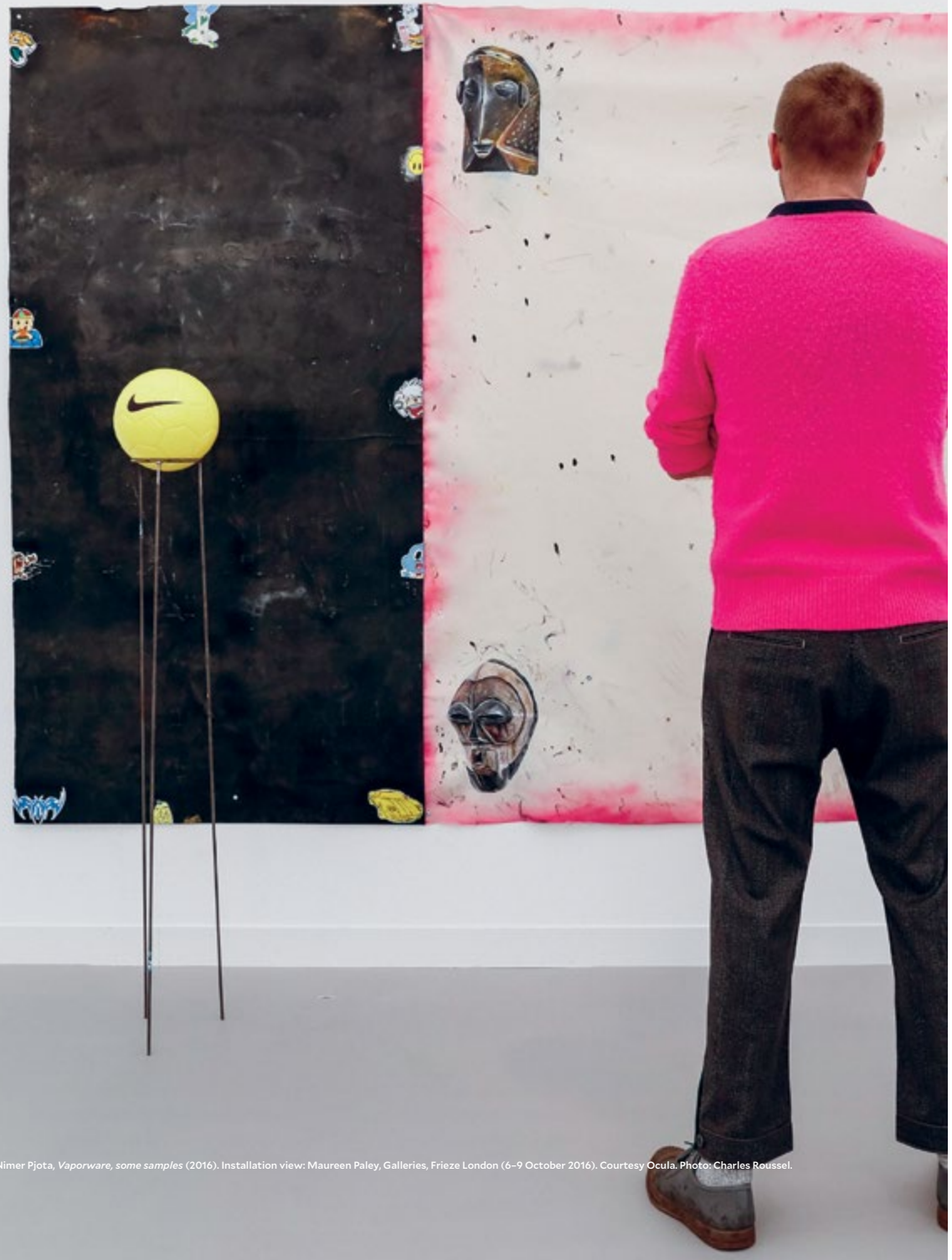
6–9 OCTOBER 2016



Installation view: Carol Bove and Bridget Riley, David Zwirner, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Kohei Nawa and Leo Villareal, Pace Gallery, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Paulo Nimer Pjota, *Vaporware, some samples* (2016). Installation view: Maureen Paley, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.

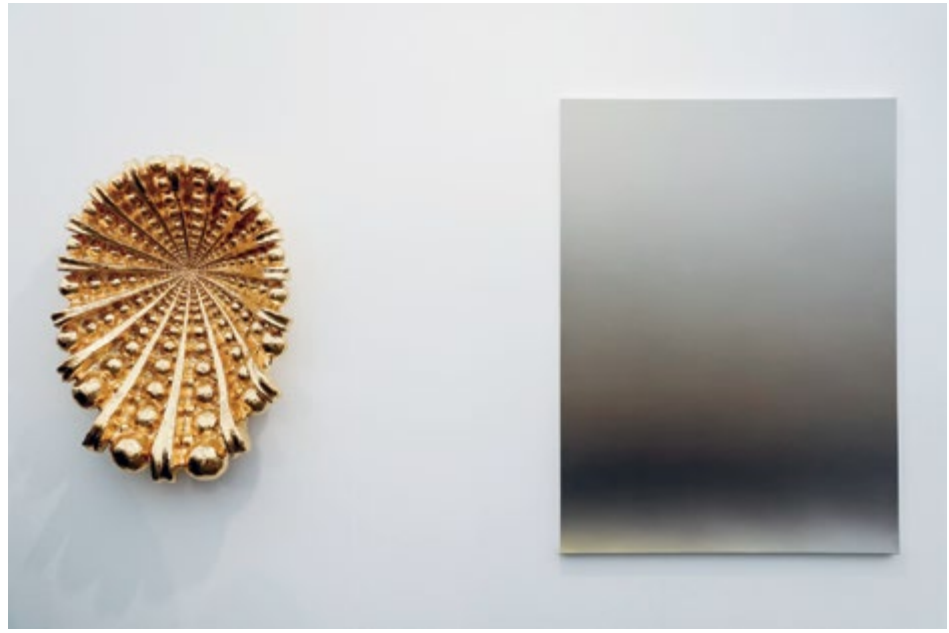


Jose Dávila, *Joint Effort* (2016). Installation view: Travesía Cuatro, Sculpture Park, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Lisa Oppenheim, Patrick Caulfield and Jack Lavender, The Approach, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.

Installation view: Paul Fägerskiöld and Meuser, Galerie Nordenhake, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Johan Creten and Pieter Vermeersch, Galerie Perrotin, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Gary Hume, Sprüth Magers, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Eddie Martinez, *Whoa, that came up out of everywhere* (2016). Installation view: Timothy Taylor, Galleries, Frieze London (6–9 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.

Anish Kapoor

IN CONVERSATION WITH ELLIAT ALBRECHT
SEOUL, 9 SEPTEMBER 2016



The artist with *Non-Object* (2013). Courtesy Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Keith Park.

Anish Kapoor's large-scale works are among the most recognisable in the art world. A tenacious affinity for drama, form and curvature characterise his sculptures, which hold court in public spaces, collections and art institutions around the globe. He is best known for works that use curved metal, marble, wax or stainless steel to flirt with and materialise the sublime. His sculptures explore dualities such as disappearance and being, heaven and earth, the visible and the just out of sight. Kapoor makes a strong case for spectacle in art, unearthing it from the pile of conditions that critics have deemed unfashionable and dusting it off to create works with monumental presence. Take, for example, his 'Sky Mirror' series: enormous concave mirrors made of reflective steel that are tilted upwards to reflect the sky, fashioning earthly portals to the clouds. Or consider *Descension* (2014), a perpetual whirlpool first presented at the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, and later realised in larger scale as part of *Anish Kapoor Versailles* in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles (9 June–1 November 2015), with a version shown earlier this year as part of Nuit Blanche in Paris. Kapoor's works are unapologetically meant to be experienced by the public at large.

Despite the often colossal size of his works, a strong relationship to the human body is rooted deeply in Kapoor's practice. He has spoken at length about his interest in the human psyche, and the orifices, apertures, caves and tunnels present in his sculptures carry physical connotations. The artist took heat last year after a casual remark was interpreted as identifying his funnel-shaped *Dirty Corner* (2015), installed at the Palace of Versailles, as the 'queen's vagina'. Jackie Wullschlager, writing for the *Financial Times,* described the work perhaps less antagonistically as 'an erotic, feminised disruption to Le Nôtre's masculine rigidities and tamed harmonies of lawn and hedge.' Kapoor shrugged off the controversy during a recent press conference in Seoul, pointing out that the majority of monuments and sculptures are plainly phallic, yet routinely escape public outrage.

Kapoor was born in Mumbai, India, in 1954. He studied in London (where he now lives and works) at Hornsey College of Art, and later at Chelsea School of Art (now called Chelsea College of Arts). In 1990 he represented Britain at the 44th Venice Biennale, winning the Premio Duemila. The following year he won the coveted Turner Prize. Some of his most recognisable projects include the installation of *Marsyas* (2002) in the Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern (2002–2003), and his 110-tonne sculpture *Cloud Gate* (2004), forged of a seamless series of highly polished and reflective stainless-steel plates and installed in Chicago's Millennium Park. In 2009, Kapoor was the subject of a major solo exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and in 2013 he was knighted for his services to visual arts. Earlier this year, he was announced as a recipient of the Lennon Ono Grant For Peace. Kapoor made news for a different reason recently when it was reported that the artist had obtained the exclusive rights to Vantablack,

a material made of carbon nanotubes and apparently the blackest substance known on earth. Some in the artistic community were outraged at Kapoor's proprietorship of the material, and it remains to be seen exactly how far Kapoor will push its artistic potential.

Recent works by Kapoor were presented in a solo exhibition *Gathering Clouds* at Kukje Gallery in Seoul (31 August–30 October 2016). The show was named after his series of circular concave 'void' works, which filled one room of the gallery. This grouping is painted with a flat shade of dark grey, resulting in an illusion of oscillating flatness and curvature. Also on view were works from Kapoor's 'Non Object' series, which are, in the artist's words, based on a 'simple, stupid idea'. Larger-than-life mirrored prisms have been 'twisted' on their axes, never amounting to a full ninety degree turn, to become curving, mysterious forms in which reflections of the gallery space and its inhabitants seem to constantly shift. A series of smaller versions of these works were also included in the show. Ocula spoke with Kapoor on the occasion of the exhibition's opening in Seoul.



Installation view: Anish Kapoor, *Gathering Clouds,* Kukje Gallery, Seoul (31 August–30 October 2016). Courtesy Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.



Installation view: Anish Kapoor, *Gathering Clouds,* Kukje Gallery, Seoul (31 August–30 October 2016). Courtesy Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.

EA **When I first viewed the reflective 'Non Object' works in the exhibition, I found the experience similar to that of performing theatre or dance: one circles around the pieces, sometimes repeatedly, interacting with and sizing them up. One's reflection even seems to jump from place to place as it moves over the curves of the work in a way that is almost cinematic. I thought that was rather interesting given the fact that you just designed the set for the English National Opera's production of *Tristan and Isolde*. Can you tell me about the presence of theatricality in your work?**

AK I'm quite interested in theatricality. In the art world in which I grew up in the seventies, the theatrical was always seen as horrific. You'd never do anything theatrical. Sculpture must be real! I'm not sure that's ever been true. There is something about the performative in a work, where the work almost switches itself on as you enter its space. I think it's terribly important because that's a conversation between a viewer and an object. You're asked to enter its space. Sculpture and the body are like this [*gestures to imply closeness*].

EA **When I stood in front of the circular concave 'void' works [*Gathering Clouds I, II, III IV* (2014)]—and I had never experienced this before, though I've seen iterations of them many times—and spoke directly in front of them, it was as if someone had turned the volume on a radio up. My voice suddenly became amplified. It was almost magical. I wonder if that kind of poetic or surprising experience is something that you pursue when you make a work.**



Installation view: Anish Kapoor, *Gathering Clouds,* Kukje Gallery, Seoul (31 August–30 October 2016). Courtesy Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.

AK I've worked a lot with concavity over many, many years, and it's one of the things about concave forms and concave space—that it almost always has a focus. Just as it focuses light, it focuses sound.

EA **On the subject of voids, Vantablack is often described as 'blacker than a black hole'—a phenomenon that absorbs light by sucking all matter into a concentrated space. Is that cosmic comparison something that you think about often when you work with the material?**

AK I'm deeply interested in the cosmic.

EA **Me too.**

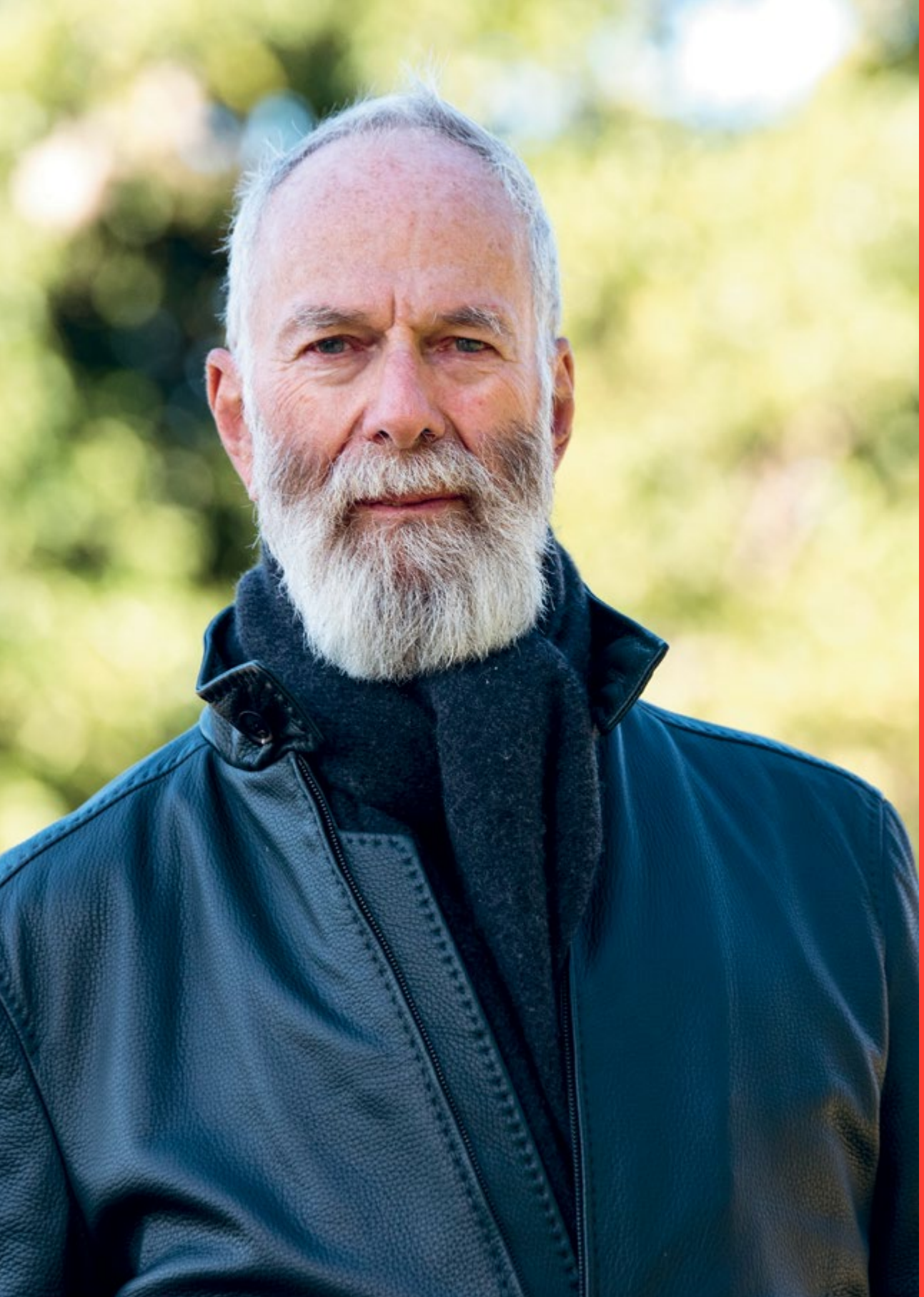
AK [*Laughs*] I was reading somewhere today that almost all religious places have a meteorite at their heart. For example, the most famous of them is obviously the Kaaba in Mecca; there's a meteorite at the centre of that. Almost all great cathedrals, at some time, had a meteorite. A bit of heavenly matter. The Australian Aborigines even believed that the sky was made of stone. So it's quite common, this idea that somehow there's something cosmic about our psychic material. It's not dissimilar from the space you hold in yourself. It's vast, dark and it's cosmic.

EA **You grew up in India and spent your adolescence in a kibbutz in Israel, and now you live in England. Those cultures all place very different importance on monuments, sacredness and beauty. How did they influence your sense of the sublime?**

AK I recently went back to the small town where I grew up in northern India. I've always known, but I never realised the extent of it—that it's a valley. The Himalayas are almost all the way around it; they're huge objects, huge. I mean, the Himalayas are high. And I thought to myself, actually you know what, this has something to do with it. It's as stupid and direct as that.

EA **I read an interview in which you said that at the time when you grew up there it was a very beautiful place—with emphasis on 'at the time'.**

AK Yes. It still is actually.



John Kaldor

IN CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN ACRET
SYDNEY, 23 SEPTEMBER 2016

Photo: Peter Greig.

Since 1969, arts patron and collector John Kaldor has been sharing his love of contemporary art with the Australian public through what is now his non-profit organisation Kaldor Public Art Projects, which commissions major large-scale projects from well-known international artists. Kaldor has sat on the boards and international councils of many art organisations over the years, and is currently on the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He was also commissioner for the Australian Pavilion at the 51st and 52nd Venice Biennales. In 2011, Kaldor gifted his private collection, which includes works by Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Long, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Sol LeWitt, Jeff Koons, Ugo Rondinone, and Bill Viola to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, bringing the works into public view.

The 32nd Kaldor Public Art Project presents Australian-Aboriginal Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones' *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, which is on view in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden from 17 September to 3 October 2016.

SA **Tell us about your introduction to contemporary art in the early 1960s. What excited you about it then?**

JK I was trained as a textile designer, and in my job I was required to travel regularly to the US and Europe to see the latest fashion trends. During that time, Pop art emerged as a very strong movement, primarily in New York. Coming from Australia, what I saw was totally new and it really excited me. It was so different from the landscape-based works that were prominent here. Pop art was the first radical art movement after the post-war years, and it signalled the beginning of consumer society, of affluence, which it both reflected and commented on.

SA **What inspired you to initiate Kaldor Public Art Projects in 1969?**

JK On these initial trips to the US and Europe—as a junior employee on a low salary—I started collecting small works by artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, which at that time were cheaper than works by Australian artists such as John Olsen or Fred Williams. I could buy a small work by Andy Warhol for as little as 50 or 60 US dollars.

Contemporary art at that time was a very small club. Only a few people were collecting and it was shown in only a handful of galleries. It was so different to the recent explosion in the field, where there is now an enormous market with many galleries, artists and collectors.

After a while, I began to feel that collecting was a very selfish thing because you see it, your family sees it, friends see it, but the general public doesn't, and I wanted to share my love of art with the art community and the general public. That's why I wanted to bring international artists to Australia.

SA **At the time, Australian audiences wouldn't have seen a lot of international contemporary art. Was there a real hunger to see it?**

JK Yes, Australian audiences just didn't have access to it. The only way they saw such art was through reproductions, which was a terribly second-hand way of seeing it.

It was a shock to see contemporary art. It was a shock to me when I first travelled. I just wanted to expose people to it. I was hoping that the reaction would be positive, but that wasn't my priority. If people didn't like it immediately, maybe in a few years they would think, 'Oh, that was interesting' or 'That makes sense to me now'.

SA **So the main focus of Kaldor Public Art Projects is education?**

JK From the very beginning, the aim was for people to see groundbreaking art. Presenting this art was intrinsically educational in a very non-didactic way; we didn't have a formal education programme until 2011.

Since we presented our first art project in 1969—Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia*—our projects have always been free. We hoped that this would encourage audiences to come to our projects, particularly those who might not ordinarily go to the traditional white-cube gallery space.

SA **The work you present is quite avant-garde. It is often performance- or installation based. How do you choose the art for your projects?**

JK Well, what we are trying to do is always exhibit the latest developments in contemporary art. It really depends on what I

feel is the art of the moment. It should be something that has meaning and relevance to what is going on today. If ten years ago someone had said we would be presenting performance or dance projects—like our 2015 project with French choreographer Xavier Le Roy [*Temporary Title*]—I would have said you are out of your mind because we are about visual art. But in the last few years we have seen a breakdown of boundaries between different art forms. The distinction between visual arts, performance and dance no longer exists in traditional, prescriptive ways.

SA **For the 32nd Kaldor Public Art Project, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones presents *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* in the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney. This is the first time an Australian indigenous artist has been chosen for a Kaldor project. Could you tell us why Jones was chosen, and about the particular work he is presenting?**

JK For our 45th anniversary in 2014 we wanted to do something different, so instead of inviting an international artist we held a competition open to Australian and Australian-resident artists. The brief was to come up with a concept that could be the foundation for a project. We had 160 entries, and an international jury unanimously chose Jonathan as the winner of the competition. At that time, Jonathan had only a concept, so we have been working solidly for over a year to turn that concept into a reality. It's one of our most important projects. The project recreates the Garden Palace, built for the Sydney International Exhibition, which opened in the Botanic Garden in Sydney in 1879. Sadly, the Garden Palace burnt down in 1882. The exhibition was part of the World Fair phenomenon, which began with the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851 and spread across the world. The Sydney showing housed international contributions from countries that included France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Japan.

The Garden Palace was an enormous building, with a floor area measuring over 112,000 metres. It stretched almost to the Conservatorium of Music on the north side and to the State Library on the south side of the Garden. Yet today it is totally forgotten. If you asked a hundred people, maybe one person would have heard something about it, so we are really looking at recreating an important part of Sydney's history.

Jonathan is coming from an indigenous angle, focusing on the part of the [1879] exhibition that featured an ethnographic court display of Aboriginal shields and weapons. The display was included to juxtapose the progress that had been made since white settlement with the 'primitive' nature of Aboriginal culture. It was presented to excuse white settlement and the ongoing devastation of Aboriginal Australia. After the exhibition, which lasted seven months, the Garden Palace was used as a cultural centre and as a storage place for the Aboriginal artefacts, which were subsequently destroyed in the fire. It was a tremendous loss to the indigenous community. All of their early objects were lost.

Jonathan is looking to turn this loss into something positive. While the objects were lost, the culture thrives and lives on.

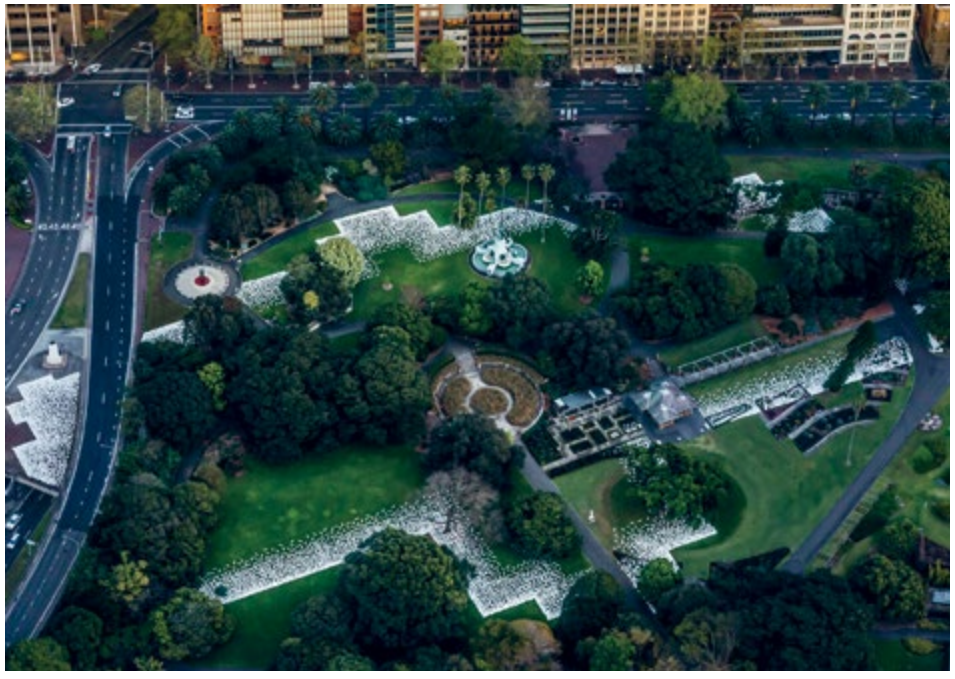
SA **What do you think about today's international contemporary art market? Contemporary art has gone from being quite an esoteric, avant-garde field to very much a mainstream attraction, with multiple global art fairs, biennales, and blockbuster exhibitions. What is your feeling about this? Are there negative aspects to this kind of booming market?**



Exterior, Garden Palace, Sydney (circa 1879). Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney.



Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* (1969). 1st Kaldor Public Art Project. Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney. Photo: Harry Shunk.





Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* (2016). 32nd Kaldor Public Art Project (17 September–3 October 2016). Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney. Photo: Peter Greig.

JK Well, yes, there are negative aspects because galleries are very market driven—that's their business. There is a pressure on artists to always come up with something new, and a pressure on young artists to develop very quickly. There is also the danger that, because art is now like fashion, artists are discarded in favour of the new.

SA **So what happens when you take that art away from the market—which is what you do with your projects—and you take it into the public sphere, allowing people to see it for free and learn from it? Does that process somehow change the art?**

JK The art is not commercial; it cannot be sold. The purpose is different. Because it isn't commercial and the projects are temporary, there's much more freedom in the scope of subjects the artist can work with. There's room to create new concepts, and experiment with innovative ways of communicating with the public.

SA **In 2011, you gifted your private collection to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Could you tell us about the works in that gift?**

JK The collection starts with American Pop art and includes Minimal art, German photography, and artists who worked in the 1990s and early 2000s. I am constantly adding to the collection.

I'm drawn to large and difficult works which don't fit into my home, so in the end they find a home at the gallery.

SA **Australia does not have a strong tradition of philanthropy. Do you think this is changing?**

JK Changing, yes, but not fast enough. We have to celebrate the achievements of philanthropy, whether it is in the field of medicine, culture, education or art. Also, those who are asking for support—the development managers of philanthropic organisations—have to be more professional. In the US it is a well-regarded profession, and it is an accepted way of running not-for-profit organisations. In Australia there is a cringe factor in asking for support.

SA **Do you still collect? What drives you to collect a particular artist or work?**

JK Yes, I am still collecting. I collect a particular work because it says something to me. It is never an intellectual exercise; there is always an emotional or gut reaction. If I like a particular artist, I collect their work over the years. I think if you like an artist, you have to collect their work over a period of time to really understand their concepts.



OCULA CONVERSATIONS 2016–2017

Danh Vō

IN CONVERSATION WITH DIANA D'ARENBERG
HONG KONG, 28 SEPTEMBER 2016

Danh Vō and Mathieu Paris. Installation view: *Danh Vō*, White Cube, Hong Kong (7 September–12 November 2016).
© White Cube. Photo: Kitmin Lee.

Artist Danh Vō brings together fragments—pieces of his life and objects of history—to tell stories. These stories are told in exhibition spaces where layers, pauses and silences between statements are created with considered restraint. There is space for phantoms and memories to float between works, creating a dialogue between the past and present; and there are moments of poetry.

Born in Bà Rịa, Vietnam, Vō was just four when his family fled the country by boat in 1979, four years after the fall of Saigon. The family was rescued by a Danish shipping freighter and settled in Denmark where Vō was raised. Much is made of this history; it is fetishised by the media, pored through in the hope that it will provide clues for interpreting the works of this elusive artist. But Vō avoids a didactic or expository approach to art. His press releases reveal little, and often there is no explanatory note accompanying the art in his shows. He allows the audience to complete the story—an approach that encourages the viewer to navigate works unaided, and sift through layers of symbolism to create meaning.

For his first Hong Kong solo exhibition at White Cube, curated by Mathieu Paris (7 September–12 November 2016), Vō suspended 450 Pleistocene mammoth fossils and a 17th-century Dutch ivory crucifix in the main upper-level space of the gallery. The title—which includes the words 'You're gonna die up there/ Keep away! The sow is mine/ Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me/ Let Jesus fuck you, let Jesus fuck you! Let him fuck you/ Lick me, lick me/ Do you know what she did, your cunting daughter?'—is taken from the lines delivered by a demon in the 1973 horror film *The Exorcist*. The installation is both a tongue-in-cheek rebuke of Vō's Catholic upbringing, and a reference to archeological finds and the spoils of colonial expeditions. The work was first exhibited by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía at the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid as part of the artist's exhibition *Banish the Faceless / Reward Your Grace* (1 October 2015–4 April 2016). At White Cube, the work is accompanied by a hanging object installed in an adjoining corridor: a sword taken from the Mamluk Arsenal at Alexandria during the last Crusade in the second half of the 14th century.

The gallery's lower-level space contains a glass-box refrigerator which functions as both a vitrine and a plinth. It contains the wooden head of a polychrome Christ, and displays a fragment of a 16th-century Roman marble sculpture. A gold-leafed cardboard Budweiser box sits partially open against the wall not far from the refrigerator, and at the entrance to the room hangs a handwritten letter.

The letter is a copy of the French Catholic missionary Saint Jean-Théophane Vénard's last correspondence to his father, written just before he was beheaded in 1861 for his efforts to spread Catholicism in Vietnam. Written in French, one of the lines translates into English as: 'A quick cut of the sword will separate my head, like a springtime flower that the gardener picks for pleasure.' Vō's father, Phung Vō, expertly copied the letter as part of an ongoing edition, which Phung Vō will continue to produce on his son's request until his own death.

Ultimately, the show presents seemingly random objects; bits of a riddle that require piecing together. But these fragments highlight destruction, cultural production, dismemberment, war, violence and exile. They evoke elements of political, sexual and religious history and also the artist's own identity, history and experiences.

DD In your White Cube exhibition, you combine fragments of antique sculptures and Pleistocene mammoth fossils with a beer carton and lines from *The Exorcist*. You once said you wanted to liberate yourself from the confines of modernism by including objects and historical artefacts. Could you talk about that?

DV Modernism detaches itself from broader history, and I don't think that should necessarily be the case. I learned much later about the Renaissance and antiquities. You find traces if you dig deeper into it. I felt it necessary to add historic layers for my own sake, as a learning process. I think that's how that started. Also, I started to travel much more to Italy and began looking at fantastic things that are part of the cultural production there. The [cardboard] boxes came much earlier, and they have much more of a modernist context.

I was raised Catholic and went to church every Sunday, and I hated it. But today I feel fortunate to have been raised with this crazy iconographic imagery. You have to respect it. It's a culture that's brutal and bloody and perverse.

DD In that context, using quotes from *The Exorcist* for titles makes sense, as does the press release, which offers little information about the meaning of the works on show, except for an extract of demonic possession from the film's script that is very provocative in its blasphemy. Is this revenge against your Catholic upbringing? Are you trying to deliberately provoke?

DV It's taken from popular culture. It's all done with a bit of humour. And it's liberating, I needed that. In the beginning, I had difficulties expressing those words, but now I feel fine with it. That's good enough for me.

DD Would you say it's an exorcism of your own feeling?

DV [*Laughs*] I think so. It's not provocation because it's about myself first of all.

DD A lot of your work seems to be exploring the idea of renegotiating or reinventing your identity; it is as if you play with and layer different identities.

DV Yes, anything else but being nationalist is good, particularly in these times. Nationalism prevents you from playing with the multiple possibilities of identities, which is stupid, almost.

DD You always seem to challenge or defy social conventions and institutions. There are the provocative lines from *The Exorcist*, and the questioning of the institution of marriage through your ongoing 'Marriage Project', for which you have married and divorced friends whilst adding their surnames to yours since 2003. What is your relationship with, or feeling towards, societal institutions?

DV I think almost everything—society and social constrictions and expectations of what is happiness, and so on—is constructed by other people. I was raised with ideas of things that didn't fit me, and I think they fit very few people in general. We have to push these aside to be able to insert ourselves into them, to find a space for ourselves.

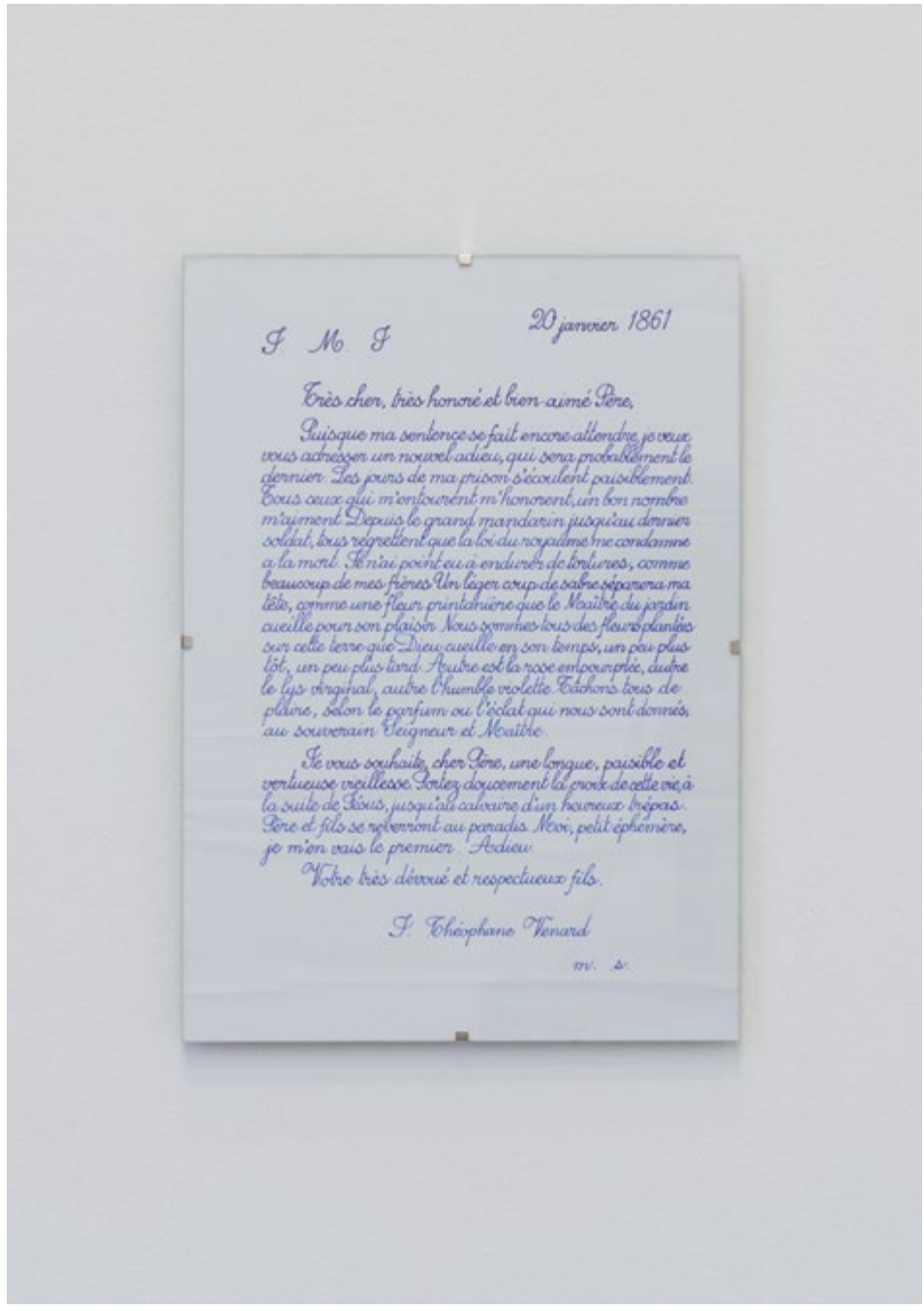
We were all raised with this expectation that if we have a family and a good job, we will be happy. It's just not right, especially in my case as a gay man from another culture, raised in Denmark—that's a lot of baggage. From very early on I had to renegotiate these things, and yes, I think this is reflected in the work I'm doing.



Installation view: *Danh Vō*, White Cube, Hong Kong (7 September–12 November 2016). © White Cube and Danh Vō. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Danh Vō, *Untitled* (2016). Late-14th-century crusader sword from the Mamluk arsenal at Alexandria; steel, leather, resin cast of hilt. 3 × 24 × 125 cm. Installation view: *Danh Vō*, White Cube, Hong Kong (7 September–12 November 2016). © White Cube and Danh Vō. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Danh Vō, *2.2.1861* (2009). Ink on A4 paper. 29.6 × 8.25 cm. Installation view: *Danh Vō*, White Cube, Hong Kong (7 September–12 November 2016). © White Cube and Danh Vō. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Installation view: *Danh Vō*, White Cube, Hong Kong (7 September–12 November 2016). © White Cube and Danh Vō. Photo: Kitmin Lee.

DD It's interesting that your work constantly gets framed in terms of your personal history and experience as a refugee. A certain expectation is imposed based on your biography. How do you feel about that?

DV Of course, it's terrible. But it also expresses the structure that defines it. It would be different if it were a white man making abstract paintings because it comes from the dominant structure. If it doesn't get expressed, then we don't define it.

It's like two guys holding hands in the street 20 years ago; people would say that they were bringing their private life into the public. But if a man and a woman do that, it doesn't get defined because it's hidden within the dominant structure.

Or like burkinis. You can lay naked on the beach and it doesn't get noticed, but if you're wearing a scarf or covering up, people are outraged that you're expressing your private life in public. What is this? What is the public and who defines it? It's a really tricky definition. It's what I oppose. And it's not a fixed structure either. That powerful structure moves all the time and we're not even aware of it. I think that is why we have to challenge these notions.

DD You are challenging these notions but in a subtle and indirect way. You leave a very open space for interpretation.

DV Yes, well I have had too many teachers and priests in my life [*laughs*]. I don't want to act like them and impose more dogma. You can suggest things and people can use it or not.

DD You use a lot of personal objects and artefacts in your work as well. How do you approach this? At what point do you realise an object can become a work of art?

DV If I knew that I would be a very rich man [*laughs*].

DD You said in another interview that you don't like to interpret your work. How do your ideas coalesce?

DV It's very simple. When I put things together and it becomes too direct, then I feel that it's not right. It's a constellation of things that still leaves openness and freedom. It's allowing people the space to still insert themselves into the work.

DD Is that the most important thing for you as an artist?

DV Yes, the dialogue and freedom, for sure.

DD You previously exhibited the fragments of mammoth fossils you are showing at White Cube in Hong Kong with the Reina Sofía in Madrid. These are two very different spaces—one is a national institution and the other is a white cube. How do you navigate these spaces? How do you curatorially approach them? You're very hands-on, right?

DV Yeah, it's a risk every time because I don't work with a studio. The exhibition space becomes the place of experimentation, so I have some ideas and materials that I bring with me, and then I get to work.

DD What is the relationship between the various objects you have used in the White Cube show?

DV Of course, I think I have a reason that I use certain references and imagery, but to be honest when I install it's primarily aesthetic. When you see the fridge with the box [*Lick Me, Lick Me* (2016)], it's all fragments inside. And then the cardboard box has fragments of a flag inside, but you barely see it unless you know that it's there. That's the same idea when you have a fragment. You only need a piece, you don't need the whole thing: just a piece to give you the freedom to imagine.



Liu Xiaodong

IN CONVERSATION WITH ELLIAT ALBRECHT
SHANGHAI, 18 OCTOBER 2016

© Liu Xiaodong. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York/Milan. Photo: Jiang Jia.

Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong takes figure painting out of the studio and into the fields, factories and family homes of regions rife with political turmoil, economic unease and environmental degradation. Setting up easels on location to depict real people in places such as rural China, Thailand, Tibet and Israeli-Palestinian conflict zones, Liu is a modern plein air artist, painting his subjects in their natural settings with a sensitivity to their complex situations. His large-scale works are like history paintings for the contemporary world, allowing still-unravelling narratives to tell themselves.

Liu paints with loose brushstrokes in a realist style, drawing out his subjects and their surroundings first, getting to know them during the process. His use of colour leans towards the liberal, while remaining vivid and believable, and the curves, shadows and textures of the bodies in his works combine to give their subjects a lifelike presence. Equal attention is given to the landscapes that surround them; grass, mountains, water and trees are rendered with highly varied impasto textures. It is obvious that Liu is a painter who is serious about the act of looking. An avid notetaker, he writes and sketches his observations and plans in his diaries, which are often exhibited alongside his work.

Liu also has an extensive personal history with film, both appearing in and making moving pictures to supplement his work. The documentary *Hometown Boy* (2011), directed by Yao Hungi, followed Liu on his return to his hometown of Jincheng in Liaoning Province, where he spent three months painting his family and childhood friends amid the economic and environmental devastation that befell the town after the local paper mill closed. Similarly, the 2006 Jia Zhangke-directed documentary *Dong* (*'East'*, 东), trailed Liu as he painted a group of labourers near the Three Gorges Dam in Yichang—a controversial structure that has flooded archaeological and cultural sites, displacing nearly 1.3 million people.

A brand-new work of a rather different sort is on view in the exhibition *Datumsoria: An Exhibition of Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik* at Chronus Art Center in Shanghai's M50 district (17 September–30 December 2016). Created specifically for the exhibition, Liu's ultra high-tech *Weight of Insomnia* (2016) features three robotic arms set up in front of large-scale canvases mounted on construction scaffolds. Below, laptops screen live footage from video cameras fixed on three locations: the first near the Bund in Shanghai, the second in Beijing's Sanlitun district, and the last on a public plaza in the artist's hometown where, at dawn or dusk, elderly people gather to dance to disco music. As the exhibition's introduction states, these robotic arms translate the incoming data into 'contours of buildings, silhouettes of trees, outlines of vehicles, and shadows of human figures', and transfer them onto the canvases in real time over the course of the exhibition, testing just what painting can be in the age of new media and data.

Ocula spoke with Liu before the opening of *Datumsoria* at Chronus Art Center. The exhibition will open at ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe on 9 September 2017 and will run until 12 November 2017.

EA How does *Weight of Insomnia* fit into your practice as a whole, and what prompted such a high-tech project?

LX It was primarily because of the curator, Zhang Ga. He and I were at the same art school, and he has always been considered a pioneer in pushing the boundaries of art. He's quite influential among his peers, including me. It was Zhang Ga who convinced me to take this on. It was a real challenge because I'm computer illiterate and don't know much about new media. I've painted for the past 30 years, and initially Zhang painted as well, but he then ventured into new media, so he knows a lot about it. It really was a huge challenge for me, but I wanted to take it on and create a very high-quality work.

EA The press release for the exhibition poetically suggests that the driving force behind *Weight of Insomnia* is you, reincarnated as a robotic consciousness. What do you make of this—can a painter be reincarnated as a machine?

LX Actually, there are two levels of meaning to the title *Weight of Insomnia*. The first is on a more personal level: we've all experienced difficulty in sleeping, and when we wake up in the middle of the night, we get very depressed. We look outside the window and stare out at the night, not moving. From a personal perspective, it creates a lot of pressure in one's mind. The second level of meaning pertains to machines themselves. A machine gets even more depressed, because when it is built and put into the factory it must run 24 hours non-stop. Unlike the people in factories, machines work all three shifts: in the morning, evening and through the night. Machines can't stop. Insomnia is even more depressing for them.

It is impossible for an artist to be reincarnated as a machine. As an artist, I value objectivity very much. There's no better way to show that than with a machine, because a machine is very objective. It doesn't have an attitude. Having said that, it also assumes a certain type of attitude because I'm the one behind it. I control the speed of the arm's movement, the size of the pen and what kind of subject the machine draws. So even though the subjectivity is minimal, there's still a trace of it. But I try as much as possible to still retain the objectivity.

This fits into my practice and interest in film. I've worked in film a lot, mainly documentary, which has had a very big impact on me. I don't know what's going to happen in the next second in film. It's the same as this project, because I don't know what's going to be captured in the next seconds by the camera. So this is very objective.

EA One of the cameras faces a busy crossing in Sanlitun. Why did you choose this location?

LX Actually, I first wanted to set up a camera to capture my apartment in Beijing, but it's not a very busy street—not very happening—so I was looking for a more exciting place. It just so happened that one of my high-school friends has become a very successful businessman and owns an office. He invited me to come visit, and I saw it was a very good spot so I installed a camera there. It so happens that the camera is facing the cross street in a busy district of Beijing. It's very congested; there are a lot of cars and people. I think it's a good representation of a city which is very cramped. It's a powerful and, to some extent, violent image.

EA What can the moving image do or convey that painting cannot?

LX It's about the element of time. In painting, you only see the end result, so the element of time is missing. But in the moving image, people experience the element of time by watching the video—it is a process that can be seen. Actually, in this new project I also wanted to employ the element of time. Because by showing the machine's arms paint in real time, people can see the passing of time. This is also in line with my ideas about painting. I want to show people the painting process, which is full of surprises. It can even be considered a performing art. It's very humorous and lively.

EA **How has your art education at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, which was rooted in Chinese socialist realism, impacted your work? I ask because your paintings don't depict the traditional, grandiose political ideals that characterise that style, but rather reflect the hardships and realities of everyday life.**

LX It has impacted my work. However, if you follow socialist realism through its history, it has two stages. The first allows you to go into real life, to experience other people's lives, so the end result is a work that expresses a stance that is highly summarised from the artist's perspective. However, I only go into other people's lives to experience them. I feel that other people's lives are already artworks. So I don't want to summarise; I don't want to make a political stance. I want to just faithfully reproduce other people's lives, because it's already a very difficult and great thing to try to record people's stories.

EA **How do you choose your subjects when you are painting on location?**

LX When I paint, I like to go somewhere that one can't explain in one sentence what's going on. I like to visit places of complexity; places that can show the dynamics of society. So you won't find me working in a park, because that's too simple. I want to work somewhere with contradiction and conflict.

EA **What is it about an individual that draws you to paint them?**

LX Basically, the selection process is more of a comparison; I try to base it on my own perception. For example, if I want to paint five people out of a group of ten, I will just choose the five people based on what I prefer. So there are no set rules.

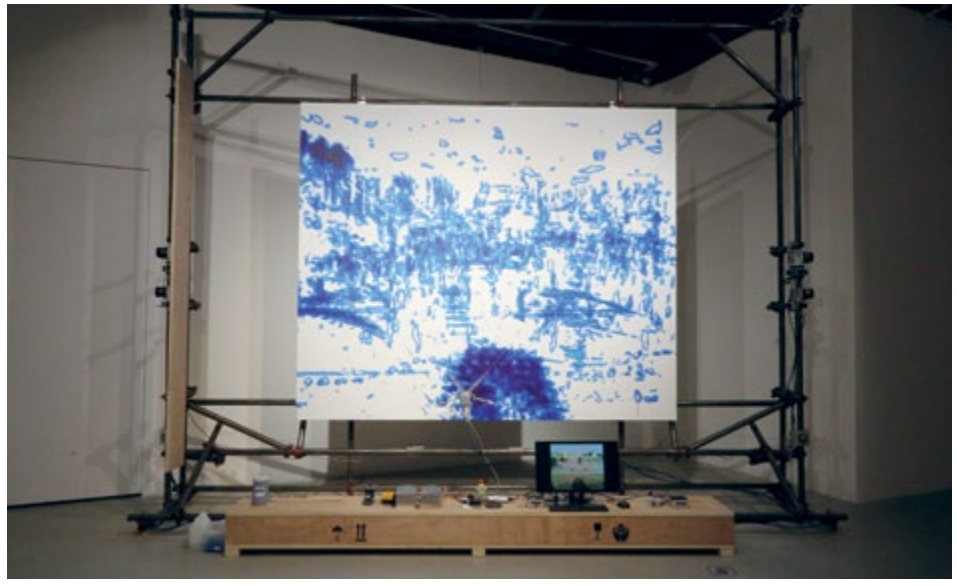
EA **In Ocula's last interview with you in 2013, you said that painting is the most difficult thing to do in today's art environment. Yet you seem to paint very quickly and very often. How do you maintain this momentum? Do you ever get frustrated with your paintings?**

LX I get frustrated when I'm not painting. It's a strange feeling. It's like you're addicted to a drug. If I don't paint, I start to question life. I start to question painting itself. But once I pick up the brush, it's all in the process. The process is what's driving me. The process breaks painting into several parts that are systematically organised in a day. So for example, today I have to finish this part, tomorrow, that part. I feel very content and full of energy.

EA **So there's structure to it.**

LX Yes, it's a very structured process.

EA **Through your work, you've immersed yourself in sites of cultural and political tension, including Thailand, Cuba, Israel, China and America. Out of all of these places, which was the one that impacted you the most?**



Liu Xiaodong, *Weight of Insomnia* (2016). Installation view: *Datumsoria: An Exhibition of Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik*, Chronus Art Center, Shanghai (17 September–30 December 2016). Courtesy Chronus Art Center.



Liu Xiaodong, *Weight of Insomnia* (2016). Installation view: *Datumsoria: An Exhibition of Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik*, Chronus Art Center, Shanghai (17 September–30 December 2016). Courtesy Chronus Art Center.



Liu Xiaodong, *Time* (2014). Oil on canvas. 20 canvases, 60×60 cm each. Overall dimensions: 240×300 cm. © Liu Xiaodong. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York/Milan.

LX Actually, it was America. At the time, I wanted to paint a group of high-school students. I wanted to make a different kind of painting. However, when I spoke with the students, they weren't cooperative. Then I realised I was the problem. As a painter or any kind of artist, we determine what we want to convey. We never think about the subject's ideas or how they feel. If you go to a poor country, people might not have many opinions about the way you paint them because as long as you give them money, they're satisfied. However, if you go to places like the United States where people are very opinionated—even the kids have their own ideas—then you'll have a problem.

So I realised that art is a process of cooperation. This is not a one-way street—the process cannot be solely decided by the artists themselves. So I invited the students to write their own opinions directly on the painting, and then they became very cooperative. I believe this is an aspect of democracy and equality, which inspires me a lot. It also aligned with my ideas about objectivity in my works, because objectivity is also a reflection of fairness. So the process of creating art is a reciprocal one that can only be created by two parties working together. It's not a matter of 'work for me', but rather 'work with me'. So it's not about how difficult the painting was; the painting itself was not difficult. But it's about the working process.

EA **Where and what would you like to paint next?**

LX I've already been there, but Bangladesh. My next project will be about Bangladeshi workers who demolish abandoned ships from all over the world, taking off all the metal parts in order to sell them. It's a very painstaking job.

FIAC Paris

20–23 OCTOBER 2016



General impression: FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Barbara Kruger, Sprüth Magers, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Liza Lou, Lehmann Maupin, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Sam Falls, Josh Smith and Ugo Rondinone, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Urs Fischer and Sarah Lucas, Sadie Coles HQ, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Chou Yu-Cheng, Edouard Malingue Gallery, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Do Ho Suh, *Hub, Wielandstr. 18, 12159 Berlin* (2015). Installation view: Victoria Miro, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Jose Dávila, Jesper Just and A Kassen, Galleri Nicolai Wallner, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Kishio Suga, Tomio Koyama Gallery, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Imi Knoebel, Theaster Gates and Damien Hirst, White Cube, FIAC, Paris (20–23 October 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Xiaoyu Weng

IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHANIE BAILEY
NEW YORK, 25 OCTOBER 2016

© Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Photo: David Heald.

In 2015, Xiaoyu Weng was appointed The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Associate Curator of Chinese Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, where Weng is working with consulting curator Hou Hanru to implement a long-term research, curatorial and collections-building programme that focuses on commissioning major works from artists born in Greater China. The appointment was a natural progression for Weng, who has organised exhibitions and public programmes at such venues as the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, CAFA Art Museum in Beijing, and Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. Prior to her appointment at the Guggenheim, Weng was the founding director of Kadist Art Foundation's Asia Programs for Paris and San Francisco, where she oversaw artist residencies, built the contemporary Asian art collection, and launched the Kadist Curatorial Collaboration, which organises exhibitions designed to encourage cultural exchange. Before that, she was the programme director of the Asian Contemporary Art Consortium in San Francisco and a curator at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts at the California College of the Arts.

In this interview, Weng talks about *Tales of Our Time*, the second exhibition organised within the framework of the Guggenheim's Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative (4 November 2016–10 March 2017). Shown at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the exhibition will present new commissions by nine artists born in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan: Chia-En Jao, Kan Xuan, Sun Xun, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, Tsang Kin-Wah, Yangjiang Group, and Zhou Tao. *Tales of Our Time* brings together artists who, as the exhibition's introduction states, 'challenge the conventional understanding of *place*' by considering 'concepts of geography and nation-state' through artworks that reflect on 'often-overlooked cultural and historical narratives'. These works 'address specific locations, such as their hometowns, remote borderlands, or a group of uninhabited islands, as well as abstract ideas, such as territory, boundaries, or even utopia.' The curatorial premise considers China 'not only as a country but also as a notion that is open for questioning and reinvention.'

In creating work for the show, each of the artists responded to a challenge Weng and Hou Hanru posed: how to represent—and respond to—the conditions of globalism and a certain kind of national frame, which in the case of this exhibition and the programme to which it belongs, is 'China'.

SB **In your introductory essay you talk about one of the greatest challenges in working on this show: how to reconcile the contemporary condition in China that is characterised by a conflicting relationship between China's developing globalism—summarised by a 'cloud' mentality in which the 'free-floating individual' embraces the idea of the global community—and its own national and political character.**

You sum up this complex situation in a really succinct question: 'Can we diagnose and counteract the deceptive deterritorialization enacted by the ideology of the cloud, without resorting to reterritorialization—that is, without projecting an equally false monumental and unified Chinese artistic character?'

Could you talk about how you sought to answer this question along with Hou Hanru, your fellow curator, in the various stages of the project?

XW Hanru and I hold interesting positions ourselves in understanding this condition. As Chinese-born curators, we both work in an international context; we absorb information, communicate with different artists, look at exhibitions, and participate in discussions with peers and colleagues from multiple cultural and political environments. Such plurality has enabled us to constantly reflect on these issues. Therefore, we are always more interested in the tensions between China and the global situation, and other different cultural contexts. The point is not to place one in opposition to the other but to examine the complexity of these relationships.

I am very much against the idea—especially for commissioning projects—of imposing a theme before even knowing what the artists are going to work on. In other words, to let the artworks somehow illustrate a theme—such a method can itself be an act of 'marking territories' through curatorial authority. Therefore, the concrete theme actually came after we did the studio visits, selected the artists, and received their proposals. We understood from the beginning that we would like to work with artists who practice in similar conditions—who understand the plural and rich tensions between China and the rest of the world, and share similar concerns. Therefore, these artists either have experience living and working abroad or have participated in exhibitions substantively outside of the context of China, or both. After fully comprehending what they were working on and thinking about, or their interests at the time, the links started to emerge among some of the artists we visited. After further evaluation, we decided to work with these seven artists and artist groups. Then, we provided these artists a set of keywords for them to respond to, including ideas of territory, boundary and borders, but we invited them to think as speculatively and poetically as possible. We also provided the same set of keywords to the fiction writers who contributed short stories to our catalogue.

What is worth mentioning is that these artworks have all entered the permanent collection at the Guggenheim Museum. The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative does not only present exhibitions, but also builds a collection to contribute to a larger narrative of our contemporary art history. This is very important and interesting, because another layer of 'deterritorialization' takes place in this context. We hope that these new commissions will have a different life after this exhibition. After being interpreted in *Tales of Our Time*, they will go on to be interpreted and displayed in many other

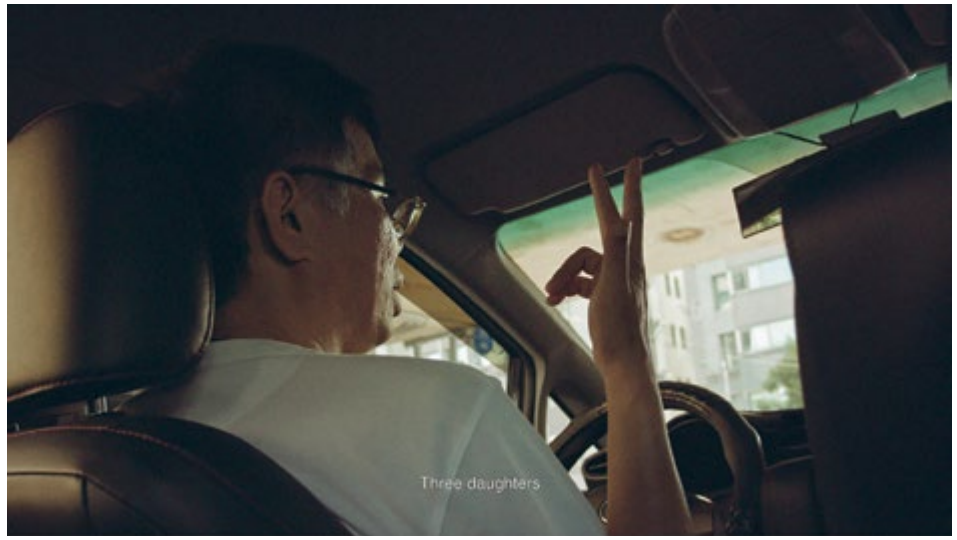
exhibitions, in many other narratives, and, most importantly, to be connected to artworks not produced in a 'Chinese' context.

SB **Could you talk about the works that will be shown, and how they reflect the theme at hand?**

XW If I can draw a parallel, I would love to compare this exhibition to a poem, but absolutely not a piece of argumentative writing or expository writing. I hope this can enable an understanding of the relationship between all these artworks with the 'theme' or 'title' of this exhibition and, more importantly, how they relate to each other. As a curator, I never consider artworks as illustrations of a curator's idea. Curators provide a context for artworks to be experienced, but not a didactic speech of how they should be understood. Therefore, for me, making an exhibition is always a process of many threads woven together, from the issues we curators would like to put forward, the ideas the artworks express and the materiality of the artworks, to the spatial relationships, architectural conditions, the route a visitor will navigate through, how such spatial experiences enhance the meaning of an artwork compared to when it is displayed alone, and so on. Perhaps such an approach also differentiates my practice as a curator versus other museum curators.

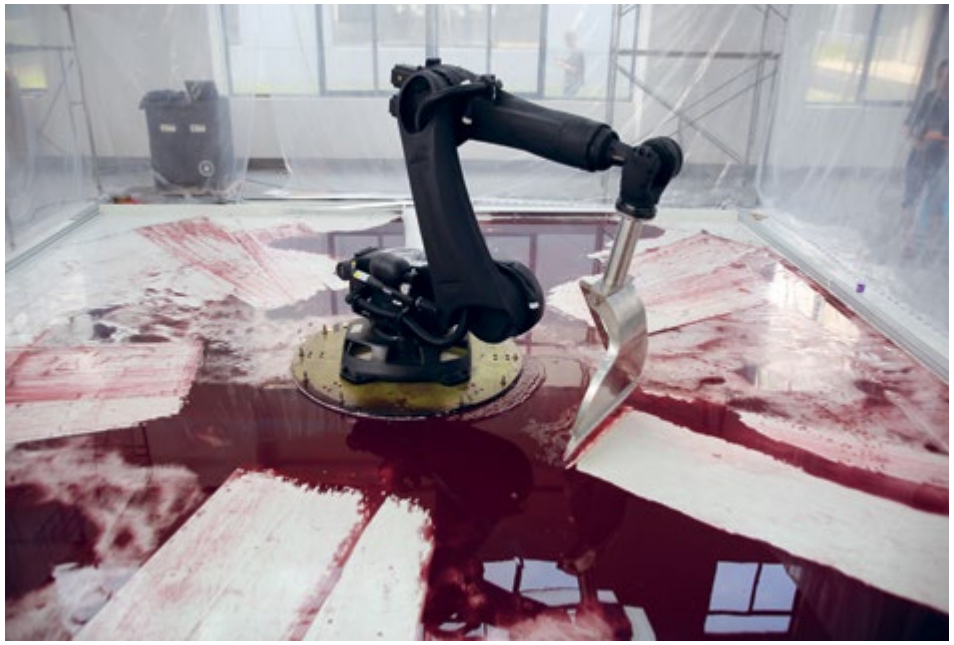
With that said, I can give a very brief outline of how these artworks connect to each other. But again, these connections are intended to be read as one would read a poem. Kan Xuan takes us to places that used to be cities in different eras of history, spinning from earlier centuries to more recent times, across thousands of years; Chia-En Jao visited sites loaded with historical and political significance with local taxi drivers in Taipei. But the work is not only about these specific sites but also Taipei and even Taiwan as a concept of place. Therefore, for Kan, it is cities of old times and for Jao, it is the urban metropolis of today. Zhou Tao investigates the formation of the urban environment; taking Guangzhou and Shenzhen as starting points, he filmed many of the construction sites and their interesting semi-ecologies and the relationship between natural and artificial elements of our contemporary existence. The complex relationship between nature and culture is also exemplified through Sun Xun's new work, for which he used the mining history of his hometown Fuxin as an entry point. The history of coal mining is itself extremely political and is a history shared by many different regions in the world. So again, China, or a specific place in China, becomes a connection point for many larger discourses. Then we have Tsang Kin-Wah, who looks at the Diaoyu Islands, known as Senkaku Islands in Japan: a place of constant and enduring territorial dispute between China and Japan. He uses this group of uninhabited islands to reflect on the course of history, and the relationship between human experience and the writing of history.

If the above-mentioned artists all consider a specific site as the starting point of their work, Beijing-based duo Sun Yuan and Peng Yu speak about the concepts of territory and boundaries in an allegorical way. They have employed a robotic machine and programmed it to conduct a specific action: monitoring a puddle of red liquid on the floor and shovelling it back whenever it spreads over a predetermined border. But the exhibition ends on an uplifting note about the possibility of creating a utopia—another concept of a place—in a contemporary art exhibition. Yangjiang Group transplanted their autonomous zone from Yangjiang, China, to the Guggenheim Museum. Since 2002, this collective has been





Chia-En Jao, *Taxi* (2016). Colour UHD video with sound. 79 min., 32 sec. The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection, 2016.37. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Chia-En Jao.



Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Can't Help Myself* (2016). Kuka industrial robot, stainless steel and rubber, cellulose ether in coloured water, lighting grid with Cognex visual-recognition sensors, and polycarbonate wall with aluminium frame. Dimensions variable overall. The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection, 2016.40. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Sun Yuan & Peng Yu.



Sun Xun, *Mythological Time* (2016) (detail). Two-channel colour HD animated video with sound, and ink, graphite and acrylic on mulberry bark paper. The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection, 2016.38. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Sun Xun.

organising communal gatherings in their studio, where they invite neighbours and friends to share meals, practice calligraphy, drink tea and play soccer. They have transformed part of the Guggenheim gallery into a tea gathering space, a Chinese garden with calligraphy murals.

SB **I am curious about how you made this selection based on the geographical criteria set by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative, which includes wider China—that is, artists born in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. There are of course political undertones to this regional framing of China, which makes me think of how Para Site's executive director and curator Cosmin Costinas and Asia Art Archive senior researcher Anthony Yung used the term 'Chinese world' in the 2015 group show, *One Hundred Years of Shame—Songs of Resistance and Scenarios for Chinese Nations*.**

To that end, could you elaborate on the politics of this exhibition, as complex as they are? On one hand, we have a show consciously trying to escape the regional or national frame in monumental, or solid terms—that is, by allowing the definition of 'China' to remain fluid. But on the other, we also have a definition of that very national space.

XW We are not interested in or capable of proposing a new 'canon' in how to define 'China', not even the art from China, not to mention China in its historical, political and cultural complexities. This is too big of an issue to be addressed through an exhibition, and I am a disbeliever of anyone who claims to do so. But this is the condition we are working from. What you have described is the condition of the [Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art] Initiative, on many levels; and it is a parameter we shall be working from. We simply selected interesting artists whose practices in recent years will make an attractive exhibition and generate previously non-existent artistic connections.

There is not much politics in this exhibition in terms of balancing a relationship between the mainland, Hong Kong or Taiwan. I think this approach has already differentiated us from exhibitions at Para Site, whose exhibitions in recent years do carry much bigger ambitions. (Para Site is doing very important work and creating interesting narrative-based essay exhibitions.)

We are not escaping/denying/protesting anything, but are open to complicating any pre-fixed frame. Simply 'escaping' does not equal 'making fluid'. We can apply your same questions to the ideas of what Hong Kong or Taiwan are. So what is Taiwan? How do you understand it? Is it just an island? A place whose recent history was made by Chiang Kai-shek? How do people living there feel about Japanese culture? I am afraid the answer is not that black and white. But art practice, through the power of imagination, can make these places and notions plural.

This is not an exhibition based on 'China', but a show with artists participating from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. If we continue the rhetoric from the media world—the art critics, the writers and even the educators—in interpreting the making of the exhibition and the artists' works, then we will be running in circles and end up at a dead end. We have to think and reflect critically on ourselves as part of the art community and how we actually contribute not so positively and effectively in perpetuating such rhetoric. Have we opened up our own minds? Have we even made an attempt to understand these exhibitions and artworks

and artists with fresh eyes? Can we get rid of the burden of pre-existing notions?

One important question I always ask myself is this: are there any alternatives for showing contemporary art from China in a non-Chinese context, besides the existing models—one, the historicisation of art, meaning the situation of artists in frameworks of politics and identities; and two, the market and commercial success of art and whoever is hot and big? Is it possible to create a different relationship with history? Can we go to the specificities: the specifics of an artist, the specifics of one artwork, the specifics of one element, one object? Are we still able to be imaginative? Can we feel them physically and let go of our mind? Can we love them? Can we balance the sensory and intellectual experience?

The same comments can be applied to the making of an exhibition. It is not just a reportage or commentary of a theme. For me, spatial relationships, site-specificities and all other experiences during one's visit to an exhibition are equally as important as what will be read on a wall label.

SB **How does this exhibition fit into the politics of its context—that is, the United States?**

XW What exactly is the cultural specificity of the US, or let's be more specific, New York? How can we understand the idea of the cosmopolitan today? Immigration culture? Do the American people know? And how to articulate it? Why is an American audience interested in arts and cultures from Asia, Africa and Latin America? Are people really still interested? Has a kind of global ambition evolved in the past decades? How can American institutions genuinely engage with art produced in these places of the world? These are the questions we all reflect on and the answers are not easy. But I would like to consider *Tales of Our Time* as a trigger for people to think more about these issues, rather than finding ready answers.

SB **I wonder if you could talk about how this exhibition develops on your previous work, predicated as it was on creating moments of cultural exchange? This includes the work you did at the Kadist Art Foundation, and with the Kadist Curatorial Collaboration, which you initiated, as well as the curatorial projects and writing projects you have engaged in prior to your appointment at the Guggenheim.**

XW I always think about alternatives to our current condition, alternatives to the dominant art systems, cultural and knowledge productions and circulations, mainstream values and even social organisations: I guess a lot of the things artists think about. I am also a true believer of the power of imagination in art. I think the possibilities of alternatives come from exchanging ideas and values, which makes the deconstruction of stereotypes possible. I am interested in introducing new things and ideas to people, as I am by nature very curious. I am always open-minded and ready to step out of my comfort zone. I think art is such a great thing when it comes to stimulating people to do the same. Many of our world's problems could be solved by more communication and exchange.

SB **In turn, how do you see your practice developing with The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative at the Guggenheim, and how do you see the Initiative developing as a result of your own evolving practice? You mention that this is really your first experience within a major institutional setting, and I'm curious how you've experienced the crossover from a more independent, freelance position. You might call this another kind of cultural exchange of sorts.**

XW For sure. I am experiencing big learning curves, but it's all interesting curatorial experience. I think, in the museum context, I am not only an exhibition maker but also a curator in its traditional sense: a caretaker of collections. As I mentioned, these newly commissioned works will enter the museum's permanent collection, forming The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection together with Wang Jianwei's work, the artist commissioned for the first cycle of the Initiative as organised by Thomas J. Berghuis. I really hope that these works will have a different life, being shown at different exhibitions and museums internationally. At the same time, I am very excited to be able to have a much bigger audience for my work. I am curious to learn how people can create a relationship with this initiative and this exhibition, and what kinds of relationship.

But I also miss the independent work environment and spirit. For me, it is really important to always keep that criticality and independent thinking no matter what kind of position I am in. I like to challenge myself. I also would like to create connections between independent practices and institutional practices, not only by myself but also with other practitioners in the field. I want to engage people who are doing amazing work but do not necessarily have a big audience. I think the institution is a great platform to circulate these ideas and knowledge. At the same time, these independent practices also challenge the institution, pushing its boundaries and motivating its reinvention. Perhaps this is how the museum might avoid becoming the 'mausoleum' described by Theodor W. Adorno. For my upcoming exhibition at the Guggenheim, for example, I am bringing many such independent and critical voices to be part of the programme accompanying the show. I think new innovations in exhibiting and interpreting art from China has to come from such cross-pollenating efforts.



Raqs Media Collective

IN CONVERSATION WITH SRINIVAS ADITYA MOPIDEVI
SHANGHAI, 11 NOVEMBER 2016

Photo: Dreamvilla.

Curated by the New Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective, the 11th edition of the Shanghai Biennale (SHB11) *Why Not Ask Again: Arguments, Counter-arguments, and Stories* opens to the public on 12 November 2016 and runs until 12 March 2017. Anchored by the idea that making a biennale is a form of posing questions, the exhibition seeks to challenge the current divisions of the world between 'East' and 'West' by developing a 'South-South' dialogue. In this Ocula Conversation, Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi speaks to the members of Raqs Media Collective—Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta—about the relevance of engaging with the biennale form today, and their specific plans for SHB11.

SAM **The form of the biennale is currently situated between the conceptual states of excess and exhaustion. The collective discourse produced from the hundreds of biennales that take place all over the world is fostering a sense of hyper-saturation in the field. Both the curatorial narratives and the artists that take part in these mega-scale events are often repetitively framed, insofar as they become merely symbolic of today's wider socio-political events. This situation has lead me to think about the idea of exhaustion as a way to frame contemporaneity within a biennale context. The moment of exhaustion is a generative state where existing imaginary resources are burnt out, and in order to proceed new forms must be invented. Does the conceptual premise of SHB11, *Why Not Ask Again,* allude to and develop from this productive condition of exhaustion?**

RMC Exhaustion has emerged as a provocative turn in thought in the last few years. It has been tagged to the concept of labouring bodies, and has found itself annotating the destiny of hydrocarbons, immaterial labour, fresh water, minerals, the ozone layer and oxygen, among many other things. Meanwhile, the global GDP in 2013 was over 75 trillion US dollars. In 1990 it was 28 trillion dollars, and in 1950, 4 trillion dollars. These shifts emerge from complicated calculations that tell us some things and also do not tell us something else. We are in the midst of an unprecedented acceleration in productivity, labour processes, access to raw materials, mobility, deployment and the distribution of surplus. Art is in some measure a site, a spike, within this seismic upheaval. This shift—what we in Raqs call 'threshold time'—overflows with excess and exhaustion, extension and shrinkage, boom and bust. There is no Archimedean point outside its jagged edge.

On the other hand, this time of exhaustion is also the time of another kind of renewal—the emergence of new journals, new film festivals, new student groups, new sites of de-occupation, new friends and new recipes, which are all very welcome. They show an inherent desire for lateral extensions and expressions. They make us move.

Relentless conversations with so many people across disciplines, practices and borders bring energy, confusion and insights. Lantian Xie, an artist based in Dubai, captured this elegantly in a social media post: 'A few weeks ago, I spent some time in Shanghai with the Biennale's curatorial team. At some point in our conversations, their words seemed to pull apart and loosen their shapes, turning into tempos, melodies, interruptions, syncopations. It was then that I began to suspect that I was in fact in the company of a jazz band in full swing.' Making a biennale can possibly become a weave of praise, of other dissimilar sensibilities and improvisations.

Why Not Ask Again does not affirm or negate—or elide over—the present pandemonium. It is trying to bring into play a panoply of vantage points, itineraries and imaginaries. It seeks to foreground a way to tap into subterranean and imperceptible forces, perceptional edges, hibernating conversations and interrupted journeys, as it leaps into heretical historical detours, and into speculative geographies.

During a conversation in Delhi between Monica and artist Peter Piller, whose work uses found material from small-town newspapers in Germany, and after hearing him talk about the exhaustion and serendipity he experienced while spending endless years inside photo archives, Monica observed: 'Perhaps it is only when you are exhausted and have exhausted all your curiosities and

ways of seeing that you are aware of, that an unknown vision erupts for you.' Maybe we are all in wait, on the cusp of exhaustion and eruption.

SAM **When biennales began proliferating two decades ago, they coincided with new global forms of exchange and circulation and were framed as an alternative to museological exhibition practices. The key binary between these two approaches is that conventional institutions are occupied in both recovering the past and appropriating the present, while, in contrast, biennales instead insist on a critical reflection of the present in speculation of the future. Recent instances include *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor [56th Venice Biennale (2015)], and *The Eighth Climate (What does art do?)*, led by Maria Lind [11th Gwangju Biennale (2016)]. Will this specific emphasis on art as a site of the present and the future—both as a prediction and possibility—continue to influence the framing of biennales and the making of the art?**

RMC Recently, during the opening of the 11th Gwangju Biennale, we were in a discussion with Babi Badalov, the exiled artist from Azerbaijan, now based in Paris. For Babi, biennales are critical mobilisations that need to keep questioning how the narrative and multiplicity of locations are formed, because that affects the poetics of affirmation—the hues and textures of the relations that are produced in a biennale—as well as the kind of provocations being proposed.

To us, the contemporary is a space to join in the ridiculed and halted *Bhole ki baraat* (the marriage procession of Shiva). Shiva's wedding party was a raucous procession of wild animals, outcasts of all kinds, ghosts and goblins with distorted, imperfect bodies, unresolved consciousness, in delirious moods and states of being. The story of Shiva's wedding ends with the god dancing in rage in response to being insulted by his in-laws for the nature of his companions. Shiva appears to have been Nietzsche's favourite god. Such processions will always find it difficult to enter history and, by extension, the museum. Rather, these unruly energies are detours. They take paths and seek connections that are not yet there; they play with instruments whose sound is yet to find an amplifier. Biennales are on that cusp that Hannah Arendt marked as the present: the indistinct zone between 'has been' and 'not yet'. It is a tightrope dance, like in the 1923 Paul Klee painting, *Tightrope Walker*.

SAM **The emphasis on the 'politics of a place' is becoming an increasingly important framework for biennales. This comes with the rising pressure faced by curators when working outside of their own local contexts, to both ethically and generatively work in a way that is informed by the discourse of the host. How did you, as curators of the 11th Shanghai Biennale, envision the selection of artists for a Chinese audience and their positioning in the local context of Shanghai?**

RMC On our first curatorial visit to Shanghai, we met the young artist Yu Ji. Along with her practice—where she explores forces of nature—she has created a studio-residency process for other artists in her studio space. We found this enfolding invitation for others very moving and challenging. With subsequent visits, we have begun to understand that there is a way in which artists in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing and other places activate and support each other. One young artist downloaded ten gigabytes of videos, images and other material by all his artist friends so that we could look at everyone's work when we visited



Hu Xiangqian, *The Labor Song I Night* (2012). High definition video. 1920 × 1080 p. Courtesy the artist.



Peter Piller, *Looking into Holes* (2000–2005) (detail). Courtesy the artist.

Next page: Simone Fattal, *Freedom is a State of Mind* (2004). Collage. Courtesy the artist.


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Instalaciones 1989-1999
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IN ÖS
Solar Eclipse
Aug. 11, 1999

Guangzhou. We also got the same feeling in Radical Space, a project space in Shanghai. This conviviality, this specific tonality of living, is probably what makes a place expressive amid the intensity of the acceleration these cities in China have witnessed.

In her acceptance speech for the 2012 Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak described her journey eloquently as one woven in many voices and lives that continue to speak through her as 'the gift of spirit'. This gift is a special one as it lives within and uncoils over long years with newer insights and dimensions. This spirit is in many ways visibly present among the artists in these cities. Within the Biennale, we are trying to draw in energies that expand on this sense. This is one trajectory of our approach.

The Biennale also positions many works from artists in China as conceptual fulcrums around which other works from other locations gather, making new readings possible. Zheng Bo, an artist who extensively researches and creates social extensions of artistic practice, confirmed an observation that we made: that in China the space of contemporary art is becoming a crucial site where people of the younger generation stay and converse. This has definitely made an impact on the ways we have looked at the work being made and imagined by the incoming generation of artists.

SAM **Recently, there has been a rising debate about the necessity of scaling down biennales and controlling their preoccupation with spectacle. The aim has been to generate initiatives that are more small-scale, experimental and sustainable. The 6th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2015, for instance, was staged as a ten-day gathering rather than a conventional exhibition. Do you consider this shift a productive direction for biennales to head towards or would it mark a regression, signalling the biennale's inability to live up to its original ambitions?**

RMC When the curators of the 6th Moscow Biennale suddenly found that they were strapped with minuscule resources and a shrunken space, they did not abandon the Biennale. Instead, they acted with agility, inventing a challenging scale and an intensification of time. This is the propositional quality that biennales are attentive to. Ideally, a biennale should run for two years slowly morphing, and then after two years make a course change with fresh energies and diversions. We first talked about this in our essay for *e-flux*, 'Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion'.

Close to home, the proposed Srinagar Biennale seems to be working out a unique model. They have put forth the proposition that you can iterate an event in the Srinagar Biennale from anywhere in the world. This is their way of transversally offering a disputed space—a space of violence by the state—as a platform that thinks itself globally. This is bold, as it opens out a radical rethinking of the relation between place and event.

Manifesta 6: The European Biennial of Contemporary Art (which was supposed to take place in Cyprus) did not go ahead due to political reasons. Manifesta suffered a major financial loss and yet, despite that, the model that was proposed by the curators of Manifesta 6—of the biennale as a school—has shaped the subsequent discourse of exhibition-making.

SAM **Raqs's engagement with curatorial practice has, from the very beginning, been about seeing the exhibition format not as a singular event that has a specific beginning and an end, but as a prolonged activity over time, during which a constellation of ideas congregate and find habitation. This method unbinds the otherwise static configuration of an exhibition into a different dialogue that is more flexible and open. For SHB 11, how will you continue to build on the idea of duration, a principle feature of Raqs' earlier projects, and critique prevalent exhibition forms?**

RMC Exploring the time field that a biennale offers is exciting. It conjures up two specific directions: one is to expand into the city, and another is to thicken the experience of time in the exhibition. There are two processes we are working with. The first is the '51 Personae' project, which is being developed with Chen Yun (with whom we have been in conversation for the last six years), looking at entire unrecognised life zones of the city and bringing them into a space of co-existing visibility. Chen Yun is working with a group of young artists, teachers and researchers at Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society to meet people and create scenarios emerging from their desires, fantasies and aspirations to make gatherings. This will happen throughout the exhibition period and spread out all over the city. The second process or axis that we have conceptualised and are developing with Liu Tian, a member of our curatorial collegiate, and scenarist Yao Mengxi, is called 'Theory Opera'. Here we turn the exhibition space into a site for an experiment on what we term the 'sensation of thought'. This will draw in academic research, performative procedures, music and improvisational display modes. Through both these durational modes, the Biennale should be able to give us a new form of doing, singing, thought and mutuality.



Martine Syms

IN CONVERSATION WITH KATE BRETTKELLY-CHALMERS
AUCKLAND, 15 DECEMBER 2016

Photo: Marco Braunschweiler.

Martine Syms is a Los Angeles-based artist who is gaining critical attention for works that explore the relationship between black creative cultures and contemporary digital media. She opened her solo exhibition *Fact & Trouble* at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in April 2016, and is currently showing in group exhibitions across the globe, including *Public, Private, Secret* at the ICP Museum, New York (23 June 2016–8 January 2017); *Los Angeles—A Fiction* at Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (22 September 2016–22 January 2017); and *Potentially Yours, The Coming Community* at Artspace, Auckland (10 November–22 December 2016). Ocula talked with Syms about her practice, focusing on her recent video *Notes on Gesture* (2015). The work was shown as part of the Artspace exhibition, and addresses the viral circulation of images of black women in television and online media.

KBC **I am interested in the way you refer to yourself as a 'conceptual entrepreneur' rather than 'artist'. How is this term a better fit for you?**

MS After I left art school, I was much more interested in creating structures for myself and other artists to have a sustainable practice. I was really influenced by the way that people ran record labels or bookshops. When I first graduated, I was definitely not making the kind of art that my school was prioritising, so ['artist'] didn't feel like the right term to me. I actually started a bookshop as a project space right out of school. In one sense, it was just a business, but I'm interested in having different kinds of platforms for creative output.

KBC **Can you tell me about your video work *Notes on Gesture*, currently showing at Artspace? Its title refers to Giorgio Agamben's 1992 essay of the same name that discusses 'gesture' as a central feature of cinema, but the work also draws on an earlier and much more obscure text on body language.**

MS Yes, a 17th-century book by John Bulwer called *Chirologia: Or the Naturall Language of the Hand*. I found it when I was looking at different acting techniques. I was thinking about how much everyone is recorded in their everyday lives, and how this might relate to an actor cheating or blocking a scene, so I tried to make an index similar to that found in Bulwer's *Chirologia*. The Bulwer text relates to gestures in Shakespearean theatre and I noticed similarities between these and emojis. Some of the symbols are exactly the same—like the 'prayer hands' and the 'raised hands' emojis. When I was working with the actor in this video, I was thinking about how we learn the way that we move in life and what influences these things, from pop culture to family references. There is this interesting relationship between 'authentic' versus 'performed' movement.

KBC **And these gestures are looped in *Notes on Gesture* so that they appear like repetitive GIFs.**

MS I'm interested in GIFs or Vines because of the way they circulate the behaviours of black people right now. I am sad about Vine being shut down, because it was such a resource and source of inspiration for me. It was really amazing seeing these teenagers making artwork with very limited means—writing and telling stories with such proficiency and economy. I am most interested in how they're choosing to represent themselves and narrativise their experiences. There are certain cinematography styles that are pioneered to do that and then these are circulated widely online and reincorporated back into bigger film-production models. This cycle is really interesting. Once it's in a big movie, another teen sees it, picks it up and then it morphs again. The problem for me might be that when this influential style gets copied, it is not really thought of as being part of black aesthetics or a black tradition.

KBC **Does this relate to your interest in Afrofuturism? You recently made the documentary piece *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* (2015), which looks at how this artistic or aesthetic movement emerged in the 1970s. This included conversations with contemporary artists who are similarly interested in futuristically 'reimagining' black experiences. What is your own relationship to the movement?**

MS I wouldn't call myself an 'Afrofuturist', as other artists do, but my methodology is tied to Afrofuturism in terms of taking things


1. 86
which white men accidentally kiss them instead of
white women these maids serve. In films like W
Happened in the Tunnel (Edison, 1903), *The Mis-Direc*

from the past or using technology to fill in information that's not available in the official archive. I use speculation as a technique to imagine what could happen. Even my use of the term 'entrepreneur' is about speculating with value—about asserting a new value, or different ideas around what could be valued.

The Artspace work [*Notes on Gesture*] is concerned with the image of black women and how these images have acquired greater value through their circulation in the media as GIFs and on American TV shows. While I was making this piece, all the September issues of [the major Western fashion and lifestyle] magazines happened to have black women on their covers. This was the first time that these magazines had simultaneously promoted black women on their covers and there were a whole lot of news stories patting each other on the back for having done this. People were making a bigger deal of it than I thought it deserved. I started thinking a lot about what cultural circumstances had changed to the point where these white magazines were interested in featuring black women—what was it about them that became valuable in the course of a year?

KBC **The colour purple is really prominent in your work. Can you talk about how it functions?**

MS Yes, purple is a frequent colour motif for me. Initially, I started using it as shorthand for thinking about the black feminist tradition. The phrase 'the colour purple' obviously references the book [by Alice Walker], but also the Steven Spielberg movie. I was particularly interested in the way Spielberg benefited the most from that movie—something that was an important point of investigation for me. I used to use purple like an Yves Klein blue, but now I realise that it functions more like a 'white'. I use it as a kind of baseline, like the way white is supposed to be a neutral or 'non-colour'.

KBC **This baseline purple is both the 'green screen' for the video *Notes on Gesture* but also the colour of the walls in its Artspace installation. The work *Lessons* (2014) in your recent ICA exhibition also established a similar spatial dialogue between a video screen installed in the middle of the gallery and the wall behind it. This spatial dynamic actually reminds me of high-end fashion or so-called 'concept' stores. Is this something that interests you?**

MS Commercial aesthetics that use glass and coloured light; those kinds of presentation methods are definitely an influence, for sure. I'm also concerned with how to make the video installation more sculptural and architectural. The Artspace installation forms a circular space that you [the viewer] are positioned within. The four-channel audio also works with this—it should sound different depending on where you're standing within that space. This also involves film narratives, including how a story unfolds spatially while still being committed to a two-dimensional flat screen.

KBC **I can't end this interview without asking you about the recent election of Donald Trump. How has your own art community responded to Trump's rise to power in the US?**

MS I was talking to people a lot in the week after he was elected who were saying, 'I didn't realise things were this bad' and 'I've never felt this hated'. While I totally understand that those are valid feelings, it was not the first time I had felt hated. It was not the first time I had felt unwanted somewhere. In many ways, it was confirmation of a lot of things I had been feeling already.



This page and previous: Installation view: Martine Syms, *Fact & Trouble*, Institute of Contemporary Arts London (ICA), London (20 April–19 June, 2016). Photo: Mark Blower.





Installation view: Martine Syms, *Fact & Trouble*, Institute of Contemporary Arts London (ICA), London (20 April–19 June, 2016).
Photo: Mark Blower.

There has been this Twitter conversation about how most people learnt about the history of Japanese internment in the US through the memoir *Farewell to Manzanar* [by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston] in high-school English class. So I've been thinking about how literature and art do this heavy lifting, historically and politically. I find that not hopeful—I can't call it 'hope'—but something I feel compelled to do.

My hope is that [Trump's election] actually radicalises people and that art returns to being a place of non-normative ideas. Many art collectors and people on the boards of museums are Trump supporters. For the past decade or so, the art world has felt increasingly conservative, racist, homophobic and misogynistic, in my professional experience. There are a lot of affirming spaces that I feel excited to be a part of, but then there are institutional spaces that I don't feel that way about. So, I hope that this might encourage people not to be so concerned with the institutional 'stamp', because it can be a really hostile space.

Art Basel in Miami Beach

1–4 DECEMBER 2016



General impression: Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Sam Durant and Henry Taylor, Blum & Poe, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.

Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Louvre (Apollo Sauroctono)* (2013). Installation view: Galleria Continua, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Anish Kapoor, *Random Triangle Mirror* (2016). Installation view: Galleria Continua, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



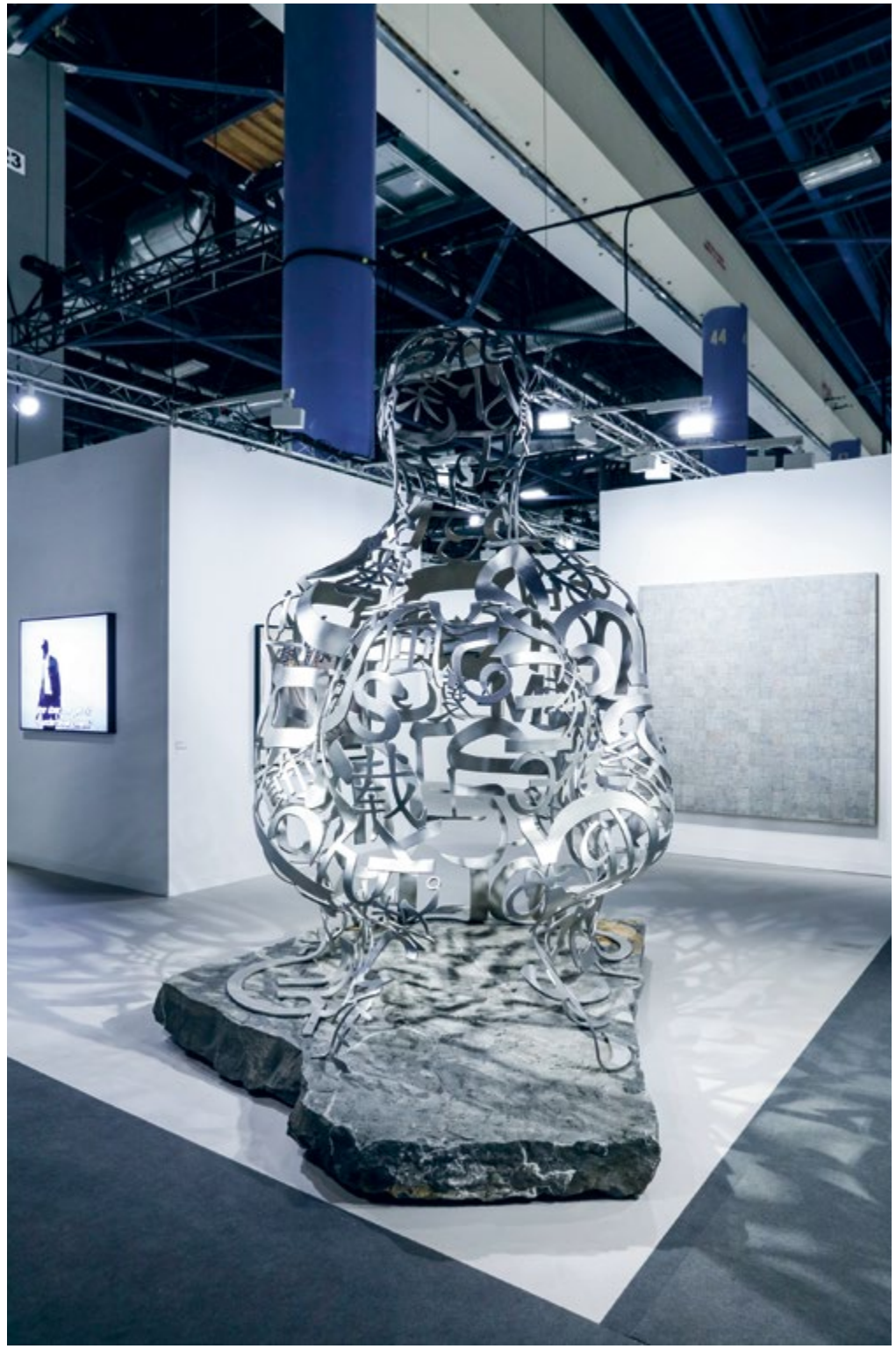
Paul McCarthy, *White Snow Head* (2012–2013). Installation view: Xavier Hufkens, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Elena Damiani and Meuser, Galerie Nordenhake, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Julieta Aranda, Jose Dávila and Matti Braun, Galería OMR, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Jaume Plensa, Galerie Lelong, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



Installation view: Ugo Rondinone, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Galleries, Art Basel in Miami Beach (1–4 December 2016). Courtesy Ocula. Photo: Charles Roussel.



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